



Government
Skills

Directors Leadership Programme

Investigating learning processes,
mechanisms, and outcomes across
Cohorts 1, 2, and 3

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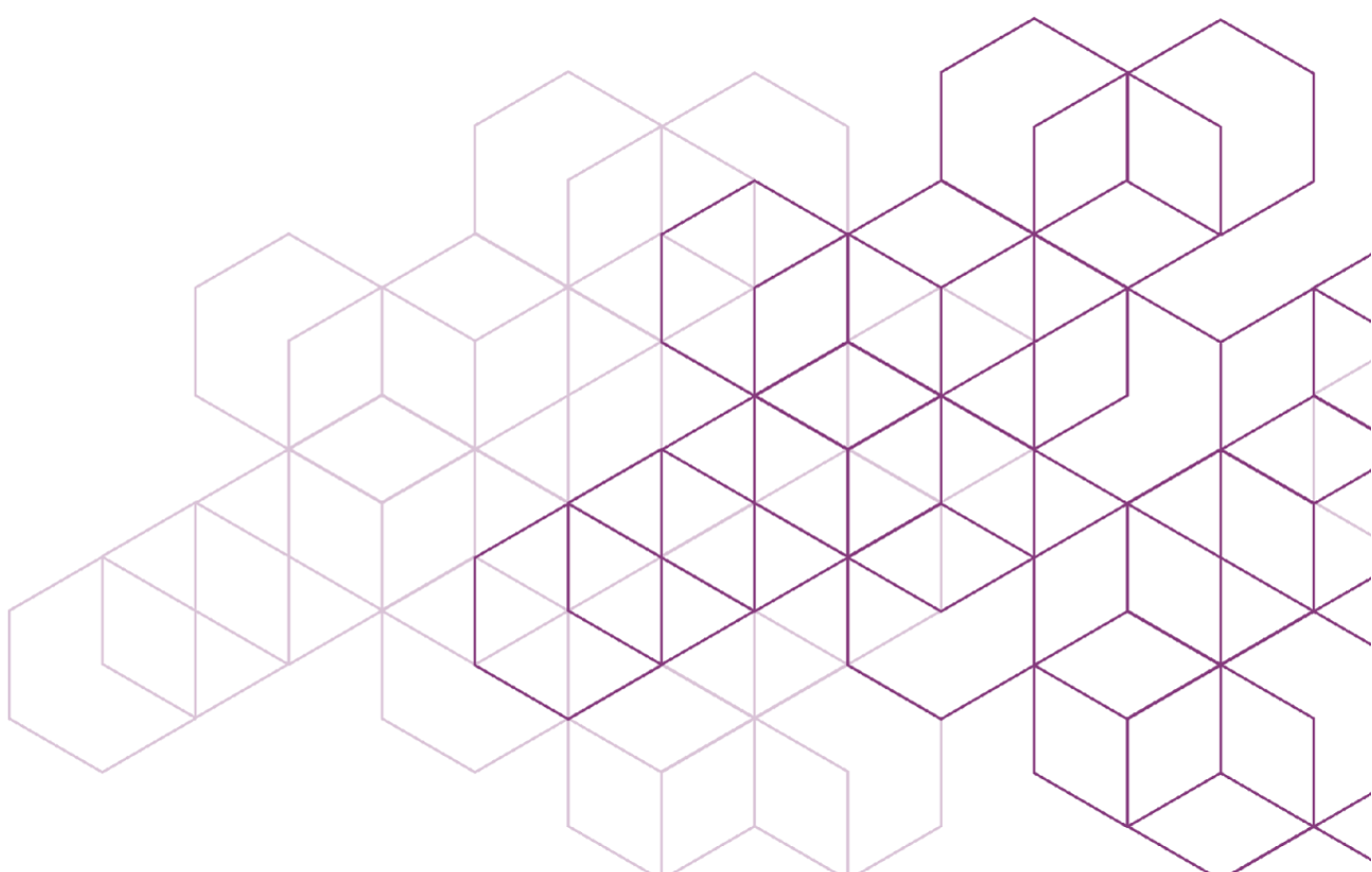




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Executive Summary

The Directors Leadership Programme (DLP) is a flagship initiative in leadership development, designed for Directors across the UK Civil Service and administered by the Leadership College for Government (LCG), a component of Government Skills. The programme seeks to equip participants with the conceptual tools, practical skills, and relational capacities required to operate effectively within complex policy, organisational, and service delivery systems.

This report presents a comprehensive evaluation of the Directors Leadership Programme (DLP) across three cohorts, assessing implementation, learning mechanisms, and outcomes for senior civil servants. Cohorts 1–2 were analysed programme-wide (all participants); Cohort 3 was analysed through case studies of five participants' learning trajectories. Data from interviews, surveys, diaries, and reflective exercises led to the following findings.

Findings

- **Implementation:** Core programme elements were delivered as designed. Participant engagement depended on facilitation quality, particularly programme coherence and content relevance. Peer interaction and cohort discussion were consistently valued; conceptual content was sometimes seen as less applicable. This indicates that programme effectiveness is driven by a combination of curriculum design and content facilitation and integration.
- **Learning Mechanisms:** Learning occurred primarily through reflection, peer exchange, and facilitated discussion. Participants often adapted concepts to their context, with impact sometimes emerging retrospectively. This suggests that leadership development operates as a socially mediated and co-dependent process rather than a linear transfer of knowledge.
- **Outcomes:** Individual-level outcomes—confidence, reflective capacity, perspective-taking, and leadership validation—were most frequently reported by participants. Behavioural change was highlighted when participants perceived content, facilitation, and participant readiness to align. There was limited evidence of team- or organisational-level change during the evaluation period. Positive emergent outcomes included peer networks; challenges included disengagement where content felt less relevant. This highlights a persistent gap between individual development and organisational impact, requiring more deliberate mechanisms to translate learning into practice.

Overall Implication:

For those designing, delivering, or commissioning leadership programmes, the findings demonstrate that how learning is facilitated, contextualised, and embedded into practice



shifts impact. Without deliberate support for application, even high-quality programmes are unlikely to produce organisational-level change.

Recommendations

1. **Address inconsistencies in facilitation quality** by establishing clear standards, shared principles, and stronger support to ensure consistent, contextually relevant delivery across cohorts.
2. **Strengthen programme coherence** by explicitly linking modules, learning objectives, and developmental progression to create a clear, cumulative learning journey.
3. **Embed application into practice** by providing structured support for translating learning into workplace contexts and encouraging active experimentation.
4. **Sustain a mixed evaluation approach** by combining cross-cohort analysis with periodic longitudinal, mechanism-focused inquiry to inform continuous programme improvement.



1. Introduction

1.1 Report Purpose and Structure

This report presents an integrated evaluation of three cohorts of the Directors Leadership Programme (DLP), combining programme-level analysis with more in-depth study of individual learning journeys. The aim is to generate a comprehensive understanding of learning processes (the sequences of activities, interactions, and experiences through which learning occurs) and mechanisms (the underlying causal factors or drivers that enable or shape these learning processes) across different implementation contexts.

The purpose of the report is threefold:

- (i) to assess how the programme was implemented across cohorts,
- (ii) to examine the mechanisms through which learning and leadership development occurred, and
- (iii) to analyse the extent to which intended outcomes, particularly systems leadership capabilities, were achieved.

As a result of variation in data availability and evaluation methods across cohorts, the report uses two analytical approaches. Cohorts 1 and 2 are evaluated together using a common analytical framework, reflecting their shared programme design, consistent implementation model, and comparable data sources. Cohort 3 was evaluated separately using a case study approach because participant engagement in data collection activities did not reach the levels observed in Cohorts 1 and 2, resulting in insufficient data for the same analytic approach. However, the case study design enabled more in-depth exploration of participant experiences and programme processes, enriching findings from earlier cohorts.

The report is structured in four parts:

- **Part I** presents the evaluation of Cohorts 1 and 2, using a programme-level analytical framework focused on implementation, mechanisms, and outcomes.
- **Part II** presents the evaluation of Cohort 3 as a case-based analysis, capturing learning processes, trajectories, and context-specific dynamics.
- **Part III** integrates findings across all cohorts, synthesising shared mechanisms, divergent implementation dynamics, and structural and contextual influences.
- **Parts IV** provides overarching conclusions and recommendations, drawing on cross-cohort synthesis rather than cohort-specific findings alone.

