

Leadership development and talent management in local authorities in Wales: Executive Summary

1. Research aims and methodology

- 1.1 This research aimed to explore the rationale, implementation and impact of leadership development and talent management provision within local authorities in Wales. A significant component of this qualitative research involved capturing the perceptions, views and experiences of staff at different tiers of management within local authorities who had taken up leadership development opportunities within the local authority. The research was carried out by the Internal Research Programme (KAS, Welsh Government) on behalf of Academi Wales, the Public Service leadership and management development organisation based within Welsh Government. Academi Wales provides professional development for staff working in a wide range of public services and third sector organisations.
- 1.2 The objectives for this research were:
- to explore the theoretical underpinnings, current structure and operation of talent management and leadership programmes within local authorities, paying attention to the relationship between leadership development and changes in organisational culture;
 - to identify local authorities with developed leadership programmes and understand the process of their development and implementation in further depth;
 - to identify leadership models / programmes implemented within local authorities and assess evidence of their impact on:
 - individual skills and behaviours;
 - organisational culture and performance, where data are available; and

- to explore, with appropriate stakeholder engagement, opportunities for using best practice in leadership development programmes to support other local authorities in developing or modifying their own offer.

- 1.3 In order to achieve these aims, a case study approach was adopted in three local authority areas with developed leadership programmes: Vale of Glamorgan Council, Powys County Council and Gwynedd County Council. These case studies drew on qualitative data collected through a series of semi-structured interviews undertaken with senior leaders, HR representatives, line managers and staff from a range of Directorates across the three local authorities, synthesised with the findings from an analysis of LD strategy and programme documentation. The research team also carried out a semi-structured interview with a senior manager and HR representative at Torfaen County Council, where there were aspirations to design and implement a leadership development offer in future.
- 1.4 This report presents the findings from the three case studies and includes a literature review which outlines key conceptualisations of talent and leadership and their contemporary application within public sector organisations.

2. Key findings

The impact of context

- 2.1 All local authorities equated leadership development with organisations' perceived ability to respond and adapt to change. The concept of situational leadership for future proofing, such as change driven by increasing pressures on council budgets for public services resonated with all senior leaders. However, there was some consensus among staff and some line managers that one of the most significant barriers to prioritising or accessing leadership development was redistributing resources to ensure delivery of public services while team members engaged in leadership development opportunities. This tension appeared to be most keenly felt in teams responsible for delivery of front line services. While senior managers viewed leadership development as a means to increase organisational capacity, and capability to drive change and transformation, at staff and line manager level, there was more of a disconnect between the perceived purpose and processes
- 2.2 Line managers and staff consistently reported the importance of empowering staff with strategic insight and the long-term objectives of leadership development. However, without mapping the aims, content and intended outcomes to shared vision and goals, staff and some line managers felt less able to make informed choices and undertake self-directed learning. This occurred when the organisational strategy reportedly did not go far enough to set out and rationalise leadership development pathways for staff, or did not clearly

articulate the role line managers were expected to play in providing a supportive environment for learning and development.

A learning culture

- 2.3 Across the local authorities who participated in this research, the need for a learning culture was mentioned by all tiers of management. The degree of proactivity and self-motivation shown by staff in seeking leadership development varied between authorities, service areas and teams, and evidence suggests that the attitude and approach of the line manager greatly influenced the likelihood of staff planning, seeking and applying for development opportunities. This was also seen in the ability of staff to apply learning following their leadership development opportunity.
- 2.4 The formative role of previous professional relationships, independent of the wider team culture, also appeared to influence the take-up of leadership development. Line managers who held a positive view of leadership development appeared to attribute this to themselves having a supportive line manager who had set them on the path to leadership. These line managers frequently referred to the forming of a reciprocal relationship as part of this process, which benefits both staff and the wider team.
- 2.5 Line managers were generally supportive of the leadership development offer within their respective authorities, particularly in terms of their focus on developing the confidence and competence of line managers. Most of the line managers that were interviewed as part of the research recognised the important role that line managers play in translating leadership values and behaviours into practice. The majority also noted the value of adopting a consistent management competency framework and performance management processes that enabled line managers to plan and record the outcomes of learning and development activities undertaken in their teams. A supportive network for line managers to share good practice and problem solve was also highlighted as an important condition necessary to implement a positive learning culture.

