



Department  
for Education

# **Evaluation of the Firstline Leadership Programme**

**Evaluation report**

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## Key messages

The Firstline programme run by the Frontline organisation aims to offer team managers in local authority children's social care services a tailored training programme to increase their leadership capabilities. The programme uses a variety of teaching and training methods, including all cohort (around 70 attendees) lectures and small group activities at two-day residential modules, group coaching sessions for attendees from each participating local authority, one-to-one mentoring/coaching sessions for individual Firstline leaders (FLLs), and guided self-study. Different ways of providing feedback are also used. The programme's content and ways of facilitation overall achieved a very high rate of satisfaction among attendees. This programme achieved a very high rate of completion among attendees (97% for cohorts that completed the training between 2017-2020).

The evaluation found that the programme improved attendees' levels of confidence, and increased their expertise and capabilities to lead their teams of front-line social workers. This was reflected in attendees' self-assessment, as well as in the assessment of their colleagues and senior managers. A vast majority of attendees reported having made changes to and improved supervision meetings. In addition, in the views of attendees and senior managers the programme positively affected and improved attendees' own and their team members' practice. There was less evidence of the programme's impact on attendees' ability to initiate and lead changes in their department or the wider local authority/organisation. The limited impacts on the wider organisation or external agencies were explained by a lack of time for implementation or lack of opportunity to initiate changes at the departmental or organisational level. While it was beyond the remit of the evaluation to explore the reasons for this, it was suggested by a few, local authority senior managers, and Firstline staff that wider changes might need greater support from local authority senior managers and potentially a department-wide approach to become embedded.

There were some reports from Firstline and FLLs of improved outcomes for children and families because social workers' communication skills and their relationships with service users were said to have improved.

There was evidence, from both attendees via survey data and interviews with local authority senior managers, that participation in Firstline has a positive impact on job satisfaction of attendees. There was also some indicative evidence that participation may have a positive impact on turnover of both attendees and their team members from team level data provided by Firstline and the reported turnover rates of attendees.

National data limitations, such as the lack of comparative national data, and the constraints within which this evaluation was carried out mean that it has not been possible to accurately assess the impact of Firstline on:

- Staff retention; and,

- The experience of, and risks to, children and families.

The evaluation was asked to consider possible new developments. One of these relates to accreditation. While it has been externally evaluated as part of the Innovation Programme scheme, the Firstline programme has no external accreditation. In addition, there is no external independent framework around the programme that evaluates changes to attendees' activities and behaviours. Firstline's internal evaluation and monitoring team engages in measurement and data collection to collect evidence of the impact of its training. As some of this present evaluation participants noted, FLL do not receive awards that they could take forward to further their career opportunities. We suggest that this point may be worth further consideration.

# Executive summary

## Introduction

This report presents findings of the evaluation of the Firstline Programme, which is run by the Frontline organisation. This programme received funding through Round 2 of the Department for Education's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (Innovation Programme hereafter). A prototype of the programme received funding in Round 1; findings of that evaluation can be found in Holmes *et al.* (2017).

The Firstline programme is available nationally to team managers and those who manage social workers in children's social care services in English local authorities. To be eligible for the programme a Firstline leader will manage social workers and can work within any part of the social work system (for example, from assessment, permanence or child protection teams). Following a selection process, attendees (known as Firstline Leaders, FLLs) are offered a place on the programme. The programme is delivered over 10 months in residentials and FLLs' workplaces. It comprises several theoretical and practice elements and features a combination of cohort teaching, small group practice, individual goal setting and learning, assisted by individual and group coaching sessions, and self-study.

## The evaluation

The essence of the Firstline programme's Theory of Change is that where FLLs are willing to change working patterns in their leading and managing roles and have the skills to do so, Firstline training will improve their leadership capabilities producing both a more effective management of social work practice and a positive influence on the organisational culture. As a result this will lead to more effective social work practice and an enabling culture and, in turn, to improved outcomes for children and families.

The process and impact evaluation of the Firstline programme aimed to answer six broad questions and used mixed methods to explore six central areas:

1. programme participation and completion rates,
2. changes to confidence, skills, and competence in FLLs,
3. views and experiences about the programme,
4. impact of the programme on FLLs' teams and local authorities, including on workforce progression and retention, and the impact on children and families,
5. costs of implementing Firstline and cost-saving potentials for participating organisations, and
6. facilitators and barriers to the expansion of the programme.

The evaluation took place between June 2018 and March 2020. As noted above, the evaluation team employed a mixed methods design. It comprised quantitative analyses of national data on both children's social care services and workforce data at local authority level, added to by a small set of workforce data on team level; surveys of participating local authorities to inform a cost benefit analysis simulation and assessment of data availability; anonymised participation and demographic data on FLLs; standardised questionnaires; and Firstline leadership diagnostics data. In addition, there were thematic analyses of outcomes of individual FLLs' development plans; data and comments from pre- and post-programme surveys of FLLs; interviews with Firstline staff and Learning Development Advisers (programme coaches), senior managers both in local authorities participating in Firstline and in authorities not taking part, and with managers with experiences of alternative leadership programmes. Finally, a small sample of programme residentials, run three times a year per cohort, supervisions, and team meetings led by FLLs was observed.

This evaluation was commissioned and designed to provide a detailed insight into the Firstline programme. Due to challenges beyond our control, such as Covid, it has not been possible to deliver the level of rigour we would have liked. There was a low response rate for both the pre- and post-programme surveys and it was difficult to access participants throughout the study, which means that the analysis in the report is based on small sample sizes and we have been unable to draw out the impact of Firstline on retention.

We had hoped to complete Difference in Difference analysis of workforce outcomes and Organisational Social Context analysis to understand the impact of Firstline training on team and LA culture and climate which would have given a richer picture of the difference participants make in their LAs. Not being able to do this meant we have had to estimate the wider outcomes achieved by the programme.

We still believe that this evaluation offers an important insight into the programme, highlighting both strengths and areas where improvements can be made. Limitations in the evidence and conclusions drawn are referenced throughout the report.

## **Key findings**

Since its prototype cohort, 376 people in six cohorts had attended the Firstline programme at the end of the evaluation period. A very high percentage of them, 96.8% (n364 of 376), of FLLs had completed it, and 55 local authorities (of 151 nationally) and one other organisation had sent FLLs.

Exploration of FLLs' self-scoring and scoring by a set of nominated colleagues, direct reports and senior managers showed that self and external assessment improved in terms of the eight Firstline capabilities. These are: 1) Resilience and self-reflexivity; 2) Analysis and decision making; 3) Learning and developing others; 4) Holding to account;

5) Effect on others and influence; 6) Professional authority; 7) Inspiring others; and 8) Moral purpose). FLLs and senior managers in participating local authorities reported an increase in confidence among attendees and an improvement in FLLs' practice due to applying techniques, especially around communication skills, learnt in the programme. FLLs seemed to have adopted more transformational and transactional styles of leadership and showed slightly higher job satisfaction after the programme, as measured by the evaluation team using questions from two standardised external surveys that are widely used.

Surveyed FLLs and interviewees from participating local authorities valued the programme's content and facilitation. In the post-programme survey (n=60) FLLs expressed generally high levels of satisfaction with the overall programme: three quarters (n=45 / 75%) said they had been 'extremely satisfied', 22% (n=13) said 'very satisfied' and only 3% (n=2) said 'moderately satisfied'. For specific elements ratings varied in the same survey, for the practice sessions 42% (n=25) of FLLs said that they had been 'extremely satisfied', 28% (n=17) 'very satisfied', 8% (n=5) 'moderately satisfied', 8% (n=5) 'slightly satisfied', and 2% (n=1) said that they had been 'not at all satisfied' (n=7 / 12% were 'unsure'). In comments to the ratings, among the offered elements, the one-to-one coaching sessions with a mentor/coach were positively highlighted as impactful; while group coaching or practice sessions in the partner organisations and lectures at the residential received slightly more mixed reviews by FLLs surveyed. FLLs enjoyed the two-day residential as a time for learning and reflection away from 'the stress of the office'. It was also appreciated that the programme focussed on children's social care/social work, providing avenues for practical application of elements and activities with great relevance to practice. Some senior managers reflected in the semi-structured interviews that there could be a sharper focus on multi-disciplinary or multi-agency working.

We show in the full report when reporting the survey findings and using other data, how in FLLs' views and the views of their senior managers the programme was considered to have had a positive influence on attendees' own and their team members' practice. There was less evidence in their reports of the programme's impact on attendees' ability to initiate and lead changes in their department, the wider local authority/organisation, or on external agencies. This was explained by a lack of time between undertaking the training and the evaluation, and lack of support by senior managers in some cases. FLLs indicated that the programme can be beneficial in terms of career progression; about half of FLLs (n=29 / 48%) had been promoted after the training, and nine of the 29 directly attributed this to Firstline participation.

Analysis of national data provided no significant evidence that Firstline had an impact on staff retention at the local authority level. However, there was evidence from both FLLs via survey data and from interviews with local authority senior managers that participation in Firstline has a positive impact on the job satisfaction of FLLs. There was also some indicative evidence that participation may have a positive impact on turnover

of both FLLs and their team members from team level data provided by Firstline and the reported turnover rates of FLLs.

The evaluation team undertook a cost benefit analysis simulation considering costs for participation in the programme and potential savings by reducing cost of turnover of social work staff (as this was the most directly cashable benefit of the training and one for which there was some supporting evidence). The total estimated benefits of involvement with Firstline over a 2 year period were £6,538. Given the estimated direct cost to local authorities, excluding DfE funding, of £5,909, this resulted in a return of investment ratio of 1.1:1, assuming a 75% attribution rate (this means that about three quarters of the changes observed could be put at the door of or attributed to the change). This fell to a return of investment (ROI) of 0.5:1 (that is, for every £1 spent, local authorities saved £1.10) when DfE funding was included in the costs, which emphasised the importance of finding a sustainable funding model going forward. Any 'non-cashable' impact, such as increased confidence and satisfaction among staff, might further outweigh expenditures and provide a better ROI.

In terms of facilitators, most FLLs were enabled to commit time and efforts to the programme as they felt supported by their managers and organisations during participating. In terms of barriers, implementation of participation fees and lack of external accreditation, compared to alternative programmes offering similar content free of charge or university courses awarding academic credit points and recognised awards, could limit potential expansion of the programme.

## Lessons and implications

The programme, in general, received very good feedback from FLLs and senior managers in the participating local authorities, especially the three residentials (overnight events – Monday to Wednesday) and the one-to-coaching received high satisfaction rates. The evaluation also identified some small areas of potential improvement to increase the quality of the programme and thus its impact:

- Specific focus on communication skills and holding 'difficult conversations': This was recognised as an important element of the programme, and improvements of FLLs' skills were reported by FLLs and senior managers when FLLs were working with their own teams. Other FLLs and senior managers questioned whether similar impact was achieved where FLLs worked with external teams.
- Some FLLs and senior managers would have liked more emphasis on multi-agency working.
- Support for FLLs working on their individual development aims: FLLs showed high engagement with the programme and provided evidence of impact when presenting outcomes of their work on individual aims. Some senior managers questioned the impact on some FLLs as they felt some aims and outcomes

presented by FLLs did not seem to reflect sustained development. Greater support by Firstline staff and facilitators might help struggling FLLs to overcome confusion about the objectives of this element.

- Group coaching sessions: One-to-one coaching sessions (referred to as leadership development sessions) were highly rated in the survey, while the group coaching in the practice sessions received slightly more negative comments from FLLs. Better communication of the objectives of these sessions by the Firstline team and by facilitators might improve overall attendance and thus outcomes of these sessions.
- There may be opportunities to extend the involvement of some FLLs' line managers in the programme. While there is strong engagement with many of the participating local authorities (the partners), greater involvement might help senior managers in some authorities develop a greater understanding of the relevance of elements and activities and assist in enhancing corporate commitment.
- Accreditation of the Firstline programme might improve its status and currency. Some local authority interviewees felt that the lack of academic accreditation might be a problem for FLLs either in terms of being able to apply for positions in local authorities that were not aware of the programme. Some alternative training allows participants to accumulate credits towards academic qualifications which was not the case with Firstline.
- Interviews with a small number of senior managers in authorities that were not engaged with Firstline revealed variable levels of awareness of the programme, which would indicate that Firstline might benefit from greater engagement with non-participating local authorities.
- Firstline should continue to work to collect team level turnover data from FLLs, without undue burden while national data are not available, and support other stakeholders to improve data quality to evaluate impact of Firstline but also of other workforce initiatives. Following this present evaluation, Firstline has indicated its interest in using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire in its own future data collections which we would recommend if they are not a burdensome addition to other data collection.

# 1. Overview of the project

## Project context

Effective leadership and management are often cited as the key to transforming services (Hafford-Letchfield *et al.*, 2014) and there is considerable interest at national and local levels in how they can be used as levers to improve both the quality of children's social care services and social work recruitment and retention rates.

There is a strong consensus within social work research that models of leadership which have their origins in business or military settings (Peters, 2018, Western, 2019) have limited relevance for social work (Hafford-Letchfield *et al.*, 2014, Fairtlough, 2017, Lawler and Bilson, 2010). This is because they tend to encourage a culture of competition and focus on financial profit by *increasing* demand, which is in contrast to the aims of social work to *decrease* demand by delivering 'proportionate' interventions (Department for Education (DfE), 2014). Business models are also often predicated on leadership within a single organisation, whereas children's social care services often have to be delivered collaboratively (Morrison and Arthur, 2013).

While there have been advances in developing conceptual models of social work leadership, there is a striking lack of empirical research (Hafford-Letchfield *et al.*, 2014, Fairtlough, 2017, Peters, 2017, 2018) in England. The lack of research means that the Firstline prototype programme is a rare example of an intervention designed to improve leadership in children/family social work that has been externally evaluated (Holmes *et al.*, 2017). This evaluation is a follow-up of that initial evaluation.

The Firstline programme is available nationally and attendees come from all areas of practice in children's social work (following a selection process described below). It is delivered over 10 months via 3 residential modules (termed residential), lasting 2 days each, and a range of other programmatic activity which takes place within participants' workplaces. It comprises several theoretical and practice elements and features a combination of cohort teaching, small group practice, individual goal setting and learning, assisted by individual and group coaching, and self-study.

## Project aims and intended outcomes

The Firstline programme aims to "develop good social work managers into high performing, considered and influential leaders [who will] ... set high practice standards, focus on developing and improving social workers and contribute to the creation of high-functioning, outcome-focused, practice systems" (Firstline, 2018, 11). It operates from the starting point that, although everyone involved in child and family social work, ranging from individual social workers to Directors of Children's Services, is a leader in their

sphere, it is especially important that line managers of case-holding social workers<sup>1</sup> demonstrate strong leadership skills.

The Firstline team aimed to expand and further develop the prototype programme run in Round 1 of the Innovation Programme. They planned to deliver the programme to 420 social work managers across 15 authorities over a 3-year period (Firstline, 2016 unpublished) and to use Innovation Programme funding to establish a more sustainable approach to programme delivery.

## Project activities

The first cohort in Round 2 commenced the programme in September 2016 and the seventh cohort was continuing at the end of the evaluation period (March 2020). The Firstline team planned to continue the programme after the evaluation period. (For further details of the project's elements and activities please see Appendix 3.)

The elements and activities of the Firstline programme are built around the 'Firstline Capabilities Framework'. There are 8 capabilities described in the Framework (see Appendix 2). The Framework and its capabilities were developed by the Firstline team and have been mapped to the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Social Work (Department for Education, 2014), informed by existing theories about leadership (as discussed in organisational change theory and organisational commitment theory), and in consultation with social work practitioners and leaders (see Firstline 2015, 2018). The capabilities are: 1) Resilience and self-reflexivity; 2) Analysis and decision making; 3) Learning and developing others; 4) Holding to account; 5) Effect on others and influence; 6) Professional authority; 7) Inspiring others; and 8) Moral purpose (not in the diagram in Firstline, 2018). Though 'Resilience and self-reflexivity' was seen as central to the Framework, there was no hierarchy to the other capabilities. Before being invited to apply, social workers have to attend a selection day where they undertake an observed group exercise and an individual interview to determine their readiness for and commitment to the programme. Once selected, participants become known as Firstline Leaders (FLLs).

The Firstline programme consisted of the following main elements and activities; these were broadly similar to those in the prototype programme (Holmes *et al.*, 2017), but there

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<sup>1</sup> These are usually team managers - although their job titles vary – who are responsible for practice in the teams they lead while also ensuring that organisational targets and service objectives are met. As such, they are seen to have a particularly important role in achieving these objectives.

have been some developments since the prototype cohort and there were further developments over the time of the evaluation:<sup>2</sup>

- 360° feedback leadership diagnostics: self- and external assessment of FLLs' capabilities based on the Firstline Capabilities Framework
- Three residentials each lasting two days (but starting with a dinner on the evening before the first day)
- Four specific approaches and elements were introduced at these residentials, and featured throughout the programme
- Radical Candour: a concept and practice on giving direct feedback, challenging others and holding others to account in a kind, respectful way
- Difficult Conversations: how to deal with conflicts in a constructive way based on clear communication
- Public Narrative: FLLs were asked to reflect on their values and expectations when joining the social work profession and to engage their teams to develop a shared vision
- Direct Observations: where FLLs are taught to observe a team member working with a family/child and to give constructive feedback
- Development Focus: FLLs worked individually on a chosen aim, developing new ways of working in their role. In the prototype programme this element was known as the 'Project' (Holmes *et al.*, 2017, 22)
- Leadership Development Sessions (LDSs) with a Leadership Development Advisor (LDA): six two-hour, one-to-one mentoring and coaching sessions across the programme, renamed Leadership Sessions during the evaluation period
- Practice Development Sessions (PDSs): four two-hour group coaching and practice sessions for all the FLLs in one authority held in that authority and facilitated by a LDA. These were renamed Practice Sessions during the evaluation period. In the prototype these were termed 'Action Learning Sets' (Holmes *et al.*, 2017, 21).

In addition, 'Kick-off' and 'Wrap-up' meetings were held in the local authorities at the start and end of each cohort, in which organisational matters were discussed and ways in which senior managers could support FLL who had completed the programme.

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<sup>2</sup> The descriptions are based on information provided by Firstline (e.g. the Programme Handbook, Firstline, 2018), interviews with Firstline staff and senior managers in local authorities, and observations of elements undertaken by the evaluation team. Since 2019 Firstline has introduced system change theory into the curriculum.

The 'Praxis' element as described in Holmes *et al.* (2017, 33) was removed as the initial evaluation showed that it had not worked as part of the Firstline programme.

The length of the programme was doubled from five months at the time of the prototype to ten months from then on. This extension was made in response to the findings from the initial evaluation, feedback from participants in the prototype cohort and representatives of participating local authorities.

## 2. Overview of the evaluation

### Evaluation questions

Firstline's Theory of Change (see Appendix 1) hypothesised that participating in the programme helps Firstline Leaders/participants to effect change in their practice and their employing organisations which, in turn, would produce better outcomes for children and families.<sup>3</sup> This evaluation aimed to answer six central questions:

1. Is the number of Firstline leaders who completed the programme broadly in line with Firstline's objective of training 420 leaders during 2017-20 across 16 different authorities? What proportion of those nominated for the programme did not complete it and why?
2. What changes were there in the self-rated confidence, skills, and competence of Firstline Leaders pre and post completing the programme and as rated by their managers and other team members and Firstline staff, Leadership Development Advisors and residential facilitators in terms of the Professional Capabilities Framework, the Knowledge and Skills Statements for Child and Family Social Work and the Firstline Capability Framework (moral purpose; analysis and decision making; learning and developing others; holding to account; effect on others and influence; inspiring others; professional authority; and resilience and reflexivity)?
3. What are the views and experiences of participants (Firstline Leaders - FLLs), Leadership Development Advisors (LDAs), and the managers of Firstline Leaders about the programme?
4. What difference (if any) does participating in the Firstline Programme have upon organisations and the profession of children and families social work in terms of perceptions of how it has made a difference to the service provided to children and families and overall vacancy and retention rates, and on Firstline Leaders' job satisfaction, career progression, retention and intention to remain within their employing organisation and the social work profession during the study period and in the future?
5. What are the costs of implementing Firstline for local authorities? What are the cost-saving implications of changes in outcomes?
6. What lessons have been learned about the barriers and facilitators to the expansion of the Firstline programme?

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<sup>3</sup> The Theory of Change was developed and amended throughout the evaluation period. The different versions can be found in Appendix 1.

## Evaluation methods

The evaluation team employed a mixed methods design for the evaluation of the Firstline programme's process and impact. The evaluation took place between June 2018 and March 2020. (See Appendix 4 for information on how evaluation questions and methods were matched. See also Appendix 5 for further details, including discussion of limitations.) Data collected and analysed consisted of:

- National data on child protection plans and referrals (including proportion subject to subsequent plan/referral) 2014/15-2018/19 and children's social work workforce data at local authority level 2015-2019
- Team level data on retention in FLLs' teams (n=92, before, at the end, and 12 months after the programme) provided by the Firstline team
- Surveys of local authorities taking part in Firstline about the availability of team level workforce data (n=54, 17 responses) and on turnover and social work recruitment costs to inform cost benefit analysis (n=44, 18 responses)
- Participation, intake and completion data and anonymised demographic data on 448 FLLs (cohorts 1-7) provided by the Firstline team
- 360° feedback leadership diagnostics data (self- and external assessment) comprising 6041 anonymised scores/448 FLLs, provided by the Firstline team
- Collation of Development Focus plans and presentations (n=135) provided by the Firstline team
- Pre-programme survey of cohorts 5-7 (n=137) completed by 75 participants; post-programme survey of cohorts prototype-6 (n=392) completed by 60 participants and repeat of post-programme survey (n=8)
- Standardised instruments on leadership styles (Avolio *et al.*, 2007), job satisfaction (Spector, 1985) and organisational commitment (Mowday *et al.*, 1976), integrated in both pre- and post-programme surveys
- Observations of 9 supervision sessions in 3 Firstline local authorities, 3 team meetings in 2 Firstline local authorities, and all 3 Firstline residential modules.
- Interviews with 6 Firstline staff, 4 Leadership Development Advisers (LDAs), 7 senior managers and workforce development managers in 3 local authorities participating in Firstline and had management roles for the FLLs, 7 senior managers and workforce development managers in 5 local authorities that did not participate in Firstline, and 2 managers with experiences of alternative leadership programmes.

## Changes to evaluation methods

There were several main changes to evaluation methods compared with the proposal.

No team level Difference in Difference analysis of workforce outcomes was completed. The evaluation team endeavoured to collect team level data from local authorities that were participating in the Firstline programme and those that were not in order to assess if Firstline affected retention/turnover of children's social work staff. After initial conversations with senior managers in two local authorities it emerged that it would be not be possible for either local authority to provide these data. They were not regularly collected at team level and even in authorities who had access to team level workforce information, the likelihood of organisational restructuring and natural staff churn made it nearly impossible to compare the impact of an initiative.

An online survey was set up and all 54 local authorities taking part in Firstline were invited to provide information on what team level data would be available and the feasibility of providing this to the evaluation team. Analysis of these data led to the conclusion that it was not possible to conduct a Difference in Difference analysis of team level workforce data. (See Appendix 7 for further information.)

The evaluation team planned to use the Organisational Social Context (OSC), a normed questionnaire measuring the culture and climate in social service organisations. The team planned to administer this in six local authorities (3 taking part in Firstline, 3 that did not). One set of OSC data was collected in one participating local authority; it proved difficult to complete the exercises in the other authorities before COVID-19 lockdown was imposed. (See Appendix 5 for further information.) The impact of not using OSC data is that any changes in the organisational culture and climate of participating local authorities cannot be assessed.

The evaluation team intended to observe supervision and team meetings in one non-Firstline local authority to explore any differences between these and those in Firstline local authorities. Due to delays in arranging observations, as access to team managers and their teams in non-participating local authorities proved difficult, and COVID-19 restrictions, this element had to be set aside and the impact of this is that there are no comparable data to draw upon.

The Firstline team explained that the 'Kick-off' and 'Wrap-up' meetings were mainly of an organisational nature and that observation of them would not be appropriate for the evaluation team.

## Limitations of the evaluation

Limitations of individual methods are outlined in the detailed description on methodology in Appendix 5. In summary the main limitations are:

- A low response rate for both the pre- and the post-programme surveys.
- Delays owing to problems in gaining access to conduct observations in non-Firstline authorities, and several observations in Firstline authorities being cancelled when individuals had to attend court or were ill. This led to fewer observations than intended and fewer interviews conducted with practitioners and managers.
- Gaining permission from senior managers to access FLLs in local authorities proved difficult, as they were reluctant to add to FLLs' or their teams' workload and burden by asking them to fill in questionnaires or to attend observed meetings.
- The evaluation was reliant on Firstline providing data on outcomes and on the distribution of the surveys. While this was necessary and data were robust, it might be seen to compromise the independence of the evaluation although the evaluation team has no reason to believe this was the case.
- Due to a lack of available team level data the ability to quantify the benefits of Firstline training in terms of its impact on staff retention was limited. As the outcomes used for costing benefits were based mainly at local authority level, it was not possible to identify strong causal connections between Firstline training and change in outcome. We have provided reasonable estimates of the outcomes that are considered achievable and reasonable based on the available evidence.

### 3. Key findings

The key findings address the evaluation questions as set out above.

#### 3.1 Participation

Since the prototype cohort, 448 social work managers in seven cohorts have started Firstline training. Completion data are only available for cohorts 1-6, as cohort 7 (n=72) continued beyond the end of this evaluation. Of 376 FLLs who started the 10 month course in cohorts 1-6, 364 (97%) completed the programme. In the Autumn 2019 a cohort of 72 started from 21 local authorities, data on completion were not available at the time of the evaluation.