1.2 Programme and Evaluation Context

The Directors Leadership Programme (DLP) is a flagship initiative in leadership development, designed for Directors across the UK Civil Service. Administered by the Leadership College for Government (LCG), a component of Government Skills. The



programme seeks to equip participants with the conceptual tools, practical skills, and relational capacities required to operate effectively within complex policy, organisational, and service delivery systems ([Civil Service Accelerated Development Schemes, 2024](#)).

DLP was launched in 2022, with the first pilot cohort of directors joining the programme in January 2023 and completing in December 2023. The second cohort of directors joined the programme in September 2023, completing in December 2024. The third cohort of directors joined the programme in March 2025 and completed in October 2025. A full description of the DLP can be found in the Technical Report.

Key programme elements include structured learning modules, Action Learning Sets (ALS), Frontline Visits (FLVs), facilitated peer engagement, and sustained cohort-based learning (see Annex B). Together, these components are intended to support participants to:

- develop deeper understanding of complex systems,
- broaden perspectives across organisational and sectoral boundaries,
- strengthen reflective and relational leadership practices, and
- apply systems leadership approaches to real-world challenges.

This report presents a comprehensive three-year process evaluation of the DLP, identifying lessons to inform improvements to programme design and implementation. A detailed explanation of methodologies used across cohorts can be found in the accompanying Technical Report. A separate feasibility assessment considered whether it would be possible to conduct an impact evaluation to determine whether the programme achieved its intended outcomes, alongside an economic evaluation of cost-effectiveness and value for money. However, the feasibility assessment concluded that undertaking these evaluations would not be reasonably possible given the available data and evaluation conditions.

Theory of Change Overview

The DLP was informed by a Theory of Change as well as a Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) matrix developed by the programme delivery team (see Annex A and C). These are grounded in the premise that sustained leadership development at Director level is most effectively achieved through reflective, relational, and practice-based learning, rather than through knowledge acquisition alone. Several mechanisms (e.g., peer learning and social comparison, reflective practice, facilitated dialogue) were hypothesised to be central. An in depth explanation can be found in the Key Mechanisms and Theory of Change sections in the Technical Report.

Research Questions/Aims

The evaluation was guided by the following research questions, which remained consistent across cohorts and informed the overarching synthesis presented in this report:

Implementation



- Was the DLP implemented as designed across the three cohorts, and what adaptations (e.g. content, facilitation, cohort composition) influenced participant experience and outcomes?
- What elements of the programme were consistently strong or weak across cohorts?

Process and Mechanisms

- What mechanisms (e.g. peer learning, reflection, facilitation, practical application) contributed most strongly to programme outcomes?
- How did these mechanisms evolve over time in each cohort?
- How did participants describe the translation of programme learning into workplace practice?

Outcomes

- To what extent did the DLP contribute to outcomes at the individual, team, and organisational level?
- What unintended or emergent outcomes (positive or negative) were observed?
- What patterns of sustained leadership behaviour or culture change are visible across cohorts?

Cross-Cohort Synthesis

- What consistent success factors, challenges, and learning mechanisms are evident across Cohorts 1-3?
- How has the DLP evolved as an intervention model, and what does this reveal about leadership development in the civil service context?

While the core research questions remained stable, the analytical approach evolved across cohorts to enable deeper exploration of specific questions, particularly those relating to process, mechanisms, and the translation of learning into practice. These analytical refinements are explained in detail below.

1.3 Analytical Rationale for Cohort Separation (C1-2 vs C3)

The report adopts a complementary mixed-analytic design, where:

- **Cohorts 1-2** provide evidence of programme-level mechanisms and structural dynamics;
- **Cohort 3** provides insight into how these mechanisms operate at the level of individual learning processes, translation dynamics, and developmental pathways.

Participant engagement in Cohort 3 data collection was lower than in Cohorts 1-2. Resulting in a more limited and uneven dataset. While qualitative thematic analysis does not require statistical representativeness, longitudinal, multi-source analysis depends on sufficient data density across participants and data types to robustly trace developmental trajectories over time.

Although similar evaluation tools (with the exception of ALS and FLVs in Cohort 3) and data collection methods were deployed across all cohorts, Cohort 3 generated substantially



lower response rates and a more limited empirical dataset, particularly in relation to reflective instruments, interviews, and learning mechanisms.

This analytical separation has important implications for how findings are interpreted. Cohorts 1 and 2 provide programme-level insights, showing how design, mechanisms, and organisational conditions support learning. Cohort 3 offers individual-level insights, tracing participants' learning trajectories, meaning-making, and transformation, while still reflecting how programme design and mechanisms operate in practice.

The report therefore does not seek to directly compare outcomes across cohorts in a uniform or standardised way. Instead, it adopts a layered interpretive approach in which different forms of evidence contribute to different levels of understanding:

- Structural and programme-level learning dynamics (Cohorts 1–2).
- Contextual and processual learning dynamics (Cohort 3).
- Integrated understanding through cross-cohort synthesis.

This approach avoids comparing findings that rest on different types of evidence as though they were equivalent, while enabling coherent integration of findings through cross-cohort interpretation rather than metric standardisation.

2. Cohorts 1–2 Evaluation

2.1 Evaluation Design

The evaluation of Cohorts 1 and 2 of the DLP was designed to assess the programme's implementation, processes, mechanisms, and early indicators of outcomes, particularly in relation to systems leadership development. The evaluation aimed to understand how participants experienced the programme, how key elements contributed to learning, and the contextual factors that facilitated or constrained these processes. Annex C documents how many participants from each cohort completed various data collection tools.

Key evaluation design features included:

- A longitudinal, mixed-methods approach, including qualitative interviews, pulse surveys, and diaries of programme activities (see Annex C for full list of data collection tools).
- Focus on both cohorts to enable comparisons and identify patterns of learning, engagement, and outcomes over time.
- Alignment with the DLP theory of change and CMO matrix, ensuring evaluation questions and methods examined both intended programme outcomes and mechanisms of learning.



2.2 Data Collection

Data collection prioritised capturing rich, contextualised insights into how participants engaged with the programme and applied learning to their leadership practice. Multiple data sources were used to support triangulation and to strengthen the robustness of findings (see Annex B, C, and Table 1 of the Data Collection section in the Technical Report for more details). Sample sizes were 34 (Cohort 1), 34 (Cohort 2), and 42 (Cohort 3), although response rates for Cohort 3 were more limited, constraining cross-cohort comparability.

2.3 Data Analysis (C1–C2)

Analysis uses realist and theory-based approaches to identify and examine evidence of learning outcomes, and explore whether and how programme elements and mechanisms generated such outcomes (see the Theory of Change Overview section of the Technical Report). Interview transcripts, pulse surveys, ALS observation tools, Visit reflection sheets, and diary entries were coded iteratively using a framework aligned with programme objectives and intended outcomes. Themes were organised under implementation, process and mechanisms, and outcomes, with cross-cutting patterns identified across cohorts. Data from Cohorts 1 and 2 were compared to explore consistency, evolution of programme design, and cohort-specific experiences.

To enhance analytic rigour, coding was conducted iteratively with ongoing refinement of the framework as new insights emerged, including attention to deviant or negative cases that did not align with dominant patterns. While formal inter-rater reliability (i.e., the extent to which multiple coders produce consistent coding decisions) was not undertaken, coding decisions were systematically documented and revisited to ensure consistency and transparency. Illustrative quotations were selected to reflect both typical experiences and the range of perspectives observed across participants, rather than to privilege singular or extreme accounts. Analysis aimed to move beyond description, focusing on explanatory insights about how and why programme elements contributed to participant learning and leadership development.

2.4 Methodological and Interpretive Limitations (C1–C2)

The evaluation has several limitations. Participants were high-level civil servants, limiting generalisability beyond comparable senior public sector leadership settings; however, findings may still be relevant to similar leadership development programmes operating within the Civil Service. Data collection tools (see Annex B) surveys rely on participant perception, which may be influenced by social desirability or memory effects. Furthermore, early indicators of outcomes were assessed, but longer-term impact on leadership practice requires follow-up beyond the scope of this evaluation. Despite these limitations, the triangulated data sources and comparison across cohorts provide robust insights into programme mechanisms and early outcomes.



2.5 Findings (C1–C2)

2.5.1 Implementation

Evaluation findings show the DLP was implemented largely as intended across both Cohorts 1 and 2, with participants engaging consistently in the programme’s core elements, including modules, ALS, and FLVs. Programme modules were delivered in a structured sequence designed to introduce participants to systems leadership concepts, provide tools and frameworks for applied learning, and encourage reflection on complex challenges within their professional contexts.

While the early modules were widely regarded as novel and engaging, particularly for broadening participants’ perspectives and highlighting connections across systems, the later modules were sometimes perceived as less rigorous or disconnected from participants’ immediate work challenges, resulting in a relative decline in engagement.

