SEND Leadership Programme 2020-2021 Evaluation

Final Report

NDTi Research and Evaluation Team, April 2021

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Contents

Introduction

The special educational needs and disability (SEND) Leadership Programme is delivered by the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) as part of the over-arching Delivering Better Outcomes Together (DBOT) support programme. The DBOT programme is commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and provides specialist advice, training and support to DfE, managers, professionals and practitioners through the SEND regional structure to support them in implementing the SEND reforms, as required by The Children and Families Act 2014.

The Leadership Programme was first commissioned in 2015-16 and is now in the sixth year of delivery, following consistently positive feedback. The Programme is specifically targeted at senior strategic SEND managers in local authorities and aims to foster and support effective local leadership in delivering the reforms across the education, health and social care sectors. Participants are encouraged to apply with a colleague from a different part of their local SEND reform 'system' with the aim that pairing people up increases the potential to implement learning in the workplace and build linkages between different parts of the local SEND system.

The 2020-21 Programme was delivered between November 2020 and March 2021. As in previous years, the Programme was made up of four modules, with a total of eight formal participant days. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, this year all sessions were delivered online via Microsoft Teams rather than in a residential setting as in previous years. As a result, participants were split into two cohorts, and the course was delivered on a staggered basis. In total the 2020-21 Programme had 75 participants.

As well as the online sessions, there was a coaching or mentoring offer for all participants, which took place outside of the formal modules, with one of the facilitation team.

There are two main content elements to the Programme: Leadership, Change and Personal Skills, and Leading Edge Practice. An outline of the Programme content is given in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Leadership Programme 2020-21 modules overview

Module 1, 17-18 November 2020: Introduction to the programme, background to SEND from a human rights-based approach, leadership values and inspiration

Module 2, 15-16 December 2020: You as a leader, Personal resilience and leadership in difficult times, Personalisation, Beyond personal budgets

Module 3, 5-7 & 12-13 January 2021: Leadership within teams and systems, Coproduction and expert sessions

Module 4, 9-10 February & 10-11 March 2021: Joint commissioning and integration, Reflection, key learning, Personal Project, Next steps

Evaluation

NDTi's research and evaluation team conducted an evaluation of the Leadership Programme, which aims to provide an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the programme against its stated objectives.[1] More specifically, the evaluation seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What were participant's motivations for enrolling in the leadership course and what were their expectations of what the course could offer them?

2. What was the overall experience of participants attending the programme, including the experience of virtual delivery?

3. How effective and appropriate was the programme design and content?

4. What impact has the course had on participants' knowledge, skills, and development of ideas around leadership in delivering the SEND reform?

5. To what extent has the course had an impact on participants' leadership, led to behaviour change and affected service delivery in their area?

6. How has the course supported the participants' career development?

7. What areas of the course could be developed or improved?

This final evaluation report summarises evidence from the following sources:

- Pre-Programme survey completed by 61 participants (81% of total)
- Post-Programme survey completed by 20 participants (27% of total)
- Event feedback forms from the four two-day modules for each cohort
- Interviews with 9 participants
- Interview with 1 member of the Leadership Programme alumni network
- Interviews with 3 members of the delivery team

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[1] The NDTi research and evaluation team are independent to the delivery team and are not involved in any aspect of the design or delivery of the SEND Leadership Programme.

1. Overview

As with previous years, the overall response from Programme participants has been extremely positive:

> *Absolutely fantastic Programme*
> Participant (survey)

> *It's amazing, absolutely amazing, I fully enjoyed it and I'm extremely sad that's its ended*
> Participant (interview)

> *Loved every minute of the Programme*
> Participant (survey)

Of the 20 people who completed a post-Programme survey, 19 said they would recommend the Programme, with just one saying that they would only recommend it if it was not virtual.

