



## Firstline Evaluation Summary

### Background

Firstline designed and delivered a prototype leadership development programme for first line managers working in children and families social work. The programme was delivered between September 2015 and March 2016. Forty Firstline Leaders (FLLs) were recruited from 8 local authorities and 37 completed the programme. They participated in a Kick Off meeting; 3 2-day residential modules; 6 2-hour individual meetings with a Leadership Development Adviser (LDA); 3 on-site Action Learning Sets (ALSs) with other FLLs in their local authorities and a Wrap Up meeting. The FLLs undertook a project, and assessments of their leadership styles and organisational climate. They had the option to participate in simulated supervision sessions and verbal reasoning assessments. The Firstline programme has several unique selling points within the current market for leadership development programmes in children and families social work – the opportunities it offers FLLs to learn and develop through the individual sessions with LDAs; the Firstline team's work with the FLLs' senior managers, and their focus on systems change.

### Aim

The programme aimed to enable good first line managers to become high-performing and influential leaders in social work and wider society.

### Evaluation

The evaluation's key questions related to the experiences of those involved in the prototype; the effectiveness of the prototype in developing the Firstline Leaders (FLLs) as leaders; the effect of the prototype on local authorities, and the effect of local authorities on their FLLs' participation. A process evaluation was undertaken and an action learning approach was applied. The evaluation design evolved during the prototype. Qualitative data were collected from:

- observations of Kick Off and Wrap Up meetings, a LDA debriefing meeting, and 3 2-day residential modules
- in-depth semi-structured interviews with FLLs, residential facilitators, LDAs, members of the Technical Advisory and Reference Groups, and the Firstline team
- focus Groups with the social work teams of FLLs
- secondary analysis of film and other data collected by the Firstline team

### Findings

Given the short timescale for the evaluation, most of the findings relate to the implementation of the programme. Nevertheless, there were signs of the prototype having had a positive impact on the FLLs' leadership capabilities and social work practice.

- the FLLs gave overwhelmingly positive feedback about the programme. The majority considered that it represented the best training and professional development that they had received as managers and leaders.

- most of the FLLs suggested that their participation had been quite a shock to their systems. They acknowledged that the programme demanded that they examine and explore themselves in unexpectedly personal ways. They viewed the experience as challenging.
- the FLLs reported that the programme helped them to think more about other people's perspectives and be more reflexive. They learned to reframe issues, act differently, and view difficult situations more positively, and had become more mindful and self-aware.
- the FLLs described their improved professional practice being applied to methods for supervision and the leadership of team meetings to encourage case discussion (rather than simply the agreement of next actions), and to influence change in their local authorities' policies and systems.
- the FLLs' teams of social workers reported perceived improvements in their FLLs' capabilities for learning and developing others; holding to account; analysis and decision making.

In terms of the FLLs' impact on their organisational culture and systems, the majority of FLLs reported using their learning and new confidence to influence their teams and those working in similar positions within their authorities. A minority also gave examples of influencing senior managers.

Most senior managers had difficulties distinguishing between the Firstline programme's wider impact on their organisations from that of other developments within their authorities. Nevertheless, they reported that they intended to use FLLs' projects to spread the FLLs' learning from the programme across their authorities and, in some instances, for FLLs to contribute to the development of policy and practice beyond their immediate teams.

### **Findings related to the programme's core components**

The programme was viewed as 'a whole package'. All the core components – the individual sessions with a LDA, residential events, ALSs and projects – enabled FLLs to trial new or different leadership skills. All the FLLs particularly valued support and challenge from their LDAs. The FLLs also appreciated the opportunity the Firstline programme provided to focus on their learning away from the demands of their usual work and home environments during the residential modules. Their experiences of the projects and ALSs were more mixed.

### **Recommendations**

The evidence gathered about the experience and effectiveness of the prototype programme suggests that the Firstline programme should be encouraged and expanded with continuing evaluation. All those who participated in evaluation agreed that there is a continuing need for leadership development programmes within children and families social work.

### **Changes made to the programme in response to evaluation findings**

The Firstline Team responded rapidly and positively to evaluation feedback during the programme delivery to improve the FLLs' experience of, and the effectiveness of, the prototype.

This evaluation study was carried out between May 2015 and July 2016 by the Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University.

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