**Table 1: Firstline participants and completions by cohort**

Cohorts	Participants	Completed	% Completed	Organisations
Autumn 16	23	22	96%	4
Spring 17	65	64	98%	12
Autumn 17	70	67	96%	19
Spring 18	62	62	100%	19
Autumn 18	84	80	95%	23
Spring 19	72	69	96%	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>376</b>	<b>364</b>	<b>97%</b>	<b>56</b>

Source: data provided by Firstline team

Fifty-six organisations (comprising 55 local authorities and one regional adoption agency) have sent staff on the training since the prototype cohort. Participation rates vary greatly between local authorities, with 14 (24%) of the participating authorities accounting for over half (53%) of all FLLs. While the prototype cohort started with 40 FLLs and the first cohort had 23 FLLs, the number of FLLs per cohort has risen to about 70, with 84 FLLs in cohort 5. Firstline staff said that numbers were as low as it was possible to go in financial and logistical terms and still be able to:

- a) organise residential modules and local authority group coaching sessions,
- b) allow FLLs to have the sense of it being a personalised programme in which they would be able to network with each other.

Local authority interviewees confirmed that they had been asked by Firstline to send a minimum number of FLLs on each cohort. Firstline staff consider this encourages peer learning in Practice Sessions, greater embedding of learning in the wider workforce, and development in groups.

Of the 448 FLLs, their gender was known for all but one: 85% were female and 15% male, which reflects national demographic data on social workers, where 86% were female in 2019 (DfE, 2020). Seventy-one per cent were in the 30-39 (35%) or 40-49

(36%) age group (Table 14, Appendix 6), which is higher than the national figure of 55% in those age groups, and may reflect the experience of those attending. Ethnicity was known for 444 FLLs with 82% indicating that they were white, 9% black/black-British, 6% Asian/Asian-British, 2% mixed, and 1% other (Table 15, Appendix 6). While generally in line with the national data they are slightly higher for white and lower for black ethnicity than the national social work profile (by 2%) (DfE, 2020)<sup>4</sup>. The majority worked in Children in Need/Child Protection (39%) and Looked After Children (26%) teams (see Table 16 in Appendix 6 for details).

According to Firstline the small number that did not complete the programme (n=12) did so for personal or work-related reasons, rather than anything that was training related. One respondent to the post-programme survey said that they had not completed the training as they had moved to a role without line management responsibilities and it had been decided by their line manager that participation should cease (no further details were provided).

FLLs responding to the post-programme survey (n=60) were asked to say why they had applied. They could choose one or more response from a list or provide their own, see Table 2 below. About two thirds (n=38 / 63%) said that they had been encouraged by their line manager or employer, 24 (40%) had followed a recommendation from colleagues in their own organisation, and a small number (n=5 / 8%) said that they had read about the programme in the press or on social media.

**Table 2: Reasons to apply to undertake the Firstline programme**  
**Question: What first led you to apply to undertake the Firstline Programme?<sup>5</sup>**

Encouragement by my line-manager/employer	63%
Recommendation from colleagues in my organisation	40%
I read about it in the press/on social media	8%
Recommendation from colleagues in another organisation	2%
Other	3%
Prefer not to say / n/a	2%

n=60

Source: pre- and post-programme survey completed by FLLs

FLLs were also asked, in both the pre- and the post-programme surveys, why they wanted to undertake the Firstline programme. The most frequent reasons were to improve their leadership skills (pre: 89% / post: 99%), their confidence (pre: 56% / post: 63%), and their effectiveness in carrying out their current job (pre 52% / post 55%). Table 3 below provides more details.

<sup>4</sup> DfE reports demographic information on the entire children and family social worker workforce, not differentiating different roles, such as team manager.

<sup>5</sup> Percentages add up to more than 100% because participants were asked to select all that apply or to give their own reasons.

**Table 3: Reasons given by participants for undertaking the Firstline programme**

**Question: What were your 3 main reasons for undertaking the Firstline Programme? <sup>6</sup>**

	<b>% Autumn 18</b>	<b>% Spring 19</b>	<b>% Autumn 19</b>	<b>% All pre surveys</b>	<b>% Post survey</b>
It will improve my leadership skills	92	83	93	89	99
It will improve my confidence in carrying out my current job	52	61	56	56	63
It will help me carry out my current job more effectively	56	57	44	52	55
It will improve my chances of promotion	32	4	11	16	15
It will improve my practice skills	28	26	22	25	28
It will be personally satisfying	16	17	19	17	10
It will improve the way I share knowledge and expertise with colleagues	12	39	41	31	13
It will help the way I manage and prioritise my workload	12	13	7	11	8
It will improve my chances of applying successfully for another job	-	-	7	3	8
Other	-	-	-	-	-
Total n	25	23	27	75	60

Source: pre- and post-programme survey completed by FLLs (rounded)

Local authorities' reasons for supporting their staff to participate in Firstline had both an individual focus and a focus on potential changes and benefits for the authority. So, for example, some local authority interviewees said that the programme was viewed as part of their authority's wider staff development scheme on leadership and management, while others emphasised individuals' development. It was also viewed as part of retention strategies; team managers were seen to play a key role in the retention of front-line social workers, not least in operationalising the decisions of the senior management team.

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<sup>6</sup> Percentages add up to more than 100% because participants were asked to select all that apply or to give their own reasons.

## 3.2 Changes to confidence, skills, and competence in FLLs in terms of Capability Frameworks

This section explores the changes to confidence, skills and competence on the basis of FLLs' self-assessments and comments, the views and perspectives of local authority senior managers and Firstline staff, and observations by the evaluation team.

### 360° feedback leadership diagnostic

Outcomes of FLLs' self-assessment and scoring by their nominated mix of colleagues as part of the 360° feedback leadership diagnostic pre and post participation in Firstline showed that on all the items FLLs rated themselves as having improved statistically significantly against all the Firstline capabilities, as did their peers (both team members and colleagues on the same level) and their senior managers.

**Table 4: Changes in mean scores on the Firstline Capabilities after undertaking the Firstline Programme as measured using 360° feedback diagnostic**

	Pre self rating	Post self rating	Pre peer rating	Post peer rating	Pre manager rating	Post manager rating	p value
Resilience and reflexivity	2.66	3.06	3.15	3.33	2.87	3.16	.00
Analysis and decision making	2.61	3.04	3.15	3.33	2.82	3.07	.00
Professional authority	2.72	3.13	3.27	3.40	2.95	3.21	.00
Impact and influence	2.64	3.08	3.23	3.38	2.86	3.14	.00
Learning and developing others	2.87	3.21	3.20	3.37	2.96	3.25	.00
Inspiring others	2.63	3.05	3.13	3.30	2.91	3.22	.00
Holding to account	2.52	2.99	3.13	3.28	2.8	3.07	.00
Moral purpose	2.97	3.26	3.4	3.52	3.17	3.43	.00
Valid n	421	399	2456	1823	421	353	

Source: data provided by the Firstline team

### Confidence

In the interviews, Firstline staff stated that increased confidence was necessary to become a competent leader, as social workers often showed a lack of confidence in their

own leadership abilities before undertaking leadership training. FLLs responding in the post-programme survey reported an increase in confidence after undertaking the training related to many aspects of their role, including in decision making, instigating changes to day-to-day operations, in challenging peers and senior managers, as well as in themselves as leaders:

Without the Firstline programme I would not be the leader I am today working with confidence to discuss progress and changes for the children and families who we work alongside. – *Post-programme survey*

This view was shared by senior managers interviewed in one of the case study sites who said that their FLLs had become more confident. While this was the majority view, not every one agreed, reflections from these interviews included one, for example, from a senior manager from another site who said that participants taking part in an alternative leadership programme at a university showed greater confidence than Firstline attendees. However, it is not known if that university programme focussed to a greater extent on increasing confidence.

## **Impact on and improvement of practice**

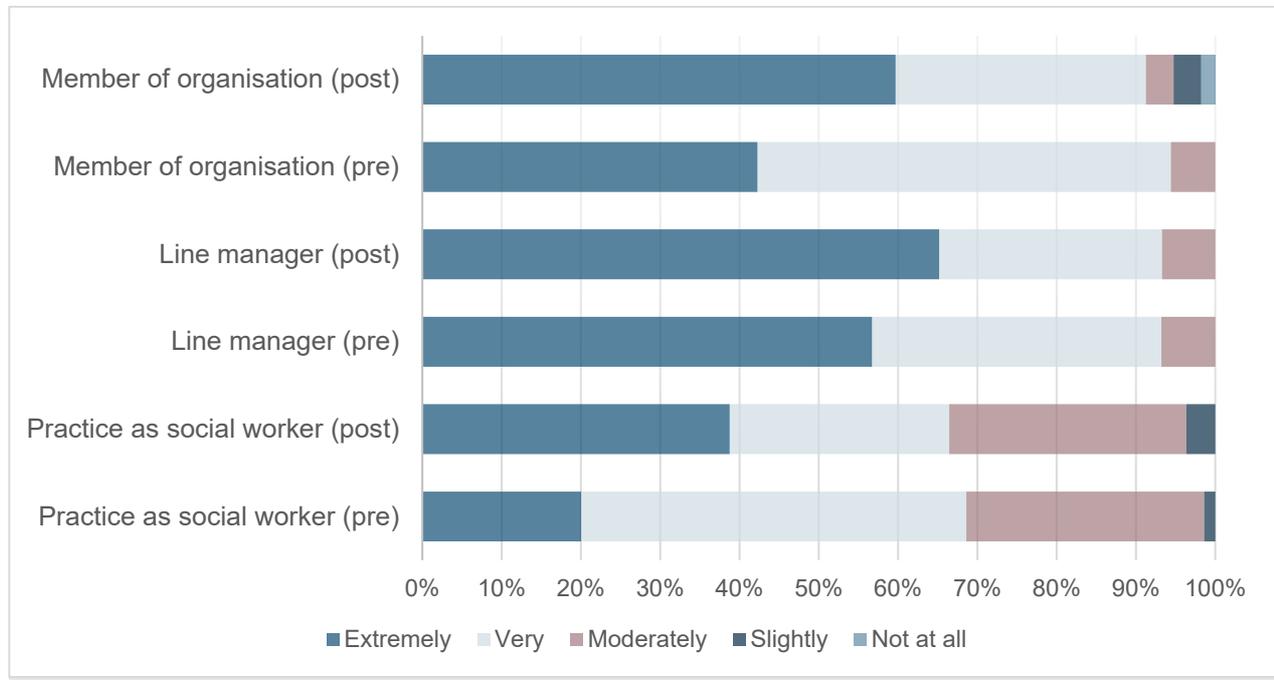
As part of the post-programme survey, FLLs were asked to report on any of the practical advice and techniques covered in the programme that they had transferred to day-to-day practice. (For detailed information on the elements and activities see Appendix 3.) Fifty respondents gave details, and about half of these said that they were applying 'Radical Candour', a theory and process taught in the programme, by challenging others directly and holding others to account. Twenty said that they used techniques learnt on holding 'Difficult Conversations', another important element of the programme. Fourteen said that they had developed a 'collective mission' within the team based on 'Public Narrative'. Other respondents mentioned reflection, feedback techniques, theories and approaches that had been covered, as well as the practical advice that had been offered, including on developing others.

As already noted, in terms of the different aspects of FLLs' role as line managers, practitioners, and staff members in the wider organisation, it is only possible to report trends and not direct comparisons made by respondents. In the pre-survey, FLLs expected the programme to impact most on their role as a line manager and the results in the post-programme survey confirm that this had happened for the vast majority. When asked about the extent to which their practice as a line manager had improved 34 respondents (65%) selected 'extremely', 17 (28%) 'very', with only 4 (7%) selecting 'moderately'. While their expectations of improvement in their roles as social work practitioners and as members of the organisation were slightly lower, their assessments of their actual improvement were substantial with a particular rise in self-rated extreme

improvements in practice as a social worker following the programme. See Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1: Self-rated effects of Firstline programme on improvement of practice as a member of the organisation, a line-manager and a social worker**

**Question: How much, if at all, has the Firstline Programme improved your practice as... a social worker / a line-manager / part of the team in your organisation?**



Pre n=75 / post n=60

Source: post-programme survey completed by FLLs

Senior managers interviewed in the case study sites said that there was evidence that the programme affected FLLs' practice. They considered that FLLs' analytic and reflective skills had improved, both in relation to their own and others' practice. As well as improvements in their ability to make informed decisions, they thought that FLLs were able to communicate their own vision and decisions with increased clarity to staff, senior managers and external partners or organisations. Most concurred with one local authority senior manager who thought that FLLs' belief in themselves as leaders had increased although one was unsure as to the depth of the self-reflection, self-challenge and new self-understanding.

One Firstline interviewee also said that changes to practice were sustainable because approaches and techniques taught in the programme were used long after completing the Firstline programme, based on the information they had received from FLLs in earlier cohorts who reported being able to still apply learning from the programme.

## Changes to leadership style

Integrated in both the pre- and post-programme survey, changes to leadership styles were measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Avolio *et al.*, 2007), measuring changes to leadership qualities. The theory behind the MLQ is that

effective leaders display both transformational and transactional leadership qualities. These are considered to be more effective than laissez-faire leadership styles, termed 'passive avoidant' in the MLQ (Avolio and Bass, 2004).

Outcomes showed an increase in mean scores for survey respondents in almost all items, with one exception ('Management by exception (active)'). The increases in mean scores between pre- and post-programme suggest that FLLs had adopted more transformational and transactional styles of leadership after undertaking the programme, considered to be more effective than laissez-faire leadership styles (Avolio and Bass, 2004). However, we can only report trends because only the increases on the subscales 'Idealised Behaviour' (mean score pre= 3.78 / post= 4.14,  $p=.014$ ) and 'Contingent Reward' (mean scores pre= 3.58 / post= 3.99,  $p=.005$ ) were statistically significantly higher, see Table 5 below.

**Table 5: Mean Scores on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)<sup>7</sup>**

	Pre Firstline	Post Firstline	P value
<i>Transformational</i>			
Idealised attributes (IA)	3.58	3.68	.724
Idealised behaviours (IB)	3.78	4.14	.014*
Inspirational motivation (IM)	3.86	4.16	.46
Intellectual stimulation (IS)	3.85	4.08	.096
Individual consideration (IC)	4.17	4.36	.169
<i>Transactional</i>			
Contingent reward (CR)	3.58	3.99	.005*
Management by exception (active) (MBEA)	2.38	2.31	.617
<i>Passive avoidant</i>			
Management by exception (passive) (MBEP)	1.56	1.64	.420
Laissez faire (LF)	2.14	2.19	.525
<i>Outcomes of leadership</i>			
Extra effort (EE)	3.49	3.72	.108
Effectiveness (EFF)	3.80	4.04	.095
Satisfaction (SAT)	3.76	4.04	.08
Valid n	74	63	

Source: Pre- and post-programme surveys completed by FLLs

## Job satisfaction

Lower levels of job satisfaction are associated with poorer work performance and greater levels of turnover, stress and burnout among social workers (Collins, 2007, Hussein *et al.*, 2014, McFadden *et al.*, 2014, Ravalier, 2018, Smith and Shields, 2013). The literature distinguishes between factors that make social work intrinsically stressful, such as dealing with distressed individuals and families, and those that potentially may be modified, such as workload management or quality of supervision.

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<sup>7</sup> \* indicates statistical significance

FLLs' job satisfaction was measured using the Job Satisfaction Scale (Spector, 1985), which was included in both the pre and post programme survey. Table 6 below summarises mean scores on the Job Satisfaction Scale before and after undertaking the programme. The mean score for 'total satisfaction' (pre= 147.12 / post= 148.26, p=.679) remained stable, but only the change to 'promotion' (mean score pre= 12.08 / post= 12.93, p=.04) was statistically significant. Mean scores on most items increased (alongside 'pay', 'promotion', 'contingent rewards', 'operating conditions', 'co-workers' and 'nature of work'), but were not statistically significant. Mean scores decreased for 'supervision received', 'fringe benefits', and 'communication'. These results suggest that survey respondents thought being able to go on the programme would benefit their promotion prospects. The greater increase in satisfaction with 'co-workers', though not significant, could indicate that the capabilities acquired on the programme, such as holding to account, helped FLLs' relationships with their colleagues or co-workers.

**Table 6: Mean Scores on the Job Satisfaction Survey<sup>8</sup>**

	Pre Firstline	Post Firstline	P value
Pay	15.28	15.60	.662
Promotion	12.08	12.93	.04*
Supervision	16.52	15.81	.152
Fringe benefits	15.83	15.43	.558
Contingent rewards	13.11	13.60	.338
Operating conditions	13.9	14.27	.288
Co-workers	12.44	14.34	.067
Nature of work	11.65	11.73	.807
Communication	19.44	18.01	.227
Total satisfaction	147.12	148.26	.679
Valid n	75	68	

Source: Pre- and post-programme surveys completed by FLLs

In keeping with the literature (for example, McFadden *et al.*, 2014), perhaps the most important finding from the data reported in Table 6 is the way it reinforces the need for a systems approach to job satisfaction that pays attention to those aspects which relate to the nature of the job itself and those which are more about the nature of the organisation in which social workers are employed.

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<sup>8</sup> \* indicates statistical significance

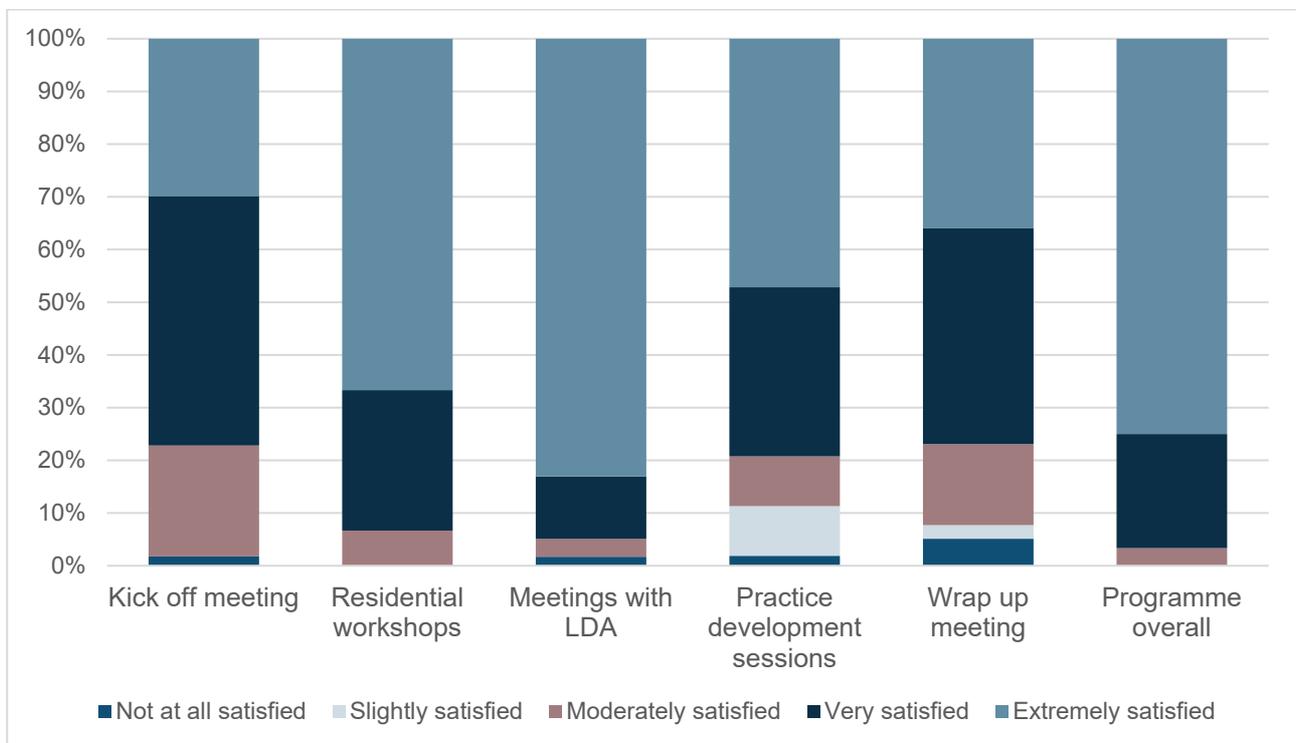
### 3.3 Views and experiences about the programme

#### General impressions and relevance of the programme

Firstline staff said that focussing solely on social workers in children’s social care provided the opportunity to reflect on the specific context, as well as making the training more relevant to children’s social work. Senior managers in the case study sites were generally in agreement with this (although a small number of managers interviewed wished for a wider, multi-agency focus, see below). Firstline staff said that the extended length of the programme would now provide more time to apply learning and enable it to become embedded, however they also said that it is difficult to gain a true picture of the extent to which this was happening. One local authority interviewee, commenting on the length of the programme, concluded that it was “about right” at 10 months to allow time for training sessions to take place and for input to be applied in practice, while not putting too much pressure on the authority from the absence of FLLs during residentials and protected time for self-study. In the post-programme survey FLLs expressed very high levels of satisfaction with the programme. While the ratings for certain elements varied, the majority (75%) said they had been ‘extremely satisfied’, 22% said ‘very satisfied’ and only 3% said ‘moderately satisfied’. See Figure 2 below:

**Figure 2: Satisfaction with the Firstline programme**

**Question: Looking back, how satisfied were you with...**



n=60

Source: post-programme survey completed by FLLs

In terms of relevance, satisfaction levels were near unanimously positive, over two-thirds (71%) of FLLs said that the programme was ‘extremely relevant’, nearly a quarter (22%)

considered it to have been 'very relevant', only 5% 'moderately relevant' with just 1 FLL saying it was only 'slightly relevant'.

## **Views about the main elements and activities of the training**

This section explores the main aspects of the programme by drawing on the views and experiences of FLLs, Firstline staff, LDAs, and senior managers from case study sites. For more details on the elements and activities, see Appendix 3.

### **Application, assessment and acceptance process ('selection process')**

The application, assessment and acceptance process ('selection process') is an important aspect of the Firstline programme. Candidates attend a selection day where they undertake a group exercise that is observed and an individual interview that is attended by staff from Firstline and the local authority to determine the candidate's readiness to participate in and their commitment to the training. As reported by Holmes *et al.* (2017, 10, 29), the programme has been criticised for being 'elitist' and for only allowing candidates whom the Firstline team identify as already 'good' to take part. Firstline staff explained their decision to select only 'good' applicants as they felt that leadership training would show the greatest impact in this group, based on their own research in this area:

This is the research that we did when we were first setting up Firstline, the biggest impact is between good and outstanding –  
*Firstline staff interviewee*

The evaluation team explored how successful candidates were chosen. Several local authority interviewees explained that the process of nomination, application and selection was a joint and shared process between local authorities and teams from Firstline, however, the final decision lay with the Firstline team who would not accept candidates even if nominated by their organisations if they did not fulfil Firstline's requirements in terms of time commitments and readiness to be professionally and potentially personally challenged as part of the programme. Firstline staff interviewed described their requirements as the meeting of selection thresholds which are scored jointly between Firstline and a senior manager in the local authority.

### **360° feedback leadership diagnostics**

The 360° feedback leadership diagnostics was a self- and external assessment of FLLs' capabilities based on the Firstline Capabilities Framework carried out by Firstline staff before and after undertaking the training. Perhaps surprisingly, there were few comments by FLLs about the 360° degree feedback in the post-programme survey, though the survey did not ask for feedback on this element directly. One senior manager interviewed commented positively on the Firstline 360° tool and 360° instruments in general as being a useful way to challenge self-perception and support self-reflection. Five respondents mentioned the tool in the post-programme survey as especially helpful but also

challenging. However, receiving individual feedback, of which this tool was one part, was highlighted more frequently as welcome, with no respondent making a negative comment.

### **Residential modules including main theoretical and practical elements**

The reasoning behind organising residential modules with a whole cohort (around 70+ attendees) was to give FLLs the opportunity to meet peers from other local authorities and to spend time with colleagues from the same employer away from the stresses of day-to-day work. Firstline describe the core aims of the residential modules as being to promote the value of group-based learning, strengthen peer networks, provide insight into different local authorities' operational and strategic priorities. In such a setting there are reduced distractions and resultant increases in FLLs' ability to focus. They also perhaps indicate employers' appreciation of FLLs. Responses in the post-programme survey indicated that most FLLs were very positive about their experiences on the residential: 40 (67%) said that they had been 'extremely satisfied', 16 (27%) 'very satisfied' and 4 (7%) 'moderately satisfied'. There were further comments about how the residential had been challenging in a positive way, had also offered a time for reflection, and given access to theories, expertise and practical advice which had proved useful for daily practice. FLLs appreciated that the residential offered a good opportunity to increase collaboration with colleagues from the same local authority, as well as to meet and network with colleagues in the same position from other authorities. FLLs also said that being able to attend residential modules was not common for social workers and valued the special attention. The least common view among FLLs was that there had been too many sessions or that some keynote speeches had been too long and dry. A few thought that some aspects had not been relevant and that there had been a failure to link content to their practice.

The four main theoretical and practical elements introduced in the three residential received positive and negative responses:

**Radical Candour:** This element, often in combination with holding difficult conversations, was most often mentioned when FLLs were asked about techniques and advice used in daily practice in the post-programme survey.

**Difficult Conversations:** Local authority interviewees felt that the ability to hold difficult conversations was one very important skill for team managers, although one manager thought that good team managers should already possess such communication and interpersonal skills. While several FLLs appreciated the opportunity to rehearse and practise difficult conversations in a safe context and thought this was very useful, a few considered it had taken up too much time.