> *I have worked in SEND strategy for many years, but even for experienced leaders there's still a lot of value to be gained by attending this training.*
> Participant (interview)

> *I have really benefited from being on this programme; it has provided me with such a positive focus in such a difficult time and when we have been going through so many challenges. I would definitely recommend this.*
> Participant (survey)

Among the participant responses through both interviews and survey responses, there was just one person who did not respond positively, primarily due to not being able to engage as a result of the added pressures of COVID-19:

> *Unfortunately I have really struggled to attend the Programme due to the COVID pandemic - my capacity has been stretched and I really do not feel that I have taken very much from the course - there was always another priority!*
> Participant (survey)

In the sections below we unpick this overall positive response by looking at the difference participation in the Programme has made and the reasons for this. Firstly, we look at the specific impact the Programme has had on individuals and on the wider organisations and areas they work in. Secondly, we identify the factors that are key to the successful delivery of the Programme by looking at 'what works'. Finally, we identify some potential areas of development for future delivery.

2. Impact

The data collected shows that the Programme has had an impact both on the individuals themselves – personally and professionally - and more widely in the areas that they work in, through what they take back and implement.
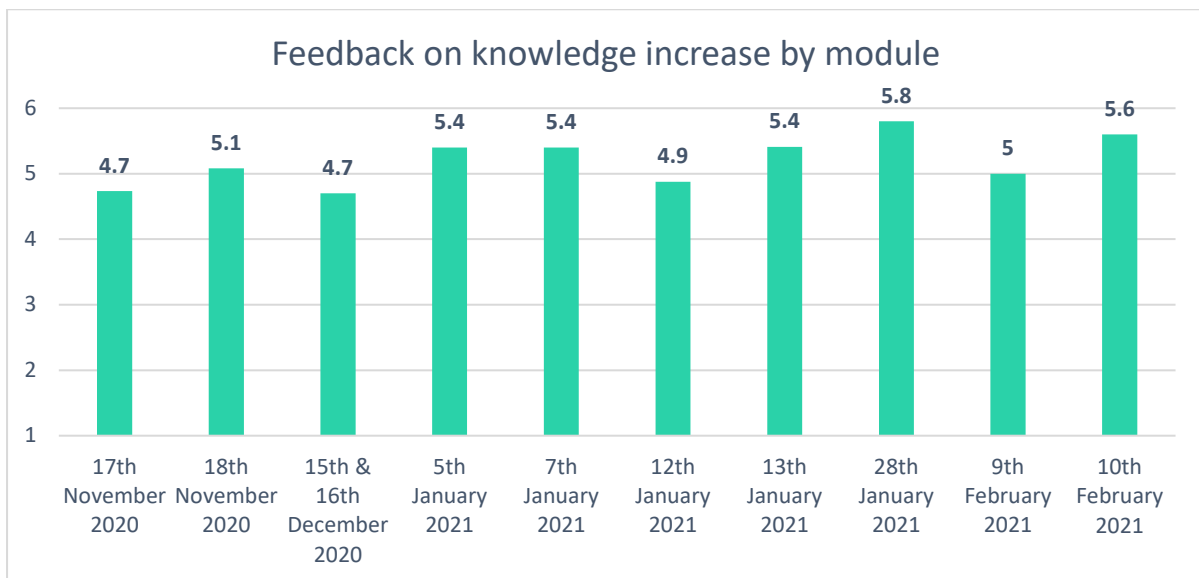
Impact on individuals

Knowledge

In the pre- and post-Programme surveys, participants were asked to select a value (on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being fully knowledgeable) that they felt currently reflected their level of knowledge of the SEND reforms. For the 19 participants who completed both pre- and post- surveys, an average rating of 7.4 in the pre-survey increased to 8.4 in the post-survey, indicating an increase in knowledge. Thirteen of the 19 people indicated that their knowledge had increased, the other 6 indicated that it had remained the same.

In feedback forms that participants were asked to complete after each module, participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 6 whether the module increased their knowledge and understanding of the topic (with 1 being not at all and 6 being completely). As shown in Chart 1 there was a consistent increase in knowledge reported, with the lowest average module score of 4.7 and highest average module score of 5.8.