“In the final module, it wasn't even new. It was, do you remember this? And have you used it? And if you hadn't used it, you sort of sit there going, Well? And yes, I remember it, but part of the reason I haven't used it is probably it didn't really land. [...] If I'm really honest, you know, there was the ability to kind of disengage a bit because of the way it was set up. Whereas actually, if it had been new content, or a new intervention, or a demonstration, or somebody talking about an intervention in a different way, it would have kept the whole group engaged.” – Participant, Cohort 1

“I'm not sure it added a lot as I already spend a lot of time thinking through my system in a wide range of ways but [there were] some useful tips and reinforcing ideas.” – Participant, Cohort 2

“The materials, especially in the introduction, were strong, and then it felt like the second and third times we looked at [systems leadership], [the facilitators] were not particularly advancing the topic... they were maybe just looking at it from a different point of view.” Participant, Cohort 2

Action Learning Sets were implemented according to the planned format, with four facilitated sessions and one self-led session for each cohort. Facilitators employed a carefully structured approach that allowed participants to reflect on their personal and professional inquiries, engage in peer dialogue, and explore multiple perspectives on complex challenges. These sessions were experienced as both conducive and constructive, providing opportunities for participants to challenge one another and receive feedback in a structured environment.

“The group was very adept in offering support and challenge skilfully. Differing perspectives were seen as adding to a complex and nuanced tapestry rather than requiring resolution. There weren't any disagreements as such – more different angles on the same issue.” – ALS Facilitator, Set 1

“The Action Learning Set provided me with practical advice and ideas in relation to my immediate challenge which has helped me to drive forward my change programme and tackle some challenges, as well as having confidence in my



approach. In addition, it was extremely valuable to learn from the challenges and situations of the other cohort members, to help to think through solutions to some of their problems and also to transfer the learning and thinking from their scenarios and approaches to my own.” – Participant, Cohort 1

2.5.2 Process & Mechanisms

Participants attributed the most meaningful learning to the mechanisms embedded within the ALS, visits, and broader cohort engagement. ALS sessions offered a structured, facilitated space for reflection, dialogue, and peer support. Effectiveness appeared shaped by participants’ prior exposure to ALS methods and the facilitation approach. This highlights the importance of careful structuring that enables participants to examine their own practices, identify blind spots, and explore alternative ways of navigating complex organisational challenges. Several participants noted that ALS sessions allowed them to “see a problem through several different eyes in a safe space,” and that engagement with peers helped them reframe challenges and identify practical courses of action. Despite high prior experience with ALS varied across participants, the sessions were consistently reported as impactful, with some participants planning to “continue [self-facilitated] ALS beyond the DLP.”

“We were going through the programme at such a time of political turmoil...[the] ability to [speak] with other senior leaders about the challenges we were all facing was cathartic. And working through problems in a structured way was really helpful to me – it's good to have that offline safe space to talk about what you might be thinking about without being embarrassed if [a move] doesn't work out.” – Participant, Cohort 2

FLVs offered participants insight into system-level dynamics, generating knowledge of different stakeholder perspectives and prompting reflection on service delivery and organisational practice. For participants with little prior exposure to frontline contexts, these visits represented a novel and transformative experience, often prompting reconsideration of assumptions about how their systems operate. For others with extensive prior experience, the value lay in exploring unfamiliar sectors or deepening understanding of known organisations.

“I do quite a lot of frontline visits, so it wasn't particularly new to me. But actually, one of the things that came out from the program was the value in getting out of your immediate sector and doing visits that are a bit different. I've asked my team to help me be a bit more systematic with future visits over the next 12 to 18 months from the perspective of what visits would open up a slightly broader perspective.” – Participant, Cohort 2

Visits were most impactful when participants were able to explicitly connect these experiences to systems leadership concepts, for example, by using systems mapping to identify gaps in their engagement or to explore the interplay between organisational units. In both cohorts, participants also reported renewed motivation to support their teams in conducting FLVs, reinforcing the programme’s broader influence on organisational practice.



Several cross-cutting mechanisms amplified the impact of individual programme elements. Cohort community emerged as a particularly important factor, with participants highlighting the value of connecting with peers from diverse departments and professional backgrounds. Residential modules and structured small-group discussions fostered trust, collaboration, and ongoing peer-to-peer exchange, creating an environment in which participants could explore ideas and challenges openly. Facilitator skill and careful cohort selection further reinforced these mechanisms, ensuring a group dynamic conducive to reflection and mutual learning. Participants noted that both formal and informal interactions, including discussions on the margins and breakout sessions, contributed to the richness of learning and strengthened the supportive peer network.

2.5.3 Outcomes

Participants in Cohorts 1 and 2 reported meaningful shifts in perspective, confidence, and capacity to apply systems leadership approaches. They described gaining a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of their systems, the perspectives of different stakeholders, and the complexity of delivering public services.

“Certainly the increased focus on stakeholders and perspectives and how to integrate them has become more prominent in my organisation as a result [of the programme], in particular reshaping my objectives for next year.” – Participant, Diary 2, Cohort 1

“Understanding how the third sector has become a part of the system and knowing the role that we play alongside the charitable sector in supporting communities [was important to me].” – Participant, Cohort 2

Participation in visits reinforced participants’ sense of strategic capability – particularly their ability to navigate complexity and adapt approaches to varied contexts – enabling them to approach challenges with greater confidence and creativity.

“Frontline visits have definitely helped open my eyes to the local perspective on issues and to the extent which a “one size fits all” approach can miss the local nuances that are important. Some of the discussions around culture and how [it] is impacted/generated have made me think differently about how I seek to influence culture.” – Participant, Cohort 2

Engagement with peers in structured reflective sessions fostered the development of alternative approaches and practical solutions, while frontline exposure highlighted the importance of connecting leadership decisions to lived realities. For some participants, these experiences were transformative, providing genuinely novel insights that shaped leadership and decision-making. For others, the value lay in consolidating or renewing existing practices, particularly among participants with prior exposure to ALS or FLVs.

The evidence strongly suggests that peer and cohort learning functioned as a central mechanism within the programme. Strong relationships built through residential modules, small-group discussions, and ALS sessions structured opportunities for sustained reflection, mutual support, and knowledge exchange beyond the formal programme.



“Engaging with such a range of people who are all so impressive in their own way was initially quite intimidating. But over the first residential and then in the ALS, it's clear that a lot of the internal struggles I have are very similar to many of my colleagues on the course. The realisation that I'm not the only one finding things hard has been helpful because it's normalised my experience.” – Participant, Cohort 2

These peer networks were consistently cited as one of the most valuable aspects of the programme, offering both professional support and a safe space to explore challenges not typically accessible in participants' day-to-day roles. Despite being an explicit aim of the ALS, meta-learning, or learning how to learn, was less evident, suggesting either that it was not actively prompted in the programme or that it did not occur to a significant extent.

Overall, the DLP's design (i.e., integrating modules, Action Learning Sets, visits, and cohort community) appears to have enabled participants to achieve early indicators of systems leadership learning, particularly in developing a broader perspective on complex challenges, fostering reflective practice, and enhancing the capacity to apply systems thinking to real-world problems. Variation in reported outcomes, ranging from reflective learning to applied practice change, indicates that participants derived value in different ways depending on their prior experience and engagement. Rather than representing a limitation, this suggests the programme's capacity to function flexibly across diverse participant needs; however, more intentional tailoring of content and learning progression may further optimise relevance and depth of impact.

3. Cohort 3 Evaluation

The evaluation for Cohort 3 adopts a case-led approach, focusing on five longitudinal case studies to identify the specific mechanisms of change that contribute to programme outcomes for individuals. By foregrounding individual journeys, the evaluation seeks to identify why particular learning mechanisms were effective for some leaders and less so for others.

3.1 Evaluation Design

As a result of the variable levels of participant engagement in data collection activities, the data were not suited to a full cohort-wide analysis like those of Cohort 1 and 2. Instead, a case-study approach was adopted, focusing on five participants with multiple data sources (interviews, pre- and post-programme questionnaires, and reflective diaries) to examine learning trajectories over time (see the C3 Analytical Processes section of the Technical Report). An additional seven interviews were completed with Cohort 3 members, assessing the presence of case study findings in other participants' experiences of DLP, and these were used to support triangulation.