**Public Narratives:** In the post-programme survey, several respondents commented that the session had been inspirational and reconnected them with their values. Others said that they had used the approach to reflect on what they could do differently, and some

reported having used the technique with their team members with the intention that they would then use it with families.

Direct Observation: Only one cohort of FLLs was able to comment on this in the post-programme survey. Most respondents said that they had found it useful.

### **Leadership Development Sessions (LDSs) / Leadership Sessions with Leadership Development Advisor (LDA)**

This element of the training received the highest scores in the post-programme survey ratings. Over four-fifths of respondents (n=49 / 82%) said that they had been 'extremely satisfied' with it. The rest were 'very satisfied' (n=7 / 12%) or 'moderately satisfied' (n=2 / 3%), with only 1 person being 'not at all' satisfied, finding the aim to have been unclear. Many FLLs commented positively on how the sessions had given them the opportunity to reflect on the residentials and how they had been "thought-provoking", "challenging", "inspiring" and "instrumental in progression". Others highlighted the knowledge of and support by the LDA, one FLL stressing that it was important to them that the LDA was external to their employer. A senior manager also reported that their FLLs had spoken very positively about the sessions; adding that, in their own view, FLLs had benefitted from them.

LDAs themselves felt that the coaching sessions needed to be aligned with the other elements of the programme to offer effective support to FLLs. One LDA explained that the LDSs gave some FLLs the first opportunity to reflect and work through the material and learning from the residentials and to approach application and implementation of content in their own day-to-day practice. But it was also noted that it took trust for FLLs to open up to them as coaches and potentially be confronted with uncomfortable situations. LDAs were aware that six sessions with a mentor came at a financial cost and on balance thought the number of sessions was about right, although one suggested that it would be worth considering inserting two post-programme sessions to reflect further on implemented changes or to discuss alternative solutions.

### **Development Focus**

The aim of the Development Focus task was for FLLs to work individually on a chosen aim, developing new ways of working in their role. In the prototype programme this element was known as the 'Project' (Holmes *et al.*, 2017, 22). While attendees in the prototype cohort were asked to write an essay on the outcomes of working on a personal aim, they now delivered this part in the form of a PowerPoint presentation (though some FLLs used a different presentation format) at their third residential. Though there were no formal limitations as to what FLLs could work on, it was important that chosen aim(s) aligned with the capabilities, related to their actual work, and were achievable. LDAs supported FLLs in this work. While Firstline staff understood that giving this presentation could be quite a challenge, they thought that the way the essay assignment had been developed meant too much had been asked of FLLs, expecting them to address their own development while examining potential changes within the employing organisation

in written format. They also thought that producing a presentation would help to shift the emphasis towards application both to practice and to becoming a 'great leader', which essays did not always achieve. Nonetheless, some FLLs were not comfortable about speaking in front of others.

The evaluation team had access to the presentation of the Development Foci through a) the collation of PowerPoint presentations given at the respective third residential (n=135 FLLs), and b) observation of presentations of one cohort. While surveyed FLLs reported progress on the aims of their Development Focus, in the view of the evaluation team several of the aims were stated in rather unspecific terms or listing of up to 15 items. The presentations often pointed to insecurity in their roles as managers but were infrequently aligned with Firstline capabilities. An examination of the way they were worded indicated that the aims had not always been developed at the start of the programme, but somewhere along the way. While most of the reports were very positive, they were not always attached to the stated aim(s), which is not surprising given the variations in the ways these were constructed.

Many FLLs presented positive outcomes in their presentations, such as higher accountability among team members and improved organisation of tasks and operations, but improvements were not always evidenced. While FLLs did reflect on how learning through Firstline had a positive impact on their own and others' practice, in too many instances it was not possible to see how the linkage had been made. Similarly, it was not possible to determine how input from the programme had brought about change when they made statements such as "the authority is moving from good to outstanding" and "the impact of a good team manager and how this permeates across the authority".

Not surprisingly there were some FLLs who had not been able to achieve what they had expected or at the pace they had hoped, although in such cases the FLLs generally recognised how the training had prepared them to modify their expectations:

At the very beginning there was positivity in the team, however when I started implementing the main area of my Development Focus, namely holding to account, there has been resistance from my team when the areas of development were exposed and I stopped stepping in to do their work. This resulted in their performance dropping significantly, however due to the training I was made aware that this situation is to be expected and that it would get better. –

*Development Focus presentation slide by a FLL*

Finally, FLLs presented how they planned to continue their development and they provided many practical as well as reflective examples (see above) of how they would do this, such as one comment that they would try to maintain work/life balance in their team by not sending emails out of office hours (see also page 37 where actual changes are reported from post-programme responses). This underscored the importance of longitudinal evaluation to assess FLLs' ongoing impact both on their organisations and

on teamwork and collaboration, and an exploration of managerial and organisational facilitators and barriers.

Thirty-seven FLLs commented on their experiences with the Development Focus in the post-programme survey. About a third of these (n=12 / 32%) said that they had enjoyed the element, some of them feeling it was useful for overall or more focussed learning. They commented on how working on it had enabled greater self-reflection, increased their confidence and improved aspects of their practice. However, others considered that it had no impact on their practice. A few admitted to being unsure at the outset about what they were supposed to do and how much time they should set aside for it. Others said that, with hindsight, they would adopt a different approach by choosing a different topic or by focussing on emotions rather than actions. More support by LDAs might have been helpful to overcome some of these minor insecurities and confusion.

There were mixed responses from 3 local authority senior managers that had attended presentations and commented on their experiences. In interview they considered these offered a good opportunity to learn about the progress of their own participants and be able to compare them with FLLs from other authorities. Feedback was generally positive, including comments that some presentations were exceptional. Two senior managers had been able to detect improvement in FLLs' leadership abilities, skills and personal journey through some of the presentations. Just one raised questions about the quality and content of some presentations; feeling that the focus was on personal experiences and emotions without sufficient attention paid to the impact of FLLs' own learning on team members and their organisation or on children and families.

### **Practice Development Sessions (PDSs) / Practice Sessions**

Apart from organisational matters covered in the the Kick-Off and Wrap-up meeting, PDSs were the element of the programme that received, by comparison, the lowest rating and most negative comments in the post-programme survey, however satisfaction levels were still high. Twenty-five respondents (42%) were 'extremely satisfied', 17 (29%) 'very', 5 (9%) 'moderately', 4 (7%) 'slightly' and 1 person (2%) 'not at all', but also 7 (12%) said they were 'unsure'. The minority negative feedback was from those who found the sessions repetitive and too focussed on 'Difficult Conversations', or badly organised. There were also some small complaints about poor attendance from other colleagues (FLLs) who had not prioritised these sessions over other commitments.

### **Issues and recommendations for changing/improving the programme**

In addition to the changes which have taken place since the prototype cohort, Firstline staff acknowledged in interview that there was always room for improvement. To this end Firstline staff said that they asked former FLLs for their opinions and ideas as well as asking current FLLs for feedback regularly throughout the training. One question discussed by Firstline staff was how to achieve a stronger link between the programme

and FLLs' workplaces. They suggested, as did some LDAs, that clearer guidelines might help with this, as would case studies of the experiences of former FLLs.

One LDA interviewed felt that the one-to-one coaching should extend to the role of the FLL's line-manager or other senior managers. Though the 360° feedback (if completed by the line manager) would allow them to express their views about FLLs' development needs, inviting line managers to the first and potentially the last Leadership Development Session would enable line managers to be directly involved in the development of the FLL and would offer the opportunity to discuss support that was available or needed. This reflected the views of one local authority interviewee who felt that Firstline did not offer enough opportunities for FLL line managers to become involved in the programme in general.

While it was generally welcomed that the Firstline team had made changes to the programme to improve content and facilitation, one local authority senior manager interviewed commented that they would expect, as a long-standing participating authority, to be officially informed about changes and not to find out afterwards, as had been the case.

### **3.4 Impact on teams, local authorities, children and families**

This section focuses on the reported impact on FLLs' team members, the employing authority and other organisations, and on children and families, either directly or indirectly.

#### **Impact of Firstline on team members line-managed by FLLs**

##### **Changes and improvement of daily operations and performance**

In the post-programme survey, respondents were asked if they had initiated something that had resulted in a change in their team (or the wider organisation). Out of the 60 replies, 53 (88%) said they had, 2 (3%) said that they had not, and another 2 (3%) were not sure (3 / 5% preferred not to reply). When asked, of those who had made a change, they said this had happened before or after the FL training, 37 (62%) said that it had happened after the training, 14 (23%) said both before and after Firstline, and 3 (5%) said before (6 / 10% did not reply). On examining the examples offered:

- About half of the examples provided referred to an improvement of existing approaches and tools, including changes to supervision and team meetings.
- About a third of respondents indicated that they had introduced new operations, such as new internal training opportunities, group supervision, or implementing support for newly qualified social workers.
- 11 respondents gave examples indicating an improvement in the atmosphere within their team and better life-work-balance.

- 7 gave examples referring to changes in practice with children and families, such as changing the way investigations were undertaken and improving the ways that children/families could feedback to the team.

Based on feedback by former FLLs, several Firstline interviewees reported accounts of how the programme had directly affected the FLLs' teams in terms of improved relationships, engagement and performance brought about by more effective communication and supervision, as well as increased autonomy and confidence among front-line social workers.

### **Changes and improvement of supervision and team meetings**

In the post-programme survey, FLLs were asked whether they had made changes to the way they supervised colleagues since the training. Fifty-five respondents answered this question, almost all (n=52 / 95%) saying that they had done so. Several respondents said that they no longer avoided difficult conversations, while others felt that they would hold others to account more directly and be clearer about their own expectations, as well as providing more specific feedback. There were also those who said that they would implement more reflective exchanges with staff, as well as more frequent supervision, allowing more pro-active and in-depth conversation where there were the opportunities for staff members to express their own views. Some made references to using the coaching techniques introduced by LDAs.

Elements of the Firstline programme on supervision were evident in several of the 9 supervision sessions that were observed. So, for example, one FLL introduced Direct Observations as part of their practice and the supervision meeting was used to reflect further on an observation. Two FLLs were observed challenging others with regard to the quality of services provided by an external service provider as well as by the local authority. In almost all the observations supervisees were encouraged by the FLLs to expand on their own experiences with children/families, with the FLL creating an environment where they were regarded 'the experts' on those cases and where they were encouraged to propose solutions to issues. In the majority of the observations, decisions that the FLLs had made were explained and discussed in detail, allowing supervisees to reflect on these decisions. FLLs also directly challenged supervisees, held them to account, and provided constructive advice, especially around keeping good notes (records) on their cases. Supervisees' own training needs, development, or potential progression were explored in all meetings, but the extent to which this happened varied. Overall, FLLs showed high regard and interest in supervisees' needs and concerns, including in relation to personal matters and emotional wellbeing.

In contrast to the vast majority of sessions, the evaluation team also observed a few meetings where the emphasis was almost exclusively on case management. While direction can be appropriate, there were a few occasions when FLLs told supervisees 'what to do and how to do it' rather than encourage them to develop their own solutions. In some of these observations there were moments where it felt that FLLs did not trust the supervisee to carry out aspects of work; some would not allow supervisees to

contribute items for the agenda and others seemed reluctant to be challenged by supervisees.

### **Changes to staff wellbeing**

Firstline staff interviewed reported tentative evidence that participation of team managers in the programme could improve the wellbeing of their team members through improved line management and support. There was no evidence from the analysis of national data to suggest that Firstline had resulted in improved staff wellbeing as measured using 3 outcomes, although this data has limitations. The three outcomes<sup>9</sup> considered were:

- sickness absence rate (% , 2015-19)
- number of Children in Need (CiN) cases per children's social worker (2015-19)
- average cases per social worker (caseload) (2016-19, numbers for 2015 were not available).

The number of Children in Need per children's Social Worker for Firstline authorities was significantly smaller than that of their statistical nearest neighbours (SNN) ( $p=.001$ ) across all years. (Please see Appendix 5 for details as to how Firstline sites and SNN authorities were identified.) Caseloads (the number of cases per social worker) within Firstline authorities were also significantly smaller than in the SNN authorities across all years ( $p=.019$ ). However, there was no significant effect by year or any significant interaction effect between year and Firstline status, indicating that while the outcomes were significantly different between Firstline and SNN authorities, they did not change significantly over the period Firstline training was being provided. It should be noted that lower caseload does not necessarily imply better staff wellbeing as cases can vary in how complex they are, and good management/supervision can improve wellbeing even with persistently high caseloads.

There was no statistically significant difference between Firstline authorities and their SNN for sickness absence rate although the mean sickness absence rate fell in Firstline authorities from 4.2 in 2015 to 3.0 in 2019 while it increased in SNNs from 3.3 to 4.5 over the same period. The two factor analysis confirmed that neither the difference between Firstline authorities and their SNN ( $p=.114$ ) nor the change over time (.702) were statistically significant. (See Outcome set 2 in Appendix 7 for further details.)

### **Impact of Firstline on the local authority and other organisations**

According to Firstline staff, impact of the programme on local authorities and other organisations could be achieved by improving FLLs' interactions with senior managers and other teams within their local authorities and by improving and strengthening multi-

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<sup>9</sup> These indicators were the only available staff wellbeing indicators in the Shared Indicators for Innovation Programme and Partners in Practice Evaluation.

disciplinary and multi-agency collaboration with other local authorities and external agencies. A senior manager interviewed felt that communication and collaboration between FLLs in their local authority had improved since participating in Firstline, which was attributed to working together as part of PDSs. In the post-programme survey, FLLs were asked about changes or improvement made to their teams, wider local authorities and external agencies. Most examples provided were team based with only a few referring to anything beyond. Those that were reported included better communication with senior managers and initiating meetings with a different team in the authority that had led to a decrease in the number of referrals.

However, in interview both Firstline and staff in local authorities acknowledged that there were limitations both to the impact FLLs could have and their ability to effect changes. One senior manager suggested that Firstline should aim to improve FLLs' ability to translate the learning from the course to the team as well as more widely across the local authority. Both Firstline and local authority staff considered that a limitation of the programme was that it was not multi-disciplinary in terms of participating individuals, though Firstline staff felt that multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working was explored and practised during the residentials and PDSs.

### **Impact of Firstline on children and families (children's services outcomes)**

Firstline staff interviewed recognised that it was difficult to measure and demonstrate the direct impact of the programme on any outcomes for children and families. In their view, as expressed in interviews and as part of the Theory of Change, FLLs could apply skills and techniques learnt on the programme when working with their teams who, in turn, could use these when working with families. So, for example, they could be used in managing difficult conversations with families, addressing their feedback, explaining expectations, as well as challenging and holding families to account. Firstline staff interviewed believed that changes introduced by FLLs had, in some instances, allowed the power imbalance to be addressed enabling families to find solutions rather than be directed to them. However, this linkage was only mentioned by one FLL responding to the post-programme survey. Similarly, the potential linkage that Firstline staff drew between changed and improved working relationship with families and reduced caseloads could not be evidenced one way or another from an analysis of local authority data.

Given the concentration of FLLs within children in need/child protection teams, we decided to focus on four outcomes related to reducing risk to children for the period 2014/15 to 2018/19:

- rate of child protection plans (per 10,000 children, 2014/15-2018/19)
- children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time (% , 2014/15-2018/19)

- rate of referrals (per 10,000 children, 2014/15-2018/19)
- referrals within 12 months of previous referral (% , 2014/15-2018/19).

One-way ANOVA analysis showed that the proportion of children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time was significantly ( $p=.03$ ) lower in Firstline sites compared to their SNNs across the years as a whole. Two-factor analysis (authority type (Firstline/SNN) and year) showed that authority type ( $p=.028$ ) and year ( $p=.023$ ) were both significant effects for the proportion of children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time as the rate had been steadily increasing in both Firstline sites and SNNs since 2015/17. The interaction effect (between authority type and year) was not significant, suggesting that change over time was not affected by Firstline training.

There were no other significant effects for any outcome, nor any for year or any significant interaction effect. Outcome set 3 in Appendix 7 presents more detail.

### **Impact of Firstline on progression**

According to interviewed Firstline staff, career progression was not necessarily a direct aim of the programme, but they assumed that some FLLs might undertake the programme to further their careers. Firstline staff did take it as an indicator for the success of the programme and LDAs reported supporting FLLs to prepare for promotion, for example, by giving strategic advice. FLLs' responses to the post-programme survey indicated that the programme fitted well with their career plans, with almost half ( $n=29 / 48\%$ ) responding that it had fitted 'extremely' well, 26 (43%) said 'very', 3 (3%) 'moderately' and 2 (5%) 'slightly'. Twenty-nine (48%) had been promoted after the training. Nine of these 29 directly attributed it to the programme and they were promoted up to a year after finishing the programme. Other FLLs said that it had increased their confidence to apply or given them the skills they would need in the new position. However, it was not just the fit with career plans that was instrumental. Three senior managers in two participating local authorities confirmed, in the interviews, that undertaking Firstline or an alternative leadership training was now a requirement for promotion beyond team manager in their local authorities. This may not apply to other participating local authorities or local authorities in general. For some FLLs, however, promotion may not be possible, even if desired and if the candidate was suitable, unless a position became available.

### **Impact of Firstline on turnover and retention**

Retention of staff and stability within teams were seen as important elements to achieve improvements for children and families and data on these items were examined as far as possible, alongside an exploration of the commitment of FLLs to their employers.

## Organisational commitment questionnaire for FLLs

Conceptualisations of organisational commitment assume that employees who are strongly committed to the organisation are least likely to leave this organisation. Organisational commitment of FLLs was measured using the shortened version of the Organisational Commitment Scale (Mowday *et al.*, 1979). On this version, scores can range from 9 (very low commitment) to 63 (very high commitment). Respondents' mean scores which were high overall (46) did not change between the times of completion of the pre- and post-programme surveys and may reflect aspects of their selection for the programme in that this process captured staff with already reasonably high commitment to their profession and employer.

## Changes in staff turnover, vacancy rates, and agency rates

Four sets of analyses were undertaken to explore potential changes of staff turnover and, in one set, vacancy and agency rates. As discussed in the Methodology section, it was not possible to collect data on team level turnover from local authorities, so the findings are based on national data for the years 2015-19.

In addition, Firstline provided the evaluation team with data on team turnover for teams of FLLs in three cohorts. Please see Outcome set 4 in Appendix 7 for more details on these three analyses.

The first analysis of authority level turnover data (2015-19) from Firstline authorities and their statistical nearest neighbour (SNN) authorities on children's social workers for three outcome indicators consisted of:

- headcount turnover rate (% , 2015-19)
- full-time equivalent (FTE) agency worker rate (% , 2015-19)
- FTE vacancy rate (% , 2015-19).

There was no significant difference between Firstline authorities and SNNs in either turnover or agency rates, nor did either outcome significantly change over time.

The mean vacancy rate for children's social workers in Firstline authorities increased from 16.3% in 2015 to 17.5% in 2018, although these percentages are driven by a very high rate of vacancies in 2019 in one of the Firstline authorities. When this authority (and its matching SNN) was excluded the mean in 2015 reduces to 15.2% and in 2019 to 12.1% and the difference between Firstline and SNN authorities becomes significant ( $p=.044$ ). Two-factor analysis confirmed that when the outlier was excluded, authority type was a significant ( $p=.044$ ) factor in vacancy rate although year was not a significant factor and there was no significant interaction with year, suggesting that the vacancy rate was not affected by Firstline training.

The second analysis, again for the years 2015-19, was a Difference in Difference (DiD) analysis comparing the impact of Firstline on two counterfactual groups: SNNs and

turnover counterfactuals (TFC, developed from What Works Centre for Children's Social Care modelling).

There was no significant ( $p=.889$ ) difference in the differences between the turnover rate of Firstline and SNN authorities in 2015 compared to the differences in 2019. There was also no significant ( $p=.904$ ) difference in the differences when comparing Firstline with TCF authorities.

The third analysis was based on team level data provided by Firstline on turnover in FLLs' teams from the autumn 2017, spring 2018, and autumn 2018 cohorts at three time points: before the programme, at the end of the programme, and 12 months after the programme ('follow-up').

The analysis showed that the average turnover rate at the start was 30%, compared with 24% at the end (based on 92 FLLs' data), and 22% after the follow-up point (but this was based on a much smaller data sample). Paired sample t-tests found no significant difference in average turnover between any of the periods, although this is to be expected given the small sample size in the follow up group.

The fourth analysis was a survey of team level data ( $n=54$ , 17 responses) asking respondents if they were able to provide data on the team level and, if so, they were requested to provide team level turnover figures for teams with a FLL and teams who had not. Most, 71%, of respondents said they could not provide this data, with the majority saying that the data was not readily available or too burdensome to provide. A further 24% could only provide the data for 2018/19. Only a single authority was able to provide team level turnover data linked to team leader training. Of the 10 teams covered in the data, 6 had a change in team leader during the period in question, leaving only 4 comparable teams. This confirmed the difficulties with accurately measuring the impact that a particular programme has on turnover.

While there were no statistically significant findings in terms of Firstline's impact on staff retention, it should be noted that assessing the impact of any initiative on turnover over time is complicated by natural churn, career progression and organisational restructuring. The only available source of team level data (Firstline's own collection from participants) did show a reduction in turnover (although this was not statistically significant for the current sample).

### **Views of FLLs and employers on turnover and retention**

Senior managers in participating local authorities thought that the experience of Firstline training had given FLLs increased confidence, increased their practice and leadership skills, which might make it more likely they would stay with their employers and they said there were indications that this was proving to be the case. Five of the 60 FLLs completing the post-programme survey had changed employers. They were from different local authorities and from 4 cohorts. Firstline also provided data for FLLs who

had stayed in contact with it after completing Firstline (via the Frontline Fellowship scheme): of 223 people, 203 (91%) were still employed in the same local authority.

Respondents to the survey of team level data also provided information about the turnover of all Firstline trained staff. From the 13 responding authorities, 71.6% of FLLs had remained in the same team, 11.8% had moved teams within the same department and 15.7% had left the authority since completing the training programme.

While it is not possible to provide a robust comparison of turnover rates (due to the varying timings of Firstline training in each authority and a lack of data on team manager turnover rates), we compared the figures for local authorities that had sent the majority of staff attending Firstline between September 2017 and September 2019, with the average authority level turnover between those dates. Two authorities were excluded as the majority of their Firstline training had occurred outside these periods to ensure data were as comparable as possible. (Please see Outcome set 1 in Appendix 7 for more details.)

Of the 11 remaining authorities that provided details of the turnover of their FLL team leaders since they completed their training, 8 (73%) had turnover rates for FLLs lower than the average rate for the authority for the equivalent period. The total average turnover rate (which includes only staff who left the local authority) for the 11 authorities was 16.1% compared to a rate of 11.5% in Firstline participants, a difference of 4.5 percentage points.

In both the pre- and post-programme surveys, FLLs were asked about their future career plans. At the pre stage, the majority (n=65 / 87%) planned to stay for more than one year with their present employer and 7 planned to stay for at least a year. Comments indicated that many FLLs felt a commitment or loyalty towards their employers; some had recently been promoted and so it would be too soon to contemplate a move. The minority who were thinking about leaving would be doing so if career opportunities were not available, because it was time for a change, or if their personal circumstances made it necessary. At post-programme stage, while the majority were still planning to stay for more than one year, more FLLs had either thought about or were planning to leave and some had had taken steps to do so. Nine respondents said that they had actively applied for a position with a different social work employer. Comments indicated that the reasons both for staying or for leaving had not changed. Those who wanted to stay, especially long term, felt committed to their employer or enjoyed the work conditions and culture in their organisation. Most of those that wanted to leave did so because opportunities for promotion were not available. None of the respondents who replied at the pre stage said that they were looking for work outside of social work, but in the post-programme survey a single individual reported having applied for a post outside social work.

### **3.5 Costs of implementing Firstline and cost-saving potentials of changes in turnover outcomes for local authorities**

To assess the cost for local authorities to implement Firstline and to explore possible savings by increasing retention/reducing turnover, the evaluation team undertook a cost benefit analysis simulation. The data on potential savings presented here are best estimates of both costs and possible impacts, based on a range of assumptions, and should be treated with great caution.

#### **Cost of social worker and team manager turnover**

To gain knowledge about cost of social worker turnover in Firstline authorities, a survey was sent to local authorities (n=44) participating in Firstline, 18 responses were received. (See Outcome set 5 in Appendix 7 for more details.) Combining all cost elements (recruiting at employment fairs, by advertisement and online; recruiting benefits (though only rarely paid); cost for involved internal personnel for screening and interviewing; cost of lost output and limited productivity; and cost differential between using agency staff and employed staff) results in total costs of £11,077 per social worker and £14,835 per team manager, assuming the vacancies were covered by agency staff while being filled. If vacancies are not filled by agency staff the cost of turnover reduces to around £8,725 for social workers and £10,693 for team managers.

#### **Cost of participating in the Firstline programme**

The total estimated cost of participation in the 10 month Firstline programme is £5,711 per participant. This is based on a £2,900 participation fee per FLL (this figure was provided by Firstline). The fee covered accommodation and catering at the three residentials, the provision of LDSs and PDSs, and all material provided.

The DfE reported that one year's funding was £1,027,406 which, when divided by the total participants in the most recent Autumn and Spring cohorts equals £6,586 per Firstline participant.

The evaluation team calculated that there were some additional costs for attending 3 x 2 days of residentials, such as £1,314 for 6 days work lost (based on daily rate for FLL as calculated based on average salary from the turnover cost survey and employer oncosts of 27.5% from Curtis & Burns (2019)) and £600 for travel. These costs would potentially increase if travel time and participating in the evening dinners were included and travel was more expensive. Again using the daily rate for FLLs, the evaluation team calculated that participating in LDSs, PDSs, the 360° feedback leadership diagnostics and protected self-study time was £1,095 based on estimates of time spent on these elements provided by FLLs in the post-programme survey.