Chart 1

Feedback on knowledge increase by module

Date	Score
17th November 2020	4.7
18th November 2020	5.1
15th & 16th December 2020	4.7
5th January 2021	5.4
7th January 2021	5.4
12th January 2021	4.9
13th January 2021	5.4
28th January 2021	5.8
9th February 2021	5
10th February 2021	5.6

Confidence

In the pre- and post-Programme surveys, participants were asked to select a value (on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being very confident) that they felt currently reflected their level of confidence in applying their knowledge of the SEND reforms. For the 19 participants who completed both pre- and post- surveys an average rating of 6.9 in the pre-survey increased to 8.2 in the post-survey, indicating an increase in confidence. In total, 16 of the 19 participants reported an increase in confidence, 2 stayed the same and 1 person reported a slight decrease in confidence (from 9 to 8).

The interviews and survey responses found consistent messages about the confidence that people gained from the Programme:

It made me think actually I'm doing a good enough job; my values are sound, it increased my confidence and helped me reflect on what my weakness and strengths are, it redressed that balance

Participant (interview)

Before I had imposter syndrome – it's very powerful to be able to say I'm in a role for a reason and I'm bringing what I bring, and it's ok to ask questions, that's been quite powerful.

Participant (interview)

It improved my confidence as leader 100%
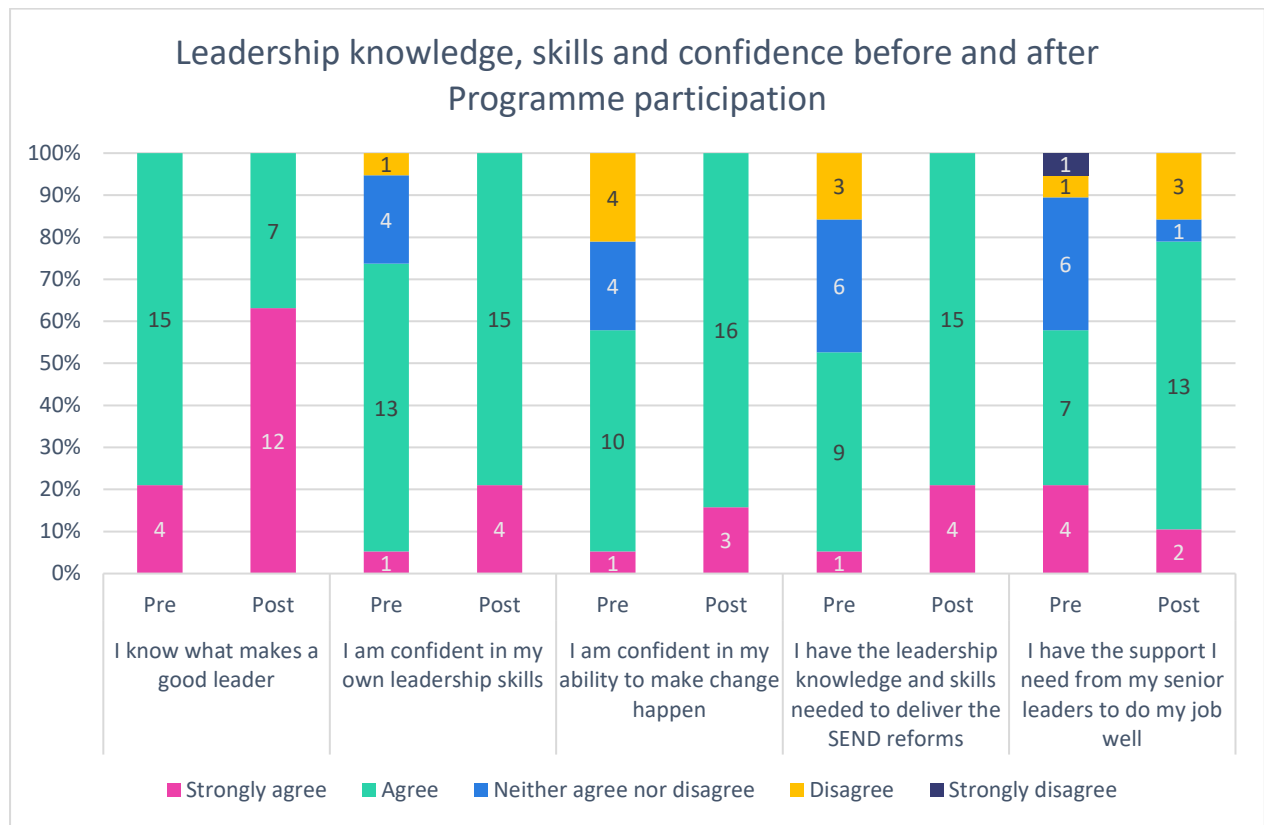
Participant (interview)

