

Evaluation of sector-led improvement

Companion Report: LC Leadership Programme

November 2013



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Evaluation of sector-led improvement

This report forms part of the Local Government Association (LGA) evaluation of sector-led improvement. Other outputs from the evaluation can be found here: <http://www.local.gov.uk/research-performance-and-improvement>.

Sector-led improvement

With changes to the nationally imposed inspection and assessment regime, a new approach to improvement has been developed by local government. This was set out in the LGA's document 'Taking the Lead' in February 2011, supplemented in June 2012 by "Sector-led improvement in local government"¹ which describes a coordinated approach to sector-led improvement across local government, the support being provided and where to go for further information and advice.

The approach is based on the following key principles:

- councils are responsible for their own performance and improvement and for leading the delivery of improved outcomes for local people in their area
- councils are primarily accountable to local communities (not government or the inspectorates) and stronger accountability through increased transparency helps local people drive further improvement
- councils have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole (evidenced by sharing best practice, offering member and officer peers, etc.)
- the role of the LGA is to maintain an overview of the performance of the sector in order to identify potential performance challenges and opportunities – and to provide tools and support to help councils take advantage of this new approach.

'Taking the Lead' identified a small core set of activities that are commonly undertaken by councils who proactively take responsibility for their own performance and improvement. This common set of activities provides the framework for sector-led improvement across councils' services and activities. It is also the framework around which the LGA's offer of support to councils is based, as follows:

- strengthening local accountability
- inviting challenge from one's peers
- learning from good practice and through regional structures and networks
- utilising transparent and comparable performance information
- investing in leadership.

¹ <http://www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement>

The evaluation

The LGA's evaluation looks at both the overall approach to sector-led improvement and the specific offers of support. It is running over a two year period, with the main aim of understanding whether, in the context of reduced resources within the sector:

- the approach to sector-led improvement has the confidence of the sector and the government, and the trust of the public
- the sector has been able to strengthen local accountability
- the sector is adopting the sector-led improvement approach and continues to improve with a reduced burden of inspection, and in the absence of top down performance assessment
- the tools offered to the sector have had a positive impact on the sector's capacity to improve itself.

A baseline report was published in February 2013, with the final evaluation report published in May 2014. Both reports can be found here:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/research-performance-and-improvement>

In addition, a number of companion reports, of which this is one, are being published alongside the main evaluation reports, looking at specific issues in more detail.

Summary

Introduction

This report outlines the findings of an evaluation of the LC Leadership Programme (formerly known as Leeds Castle Leadership Programme). The programme was designed for chief executives and leaders in local government, customising their learning so it could be applied to real-life issues.

The evaluation looked at the experiences of the most recent two cohorts, through analysis of feedback forms and a small number of in depth telephone interviews.

Although participants gave a range of constructive suggestions for programme improvements, it should be noted that overall, feedback from both cohorts was largely positive. Participants broadly thought highly of the LC Leadership Programme, found it effective and highlighted that their expectations were largely met.

Most useful aspects of the programme

Participants were asked to identify which aspects of the programme they found particularly useful. A wide range of aspects were reported, but participants in both cohorts commonly said that interacting with others in their cohort and having the opportunity to bond, build networks and gel with other participants was highly beneficial.

Participants also noted that having a change of environment gave them the space and time to reflect, listen, think and absorb views, ideas and experiences. Several specific sessions were also highlighted, including the RADA sessions which looked at participants' personal impact by giving a deeper understanding of the importance and qualities of clear and focused communication skills.

Less useful aspects and suggestions for improvement

In order to enable the LGA to continue to develop and refine its leadership support offer, participants were asked to identify areas of the programme that were less useful than others, and suggest areas where the programme could have been improved.

Common themes were around the inclusion of more group work and practical discussions, and less 'academic' content, as well as making the most of the expertise that existed within the group participants themselves.

Participants' expectations

Where participants had defined expectations for the programme, these were wide ranging but included:

- An introduction to tools in order to improve and renew leadership styles and the development of frameworks for thinking through issues.

