

SEND Leadership Programme 2019-2020 Evaluation

Final Report



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1. 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 children, young people and parent/carers, DfE and other national bodies, strategic leaders and key professionals through the SEND regional structure to support them in implementing the SEND reforms, as required by The Children and Families Act 2014, and the SEND Code of Practice

The Leadership Programme was first commissioned in 2015-16 and is now in the fifth year of delivery, following consistently positive feedback. The Programme is specifically targeted at senior strategic SEND leaders 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 SEND reform 'system' with the aim that pairing increases the potential to implement learning in the workplace and build linkages between different parts of the local SEND system.

The 2019-20 Programme was made up of four modules, as outlined in Figure 1. Building on positive feedback from previous years, a key component of the Programme is the support and space given to participants to identify, design and deliver a personal project within their local authority.

The Programme was delivered as a series of four, two-day residential modules over a six-month period. During the Programme, participants also have access to Basecamp, an online platform, to share questions, ideas and resources as well as the opportunity for further learning, growth and support through the online alumni network once the Programme is finished. New for the 2019-2020 Programme was a coaching or mentoring component, which took place outside of the residential modules with one of the facilitation team.

Figure 1 Leadership Programme 2019-20 modules overview

Module 1, 17-18 September 2019: Introduction to the programme, history of SEN as a concept and policy and legal framework, background to SEND from a human rights-based approach, leadership values and inspiration. Understanding co-production and participation (parent/carers) in everything we do.

Module 2, 12-13 November 2019: Diving Deeper into Leadership. Team-working and personal management style, leading edge practice sessions, development of personal projects. Understanding the importance of young people's voice.

Module 3, 20-21 January 2020: Resilience and workplace wellbeing. Personal resilience and leadership in difficult times, leadership and change management within teams and systems. Leading edge practice. Culture and change, managing conflict.

Module 4, 16-17 March 2020: Joint commissioning and integrated working, Leadership in the NHS, Positive psychology for leaders and Imaginative Leadership. Outcomes based accountability and large group interventions. Reflection and evaluation of programme.

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:

- What were participants' motivations for enrolling in the leadership course and what were their expectations of what the course could offer them?
- What was the overall experience of participants attending the programme?
- How effective and appropriate was the programme design and content?
- What impact has the course had on participants' knowledge, skills, and development of ideas around leadership in delivering the SEND reforms?
- To what extent has the course had an impact on participant's leadership, led to behaviour change and affected service delivery in their area?
- What areas of the course could be developed or improved?

This final evaluation report follows a preliminary findings briefing published in January 2020. This report summarises evidence from the following sources:

- Event feedback forms from the four residential courses
- Alumni group survey completed with members of the Leadership Programme alumni network
- Observations, conversations and interviews with six participants during the third residential course
- Interviews with two members of the Leadership Programme alumni network
- Interviews with three of the delivery team
- Post-course interviews with three participants
- Six responses to a post-course survey

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.



3. Findings

Context and expectations

The 2019-2020 Leadership Programme has 32 participants. Participants came to hear of the Programme through different means. For many, the Programme was known to them, either through a colleague or manager having done the course, or through word of mouth or general reputation. For others, they received information about the programme through communications from the DfE or NDTi directly. One interviewee reported that they enrolled on the Programme after reading the positive feedback online.

Those interviewed reported mixed motivations for enrolling; for some the focus on leadership development, rather than management training, was important, while others were keen to broaden their understanding and grounding in the SEND reform context, particularly those who were relatively new in their roles. One participant mentioned wanting to specifically focus on inclusion, and that NDTi's approach to inclusion was a key selling point. Most reported that having the opportunity to meet like-minded people in similar roles was an advantage, as well as the opportunity to work on a specific personal project.