Leadership

In the pre- and post-surveys, participants were asked to rate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statements about leadership knowledge, skills and confidence:

- I know what makes a good leader
- I am confident in my own leadership skills
- I am confident in my ability to make change happen
- I have the leadership knowledge and skills needed to deliver the SEND reforms
- I have the support I need from my senior leaders to do my job well

As is shown in Chart 2 below, the total number of participants either agreeing or strongly agreeing increased for all of the five statements after participating in the Programme, with the exception of 'I know what makes a good leader' where it stayed the same (but note that the number strongly agreeing increased from 4 to 12).

Chart 2

Leadership knowledge, skills and confidence before and after Programme participation

Statement	Pre/Post	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I know what makes a good leader	Pre	4	15			
	Post	12	7			
I am confident in my own leadership skills	Pre	1	13	4	1	
	Post	4	15			
I am confident in my ability to make change happen	Pre	1	10	4	4	
	Post	3	16			
I have the leadership knowledge and skills needed to deliver the SEND reforms	Pre	1	9	6	3	
	Post	4	15			
I have the support I need from my senior leaders to do my job well	Pre	4	7	6	1	1
	Post	2	13	1	3	

Legend: ■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree

These findings are reflected in the post-survey findings:

> *I think the programme has helped me to distinguish my manager role in terms of me line managing staff to get tasks done versus leadership role where I am using influencing skills with stakeholders and building relationships, selling a vision and leading by example to others.*
>
> Participant (survey)

> *It has helped me to hold true to the values and aspirations for young people which are continually challenged by others who do not hold the same values. Given that I have a very new team it is vital that I model the behaviours and aspirations I would want from my team in order to support them and ensure they perform to the standard our children need and deserve.*
>
> Participant (survey)

Personal impact

For some individuals, the Programme has had a significant impact personally, which in turn has an impact on their professional lives:

> *Thank you, it's been emotional but life changing (that is professionally and personally)*
> Participant (survey)