Limitations

The five case studies were selected based on the availability of multiple longitudinal data sources, rather than as a representative sample of the cohort. Findings should therefore be understood as illustrative of particular learning trajectories, not as reflecting the experiences



of all participants. Interviews with other cohort members were used to explore whether similar patterns were evident, but these do not provide comprehensive cohort-wide representation. Participants who engaged consistently in data collection activities may not be representative of the wider cohort, which could influence the types of learning trajectories captured.

3.2 Findings

3.2.1 Cohort and Programme Context (Implementation)

This section presents findings from five case studies drawn from the most recent DLP cohort, situated in relation to earlier cohorts (C1-2). Participants in this cohort were broadly comparable to previous cohorts in seniority and organisational role with several entering the programme with substantial prior leadership development experience, shaping expectations of challenge and relevance.

Minor adaptations to the programme were made for this cohort, including a revised schedule of material regarding systems leadership, while core components and intended learning mechanisms remained consistent. These contextual factors are important for interpreting engagement patterns and outcomes. Findings are organised around the study's research questions, drawing on individual cases to illustrate key mechanisms and outcomes.

3.2.2 Engagement Trajectories and Learning Mechanisms

Each case study displayed a distinct engagement trajectory that illuminated how programme mechanisms operated in practice. These trajectories highlight the relative influence of facilitation, peer learning, reflection, and opportunities for experimentation, and how these mechanisms supported (or constrained) translation into practice (see Annex D).

Case 1: Delayed reflective reframing

Case 1 entered the DLP with strong leadership experience and high confidence, showing limited need for basic leadership development. Instead, Case 1 indicated looking for challenge and practical value. Early reflections highlight that several parts of the programme felt disconnected from their day-to-day work, particularly systems thinking content and FLVs, which were seen as offering little value (Annex D, Case 1 Questionnaires). Engagement was therefore uneven, with little early application of learning in the workplace. Later reflections indicated that content relating to leadership culture and leading at scale became more meaningful as it became applicable to day-to-day tasks (Annex D, Case 1 Interview). Learning appeared to occur primarily after the modules, as Case 1 reflected independently and synthesised how insights could be applied to their role, rather than during facilitated activities, peer interaction, or use of programme tools. Outcomes were largely reflective rather than behavioural, with Case 1 describing shifts in perspective, increased self-awareness, and new ways of thinking about leadership challenges. The participant described retrospective validation of existing leadership practice, with no reported changes in behaviour or application of tools.



Case 2: Facilitated peer learning as the primary mechanism

Case 2 entered the programme wanting to strengthen their problem-solving skills and their confidence in handling complex leadership situations. From the outset, they engaged strongly with group discussions and peer learning and consistently valued the opportunity to learn with and from others (Annex D, Case 2 Interview). Simulation exercises, new to Cohort 3, were experienced as particularly useful, offering a safe space to practise skills and test new approaches. Other elements, including Action Learning Sets and visits, felt less connected to their role and day-to-day challenges (Annex D, Case 2, Interview Quote 3). What sustained their engagement was the quality of facilitation and the relationships within the cohort. Shared problem-solving and reflection with peers remained central to their experience, even when some programme components felt less relevant. The main impact of the programme was on how the participant thought about leadership and understood different perspectives. While they described increased reflection and awareness in their approach, this did not translate into clear or sustained changes in day-to-day workplace practice.

Case 3: Selective experimentation and adaptive use of concepts

Case 3 entered the programme with strong communication and storytelling skills, and a clear sense that they wanted to develop their ability to work across systems and organisational boundaries. They engaged with the content mainly at a conceptual level and were selective about what they took forward (Annex D, Case 3 Diaries). Some systems leadership material felt too theoretical and disconnected from day-to-day practice. Learning happened through adaptation rather than direct application. Rather than using programme tools exactly as designed, the participant described adapting the underlying ideas and approaches to respond to live leadership challenges in their own context. Reflection and experimentation, driven by their own initiative, were more important than structured activities or formal sessions (Annex D, Case 3 Questionnaires & Interview). The participant reported some meaningful changes in how they worked, with early signs of behavioural change in their leadership practice. These impacts were mainly at an individual level, with wider team or organisational effects not yet clearly visible.

Case 4: Relational learning with limited practical translation

Case 4 began the programme with established leadership experience and a strong interest in learning from other people's perspectives and contexts. They engaged consistently with networking opportunities and valued being exposed to the challenges faced by peers in different roles and settings. The diversity of the cohort was central to their experience, creating space to reflect on their own leadership in relation to others. Learning was shaped mainly through relationships rather than formal programme content. Peer interaction, shared reflection, and learning from others' experiences mattered more than skills training or the use of tools. The participant described growing confidence, broader perspective, and greater awareness of different leadership contexts, rather than developing new technical skills (Annex D, Case 4 Diaries). The outcomes were mainly reflective and relational, focused on confidence and understanding rather than clear changes in behaviour or practice. The impact was felt at an individual level, with no clear evidence of application within their team or organisation.



Case 5: Integrated engagement and sustained application

Case 5 expressed clear development goals at the outset and a strong readiness to put learning into practice. From the start, they were open to experimenting with new approaches and felt that the programme content closely matched the challenges of their role (Annex D, Case 5 Questionnaires). Engagement was consistent throughout the programme, supported by positive experiences of facilitation and a strong sense of relevance. Learning was active and practical. The participant made regular use of programme tools, supported by opportunities for reflection and ongoing experimentation in their day-to-day work. Peer interaction strengthened this process, while the structure of the programme helped sustain application over time (Annex D, Case 5 Diaries). This case showed the clearest evidence of lasting change. The participant described continuing to apply learning in practice and to experiment with new ways of working beyond the programme itself. The strongest impacts were at an individual level, with early signs of wider influence on practice.

3.2.3 Translation into Practice and Outcomes

Participants varied in how learning from the DLP translated into day-to-day practice. Some described clear behavioural changes, including active use of programme tools, while others reported learning primarily through reflection, confidence-building, or greater awareness of organisational culture and systems, without immediate changes in practice.

At the individual level, common learning outcomes included increased confidence, reassurance about existing leadership approaches, and enhanced understanding of organisational systems. In several cases, participants described learning in broad or reflective terms rather than through specific actions, indicating cognitive or attitudinal engagement rather than observable behaviour change. One case (Case 5) demonstrated sustained application, with ongoing experimentation and consistent use of programme tools in the workplace.

Evidence of team- or organisational-level change was limited. Participants more often described learning in terms of how they thought about leadership, approached conversations, or reflected on practice, rather than observable changes in team behaviours or outcomes. Where learning was applied (Case 3), participants adapted underlying ideas and approaches to fit local challenges, rather than implementing programme tools exactly as designed.

Participants also reported experiences that influenced whether programme learning led to changes in practice. Peer relationships and exposure to different leadership contexts were highly valued (Cases 2 and 4), even when they did not result in direct changes to practice. Where programme elements were misaligned with participants' needs (Annex E; Participants 15, 24, & 56), engagement was selective (Case 1), though this did not reduce overall perceptions of programme value. This suggests that participants actively curated their engagement, drawing on components most relevant to their roles and experience while disengaging from less applicable elements.



Overall, the DLP contributed most clearly to individual-level learning and reflection. Sustained behavioural change was observed in cases where programme content, facilitation, and participants' readiness aligned. Evidence of wider team- or organisational-level change was not strongly apparent within the timeframe of this evaluation.

3.2.4 Cross-Case Synthesis

This section synthesises findings across all cohorts, including for Cohort 3 both the five case studies, and seven additional interviews, focusing on how programme design, learning mechanisms, and participant context shaped outcomes.

3.2.4.1 Implementation and Participant Experience

Prior leadership experience strongly influenced engagement with the programme. More experienced leaders were more likely to disengage from content perceived as introductory, while participants whose development needs aligned with programme content engaged more fully. Although reflective engagement and validation of leadership capability were widely valued, these experiences were not consistently associated with changes in practice. This pattern was evident in Cases 4 and 5, reinforced in the additional interviews (Annex E, Interview Quote 1, Participant 15), and consistent with findings from earlier cohorts.

3.2.4.2 Learning Mechanisms

Facilitation and peer interaction were consistently valued and supported reflection and sense-making. However, these mechanisms alone rarely led to behavioural change. Where programme content was experienced as overly theoretical, participants either disengaged or adapted ideas independently, requiring high motivation and contextual authority. The recurring theory-practice gap helps explain why reflective and relational learning, while valuable for validation and support, did not reliably translate into action in the absence of concrete, practical content. Similar patterns were observed across earlier cohorts; however, in Cohort 3, participants more frequently adapted theoretical content independently. While these five cases are not intended to be exhaustive, they provide insight into how variation in factors such as prior experience, role context, and motivation influences engagement with programme mechanisms and the extent to which learning translates into practice.