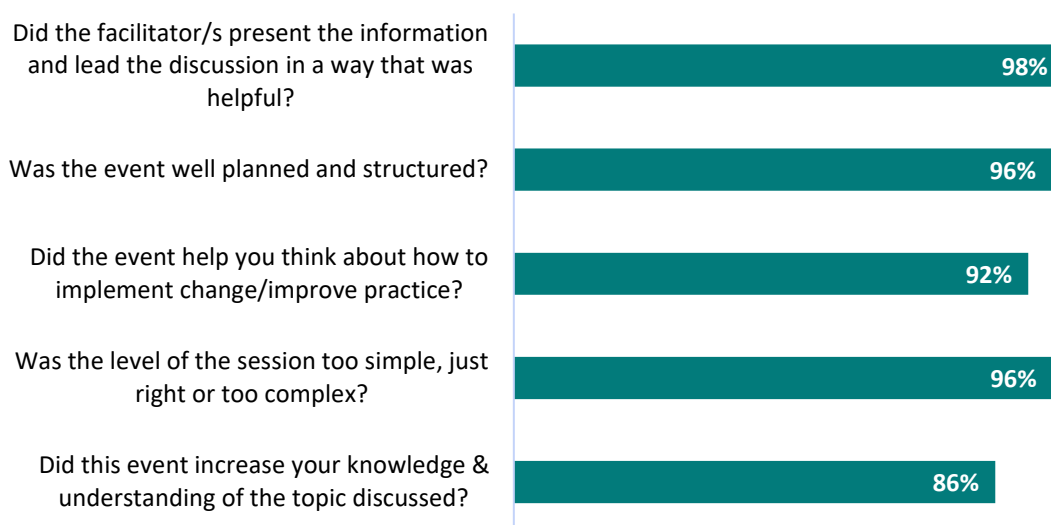
All participants spoken to, both during and after the course, felt that it had met and exceeded their expectations:

“This course has been so much more than networking and learning from one another. The passion and inspirational skills I have experienced has transported me on a journey I had not expected but am so thankful to have had such a wonderful safe space to learn and grow”

Assessment of the programme

Based on event feedback, the Programme has been very positively received by participants. At the end of each day, participants are asked to complete a form rating their experience against five aspects: knowledge and understanding of the topic, level of complexity, change, structure and presentation. The Programme has agreed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of 70% of participants reporting satisfaction within the top two bands (question is scaled 1-6, with 1 being 'not at all' and 6 being 'completely'). All modules delivered exceeded these KPI targets of participant experience, with overall average satisfaction levels reported as 90% (module 1), 94% (module 2), 98% (module 3) and 91% (module 4). Figure 2 shows aggregated satisfaction against these five aspects across all four modules.

Figure 2 % of responses falling in top two satisfaction bands



Key themes in participant satisfaction with the course are outlined below, including participants' feedback on the delivery of the programme and what makes the programme effective.

Reflection and reinvigoration

Interviews and conversations during the third module and after the course, and written feedback from participants emphasised the unique opportunity the Programme provides for individuals to step out of busy day jobs and self-reflect on the importance of the SEND reforms, and the young people they seek to support. A consistent message from conversations and interviews was that this opportunity was greatly valued. Many spoke about how the course has re-affirmed their belief in the importance of the SEND reforms and given them the confidence and conviction to continue challenging their local authority and senior management to push the inclusion agenda more strongly. For many, learning from the programme has reinforced and re-energised their own approach.

“Having the opportunity to lift your head above the challenge of the day role and step out to have time to consider the aspects of your role in greater depth is of great value”

“[the course is] self-reflective, empowering and a chance to check-in”

In the interviews and conversations during the third module, many participants reported that a lot of what they were learning was not necessarily new but acts to re-affirm that what they are doing is right and give a renewed sense of confidence.

“It reinforced my knowledge, but this gave me renewed confidence that my principles are right in an increasingly challenging LA system”

“Ratified and validated my own view about the inclusion agenda, but also extended and challenged my own perceptions around the glass ceiling imposed”

Participants also commented on the benefits of having the opportunity to meet other people grappling with similar challenges in different areas, and to network, share ideas and reflect with like-minded people. Many participants commented on the fact they can feel quite isolated in their local authority, not least because they are the only ones in their role. The

Programme gives them the confidence that they are not alone, as well as underscoring the fact that there are good examples to learn from elsewhere. Programme alumni also highlighted in interviews that it is this bringing together of a cross-section of people from different backgrounds and regions which is what make the course so effective and the mixture of colleagues from education, health and social care. Both interviewees also reported they had stayed in touch with people from the course and continue to share information and resources and provide remote support to each other.