Access to information

- 2.6 Staff expressed interest in having greater coherence, integration and sometimes external validation of the leadership development that was offered within the respective authorities. They also noted a desire for clear and identifiable routes to accessing leadership development opportunities, particularly where those could be complemented by external provision, notably an external accreditation or qualification. The majority of staff indicated that they would benefit from further information and guidance in relation to leadership development, either through a stronger relationship with their line manager, or alternatively through an informed and impartial workforce development lead within Human Resources.

- 2.7 There is some evidence to suggest that within those councils where there is an intended inclusive approach to leadership development, staff-led, open-access programmes may not be as effective in reaching staff with an interest in pursuing leadership development. In these cases, open access leadership programmes appear to be most effective where there is a supportive learning culture in place or where line managers support and endorse participation in such learning. Even when information about these programmes is accessed, the timing and location of events may inadvertently exclude those with caring commitments or create barriers for groups who have not been involved in their planning , thereby influencing the diversity of future leaders.
- 2.8 Evidence suggests that those responsible for planning and/or commissioning the provision of leadership development programmes may require further support to consider how leadership development takes account of factors relating to the Welsh language and culture. In particular, consideration should be given to the socio-cultural dimension of being a leader responsible for promoting and providing services through the medium of Welsh, over and above meeting statutory duties to comply with the Welsh Language Standards.

Defining, identifying and nurturing talent

- 2.9 Across all local authorities who participated in this research, staff, line managers and senior leaders noted that talent, and the processes in place to identify and nurture talent required better conceptualisation. The existing evidence base on talent management also reveals no accepted or consistent definition of talent in circulation or use across the public sector, finding instead variations according to particular schemes or service areas.
- 2.10 Gwynedd County Council demonstrated the most articulated mechanism and pathway for identifying and developing talent, with a formal talent management scheme set up and aligned to a workforce development strategy. Despite this, there appeared to be a reluctance to introduce a selection process to identify talented staff. The research highlighted that even this formal pathway may require modification to ensure clearer formulation and improved communication about the opportunities available within the organisation.
- 2.11 This reluctance to define, formalise and communicate selection criteria for leadership development provision within the existing workforce was shared across all local authorities participating in the research. This was mainly due to concerns about the impact of a centralised selection process on the culture and relationships within teams and between team members; the effect on staff morale and performance; and the extent to which there were robust, mature and defensible frameworks in place to underpin a selection process (such as a clearly articulated definition of talent or leadership potential).

- 2.12 Some line managers appeared to conceive of talent in a holistic way, and used local performance management review processes or tools to have conversations with staff about where they had untapped or under-utilised talents and skills. In some cases, line managers brokered the provision of informal mentoring or shadowing for staff within their own teams or across Directorates. It was highlighted that this might be important for unlocking the talents and interests of staff whose potential may otherwise only be assessed in the context of their current role, or for the opportunities available to them.

Outcomes for staff

- 2.13 Among the elements of leadership development provision that were most highly valued by line managers were those that equipped participants with an understanding of the part of emotional intelligence, interpersonal and team dynamics to performance and organisational culture. Line managers, and some staff, identified that participating in leadership development had enabled them to develop better communication skills, stronger negotiation and influencing skills, and had helped to improve their relationships with others by emphasising the role of reflective thinking skills and attunement in productive relationships.
- 2.14 The coaching methodologies and practices that were embedded within most leadership development provision were also highly valued among line managers and staff. There was agreement among the majority of research participants that taking part in leadership development opportunities that comprised coaching approaches and techniques, had allowed them to reconfigure their relationship with their line manager and their peers. For most staff this was a positive outcome, which enabled them to offer constructive challenge, explore ideas and test new ways of working, take greater ownership over their work, and take a more proactive approach to problem solving, team working and collaboration.

Staff involvement

- 2.15 A participatory approach to leadership development, comprising an open-access, staff-led leadership development offer, appears to have some positive environmental impacts conducive to developing a learning culture. The sponsorship and support of line managers in encouraging the participation of their staff is an important enabler in creating a learning culture that produces outcomes for individuals and team members.

Citizen involvement

- 2.16 The Wales Audit Office recognises a need and the subsequent potential of adopting a staff engagement approach which involves citizens in shaping workforce development strategies for organisations which are required to future-proof public services.

- 2.17 There are indications that some councils who took part in this research are beginning to consider citizens in their approaches to leadership development. Where the role of citizen involvement is being considered, councils were more inclined to think of citizens as stakeholders, and articulate a need to consider their expectations and future needs, in the development of future leaders and public service transformation.

