Findings from Sector Led Improvement leadership development research for heads of service/third tier managers/senior leaders

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July 2019

1. I would like to thank all the respondents who participated in the one to one telephone conversations and the Survey Monkey questionnaire. I appreciate their openness in sharing their experiences. The author, Melani Oliver, regrets any errors or omissions and takes full responsibility for the same.

Introduction

2. This report provides a summary of the findings from a piece of research carried out between May 2019 and July 2019. The work was commissioned by the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP) via The Staff College.

3. SESLIP is a membership group of all single/upper tier local authorities in the South East that aims to:
   - Improve outcomes for children and young people across the South East
   - Establish a culture of honest and constructive dialogue and challenge within and between authorities
   - Demonstrate the capacity and capability of the sector to achieve a coherent self-improving system.

4. SESLIP identified as a key strand of enquiry the need to better understand the succession planning for second and first tier officers in local authorities' Education and Children services. SESLIP has commissioned The Staff College to undertake this research with a view to both understanding the challenges and issues local authorities are facing and to seek potential solutions for these issues.

5. All data relating to individuals and local authorities has been anonymised.

Data Gathering

6. The data for this piece of work was gathered using 2 methods:
   - Survey Monkey – a 10 question survey sent to all third and second tier officers in the South East. 58 responses were received.
   - Individual interviews – an open invitation was circulated to all officers. 13 individuals took part in telephone interviews covering the same questions as those in the Survey Monkey.

   The sample provides a reasonable and fair representation of the authorities across the south east region. The 71 responses were analysed, identifying key themes in each section which are represented in this report along with recommendations generated from the feedback.

Data

7. The composition of respondents:

Table 1: The composition of respondents

Gender	
Male	18
Female	53
Years in Management	
1 – 2 years	16
3 to 5 years	17
6 to 10 years	16
10 years plus	20
Satisfaction with job role	
Dissatisfied	2
Fairly dissatisfied	1
OK	7
Fairly satisfied	37
Satisfied	25

8.   52% of respondents had been in a second or third tier management post for 6 or more years, with an equally high number having been in the same authority for many more years than their time in management. This suggests there is a low degree of personnel movement between authorities.

9.   Satisfaction with their current role was high with only three people (4.23%) reporting being dissatisfied or fairly dissatisfied with their role. 52% reported being fairly satisfied with 35.2% being satisfied.

10.   39.4% of respondents were likely or were planning to apply for a 2nd or 3rd Tier post. Whilst this question was not explored further through survey monkey, during the one-to-one interviews it was noted that four individuals had applied for a more senior role in the last year with an additional four having been promoted to more senior roles in the last 18 months.

Table 2: Aspirations to AD or DCS

To what extent have you considered becoming an assistant director or director in the future	
Planning to apply	14
Likely to apply	14
May apply	18
Unlikely to apply	21
Definitely won't apply	4

11.   In relation to the four who applied in the last year, the roles had arisen due to restructuring in their existing authorities. Three have been unsuccessful and one is awaiting the outcome.

12.   Of those who had secured promotion in the last 18 months, three out of the four were willing/able to move to a new authority. One secured promotion internally. This suggests that there is a desire from individuals aspiring to becomes second tier and DCS, however this is not matched by a willingness or ability to move to other authorities. In the main this is due to people having already set down geographical / family roots. This is a significant learning point as it implies there is a need for local authorities to take seriously how they grow their own future leaders.

Key Theme 1: Best and worst things about your current role?

13. Given the challenging context of local authorities, where over the last 11 years they have faced rising demand , large budgets reductions and no reduction in the levels of bureaucracy and scrutiny, it was both surprising and reassuring to hear so many positive messages in relation to how people felt their roles. The responses evidence a high level of commitment to developing and delivering good practice to improve outcomes for children at all levels. Many respondents talked about the best part of their jobs being:

    "working to enable more families to stay safely together"
    "working to improve outcomes for disabled children and their families, especially vulnerable ones, safeguarding children and improving their wellbeing"
    "making a difference for all children"
    "making a difference to the lives of the most vulnerable children and young people"

14. Respondents reported enjoying staying connected to operations and although they were no longer directly delivering services, they valued the connection they had to practice through the staff they managed. Many raised concerns that gaining a more senior post would further remove them from direct contact with clients. However, they recognised this had to be balanced with extending the other elements of the work they enjoyed such as having the scope to develop services and having a broad and varied range of work.

