

Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives



National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

Highly effective leadership in children's centres

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Resource

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Foreword

Children's Centres are making a significant difference to the lives and life chances of children and their families across the country everyday.

This research celebrates children's centre leadership but also recognises the complexity of the role, using the experiences of leaders to reflect on what works, what is valued and what leadership behaviours make a real and sustained difference. The intention is for this to support and encourage national policymakers, local authorities and their providers but above all, leaders themselves, to reflect on their own leadership story and implications for the future. It should also serve to underpin the learning and development of centre leaders of the future, ensuring they are well prepared, informed and inspired as they step up to this important leadership role. As the report points out, ensuring a future pipeline of high quality children's centre leaders is critical.

The economic environment and resource pressures have added particular challenges to the leadership of integrated services and these are well highlighted in the Report. However, the best leaders are demonstrating that leadership with moral purpose, resourcefulness and resilience can lead to greater innovation, collaboration and trust across the sector and with families, in spite of a challenging operating landscape.

Children's Centres remain central to the Government's vision of early intervention and co-ordinated support. Where this works well there is engagement and leadership at all levels, centred around a compelling sense of shared purpose and local endeavour. Leaders are able to articulate the "what", the "how" but above all, the "why" of their work. This makes the concept of a self improving system based on deep and meaningful partnerships a particularly exciting vision worthy of further exploration across the Foundation Years in the future.

Steve Munby, Chief Executive Officer, National College for School Leadership

Glossary

Term	Definition
children's centre	See Sure Start children's centre
children's centre reach area	the designated geographical area served by a children's centre and in which families with a child/children under the age of five live. The reach area is often aligned with ward and parish boundaries, and may or may not be coterminous with local primary school and other service boundaries
cluster model	a group of two or more children's centres collaborating on an informal basis, or more formally as a designated locality cluster
common assessment framework (CAF)	a standardised approach used by practitioners to assess children's additional needs and decide how these should be met www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/integratedworking/caf
core purpose (of Sure Start children's centres)	the improvement of outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged, so children are equipped for life and ready for school, no matter what their background or family circumstances. This is supported by improving parenting aspirations, self-esteem and parenting skills, and child and family health and life chances www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/a00191780/core-purpose-of-sure-start-childrens-centres
distributed leadership	the sharing of leadership responsibilities across an organisation with the aim of developing many leaders, empowered to take on their own areas of responsibility, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of outcomes for the clients served (eg, children, parents and families) www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/leadershiplibrary/leadingschools/developing-leadership-in-your-school/distributed-leadership.htm
Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	a comprehensive statutory framework that sets standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to five. All early years providers are required to use the EYFS to ensure that whatever setting parents choose, they can be confident their child will receive a good-quality experience that supports their child's care, learning and development www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/delivery/education/a0068102/early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs

<p>Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP)</p>	<p>the statutory assessment requirement for children who are reaching the end of the Foundation Stage. Schools and settings with children in the final year of the EYFS must complete the EYFSP assessments and return the final results to the local authority towards the end of the summer term</p> <p>www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/delivery/education/a0068102/early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs</p>
<p>early years teaching centre pilot</p>	<p>a two-year pilot to establish a national network of early years teaching centres run by outstanding children’s centres and nursery schools across the country</p> <p>www.pengreen.org/page.php?article=1726&name=Early+Years+Teaching+Centres</p>
<p>foundation years</p>	<p>the 2011 report on poverty by Frank Field MP, Supporting families in the foundation years, identified the importance of intervening during the period of development from pregnancy up to the age of five to prevent poor children from becoming poor adults. The goal is to ensure that by the age of five children are ready to take full advantage of the next stage of learning and have laid down foundations for good health in adult life</p> <p>www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/early/a00192398/supporting-families-in-the-foundation-years</p>
<p>hub-and-spoke model</p>	<p>an arrangement in which a hub centre has responsibility for co-ordinating services across one or more satellite, or ‘spoke’, children’s centres</p>
<p>National College’s Children’s Centre Leaders Network (CCLN)</p>	<p>a professional learning network for children’s centre leaders providing the opportunity to work with other children’s centre leaders to improve practice, share experience and develop expertise</p> <p>www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/professional-development/ccln.htm</p>
<p>National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL)</p>	<p>the first national programme to address the needs of leaders within multi-agency, early years settings, and aimed at leaders of children’s centres delivering integrated services. It gives them the opportunity to collaborate across the community and provide seamless, high-quality services for babies, children and families</p> <p>www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/professional-development/npqicl.htm</p>
<p>Sure Start children’s centres</p>	<p>centres providing integrated services for young children and their families and which bring different support agencies together to offer a range of services to meet the needs of parents, families and children from pregnancy through to Reception in primary school (and in some cases offering family support beyond age five). There are more than 3,600 children’s centres in England</p> <p>www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/delivery/surestart</p>
<p>Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs)</p>	<p>the first 524 SSLPs, established 1999-2003, for families with children up to the age of four living in disadvantaged areas aimed to bring together early education, childcare, health services and family support to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and children</p> <p>www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RR073</p>