- Space for personal growth and reflection outside the “day to day” environment.
- Reflecting on the future of local government in challenging times and raising their awareness of the issues facing local government and public services more broadly.

Broadly these expectations were met and in some cases exceeded. Where expectations were not fully met, participants made a range of suggestions as to how this could be addressed in future.

Longer term impacts of the programme

The telephone interviews also looked at the longer term impacts of the programme. Interviewees were presented with some aspects of leadership that the programme aimed to cover, and were asked whether the programme changed their perspective on or helped them to further develop in any of these areas.

Areas where participants commonly identified an impact were work undertaken on understanding the link between leadership, council success and positive outcomes for the local area, and also communication skills, as well as resilience in times of adversity and empathy when dealing with others.

Developing networks

An aim of the programme was to introduce participants to one another, building networks for informal support and advice. Interviewees were asked whether they thought that this had been achieved for their cohort and, if so, whether this had been of benefit.

Interviewees generally had felt support from their cohort on the course, and gave examples where these ongoing relationships had proved valuable. However, issues around geographic location and time constraints were highlighted as reasons why in some instances networks had not continued to develop since the course.

Wider impacts

Interviewees were asked whether they had any examples of things that they had done differently as a result of the programme, that had led to better outcomes or improvement in their authority or for their area or local community, or had any impact on the reputation and influence of their authority on partners or the general public.

A number of interviewees said that whilst they couldn't draw direct causal links between the course and wider outcomes, the skills that they learnt have contributed to positive changes which would have wider impacts. However, some more specific examples were given, particularly around improved partnership working using the skills learned on the course.

Introduction

This report outlines the findings of an evaluation of the LC leadership programme (formerly known as Leeds Castle). The programme was designed for chief executives and leaders in local government, customising their learning so it could be applied to real-life issues.

2013 was the last year that the programme ran in the form described below. The evaluation looks at the impact that the programme had, as well as providing feedback and learning which has contributed to the development of a new LGA leadership support offer.²

The programme was bespoke for each cohort, looking at leadership challenges relevant to the times in which participants were leading, but there were a number of common core elements, in particular: a foundation of knowledge around systems thinking; problem classification; leadership styles and approaches; personal presence; and the impact of history.

The programme was devised and delivered on the basis of a number of design principles, including: the idea that the programme should be co-designed with participants; that the cohorts should include both leaders and chief executives; that each cohort should benefit from both established theory and practice of leadership and also the latest innovations; and that there should throughout be an emphasis on practical learning which could be applied in each participant's own place.

The intensive residential programme usually ran over eight days, split into three blocks.³ It included:

- contributions from key players who were dealing with major issues of the day
- pertinent scenarios of the future
- the chance to work on live significant policy issues.

The programme also included periodic one to one coaching support for each participant.

This evaluation looked at the experiences of the most recent two cohorts (cohort eight and cohort nine). Thirty one leaders and chief executives in total participated in the programme over these two cohorts:

- Cohort eight: Autumn 2011 – Spring 2012
- Cohort nine: Autumn 2012 – Spring 2013

² Details of the leadership support offer can be found here: <http://www.local.gov.uk/support1>

³ The content of each programme block was designed around the particular needs and interests of the cohort at the time. Over the course of a programme, block 1 tended to focus on the introduction of new ideas, block 2 provided immersion in an alternative governance system (for these cohorts this was Denmark and Sweden), and block 3 provided consolidation and application of learning.

Methodology

The evaluation of the LC Leadership Programme had two different aspects:

Analysis of feedback forms

Immediately after completing the programme, participants were asked to complete a feedback form looking at the most and least useful elements of the programme, suggestions for improving the programme and whether it met their expectations. Additionally, further views of cohort nine participants on these issues were sought as part of a 'wrap up' session and the analysis below draws on this as well.

Qualitative interviews

Six interviews were conducted with cohort eight participants (three with chief executives and three with leaders). The purpose of these interviews was to look at the longer term impacts of the programme, as cohort eight had finished the programme around 22 months prior to being interviewed.

The interviews also explored some similar issues to the feedback forms, in greater depth; where this is the case, findings are reported alongside the feedback forms.