“[Leaves you] positive in a very negative system”

“Gave me time to reflect on the underlying principles in which I work rather than being on the treadmill and losing sight of the purpose of my work”

“Having people from across the country is really effective... [because] having a good understanding of the wider picture nationally is really important”

“I continue to keep in touch with people from the course and we use each other as a source of support and ideas. It’s a safe space because there is no one else to talk about these things with”

“Everyone realised that they were all in the same boat. You weren’t alone”

Generally, there was a sense that participants look forward to attending the Programme, that they leave enthused and empowered and that the residential courses act as professional ‘nourishment’ between periods of often high pressure. A few participants also commented on the good mix of representatives from local authorities, education and health in the cohort.

Speakers and presentations

Participants spoke very positively about specific presentations and speakers that challenged their thinking. External presentations from young people and families were frequently described as ‘emotional’, ‘powerful’ and ‘inspiring’. There was a definite sense in conversations with participants that these sessions were a timely and impactful reminder as to why they do their jobs, despite the challenges and frustrations which can seem overwhelming at times.

“[the presentation was] fantastic at taking us out of our comfort zone in a supportive way and offering skills we can start putting into practice straight away”

“Rip Stars was a great grounding into why I get up every day and the opportunity we have to make a difference in people's lives”

The talk on the history of SEN and inclusion was highlighted by many participants as especially challenging and inspiring. Sessions on adopting a human rights-based approach and on partnerships were also highlighted as being useful.

“Excellent presentation from genuine partnerships - this has re-energised our work with our CYP and parent/carers”

“I have never thought of my role before in connection with human rights. Am now ready to rethink this and how it impacts on LA decisions”

The sessions on communication and public speaking were highlighted as being practical and immediately applicable. Other sessions that were mentioned as being especially beneficial were sessions on creativity, the Art of Brilliance, imagination and ‘what if’, and the personal

development sessions. One participant interviewed after the course reported that even sessions which they did not expect to be useful on the agenda, were very impactful.

“I take something away from every session - from things I can take back for immediate consideration and inclusion, to others that are useful in 'the bank' of resources for future use”

Alumni and participants also highlighted in interviews that the external speakers were useful in helping participants understand how the DfE and Department for Health work and are organised which increases general political awareness of SEND delivery. This helps when speaking with relevant colleagues across sectors, to have a better idea of where they are coming from.

“It was great to hear about the work of DBOT and of how national policy reflects what we see and feel 'on the ground’”

Facilitation and format

Participants reported consistently the high level of knowledge and experience among facilitators and the sense that they had an authentic understanding of the day-to-day challenges that the participants faced in the workplace. The different backgrounds and experiences of the delivery team was highlighted as a positive. Many participants commented on the positive way in which the delivery team created a safe space and built people’s confidence to discuss more challenging issues. Participants felt able to speak without judgement, and to share and unpack their vulnerabilities in a respectful environment. One participant also felt that there was strength in NDTi delivering the programme as an independent, objective organisation.

“The topics were presented in a way to increase knowledge about frameworks, guidance, experience and provide a 'critical friend' style challenge to generate debate amongst delegates. Trainers were good facilitators and clearly had excellent knowledge and evidential base to work from”

“Excellent relevant topics, good balance between delivering information and getting you to test, find out and explore for yourself, to better improve in role in the workplace”

Participants also commented on the flexibility of the programme and how responsive the facilitation team were to participants’ needs. When asked what makes the course effective overall, most participants reported the facilitation team, their engagement, personalities and knowledge, as a key element.