<p>system leadership</p>	<p>in this project, refers to leaders working beyond their centres to secure improvements more broadly across the Foundation Years sector</p> <p>www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/leadershiplibrary/leading-early-years/early-years-developing-leadership/early-years-system-leadership.htm</p>
<p>Team Around the Child (TAC)</p>	<p>a multi-disciplinary team of practitioners established on a case-by-case basis to support a child, young person or family and designed to ensure joined-up working, information-sharing and early intervention. For children subject to a CAF process, relevant service practitioners come together in a TAC to assess needs and decide with the child/family a course of action to provide the services needed</p> <p>www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/integratedworking/a0068944/team-around-the-child-tac</p>
<p>targeted services</p>	<p>services for children and families with additional and multiple needs, but which fall below the threshold of specialist or crises support (such as would be required for children in need of immediate care or protection). In 2011, the government introduced a requirement for Sure Start children's centres to target services on families in greatest need of support, although there was a continued acknowledgement of the importance of offering universal access to services</p> <p>www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare/delivery/funding/a0070357/eigfaqs</p>
<p>universal services</p>	<p>services offered to meet the needs of all children, where specialist or targeted support is not required. The government has signalled its support for retaining a 'universal presence in communities, [and by so doing] children's centres will be non-stigmatising places to go to access services'</p> <p>www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmeduc/768/76804.htm</p>

Executive summary

The National College commissioned this project to research the nature of highly effective leadership in children's centres and the development of system leadership. The study included a rapid review of research and policy, case studies of 25 centre leaders identified as 'highly effective'² and practitioner workshops to validate the findings. The project took place between summer 2011 and spring 2012.

The network of children's centres has grown rapidly over the past decade. The Sure Start local programme was announced in 1999 and by 2010 more than 3,600 centres were operating throughout England. The coalition government's decision to remove the ring-fence on funding for Sure Start in 2011 has led to a period of intensive change, including local authorities seeking to rationalise their expenditure on children's centres and to increasingly outsource responsibility for running centres to other providers.

New models for children's centres

New models of children's centre organisation are developing in response to the current policy environment, including changes in the funding of children's centres. The most common of these new models are:

- a cluster of children's centres working together on strategic goals
- a cluster model with a locality manager who is directly responsible to the local authority
- a hub-and-spoke model, whereby the leader of a hub centre is responsible for the work of satellite or 'spoke' centres

Other dimensions of centre organisation of increasing significance are:

- centres working as part of other organisations, commonly schools, but also 0-19 services or combined centres for children and families
- individual centres with charitable status, or operating as social enterprises
- increasing involvement of regional and national chains operating centres across more than one local authority

What are the main challenges for children's centre leaders?

Leading a children's centre is an inherently complex and difficult task, given the breadth of the remit and the need to work effectively with partners in other services to improve outcomes for children and families. The recent period of change has intensified the challenges, producing a loss of experienced leaders and resulting in a period of uncertainty for leaders and staff. The key challenges are:

- leading in a time of intense change
- maintaining high-quality services in the face of uncertainty and funding cuts
- maintaining staff morale and motivation
- keeping an appropriate balance between universal and targeted services
- dealing with increasing numbers of vulnerable families, combined with fewer sources of support
- managing limitations in the understanding by other agencies of the contribution made by children's centres, combined with a perceived low status of early years' professionals

2 including five case studies of 'good' leadership

-
- tackling barriers to effective data-sharing between partner agencies

How were highly effective leaders addressing these challenges?

The most effective centre leaders are change managers. They see change as an opportunity to be proactive and solutions-focused, taking the opportunity to reshape today's world to create solutions for tomorrow. They also have a high degree of **emotional intelligence**, demonstrated through resilience, optimism, motivation, intuition, and the ability to form strong relationships and work in partnership to make a difference for children and families.