The interviews were conducted by the LGA research team. They lasted around 30 minutes and were conducted via telephone. The topic guide can be found at Annex A. The interviews are not intended to present a representative view of all participants, rather to give a flavour of the experience of individual participants, and to provide some examples of the impact that participation has had on them.

LC Leadership Programme: the views of participants

Most useful aspects of the programme

The feedback forms asked respondents to identify which aspects of the programme they found particularly useful. Participants in both cohorts viewed the programme positively, and commonly reported that:

- Interacting with the cohort group and having the opportunity to bond, build networks and gel with other participants was highly beneficial.
- Sharing thoughts and experiences with other leaders and chief executives in the cohort and listening to the views of others was helpful.
- A change of environment gave participants the space and time to reflect, listen, think and absorb views, ideas and experiences. This point was further illustrated by a cohort eight interviewee who said:

“the opportunity to spend some time reflecting, not running round like headless chickens as you do in your day job, and to have conversations with colleagues from a similar peer group was invaluable...”

Cohort eight interviewee

In addition to the overarching aspects identified above, participants also identified various specific aspects of the programme that they found most useful. These are reported separately for each cohort, as views varied between the two.

Cohort eight

Many participants mentioned individual sessions, with several specifically highlighting the following sessions as being particularly useful and engaging:

- The RADA sessions - which looked at participants' personal impact by giving a deeper understanding of the importance and qualities of clear and focused communication skills.
- Sessions on 'wicked' problems - which encouraged participants to understand the importance of deciding what type of challenges they face and consider how to tackle their own 'wicked' problems.
- Public leadership in challenging times - which aimed to stimulate a discussion about the changing character of the challenges to public agencies and the way in which political and managerial leaders need to adapt to meet these challenges.
- A national perspective - which provided an opportunity to discuss the government's reform programme in relation to local government, the role local democracy might play in the future and the impact that the coalition government has on this debate.

Specifically in relation to block two, the visit to the Scottish Parliament gave many respondents a valuable opportunity to view another system of governance and absorb the workings of an alternative democratic structure. The opportunity to interact with politicians and civil servants during this trip was also noted and valued. For example:

"I liked the visit to Scotland – that really helped me – it helped me see things from a different perspective which helps put your own stuff into context more."

Cohort eight interviewee

"I thought the visit to Scotland was very useful – the ability to see something completely different from our own experience... it was really interesting to reflect/have reflective practice on the issues which were emerging and the challenges being faced in a different jurisdiction."

Cohort eight interviewee

Cohort nine

Several participants gave specific praise for certain sessions; as with cohort eight, RADA and 'wicked problems' were mentioned, as well as 'local government today: society tomorrow' (which covered the 'known unknowns' facing local government, and considered how local government will need to change to meet current and future challenges).

Specifically in relation to block two, cohort nine participants valued the overview of Danish government and engagement with Danish politicians gained through the project visit and other trips.

For block three, participants mentioned the following as particularly useful sessions:

- The 'merry go round' tasters - which aimed to offer the cohort a taster of four different ideas/tools around communication and leadership.
- The fishbowl exploration session entitled: 'By 2015, how do we want people to be describing local government and what do we need to make that happen' - which aimed to develop and deepen the group's understanding about what they, collectively and individually, needed to do in order to achieve the perceptions and relationships that they aspire to in the future.
- The Open Space/informal group sessions - this was time handed to the group to hold discussions about different self-chosen topics.

Participants also appreciated the opportunity for exposure to leaders and the interaction with senior LGA political and officer leadership.

Less useful aspects and suggestions for improvement

The programme overall was largely viewed positively by participants, however in order to enable the LGA to continue to develop and refine its leadership support offer, participants were asked to identify areas of the programme that were less useful than others, and suggest areas where the programme could have been improved.

Specific sessions

Some specific sessions were identified as weaker than others. In cohort eight, for 'In conversation'(a discussion with an expert on ageing society and demographic change) and the session on Public Sector Reform, issues were raised around lack of presenter engagement and therefore poor group input and discussion, and comments were also made about the relevance of case studies used.