“The facilitation team are adaptive and responsive to issues and needs as they arise. The team are so skilled and knowledgeable about leadership and change, but never lose sight of how this feels working with large multi-agency and ever-changing environments”

“The sessions were very carefully structured and kept everyone engaged all the time, that’s due to the planning done by the team and the different leadership styles demonstrated by the team”

There was a lot of positive feedback regarding the residential nature of the course; it means people are physically removed from their day job, so distractions are lessened and there is a sense of being on a ‘retreat’. It is felt that closer relationships between participants and existing colleagues are also formed due to the residential aspect and there is greater

opportunity for sharing experiences, ideas and problem-solving in the margins of the formal Programme. There were also many positive comments about the venue being well set-up for this type of event.

“You’ve left your area, you don’t have your seniors walking past the room... all about support and positivity, made it feel a safe space”

“Having it as residential is great, it allows the networking to strengthen which is essential as it is a national course”

Personal projects

Space was also carved out during the third module for work on the personal project, including group problem solving and feedback. The perceived relative usefulness of the personal project sessions hinged on whether both participants were present and engaged in the project – some participants found it less useful because for example their colleague had left the position and they did not have the agency or momentum to deliver the project alone. Most participants spoken to felt this was a positive aspect of the programme offer, and a good ‘hook’ to hang some of the learning from the course on. One participant felt they could use the personal project as a leverage within their authority to move things along.

Of the two alumni interviewed, one had managed to successfully implement the personal project, and they now have a much stronger ethos around communicating effectively with parents. The other had been unable to complete the project as their colleague had since left their post, highlighting the challenges high turnover brings. Both stressed that the support provided from the Programme was helpful in exploring options, harvesting ideas from other people and generally providing supportive conversations, rather than ‘have you done it yet?’.

Interviews with participants after the course reported that developing the personal projects had been a useful exercise, though delivery was temporarily on hold during the Covid-19 crisis. One interviewee had not been able to take their project further due to their colleague not being able to finish the course.

“We had a number of feedback sessions during the leadership programme which were really useful, came up with some good ideas”

“My project for the programme was to clarify and improve the 5 day offer for young people post 16. Through the programme I have gained the knowledge and confidence to be much more pro-active in doing this.”

Coaching and mentoring

Coaching or mentoring sessions were offered to participants for the first time this year. Participants were offered two sessions, to take place outside of the residential courses to provide specific one-to-one support. Some participants had not had their sessions when interviewed, but everyone who had spoke of the experience positively. One participant admitted they were unsure how much impact two coaching sessions could have, but found them very useful personally and professionally, providing a supportive space to talk through specific issues and come up with new, actionable ideas. Feedback from the delivery team was also positive, mentoring allowing for different means of communication and a deeper, more trusting relationship to grow between the trainers and the participants.

Impacts of the programme

Increased confidence in leadership skills

Feedback from the Programme suggests that it has had a significant impact on participants' confidence in their role and conviction in their approach. Findings from the survey suggest participants have increased confidence in their own leadership skills, knowledge of what makes a good leader and increased confidence in their ability to make change happen. Interviewees shared that the course has enabled them to take a step back and rationalise their reactions to what are often stressful situations that can feel very personal, and that the course has given them some tools to help develop their resilience.

“Key thing is confidence – I am 100% behind the reforms and now much more prepared to fight for the things that I believe in and on a more personal level I have more confidence in my leadership style and my ability to get things done”

“I feel more confident that I can be my best self... I am in a great position to promote and create change for our children and young people”

The practicality of the support was also highlighted, and various participants commented that they had actively drawn on different elements of the programme in their day to day work, for example the session on upward management, difficult conversations and presentation skills, among others. One alumnus interviewed said they now ensure protected 'thinking' time in the diary and another said the Programme taught them the importance of having a trusted group of colleagues to support each other.

“Practical strategies for critical conversations presentations were excellent”

“The impact session was just amazing, so practical - you could pick up and practice, things so simple to put in place to ensure and engaged audience”

“I have gained knowledge, skills and confidence in delivering to large groups of people. I have also gained confidence in asking for what I want”

Increased commitment

Event feedback suggests certain topics and presentations have energised some participants to think differently around SEND reform delivery and encouraged individuals to re-centre their approach. Feedback from the delivery team emphasised the ambition of the cohort this year and their willingness to explore vulnerabilities leading to brave conversations challenging themselves.

