



The Civil Service Directors Leadership Programme - Evaluation Update

This document provides a mid-point update on our evaluation of the new Directors Leadership Programme, and summarises our findings from the process evaluation of the first year of the programme. **It provides a snapshot of our progress as of August 2024, and is not a completed evaluation report.**

The Directors Leadership Programme

The Directors Leadership Programme (DLP) is a flagship leadership development programme for Directors from all parts of the Civil Service. The DLP is run by Leadership College for Government (LCG), part of Government Skills, and aims to equip the Civil Service's most senior leaders with the skills, knowledge and networks they need to lead across the public sector system to deliver for the public.

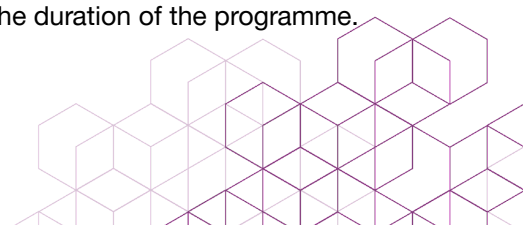
We are carrying out a three year evaluation of DLP to assess whether it is achieving its intended impact (impact evaluation), whether we can learn lessons to improve its implementation and design (process evaluation) and whether it offers good value-for-money (economic evaluation). This evaluation will run from 2023 to 2026.

DLP was launched in 2022, with the first pilot cohort of directors joining the programme in January 2023, completing in December 2024. Thirty-four Directors from a wide range of departments and agencies took part in this first DLP cohort.

The programme undertaken by this first cohort included approximately 15 days of formal learning, advice on informal, self-directed learning beyond the programme, and optional content. Key elements of the programme included:

- Residential and online modules
- Visits with stakeholders at the frontline (visits)
- Action Learning Sets (ALS)¹

¹ Action learning allows participants to work on live challenges with peers. The DLP ALS saw participants placed in facilitated groups which met several times over the duration of the programme.





DLP particularly focuses on developing systems leadership. By systems leadership we mean that participants will understand their role in working across one or more systems, and understand the policy or delivery system in which they operate. This includes understanding how to work within a government system in which ministers and senior officials have shared but distinct responsibilities.

The evaluation

We are using a **mixed methods, theory-based approach to the evaluation**, collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data, so we can understand not just whether the programme is working, but also why it is or is not working. As we have not run this type of evaluation before, we are running the evaluation as a feasibility study - understanding what works well and less well in our evaluation approaches, so we can learn lessons for future government evaluations. Our evaluation met the feasibility criteria we set for the end of Year 1, meeting the threshold for continuing into Years 2 and 3.

- Our **impact evaluation** uses a standardised assessment to compare the systems leadership, networking and collaboration outcomes of those who were successful in being admitted onto the programme to those who applied but were unsuccessful.
- Our **process evaluation** sees participants complete learning journals, reports and surveys, and course facilitators provide observational feedback, particularly on the visits and following ALS.

Due to the small cohort sizes we do not yet have conclusive impact evaluation data to report, nor full methodological findings from our feasibility study. This report therefore focuses on our process evaluation findings from the first, pilot cohort of DLP.

Key findings

Participants felt broadly positive about the programme and how it supported their leadership development, although this occurred in different ways and to different extents.

Systems leadership: There are signs that DLP helped some participants, particularly those with less prior experience in systems leadership, develop systems leadership skills and capabilities. DLP helped those participants **better understand the different perspectives within their system, their role in their system, and how to use their system to achieve key priorities**.





Most participants starting the programme felt they already had a good understanding of their system, potentially limiting the ability of the programme to change some associated skills and behaviour.

Participants tended to feel they **benefited most from the systems leadership sessions which occurred earlier in the programme, and less from later sessions**. The first module was viewed particularly positively, with participants feeling it offered novel opportunities to engage with systems thinking and tools, such as a systems mapping tool. More analysis is needed to understand why positive perceptions of the modules declined over time, with individual participants providing a range of different reasons.

Some participants said **the DLP helped them use systems leadership approaches in practice**. They tried out systems leadership tools (mainly where they had not used them before) in their day-to-day work, used systems leadership approaches to address complex problems, and supported team members to use systems leadership tools. **Elements of the programme, like frontline visits, helped many participants connect with service users or become aware of different perspectives from parts of the system which were different from their own.**

General leadership: Participants also reflected on how DLP helped their leadership in general, beyond systems leadership. **Most participants felt the DLP improved their networks across the Civil Service and helped them reflect on their general leadership strengths and areas for development.**

How and why has the programme worked?

The evaluation showed that several mechanisms were particularly important to how and why the programme worked.

- **Module content**

Modules were most effective when content was **new, relevant to their day-to-day work, and provided practical and in-depth content**. Content which was designed to enable reflective discussion with a diverse cohort of peers was important.