In cohort nine, the session on 'Leadership in Practice' was commonly identified as weak, with comment about a negative style of delivery and lack of group discussion as a result. Several delegates also expressed a view that some of the sessions during the trip to Copenhagen could have been more clearly presented.

Also in cohort nine, some participants mentioned that some sessions in the Engagement Workshop (which explored the concept and application of effective engagement in terms of locality leadership and community building) were too long and did not add anything to the block.

Block two

Some cohort eight participants mentioned that there was too much travelling that did not add value in block two. Some also said that they did not find the visit to the

Scottish Parliament particularly useful (however this visit was also highlighted as a positive by others so it appears that opinions were mixed amongst the participants).

Both cohorts mentioned that block two did not contain enough reflection or discussion time. They felt that the agenda was too full with too much emphasis on external input and that they “needed time to breathe and reflect”⁴.

Delivery style

Some cohort eight participants felt there were too many long lecture-based sessions during blocks one and two and that some form of activity would have been beneficial to break this up.

“it was a good event, I enjoyed it and would say it was positive and recommend it to others, subject to some things being slightly tweaked ...and slightly tweaked would be the bit where it was somewhat academic ...”

Cohort eight interviewee

Similarly, some cohort nine participants felt that the delivery of some sessions in block one was too theoretical and that there was “too much being talked at”⁵. Sessions which incorporated discussion were felt to be more useful.

Participants in both cohorts commonly suggested that there could be more opportunity for discussion, group work and debate, and that less time should be spent being ‘talked at’ in an academic manner, with more interaction during the presentations and more discussion opportunities generally.

Group behaviours and facilitation

The quality of the cohort was seen as crucial to the success of the programme. It was felt that using the experiences and contributions of the group to greater effect, perhaps through forum discussions, would enhance the event. It was also suggested that participants could present or sessions could be organised by the group itself.

Another issue which was mentioned by a few delegates in both cohorts was around the behaviours and personalities which emerged within the cohorts and the role of facilitators in dealing with these. Interviewees also mentioned the disruption caused to the group as a whole by those participants who failed to attend all sessions:

“There was a core group of people and then others who didn’t attend all the sessions. This was disruptive having people coming in and out of the group – you either attend or not at all.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

On a related note, a couple of points were made about the role of the facilitator when strong personalities are present:

⁴ Cohort nine feedback form

⁵ Cohort nine feedback form

“I think something (improvements) in relation to drawing people out a bit further because I don’t think there was any reflection on people’s learning styles. ...I don’t find it necessary to really always have my voice heard and I feel comfortable in that, but I feel that that could have been handled differently because it doesn’t mean that people haven’t got things to say - it just needs to be delicately handled when you have got some very forthright individuals in that context to get the balance correct.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

Additionally, cohort nine participants voiced some uncertainty around the role of the facilitators in block three (and in particular whether their role was one of observer or participant).

Suggestions for addressing these issues included:

- On occasion facilitators could more openly challenge behaviours and comments.
- Ensure mutual respect between cohort members.
- Consider who really owns the programme – the facilitation team or the group.

Other suggestions for improvement

On a more overarching note, although generally viewed positively in its current form, a broad rethink of the programme structure was mentioned by several participants, including a review of what it is trying to achieve, the process for learning, tools and techniques, the inclusion of more group work and less academic content. A need for a general sharpening of the programme around areas such as timing, interaction and session content was highlighted.

“it’s a really good programme but could benefit from more systematic synthesis at the end, to remind everyone about what the objectives of the programme were and to test where we were on that through our own personal and collective journey.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

Some suggestions made by specific cohort eight participants included:

- There could be more input from the chief executives or chairs of other public service agencies, such as police and health, as including these groups within the cohort would help challenge group thinking.
- More opportunities could be provided to share best practice/solutions and techniques, with more than one session to share practical ideas.
- There was a suggestion that, having identified issues at the start of the programme, it would have been helpful to review how these could be worked through and experiences gained during the programme learnt from.

“I was clear in the pre-design phase that we needed to make sure it wasn’t a talking shop and we actually got some practical examples of what others were doing... didn’t quite reach my expectations on that”

Cohort 8 interviewee

- There should be more quality control of presenters and their presentations.