“The impact on the child/young person in early adulthood, I believe, isn't understood. The system/process is failing these people. It's made me determined to challenge thinking within my local authority”

“Human rights will now be at the centre of a lot of what I do”

“I want to utilise the Human Rights Act into our change of culture and values. I also want to embed a similar co-production approach as Rotherham within how we work”

“I now feel that I can effect change, but in very different ways to what I anticipated”

Participants interviewed after the course emphasises how it reminded you to regularly step outside of the operational side to consider the bigger picture and, in particular, the

perspectives of others in the system. The fact the course brings together education, health and social care professionals was mentioned by many participants as a strength, and the opportunity to hear the views and agendas of different sectors and a reminder that they all serve the same people. One participant said they were now more confident to take this broader perspective to senior management meetings and to provide those prompts, for example when the health or social care voice is missing.

“Course kept punctuating the importance of health and social care”

“Gives you another lens to look at other people’s behaviour in the system, helps you to understand the bigger picture”

“It was good to see so many partners attending the programme and this sort of joint training is very important”

Impact on ways of work

Participants interviewed after the course gave examples of how learning from the course was having an impact on their work, including increased work in joint commissioning and communication work with parents and young people. Most participants reported that they either formally or informally shared the learning from the course with their team and colleagues, and those who had other colleagues who had completed the course in a previous year felt a sense of solidarity with them. One interviewee said they were using the ‘what if’ approach with some of their cases.

Overall, findings from the alumni survey suggests impacts of the Programme have been felt more at the individual level than organisational. Alumni reported that the main personal impacts of the course have been around improved awareness, understanding and confidence in delivering the SEND reforms and the benefits from the wider networking facilitated by the programme. An alumni interview emphasised this point, reporting that knowing what other areas were doing gave you the confidence to challenge the pace of change in your own authority, and having a greater peer network enabled you to connect colleagues for specific advice. One participant spoke specifically about having built greater collaboration with health colleagues in their local area. An alumnus interviewed for the evaluation reported that they approached their next Local Area inspection with a lot more confidence and was able to demonstrate good leadership skills.

“I have taken a more strategic approach to the SEND agenda and have been able to apply leadership/management strategies adopted to enable change to meet demand”

“It has given me confidence to make better decisions and be ok with the fact that I might not get it right every time and to recognise that if information changes then I can change my mind and that is not a weakness”

Evidence of organisational impact as a result of the Programme is more mixed. In some cases, more strategically influential issues have taken precedence over learning from the Programme, such as overspend concerns, budget cutbacks, re-structuring and turnover of senior staff. On the other hand, there have been positive signs of change, with two respondents reporting a new or improved SEND strategy with a focus on promoting inclusion and another reporting a greater degree of coproduction in system and process design. One respondent also reported some success in the implementation of their personal project, with two supported internships successfully established. One alumnus interviewed reported

having developed a performance-based accountability framework, inspired directly by the Programme, which is now being highlighted nationally as best practice. Feedback from participants suggested that some of the learning from the course would be harder to implement, given the wider systemic change required which requires the buy-in of senior management.

Most alumni respondents reported the programme has resulted in some change in their local area, including greater multi-agency relationships, improved strategic planning and renewed commitment to the SEND agenda which, in two cases, has led to improved provision of services.

“I have been able to shape the provision we have to enable the Local Authority to meet the changing needs of SEND within the local area”

However, for others, high senior staff turnover, competing priorities and lack of buy-in from senior management limited the impact.

“I was made redundant due to cuts in budget. Not sure that senior management saw the benefit of the training, even though it supported our local area inspection.”

Ongoing challenges in SEND leadership

In terms of the biggest challenges as a SEND leader, most respondents referenced funding and staffing cuts and increased demands on the public sector, including the high needs block, as a key challenge as well as the enormity of the task and satisfying different stakeholders. Others also referenced challenges around a lack of shared vision, engagement and buy in senior management and from partners, particularly health, education and social care.