This means a total cost of £5,909 per participant for the local authorities, or £12,495 including DfE funding. (See Table 17 in Appendix 6 for details.)

## **Cost benefit analysis simulation: potential for savings**

The cost benefit analysis simulation considered cost for participation in Firstline and cost for turnover of social workers and team managers (see Table 18 in Appendix 6).

There is evidence from both FLLs via survey data and interviews with local authority senior managers that participation in Firstline has a positive impact on job satisfaction of FLLs. There is also some indicative evidence that participation may have a positive impact on turnover of both FLLs and their team members from team level data provided by Firstline and the reported turnover rates of FLLs. The benefits are assumed to occur over a 2 year period as the data on turnover of Firstline leaders and the team level turnover data both cover this period. We have costed the turnover benefits using the data collected on the costs of staff turnover. We have provided three simulations based on low, medium and high attribution of outcomes (i.e. the high attribution assumes that 75% of observed differences/changes in turnover can be directly attributed to involvement in Firstline).

For turnover of Firstline leaders we have used data from the survey of team level data that identified the average turnover rate (which includes only staff who left the local authority) for Firstline trained staff was 11.5%, compared to an average of 16.1% at authority level across the equivalent period, a difference of 4.5 percentage points.

For team level turnover, the team level data available was provided by Firstline which showed an (albeit insignificant) change in average turnover rate within the Firstline leaders teams of 30%, compared with 24% at the end of training, and 22% a year later.

The total estimated benefits of involvement with Firstline over a 2 year period (assuming 75% attribution of outcomes) are £6,538. The cost benefits are mainly driven by the large potential saving in reducing turnover within teams through better line management. Given the estimated total cost to local authorities of £5,909 per participant, this results in a return of investment (ROI) ratio of 1.1:1, assuming a 75% attribution rate on observed turnover benefits. This falls to a ROI of 0.5:1 when DfE funding is included in the costs, which emphasises the importance of finding a sustainable funding model going forward.

## **3.6 Facilitators and Barriers to expansion of the programme**

### **Facilitators**

Taking part in Firstline requires local authorities to commit and support FLLs. In general, FLLs had felt supported by their local authority while participating in terms of time to meet programme requirements as well the encouragement they received. In the post-programme survey, 20 out of 37 respondents who answered the question said either that they had not needed additional support or had received all the support they needed.

## Barriers

Setting aside time for the learning and coaching as part of the training as well as self-study was a barrier for some but not all FLLs. In the post-programme survey 10 respondents said that they would have liked more protected time for self-study or to reflect on learning, especially after the residentials, and 4 respondents would have appreciated more support from their own line manager, including provision of cover for their own work. Two FLLs and one senior manager said that attending 3 residentials staying overnight was a problem for some attendees, for example as some parents could not easily organise replacement child care. But this potential barrier also applied to alternative leadership training programmes.

Firstline emphasised the importance of employing agencies being open to change, including from the bottom up and this appears to be the case. Only 5 respondents to the post-programme survey, from different local authorities and cohorts, said that there had been a general lack of awareness among their senior management of the programme and what the programme aimed to achieve in their organisation and no organisation-wide approach. Just 1 FLL reported experiencing resistance when implementing changes to operations from a senior manager.

Firstline staff forecast that a possible barrier to the further expansion of the training offer was having to charge fees per FLL although this is not currently a barrier, with the cohort size increasing annually. Initially the programme had been sponsored by national government funding enabling the prototype of Firstline participants to take part free of charge, aside from costs for travel and back-fill where available. However, attendance fees for Firstline were introduced from the second cohort onwards. In this regard the Practice Supervisor Development Programme (PSDP) was seen by Firstline to be its “biggest competitor”.

Local authority interviewees compared Firstline to other programmes on leadership, some of which also offered a social work focus, provided by universities and awarding academic degrees and credits, which the Firstline programme did not. One commented:

[Undertaking a post-graduate certificate] They do three modules and end up with academic credits if they want to take it forward. Firstline is costing me £3,900 a head and they don't get anything. – *Local authority interviewee*

Another local authority senior manager felt that the missing academic accreditation might be a problem for FLLs in terms of being able to apply for positions in local authorities that have not taken part in the programme and so did not recognise it. Another challenge was that, without accreditation, FLLs would not be able to use or carry over credits to another university-based award such as a MSc or MA. However, this situation also existed with some alternative programmes.

Other senior manager interviewees, especially in those local authorities not participating in Firstline but aware of the programme, felt that Firstline was on the level of their internal leadership development offers. Some of them indicated that they would prefer to sponsor individuals to go on supplemental training fitting to their interests and needs rather than a lengthy training programme.

### **Opportunities beyond the Firstline programme – Frontline Fellowship**

A potential advantage of the Firstline programme is that it offers an opportunity for FLLs to engage in further development and networking as part of the Frontline organisation Fellowship scheme (Frontline, 2020). Firstline staff reported that the Fellowship scheme was open to and offered to all FLLs of the Firstline programme. This scheme would offer FLLs the opportunity to develop their abilities and skills further and to network with other FLLs from the same and other cohorts on a national basis to create change for children and young people and families within local authorities. Eight respondents to the post-programme survey welcomed the opportunity to access further training and networking opportunities as part of the Fellowship scheme after Firstline had ended. Firstline staff reported in 2020 that a high volume of FLLs is active in the Fellowship.

## 4. Summary of key findings on 7 practice features and 7 outcomes

As reported in the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme Round 1 Final Evaluation Report (2017), evidence from Round 1 of the Innovation Programme led the DfE to identify 7 features of practice and 7 outcomes to explore further in subsequent rounds (Sebba *et al.*, 2017). This evaluation did not address all features and outcomes.

### **Strengths based practice frameworks**

The Firstline programme aimed to improve FLLs' ability to communicate their expectations and objectives clearly and concisely and to give constructive feedback to team members. Programme elements and activities, such as Difficult Conversations, were used by FLLs to change the way they operated, to hold others to account and to provide challenge in a productive way. Several FLLs also reported that they had used the 'Public Narrative' approach to develop a shared understanding and vision among team members, and that this had led to a more consistent approach to working with children/families. There is evidence from FLLs' and senior managers' comments, and from observations of supervision and team meetings, that improving practice was achieved for the majority of FLLs. A majority of surveyed FLLs (see Table 4) believed that taking part had given them the confidence to change the ways in which they and their teams worked, and, in turn, improve the chances of better outcomes for children and families. However, within constraints of this project, it was not possible to evidence if this was the case.

### **Multi-disciplinary skills sets**

The Firstline programme aimed to improve collaboration with colleagues from other areas within local authorities and external agencies/ organisations. This was covered as part of improving communication and collaboration skills and was a focus of the third residential. FLLs, LDAs and Firstline staff reported that some FLLs chose to enhance their multi-disciplinary skill set as part of working on their individual development aims. However, some local authority senior managers felt that FLLs were not able to explore collaboration with external organisations as the programme was not inherently designed to be multi-disciplinary or multi-agency.

### **Group case discussion**

Several FLLs reported that they had introduced group supervision meetings alongside one-to-one supervision with team members. As part of the evaluation, one such session was observed, and as group supervision meetings were not common practice in this local authority, it can be assumed that the introduction was based on Firstline training.

## **Skilled direct work**

There was some evidence from the observations that FLLs used the skills and techniques they had learnt on the training with their team members who, in turn, may have used them with families with whom they work.

## **Reduce risk for children and young people**

The proportion of children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time was significantly ( $p=.03$ ) lower in Firstline sites compared with their SNNs. Two-factor analysis showed that authority type (Firstline/SNN) ( $p=.028$ ) and year ( $p=.023$ ) were both significant effects for the proportion of children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time as the rate had been steadily increasing in both Firstline sites and SNNs since 2015/17. The interaction effect (between authority type and year) was not significant, suggesting that change over time was not affected by Firstline training.

## **Increasing workforce wellbeing**

While there was no evidence from analysis of national data to suggest that Firstline had resulted in improved workforce wellbeing, there was some evidence, captured through the use of a standardised instrument, that overall job satisfaction increased, although this did not reach statistical significance. FLLs reported greater levels of confidence, also reflected in the interview data from senior managers, which may, in turn, impact positively on team members' wellbeing.

## **Increasing workforce stability / Reduce staff turnover and agency rates**

Based on national data, there was some indication that there was lower turnover in teams managed by FLLs compared with teams managed by colleagues not participating in Firstline. In terms of retention, at team level we found no statistically significant evidence that Firstline had an impact on staff retention or reduction of levels of agency staff however this is based on small data sets and does not mean that there may not be impact. Further research is needed.

## **Generating better value for money**

In the cost modelling/cost benefit analysis simulation, we identified that local authorities might be able to make savings of about £6,149 over a 2 year period by increasing team stability (reducing cost for agency staff and recruitment). This needs to be balanced against the cost of taking part in the Firstline programme, which was in the region of £5,711 per FLL after DfE sponsorship ended (based on information provided by Firstline, although local authority interviewees reported higher participation fees per FLL perhaps reflecting other time committed to the programme). Thus, participating local authorities would 'break about even', though any 'non-cashable' impact, such as increased confidence and satisfaction among staff, might outweigh expenditure.

## 5. Lessons and implications

Firstline's Theory of Change (ToC) recognises the centrality of leadership at all levels as well as the skills required for professional leadership from team manager upwards. The Firstline programme is designed primarily for managers of case holding social workers in statutory children's social care, but it may be of interest to other settings, such as adult social care and the independent and voluntary sectors (one participating employer was not a local authority).

While the programme in general received very good feedback from the FLLs in their survey responses and their senior managers who were interviewed alike, there were comments from a minority of FLLs, managers, and also LDAs that the Firstline team might wish to consider further ways to improve the quality of the programme and thus its potential impact on FLLs, their teams, organisations and also children/families.

One such point related to the content of the leadership capability programme covers the focus on 'Difficult Conversations', as this area was addressed throughout the programme and across several elements and activities. While several FLLs and local authority interviewees felt that it was important for team managers to be able to communicate decisions in a clear way, to give constructive feedback, and to hold others to account, others felt that this element was over-emphasised. One theme that emerged from some of the senior managers interviewed was an over-emphasis placed on communication skills more generally, which could lead to the impression that Firstline was developing skills that team managers should already possess. Some FLLs and interviewed senior managers indicated that they would have liked more emphasis on leadership to support multi-agency working.

The 'Development Focus' and coaching sessions (LDSs) addressed the development of FLLs' capabilities. Some FLLs reported that objectives and amount of time for self-study needed, for example to work on the 'Development Focus', were unclear at the outset. The Firstline team and LDAs could check if such information needs clarifying. Outcomes of working on one's own aims are presented at the third and final residential. However, the quality of a few presentations was questioned by some local authority senior managers and it is the individual FLL's responsibility to take this element seriously.

A clear advantage of the Firstline programme, and one that was valued by FLLs and managers alike, was the opportunity for FLLs to engage in one-to-one coaching. Matching the needs of FLLs with the right expertise of the LDA is a skill and the Firstline team seemed to have been successful in that only one FLL made critical remarks about the one-to-one sessions or their facilitator. There was high commitment to attend and engage in group coaching sessions in most local authorities that were spoken to, where collaboration among FLLs and potentially their teams increased, although in some areas, other FLLs reported less motivation and commitment among colleagues to engage in these sessions. The Firstline team and LDAs may wish to consider if there is a way to

ensure the objectives of these sessions are fully shared. Improving group coaching sessions could also lead to greater collaboration and changes at the departmental level.

Local authorities are now charged participation fees for their team managers to take part in the programme. There are alternative programmes, available for and used by local authorities, that offer a similar content but for lower fees or free of charge. Accreditation of the Firstline programme might improve its status and currency. Some local authority interviewees considered that the absence of academic accreditation might be a problem for FLLs either in terms of being able to apply for positions in local authorities that were not aware of the programme or did not recognise it or when wanting to undertake other training as FLLs cannot carry over any credits.

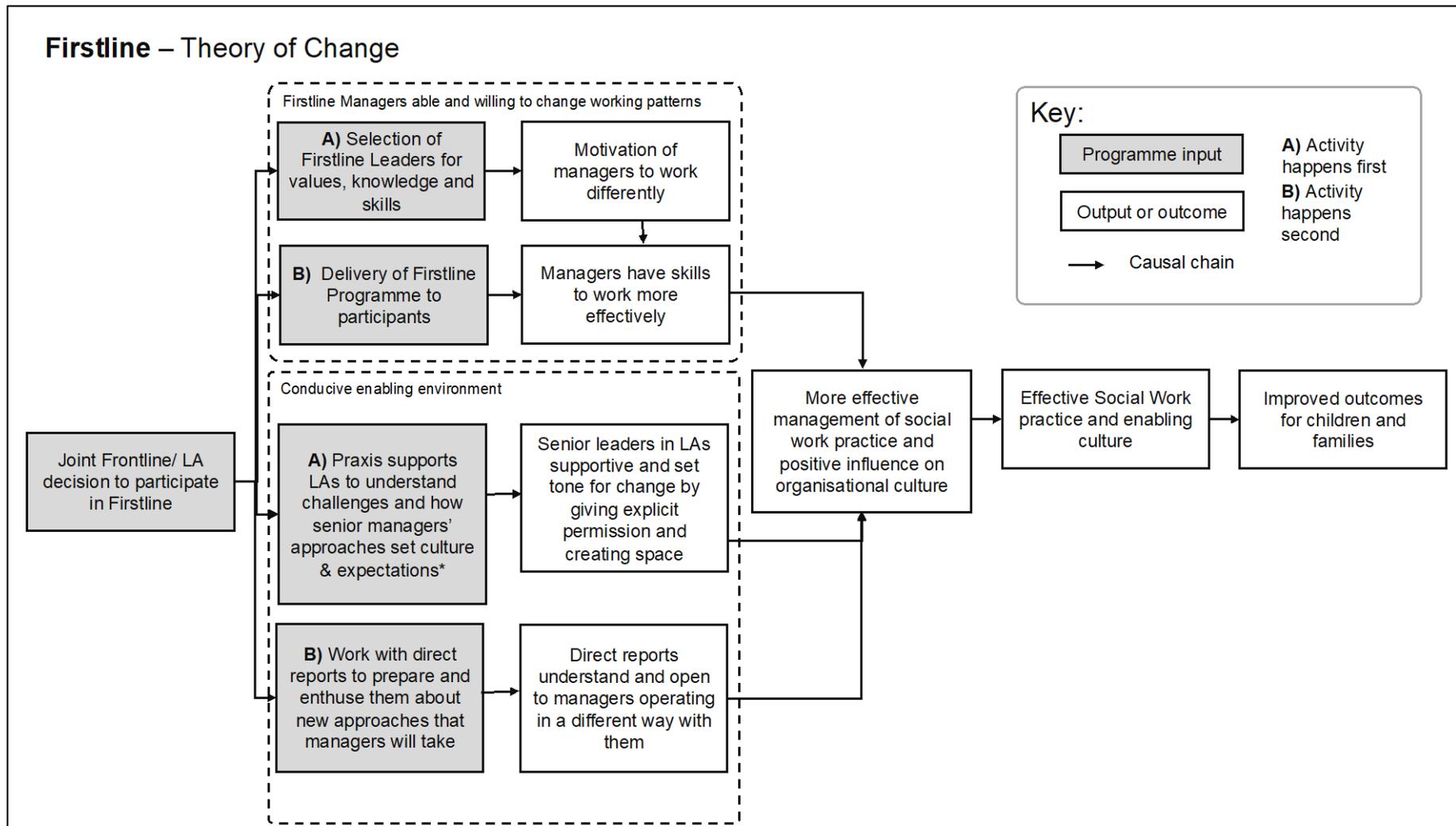
The potential to embed close working relationship between the Firstline team and senior managers in local authorities, including line managers of FLLs, might serve to improve their commitment to invest, not only financially in the programme but beyond . As noted above, a group of local authorities is strongly supportive of the programme, as indicated by their continued support of their staff to attend and Firstline staff report that they work closely with their directors and other senior managers throughout the time that their staff are on the programme. Some senior managers that were interviewed showed interest in becoming more involved in the training rather than only attending the presentations of the Development Focus work (most attend more than the presentations including kick off and wrap off meetings). This wish was echoed by LDAs. Furthermore, senior managers expected to be informed about changes to programme content, but this had not always happened. Greater involvement with the range of local authorities (not just those that have traditionally sent staff on the programme but also those that have not done this so regularly) might help senior managers understand the relevance of new elements and activities and assist in providing corporate and sector commitment.

Finally, in relation to ensuring the sustainability of the programme, discussions with senior managers interviewed in the 7 authorities that were not engaged with Firstline revealed some low awareness of the programme. (A summary of findings from these interviews can be found in Appendix 8.) Firstline might wish to undertake more engagement with such local authorities using evidence of its very positive feedback to open such conversations.

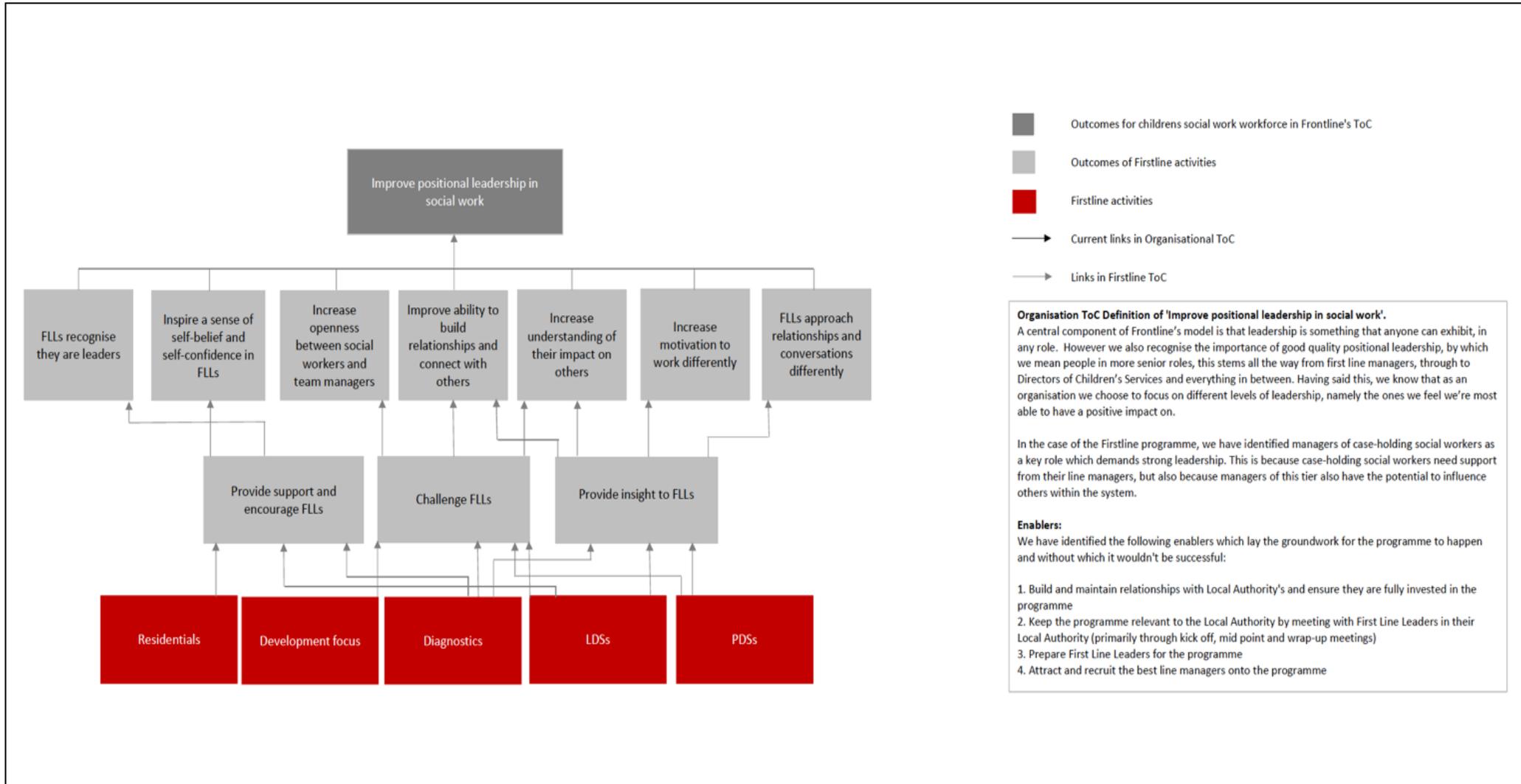
# Appendix 1: Project Theory of Change

The Theory of Change was developed by the Firstline team.

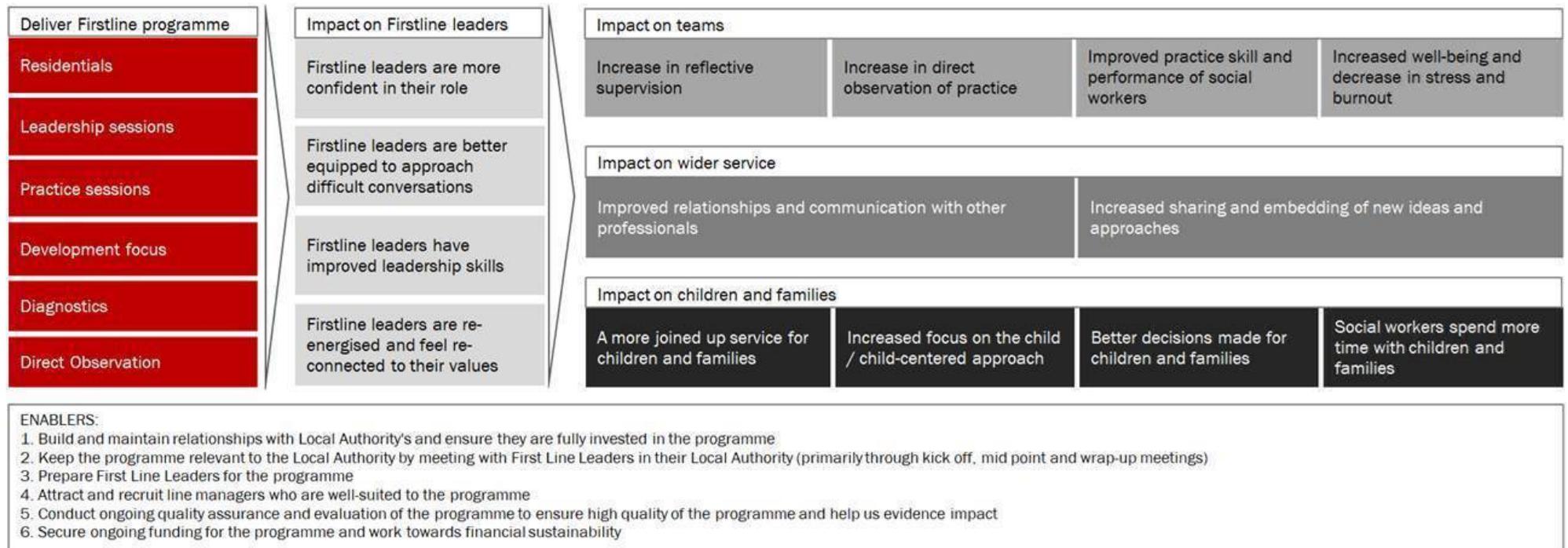
a) Original Firstline Theory of Change at the prototype stage and outset of the evaluation:



b) Updated Theory of Change (March 2019)



c) Current version Theory of Change (February 2020)



## Appendix 2: Firstline Capabilities Framework

The descriptions of the eight Firstline capabilities are based on the Firstline Handbook (Firstline, 2018, 23-24).

### **Resilience and self-reflexivity**

Demonstrating self-reflexivity that enables focus and tenacity when faced with increasingly challenging circumstances. The ability to respond appropriately, manage uncertainty and bounce back even in the most trying situations. To do so leaders must be aware of own personal strengths, potential and areas for future growth and understand how their behaviour impacts on others. This involves being aware of emotional triggers, biases and prejudices and identifying ways to manage these effectively.

### **Analysis and decision making**

The ability to spot patterns between potentially unrelated concepts and use this information to make informed decisions. At higher levels, this involves simplifying complex issues, being innovative, taking a broader view and considering additional information to support decision-making while driving others to do the same.

### **Professional authority**

The ability to build relationships and engender confidence by understanding the thoughts, emotions and feelings of staff and colleagues, and identifying reasons for why others behave the way they do. Using excellent interpersonal skills, first line leaders [team managers] are able to empower others to achieve, building a strong rapport to create a culture which has children and families at its heart.

### **Impact and influence**

To have a positive impact on their teams and partners within the practice system through persuading, convincing and bringing others round to their perspective. Understanding others' perspectives and priorities will enable the first line leader [team manager] to tailor their communication to suit their audience.

### **Learning and developing others**

A curiosity and willingness to develop or acquire new knowledge, skills or experience and develops and empowers their team to do so, to ensure they experience real, significant professional growth. Making the most of opportunities to learn from mistakes, modelling this within the team to encourage curiosity and avoid the development of a blame culture. Uses initiative and creativity to create opportunities for learning and discovering different ways of doing things, personally and for others through long and short term strategies.

Sees the Firstline programme as an opportunity to satisfy hunger to learn, and develop themselves. Continually seeking out opportunities to develop colleagues through activities such as mentoring, coaching, championing and guiding, in order to bring out the very best in them.