Improvement suggestions made by cohort nine participants included:

- Some participants suggested that the RADA sessions on day one needed to be longer to be of more use.
- There could be more focus and awareness on differences – specifically with reference to women and an acknowledgement of particular strengths around women's leadership styles.
- Providing better quality support materials and a summary of the structure beforehand.
- Creating a better linkage between theory and practical applications.
- Providing more opportunity for engagement with politicians and generally more political input.
- A greater emphasis on one or two major areas in depth.
- Explain the purpose of each session beforehand with an option to challenge and change if it doesn’t meet expectations.
- Participants should be given a clearer definition of what they could expect to gain from the programme beforehand.
- Several participants commented that more effective use could have been made of senior LGA political and officer leadership time with the group.

Participant’s expectations

The feedback forms asked participants what expectations they had for the programme and how far these were met, whilst interviewees were asked what their reasons for participating were, what they aimed to get out of the programme and whether these aims were met.

Cohort eight

Some delegates said that they were either open minded or unsure about what to expect from the course. Others had more defined expectations which included:

- Being challenged, stimulated and supported whilst learning from the training offered on the programme.
- Having the time and space to reflect and observe.
- Developing and reviewing their own personal leadership style and skills and being introduced to the latest thinking in this area.

- Reflecting on the future of local government in challenging times and raising their awareness of the issues facing local government and public services more broadly.
- Analysing and debating ideas.
- In block two, to help inform partnership working with other agencies.
- Also in block two, to learn from an alternative political model.
- The opportunity to network with high calibre individuals such as political leaders.
- Engaging and interacting with a diverse and supportive cohort of individuals.

Broadly these expectations were met and in some cases exceeded. Several delegates mentioned that they had enjoyed the programme, found it informative and had experienced worthwhile networking opportunities within the cohort where they were able to broaden their knowledge and learn from one another. For example:

“I found that the networking with a group of people, both officers and members who had different political perspectives from me.....just to help me understand their side of how a council works more clearly was useful to me.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

There were some instances where specific expectations had not been met, and delegates suggested areas where improvements could be made to address this. These included:

- A need to get to the “wicked issue” more quickly.
- More discussion of complex and difficult issues and getting to the heart of these.
- Considering more fully what could be learnt from the exposure to a different political system through the visit to the Scottish Parliament, in terms of working through current issues for local government.

Cohort nine

Some participants in cohort nine said that they were unsure of what to expect from the programme while others specified that they had high hopes. Of those delegates who had clearly defined expectations these included:

- Exposure to high level leadership and chief executives.
- Camaraderie from within the cohort and an opportunity to share and compare experiences, insights, learn from others and discuss complex problems in common with colleagues.
- An introduction to tools in order to improve and renew leadership styles and the development of frameworks for thinking through issues.
- To gain a perspective on the Danish local government system, exposure to a new system, how it works, and the challenges and the solutions.

- High quality presentations.
- The opportunity to work with other chief executives and senior leaders.
- An introduction to new ideas and concepts.
- Space for personal growth and reflection outside the “day to day” environment.

Many respondents stated that these had been met. Where expectations had only been partially met this tended to be because participants were either expecting to come away with more practical examples of things that they could translate to their own situation or because they felt that they needed more time for interpretation, reflection and thinking through how to apply the experience.

RADA

The RADA sessions looked at participants’ personal impact by giving a deeper understanding of the importance and qualities of clear and focused communication skills. Participants from both cohorts completed RADA specific feedback forms. They were asked about their expectations, the elements they found most useful, any changes they would make, how the course would help them in their professional life, and were also asked to sum up the RADA experience as a whole.

Fulfilment of expectations

The majority of cohort eight and nine participants said that their expectations of the RADA sessions were met although some were initially unsure what to expect from the sessions. Their expectations included:

- to be challenged on presentational style, performance and delivery
- a focus on body and voice
- to be given communication tools and tips
- awareness of body presence, breathing and vocal skills.