Core behaviours of highly effective leaders

The research identified eight core behaviours displayed by highly effective children's centre leaders. These are:

1. having a clear vision to improve outcomes for children and families
2. engaging responsively with families
3. using evidence to drive improvements in outcomes
4. using business skills strategically
5. facilitating open communication
6. embracing integrated working
7. motivating and empowering staff
8. being committed to their own learning and development

Each of these behaviours is underpinned by a set of key knowledge, skills and attributes, including change management, distributed leadership and emotional intelligence. Highly effective leaders understand their role in setting the vision and culture, which they pursue in partnership with staff, other service providers, parents and other stakeholders.

Core behaviours of system leaders

System leadership is about leading across the foundation years to develop a self-improving system. It involves driving improvement and challenging each other with rigour. The research identified three main ways in which system leadership can operate: centre-to-centre, across other foundation years' settings and in leading service development.

The research identified seven core behaviours of system leadership:

1. investing in the bigger picture
2. focusing on achieving best outcomes for children and families across the foundation years
3. using key knowledge and evidence across the system
4. creating partnerships serving children and families across the system
5. leading and constructing collaboratively across the system
6. building system leadership capacity
7. improving practice and tackling underperformance across the system

These behaviours are built on effective leadership within children's centres, but require leaders to act strategically to improve outcomes for children and families beyond their own centre's reach area.

The research found that the concept of system leadership was not well understood by centre leaders. Nevertheless, the case studies showed that leaders were taking on aspects of system leadership, and were interested in expanding their role (for example, through the early years teaching centre initiative pilot (Pen Green 2011)). One of the underpinning abilities demonstrated by centre leaders involved in system leadership is an investment in horizon-scanning, combined with a strong grasp of the situation on the ground and an ability to operate in a politically astute manner.

Implications for NPQICL

The research team asked children's centre leaders and staff for their views on the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL). This found overwhelming support both for the qualification and the intention to develop a modular course. Centre leaders were concerned that the course might be shortened in future, and wanted to retain opportunities for reflection and professional exchange. They wanted any revised NPQICL to be aimed at postgraduate level, but argued for more routes into and onwards from NPQICL.

Future challenges and solutions

Future challenges included:

- remaining positive in a time of continuing change
- improving the status of staff working in children's centres
- ensuring positive impact and improved outcomes
- addressing the barriers to system leadership
- making difficult decisions in a time of scarce resources
- developing future leaders

Centre leaders were concerned about the challenges of leading across split sites (eg, in hub-and-spoke models) and did not want to lose touch with the communities and families they serve. They also pointed out that many of the current leaders are approaching retirement, and were concerned about the supply of future leaders.

Key messages for policy and practice

The report contains detailed recommendations for policy and practice. These can be summarised as follows.

- National policymakers need to recognise the key contribution of children's centre leaders to our society. They need to do more to encourage joined-up policy development and joint working across education, health, employment, housing and social care.
- There is a role for national government in providing support and information to children's centre leaders, for example through clear and timely information, the Children's Centre Leaders Network (CCLN), and the early years teaching centre initiative pilot.
- There is a need to secure the future pipeline of highly skilled and well-prepared centre leaders of the future.
- NPQICL should be retained at Master's level, with clear progression routes into and beyond this qualification.
- National and local policymakers should recognise the implications of new models of children's centre organisation, and ensure that centre leaders have adequate access to support. The concept of system leadership has potential benefits for the sector, but needs further explanation and development.

-
- Children’s centre leaders should make the most of existing links to support one another. Highly effective leaders have a wealth of experience and skills which could be better utilised to develop new leaders and address underperformance both within their own settings and across the foundation years.

About this research

Context

Children's centres and their leaders play a significant role in supporting children and their families in the foundation years, for example by delivering early intervention approaches and joining up services to meet family and community needs. However, the sector is relatively new and there has been little research on the elements that constitute highly effective leadership in Sure Start settings. Whilst leadership and multi-agency working have been researched more broadly within children's services (eg, Anning et al, 2006; Martin et al, 2009), leadership was not a specific theme within the national evaluation of Sure Start (Melhuish & Belsky, 2010) or of Sure Start local programmes (Anning et al, 2007).