3.2.4.3 Outcomes and Translation into Practice

The most consistent outcomes of the DLP were individual-level gains, including increased confidence, validation of leadership identity, and improved reflective capacity. Behavioural change was less common and occurred primarily where content relevance, facilitation quality, and opportunity to apply learning aligned. Participants engaging mainly through reflection and peer exchange showed limited evidence of change beyond the individual level. These findings indicate that engagement routes were not equivalent in their effects and that programme impact depended on the interaction between both design and participant context.



4. Findings

4.1 Implementation

Was the DLP implemented as designed across the three cohorts, and what adaptations influenced participant experience and outcomes?

Across all three cohorts, the DLP was delivered broadly in line with its intended design, with core components, including structured sessions, facilitated discussion, peer learning, and reflective activities, consistently present. However, implementation varied in practice across cohorts and sessions, particularly in relation to facilitation quality, curriculum emphasis, and participant engagement.

Participants in Cohorts 1 and 2 described variation in how consistently programme elements were delivered and integrated. Some sessions were experienced as coherent and well-pitched to Director-level leadership challenges, while others were perceived as fragmented or uneven in relevance. These variations were often attributed to differences in facilitation approach, the balance between conceptual input and practical engagement, and the extent to which sessions were explicitly linked to participants' leadership contexts.

In Cohort 3, while the programme architecture remained similar, participant experience reflected greater sensitivity to facilitation style and programme pitch. Case study evidence indicated that when facilitation was perceived as strong, participants reported higher levels of engagement regardless of content familiarity. Conversely, perceived misalignment between session design and participants' experience levels contributed to disengagement or selective participation.

Adaptations over time included changes to session sequencing, increased emphasis on participant-led discussion, and refinements to reflective components. Participants noted these changes unevenly: some reported improved coherence, with clearer links between sessions, activities, and reflective components, while others continued to experience disconnection between programme elements, particularly in terms of how different sessions related to one another and supported their practical learning.

What elements were consistently strong or weak across cohorts?

Across cohorts, peer interaction and cohort discussion were consistently identified as strong elements. Participants valued opportunities to engage with peers facing similar leadership challenges, compare experiences, and test assumptions in a confidential environment.

“The thing I found most helpful was my first action learning set. The group told me I was wrong and that I needed to, basically, get a grip and focus on something else. And at the time I was a bit ‘oh my God, never had that’ but actually, I needed that and that was probably the most effective intervention I’ve ever had in an action learning chat.” – Participant, Cohort 2



“There is huge benefit in connecting and speaking with the cohort, and the time and space to reflect on myself as a leader. I feel like a plane that's broken through the clouds and can look with more perspective and clarity on my strengths and next role.” – Participant, Cohort 2

“[The networking] is probably more valuable than the content.” – Participant, Cohort 3

Facilitation quality emerged as a consistently influential element, with strong facilitation – characterised by coherent delivery, a balanced mix of theory and practice, and relevance to participants’ day-to-day roles – associated with higher engagement, deeper reflection, and perceived value.

“I found that the Action Learning Sets enabled us to talk a bit about issues that weren’t always front and centre of the wider plenary, particularly around personal resilience, dealing with personnel management challenges, how it feels to work our way up to Director. The chemistry of the groups was good, and I think the facilitators have to take some credit for this.” – Participant, Cohort 2

Where facilitation was perceived as weaker or inconsistent, participants reported reduced engagement even when content was viewed as relevant.

“I think what came across was this wasn't a single programme that had been put together by a team of learning experts. This was a set of contracted out segments and the people running the program didn't know how or if they were going to fit together.” – Participant, Cohort 3

Elements most frequently described as weaker or inconsistently valued included conceptual sessions when participants struggled to see clear links to their day-to-day leadership responsibilities.

4.2 Process and Mechanisms

What mechanisms contributed most strongly to programme outcomes?

Across cohorts, several mechanisms were consistently identified as contributing to learning and perceived outcomes:

- Peer learning, particularly through facilitated discussion and informal exchange, enabled participants to normalise challenges, gain perspective, and reflect on alternative leadership approaches.
- Structured reflection, including diaries, ALS, and guided reflective activities, supported sense-making and integration of learning with prior experience.
- Facilitated dialogue, when delivered effectively, enabled challenge, psychological safety, and exploration of uncertainty.

Participants less commonly described direct, linear application of programme tools. Instead, learning was often mediated through reflection, discussion, and adaptation.



Evidence from Cohort 3 indicates that learning did not occur consistently or uniformly across the programme. One case reported limited immediate value from particular sessions or concepts, with relevance emerging retrospectively in response to later leadership challenges (Annex D, Cohort 3, Case 1).

Longitudinal case studies showed that mechanisms such as reflection and peer comparison often accumulated impact gradually, supporting reframing of leadership identity rather than immediate behavioural change. For some, learning experiences functioned less as sources of new knowledge and more as prompts for validation, recalibration, or renewed attention to relational and cultural dimensions of leadership.

How did participants describe translation of learning into workplace practice?

Translation of learning into practice was described in varied and non-linear ways. Some participants reported active experimentation with specific approaches (e.g. communication strategies, stakeholder engagement, leadership behaviours) (P209; P216; Annex D, Case 5 Questionnaires), while others described more diffuse changes, such as increased awareness or perspective-taking (Participant, Cohort 3; Annex D, Case 4 Diaries).

Where application occurred, it was often participant-led, with individuals adapting programme concepts to their own contexts rather than following tools in a prescriptive way (Annex D, Case 3). Participants described drawing selectively on language, frameworks, or insights that aligned with immediate leadership challenges.

In several cases, participants reported that learning influenced how they thought about leadership rather than what they did in concrete terms. For some, this reflected reinforcement of existing approaches that they were already using, while for others, opportunities to translate learning into behaviour had not yet arisen.

“I am already planning to use systems mapping to support some work that we are doing with [some groups] to better understand the different services that we currently provide to [them], the relationships and systems that are currently in place in [our organisation] and how we can improve these to provide better outcomes.” – Participant, Cohort 2

“Storytelling tools were instantly helpful, and I've been using [them] when giving presentations and engaging with groups. Some of the systems thinking work I've been using - particularly using different ways of considering a challenge to understand it better.” – Participant, Cohort 2

This included shifts in how participants understood their role, interpreted organisational dynamics, or approached complexity.

4.3 Outcomes

To what extent did the DLP contribute to outcomes at the individual, team, and organisational level?



At the individual level, participants across cohorts reported outcomes including increased confidence, enhanced reflective capacity within the programme, greater awareness of leadership style, and improved ability to navigate complexity.

“Some opportunity to reflect, and some feedback from others, has helped me to recognise certain strengths - such as authenticity, empathy and emotional openness, and personal commitment and drive.” – Participant, Cohort 2

“I've also been thinking more recently about what I bring as a leader and whether I'm maximising my impact as I get dragged into the detail” – Participant, Cohort 2

Reflection primarily occurred during programme activities, rather than indicating a broader change in reflective practice outside the programme context.

At the team level, participants described changes indirectly, such as altered communication approaches, increased attentiveness to team culture, or greater willingness to involve others in decision-making.

“I think one of the sessions that stuck in my mind, and I've actually used elsewhere with my team, was the constellating (i.e. the physically mapping out and positioning of people in a room), thinking about their emotions within that system, and then how they are represented.” – Participant, Cohort 2

These outcomes were typically reported qualitatively and varied substantially across participants.

At the organisational level, evidence was more limited. Participants described intentions or early steps toward influencing broader systems, but longer-term organisational outcomes were beyond the scope of available data. Organisational impact was more often inferred through participants' expanded perspective or strategic awareness than through measurable change.

What unintended or emergent outcomes were observed?

Several unintended or emergent outcomes were identified across cohorts. Positive emergent outcomes included the development of informal peer networks, increased sense of solidarity among Directors, and validation of participants' leadership experiences.

Negative or unintended outcomes included participant frustration when programme content was perceived as insufficiently challenging, decreased engagement with elements deemed lower value, and the experience of stress or time pressure resulting from programme participation. Some participants reported that variability in facilitation undermined confidence in the programme's overall coherence.

What patterns of ongoing behaviour or change are visible across cohorts?

Patterns of change across cohorts were most evident at the level of individual learning and orientation, rather than in widespread behavioural or cultural transformation. A small number of participants, particularly those whose development needs closely aligned with programme content, reported sustained behavioural change, including ongoing experimentation and continued use of programme learning beyond completion.