Evidence-based approaches

- 2.18 There was general consensus across the three local authorities that adopting an evidence-based approach to developing and sustaining leadership development provision, as well as measuring its impact, was important in justifying future investment in the area. Within this context, the research highlighted that participating local authorities had all taken some steps to measure the outcomes of their provision. The methodologies adopted ranged from a staff survey to a cost-benefit analysis.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- 3.1 Local authorities make positive associations between leadership development and capacity and capability to deliver service transformation and organisational change. Leadership development was considered, among those that had an LD offer in place and those that aspired to, as a key enabler of better collaboration, partnership working and innovation. The majority of research participants identified examples of the ways in which participating in LD opportunities had prompted attitudinal and behavioural change with respect to themselves and their teams, which they equated with their abilities to influence positive culture change.
- 3.2 Local authorities held mixed views and approaches with respect to the need for and the application of selection processes for leadership development provision. The majority of research participants were hesitant to define, formalise and communicate selection criteria, particularly with respect to supporting their existing workforce, owing to concerns about the impact of a centralised selection process on the culture and relationships within and between teams and the effect on staff morale and performance. There were also some concerns about the extent to which robust, mature and defensible frameworks were in place to underpin a selection process, such as a strategic and clearly articulated definition of talent or leadership potential. The lack of clarity or in some cases communication, with respect to any selection criteria for LD opportunities was felt by some to be contributing to attitudes and perceptions among staff and peers that may be an obstacle to progression for some staff.

- 3.3 There was a need among staff for better information about and communication of LD opportunities to empower staff to make informed decisions about and plan their LD pathway. Staff and line managers in some areas wanted clearer information about the objectives, content, and intended outcomes of development opportunities in order to better judge the level, relevance and direction of development opportunities with respect to individuals' prior learning and experience and their aspirations for progression. There was evidence that staff and line managers, to some degree, would benefit from guidance from HR with regards to the scope, relevance and linkages between courses and accreditation. Staff and line managers articulated a need for options to undertake external accredited development and wanted information to be made available about how this provision might complement the suite of internal LD opportunities for staff.
- 3.4 The attitudes and behaviours of line management were considered an important indicator and enabler of a positive learning culture within teams. The majority of research participants identified that the relationship and interactions they had with their line manager were key to their decision to register their interest or accept encouragement to participate in LD. Performance management tools could be an effective facilitator of holistic conversations that supported line managers to identify untapped talent, leadership aspirations and potential, but this appeared dependent on the perceived value of LD to service delivery and continuity as well as the attitude and capacities of line management to engage in discussions about LD.
- 3.5 Among the elements of LD provision that were most highly valued by line managers were those that equipped participants with an understanding of the part of emotional intelligence, interpersonal and team dynamics to performance and organisational culture. Line managers, and some staff, identified that participating in LD had enabled them to develop better communication skills, stronger negotiation and influencing skills and to improve their relationships with others by emphasising the role of reflective thinking skills and emotional attunement in positive and productive relationships.
- 3.6 Highly valued among line managers and staff were the outcomes attributed to the coaching methodologies and practices embedded within most LD provision. There was agreement among the majority of research participants that taking part in LD opportunities that comprised coaching approaches and techniques, had allowed them to reconfigure their relationship with their line manager and their peers. For most staff this was a positive outcome, which staff described gave them permission to offer constructive challenge, explore ideas and test new ways of working, allowed them to take greater ownership over work and take a more proactive approach to problem solving, team working and collaboration. Line managers noted that adopting a coaching approach allowed them to

critically evaluate the work of the team, redistribute work more effectively and retain more time for strategic thinking and planning.

- 3.7 The creation of a safe and supportive relationship between line management and staff, in which both may experience the mutual benefits of investment in LD was considered a key condition necessary for effective knowledge transfer. All line managers identified that they perceived themselves to have an important role to create space and supportive structures for staff to reflect on, apply and share their learning with others. Most highlighted that this supportive environment for development extended to the ways in which they engaged, communicated and shared their time, feedback and new challenging projects with the wider team. The majority articulated that colleagues and peers, who may not be directly participating in LD, must experience indirect benefits through knowledge transfer, role-modelling and delegation of different work which also allows them opportunities for professional growth.
- 3.8 Line managers and staff wanted better ways of being able to transfer and exercise the knowledge and skills gained through LD within and beyond their immediate teams. Evidence suggests that existing LD provision in some local authorities may not always provide sufficient or structured opportunities for staff to either seek out experiences that allow them to exercise their new skills and knowledge or to share among peers the further learning they acquire as a result of putting their new skills and knowledge into practice following participation in LD. Some staff saw a role for HR in helping to continue to bring together, coordinate and share learning and good practice in a group forum following participation in LD in order to maintain the professional network and practice of continuous learning among staff committed to further personal and professional development. Others felt that the team environment could operate as a safe space in which to practise the skills and approaches acquired from participating in LD opportunities, receive feedback and undergo coaching for continuous improvement.
- 3.9 Local authorities would welcome more meaningful strategies for conceptualising, attracting and developing talent. There was broad agreement at every tier of management across the local authorities represented in these case studies that there is a lack of consensus with respect to the definition of talent and therefore, what might comprise effective talent management. Approaches to identifying and nurturing talent within the existing workforce, where they were currently in place and distinct from approaches to LD, were typically unique to a service-area or specific profession, informed by a need to succession plan and often dependent on the skills of line managers. Where local authorities had more formalised mechanisms for identifying and developing talent, it tended to be as a means of attracting new staff into local government. This was also reflected among those who were