Most useful element (asked only to cohort 8)

Cohort eight participants were asked to identify the elements of the RADA session that they found most useful. These included guidance on:

- slowing down speech and breathing/visualising/relaxing
- better posture
- the linkage of all elements and techniques in order to deliver effective speech
- projecting.

Using RADA learning in professional life

Both cohorts were asked to identify how they would use the course learning in their professional lives. Comments included:

- allowing more time for speech preparation
- improving speech delivery
- focus on breathing/slowing down for a less rushed delivery
- use of techniques in daily meetings, public speaking and presentations
- use of exercises and voice projection.

Changes to the course

Participants from both cohorts were asked if they would make any changes to the course and why.

Several participants specified that they would have liked more time on the course and more time to prepare presentations on the course.

Course experience

Participants from both cohorts were asked to sum up their experience on the RADA course. Overall comments were broadly positive and the course was described as productive, useful, challenging, insightful and enjoyable.

“I really enjoyed ironically the bit with the RADA people which is about presence and about how you can say something quickly and effectively in a short period of time. It interested me that a lot of people struggled with that - bearing in mind some of the roles and responsibilities that we have in our posts, it was quite an eye opener.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

Participants were also asked if they had any additional comments and these largely highlighted the helpful support offered by the tutor.

Longer term impacts of the programme

The telephone interviews with six cohort eight participants also looked at the longer term impacts of the programme, as cohort eight had finished the programme around 22 months prior to being interviewed.

Leadership skills

Interviewees were presented with some aspects of leadership that the programme aimed to cover, and were asked whether the programme changed their perspective on or helped them to further develop in any of these areas.

Interviewees broadly agreed that all aspects had been helpful to them in their roles. Particular emphasis was given to work undertaken on the impact of the link between leadership and council success and also communication skills, as well as resilience and empathy. Each area is outlined below with examples given by interviewees.

- Several interviewees provided examples of where the programme had helped with **understanding the link between leadership, council success and**

positive outcomes for the local area. Examples centred around the role of assertion in driving political outcomes forward:

“It made me understand that I need to be more assertive in driving my political outcomes forward and that was really helpful to me so that was really good. It made me think about women in leadership roles and....whether there are any differences in the way I lead because I am a woman leader. I'd not really thought about it before but I think it is important and (it is important to use) those differences to a positive effect...”

Cohort 8 interviewee

- Others provided examples of where the programme had helped with **communication skills**. Examples centred around the need for effective engagement with the community:

“...it is fundamental to us that we are not just communicating with, but engaging properly with our communities...I think doing the course helped me to understand that a bit better and gave me some tools and techniques to take that forward.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

- In terms of **personal insight, including self-awareness and emotional intelligence**, responses centred on the value of challenging effectively and listening and exploring new ideas:

“I think that could have been emphasised a bit more by being more challenging in the context of drawing people out of where they felt comfortable, or where behaviours should have been challenged a bit more effectively”.

Cohort 8 interviewee

“I certainly felt that I got a lot out of two or three sessions for my own personal development, particularly around listening and exploring different constructs...”

Cohort 8 interviewee

- Several interviewees provided examples of where the programme had helped with **adapting behaviour to different situations**, for example:

“Some of the stuff from Leeds Castle has helped me in relationship to building and holding people together who have different agendas...chairing a meeting when everyone is of the same status so everyone is taking a leadership role can be very difficult as everyone thinks they should be in charge, so using some of the skills I got from Leeds Castle were very good.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

- A number provided examples of where the programme had helped with **resilience in times of adversity**. Comments centred on the importance of assertiveness skills and the value of support networks:

“Being more assertive in delivering political outcomes is something that I have struggled with. It has helped me understand that I tend to be a person who wants to keep things calm – I don’t willingly go into situations where I am challenging and I think it helped me to understand that I have to do that sometimes and it is justified to do it and there will be occasions when it gets a bit uncomfortable for a little while, and you just have to understand that.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

“I think the resilience piece would have been better served if we had put more into people’s experiences and what they were doing to meet the challenges of the times. I think we didn’t have enough about how we could support each other and provide an informal network outwith of the course itself.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