More commonly, change was described in terms of shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and leadership identity (e.g., altered perspectives on leadership, increased reflexivity, and greater attentiveness to relational and organisational dynamics) rather than consistent changes in day-to-day leadership practices. These shifts indicate cognitive and attitudinal change, but were not generally accompanied by systematic behaviour change.

Cultural change at team or organisational level was not directly observable within the evaluation timeframe. Where participants referred to “cultural” effects, this primarily related to heightened awareness of relational dynamics, communication practices, and leadership norms within their teams, rather than demonstrable changes in collective behaviours or organisational practices.

4.4 Cross-Cohort Synthesis

What consistent success factors, challenges, and learning mechanisms are evident across Cohorts 1–3?

Across cohorts, consistent success factors included strong facilitation, opportunities for peer learning, and alignment between programme content and participants’ leadership challenges. Challenges consistently included variability in facilitation, perceived gaps between theory and practice, and differential relevance based on prior experience.

Learning mechanisms operated consistently across the programme, but participants’ engagement with learning showed common patterns of selectivity, adaptation, and delayed uptake. Participants engaged selectively with specific mechanisms (e.g., peer learning or structured reflection), adapted ideas and insights from these mechanisms to fit their own contexts, and in some cases translated learning into practice only after a time lag, when relevant opportunities arose (see the Key Mechanisms section alongside Annexes E and F of the Technical Report). Engagement was shaped by participants’ experience level, expectations of challenge, and perceived coherence of the programme.

How has the DLP evolved as an intervention model?

Across cohorts, the DLP evolved incrementally, with refinements to delivery and emphasis rather than fundamental redesign. Findings indicate that the DLP functions less as a uniform intervention producing standardised outcomes and more as a developmental space within which participants engage selectively, drawing on content that aligns with their individual contexts and readiness.

5. Discussion

This section interprets the evaluation findings in relation to the research questions, drawing out implications for the future design, delivery, and positioning of the Directors Leadership Programme (DLP), as well as broader insights for leadership development in the civil service context.



5.1 Implementation

Implications for programme implementation and adaptation

The findings suggest that while the DLP was broadly implemented as designed, implementation fidelity alone is insufficient to ensure consistent participant experience or outcomes. Variability in facilitation quality and perceived programme coherence had a greater influence on participant engagement than the influence of specific programme components. Facilitation quality refers to differences between facilitator groups and individual facilitators in terms of their knowledge, use of relevant and realistic examples, ability to balance practical application with theory, and overall effectiveness in guiding discussion and reflection.

This has several implications for future delivery. First, facilitation should be treated as a core design feature rather than a delivery variable. Investment in facilitator capability, consistency, and shared understanding of the programme's developmental intent is likely to yield greater returns than further curriculum expansion.

The findings also suggest that engagement is closely linked to perceived value. Where participation demands (time, emotional labour, and reflective work) were not clearly justified by perceived relevance, engagement diminished. This points to the importance of explicitly linking reflective and developmental activities to participants' leadership challenges, role demands, and organisational contexts, so that programme demands are experienced as purposeful rather than burdensome.

5.2 Process and Mechanisms

Implications for how leadership development works in practice

The evaluation highlights that leadership development at senior levels operates more than through direct and linear mechanisms. Peer learning, facilitated reflection, and sense-making were seen to be more influential than the direct transmission of tools or frameworks. Consistent with established leadership development theory, the findings emphasise identity work, social learning, and experiential reflection over skill acquisition.

An important implication is that programme success should not be judged solely on immediate or visible application of learning. Retrospective engagement, reframing, and validation emerged as legitimate and meaningful forms of learning, particularly for highly experienced leaders. Programmes that fail to recognise these forms of engagement risk misinterpreting delayed uptake as disengagement.

At the same time, the persistent gap between conceptual input and practical application indicates a need for stronger scaffolding. Where participants successfully translated learning into practice, this was typically through participant-led adaptation. Making this adaptation process more explicit (e.g., through facilitated experimentation, peer coaching, or structured application cycles) could enhance the effectiveness of existing mechanisms without increasing content load.



5.3 Outcomes

Implications for expectations of impact

The findings suggest that the DLP contributes most reliably to individual-level outcomes, particularly in relation to confidence, reflective capacity, and leadership perspective. Team- and organisational-level outcomes were less consistently observed within the evaluation timeframe, reflecting both methodological constraints and the complexity of change at these levels.

This has important implications for how programme impact is framed and assessed. Expectations of rapid or directly attributable organisational change may be unrealistic for a programme of this nature. Instead, impact should be understood as cumulative and mediated through individual leaders over time, often in subtle or indirect ways.

The presence of unintended outcomes, both positive (e.g. peer networks) and negative (e.g. frustration, disengagement), suggests that leadership programmes function as complex interventions. Explicitly monitoring and addressing these emergent dynamics may help maximise positive spillovers while mitigating risks to engagement.

5.4 Cross-Cohort Synthesis

Implications for the evolution of the DLP as an intervention model

Across cohorts, the DLP appears to function less as a standardised intervention and more as a developmental platform within which participants engage selectively based on readiness, experience, and context. This raises important questions about differentiation and targeting.

Participants reflected that the programme's approach to systems leadership development was mixed. Several noted that it felt fragmented and insufficiently tailored to the realities of working in complex systems, with segments contracted out and no clear unifying design, leaving the programme without a "single guiding mind" (Annex F, Participants 15, 24, 56). At the same time, some elements were positively received: simulation activities were valued for providing practical opportunities to develop skills such as negotiation within complex challenges, and the programme did accommodate diverse entry points (Participant 2). Practical considerations, however, were flagged, including session length and scheduling, which sometimes made participation difficult alongside personal and professional commitments (Annex F, Participant 12).

One implication is that a single programme model may struggle to meet the developmental needs of a highly heterogeneous Director population. Greater flexibility in pathways, challenge level, or optional components may help align the programme more closely with participant experience and expectations.

More broadly, the evolution of the DLP reflects wider challenges in civil service leadership development: balancing standardisation with relevance, conceptual input with practical application, and short-term evaluation cycles with long-term leadership impact. The



findings underscore the importance of viewing leadership development as an ongoing, relational, and context-dependent process rather than a discrete intervention.

An additional, cross-cutting insight emerging from the evaluation concerns the role of leader readiness and programme fit. Participants with extensive prior experience did not necessarily demonstrate lower readiness for change; in many cases, they were highly reflective and open to development. However, they often reported that the programme did not meet them at their level or provide sufficiently tailored, practice-oriented opportunities to translate that reflection into behavioural change. As a result, the value they derived was more relational than developmental, particularly in the formation of cross-sector peer networks, rather than in substantive shifts in leadership practice.

By contrast, participants whose experience and developmental needs were more closely aligned with the programme's core content appeared better able to engage with and apply its frameworks. This suggests that programme effectiveness is shaped less by participant readiness alone and more by alignment between participant experience, expectations, and the level at which the programme was pitched.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the programme was not necessarily less effective for more experienced leaders, but that it delivered a different, potentially narrower, form of value for this group. This raises important considerations for programme design, including whether to differentiate pathways, incorporate more advanced or practice-based components, or explicitly position networking as a primary outcome for more experienced participants.

6. Conclusions

This evaluation provides a comprehensive, cross-cohort assessment of the Directors Leadership Programme (DLP), examining its implementation, learning mechanisms, and outcomes across three cohorts delivered over time. The findings demonstrate that the DLP has functioned as a meaningful leadership development intervention for Directors, while also revealing important variation in how participants engaged with, experienced, and derived value from the programme. The inclusion of a longitudinal, case-led evaluation in Cohort further demonstrates the value of complementing broad evaluative approaches with deeper, mechanism-focused inquiry. This approach surfaced learning dynamics that would likely remain invisible in cross-sectional designs, suggesting a role for mixed evaluative strategies in ongoing programme learning.

A central contribution of this evaluation is its illumination of how leadership development operates at senior levels. Learning was rarely linear or uniform; instead, it unfolded through selective engagement, reflection, peer interaction, and, in some cases, delayed or retrospective sense-making. The programme's effects were more evident in shifts in perspective, confidence, and leadership identity than in immediate behavioural change. While these shifts reflect meaningful individual-level learning, they did not consistently translate into observable changes in practice within the evaluation timeframe. This underscores the importance of evaluating leadership programmes not only by what



participants do differently in the short term, but by how they think, relate, and position themselves within complex systems over time.

The evaluation also highlights that programme effectiveness is shaped as much by *how* the DLP is delivered as by *what* it contains. Facilitation quality, programme coherence, and alignment with participants' experience levels emerged as critical conditions for meaningful engagement. Where these conditions were present, the programme supported experimentation, reflection, and sustained learning; where they were weaker, engagement diminished regardless of content relevance.

