

# Evaluation of the Early Years Leaders Programme (January 2019 - December 2020) for the Greater London Authority

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## Introduction

The evaluation of the Early Years Leaders Programme was commissioned by the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), the organisation contracted by the Greater London Authority (GLA) to deliver the programme. The aim of this programme was to support the development of early years leaders across London.

The development of the early years workforce is central to providing high-quality early years provision for children. However, the early years sector nationally is facing substantial ongoing challenges with under-funding, recruitment and retention difficulties, and limited professional development opportunities for leaders and aspiring leaders. These challenges are putting the availability and quality of early years provision at significant risk. The Early Years Leaders Programme was launched by the Mayor of London in January 2019 to address some of these issues.

Based on a coaching model, the Early Years Leaders Programme aimed to recruit 30 coaches from the early years sector to work with 90 early years practitioners (or 'participants'). It comprised five main elements: one-to-one coaching sessions; triad meetings with a small group of participants; network meetings for all participants and coaches; reflection and planning sessions for coaches; and access to resources via an NDNA online learning platform. Following contract initiation in January 2019 and a recruitment phase between March and May, the coaching sessions were delivered between June 2019 and December 2020.

The key objectives of the programme were to:

- Improve the management, leadership and business skills of early years practitioners
- Improve the quality of early years provision for children, particularly the most disadvantaged two-year-olds
- Better equip early years practitioners to progress in their careers
- Improve joint working between schools, private, voluntary and independent nurseries, childminders, local authorities and sector experts.

This research summary presents the key findings from the independent evaluation of the programme, which was based on evidence from three main strands of research: analysis of monitoring data collected by NDNA; in-depth telephone interviews with a sample of participants and coaches; and an online survey of participants and coaches.

## Key findings

### Recruitment of participants and coaches

- The Early Years Leaders Programme was successful in recruiting 92 eligible leaders from across London with the potential and aspirations for development. They were a diverse cohort in terms of their experience, qualifications, and the level of leadership responsibility they held. The majority of settings were located in areas of deprivation and were supporting disadvantaged families through the offer of funded places for two-year-olds.
- Recruitment of participants proved to be more difficult than expected, and not all participants seemed to have a full understanding of the programme when they applied. Improvements to the content of the marketing materials and a longer, more rigorous recruitment phase would have been beneficial.
- A comprehensive recruitment process was employed for coaches, and while few had experience of coaching, those recruited seemed to have the relevant skills, experience and sector knowledge to complement the coaching role. Significant emphasis was placed on the initial training and ongoing development of coaches to ensure consistency and quality, and it was well-received by coaches.
- Maintaining the target number of coaches and participants was challenging and numbers fluctuated throughout the programme. Reasons for withdrawal were, on the whole, due to external factors rather than related to the design or quality of the programme.

### Effectiveness of the programme design and delivery

- Participants were, on the whole, positive about the main elements of the programme, particularly the one-to-one coaching sessions and the termly network meetings. Relationships between participants and their coaches were generally positive, and participants valued the intensive support and guidance and the opportunity to reflect on and review their practice.
- There were mixed levels of engagement among participants, and a range of barriers to their participation were evident, which may well have hindered their progress and outcomes. These included a lack of support from their setting owner or manager, staffing issues and a lack of autonomy to enact change in their setting, despite employer support being a condition of participation.
- Triad groups were more difficult to establish, and a significant minority of participants, although in receipt of one-to-one coaching, did not take part in any group coaching sessions. Coach engagement and buy-in was key to their effective delivery. Where they worked well, triads were a very valuable networking opportunity, and facilitated partnerships between early years practitioners and the sharing of good practice across London. This was particularly appreciated by participants and coaches in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

- The pandemic and the mandatory closure of early years settings between March and June 2020 had a detrimental impact on participants' and coaches' engagement in the programme, and the extent to which they were able to meet the programme requirements.
- With the closure of settings, contact between some coaches and their participants became challenging and fragmented. The priorities and goals that participants had set themselves when joining the programme also changed as their focus moved to dealing with the effects of the pandemic.
- Despite the ongoing challenges, the GLA and NDNA were committed to continuing the Early Years Leaders Programme. Maintaining participants' engagement in the remainder of the programme required careful management and mitigation of a range of issues. A series of business recovery webinars were delivered by NDNA in summer 2020 to support settings with business recovery and planning.
- All face-to-face activity ceased, and the programme moved to remote delivery. While most participants missed the face-to-face contact with their coach, there were some obvious benefits as difficulties with staffing and travel time were minimised or eliminated.
- It was evident that for the participants and coaches who were able to remain engaged, the Early Years Leaders Programme had provided an invaluable source of support during an extremely challenging period for the early years sector.

## **Outcomes for participants, coaches and early years settings**

- A total of 55 participants across 25 local authorities (and 19 coaches) completed the Early Years Leaders Programme, which was a significant achievement given the challenges brought about by the pandemic.
- Although due to the COVID-19 pandemic the outcomes of the programme may not fully reflect the potential success of the programme, it was successful in achieving its key objectives. Participants and coaches were overwhelmingly positive about the impact the programme had on their confidence, their leadership and management skills and on the quality of provision in their settings. They attributed this to the support and guidance provided by their coach, and the collaborative support and sharing of information with other participants, which reassured them that they were not alone in the issues they were facing.
- The programme also succeeded in increasing participants' aspirations for further development and progression, and gave them a clearer idea of how to progress in their careers.
- Tangible improvements to practice and provision were evident, and although some may be considered to be small changes, they contributed to raising the quality and accessibility of early years provision. The actions implemented in settings could be grouped into six main areas: teaching and learning; staff recruitment, retention and development; staff structure and management;

planning and assessment; policies and systems; and business expansion, including an increase in the two-year-old offer.

- The programme also proved to be a development opportunity for the coaches, and many felt that they had gained just as much as the participants they had supported. As well as developing their coaching skills, they valued the opportunity to reflect on their own practice and leadership style, and to collaborate with other early years professionals.
- The programme provided valuable networking opportunities, and facilitated the sharing of best practice between early years practitioners across London. These ongoing partnerships will be an important legacy of the Early Years Leaders Programme, and will provide a much-needed source of ongoing support and collaborative working.
- An unintended but important outcome of the programme was its contribution to supporting early years settings through the COVID-19 pandemic. While the crisis had a detrimental impact on the engagement of some participants, for others it proved to be an invaluable source of support and guidance.

## Recommendations

- Any future leadership development programmes of this nature should give careful consideration to the target group who would benefit most from the support, and ensure that sufficient time is allocated for set-up, marketing and recruitment. It is crucial that applicants and their employers have the opportunity to reflect on the requirements of such a programme to ensure that they fully understand the commitment involved, and that senior leadership support is ongoing. Future coaching programmes should also consider a mixed delivery model involving both face-to-face contact and remote activities to minimise barriers to participation.
- The need to invest in the development of the early years workforce remains as strong as ever given the significant challenges currently facing the sector. The sector requires a long-term strategy for providing clear progression pathways and access to ongoing training and development for leaders at all levels.
- There is an ongoing need and desire for networking and collaborative sharing of information within the early years sector. Further consideration should be given to how such networks could be developed and encouraged within the early years sector in London, through for example, online forums or local networks of practitioners.
- Dissemination of the outcomes and lessons learned from this programme should be shared widely across London's early years sector. This would not only celebrate the achievements of those involved in the programme, but would also help to raise awareness of the importance of investing in the early years workforce.