- Several interviewees provided examples of where the programme had helped with **demonstrating sound judgement**. Examples included the importance of being decisive:

“...it’s about trusting your own judgement and understanding that people expect you to do that when you’re a leader, they expect you to make a judgement on something and then stick with it. It helped me to understand that better and even if it does upset people, if I have a political objective that my group want to achieve then I have to sometimes push against people to get that done.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

- Finally, examples were provided of where the programme had helped with **empathy when dealing with others**, particularly looking at the importance of understanding and responsiveness:

“It probably built a different understanding of others. I feel I am quite an understanding and empathetic person but it may have helped with that.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

Leadership

More generally, interviewees were also asked whether the programme helped them to feel more confident in their leadership role. One interviewee said it would have been more help if they were new in post, however others gave several examples of how they had benefitted from the course in this respect, including:

- increased confidence to help councillors make difficult decisions about services

- increased confidence across a wider range of local authority activity
- greater insight into their own leadership style, whether it was working and what others might think of it
- increased confidence dealing with people of opposing views:

“It helped me to develop the resilience that I needed to kind of stand up in the chamber – when there are only (a small number of you against a large number) of the opposite political persuasion you know to think, well that’s ok, they’re not going to like what I say but I’ve got to say it anyway because that’s why people elected me to come here – and so it helped me with some of that.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

Another respondent said that whilst the course didn’t specifically make them feel more confident, “what it did do was provide me with other insights and gave me a bit more grounding about alternative ways of dealing with some issues.”⁶

Developing networks

An aim of the programme was to introduce participants to one another, building networks for informal support and advice. Interviewees were asked whether they thought that this had been achieved for their cohort and if so, whether this had been of benefit.

Interviewees generally had felt support from their cohort on the course, and gave examples where these ongoing relationships had proved valuable. However some highlighted issues around geographic location and time constraints, as reasons why in some instances networks had not continued to develop since Leeds Castle:

“It has been incredibly useful to me. I come across other people that were on my cohort quite frequently since we finished and they are a group of people from across the political spectrum... and I have spoken to them about things when I have been worried about them...”

Cohort 8 interviewee

“Having gone through the rigours of the course there is a shared bond between us and it has been a useful network. The problem of course with all of these things is back in everyday busy life it has been difficult to maintain, so I have always tried where possible to get involved in the alumni sessions but there is not a huge opportunity to further those networks...”

Cohort 8 interviewee

⁶ Cohort 8 interviewee

Wider impacts

In order to identify whether the support offered to participants through the programme has gone on to have any wider impacts, interviewees were asked whether they had any examples of things that they had done differently as a result of the training that had: led to better outcomes or improvement in their authority; led to better outcomes for their area or local community; or had any impact on the reputation and influence of their authority on partners or the general public.

A number of interviewees said that whilst they couldn't draw direct causal links between the course and wider outcomes, the skills that they learnt have contributed to positive changes which would have wider impacts. For example:

“...the course made me think about my approach to some things differently, particularly my style and communication with partners and with colleagues, so I believe that I can adapt my behaviours as a result of some of what I heard.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

“... I wouldn't go so far to say it has had a dramatic impact on the organisation and the community at large but it may have made subtle and important contributions to making me a better chief executive.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

Some interviewees gave examples of improved partnership working, for example:

“I think certainly working through some of the stuff at Leeds Castle has helped me in relationship building and holding people together who have different agendas...”

Cohort 8 interviewee

“I think also there have been good outcomes in the way we have shared resources and building strategic partnerships across the county...I think we are doing it by putting politics aside, territorial differences aside to try and be grown up and emotionally resilient really in the way we are building those relationships, in a way that I suspect would have felt far too brave previously...”

Cohort 8 interviewee

“...working with the county council ...it's kind of helped me to understand that I might not agree with them on all they do, but if there are things that I want to achieve then you know you can work with them quite comfortably on things where you agree but you don't have to agree on everything...”