Finally, by integrating cross-cohort analysis with a longitudinal, case-led approach in Cohort 3, this evaluation extends understanding of the DLP as an evolving intervention model rather than a fixed programme. It provides a useful and substantive evidence base to inform future programme refinement, particularly in relation to differentiation, facilitation, and support for translation into practice.

The following recommendations build directly on these insights, focusing on how the DLP can strengthen its impact, coherence, and relevance for future cohorts of senior civil servants.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and cross-cohort analysis presented in this report, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the design, delivery, and impact of the Directors Leadership Programme (DLP).

1. *Invest in consistent, high-quality facilitation as a central component of programme design, including clearer expectations, shared facilitation principles, and enhanced support for facilitators.* Across cohorts, facilitation quality was an influential factor shaping participant engagement and perceived value. Strong facilitation enabled challenge and meaningful peer learning, even where content was familiar. Variability in facilitation, such as differences in facilitators' knowledge of the civil service context, ability to link content to participants' live challenges, and understanding of the programme arc, undermined coherence and diluted the impact of otherwise well-designed components.
2. *Clarify and strengthen the coherence of the programme by making explicit links between modules, learning objectives, and intended developmental progression.* Participants across cohorts reported uneven experiences of coherence. Some felt that sessions were disconnected or lacked a clear cumulative logic, with individual facilitators introducing content without consistently situating it in the broader programme. Explicitly articulating how components relate to one another and to overall learning goals could improve sense-making and reduce perceptions of fragmentation.

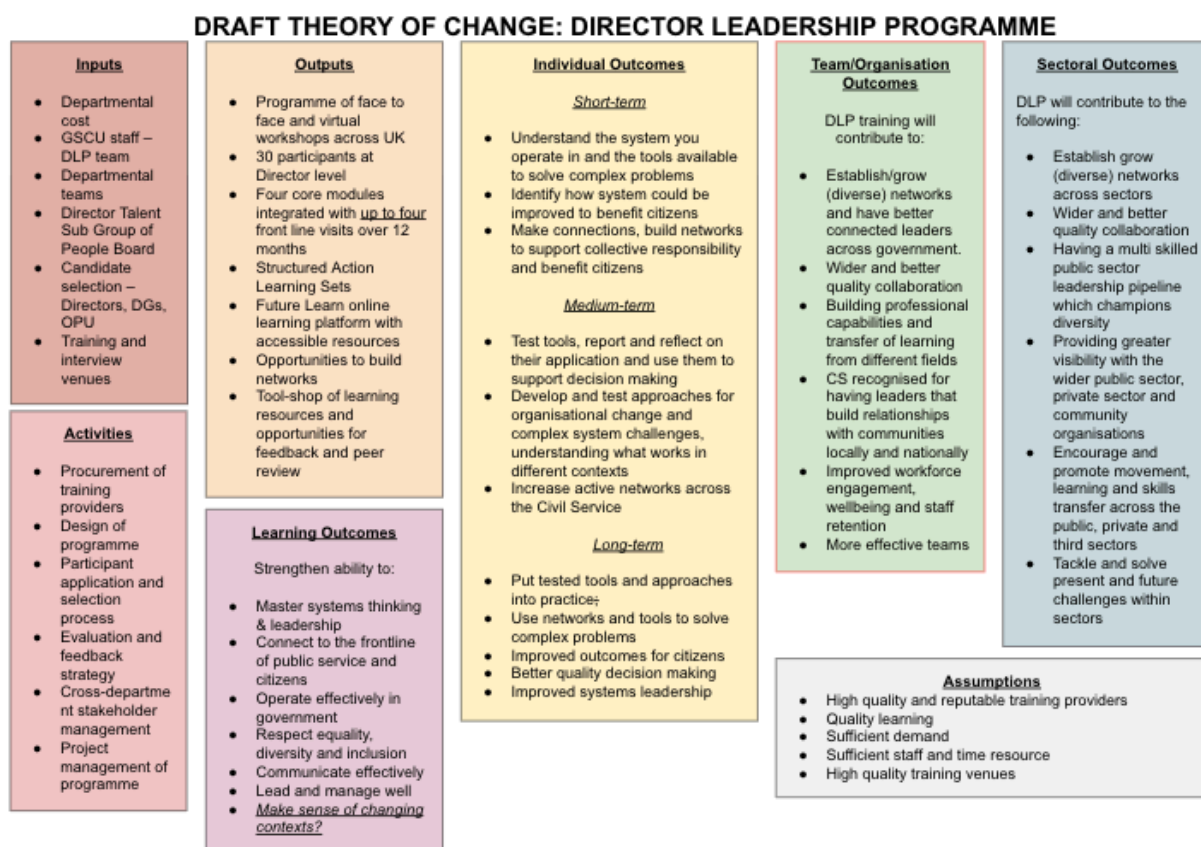


3. *Make the process of translating learning into workplace practice more explicit and better supported throughout the programme.* Where application occurred, it was typically driven by participant-led adaptation rather than direct implementation. Explicitly supporting experimentation would increase the likelihood that learning is embedded in leadership practice.
4. *Continue to combine cross-cohort evaluation with periodic longitudinal, mechanism-focused inquiry to inform ongoing programme development.* The Cohort 3 case-led approach highlighted learning dynamics that were less visible through the earlier cross-sectional methods, including the evolution of participant engagement over time, the interaction of programme components within specific contexts, and the mechanisms through which learning was consolidated or disrupted. These insights suggest that capturing temporal and processual dimensions provides a richer understanding of programme functioning and impact. Maintaining a diverse evaluative approach, integrating both snapshots and longitudinal, mechanism-oriented inquiry, will therefore support more nuanced programme learning and evidence-informed adaptation.



Appendix

Annex A. Theory of Change



Grounded by the Theory of Change, the programme design prioritised structured opportunities for senior leaders to engage in critical reflection, peer dialogue, and experiential learning, with the expectation that these processes would generate progressive shifts in leadership behaviour, decision-making, and professional influence over time.

Annex B. List of data collection tools and purposes

Data type	When data is collected	Data captures...	Data used for
Baseline pre survey	1 month before the start of the programme	Participants' prior practices, orientations, and knowledge before the DLP	Pre-post impact evaluation



1-1 Introductory meetings notes	Between launch event and first module	Participants' expectations, goals, and areas of consideration prior to the programme	Qualitative baseline information to inform analysis of participant context and mechanism analysis
Standardised surveys	End of final day of each module	Participant feedback about each module including relevance, usefulness, and perceived learning	Programme process monitoring, early indicators of learning and qualitative process and mechanism analysis
Module facilitator feedback	Within 1 week of each module	Facilitators' experiences and formative feedback on modules including areas to improve in the future	Programme process monitoring and qualitative process and mechanism analysis
Module observations	Within 1 week of each module	LCG teams' opinions and feedback about module sessions including areas to improve in the future	Programme process monitoring and qualitative process and mechanism analysis
Online diaries	1 month before each module and one month after the final module	Participants' ongoing reflections about their learning during the DLP as a whole programme and whether and how they are applying their learning in their day-to-day practice	Early indicators of learning and qualitative process, context, and mechanism analysis
Action Learning Set reflections (LeDALs)	Within 1 week of each ALS	ALS facilitators' observations and feedback on each action learning set including the nature of the conversation, how participants engage in dialogue, draw on DLP tools and ideas, use evidence to or other stakeholders' perspectives to inform their thinking	Early indicators of learning and qualitative process, context, and mechanism analysis
Visits reflections (TELIF)	Within 1 week of conducting an independent Visit	Participants' reflections, insights, and perceived impact of their experiences during visits with stakeholders at the frontline	Early indicators of learning and qualitative process, context, and mechanism analysis
Post-programme interviews	Within 1-2 months of finishing the programme	Participants' feedback on the DLP as whole, with a focus on each programme element, overall relevance, and coherence, as well as perceived impact on their practice and ideas to improve the programme	Early indicators of learning and qualitative process, context, and mechanism analysis



Post-programme surveys	Immediately after programme finishes (available for 1-1.5 months)	Participants' knowledge, practices, and orientations after the programme	Pre-post impact evaluation
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Annex C. Data collection response rates

Standardised surveys

Module	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3 (42)
1	94%	100%	48%
2.1	44% (not embedded as planned)	71%	57%
2.2	79%	71%	-
2.3	15%	56%	-
3	35%	71%	60%
4	-	-	40%
5	-	-	50%

Action Learning Set observation tool (LeDALs)

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
ALS 1	100% (5/5 facilitators)	83% (5/6 facilitators)	-
ALS 2	100% (5/5)	83% (5/6)	-
ALS 3	100% (5/5)	83% (5/6)	-
ALS 4	N/A - participant led	100% (6/6)	-
ALS 5	20% (1/5)*	N/A - participant led	-



*Nb. Facilitators did not receive LeDALS form in time due to data generation oversight; the one facilitator who submitted the form independently completed it.