### **Inspiring others**

The intention to inspire through motivating and energising social work teams, colleagues and partners, uniting them around shared goals or objectives. Create a motivating and energetic context within which social workers are driven and supported to work directly with families to improve their life experience.

### **Holding to account**

The ability to clarify expectations, set high standards for others and ensure that goals or objectives are achieved. This involved holding others to account for performing in line with expectations. Part of this will also involve using one's own position or authority to get others to get others to do what has been asked of them, and at times, this will involve making tough or unpopular decisions. These choices of actions will always be instigated with children and families in mind.

### **Moral purpose**

To act in a principled way based on a clear set of personal values and makes decisions with the best interests of children at heart. Contributes value as a first line leader [team manager] and is passionate about affecting positive change in the lives of children and families. Has an unswerving belief that social work can play a crucial part in changing lives and improving life chances and believes wholeheartedly that with the right support, families are able to change.

## Appendix 3: The main elements and activities of the Firstline programme

Also see Appendix 5 for further details on how data were collected as part of these elements.

### **Application, assessment and acceptance process ('selection process')**

Candidates attend a selection day where they undertake a group exercise that is observed and an individual interview, which is also attended by senior managers from the local authority. The selection process is designed to assess whether candidates are committed to the training, including their level of preparation to accept personal and sometimes difficult feedback as well as potentially personally challenging and uncomfortable situations. Candidates must commit to engage fully with the programme, including attendance at residentials, coaching sessions and self-study. Unsuccessful applicants receive detailed individual feedback and can reapply.

### **360° feedback leadership diagnostics**

FLLs and a nominated mix of colleagues including FLLs' team members, peers, line-managers and more senior managers, were asked to score participants' capabilities based on the Firstline Framework and to add comments both at the beginning and end of the programme. Individual feedback reports for FLLs were drawn from both self-assessment and the evaluation by others where there was a reply from at least four colleagues/managers. The report of the pre training 360° feedback was usually introduced by the Leadership Development Advisor in the first Leadership Development Session. This element replaced the 'Diagnostics of Leadership Styles and Organisational Climates' as undertaken by the Hay Group for the prototype cohort (Holmes *et al.*, 2017, 24).

### **Residentials**

During the ten months of the training, there were three residentials; one at the beginning of the training, one in the middle, and one towards the end. The residentials featured whole cohort lectures, small group discussions and small group practice sessions. They started on a Monday evening with a dinner and the opportunity to network. Tuesday and Wednesday were full days working on topics. Different themes were covered in each:

- Residential 1: What is leadership - my personal vision
- Residential 2: Change in self and organisations
- Residential 3: Making it happen" (Firstline, 2018, 15).

Four specific approaches and elements were introduced at these residentials and then featured throughout the run of the programme:

- **Radical Candour/giving direct feedback:** The concept of Radical Candour was related to the capability of 'Holding Others to Account' and was introduced on the first full day. The concept behind Radical Candour is to be able to challenge others and to give direct and specific feedback and advice without being or being perceived as being unkind. Firstline staff explained that social work team managers would often struggle with giving direct feedback as this might be perceived as negative by others, they were rather used to nurture but this was not always constructive.
- **Difficult Conversations:** Though the concept of Difficult Conversations was introduced at the first residential, it was addressed throughout the programme. The idea was to teach FLLs how to deal with conflicts in a constructive way based on clear communication. At the first residential, there was a theoretical introduction and then FLLs were divided into small groups led by a trainer. Here, FLLs were asked to think about a former challenging situation where a conversation was difficult or a difficult situation that could occur in the future. In a one-to-one 'role play', where FLLs were themselves, the trainer took the place of the other person involved in the conversation. The difficult conversation was then held and the trainer and attending participants provided feedback. If there was time, FLLs could practice an alternative approach. Difficult Conversations as part of multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working were explored at the third residential.
- **Public Narrative:** The concept of Public Narrative was introduced at the second residential. Participants were asked to reflect on their own values and expectations when joining social work in form of a narrative that still underpinned their work. FLLs were then asked to describe the narrative to team members and to encourage them to share their own narratives. It was felt that this concept and approach could also impact on the work with families and children.
- **Direct Observations:** This element was introduced in 2019. FLLs were taught to observe a meeting between a staff member that they line-managed and a family/child and to give constructive feedback to the social worker. It was expected that observing and improved feedback would have direct impact on outcomes for children and families.

### **Leadership Development Sessions (LDSs) / Leadership Sessions with Leadership Development Advisor (LDA)**

The Firstline programme offered 6 two-hour long one-to-one mentoring and coaching sessions for FLLs with an Leadership Development Advisor (LDA). These sessions happened throughout the training. While reflecting on the findings of the 360° feedback

report was the focus of the first session, deciding and working on the Development Focus happened in the following sessions. FLLs could also suggest their own topics depending on the individual's needs and context. LDAs highlighted that they ensured that content and discussions of sessions were aligned with the other elements of the training. Sessions were also video-recorded and particular sessions were forwarded to an LDA supervisor to review and provide additional feedback to FLLs.

## **Development Focus**

The Firstline Handbook (2018, 12) stated that “the Development Focus will span the duration of the programme and gives you an opportunity to apply your learning from the programme in a tangible way choosing (and working in) a particular way to do something differently”. Though there were no formal limitations, it was important that aim(s) aligned with the capabilities, related to actual work, and achievable. LDAs supported FLLs in this work. This was in step with a leadership development plan that was linked to effecting change and which would include areas someone wanted to improve, responsibilities they wished to assume, tasks that they hope to complete and increased self-reflection (Rubens *et al.*, 2018). Outcomes of the work on the Development Focus were presented at the last residential in front of other FLLs, Firstline staff, LDAs, as well as senior managers attending from their own local authority and other participating local authorities. This was usually undertaken in form of a PowerPoint presentation, but some FLLs chose other ways. Most presentations were based on or around four questions: 1) Aim of development focus, 2) Progress on development focus and impact on own practice, 3) Changes to team and the wider local authority/organisation, and 4) Planned continuation of own development and impact on the team/organisation. In the prototype programme this was known as the ‘Project’ (Holmes *et al.*, 2017, 22).

## **Practice Development Sessions (PDSs) / Practice sessions**

In the prototype programme this element was known as ‘Action Learning Sets’ (Holmes *et al.*, 2017, 21). The Firstline programme offered FLLs four two-hour group practice and coaching sessions, which took place in the local authorities and across the time of the programme, they were facilitated by a LDA. The aim was to practice more Difficult Conversations, but participants were also asked to bring forward other issues for discussion. LDAs said that dealing with Difficult Conversations and collaboration with external partners were typical topics explored during the sessions.

## **Improved support for Leadership Development Advisors (LDAs)**

Similar to the changes and improvement to the programme's content, changes were also made by Firstline in terms of working with and supporting LDAs. Initially, LDAs were supposed to feedback to Firstline on a monthly basis, this was extended to a quarterly basis. However, LDAs felt that this was sufficient as supervision and support were always

available via the regional programme co-ordinators when needed. The more recent installation of an LDA supervisor ('Super-LDA') was in general welcomed by LDAs as the person would offer extended support and supervision for LDAs based on the video recordings of LDSs or when needed. The annual national LDA meetings and more frequent regional meetings were also appreciated.

## Appendix 4: Matching evaluation questions and evaluation methods

Detailed list of data collection and analysis methods as matched against evaluation questions.

1. Is the number of Firstline leaders who completed the programme broadly in line with Firstline's objective of training 420 leaders during 2017-20 across 16 different authorities? What proportion of those nominated for the programme did not complete it and why?

This question was answered using anonymised demographic data on 448 FLLs from cohorts 1-7 as provided by the Firstline team. The evaluation team also explored comments from the post-programme survey and interviews with Firstline staff.

2. What changes were there in the self-rated confidence, skills, and competence of Firstline Leaders pre and post completing the programme and as rated by their managers and other team members and Firstline staff, Leadership Development Advisors and residential facilitators in terms of the Professional Capabilities Framework, the Knowledge and Skills Statements for Child and Family Social Work and the Firstline Capability Framework (moral purpose; analysis and decision making; learning and developing others; holding to account; effect on others and influence; inspiring others; professional authority; and resilience and reflexivity)?

The findings answering this question are based on analysing anonymised data from the 360° feedback leadership diagnostic that the Firstline team undertakes before and after the training and also the content of Development Focus presentation slides as provided by the Firstline team. The evaluation team analysed data and comments by FLLs in the pre- and post-programme surveys, including those from administering 2 standardised instruments on leadership styles and job satisfaction. Another focus of analysis were the observations of 9 supervision and 3 team meetings led by FLLs. This question was further informed by reporting on findings of analysing the interviews with 7 local authority senior managers from the case study sites. Further information was taken from interviews with Firstline staff and LDAs, and observing the residential.

3. What are the views and experiences of participants (Firstline Leaders - FLLs), Leadership Development Advisors, and the managers of Firstline Leaders about the programme?

To answer this evaluation question the pre- and post programme surveys as submitted by FLLs were analysed. The evaluation team also used data and information collected when observing the 3 residential. In addition, data from interviews with 7 senior managers in case study sites and also 7 from local authorities that did not send any

attendees to this training were used. Interviews with 6 Firstline staff and 4 LDAs were further explored to inform the question.

4. What difference (if any) does participating in the Firstline Programme have upon organisations and the profession of children and families social work in terms of perceptions of how it has made a difference to the service provided to children and families and overall vacancy and retention rates, and on Firstline leaders' job satisfaction, career progression, retention and intention to remain within their employing organisation and the social work profession during the study period and in the future?

The evaluation team analysed national data on both children's social care services and workforce data on local authority level to answer question 4. Retention data in teams of FLLs' on team level were also analysed. Additionally and similar to evaluation question 2, the evaluation team based its analysis on the anonymised data from the 360° feedback leadership diagnostic and the content of Development Focus presentation slides provided by the Firstline team, data and comments provided by FLLs in the pre- and post-programme surveys, now including all three standardised instruments, observations of the residentials and of both supervision and team meetings led by FLLs, and interviews with local authority senior managers from case study sites, Firstline staff and LDAs.

5. What are the costs of implementing Firstline for local authorities? What are the cost-saving implications of changes in outcomes?

The answer to this question is based on information provided in two surveys by local authorities taking part in Firstline on turnover and social work recruitment costs and about the availability of team level workforce data, in addition the team used information provided by the Firstline team on retention in FLLs' teams. National data on both children's social care services and workforce data on local authority level were also used. To further answer the question and to carry out a cost benefit analysis simulation the team used information from interviews with Firstline staff and case study site interviewees.

6. What lessons have been learned about the barriers and facilitators to the expansion of the Firstline programme?

Question 6 was answered by analysing comments by FLLs in the post-programme survey and by senior managers in both case study sites and local authorities not taking part in Firstline. The team also used information and comments from interviews with Firstline staff and LDAs.

## Appendix 5: Evaluation methods

This section provides details about the individual evaluation methods.

The evaluation team has provided the tools and instruments utilised, where possible, in an additional appendix.

As a first step the evaluation team needed to define what would 'count' as a 'Firstline authority' (local authority taking part in Firstline) and what would count as non-Firstline site (local authority not undertaking the programme).

### **Identifying Firstline authorities and potential case study sites**

Since the first prototype cohort, 7 cohorts have gone on the Firstline programme. A spring cohort starts in February/March and runs until the end of the year, and an autumn cohort starts in August/September and runs until the following year. The staggered nature of the cohorts makes it difficult to identify accurately the proportion of staff within each authority that has had Firstline training in any one year.

As authorities had varying participation rates and participated in different cohorts, identifying a consistent and robust group for analysis was not simple. A total of 58 organisations had sent staff on Firstline training (including the prototype cohort). To identify suitable local authorities for the analysis, the following exclusion criteria were applied:

- Organisations must have sent staff on more than one cohort.
- Organisations must have sent more than 4 staff (the average attendees per organisation per cohort) in total across all cohorts.
- Organisations must have sent some staff in either autumn 2016 or spring 2017 and further staff in either autumn 2017 or spring 2018 (these cohorts are relevant due to the timings of the available workforce turnover data).
- Organisations must have sent some staff in one of the following cohorts: autumn 2018, spring 2019, autumn 2019 (this is a proxy for continued commitment to Firstline).

A total of 7 authorities met these criteria, hereafter referred to as Firstline authorities, with details of the total number of exclusions under each criterion provided in Table 7:

**Table 7: Exclusion criteria for identifying 'Firstline Authorities'**

	<b>Organisations excluded</b>	<b>Total remaining organisations</b>
Total organisations		58
More than one cohort	24	34
More than four staff in total	18	16
Attendees in both 2016/17 and 2017/18	7	9
Attendees in either 2018/19 or 2019/20	2	7
Included in Analysis		7

### **Identifying and selecting non-Firstline authorities for quantitative analysis**

Having identified the relevant Firstline authorities, it was necessary to identify and select counterfactual authorities (non-Firstline authorities), which could be used as a comparison group to the Firstline authorities.

One of the anticipated impacts of the Firstline programme is a reduction in turnover, both in participants and in people directly managed by participants. As such we wanted to ensure that the counterfactual group was as close as possible to the Firstline authorities in terms of their turnover rate prior to the programme starting.

We undertook two-cluster analysis<sup>10</sup> based on both the turnover rate in 2014/15 and the percentage change in turnover rate from 2014/15 to 2015/16. The two cluster models were then combined with the statistical nearest neighbours (SNN)<sup>11</sup> for each of the seven Firstline authorities, and the closest SNN that was in the same or adjoining turnover cluster and change in turnover cluster was chosen as the comparison site. A breakdown of the pilot and comparator sites by broad region, type and CSC grade is provided in Table 8:

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<sup>10</sup> The number of clusters was specified as five and we used Square Euclidian distance as the distance measure. Ward's method provided the most evenly distributed clusters so was used as the cluster method.

<sup>11</sup> Based on the Children's Services Statistical Neighbour Model available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-interactive-tool-lait>

**Table 8: Characteristics of non-Firstline sites and statistical nearest neighbours (SNNs)**

	<b>Firstline sites</b>	<b>SNNs</b>
English Unitary	1	2
London Borough	2	1
Metropolitan District	1	1
Shire County	3	3
London	2	1
South	1	3
Midlands/North	4	3
Inadequate – Ofsted judgement	0	0
Requires improvement – Ofsted judgement	3	4
Good – Ofsted judgement	4	3

For further analysis of turnover rates, using a beta version of a counterfactual model developed by the What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care<sup>12</sup>, a group of authorities that closely matched the Firstline authorities’ turnover rates in 2013 and 2014 was identified. This comparison group is referred to as the TCF (turnover counterfactual) group.

### **Lack of available team level children’s services workforce data for analysis**

As part of the evaluation of the Firstline programme the evaluation team had intended to undertake a Difference in Difference analysis at team level within selected local authorities to assess the impact that the training had on turnover and other measures of workforce stability. This would have involved the local authority providing team level data on turnover, sickness absence and agency staff usage for the years prior to September 2015 and 2019.

Two suitable Firstline authorities were approached. The evaluation team was informed that making these data available was an unrealistic request to make of local authorities as the data was most likely unavailable in the required format and, even if it were possible to provide, would require far too much resource to prepare. As one of the local authority senior managers said:

In terms of how this has impacted on retention etc in each specific team that would not be something I could tell you, the reason for this

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<sup>12</sup> <https://esch.shinyapps.io/BetaVersion-DiDanalysis/>

is because we put all the social work vacancies/turnover together for the DfE quarterly return and do not separate the manager roles that are vacant and filled from the social work roles and they only ask us for social work qualified staff. Splitting this data out for each team would be a monumental task and beyond our capacity to provide. –  
*Local authority children's services senior manager*

Following this initial feedback, an online survey was set up and all 54 local authorities taking part in Firstline were invited to provide information on what data would be available and how feasible it would be to provide this in order to evaluate if and to what extent other local authorities could provide data. The majority of respondents could provide team level data on turnover, sickness absence and agency staff usage, with information on training and leavers more difficult to provide. However, only one-fifth of respondents said this these data were available consistently over a 4 year period. Several respondents cited service restructuring as a factor in the inability to provide consistent data over the past 4 years.

To compare the impact of Firstline training, we would also require those staff who had taken part in Firstline to have stayed in the same post before and after training. Within the responding authorities, 71.6% of FLLs had remained in the same team, with a further 15.7% having left the authority since completing the training, and 11.8% having moved teams within the same department. Compared to the total turnover rate in 2018 in the relevant authorities, the rate of 15.7% in Firstline trained staff was 2.7% lower than the total turnover rate (which includes only overall staff who left the local authority) of 18.4%.

Respondents were further asked whether they could provide a random sample of data from 5 teams who had a FLL manager and 5 who did not. The required data would be headcount and leavers from 2018/19 and 2015/16 along with information about the team leaders' training. Seventy one per cent of respondents said they could not provide these data, with the majority saying that the data were not readily available or too burdensome to provide. A further 24% could only provide the data for 2018/19. Only a single authority was able to provide team level turnover data linked to team leader training. Of the 10 teams covered in the data, 6 had a change in team leader during the period in question, leaving only 4 comparable teams (only 1 of which had received Firstline training).

The evaluation team concluded that it was not possible to undertake a team level Difference in Difference analysis. While the majority of respondent authorities thought most of the requested data would be available for the most recent year (although with varying degrees of difficulty in supplying it), organisational restructuring and natural staff churn made comparable data over time highly unlikely.

## National data on children’s social care services 2015-2019

National data from 2014/15, 2015/16, 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 were included in the analysis. Given the concentration of FLLs within children in need/child protection teams, we decided to focus on four related to reducing risk to children outcomes:

- Rate of child protection plans
- Children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time (%)
- Rate of referrals
- Referrals within 12 months of previous referral (%)

Descriptive statistics and standard errors were produced for the Firstline sites and their SNNs for each outcome. These were plotted onto a graph to examine possible patterns or trends. To test whether there is significant change over time and also whether there is a difference between Firstline sites and their SNNs across time, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with outcome as the dependent variable and authority type (e.g. Firstline or SNN) and year (2014/15 – 2018/19) as factor variables was used.

## National data on workforce data on local authority level 2015-2019

Due to the issues in provision of team level data, all workforce data were sourced from existing national collections and the analysis included data from 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. The final analysis included 6 outcome indicators which have been grouped according to the outcome categories identified by the DfE. Table 9 below provides an overview of the outcomes included in 2 categories.

**Table 9: Categories staff wellbeing and turnover and agency rates and indicators**

Category	Outcome indicators
Changes staff wellbeing	Number of children in need per children's social worker Sickness absence rate Caseload: average cases per social worker
Reduce staff turnover and agency rates	Children's social workers – turnover rate Children's social workers – agency worker rate Children's social workers - vacancy rate

Descriptive statistics and standard errors were produced for the Firstline sites and their SNNs for each outcome. These were plotted onto a graph to examine possible patterns or trends. To test whether there is significant change over time and also whether there is a difference between Firstline sites and their SNNs across time, a two-way analysis of

variance (ANOVA) with outcome as the dependent variable and authority type (e.g. Firstline or SNN) and year (2015-2019) as factor variables was used.

For turnover and agency rates, a Difference in Difference (DiD) analysis was undertaken on turnover using both SNNs and turnover counterfactuals authorities identified by the What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care beta model.

**Limitations:**

Turnover data were not available by role or by service area, but they were available in recent collections by age group. We considered including the turnover rate for those age groups most represented at Firstline training (30-39 and 40-49) within the turnover analysis, but the responses in the national data at that level were variable and data were not available for 2015 which was the year prior to any Firstline involvement, and so we concluded it would not add to the analysis.

**Team level data on retention in FLLs’ teams (n=92) provided by the Firstline team**

Firstline asks participants to provide data on headcount and leavers in the teams they manage at the beginning of the programme (covering the 12 months prior to starting and referred to here as ‘before’), at the end of the programme (covering the 9 months of the training and referred to as ‘after’) and in the 12 months following the programme (‘follow-up’). Due to the timescales involved data were only available at time of publication for the cohorts autumn 2017, spring 2018, and autumn 2018. Due to the timing of collecting data 12 months after the programme had finished, there was also a much lower response and data base for that period than the other 2. To ensure a comparable turnover rate figure for the ‘after’ period, a pro-rata figure based on 12 instead of 9 months was created. A total of 92 FLLs provided data for at least 2 of the periods, with the descriptive statistics shown in Table 10 below.

**Table 10: Descriptive statistics for Firstline team level turnover data**

<b>Period</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>mean</b>	<b>std. dev.</b>
Before	86	.300	.304
After	88	.239	.286
Follow-up	24	.221	.302

Source: data provide by the Firstline team

The team level turnover data were analysed using paired sample t-tests to identify significant changes.

**Limitations:**

The data, especially at the follow-up stage (n=24), are very limited, and data were only available for FLLs (see availability of retention/turnover at team level in main report).

There were also only 18 FLLs who had provided data for both the before and follow-up periods.

### **Survey of local authorities taking part in Firstline about the availability of team level workforce data: 17 responses**

The survey was provided on the JISC 'Online Survey' platform. Respondents were asked whether it would be possible to provide team level data on headcount, leavers, vacancies, agency staff use, sickness absence over the year, and the date team leaders (or equivalent) had started managing teams for the years ending September 2015 and September 2019, and, if so, how feasible they thought it would be. They were also asked about the movements of all staff who had undertaken Firstline training to assess the degree to which the natural turnover of staff would cause issues for this type of analysis over time. Finally, respondents were asked whether they could provide a random sample of data from 5 teams who had a FLL and 5 who did not. The required data would be headcount and leavers from 2018/19 and 2015/16 along with information about the team managers' training.

Responses were received from 17 local authorities (31% response rate).

### **Survey of local authorities taking part in Firstline about turnover and social work recruitment costs to inform cost benefit analysis: 18 responses**

As part of the Innovation Programme evaluations, teams were asked to provide a cost benefit analysis of interventions. To undertake the analysis, information on the cost of social worker workforce turnover was used as a main indicator if the Firstline programme could lead to 'cashable' savings for local authority. Turnover was used as the programme aimed to lead to a reduction of turnover among FLLs and their team members.

The team aimed to quantify the costs of labour turnover amongst social workers working within local authorities in England. 'Labour turnover' was defined here as an employee leaving the authority and being replaced by a new employee to fulfil the same role. The costs are estimated under the following headings:

- External recruitment methods
- Recruitment benefits
- Screening and interview costs
- Agency cover
- New starter processes
- Starter productivity

An online survey of 44 local authorities who had taken part in Firstline was conducted, using the Online Survey platform provided by JISC.

Respondents were asked to estimate the approximate cost per post/starter. Where respondents provided a figure covering a particular period of time this was divided by their reported starters (from the DfE workforce statistics) over the same period to create a comparable figure. Due to the high level of variance in the responses all average figures are median unless otherwise stated.

When calculating costs of an employee's time we have included an assumption of 20% on-costs to cover their employer's National Insurance and Pension contributions. We worked on the assumption of 253 working days per year.

For the cost benefit analysis, we did not expect all authorities to use every recruitment method, therefore when calculating the cost in the example authority we have weighted the average cost by the probability of use. Alongside, we have also provided a cost calculator for individual local authorities to estimate the cost of turnover within their own authority.

### **Participation, intake and completion data and anonymised demographic data on 448 FLLs (cohorts 1-7) provided by the Firstline team**

The Firstline team provided anonymised demographic data of all 448 FLLs who had commenced training in cohorts 1-7. Information was provided on age, gender, ethnicity, disability, social work service area, and local authority (employer), and completion data for all cohorts (1-6) that had completed the training up to the end of the evaluation period.

#### **Limitations:**

The evaluation team relied on the Firstline team to provide a complete set of data. Service area was collected from FLLs but this was an open text field and so required coding. Around a fifth provided a generic description of their post (e.g. 'children's services', 'children and families'). (See Table 16 in Appendix 6 for further details.)

### **360° feedback leadership diagnostics data (self- and external assessment)**

The Firstline team forwarded the anonymised scores on capabilities (n=6041) for 448 FLLs for both pre- and post-programme, but not any other information such as the comments provided by colleagues.

#### **Limitations:**

There were some limitations in terms of comparing the scores of the pre- and post- data sets for individuals as it was not always possible for the Firstline team to approach the same set of colleagues at the end of the programme and response rate for the post-programme was substantially lower than for the pre-programme set.

## **Development Focus plans: collation of anonymised content of slides accompanying 135 presentations**

Outcomes of the work on individual aims as part of the Development Focus element were presented at the third residential. Where FLLs used slides for a PowerPoint presentation, the Firstline team collected these and forwarded them in anonymised format to the evaluation team sorted by the four aforementioned questions. The information was available for 135 FLLs from 3 cohorts (spring 2018, autumn 2018 and spring 2019).

### **Limitation:**

The evaluation team had only access to the written content of these presentations, but not the verbal element of the presentations (with the exception of a sub-group of presentations observed in one residential by one evaluation team member).

## **Surveys of FLLs pre and post programme**

Before each programme started a link to an online survey (on the JISC Online Survey platform) was sent on behalf of the evaluation team by Firstline to the FLLs in the three cohorts that started during the evaluation period (total n=137; cohort 5 n=84, cohort 6 n=65, and cohort 7 n=72). This way participation in the survey remained entirely voluntary and the identity of FLLs remained confidential unless and until they provided their name. Reminders were also sent by the Firstline team. The post-programme survey was also sent by Firstline to FLLs in all cohorts who had completed the training (prototype to cohort 6). Invitations were sent to 97.8% of FLLs who had completed the programme (n=392). FLLs who had submitted a response to the pre-programme survey (and given their contact details) were contacted by the evaluation team to submit a response to the post-programme survey to allow data to be compared on an individual basis: 19 FLLs have responded to both surveys. The instruments are included in the additional appendix.