Interviews with participants after the course also emphasised silo-working as an ongoing challenge and some suggested a similar leadership course with an emphasis on education professionals would be hugely beneficial. There was a strong feeling that joint working needs to improve, despite some positive work being done, to ensure better outcomes for children with SEND that cuts across sectors, teams, communities and organisations. The perceived difficulty of the working environment in which SEND leaders are operating, particularly in the current climate with COVID-19, should not be underestimated.

“[significant financial pressure and...recruitment freezes] means that more work is required on a smaller number of managers and so things become crisis management and reactive responses, as opposed to strategic planning and development”

“Local Area Inspection is read as Local Authority which means the range of partners who should have responsibility and accountability do not engage effectively as not their current priority”

Despite this, respondents identified positive elements of their SEND leadership journey, the impact on their staff and colleagues and improved leadership confidence and skills was mentioned, as well as crucially the impact of the work on positive outcomes for children, young people and their families.

“Being able to implement changes and having the confidence to do this in extremely challenging circumstances”

Areas for development

Very few issues were raised through the participant event feedback and these have related to pace of delivery – on some occasion’s participants feeling too long was taken over a topic, and at other times, not enough. One participant suggested an earlier start time on the first day, and another suggested an evening speaker to extend the learning (though these suggestions were since incorporated into the third module, and feedback from this session will be analysed around this). Others felt the sessions could have been longer (e.g. the history of SEN and human rights) and/or extended across different sessions to reduce the intensity, though there is an appreciation that with the limited time and resources allocated, the onus is on participants to complement their learning with work outside the programme.

A few participants also requested more ‘free time’ to work on personal projects and space for action planning, in order to ensure action is committed to before normal tasks take over:

“Need for more reflection and action planning space... unless action is signed up to before leaving there's a real risk these will not be acted upon when sucked into day job”

A couple of interviewees mentioned that it would be beneficial to share good examples of inclusion and ideas for how to make change happen, as well as more systematically sharing links to resources that emerge in the discussion, for example in a designated place on Basecamp. It was also suggested this could be a place to share resources and updates on the wider national SEN context and learning. For a few people, the Base camp platform was not the most useful communication tool and they would have preferred email or WhatsApp.

Alumni interview findings also highlighted the importance of the Programme’s emphasis on bringing health and social care colleagues together, as well as education. One interviewee felt the Programme was too skewed toward education and external DfE speakers demonstrated that there is not an understanding of integration from the top. Additionally, it was suggested that, as well as leadership, joint commissioning was another key theme for improvement in inspection letters and that this could be something the Programme, so similar, focuses on going forward.

As mentioned above, some interviewees suggested that expanding this type of course to other groups would be beneficial, for example having a course focusing on education professionals, including non-SEND specific roles, or a course targeting senior director-level professionals, as well as service-level aspiring leaders.



4. Conclusion

Findings from the evaluation of the 2019-20 Leadership Programme are overwhelmingly positive. Participants are overall very satisfied with the course and feel their leadership knowledge and skills have improved. The scale of the challenges felt by SEND professionals in delivering the reform agenda should be noted, especially in the current COVID-19 context, and there is no doubt that participants feel there is real value and need for this kind of Programme. Some participants said that while they have been on management courses before, none have been as different, creative and inspiring as this one.

Feedback from participant and alumni suggests that the key ingredients are the rich, topic-based sessions, the quality and diversity of the external presenters, the opportunity for building networks and the safe and authentic space for personal growth and development engineered by the facilitation team. In particular, the opportunity for self-reflection and reinvigoration were highlighted as important features of the programme. While limited time has passed since the course, and the COVID-19 response has significantly affected the immediate context, there is evidence that the programme is having a positive impact on the leadership skills of participants, and their ability to deliver reforms. This is particularly seen around leaders having a renewed sense of confidence in their work and being equipped with the necessary skills and tools to elevate the reform and inclusion agenda within their workplaces.