15. Developing and working with strong teams and having a good strong management team were other commons themes raised as positives of their roles

Key Theme 2: the elements of the role you find most challenging?

16. In relation to, separate from number of issues such as travel time, lack of administration support and lack of autonomy, overwhelmingly three key issues emerged:
    - Time
    - Budgets
    - Volume of work

17. These three areas are intrinsically connected. Many felt the levels of demand had increased significantly as a result of the reductions in budget. The increase in the volume of work placed pressure on their time. Whilst responses naturally varied from authority to authority depending on the individual authorities' strategic positioning, a common frustration expressed related to the reduction in early help resources. This was expressed as "local authorities not always being innovative enough, focusing on savings as opposed to cost reductions" and not taking the "long view in relation to the consequences of these decision".

18. Some of the consequences of the rise in demand and pressure on peoples' work time included:
    - a reduction in being able to be as rigorous as one would wish
    - having to attend far too many meetings as other job roles have disappeared
    - not being able to collaborate with peers from other authorities and disciplines
    - less time for innovation
    - less support
    - feeling "not being on top on things"
    - lack of time for reflection and planning

19. Most local authorities were reported to be going through some form of "change process"; investing in transformation of one kind or another in order to improve practice and future proof services. Being involved in these transformations energised people in the main, giving them a sense that they were travelling in the right direction. However, despite this "sense of travelling in the right direction", the focus on savings and the ongoing resource pressure, have left many feeling they are firefighting at a time when they should be leading by influence. However, it was reported that there is not sufficient time to do this. Many reported change as just "part of the everyday job" but also felt they were at the point of change fatigue.

20. To contextualise these comments, it is worth noting the National Audit Office report published in January 2019 entitled "Pressures on children's social care". The report identified that;

> "15 Local authorities had responded to financial pressures by prioritising child protection work and reducing spending on non-statutory children's services. Local authorities have seen their overall real spending power reduce by 28.6% since 2010. Furthermore, authorities have responded to this pressure, and increased statutory children's social care activity, by reducing spending on non-statutory children's services and increasing spending on statutory social work. The proportion of spending on preventative services, such as children's centres, fell from 41% in 2010-11 to 25% in 2017-18. Spending on statutory activities rose from 59% to 75% over the same period. In 2017-18, the total national overspend on children's services was £872 million. The proportion of local authorities that have overspent on children's social care has increased, rising from 63% in 2010-11 to 91% in 2017-18". (paragraphs 2.18 to 2.21 and Figures 13 and 14)

21. Many of the recipients felt that this situation was preventing them from doing the work that matters most, that of proving the best outcomes for children and families.

Key Theme 3: Attractions and challenges for becoming an assistant director or director

22. Respondents were asked "what do you feel, if any, are the attractions of making a move to AD or DCS?" Being able to influence change, strategic thinking and future developments were common themes. The respondents interviewed commented that as a third-tier officer they were often not sufficiently included in strategic decision making, resulting in them feeling frustrated. They wanted to have greater opportunity to innovate, be creative, influence and drive change rather than just implement it. A large number of respondents stated how much they enjoyed developing and leading people and saw a step up to AD and DCS level as a means of not only developing others but also as a learning and development opportunity for themselves.

23. The issue of working with the wider council and politicians was raised by 3 respondents in a positive way. Being able to have a greater influence on political decision making and ensuring the effectiveness of children's services, is placed centrally in their local authorities' vision. This was an area of work that excited the participants.

24. Other advantages raised included the opportunity for career enhancement and financial reward.

Key Theme 4: What do you see as the key challenges that would put you off considering becoming an AD or DCS

25.   In response to this question, the issue of the volume of work was raised numerous times. Third tier officers reported experiencing their line managers as being overworked; leading to less support for both themselves and for the line managers from their own seniors. There was a general view that the higher one went in the organisation the less support existed and at the same time there was a poorer work-life balance. Some were also concerned that this led to even less time for reflection resulting in uncertain and unclear outcomes. However, it was also noted that many third-tier officers had not been exposed to the role of an AD or DCS and therefore had not gained a true refection or understanding of the role.

26.   A further concern was the engagement with local politicians. Several respondents felt they had had little exposure to the political environment and therefore lacked confidence in this area. Others felt, whilst they had some exposure, it was limited to their area of expertise as opposed to the wider council business. The lack of exposure to local politicians was seen as the biggest challenge in making a step up. A couple of people felt this would leave them "feeling very exposed and not able to support their leader".