**Table 11: FLLs contacted to take part in pre- and post-programme survey respectively**

<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Number starting</b>	<b>Number completing</b>	<b>Number who were sent the pre survey</b>	<b>Number who were sent the post survey</b>
Prototype	40	37	n/a	35
Autumn 2016	23	22	n/a	21
Spring 2017	65	64	n/a	61
Autumn 2017	70	67	n/a	67
Spring 2018	62	62	n/a	62
Autumn 2018	84	80	84	80
Spring 2019	72	69	65	66
Autumn 2019	72	n/a	72	n/a
<b>Total</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>392</b>

Source: data provide by the Firstline team

Survey data were analysed using descriptive and comparative approaches, comments to open questions were thematically analysed.

As an incentive, respondents to the pre- and post-surveys who so wished were added to a raffle for a retail voucher. The draw was conducted using the random draw function in Excel software. FLLs who submitted a survey were also offered a 1 hour CPD certificate to recognise their participation.

For the pre-programme survey, in total, 75 replies were received:

Cohort 5/autumn 2018: n=25, response rate: 29.8%

Cohort 6/spring 2019: n=23, response rate: 35.4%

Cohort 7/autumn 2019: n=27, response rate: 37.5%

For the post-programme survey, the team received 60 replies (response rate: 15.3%).

The response rates were calculated based on the numbers of FLLs commencing the programme and those that were contactable.

Limitations:

The evaluation team relied on support by the Firstline team to approach FLLs to request their involvement. While it would have been possible for the Firstline team to select certain FLLs over others, there were no indications that this happened. The response rates for the 3 pre-programme surveys, while not good, should be seen within the context of having to complete other assessments before applicants were accepted by the programme and their possible feeling of burden.

The post-programme survey response rate was disappointing but realistic in the context of existing research with social workers where response rates are notoriously low. All

cohorts were represented in the replies, but given the low response rate analysis per cohort was impossible and numbers are only provided on the full survey level.

### **Repeat of post-programme survey**

FLLs responding to the post-programme survey were approached six months after completing the post-programme survey to complete the survey for a second time to measure any changes that might have occurred with more time having passed since completing Firstline. The Firstline team also asked and reminded FLLs that had completed the programme in general to complete the survey. Conditions of repeating were the same as with the post-programme survey (including ability to enter the prize draw and receiving a CPD certificate for submission). Eight responses were received, response rate: 13.3%.

#### **Limitations:**

Given that the response rate for a first reply to the post-programme survey was already low, it was difficult to recruit FLLs to complete the survey for a second time. Although there were 8 replies in total, 3 repeats were done within only a couple of weeks. For the analysis of data, replies were considered but participants were of course only counted once. For the standardised instruments all replies were used as it was only possible to report trends in this evaluation given the limited overlap of FLLs responding to both the pre and post-programme surveys.

### **Standardised instruments: Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire**

Included in both the pre and post-programme survey, changes to leadership styles were measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Avolio *et al.*, 2007). The MLQ has been used extensively in research and work settings to measure a broad range of leadership styles (Avolio and Bass, 2004, Avolio *et al.*, 2007, Bass and Avolio, 1994). The theory behind the MLQ is that effective leaders display both transformational and transactional leadership qualities. These are considered to be more effective than laissez-faire leadership styles, termed 'passive avoidant' in the MLQ (Avolio and Bass, 2004). The current version, MLQ (5X-Short), consists of 45 items that identify and measure key leadership styles and effectiveness of leadership behaviours, research has strongly linked it with both individual and organizational success (Avolio and Bass, 2004).

The questionnaire is licensed but the developers allow four items to be shared in publications to give a sense of the content:

**Table 12: Items from Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)**

	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Once in a while</b>	<b>Some-times</b>	<b>Fairly often</b>	<b>Frequently, if not always</b>
As a leader I ...					
say exactly what I mean	0	1	2	3	4
demonstrate beliefs that are consistent with actions	0	1	2	3	4
solicit views that challenge my deeply held positions	0	1	2	3	4
seek feedback to improve interactions with others	0	1	2	3	4

Source: MLQ items

The MLQ was not intended to cover every leadership style. Antonakis *et al.* (2003) and Avolio and Bass (2004) suggest that it measures a 9 factor model of leadership. (See Table 13 below.)

Idealised behaviours are defined as: “Talk[ing] about my most important values and beliefs; Specify[ing] the importance of having a strong sense of purpose; Consider[ing] the moral and ethical consequences of decisions; Emphasis[ing] the importance of having a collective sense of mission” (Avolio and Bass, 2004, 103). Transactional contingent reward leadership clarifies expectations and offers recognition when goals are achieved. The clarification of goals and objectives and providing of recognition once goals are achieved should result in individuals and groups achieving expected levels of performance (Avolio and Bass, 2004).

The MLQ was chosen over the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ, developed by the same team) as proposed in the evaluation proposal because the Firstline Theory of Change implied changes to FLLs’ leadership style and behaviour, the evaluation team considered that this instrument was a better fit to test the premise.

**Table 13: Underlying constructs of Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)**

No	Factor	Characteristic	Definition
1	Idealised influence (attributes)	Transformational	Socialised charisma of the leader, whether the leader is perceived as being confident and powerful, and whether the leader is viewed as focusing on higher-order ideals and ethics
2	Idealised influence (behaviour)	Transformational	Charismatic actions of the leader that are centred on values, beliefs, and a sense of mission
3	Inspirational motivation	Transformational	Ways leaders energize their followers by viewing the future with optimism, stressing ambitious goals, projecting an idealized vision, and communicating to followers that the vision is achievable
4	Intellectual stimulation	Transformational	Leader actions that appeal to followers' sense of logic and analysis by challenging followers to think creatively and find solutions to difficult problems
5	Individualized consideration	Transformational	Leader behaviour that contributes to follower satisfaction by advising, supporting, and paying attention to the individual needs of followers, and thus allowing them to develop and self-actualize
6	Contingent reward	Transactional	Leader behaviours focussed on clarifying role and task requirements and providing followers with material or psychological rewards contingent on the fulfilment of contractual obligations
7	Management-by-exception active	Transactional	Active vigilance of a leader whose goal is to ensure that standards are met
8	Management-by-exception passive	Passive avoidant	Leaders only intervene after non-compliance has occurred or when mistakes have already happened
9	Laissez-faire	Passive avoidant	Avoids making decisions, abdicates responsibility, and does not use their authority

Source: Antonakis et al. (2003, 264-265)

**Limitations:**

Given the low response rate to the post-programme survey and the fact that only a small number of FLLs responded to both the pre- and post-programme survey, direct comparisons were not meaningfully possible although trends have been reported.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This applies to the three standardised instruments.

Despite its widespread use internationally only a limited number of studies have used the MLQ in a social work context or in a UK context (Mary, 2005, Gellis, 2001, Edwards *et al.*, 2012).

### **Standardised instruments: Job Satisfaction Survey (Spector, 1985)**

The Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) (Spector, 1985) was used to measure FLLs' satisfaction with both their position and the context in which they worked. It was included in both the pre- and post-programme surveys. This standardised instrument is widely administered and was specifically designed to measure job satisfaction in human service and not-for-profit organisations (Koeske *et al.* 1994). It measures nine aspects of job satisfaction:

- Pay
- Promotion
- Supervision
- Benefits
- Contingent rewards
- Operating procedures
- Co-workers
- Nature of work
- Communication

Scores on all the subscales are added to give a total satisfaction score, ranging from 36 (extremely low satisfaction) to 216 (extremely high satisfaction).

### **Standardised instruments: Organisational Commitment Scale (Mowday *et al.*, 1979)**

Organisational commitment is defined as “a psychological state that (a) characterizes the employee’s relationship with the organization, and (b) has implications for the decision to continue or discontinue membership in the organization” (Meyer and Allen, 1991, 67). It is also linked with job satisfaction and turnover. Conceptualisations of organisational commitment assume that employees who are strongly committed to the organisation are least likely to leave. In the evaluation, FLLs organisational commitment was measured using the Organisational Commitment Scale (Mowday *et al.*, 1979). We used the 15 item shortened version, with negatively worded items omitted in order to limit the number of survey questions FLLs would be requested to answer. The shortened version is widely used. Using the shortened version, scores can range from 9 (very low commitment) to 63 (very high commitment).

## Observations

The evaluation team had access to observe 9 supervision meetings (8 one-to-one and 1 group supervision) held by FLLs in 3 different local authorities. The focus in these observations was on how FLLs were organising and leading or facilitating the sessions and how supervisees reacted to and engaged with FLLs, not on individual children/families. The sessions and observation lasted between 1 and 3 hours. Written consent was obtained from FLLs and supervisees. Written notes were taken using an observation template adapted from a form used by a team from the Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care, University of Bedfordshire, for an evaluation in Round 1 of the Innovation Programme (Bostock *et al.*, 2017). All notes were further anonymised immediately after the observation and subsequently were thematically analysed.

Similar to observations of supervisions sessions, the evaluation team observed 3 team meetings led/facilitated by FLLs in 2 different local authorities that were taking part in the programme. These observations also lasted between 1 and 3 hours. Written consent was obtained from FLLs and team members. The focus was on how FLLs were organising and leading or facilitating the sessions and how team members reacted to and engaged with FLLs. As with the supervision sessions, written notes were taken using an observation template adapted from a form used by a team from the Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care, University of Bedfordshire, for an evaluation in Round 1 of the Innovation Programme (Bostock *et al.*, 2017). All notes were further anonymised immediately after the observation. Thematical analysis followed.

Each cohort was offered 3 residential. The evaluation team observed all 3 – the first residential of the spring 2019 cohort, the second for the autumn 2019 cohort, and the third residential of the autumn 2018 cohort. Observations focussed on both how the content, elements and activities were facilitated and how FLLs engaged with the programme. FLLs, Firstline staff, LDAs and other external facilitators and trainers were informed and aware of observations taking place and had the opportunity to opt out of being observed individually, although no participant did so. Observers took written notes using an observation template adapted from the evaluation of the prototype programme (Holmes *et al.*, 2017). All notes were further anonymised after the observations and then thematically analysed. Observing the third residential also gave access to the verbal content of Development Focus presentations of a FLL subgroup which were presented there.

## Limitations

The evaluation team planned to observe 10-12 supervision sessions in 2 local authorities that were taking part in Firstline. This number was almost achieved.

The evaluation team also planned to observe 10-12 team meetings in 2 local authorities that were taking part in Firstline. It was more difficult to establish access to team

meetings as they were taking place less often than supervision meetings in general, and also consent needed to be given by all attendees, which could be up to 15 social workers.

As far as the residential modules were concerned, where elements were facilitated and practised in small groups, member(s) of the evaluation team could only observe specific small groups. These groups were chosen by Firstline staff but we saw no reason to think that this led to any bias.

## **Interviews**

Firstline staff (n=6, Head of Programme, the Chief Programmes Officer at the Frontline organisation, the Evaluation Manager and 3 Programme Officers) were interviewed. The aim of these interviews was to learn more about the Firstline programme, its aims, content, facilitation methods, and impact as known to the team, and to understand the vision on good leadership in children's social work underlying the programme. (The interview guides are included in the additional appendix).

In addition to the Firstline staff, 4 Learning Development Advisers (LDAs) were interviewed. These LDAs led/facilitated the coaching elements (LDSs and PDSs) of the programme and also presented at the residentials. Most LDAs had a social work background. The aim of these interviews was to explore LDAs' views on the programme's aims, their role, approaches to content facilitation, impact of the programme on FLLs, their teams and potentially wider impact if known, and views on good leadership in children's social work in general.

Interviews were also conducted with with 7 senior managers, including Principal Social Workers, Head of Children's Services, HR workforce development managers, as well as line managers of FLLs in two local authorities participating in Firstline (case study sites). The aim of these interviews was to explore senior managers' and line managers' views on good leadership in children's social work, the Firstline programme, its aims, content, facilitation methods, and the impact of the programme on FLLs, their teams and potentially wider impact, and to explore if they were familiar with alternative programmes. HR workforce development managers were asked about their authorities' approach to social work team managers' development as well as to staff development in general and the internal and external training opportunities that were available to social work staff.

Seven senior managers, such as Principal Social Workers, Head of Children's Services as well as workforce development managers, were interviewed in 5 local authorities which had not sent staff on the Firstline programme. The aim of these interviews was to explore senior managers' and line managers' views on good leadership in children's social work, approach to social work team managers' development and staff development in general. They were also asked:

- a) if the authority had sponsored staff to undertake alternative external management or leadership training and if so, their views and experiences with this training.
- b) if they were aware of the Firstline programme, and if so their views of it and why they had decided not to take part.

A summary of findings from these interviews can be found in Appendix 8.

All interviews were digitally recorded (with consent) and transcribed. Any personal data were removed and transcripts were anonymised. All interview data were thematically analysed.

Two managers who had undertaken and led on alternative leadership programmes were interviewed. The aim was to explore interviewees' views on good leadership in children's social work, approach to social work training and development opportunities, and their views of and experiences with alternative training programmes.

Limitations:

The plan was to interview approximately 10 senior managers and development staff in two local authorities taking part in Firstline. Although interviews were conducted in 3 local authorities, the objective was only partially met. The team faced considerable barriers to carry out interviews as local authority staff were very busy otherwise. Coronavirus restrictions and activity did not allow further interviews that had been lined-up to take place and this element of data collection was cut short.

The original plan was to interview approximately 10 senior managers in one non-Firstline local authority. After access to senior managers and workforce development staff proved difficult in some local authorities taking part in Firstline, the evaluation team decided to increase the number of non-Firstline sites to interview managers with experience of alternative leadership programmes.

## Changes to the evaluation methods

### Use of the Organisational Social Context (OSC) tool

The Organisational Social Context (OSC) is a normed questionnaire measuring the culture and climate in child social/welfare service and mental health organisations. The evaluation team planned to administer the OSC in six LAs (three taking part in FL, three that did not). This was then changed at the progress meeting held in October 2019 to allow for administration at the observations of team and supervision meetings. However, once these took place, it became clear that it was unduly burdensome to ask social workers to complete the OSC, which takes 20-25 minutes to administer, after a long meeting. One set of OSC data was collected online in one participating LA, and data collection was set up with two further LAs. However, due to complications for both the

evaluation team and staff in those LAs in setting up the instrument electronically, followed by coronavirus pandemic requirements to abandon working with and in LAs in February 2020, data collection could not be completed and no analysis has taken place of the data from the single LA. If this missing delayed element of the evaluation had been undertaken in March – April 2020 it would have been very difficult to analyse in the context of the coronavirus pandemic and the major changes to children’s social care at this time. In the view of the evaluation team, such data might only be realistic to collect when there is agreement on whether more stable organisational working has been achieved.

## Appendix 6: Findings: Tables

Table 14: Firstline participants by age

Age group	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over
Autumn 16	57%*		35%	9%	0%
Spring 17	42%*		28%	31%	0%
Autumn 17	14%	32%	36%	17%	0%
Spring 18	6%	44%	35%	15%	0%
Autumn 18	6%	36%	36%	19%	2%
Spring 19	1%	34%	44%	20%	1%
Autumn 19	3%	39%	39%	19%	0%
<b>Total</b>	6%**	35%**	36%	19%	1%

n=442

Source: data provide by the Firstline team

\* Some respondents in early cohorts used 20-39 banding and so these bands have been combined for all for these cohorts. \*\* Does not include the data collected against 20-39 age groups.

Table 15: Firstline participants by ethnicity

	White	Asian/Asian-British	Black/Black-British	Mixed	Other
Autumn 16	86%	0%	0%	5%	9%
Spring 17	80%	3%	14%	2%	2%
Autumn 17	84%	7%	9%	0%	0%
Spring 18	89%	5%	5%	2%	0%
Autumn 18	80%	10%	7%	4%	0%
Spring 19	82%	4%	11%	1%	1%
Autumn 19	77%	7%	11%	3%	1%
<b>Total</b>	82%	6%	9%	2%	1%

n=444

Source: data provide by the Firstline team

**Table 16: Firstline participants by Service Area**

	<b>Assess- ment</b>	<b>Child in Need/ Child Protection</b>	<b>Children with Disabili- ties</b>	<b>Looked After Children</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Not available/ Generic*</b>
<b>Autumn 16</b>	4%	22%	0%	35%	4%	35%
<b>Spring 17</b>	8%	23%	3%	23%	3%	40%
<b>Autumn 17</b>	7%	20%	4%	20%	9%	40%
<b>Spring 18</b>	5%	52%	0%	34%	3%	6%
<b>Autumn 18</b>	5%	56%	2%	23%	5%	10%
<b>Spring 19</b>	4%	50%	7%	29%	0%	10%
<b>Autumn 19</b>	11%	36%	6%	25%	6%	17%
<b>Total</b>	6%	39%	4%	26%	4%	21%

n=448

Source: data provide by the Firstline team

\*Data on service area was open text and responses were coded into the above categories by the evaluation team.

**Table 17: Calculation of cost for participating in Firstline**

<b>Costs (£)</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Calculation and Assumptions</b>
<b>2,900</b>	Participation cost per person	Figure re cost for local authorities as provided by Firstline
<b>1,314</b>	Days' work lost due to residential	3 residential over 10 months, all consisting of 2 full days training and all starting with an evening with dinner for arrival/networking. Assuming daily rate for team manager (including on-costs of 27.5) of £219 from survey of turnover costs.
<b>600</b>	Travel expenses	Estimate of £200 costs for 2 overnight stays plus travel for each residential
<b>1,095</b>	Days spent on other training	6x 2 hours LDSs. 4x 2 hours PDSs. The 360° feedback leadership diagnostics. Protected self-study time Estimate of 5 days training (estimated on the average time that FLLs spend on training activities in addition to the residential, according to information provided in the post-programme survey) assuming daily rate for team managers of £219.
<b>5,909</b>	Total cost to local authorities	over 10 month participation
<b>6,586</b>	Dfe Funding per participant	Figure for one year funding of £1,027,406 provided by DfE divided by participants in Autumn 2018 and Spring 2019 cohorts.

<b>12,495</b>	Total cost of Firstline training per participant in 2019/20 including DfE funding
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Table 18: Calculation of benefits for participating in Firstline

Benefits (£)			Description	Calculation and Assumptions
33% Attribution	50% Attribution	75% Attribution		
<b>375</b>	<b>625</b>	<b>938</b>	Improved retention of Firstline Leaders	Assumes 4.5% reduction in turnover rate of FLLs (as survey data showed FLL turnover of 11.5% compared to authority wide average of 16.1%). Data from Fellowship programme also shows 91% of members still work for same authority. Costed based on annual turnover costs of team leaders of £13,592 (assuming 70% agency cover while posts are vacant). Assumes turnover of team leaders is affected over a two year period.
<b>2464</b>	<b>3734</b>	<b>5601</b>	Improved retention of team members	Assumes team size of 8 (observed average in Firstline data). Assumes team turnover rate of 27.5% before training compared to 23% in the year after (as evidenced in Firstline matched data - all available data showed 30% before and 22% after) Based on turnover costs of Social Workers of £10,371 (Assuming 70% agency cover while posts are vacant). Assumes turnover of social workers is affected over a two year period.
-			Improved team leader wellbeing	Improved confidence, job satisfaction, and improved resilience and self-reflexivity
-			Improved support networks	Participants reported engaging with the Frontline Fellowship scheme as a good way to receive further support after completing the training.
<b>2,839</b>	<b>4,359</b>	<b>6,538</b>	Total benefits over 24 month period	
<b>5,909 (12,495)</b>			Total direct costs to local authority (costs including DfE funding in brackets)	
<b>0.5 : 1</b>	<b>0.7 : 1</b>	<b>1.1 : 1</b>	ROI (two year benefit period) excluding DfE funding	
<b>0.2 : 1</b>	<b>0.3 : 1</b>	<b>0.5 : 1</b>	ROI (two year benefit period) including DfE funding	

## Appendix 7: Detailed outcome sets

### Outcome set 1: Availability of team level workforce data

#### Method

As part of the evaluation of the Firstline leadership training programme we had intended to undertake a Difference in Difference analysis at team level within selected local authorities to assess the impact that the training had on turnover and other measures of workforce stability. This would have involved the local authority providing team level data on turnover, sickness absence and agency staff usage for the years prior to September 2015 and 2019.

Having approached several suitable authorities the feedback we received was that this was an unrealistic request to make of local authorities as the data was most likely unavailable in the required format and, even if it were possible to provide, would require far too much resource to prepare. As one of the local authorities said:

In terms of how this has impacted on retention etc in each specific team that would not be something I could tell you, the reason for this is because we put all the social work vacancies/turnover together for the DfE quarterly return and do not separate the manager roles that are vacant and filled from the social work roles and they only ask us for social work qualified staff. Splitting this data out for each team would be a monumental task and beyond our capacity to provide. –  
*Comment in reply to data availability survey*

To assess whether this type of analysis might be possible in other local authorities we undertook a survey of 54 local authorities who had received Firstline training and received responses from 17.

Respondents were asked whether it would be possible to provide team level data on all the required items, and if so how difficult they thought it would be. They were also asked about the movements of all staff who had received Firstline training to assess the degree to which the natural turnover of staff would cause issues for this type of analysis over time.

#### Availability of Team Level Data

Respondents were asked to indicate whether the following data were available for a particular year and, if so, how easy it would be to provide:

- Headcount

- Leavers
- Vacancies
- Agency staff use in the year
- Sickness absence over the year
- Date team leader (or equivalent) started managing team
- External training courses for staff in the year
- Leadership training of any kind in the year.

The proportion of respondents who said the data were available at team level and, of those, the proportion who said providing it would be either difficult or very difficult to provide are shown in Table 19.

**Table 19: Data availability at team level**

	<b>Data Available</b>	<b>Difficult or Very Difficult to provide</b>
Sickness absence over the year	100%	8%
Headcount	93%	14%
Agency staff use in the year	93%	17%
Date team leader started managing team	93%	8%
Vacancies	87%	29%
Leadership training of any kind in the year	73%	31%
Leavers	71%	21%
External training courses for staff in the year	40%	67%

n=15

The majority of respondents could provide team level data on sickness absence, staff numbers, agency staff use, vacancies and the starting date of team leaders with relative ease.

Details of leadership training and leavers within the team were available for around three quarters of respondents, although this was reported to be difficult to provide by around a third of those with the data available. External staff training was the least available at team level and the most difficult to provide.

Respondents were then asked whether the data would be available in a consistent format for the past four years (which is what would be required to enable a Difference in Difference analysis). Only 21% of respondents stated that the data would be available consistently over a four year period, with 57% saying it would not and the remainder were not sure.

Several respondents to the data availability survey cited service restructuring as a factor in the inability to provide consistent data over the past four years, with one saying:

The availability of retrospective team level data (e.g. 4 years) would pose a significant challenge given the level of change that has taken place within the service in relation to increasing the size of the SW (social work) workforce and also the interim reliance on locum staffing – *Comment in reply to data availability survey*

### **Movement of Firstline leaders**

Respondents were asked how many first line managers (team leaders, assistant team leaders or equivalent) had been on the Firstline programme since September 2016 and, since completing the Firstline programme, how many had:

- remained in same team
- moved teams within department
- left this department
- left the local authority.

A full breakdown of the responses from 13 authorities is provided in Table 20. In total, 71.6% of FLLs from the responding authorities had remained in the same team, with a further 15.7% having left the authority since completing the training and 11.8% having moved teams within the same department.

**Table 20: Movement of Firstline leaders**

	<b>Staff been on Firstline</b>	<b>Remained in same team</b>	<b>Moved teams within department</b>	<b>Left department</b>	<b>Left local authority</b>
Authority 1	10	30%	60%	0%	10%
Authority 2	8	100%	0%	0%	0%
Authority 3	14	93%	7%	0%	0%
Authority 4	14	50%	7%	0%	43%
Authority 5	4	75%	25%	0%	0%
Authority 6	8	50%	0%	0%	50%
Authority 7	5	60%	20%	0%	20%
Authority 8	9	89%	0%	0%	11%
Authority 9	10	70%	10%	10%	10%
Authority 10	4	75%	0%	0%	25%
Authority 11	9	89%	0%	0%	11%
Authority 12	2	100%	0%	0%	0%
Authority 13	5	80%	20%	0%	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>71.6%</b>	<b>11.8%</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>15.7%</b>

While it is not possible to provide a robust comparison of turnover rates (due to the varying timings of Firstline training in each authority), we have compared the figures for local authorities who had the majority of staff attending Firstline between September 2017 and September 2019 with the average authority level turnover between those dates. This was calculated from DfE social care workforce statistics for 2018 and 2019. Two authorities were excluded as the majority of their Firstline training had occurred outside these periods to ensure data were as comparable as possible. The data are shown in Table 21.

Of the 11 remaining authorities who provided the turnover of their Firstline team leaders since they completed their training, 8 (73%) have turnover rates lower than the average rate for the authority for the equivalent period. The total average turnover rate (which includes only staff who left the local authority) for the 11 authorities was 16.1% compared to a rate of 11.5% in Firstline trained staff, a difference of 4.5 percentage points.