> *Starting the course was a turning point of things getting better for me. At the time, I wasn't in a great place, I was feeling quite run into the ground by old role… When I started the course it was so wonderful, it gave me permission to celebrate my successes which I hadn't done… It was really great on different levels - personal, national, developmental work level.*
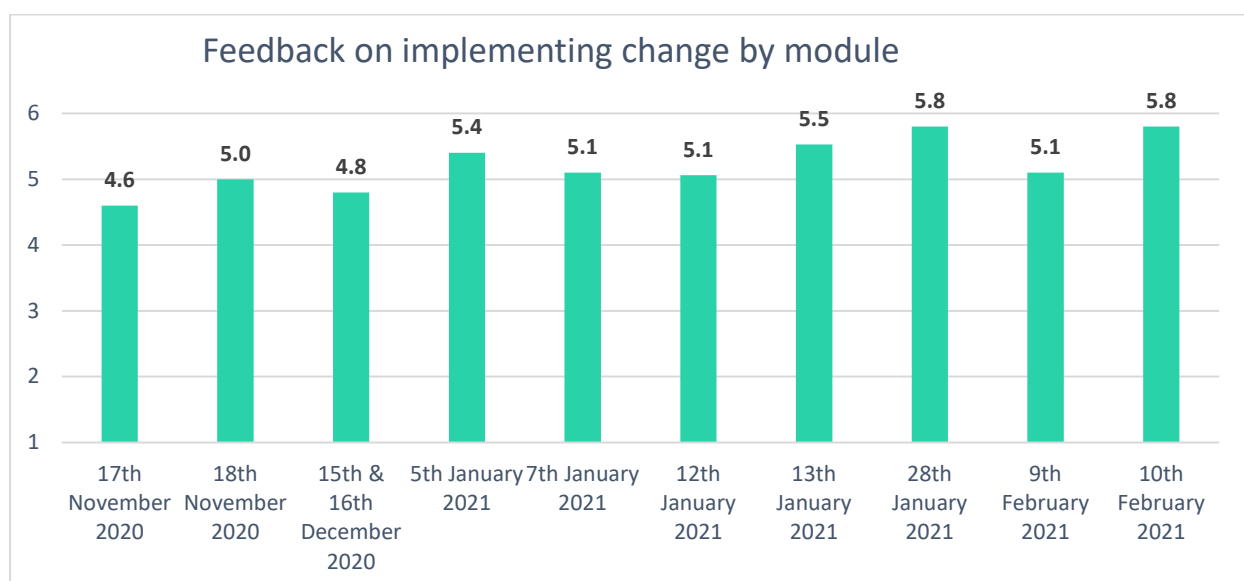> Participant (interview)

> *I've never done a course where I've reflected so much and at times it's upset me, not in a bad way, it's been quite emotive and really affected me emotionally. It's an amazing course.*
> Participant (interview)

Wider organisational and area impact

The purpose of the Programme is ultimately to effect change and improve practice in the delivery the SEND reforms. In feedback forms that participants were asked to complete after each module, participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 6 whether the module helped them think about how to implement change/improve practice (with 1 being not at all and 6 being completely). As shown in Chart 3 there was consistent reporting that the module was supporting them to think about implementing change, with the lowest average module score of 4.6 and highest average module score of 5.8.

Chart 3

Feedback on implementing change by module

Module date	Score
17th November 2020	4.6
18th November 2020	5.0
15th & 16th December 2020	4.8
5th January 2021	5.4
7th January 2021	5.1
12th January 2021	5.1
13th January 2021	5.5
28th January 2021	5.8
9th February 2021	5.1
10th February 2021	5.8

Through the interviews and survey, people gave examples of what they were doing differently in their organisations and areas as a result of the Programme:

As a result of the human rights sessions, we are getting the human rights commission to deliver within our organisation – my colleague and I are really fired up about that - that is going to feed into some change of practice.

[The session] sparked a new piece of work which is about having different conversations with families – I'm hoping to get the CCG on board to work differently with families with young children across education, health and social care, to reframe conversations about aspiration.

As soon as I finished [the participation session] I looked at how they could participate more effectively. I had a meeting with regional SEND leads to see how we could drive participation. The project is in early days – but we are linking into children's council and exploring opportunities to join their meetings, which can then inform local areas.

I have taken some learning and embedded it across the team/organisation, for example running a training session on SEND and human rights.

I had to develop a SEND model for the region. Each session has allowed me to reflect and to explore how this could be implemented in practice. I have since developed a Regional Model and I have currently started to draw up a Standard Operational Procedure to support this model.

We have started engaging with families and young people and professionals to help us as an inclusion team develop a shared vision which we will then share with the new managers who are due to come into post in March 2021 in the hope that this will drive service improvements.

Recently secured support from Director for a project centring around school self-evaluation of SEND.