Cohort 8 interviewee

Another highlighted an improved political insight:

“What I did get was a better appreciation for the way political leaders are impacted by the local politics of place and the way in which different leaders try to adapt their position to deal with that.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

Finally, a specific example was around the appointment of staff:

“I came back from it with a much clearer focus on, yes, these are the things I wanted to do and now I’ve got to make them happen and that goes from the appointment of staff (and we’d had a couple of not very successful appointments) but we’ve had much more successful ones since then, so being much clearer in the way you set things out when people come for senior jobs here is really vital; and I think it certainly helped me to sharpen up what I’ve been doing so I think people understand it better and being more assertive.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

General observations and comments

Finally, both the interviews and feedback forms invited participants to share any additional feedback about the programme.

Cohort eight

Cohort eight participants fed back that they broadly found the programme enjoyable, well organised, balanced and challenging.

“Overall my impression was that it was an excellent programme. It has been two years now since I did it but I have drawn on it heavily and it has influenced my networking and has been an excellent resource.”

Cohort 8 interviewee

Generally speakers were felt to be engaging and the cohort were described as “a good mix of bright people”.

Many participants were keen to ensure that a follow up group was established for the cohort in order to “build on the momentum we began to create” and to ensure contacts were not lost. A mechanism for meeting as a group in the future was seen as important and something currently lacking. Giving input to future cohorts was also suggested as a way of keeping in contact and giving something back.

Cohort nine

The participants in cohort nine broadly commented that the programme was enjoyable, thought-provoking and that the group gelled well and had a good mix of supportive participants with a variety of experiences to offer and share. Several comments also related to the need to review the structure of the programme, as discussed in the ‘suggestions for improvement’ section.

Other feedback and suggestions included:

- Post session discussions and group feedback were very helpful and thought provoking.
- There were occasions where debates were started but not brought to a conclusion, suggesting the need for a stronger facilitation role.
- A more flexible approach to the programme would have been beneficial.
- Speakers or debate topics after dinner might have worked well.

Annex A: Interview topic guide

Thanks very much for agreeing to take part in this evaluation. We are undertaking several interviews with past participants as well as an analysis of feedback forms.

The output will be a short report which pulls out key themes. Quotes may be used to highlight points, however this interview will be treated confidentially, all quotes will be anonymised, and you will not be named in the report.

The findings will be used to inform the development of future LGA leadership offers, and the report will be published on our website in early 2014, as part of the wider evaluation of sector led improvement.

The interview will take no more than 30 minutes. Do you mind if I record the conversation, to help with the write up? This will be kept confidential within the research team and will be deleted once it has been used for the write up.

1. What was your overall opinion of the Leeds Castle programme?

What were your reasons for participating and what did you aim to get out of it?

And did the programme meet these aims?

If no, probe as to why that was

Were there any aspects of the programme that you thought were particularly useful or successful?

If necessary, probe as to why these aspects were successful

Were there any aspects of the programme that were weak or could have been improved?

If yes, ask in what way they could have been improved

Leeds Castle aimed to offer further leadership development for highly experienced leaders. Some aspects of leadership that it aimed to cover were:

- understanding the link between leadership, council success and positive outcomes for the local area
 - personal insight, including self-awareness and emotional intelligence
 - communication skills
- a) Did the programme change your perspective on or help you further develop in any of these areas?

If yes, could you say anything further about how the programme helped with this?

Some further aspects of leadership that Leeds Castle aimed to cover were:

- adapting behaviour to different situations
- demonstrating sound judgement
- resilience in times of adversity
- empathy when dealing with others

Did the programme change your perspective on or help you further develop in any of these areas?

If yes, could you say anything further about how the programme helped with this?

And overall, would you say that the training helped you to feel more confident in your leadership role?

A further aim of the programme was to introduce participants to one another, building networks for informal support and advice. Do you think that this was achieved for your cohort?

If yes, has this been of benefit?

Finally, we are interested to know whether the support offered to participants through the programme has gone on to have any wider impacts. Can you think of any examples of things you have done differently as a result of the training that have:

led to better outcomes for or improvement in your authority?

led to better outcomes for your area or local community?

had any impact on the reputation and influence of your authority on partners and the general public?

Thank you very much for taking the time to give us this feedback. Before we finish, is there anything else you would like to say about the Leeds Castle programme?



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