**Table 21: Turnover of FLLs compared to September 2016 – September 2019 turnover**

	<b>Turnover of FLLs</b>	<b>Average turnover in 2018 and 2019</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Authority 1	0.0%	10.9%	-10.9%
Authority 2	0.0%	15.1%	-15.1%
Authority 3	0.0%	23.3%	-23.3%
Authority 4	50.0%	30.5%	19.5%
Authority 5	20.0%	21.1%	-1.1%
Authority 6	11.1%	10.2%	0.9%
Authority 7	10.0%	15.4%	-5.4%
Authority 8	25.0%	10.7%	14.3%
Authority 9	11.1%	20.1%	-9.0%
Authority 10	0.0%	17.8%	-17.8%
Authority 11	0.0%	9.3%	-9.3%
<b>Total</b>	11.5%	16.1%	-4.5%

### **Team Level Data Request**

Respondents were asked whether they could provide a random sample of data from five teams who had a Firstline leader and five who did not. The data would be headcount and leavers from 2018/19 and 2015/16 along with information about the team leaders' training.

71% of respondents said they could not provide this data, with the majority saying that the data was not readily available and that it was too burdensome to provide. As one respondent stated:

The issue is that the make-up of some teams has changed, new teams created, new managers appointed so that some teams are led by a manager and an assistant manager so that data doesn't readily fit with the questions asked. Also data on leavers (in fact most data) is not stored at a team level, just at a workforce level. – *Comment in reply to data availability survey*

Of the five respondents who said they could provide the data, four could only do so for the year 2018/19, which made comparison of the impact of Firstline impossible. One authority was able to provide team level turnover data linked to team leader training, which is summarised in Table 22. Only four of the records provided by the local authority would have been comparable across the relevant time period (with only one with a Firstline team leader).

**Table 22: New starter processes**

	<b>Started Managing After Oct 2015</b>	<b>Comparable data for both years</b>
FLLs	4	1
Non-Firstline team leaders	2	3

We can only conclude that the team level Difference in Difference analysis, suggested as an analysis approach at the beginning of the project, is not possible to undertake. While the majority of respondent authorities thought most of the requested data would be available for the most recent year (although with varying degrees of difficulty in supplying it), it was the longitudinal nature of the data that made it nearly impossible to provide. Even in authorities that had ready access to team level workforce information, the likelihood of organisational restructuring and natural staff churn made it nearly impossible to compare the impact of an initiative at team level. Any evaluation of a process over equivalent periods of time should not sensibly require this level of evidence in terms of impact on turnover as it is not possible to measure.

## **Outcome set 2: Changes to staff wellbeing**

This category contains three outcome indicators:

- Number of Children in Need per children's social worker (2015-2019)
- Sickness absence rate (%) (2015-2019)
- Caseload: average cases per social worker (2016-2019)

Table 23 below presents the mean and standard deviation of the outcome variables across all years and compares the means using one-way ANOVA, comparing Firstline authorities with their statistical nearest neighbour (SNN) authorities.

**Table 23: Comparison of staff wellbeing outcome variables across all years**

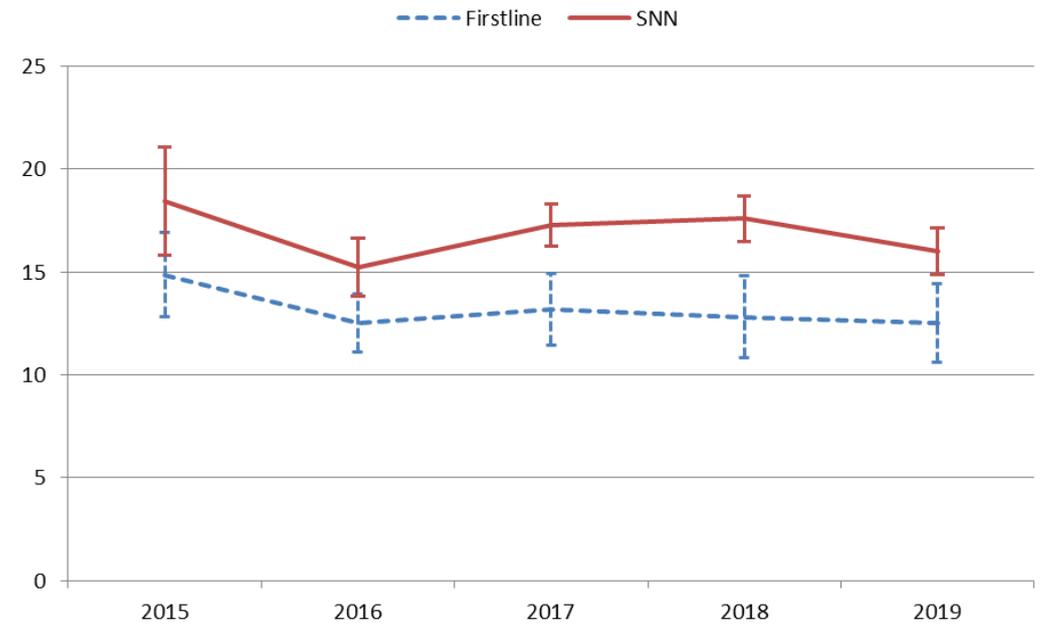
	Type of Authority						F Stat	P value
	Firstline		SNN		Total			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Number of Children in Need per children's social worker	13.17	4.65	16.91	4.11	15.04	4.75	12.67	.00
Caseloads: Number of cases per social worker	16.95	2.47	19.25	4.27	18.10	3.65	5.84	.02
Children's social workers - Sickness absence rate	3.12	1.20	3.85	2.19	3.49	1.80	2.88	.09

Source: national datasets

Two-factor analysis was also undertaken with authority type (e.g. Firstline or SNN) and year (2015-2019) as two factors with the results for each outcome shown in Table 24 below. This also includes an interaction effect to assess if the effect of Firstline is different over the years or not.

It is observed that the number of Children in Need per children's social worker for Firstline authorities is significantly smaller than that of SNN authorities ( $p < .001$ ). Figure 3 shows the mean and standard error bars for number of Children in Need per children's social worker for Firstline and SNN authorities which clearly illustrates the ongoing difference between the groups. Where the standard error bars overlap (as in the first two years), this indicates the difference between groups is not statistically significant in that year, although not overlapping bars does not necessarily indicate statistical significance.

**Figure 3: Number of Children in Need per children's social worker**

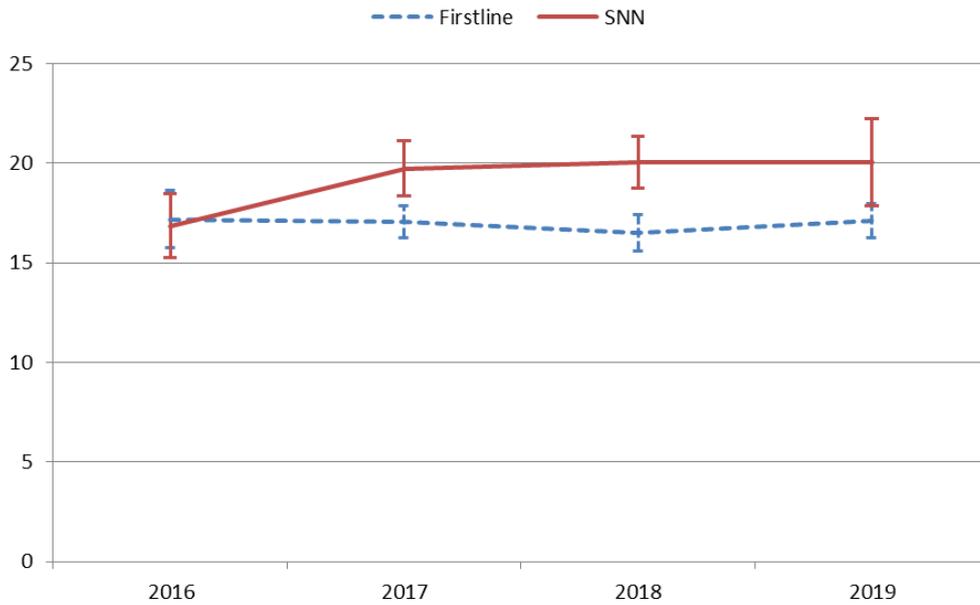


The main effect of authority type is significant for number of Children in Need per children's social worker ( $p=.001$ ). There is no significant effect of year or any significant interaction effect. This means that while the average number of Children in Need per children's social worker was significantly different between Firstline and SNN authorities, it was not significantly different over the years (no interaction).

Caseload data was not available for 2015. Caseloads (the number of cases per social worker) within Firstline authorities were also significantly smaller than in the SNN authorities across all years ( $p=.019$ ). The main effect of authority type is also significant for caseloads ( $p=.029$ ).

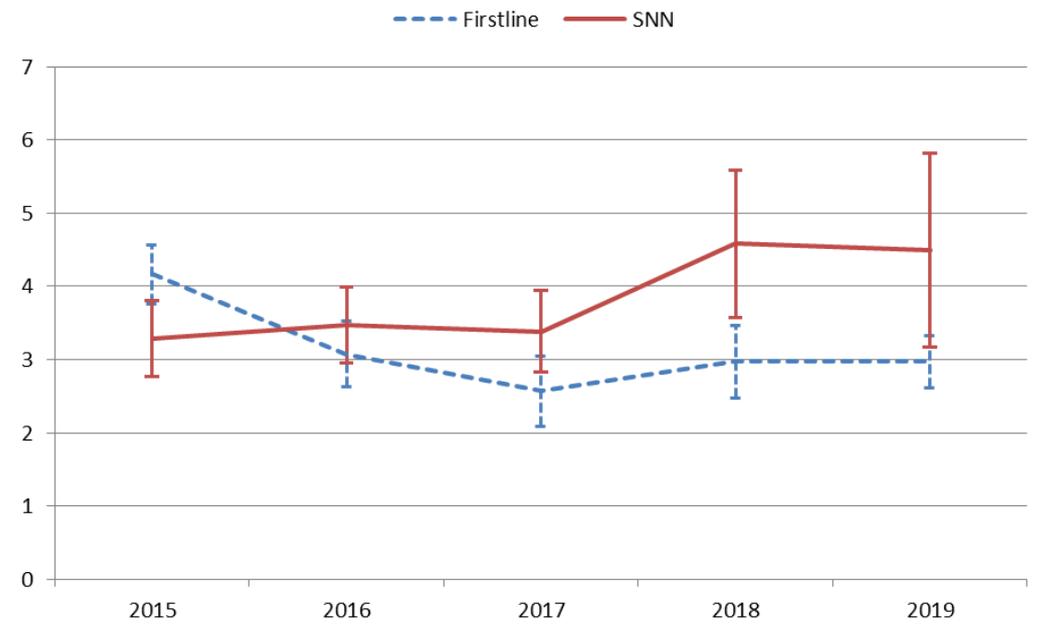
Figure 4 shows the mean and standard error bars for Firstline and SNN authorities which illustrates a gap developing in 2017 and continuing between the two groups in the past 2 years, although neither the change over time ( $p=.690$ ) nor the interaction effect ( $p=.536$ ) is statistically significant.

**Figure 4: Caseloads: Number of cases per social worker**



There was no significant difference between the groups for sickness absence rate, although the mean sickness absence rate fell in Firstline authorities from 4.2 in 2015 to 3.0 in 2019 while it increased in SNNs from 3.3 to 4.5 over the same period, although there was still large overlap between the groups, as illustrated in Figure 5. The two factor analysis confirmed that neither the difference between groups ( $p=.114$ ) nor the change over time (.702) were significant.

**Figure 5: Children's social workers – sickness absence rate**



**Table 24: ANOVA table - Change staff wellbeing outcomes**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P value
<b>Number of Children in Need per children's social worker (2015 – 2019)</b>					
Authority Type	244.430	1	244.430	11.841	.001
Year	64.739	4	16.185	.784	.540
Authority Type *Year	8.256	4	2.064	.100	.982
Error	1238.558	60	20.643		
Corrected Total	1555.982	69			
<b>Caseloads: number of cases per social worker (2016 – 2019)</b>					
Authority Type	65.190	1	65.190	5.114	.029
Year	18.810	3	6.270	.492	.690
Authority Type *Year	28.164	3	9.388	.736	.536
Error	586.400	46	12.748		
Corrected Total	18395.500	54			
<b>Children social workers - Sickness absence rate (2015 – 2019)</b>					
Authority Type	8.320	1	8.320	2.580	.114
Year	7.061	4	1.765	.547	.702
Authority Type *Year	13.758	4	3.439	1.066	.381
Error	190.270	59	3.225		
Corrected Total	219.831	68			

### Outcome set 3: Children's services outcomes

This category contains four outcome indicators all covering the period 2014/15 to 2018/19:

- Rate of child protection plans
- Children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time
- Rate of referrals
- Referrals within 12 months of previous referral

Table 25 below presents the mean and standard deviation of the outcome variables across all years and compares the means using one-way ANOVA.

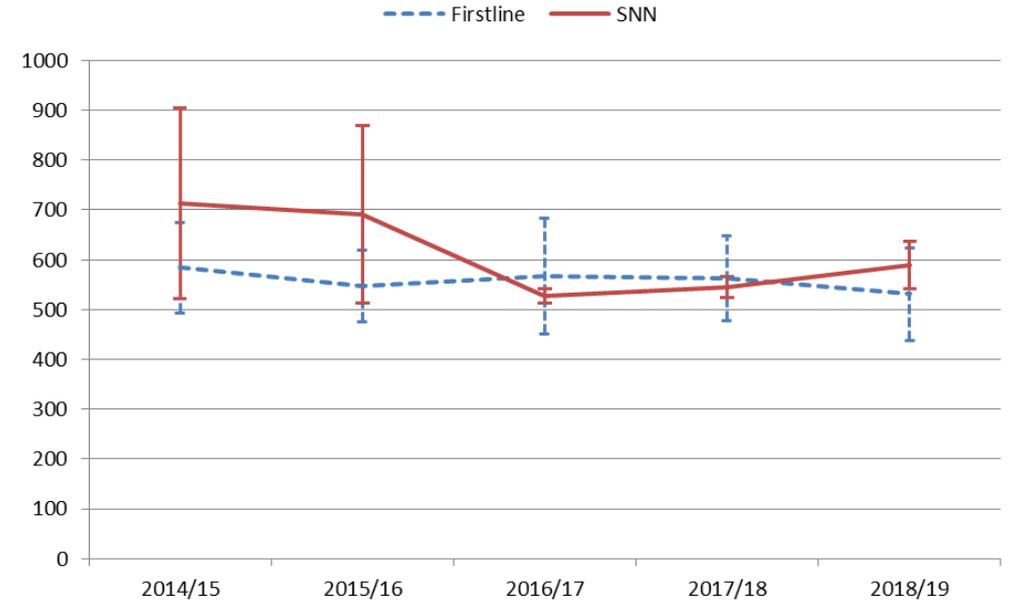
Two-factor analysis was undertaken with authority type (Firstline or SNN) and year (2014/15-2018/19) as two factors with the results for each outcome shown in Table 26 below.

**Table 25: Comparison of staff turnover and agency rates outcome variables across all years**

	Type of Authority						F Stat	P value
	Firstline		SNN		Total			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Rate of referrals	558.2	229.4	613.1	306.5	585.6	270.2	0.72	.40
Referrals within 12 months of previous referral	19.7	4.9	20.6	10.6	20.2	8.2	0.20	.65
Rate of child protection plans	65.1	50.7	56.6	19.1	60.9	38.3	0.86	.36
Children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time	16.7	4.5	18.9	4.2	17.8	4.5	4.63	<b>.03</b>

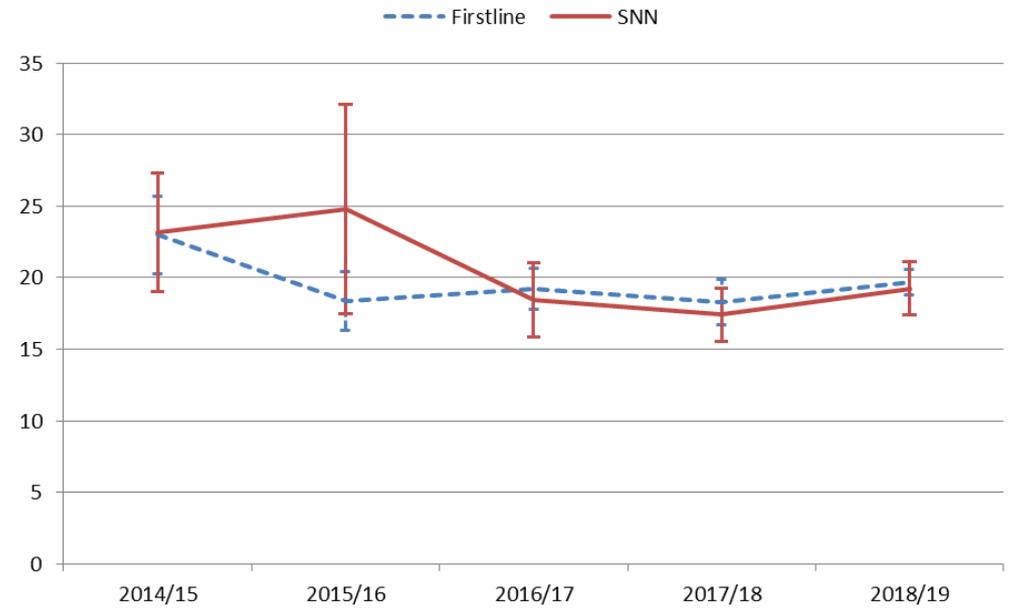
Figure 6 shows the mean and standard error bars for the rate of referrals for Firstline and SNN authorities which show SNNs were higher in 2014/15 and 2015/16 before following a similar trend to Firstline sites in the last three years. The standard error bars in each year overlap indicating no significant difference between the groups.

**Figure 6: Rate of referrals to children's social care**



A similar pattern was observable for the proportion of referrals that occurred within 12 months of the previous referral. SNN authorities were higher in 2015/16 but then follow a very similar pattern to Firstline sites, as shown in Figure 7, with no significant differences ( $p=.65$ ).

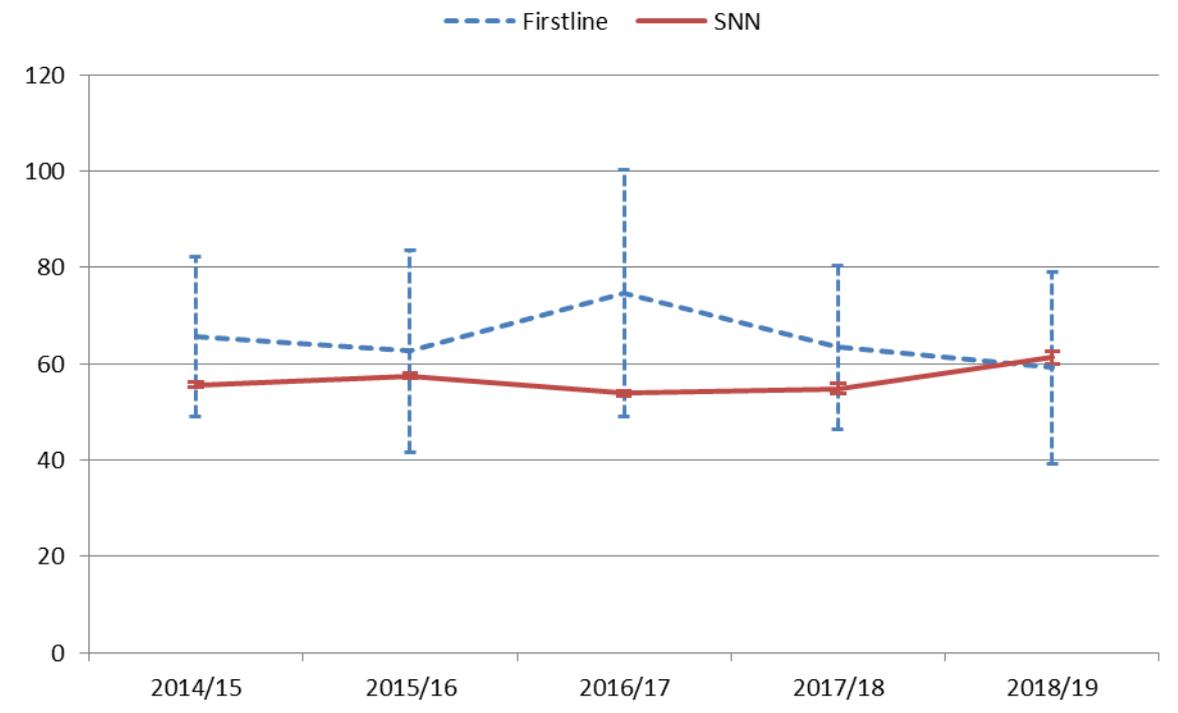
**Figure 7: Proportion of referrals within 12 months of previous referral**



Firstline sites had slightly higher rates of child protection plans (CPP) across each of the previous five years, apart from 2018/19 when a gradual reduction resulted in Firstline sites having an average CPP Rate of 59.2 compared to their SNNs of 61.3, although

neither the change over time ( $p=.998$ ) nor the difference between the group ( $p=.384$ ) was significant (see Figure 8).

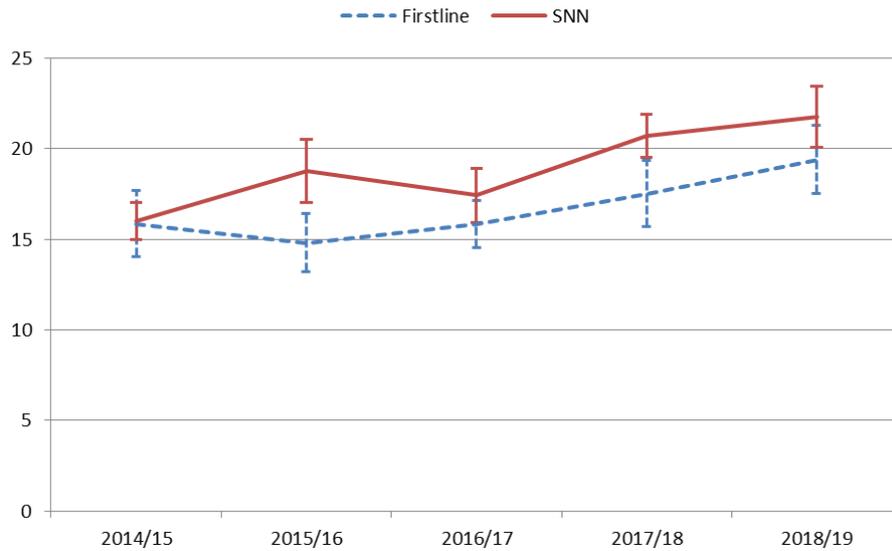
**Figure 8: Rate of Child Protection Plans (per 10,000 children)**



The proportion of children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time was significantly ( $p=.03$ ) lower in Firstline sites compared to their SNNs across the years as a whole.

In 2014/15 both Firstline sites and SNNs had a similar proportion of children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time. In 2015/16 this decreased in Firstline sites while increasing in SNNs. It then gradually increased at a similar rate in both Firstline and SNNs, resulting in Firstline sites having lower rates over each of the past 4 years, although there is still overlap in the standard errors on most years, as shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: Children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time (%)**



Authority type ( $p=.028$ ) and year ( $p=.023$ ) were both significant effects for the proportion of children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time (see Table 26). However, the interaction effect was not significant, suggesting that change over time was not affected by whether the staff had received Firstline training. There were no other significant effects for any outcome, nor any for year or any significant interaction effect.

Table 26: ANOVA table - Reduce risk for children and young people

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P value
<b>Rate of referrals to children's social care (per 10,000 children)</b>					
Authority Type	52882.51	1.00	52882.51	0.66	.418
Year	114152.30	4.00	28538.07	0.36	.837
Authority Type *Year	96667.13	4.00	24166.78	0.30	.874
Error	4772598.77	60.00	79543.31		
Corrected Total	5036300.71	69.00			
<b>Proportion of referrals within 12 months of previous referral</b>					
Authority Type	13.906	1	13.906	.195	.660
Year	253.372	4	63.343	.890	.476
Authority Type *Year	135.785	4	33.946	.477	.753
Error	4270.754	60	71.179		
Corrected Total	4673.818	69			
<b>Rate of Child Protection Plans (per 10,000 children)</b>					
Authority Type	1263.525	1	1263.525	.768	.384
Year	215.005	4	53.751	.033	.998
Authority Type *Year	971.519	4	242.880	.148	.963
Error	98692.754	60	1644.879		
Corrected Total	101142.803	69			
<b>Children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time (%)</b>					
Authority Type	88.706	1	88.706	5.040	<b>.028</b>
Year	214.909	4	53.727	3.053	<b>.023</b>
Authority Type *Year	30.592	4	7.648	.435	.783
Error	1055.991	60	17.600		
Corrected Total	1390.199	69			

## Outcome set 4: Changes in staff turnover, vacancy rates, and agency rates

### Reduce staff turnover and agency rates

This analysis intended to measure whether Firstline training reduces the turnover, vacancy rates and agency worker rates within Firstline authorities when compared to similar authorities where no staff received Firstline training. This category contains three outcome indicators comparing selected Firstline authorities and their statistical nearest neighbour (SNN) authorities:

- Children's social workers – headcount turnover rate (2015-2019)
- Children's social workers – FTE agency worker rate (2015-2019)
- Children's social workers – FTE vacancy rate (2015-2019)

Table 27 presents the mean and standard deviation of the outcome variables across all years and compares the means using one-way ANOVA.

Two-factor analysis was undertaken with authority type (Firstline or SNN) and year (2015-2019) as two factors with the results for each outcome shown below in Table 28.