Key Theme 5: Barriers to applying

27.   When asked "what are the barriers which might stop you from applying for and getting more senior roles?" a number of comments were received regarding the inequity women experience in considering second and third tier posts. Comments such as:
>   "the aggressive macho culture of our organisation"
>   "subtly women are having to work harder for the same credit"
>   "women don't blow their own trumpet as much as men"
>   "women are inherently less confident"
all highlighted the need for organisations to understand how they can better support women leaders through their organisation's succession planning. The issue of women returning to work after maternity leave and the lack of flexible arrangements for parenting and working were also raised as barriers.

28.   A further area identified by some respondents as a barrier to more senior posts, related to the limited number of roles accepting non-social work qualified staff. Health staff, youth justice, youth and community and early help staff expressed the view that very few authorities consider recruiting staff with qualifications in these areas, despite the number of years' experience they have. This revealed a level of frustration experienced by some, who believed that being an expert practitioner in social work should not be a prerequisite for being a good senior leader in children's services. Linked to this was a concern raised connected to not having enough breadth of experience across the range of disciplines within education and children's social care.

29.   Furthermore, it was suggested the practice of constantly employing interims and consultants, rather than seeking skilled people from within, did not provide an enabling environment for retaining staff. It was felt that organisations were losing valuable resources by continuing with these practices. It had the effect of undermining the staff already in the organisation. It is important to remember that in the cohort for this research, staff retention within authorities seems to be high, with over 50% having been in post 6-plus years. This provides a great opportunity for consistency and could be better utilised to the LA's advantage.

30. The issue of LA's attitudes towards succession planning was raised. It was reported that some LA's took succession planning seriously, whilst others reported it as being non-existent. A lack of confidence in knowing what knowledge and skills were needed for an AD or DCS role as well as having the rights skills to make the step up, were frequently raised as areas of concern. A lack of training opportunities to develop the skills to ensure success, lack of professional guidance and a lack of care for staff were sited as barriers.

31. There was a lack of confidence in knowing that they would be properly inducted and have planned and consistent support on becoming an AD or DCS was also a concern. Respondents reported seeing their line managers not well supported

Key Theme 6: Enablers that would support you in applying for AD and DCS roles

32. A small number of respondents felt their local authority LA's had provided a supportive environment for them to develop knowledge and skills that would help them in more senior job roles. These opportunities included
    - coaching,
    - sector led improvement work,
    - formal training,
    - peer reviews and
    - good quality line management.

    However, as already identified, there is a lack of understanding regarding the skills and knowledge required. A clear programme for personal and professional growth and development, with opportunities for guided career development, would enable individuals to be clear about future requirements. Likewise, a focus on competences, as opposed to qualifications, would enable those without a social work qualification to feel they had a genuine chance of being selected.

33. In considering a move up to Tier 2 and Tier 1 posts respondents talked about the post needing to "be in the right type of authority". This was defined as authorities that had a culture of developing people, transparency and honesty and supportive managers who were realistic about work life balance and their expectations of staff.

34. Supervision was an issue for some. They felt that supervision was task focused and rarely focused on either the professional or personal growth of the individual. There required to be a greater focus accessing development opportunities. One person commented that "getting a more senior role would feel like passing your driving test and being expected to drive on the motorway an hour later". Several people referred to stepping up as a scary thing. Greater clarification about the role of supervision, linked to a programme of development, would enable a greater focus on people development.

35. It was suggested in the one-to-one interviews, that it is not in the interests of local authorities to encourage staff to think about career progression, as it may have a negative impact on retention of their own staff. This was not a view across the research participants, as others reported having been positively encouraged in their career progression. However, overall respondents felt creating a programme of cultural change, which allowed for the encouragement of skills growth and a healthy work life balance, was seen as an enabler.

36.	A large number of respondents commented on how they experienced local authorities as being siloed, due to the lack of opportunity for working with peers across other local authorities. Some referred back to a time when there was greater opportunity in this area. They felt the reduction was due to the increase in work load, reduced budgets and lack of time. The opportunity to shadow and work with other local authorities across other regions would provide exposure to a broader range of experiences and services.

Key Theme 6: What development opportunities would be attractive

37.	As with the other questions in this research, there was a significant amount of commonality in response to the question "what development opportunities would be attractive?"

38.	Coaching, mentoring and action learning were all repeatedly raised as opportunities for support and development. However, respondents were keen not have a coach from within their own or a neighbouring authority. Ensuring confidentiality and independence was an important factor.