Aims

The main aim of this project was to research the nature of highly effective leadership in children's centres (theme 1) and the development of system leadership among children's centre leaders (theme 2). Although leadership and management are closely related, the research focused on leadership (ie, those ways of being and ways of acting as a leader in relation to context and people), as opposed to management (ie, managerial oversight of responsibilities and duties). The research explored three main questions for each theme, as well as some additional overarching questions:

Theme 1 research questions

- What are the main **challenges** facing children's centre leaders?
- What **leadership behaviours** are effective in addressing these challenges?
- What are the **underpinning knowledge, skills and attributes** required of children's centre leaders?

Theme 2 research questions

- What **practical issues and barriers** are there to developing system leadership in the foundation years' sector?
- What **leadership behaviours** are effective in addressing these challenges?
- What are the **underpinning knowledge, skills and attributes** required of system leaders in the foundation years?

Overarching research questions

- What are the **existing and emerging models** of Sure Start children's centres, and what are the implications of these for leadership? Are there existing or new **leadership concepts or models** that children's centre leaders find useful in helping them to conceptualise and be effective in their roles?
- What **leadership skills** might be needed in the **future**? What are the **implications for the professional development** of children's centre leaders and their workforce?
- What are the **implications** for the formulation of **policy targeted at promoting system leadership** in the foundation years?

Research design and methods

The project had four strands:

- Strand 1: a desk study of published and semi-published literature involving a rapid review of UK policy documents and research evidence (2003–11), using systematic searches of relevant databases and internet websites and gateways, and recommendations from the National College
- Strand 2: a call for evidence via NFER's network of links with local authorities asking them to contribute relevant documentation on models of leadership in children's centres
- Strand 3: 25 case studies across a range of children's centre settings, 5 focused on highly effective³ leadership in single-centre settings, 5 on good leadership in single-centre settings, and 15 on system leadership and new/emerging models. Each case study involved interviews with local authority staff, children's centre leaders, children's centre staff, staff from other agencies and parents
- Strand 4: practitioner workshops at the British Early Childhood Educational Research Association (BECERA) conference and three regional workshops with the CCLN to validate findings and develop recommendations

Appendix 1 outlines further the review strategy employed in strand 1. Appendix 2 provides information on the sample selection for the case studies, and a breakdown of interviewees. Please note that interviewees in all three types of case study were asked about effective leadership. However, only interviewees in the 15 case studies of system leadership and new models of organisation were asked about system leadership.

About this report

This is the final report for this project. In producing this report we have drawn on the model presented in Canwell et al's (2011) report for the National College on resourceful leadership relating to directors of children's services (DCSs). We found their model of tabular presentation of leadership behaviours both useful and accessible, and with guidance from the National College have adopted this form of presentation in our report.

This report presents sections on:

- the challenge of leading children's centres in a context of change (chapter 2), exploring the changing environment for children's centre leaders including new organisational models
- highly effective leadership in children's centres (chapter 3), exploring the eight core behaviours of highly effective centre leadership
- system leadership (chapter 4), discussing the seven core behaviours for system leadership within the foundation years' sector
- the future (chapter 5), outlining the leadership concepts and models used by centre leaders, views on developing NPQICL, current leadership challenges and solutions, and the leadership skills needed in the future
- conclusions and recommendations (chapter 6) for national policymakers, local authorities and children's centre leaders

3 These categories of 'highly effective' and 'good' were based largely on Ofsted inspection reports, coupled with other information, where relevant. Please see Appendix 2 for further details.

The challenge of leading children's centres in a context of change

Leading a children's centre is an inherently complex and difficult task. The remit includes serving the needs of children and families, working collaboratively with a range of services and dealing with a range of stakeholder groups (including the local authority, advisory boards, governing bodies and parents). Ever since the first Sure Start children's centres were established, children's centre leaders have been working in a context of rapid and multiple change. As our children's centre leaders said, 'Keeping on top of change is key', and 'A challenge is trying to predict those changes and how to prepare your team for that change'.

The first areas to get Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs) were announced in 1999. SSLPs had the aim of ameliorating the impact of poverty. By 2004, there were 524 SSLPs working with families with children aged 0–4 in the 20 per cent most deprived communities. In 2005 SSLPs were developed further by turning them into children's centres and the programme was rolled out nationally to ensure that comprehensive early education and family support services were available in every community (see Melhuish et al, 2010 for further details). By the end of 2010 there were more than 3,600 children's centres in England. The roll-out of children's centres has been in three phases with phases 1 and 2 (April 2003–March 2008) serving families primarily in the 30 per cent most disadvantaged areas and phase 3 (April 2008–March 2010) mostly situated outside the most disadvantaged areas to complete universal coverage.