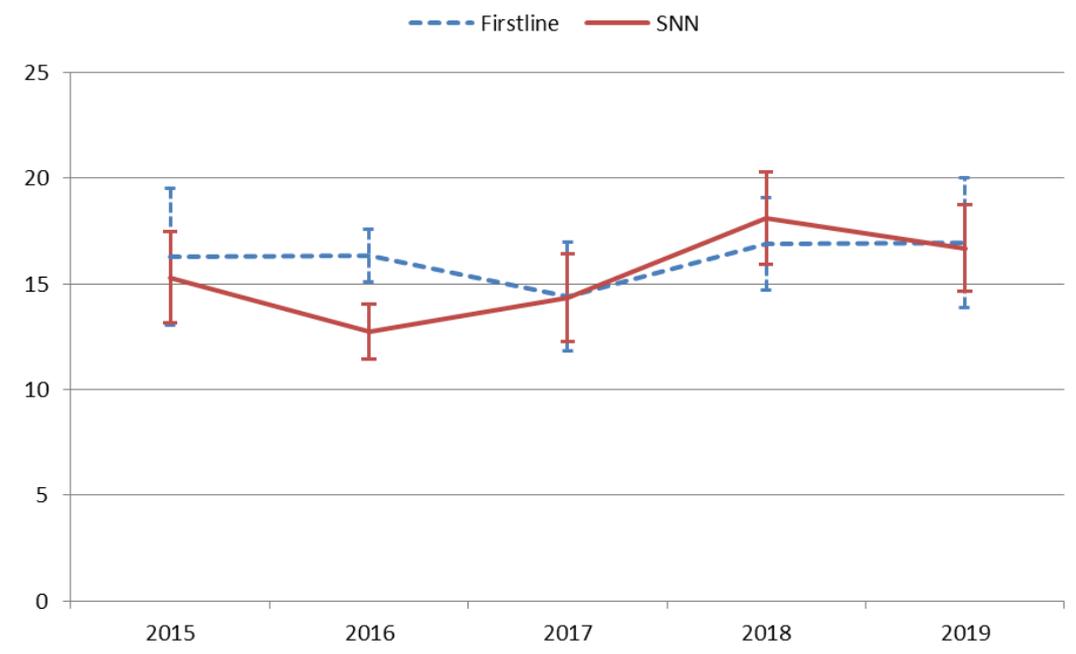
There were no significant differences between Firstline and SNNs in any of the three outcome variables across the years as a whole.

**Table 27: Comparison of staff turnover and agency rates outcome variables across all years**

	Type of Authority						F Stat	P value
	Firstline		SNN		Total			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Children's social workers - headcount turnover rate	16.21	6.36	15.43	5.26	15.82	5.79	0.31	.58
Children's social workers – FTE vacancy rate	14.05	10.87	17.33	9.42	15.69	10.23	1.83	.18
Children's social workers – FTE agency worker rate	13.13	12.11	16.73	10.22	14.96	11.26	1.73	.19

Figure 10 shows the mean and standard error bars for turnover (based on headcount) for Firstline and SNN authorities which show no obvious difference in the overall trends and large overlap in standard error, indicating no significant difference between the groups. other than a slight deviation in 2016 where Firstline authorities were slightly higher than their SNNs. It should be noted analysis was also undertaken with turnover based on FTE to see if this had any impact on the analysis and it showed the same trends and results as turnover based on headcount.

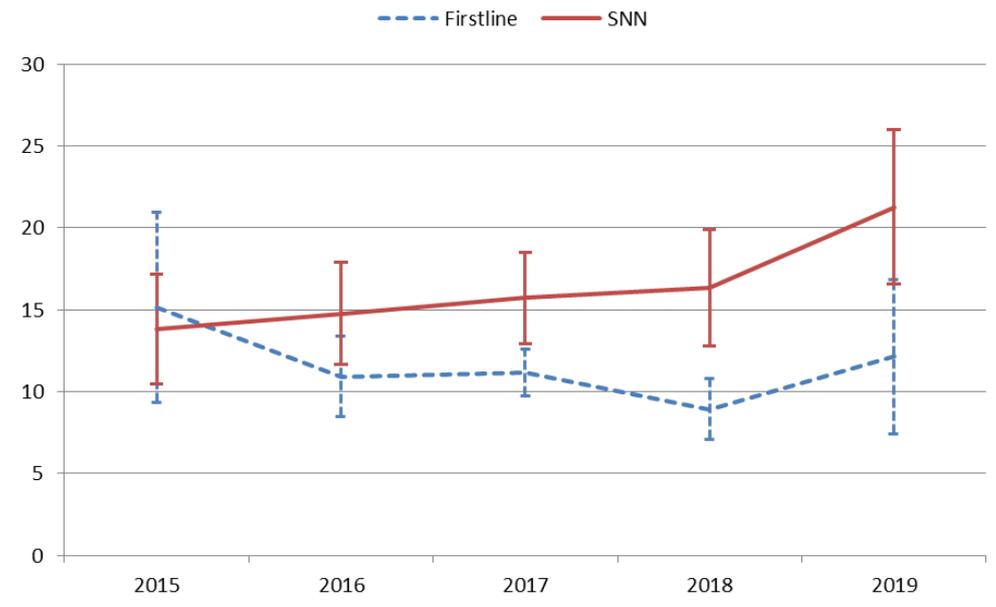
Figure 10: Children's social workers - turnover rate (headcount)



The mean vacancy rate for children's social workers in Firstline authorities increased from 16.3% in 2015 to 17.5% in 2018, although this was driven by a very high rate in 2019 in one of the Firstline authorities. When this authority (and its matching SNN) was excluded the mean in 2015 reduces to 15.2% and in 2019 to 12.1% and the difference between Firstline and SNN becomes significant ( $p=.044$ ).

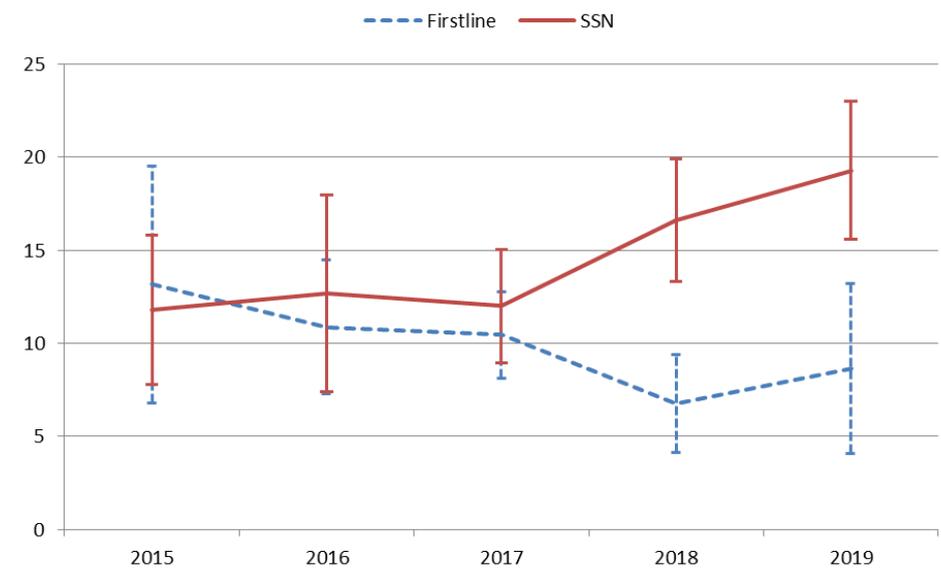
Excluding the outlier also resulted in authority type being a significant ( $p=.044$ ) factor in vacancy rate although there was no significant change over time ( $p=.79$ ) and no significant interaction between authority type and year ( $p=.656$ ).

**Figure 11: Children’s social workers – vacancy rate (outlier and SNN removed)**



The agency rate of children’s social workers (agency workers as a percentage of the sum of all permanent and agency workers) follows a similar pattern as vacancy rates, with the same outlier authority accounting for a large increase in 2019. When this is removed the remaining Firstline authorities saw a decrease from 13.2% in 2015 to 8.6% in 2019, while SNNs increased from 11.8% in 2015 to 19.3% in 2019, as shown in Figure 12, although this change is not significant ( $p=.969$ ). Even when the outlier and its SNN are excluded, the difference between the groups over the years is not significant at the 5% level ( $p=.094$ ).

**Figure 12: Children’s social workers – agency rate (outlier and SNN removed)**



The results presented below exclude the outlier authority and its corresponding SNN. There were no other significant effects for any outcome, nor any for year or any significant interaction effect.

**Table 28: ANOVA table - Reduce staff turnover and agency rates outcomes (outliers and SNNs removed)**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P value
<b>Children’s social workers - headcount turnover rate</b>					
Authority Type	5.212	1	5.212	0.169	.683
Year	54.563	4	13.641	0.441	.778
Authority Type *Year	60.556	4	15.139	0.49	.743
Error	1515.384	49	30.926		
Corrected Total	1635.942	58			
<b>Children’s social workers – FTE vacancy rate</b>					
Authority Type	335.168	1	335.168	4.256	<b>.044</b>
Year	133.586	4	33.396	0.424	.79
Authority Type *Year	192.612	4	48.153	0.612	.656
Error	3937.28	50	78.746		
Corrected Total	4598.646	59			
<b>Children’s social workers – FTE agency worker rate</b>					
Authority Type	285.496	1	285.496	2.921	.094
Year	52.776	4	13.194	0.135	.969
Authority Type *Year	335.7	4	83.925	0.859	.496
Error	4594.426	47	97.754		
Corrected Total	5295.996	56			

### Difference in Difference analysis of local authority level data

This Difference in Difference (DiD) analysis intended to measure whether Firstline training reduces the turnover within Firstline authorities when compared to similar authorities where no staff received Firstline training. This outcome set shows the differences between Firstline authorities compared to authorities who most closely matched pre-intervention trends in turnover. Using a beta version of a counterfactual model developed by the What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care<sup>14</sup> we identified a group of authorities that closely matched the Firstline authorities’ turnover rates in 2013

<sup>14</sup> <https://esch.shinyapps.io/BetaVersion-DiDanalysis/>

and 2014. This comparison group is referred to here as the TCF (turnover counterfactual) group.

Table 29 below shows the turnover DiD analysis results for Firstline authorities compared to the 2 counterfactual groups (SNN and TFC) for the years 2015 to 2019. For Firstline and SNN authorities, the DiD estimate is 0.76, indicating that the difference in headcount turnover rate in 2018 between Firstline and SNN authorities is actually smaller than the difference in 2015. This difference is not significant ( $p=.889$ ).

**Table 29: Difference in Difference (DiD) analysis results for headcount turnover rate**

	<b>DiD Estimate</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>t statistic</b>	<b>P value</b>
<b>Firstline – SNN, turnover</b>	.757	5.379	.141	.889
<b>Firstline – TFC, turnover</b>	.743	6.092	.122	.904

For Firstline and TCF authorities, comparing over the years 2015 – 2018, the DiD estimate is 0.74, indicating that the difference in headcount turnover rate in 2018 between Firstline and TFC authorities was again smaller than the difference in headcount turnover rates in 2015; it was also not significant ( $p\text{-value} = .904$ ).

We also undertook DiD analysis of 8 of the remaining 9 outcome variables comparing Firstline authorities with their SNNs excluding caseloads as data were not available in 2015. None of the remaining outcomes had significant DiD results as shown in Table 30.

**Table 30: Difference in Difference (DiD) analysis results for other outcomes**

	<b>DiD Esti-mate</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>t statistic</b>	<b>P value</b>
Number of children in need per children's social worker	-.058	4.027	-.014	.989
Sickness absence rate	2.410	1.570	1.535	.138
Children's social workers – agency worker rate	5.886	10.404	.566	.577
Children's social workers - vacancy rate	.614	10.480	.059	.954
Rate of child protection plans	12.157	28.210	.431	.670
Children who became the subject of a plan for a second or subsequent time (%)	2.214	3.305	.670	.509
Rate of referrals	-70.543	236.154	-.299	.768
Referrals within 12 months of previous referral (%)	-.600	5.390	-.111	.912

**Team level turnover data based on FLLs' teams**

Table 31 shows the results of paired sample t-tests comparing turnover of the teams in different periods. None of the t-tests are significant, which means there is no significant difference in average turnover between any of the periods, although it should be noted that due to the smaller sample in the follow-up period, the degrees of freedom for the t-test comparing the periods with follow-up are rather small.

**Table 31: Comparison of average turnover in before, after and following training**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Mean Difference</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Degrees of Freedom</b>	<b>P value</b>
Before – After	.064	.045	1.404	81	.164
Before – Follow-up	.045	.101	.444	17	.662
After – Follow-up	.013	.058	.226	19	.824

Source: based on data proved by the Firstline team

Only 18 participants had provided data in both the before and follow-up period. Comparing their responses, as shown in Table 32, the before turnover rate was 27.5% compared to the follow-up rate of 23%, although this difference was not significant (p=.674).

**Table 32: Descriptive statistics for matched Firstline team level turnover data**

<b>Period</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev</b>
Before	18	0.275	0.316
Follow-up	18	0.230	0.319

Source: based on data proved by the Firstline team

## **Outcome set 5: Cost of Social Worker Turnover**

To assess cost of social worker turnover in Firstline authorities, a survey was sent to 44 local authorities who had received Firstline training and responses were received from 18.

The aim of the survey was to quantify the costs associated with social worker labour turnover. These costs were then used to inform the cost benefit analysis of the Firstline training programme.

The costs are estimated under the following headings:

- External recruitment methods
- Recruitment benefits
- Screening and interview costs
- Agency cover
- New starter processes
- Starter productivity.

Respondents were asked to estimate the approximate cost per post/starter. Where respondents provided a figure covering a particular period of time this was divided by their reported starters (from the DfE workforce statistics<sup>15</sup>) over the same period to create a comparable figure.

Due to the high level of variance in the responses all average figures are median unless otherwise stated. We have also provided minimum and maximum values for costs and provided the base on which each individual cost is based.

When calculating costs of an employee's time we have included an assumption of 27.5% on-costs to cover employer's National Insurance and Pension contributions, which is the

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<sup>15</sup> Department for Education (2020) Children's social work workforce 2019; February 2020.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-social-work-workforce-2019>

on-cost rate for children’s social workers in the Unit Costs of Health and Social Care 2019<sup>16</sup>. We worked on the assumption of 253 working days per year.

We would not expect all authorities to use every recruitment method, therefore when calculating the cost in the example authority we have weighted the average cost by the probability of use.

### External recruitment methods

Respondents were asked to indicate which external recruitment methods their local authority uses to recruit social workers and what the average cost per post was for each method, as shown in Table 33.

The most widely used recruitment method was careers fairs (used by 82% of respondents) followed by advertisements (76%) and online recruitment methods (65%).

The most expensive recruitment method was recruitment consultants who cost, on average, £4,500 per post, although respondents highlighted these were only really used in exceptional circumstances.

Of those who stated they used “other” methods most mentioned using regional recruitment platforms.

**Table 33: External recruitment costs**

	% Using	Min Cost (£)	Median cost (£)	Max Cost (£)	Base for Costs (n)
Advertisements	76%	40	750	2,000	9
Careers Fairs (including staff costs)	82%	66	195	435	7
Online Recruitment resources	65%	6	58	150	6
Recruitment consultants	38%	2,500	4,500	5,000	4
Applicant testing services	12%	55	55	55	1

n=18

Due to their high cost and the fact they are only used for specific needs, we have not included recruitment consultants in the example costs. Weighting for the likelihood of

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<sup>16</sup> Curtis & Burns, 2019, 131

use, local authorities can spend on average around £845 per post on external recruitment methods.

### Recruitment benefits

Respondents were asked to indicate which recruitment benefits their local authority offer to new social workers and what the average cost per starter was for each benefit, as shown in Table 34.

Recruitment benefits were reportedly used only for hard-to-fill posts, and the use was limited across the respondent authorities. The most widely used recruitment benefit was relocation expenses (offered by 67% of respondents), with an average cost of over £7,000 per starter, although a number of respondents highlighted this was only available for hard to fill posts with one authority highlighting that in the past three years it had only been paid once (out of approx. 100 starters over the same period).

Of those who stated they used “other” methods, most mentioned were market premiums and comprehensive training packages.

**Table 34: Recruitment benefits**

	% Using	Min Cost (£)	Median cost (£)	Max Cost (£)	Base for Costs (n)
Hiring bonuses (golden handshakes)	33%	1,500	2,000	3,500	4
Relocation expenses	67%	2,000	7,079	12,000	8
Agency transfer bonuses	6%	3,000	3,000	3,000	1
Other	24%	2,000	3,000	8,000	3

n=18

As relocation expenses are rarely paid we have assumed they are only used in 1% of cases. Weighting all others for the likelihood of use, local authorities can spend on average around £1,990 per post on recruitment benefits, although the cost should be assessed on a post-by-post basis as they will not be offered to all starters.

### Screening and interview costs

Respondents were asked to estimate how many staff members (managerial and HR) were involved in screening and interviewing candidates for a vacant post, how much time was spent per person, and the approximate salary rate of the staff involved.

On average, local authorities have 2 managerial staff involved in screening and interviewing and 1 member of HR, with each person spending 1 day's time.

The average managerial salary was around £46,000 and the average HR salary was £32,000, which means, including on-costs, the daily cost of staff was £232 for the two managerial staff and £161 for one member of HR.

The total cost of screening and interview staff time was therefore £625 per post.

### **Starter productivity**

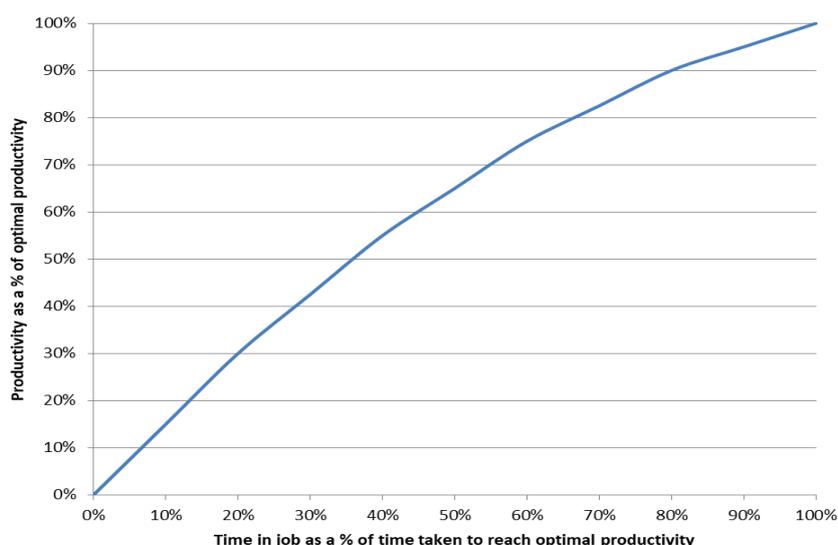
As explained by Oxford Economics (2014), there are two type of costs associated with labour turnover: logistical and productivity. Logistical costs are those directly associated with the process of recruiting a replacement employee. Productivity costs are “the cost of paying wages to a worker who is working below the expected level of performance (or optimal productivity)” (Oxford Economics, 2014, online). As a social worker learns how to perform their role within a new environment, they will not be equivalent in output to an experienced social worker in the same authority.

Calculating the productivity cost of a new social worker depends on three variables:

- the length of time it takes the worker to reach optimal productivity,
- the speed at which they learn on the job,
- the salary they are paid.

We are assuming that social workers will tend to learn quickly at first, as they are able to utilise their social work training immediately. Their learning slows as they become accustomed to the particular processes and approaches within a local authority. The learning curve we are assuming is visualised in Figure 13.

**Figure 13: Assumed learning curve of starter social workers**



On average, local authorities said it took 16 working weeks for an average social worker to settle into a new post and reach expected performance levels. Using this figure as the length of time it takes the worker to reach optimal productivity, and the average starter salaries (as discussed previously), we can calculate the number of weeks lost to lower than expected productivity. So, for example, if in the first week a social worker is only working at 10% of optimal productivity, this equates to 0.9 weeks of lost output.

Applying the above learning curve to the 16 weeks it takes for a social worker to get 'up to speed' equates to 6 weeks of lost output. We have applied the same curve for team leaders. The median daily rate (including on-costs) for a starter social worker was £153 and for a team leader was £219. This means that the average cost of lost output due to lower productivity in starter social workers is £4,567 and for team leaders is £6,535 per employee.

### **New starter processes**

Alongside the impact of lower starter productivity, there is also the cost of existing staff supporting starters in ways which may impact their own productivity levels. Respondents were asked to indicate which new starter processes their local authority offer to new social workers and what the average duration was for each process, as shown in Table 35.

**Table 35: New starter processes**

	<b>% Using</b>	<b>Duration (working days)</b>	<b>Base for duration</b>
Onboarding	69%	4	8
One-to-one Handover	82%	4.5	11
On the job training	100%	7.5	8
Shadowing	94%	6.3	10
Mentoring	89%	1.5	8
Other (service induction)	50%	0.5	5

n=18

All of the respondent local authorities provided on the job training, with high proportions supplying shadowing (94%), mentoring (89%) and one-to-one handovers (82%). Of those who stated they used “other” starter processes, the most frequently mentioned was a half-day service induction.

It is difficult to calculate the cost of these processes without the risk of double-counting against the cost of starter productivity (for example, on the job training is likely to be an element of the assumed lower productivity levels of starters). Similarly, processes like shadowing are unlikely to have a significant impact on the productivity levels of the person being shadowed.

We have included a half day of HR time for service induction, and 1.5 days of management time for mentoring. We have also assumed that the one-to-one handover impacts existing staff time<sup>17</sup> at a rate of 50% for the specified period. Weighting for the likelihood of use, new starter processes can cost local authorities around £698 per post in lost productivity for existing staff.

### **Agency cover**

On average, it took local authorities 11 weeks to fill a social worker vacancy and 16 weeks to fill a team leader vacancy. For much of this time the vacancies will be filled with agency staff. We asked respondents to provide figures for the average rate paid to

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<sup>17</sup> We did not have figures for the salary levels for existing staff so have used the starter figures for team leaders as a proxy for experienced staff pay levels. We have assumed providing one-to-one handovers would reduce their productivity for the specified period by 50%. This is an arbitrary figure so should be treated with caution.

agency staff (including agency costs) and the starting rate for an equivalent employed social worker.

We then calculated the daily cost differential between agency and employed staff, by calculating a daily rate (including on costs) for employed staff and subtracting this from the agency day rate. This equated to £43 for social workers and £52 for team leaders per day.

This means that to cover one social worker vacancy with an agency worker for the 11 weeks it takes to fill it, will cost an additional £2,352 compared to an employed social worker. The equivalent figure for team leaders is £4,142.

It should be noted that these figures do not take into account that agency staff will also work at lower levels of productivity when they first start in a role, so the actual cost to a local authority will be higher than our estimates.

## Summary

Combining all cost elements results in total costs of around £11,077 per social worker and £14,835 per team leader, assuming the vacancies were covered by agency staff while being filled. If vacancies are not filled by agency staff the cost of turnover reduces to around £8,725 for social workers and £10,693 for team leaders, as shown in Table 36.

**Table 36: Summary costs of turnover**

		Estimate cost per post (£)
External recruitment costs		845
Recruitment benefits		1,990
Screening and interview costs		625
Agency cover	Social worker	2,352
	Team leader	4,142
Starter productivity	Social worker	4,567
	Team leader	6,535
New starter processes		698
Total with Agency cover	Social worker	11,077
	Team leader	14,835
Total without Agency cover	Social worker	8,725
	Team leader	10,693

Source: local authorities responding to survey on turnover cost

To provide an estimate of the agency usage we took the median average of vacancies and agency workers covering vacancies from the 2019 DfE social care workforce statistics. There were an average of 30 vacancies and 21 agency workers covering vacancies. We are therefore assuming that 70% of vacancies are covered by agency staff for the period it took to recruit replacements.

## Appendix 8: Interviews with 7 senior managers and workforce development managers in 5 local authorities that did not participate in Firstline

We approached five local authorities not taking part in the Firstline programme that were statistical nearest neighbours (SNN) to local authorities participating in Firstline to understand two question areas:

- had they considered sending staff on the Firstline training and
- what, if any leadership training was in place for managers in the early stages of their careers.

All five authorities agreed to participate in interviews with senior managers. Interviews were conducted with the Principal Child and Family Social Worker or a Head of Service in all authorities, in two cases accompanied by a senior manager from the authority's workforce department.

In four of the five authorities those interviewed associated the Firstline and the Frontline programme (a two-year graduate qualification programme for social workers). There was an assumption that authorities that adopted the Frontline model would be more likely to adopt Firstline. None of the interviewed local authorities engaged in Frontline. Interviewees indicated that they were not interested in engaging in Frontline nor would they consider sending staff on Firstline training. In the fifth authority there was a very low awareness of Firstline. It was in the process of developing its training strategy and was interested in learning more about Firstline.

Most interviewees were satisfied that the internal training offer in their authorities, supplemented as appropriate with courses that fitted individuals' strengths and interests, was sufficient. In some cases, even where a distinction was made between 'managers' and 'leaders', internal courses were usually designed to cover both groups, viewing future leaders as embedded in the wide group of managers. In two instances, however, informants were very clear that their team managers were regarded as the leaders of practice and that as such the authority would want to design and provide the appropriate leadership training, in line with their practice model and vision. In essence, they wanted to build capacity and capability in relation to the future leadership skills that the authority required. One of these authorities had centralised its workforce development budget across the authority to ensure that access to development and the quality of development was transparent and equitable. So, while staff may be supported to gain external qualifications in leadership where it fitted with the authority's ethos and goals, it was unlikely that it could be driven by an external model such as Firstline.

It should be noted that four of the five authorities had sent staff on the Practice Leadership Programme funded by the Department for Education and designed for Service Heads or equivalent. Feedback from staff who attended had been very positive but there was some confusion about how this fitted with Firstline. Even though the target groups were different both were receiving funding from the same source.

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