Visit reflection tool (TELIF)

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
Submitted at least 1 tool	53% (18/26)	47% (16/34)	-
Submitted at least 2 tools	24% (8/26)	15% (5/34)	-

Nb. It is difficult to assess whether the TELIF tool is being completed to reasonable levels as we do not know how many FLVs have been completed.

Online diaries

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
Completed at least one diary	88% (30/34)	38% (13/34)	55% (23/42)
Completed at least three diaries	44% (15/34)	15% (5/34)	5% (2/42)
Completed at least five diaries	15% (5/34)	0%	0%
Completed all six diaries	0%	0%	0%

Individual diary completion:

Diary	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3 (42)
1	53% (18/34)		12% (5/42)
2	62% (21/34)		33% (14/42)
3	56% (19/34)		31% (13/42)
4	27% (8/34)		5% (2/42)
5	38% (12/34)		-
6	9% (3/34)		-



Pre / post surveys

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3 (42)
Pre-Survey	22	31	27
Post-Survey	11	6	17

End of programme interview

Cohort 1

59% of participants (20/34) completed interviews.

- **7 interviewed delegates also submitted TELIF tools and at least two online diaries**, meaning we have very well-rounded qualitative data from these delegates and can examine their detailed learning trajectories over time.
- **11 interviewed delegates also submitted at least one online diary**, providing opportunities to cross-check and triangulate across different data. Notably these delegates did not submit any TELIF tools, so the interviews generated detailed information on **visits** that otherwise did not exist on record.
- **1 interviewed delegate also submitted one TELIF tool only**, meaning the interview generated detailed information on this delegate's DLP learning experiences that did not otherwise exist on record.
- **1 interviewed delegate did not previously participate in any online diaries or TELIF tools**, so the interview generated information that otherwise did not exist on record and expanded in-depth evaluation participation to almost all delegates.

Cohort 2

44% of participants (15/34) completed interviews.

- **2 interviewed delegates also submitted TELIF tools and at least two online diaries**, meaning we have more well-rounded qualitative data from these delegates and can examine ways their learning was supplemented by various content and facilitation methods.
- **9 interviewed delegates submitted at least one online diary (only 4 also submitted a TELIF tool)**, providing opportunities to cross-check and triangulate across different data. Notably, five delegates did not submit any TELIF tools, so the interviews generated detailed information on **visits** that otherwise did not exist on record.
- **4 interviewed delegates submitted only TELIF tool(s)**, meaning the interview generated detailed information on this delegate's DLP learning experiences that did not otherwise exist on record.



- **2 interviewed delegates did not previously participate in any online diaries or TELIF tools**, so the interview generated information that otherwise did not exist on record and expanded in-depth evaluation participation to almost all delegates.

Cohort 3

29% of participants (12/42) completed interviews.

- Only **5 delegates (12%)** completed an interview and either pre- and post-programme questionnaires and one or more diaries.

Annex D. Longitudinal data sources and analytic focus across five case studies

Case	Data sources	Questionnaires	Diary Entries	Interview	Trajectories
1	1Q, 2D, I	(1) <i>"I think it was useful to an extent, but I had assumed [systems leadership] was part of thinking and working politically, that leaders across the civil service are doing all the time?"</i> (2) <i>"I found it was not pitched at the right level for directors. I do not need a whole day's role play on how to brief a minister; I do that every week."</i>	<i>"It has helped me - alongside my day job - think about how I keep connected to people and demonstrate the 'caring' part of me as a leader. I find this easy to do at a human level, but much harder at scale."</i>	<i>"Last night, you know the story slam part of it, I was making a speech and I started with a personal story. So things that...I think I learned. maybe it wasn't groundbreaking, but actually the chance to think about and then bring it into my practice has been helpful, yeah."</i>	High-confidence entry with limited developmental need led to uneven early engagement due to perceived lack of relevance, followed by later selective meaning-making and retrospective reflection that reinforced existing leadership perspectives without producing substantive behavioural change.
2	2D, I	No questionnaire data available.	<i>"The 1-day module was the most helpful and gave me useable tools – e.g., how to use a personal office, and comms around regulation. The first week didn't really give me any tools."</i>	(1) <i>"Some of it felt really good and challenging. Some of it felt pitched at the wrong level, if I'm honest. It was really,</i>	Goal-oriented entry and strong peer engagement drove consistent participation despite uneven relevance of some



				<i>really varied in terms of the overall kind of facilitation of the whole thing."</i> (2) <i>"The networking is the biggest benefit of the course."</i> (3) <i>"[The ALS] are very therapeutic but I'm not sure it has much impact on my day to day. The visits were the least useful part of the course."</i>	components, culminating in enhanced reflective thinking and perspective-taking without clear translation into sustained behavioural change in practice.
3	2Q, 2D, I	(1) <i>"I think I have a good level of understanding leadership at scale but hope the course opens other avenues for taking forward."</i> (2) <i>"I also wonder whether we should focus even more on agile/productive Civil Service in an era of reducing numbers and deepening debt. How do we make ourselves even more effective?"</i>	(1) <i>"I've definitely brought back language around identifying how we work in the system and leading at scale, and it did generate some interesting thoughts."</i> (2) <i>"Some of the external partners were a bit too theoretical and then the practical components involved walking around the room or things that didn't translate very practically at all."</i>	<i>"[During the programme], I thought a lot about whether there's a way to weave thinking about... how do we deliver things in a complex world with other partners, not just government."</i>	Strong initial capability and clear development goals led to selective, concept-driven engagement and adaptive learning, resulting in early individual-level behavioural changes through self-directed experimentation but limited wider organisational impact..
4	2Q, 3D, I	(1) <i>"We work quite collaboratively already and I am comfortable in my role."</i> (2) <i>"I think it was a bit of a missed opportunity that [some of the content] was not</i>	(1) <i>"Understanding the challenges of others in the room has been hugely valuable even if not directly in my system."</i> (2) <i>"I've had an increased realisation and confidence on what</i>	(1) <i>"[The networking] is probably more valuable than the content."</i> (2) <i>"They want a whole lot of cross-cutting stuff done for civil service reform and</i>	Experienced entry and strong relational focus drove consistent engagement through peer learning, leading to increased confidence and



		<i>really applicable. It's an easy fix but some external partners felt a bit weak."</i>	<i>transferable skills I have to offer."</i>	<i>haven't got enough resources and it feels like there's a willing group here but it was a missed opportunity utilising time to focus on not very practical stuff instead."</i>	broadened perspective but primarily reflective outcomes with little evidence of behavioural or organisational change..
5	2Q, 2D, I	(1) "I would like to go on more frontline visits. I think I can be more proactive." (2) "I am definitely going to use storytelling as a means to improve my communications and engagement with my large disparate workforce...and stakeholders and partners in my current and future roles."	"The DLP has helped me to think about longer term relations, shaping government policy and strategy as well as just ministerial trust and confidence in a crisis. The session with ministers was crucial for me."	"I got the most value out of building relationships, hearing about the complex things they do, realising that they are facing similar challenges...it kind of gives you a bit of a support group and it is quite important."	Clear development goals and strong readiness to apply learning drove sustained engagement and active experimentation, resulting in ongoing application in practice with emerging wider influence.

(Q = questionnaire, D = diary, I = interview)

Annex E. Supporting Quotes (from additional 7 interviews):

1. "I think it was just pitched at too low a level, like introduction to systems, but we're all conscious that we operate in a system where we can't make decisions or develop policy or deliver operations in silos" (Participant 15).
2. "I think what came across was this wasn't a single programme that had been put together by a team of learning experts. This was a set of contracted out segments and the people running the program didn't know how or if they were going to fit together" (Participant 24).
3. "I think overall it didn't feel like there was a single guiding mind on the programme; it felt disconnected" (Participant 56).
4. "I think the programme did well to attend to the cohort's various entry points. The simulation activities allowed time to practise applicable skills like negotiation in complex challenges" (Participant 2).
5. "There were some sessions that could have been collapsed significantly and especially when the accommodations are far, we finished late and are balancing home life and emails, calls...there needs to be more time built in for all of that" (Participant 12).