Although the establishment of children's centres developed rapidly between 1998 and 2010, the removal of ring-fencing from the Sure Start grant in spring 2011 and the introduction of funding through the Early Intervention Grant (EIG) has led a period of intensive change, with many local authorities rationalising their children's centres and considering outsourcing their children's centre management to other providers. Some of the local authority staff and children's centre leaders we interviewed identified the key challenge in restructuring as the high turnover of children's centre leaders, which in turn required more effort to be given to developing and supporting new leaders, and maintaining staff morale. As a centre leader said:

It's trying to keep staff motivated and on track... so that they're not thinking 'Why are we here if we're going to be made redundant?' It's about reinforcing that we are here for the children and families as long as we can be.

Children's centre leaders are being called on to work beyond their centres in order to secure improvements more broadly across the sector. There is an expectation that high-performing centres with outstanding leadership will be the catalyst for raising the standards of other centres. This in turn will provide the momentum towards a self-improving system in the foundation years. For the centre leaders we interviewed, the key challenge to achieving such system-wide improvement was sharing and leading best practice where there are limited benchmarks, and where there may be competing priorities, time and pressure to focus on your own centre or setting.

Children's centre leaders are operating in a tough financial climate in which there are high expectations of children's centre services, increasing levels of need, but lower levels of public funding. In managing this multifaceted environment there is a particular challenge in striking the right balance between universal and targeted services (see Lord et al, 2011). On the one hand there is the policy drive to ensure the work of children's centres focuses on acute need and the most vulnerable families. On the other, leaders have expressed the view that identifying categories such as young parents, black and minority ethnic (BME) groups or children with disabilities does not always address the most pressing needs. As a centre leader explained:

The government wants children's centres to move towards more targeted support, and while I agree with that, I think we should continue with universal services because I don't think we are in a position to say which group requires services more. People think that if you are a lone or teenage parent you need support. But there are lots of teenage parents that are coping very well and are quite capable of bringing their child up, whereas you might get a

professional middle-class person who has a baby and does need support. So we need to have the flexibility to decide who that targeted audience is.

There is also a widely held concern that a reduction in universal provision may, ironically, undermine targeted provision, because acute need may only be identified when parents begin to build a relationship with a centre through attending its universal offer. Centre leaders are concerned that families most in need may not wish to attend a children's centre that focuses more narrowly on the most needy for fear of being stigmatised as a problem family.

In addition, the centre leaders we spoke to find that they are increasingly working with vulnerable families who do not quite meet thresholds for specialist or social services support. In so doing, centre leaders need to work even more effectively with many partner agencies. But as one leader said: 'Multi-agency working with a shared vision is a big challenge'. For centre leaders, part of this challenge is in the practicalities of data- and information-sharing, but it also relates to the perceived low status and lack of understanding of the contribution made by children's centres to achieving outcomes for children and families among other professional groups.

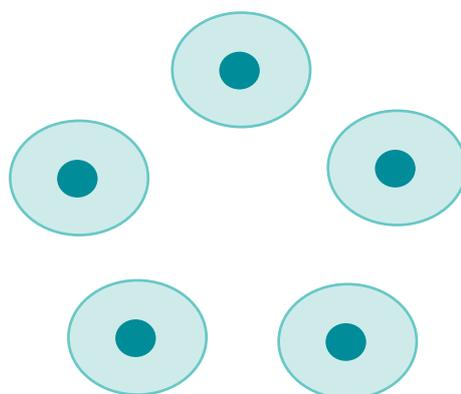
(For more information on challenges and solutions, please see chapter 5.)

New models for children's centres

The concept of a children's centre is less well established than that of a traditional school, and therefore what constitutes a new model is more difficult to define. Nevertheless, in the autumn of 2011, the NFER research team sent out a request for information via the Education Management Information Exchange (EMIE) service to all English local authorities. We invited local authorities to let us know of any organisational changes affecting children's centres in their areas. We received replies from 10 local authority representatives, who agreed to take part in a short interview and send relevant documents. This, together with the case study interviews and user workshops, identified two main new models of organisation: clusters and hub-and-spoke arrangements.

Cluster model

In this model, a group of two or more children's centres collaborate. This may be on an informal basis, or more formally as a designated locality cluster. Local authorities may have explicit expectations for the work of locality clusters, including agreements for the clusters to work on specific strategic goals and liaise with local authority area representatives.