39.	Cross boundary/region action learning was seen as a way of providing ongoing support in their existing roles, as well as an opportunity to work across authorities and disciplines. Similarly, identifying joint training needs and opportunities between authorities was suggested.

40.	In addition, secondment and shadowing people in AD or DCS roles was thought to be a good way of better understanding the requirements of such roles. Again, this was thought to be most useful if facilitated across authorities.

41.	It was further suggested that individuals could be offered the opportunity to undertake a project within another authority providing a greater sharing of roles and opportunities across authorities. Such shadowing and role exchange would enable individuals to have exposure to different professional disciples.

42.	There were some very specific training requests such as how to manage risk, how to motivate staff in tough environments, working with politicians, report writing and managing short and effective meetings.

43.	It was suggested that, as with the DCS and ADs, there should be a forum/network for third tier officers. Similarly, it was suggested that an annual event for third tier officers, run by ADs and DCSs focusing on sharing experiences, could be offered as part of a range of responses. Finally, the Aspirant Directors course run by The Staff College was sighted as a good example of leadership development with education and children services. The question as to whether something similar could be developed specifically for third tier officers was raised.

Recommendations for SESLIP

44.	The research asked respondents what they thought the South East region could do to encourage more heads of services to apply for Tier 2 and Tier 1 posts. In this section of the report the author has incorporated the responses to this question into the recommendations, whilst at the same time drawing on the key messages summarised in this report. It is suggested that SESLIP should consider these recommendations as part of an overall strategic response to the issues generated.

1. The South East region could usefully consider developing a succession planning statement and policy for the region, shared by all local authtories. It is evident from this piece of work that this both untapped talent and capacity in the region that could be better utilised through a regional approach. For example, sharing and providing development opportunities, vacancies and posts across the region.
2. The South East region should consider working with Local Authorities to share and encourage best practice in relation to succession planning, including a focus on personal and professional and developing a learning culture. There is a strong requirement to include a focus on the specific needs of women leaders. It is worth noting that the research did not focus on issues of ethnicity and therefore in not in a position to offer any findings in this area. However, SESLIP may wish, in the light of issues raised by women, to consider undertaking further research in the future which focuses on the experiences and needs of different ethnic groups in relation to succession planning.
3. As respondents raised concerns about the recruitment of interims, consultants and the use of recruitment agencies and whether this was a costly error (often overlooking existing staff in the organisation) SESLIP could help DCS's consider alternative ways of securing staff.
4. It was suggested that a leadership programme (similar to the Aspirant Directors) would be welcomed. SESLIP could usefully consider how such a programme could be designed and commissioned. Suggested content raised by the respondents included:
   - coaching and mentoring training
   - working with politicians
   - managing and leading through influence
   - managing high level conflict
   - managing risk
   - council wide finances
   - partnership working
5. There is a significant need to make transparent the role of AD and DCS, in order that third tier officers have a clear expectation of what they are aiming for. This could be delivered in a range of ways. For example, informally, within own authorities, shadowing ADs and DCSs, through a day in the life of blogs, annual event for third tier officers hosted by DCS or ADs and/or incorporated into an overall leadership programme.
6. Equally important is the need for far greater cross fertilisation between authorities and sharing challenges and opportunities amongst peers. SESLIP could usefully consider how they can encourage and support the creation of opportunities for shadowing, project exchange, secondments and forums, all of which have been suggested by the respondents as ways of increasing cross authority / region learning.
7. SESLIP could helpfully facilitate the training of a number of people in the facilitation of action learning sets, leadership coaching and mentoring and establish a cross regional pool of staff willing to undertake these roles. Alternatively, funding should be sought to bring in facilities available to undertake this work.
8. There are some important messages for DCS to hear contained within this report such as the work life balance pressures people feel, the desire to have management environments that celebrate and support staff and the need for staff to have their confidence raised, not just in their skills now but in their skills, knowledge and experience for future roles. SESLIP should consider how to best share these messages with DCS.

Summary

45.   Perhaps it is not surprising to report women felt less supported to ensure success in gaining promotion. Equally it was not surprising to hear the level of change and challenge people are experiencing in their roles. It is however, encouraging to note the level of commitment that existed amongst the respondents. Overall it appears there is a deep reservoir of homegrown talent ready to take on the challenges of a senior management role. However, in order for this to be released there the need for targeted training, coaching and opportunities for co learning as identified in the recommendations.