- **Action Learning Sets**

ALS provided a rare opportunity for peer support among Directors, **providing a structured space for sustained dialogue and reflection**. While there were limited



signs that ALS encouraged meta-learning (learning about how to learn, as a senior leader), there were clear and important signs that ALS were helping participants act more strategically by providing the chance for them to think in new ways about the challenges they face, their context, or their own skills and approaches, and to recognise opportunities to exercise their own agency for action. The quality of facilitation was important as an enabler of this dialogic space.

- **Visits**

Visits supported most participants' knowledge of different perspectives in their system. For a small subset of participants, visits helped them develop ideas for how to improve their system, problem solve and pursue organisational change based on insights from experiences at the frontline. Some participants reported the DLP helped them remember the value of frontline visits, motivating them and their teams to go on visits more frequently. Nonetheless, the idea of carrying out frontline visits was not new to most participants, who reported visiting stakeholders at the frontline frequently or very frequently before starting the DLP either. New perspectives and insights could only emerge for participants through visits when that visit allowed them to **experience something genuinely new**. Visits were most effective when participants could connect their practical, applied experiences on visits with their systems leadership learning on DLP modules. For a few participants, the frontline became a live test ground to see theoretical issues come to life.

- **Additional mechanisms**

The evaluation identified signs that three additional, cross-cutting mechanisms were important in enabling participation, learning and leadership development. Participants benefited from the **close-knit community established among participants, the opportunities for peer engagement, and the extent of cohesion** in programme content and learning opportunities sustained throughout the programme.

Recommendations

Evaluation results suggest that DLP may have **potential to be an valuable leadership development programme for senior civil servants in the UK**. The first year of evaluation has helped identify several ways to help maximise the DLP's future impact:

1. **Continue the focus on creating a strong peer community and maximising opportunities for peer-to-peer dialogue and**





reflection. There is extensive evidence that peer learning, professional dialogue and psychological safety is important for senior professionals' development. Our early findings are consistent with this evidence base and suggest this should continue to be a focus of the programme.

2. **Maximise coherence and linkages across programme content**, including signposting the thematic links to participants.
3. **Carry out a thorough user needs assessment for each cohort, and adapt programme content based on it, so all participants are able to develop from their individual starting points.** Not all participants made maximum progress because the programme repeated content they were already familiar with. More developed user needs analyses than the current pre-programme discussion would address this. Evidence from a large meta-analysis shows that leadership and management programmes that undertake a user needs analysis have better learning and results than programmes that do not analyse user needs ([Lacerenza, 2017](#)).
4. **Sustain the value, quality and rigour of the systems leadership component over the full duration of the programme.** Participants felt the systems leadership content was important and relevant but fell away towards the end of the programme. This content should be reviewed, both to ensure the content of later modules fully meets user needs, and to check that best pedagogical practice is followed. This could include reviewing existing research on spaced learning and mastery learning, particularly any research on the level and nature of challenge for highly-experienced leaders so they continue to feel stretched by the content.
5. **Ensure participants feel sufficiently stretched throughout the programme.** Participants benefited most where they experienced something new and were stretched (including at the start of the systems leadership sessions). New experiences, insights and tools helped participants not just do things differently, but also think differently about their work and about service users and their needs. Therefore, the programme should maximise these learning mechanisms within design and delivery approaches.
6. **Continue to gather evidence through ongoing delivery, with a view to updating the programme Theory of Change and content.** Results for Cohort 1 outlined numerous areas where learning outcomes were met, and a few that were not met. The programme should continue to develop to improve learning and, where the generalisability of lessons from Cohort 1 to other cohorts is unclear, collect further evidence to understand what is or is not working.





Next steps

We are already **incorporating evidence from this first phase of the evaluation into the programme design of DLP for the next cohorts**, building on the many current strengths of the programme identified in the evaluation.

We are updating our theory of change for the programme based on these initial findings, to help us focus our research questions for the next phases of the evaluation, and to support continuous improvement of the programme.

The DLP evaluation will continue in its current form for Cohorts 2 and 3, providing a solid evidence base for further evidence-based change. A full process evaluation report will be available after Cohort 3 finishes. We may not have conclusive impact evaluation results at that stage due to the cohort sizes, but we expect to be able to report descriptive findings as a minimum. At the conclusion of our three year evaluation we will assess what economic evaluation is feasible based on the impact evaluation findings, and will take a decision on future approaches to evaluating the programme.

This note was prepared by Government Skills. It represents a snapshot of the evidence as of August 2024, with a full process evaluation report being available after Cohort 3 finishes (est. Summer 2026). To learn more about this work, please contact:

gscu.comms@cabinetoffice.gov.uk

This evaluation is registered on the [Government Evaluation Registry](#), and can be located by typing “Directors Leadership Programme (DLP) Evaluation” into the relevant field on the “Search evaluations” page.