Attendance on the SEND Leadership Programme has resulted in discussion between the DCO and IASS to undertake joint planning and delivery of training to Health teams to increase awareness and understanding of the graded response and SEND support rather than having a narrower focus on the EHC process. This was inspired by the Gloriously Ordinary Lives and inclusion elements of the programme and the session on joint commissioning through effective partnerships and working relationships.

3. What works to deliver a successful Programme?

This section explores what worked in the delivery of the 2020-21 Leadership Programme to enable the positive impact described above. First, given that it was a new form of delivery for 2020-21 we consider the specific opportunities and challenges that arose from online delivery, before looking at the elements and factors that are key to the successful delivery of the Programme.

Delivery online: What worked?

A new and unintended change to the delivery of the Programme for 2020-21 was delivering the Programme purely online as a result of COVID-19. While this was unplanned and not what either the delivery team or the participants would have chosen, there is some useful learning about which aspects of being online worked, and which aspects that did not work so well that can inform future delivery.

Delivery leads reported that in general delivering online had worked better than had been anticipated and it had surpassed their expectations. Similarly, participants broadly recognised that it was necessary and had worked as well as possible in the circumstances. Two positive aspects of being purely online were identified.

Easier to manage work-life balance

Four of the interviewees mentioned the benefits of not having to arrange childcare or other non-work commitments that they would have had to do with a residential:

> *It was good for me doing it online, residential is difficult with kids. I possibly wouldn't have done the course if it was residential.*
>
> Participant (interview)

Increased reach

As highlighted by the delivery leads, moving to online meant that they were able to deliver the Programme to two cohorts instead of one, consequently reaching twice as many people (and potentially having double the impact).

Delivery online: What were the challenges?

Despite the sense that online delivery had gone better than anticipated, inevitably there were some challenges or limitations as a result of online delivery.

Difficulties of long periods of screen time

> *I struggled to sit all day in front of a computer… It was a big ask to sit all day – a lot of screen time. It's difficult when it's not interactive.*
>
> Participant (interview)

Not being able to switch off from day-to-day work

> *Working remotely meant I filled up any gaps with meetings.*
>
> Participant (interview)

> *The pressure of work, particularly in COVID meant I wasn't always able to turn emails off whilst accessing the Programme. I would suggest that time away from the 'office' would be better in future.*
>
> Participant (survey)

Limited opportunities for networking

> *Networking is lost virtually – there's a small group of people I have managed to connect with, I think that element would have been much better in person.*
>
> Participant (interview)

> *It was difficult for us being online, we missed out hugely by not having the networking opportunities other groups have had so face-to-face would be better.*
>
> Participant (survey)

> *As it got closer to the end there was real need to be together, people needed to connect – the residential side is so powerful for that.*
>
> Delivery lead

Lack of opportunity for reflection with other course participants

If I was there in person I could chat in the evening, which would aid reflection. You don't get that added time of reflection, it's not the same talking to family as it is to someone who's done the course. There's no opportunity to challenge and unpick.
Participant (interview)

Difficulties supporting participant engagement

From a facilitator perspective, delivery leads highlighted that it was easier for less confident or more introverted participants to "hide" by switching off their videos or not joining in. Whereas in a face-to-face situation this could be observed and addressed through drawing them in through chats in between sessions, over coffee or lunch; this was lost online.

The overall view from both participants and delivery leads was that in the future, once in person gatherings are allowed again, a blended approach of residential and face-to-face would work best. There was consensus that delivery purely online does not create the important opportunities for networking, but that it does offer some benefits that could be harnessed to deliver a programme that can combine the successful elements of both modes of delivery.

Delivering the Programme: What works?

Through the survey and participant interviews a number of 'key ingredients' for the success of the Programme were identified – factors that are consistent with the previous evaluations of the SEND Leadership Programme.