planning to develop their thinking around talent and talent management who intended to capitalise on the apprenticeship levy available to employers through the Apprenticeship Provider Network.

Recommendations

- 3.10 These recommendations have been put forward with a view to informing how Academi Wales and local authorities may, independently or in partnership, implement the findings of this research.

Local authorities

- 3.11 Local authorities should consider developing mechanisms to include the voice of the citizen to inform its workforce planning activities. Local authorities, through the provision of Public Service Boards (PSBs) and Local Wellbeing Plans have an opportunity to ensure that the views and long-term aspirations of citizens are included in the development of a future workforce that has the skills and behaviours to meet the demands of the local community.
- 3.12 Leadership development provision should be formulated on the basis of an understanding of the skills, profile and aspirations of its current workforce integrated with the needs, assets and demands of the local community. A needs assessment undertaken in the context of understanding the likely future trends affecting the provision of public services may help local authorities to address the demand and supply of skills across the workforce and in particular service-areas, which highlight the potential impacts of skills shortages and a lack of diversity on future service provision.
- 3.13 Local authorities may wish to consider making provision for a combination of universal and targeted LD to develop a consistent approach to leadership development at every tier of management. There is evidence to suggest that a universal internal LD offer that makes coaching widely available to staff at all tiers of management may support staff to take ownership of their development, challenge existing working practices and adopt new ways of working which may be effective across other service areas. A selection criterion may be applied to targeted LD provision which looks to build the leadership skills and behaviours of staff aligned to workforce planning priorities.
- 3.14 Local authorities may wish to include expectations and commitments to LD, underpinned by a consistent management competencies framework, that provides staff with the leverage to seek out and expect to access LD opportunities. Staff and line management should be engaged in developing the aims, objectives and content and evaluating progress against these commitments. Evaluation data may be used to facilitate the

development of a positive learning culture and equal participation across Directorates which have different pressures and resources to engage in LD.

Academi Wales

- 3.15 Academi Wales should consider the support it provides to local authorities to monitor, measure and evaluate the collective impact of leadership development. The findings of this research may be utilised to inform the development of a Theory of Change and accompanying outcomes measures to monitor the medium and long-term impacts of leadership development and strengthen the evidence base on the relationship between leadership development, performance and culture. A consistent framework for measuring the collective contribution of local government to the development of future leaders of public service in Wales could be aligned to the seven wellbeing goals set out in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and support the five ways of working that aspire to the leadership behaviours, some of which research participants attribute to participation in LD.
- 3.16 Academi Wales should consider the role Welsh language mainstreaming has to play in the development of future leaders in Welsh public service. There is some evidence to suggest that local authorities may benefit from guidance with respect to the role of the Welsh language in leadership, particularly in the context of the cultural and social wellbeing of local citizens and delivery of the Welsh language strategy, and independently of its obligations to meet the Welsh Language Standards.

Academi Wales and local authorities

- 3.17 Academi Wales may wish to work with local authorities to rationalise its suite of external accreditation and leadership development opportunities, with a view to mapping and developing clear pathways for individuals wishing to build on internal leadership development undertaken in the local authority. Staff and line managers wanted clearer guidance from HR professionals and external stakeholders to take ownership of their career development and make informed decisions about the scope, relevance and likely direction of their LD activities.
- 3.18 Academi Wales and local authorities may wish to undertake further research to develop a fuller understanding of approaches to identifying and managing talent that may be unique to particular service areas and professions. Future research should look to build an understanding of talent in the context of internal and external drivers which impact on the resources of external stakeholders, such as Further and Higher Education and the wider public sector, that influence supply and demand on the talent pipeline.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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