Combination of leadership theory applied to the SEND context

The programme is a balance of leadership and SEN knowledge – you could go on a course for one or the other but it's unique to have them together – the facilitators are embedded in SEN…. It definitely fills a gap that no other organisation fills.
Participant (interview)

The programme was an excellent mixture of theoretical and practical information brought to life by enthusiastic and knowledgeable presenters.
Participant (survey)

> *I think it's the combination of developing your leadership skills through a range of opportunities combined with some really good examples of good practice pulled from all over the country. Those two together really improve you on the journey.*
>
> Participant (interview)

Excellent facilitators

> *The facilitators and their own experience, attitudes, honesty, enthusiasm. They all bring something and they are all inspiring and I felt I could go to any of them and say I am struggling.*
>
> Participant (interview)

> *I felt that the course was really well pitched. The leaders were incredible in their ability to maintain engagement and deliver to a high standard whilst being completely virtual.*
>
> Participant (survey)

> *The delivery team – they were really good, engaging, welcoming, friendly, open - they made it easy to look forward to*
>
> Participant (interview)

High quality speakers and sessions

Reflecting on the Human Rights and SEN history:

> *What a luxury to go through that and take a step back and say this is why we are doing all this. Wonderful.*
>
> Participant (interview)

> *What makes it really effective is that you've got very inspiring speakers and programme leaders and that helps draw you in. They also strip things back to basics, and they pick a very varied programme, covering the majority of the aspects of SEND.*
>
> Participant (interview)

Coaching or mentoring support

There was also wide support from those who had taken up the offer of coaching or mentoring:

I thought it was really excellent, they managed to move me on in my thinking and flip something on its side I was getting stuck on… Really made me think in a different way.

Participant (interview)

It complemented the rest of course.

Participant (interview)

I got the sense it was really valued… I think for a few people it was transformational.

Delivery lead

The mentoring sessions have been AMAZING for me, alongside the opportunity to work alongside and with other leaders. The mentoring alongside the other learning has allowed me to develop my knowledge and put that into practice and being called on to do the action.

Participant (survey)

I feel totally empowered by the whole experience... I cannot say enough how amazing it has been.

Participant (interview)

Delivering the Programme: What did not work so well?

There were two areas that people identified that had not worked so well in terms of the delivery of the Programme this year.

Personal projects

In recognition of the context that participants were working in, in particular the challenges resulting from responding to the implications of COVID-19 in their local areas, the delivery team took the decision to place less emphasis on personal projects than in previous years. While this decision may have suited some, three participants mentioned being unclear why there was little reference to the projects and being disappointed not to have the opportunity to focus on their project more.

> *Personal project – there has been almost no reference to this in delivery – we had to submit a brief but have had no occasion to go into working with partners, no time dedicated to it. We're very committed to it so we are going ahead with it regardless but surprised we haven't spent any time on it during the programme sessions.*
>
> Participant (interview)

Lack of diversity

One area that was highlighted by both a participant and a delivery lead was the lack of diversity among those involved in facilitating and presenting the Programme:

> *All of their champions seemed to come from SEND professionals who have moved into the roles because of their own families, all from same or similar backgrounds (white English) – not so relevant for us [in high BAME area]… Think there should be greater diversity in the champions/speakers.*
>
> Participant (survey)

> *One issue is diversity. It's predominantly white, middle class speakers – there would potentially be lots of opportunities to involve others.*
>
> Delivery lead

Getting the most out of the Programme: What works?

While the factors above are key elements in terms of what is delivered, there are also a number of factors that were identified that support people to get the most out of what is delivered.

Attending with a colleague

Some people found that the recommendation to attend the Programme with a colleague really enhanced what they got out of it:

> *It is effective bringing two colleagues together… having that shared learning experience been really powerful and strengthened relationships… the course has sparked conversations we might not have had*
>
> Participant (interview)

> *It was good for me to have a colleague in education there with me, it was great timing for us both. You could have done the course without a partner, but doing it as a pair helped us to reflect together – we both heard the same things.*
>
> Participant (interview)

Opportunity to network

Despite the constraints in this area due to being delivered online, people still found some opportunities to meet people and network with colleagues in other areas, and highlighted the benefits of this:

> *I made local connections and absolutely will stay in touch… There are people I would reach out to through the alumni network, the opportunity to network after the course is massive.*
>
> Participant (interview)

> *It has been wonderful to meet other people from our SEND 'family' from all over the UK.*
>
> Participant (survey)

> *Having been in post for just a year (most of that being in lockdown) this has given me the opportunity to meet colleagues from other areas, build relationships and have the opportunity to share ideas, concerns, problem solve. It was reassuring that issues I am facing in our Borough are not isolated to my Borough.*
>
> Participant (survey)

Having time out from normal job

Again, despite this being more challenging due to being online, as with previous years people still identified the importance of having time and space away from their day-to-day work to reflect on their work and their roles.

> *It felt like a luxury and so lovely to take some time out and look at things you perhaps wouldn't normally look at, it was so good to do that, and be able to reflect on my own practices and relationships, you just don't get that normally.*
>
> Participant (interview)

> *The time to reflect was really important… give some headspace… it allows you to take time away from day job and step back and see issues from a different perspective.*
>
> Participant (interview)

4. Areas for development

In the survey and interviews, participants and delivery leads were asked to identify any areas that could be improved, or suggestions for future delivery of the Programme. A number of suggestions were made, though it should be noted that most of these were raised by just one individual.

Some specific suggestions about format or delivery were:

- Greater diversity among those facilitating and presenting the sessions in terms of ethnicity, class and experience
- More opportunities to work with colleague from their area during the Programme
- A coaching session after the Programme with colleagues who attended together focusing on moving forward with the personal project
- A networking session at the end of the programme (similar to the one at the start), to identify other local and regional participants to support making contacts
- Delivered one day a week, rather than two to make it easier to balance with day job priorities
- More opportunities to work in small groups to facilitate networking
- More opportunities to work in small groups to reflect on content of presentations and how it can be applied to current practice

Some specific suggestions around the content of the Programme were:

- A session on tribunals
- A focus on some of the more day-to-day challenging areas of the reforms
- Delivery leads reflected that the content of the next Programme may need to respond to what comes out of the 2021 SEND Review

It was clear from the participants and the delivery leads that there is a range of experience and seniority among the Programme participants, from established senior and strategic leads, to emerging leaders. While the Programme was initially aimed at those at more strategic level with potential for greatest impact within their areas, the Programme is clearly having a significant impact for emerging leaders looking to grow in confidence. The possibility of two strands to the Programme for the different participants is an area that could be explored.

Conclusion

It is clear that the SEND Leadership Programme continues to be hugely valued by those who participate. It has an impact on the knowledge, confidence and leadership skills of participants, with some individuals finding it transformative. Individuals are applying what they learn back at work and the indications are that this is generating change in their organisations and areas in the delivery of the SEND reforms.

It is evident from this evaluation and previous ones, that there are some elements that are key to making this a successful Programme: a combination of leadership theory applied to the SEND context; excellent facilitators; high quality speakers and sessions; and coaching or mentoring support. These should be continued. Attending with a colleague, having an opportunity to network and having time out from the normal job are key to supporting people to get the most out of the Programme. As different formats are considered for future delivery, it will be important to ensure these are able to continue.

The learning from online delivery has revealed some benefits of delivering remotely, and produced learning about which elements worked. It has also emphasised that there are some fundamental elements missing and opportunities missed through not having any face-to-face time. Feedback from participants and delivery leads supports the idea of a blended approach to get the best out of both modes of delivery.

While the areas for development that participants suggested could be considered by those planning the Programme for future years, one key element that stands out is the need for greater diversity among those delivering and presenting in terms of ethnicity, class etc. and also in experiences.

Key recommendations

To conclude, the key recommendations that we would make in consideration of future delivery of the Programme are:

- ❖ Continue with the key factors that have been shown to work
- ❖ Ensure the supporting factors are enabled in any changes of delivery format
- ❖ Deliver a blended approach of online and face-to-face
- ❖ Increase diversity among facilitators and presenters