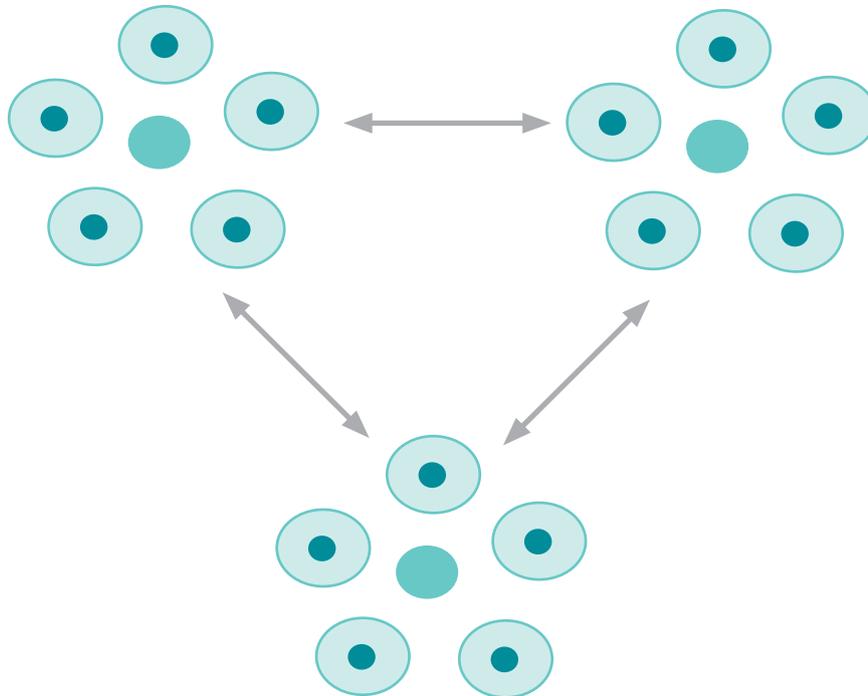


This model has the following features:

- Children's centres are usually located in the same geographical area.
- Centres each have their own centre leaders but leaders (and other staff) agree to collaborate on specific areas of work, or one centre may lead a specific piece of work which is then shared across the cluster.

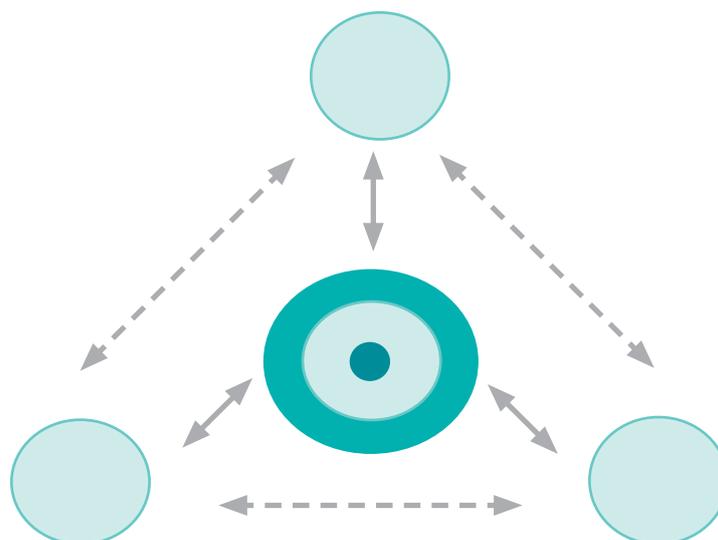
Cluster model with locality managers

Some local authorities have an additional locality or cluster manager who is responsible to the local authority for a cluster of children's centres.



The arrows indicate a situation in which locality or cluster managers collaborate with each other as well as being responsible to the local authority for the work of their own cluster.

Hub-and-spoke model



In this arrangement, a hub centre has responsibility for co-ordinating services across one or more satellite or 'spoke' children's centres.

This has the following features:

- Hub centres have their own leaders, and spokes may or may not be led by an individual centre manager (or deputy).
- The hub may provide core services (eg, extended services, health visiting, job-seeking services) that are not available in spoke centres.

This model was being implemented in a number of case study authorities, whereby formerly independent centres (each with their own leaders) were being reorganised into groups, with one centre being designated a hub, and leader posts being made redundant in spoke centres.

Other models of children's centre organisation include those where **the children's centre is part of another organisation**. Two common arrangements are school-governed models (particularly where there is co-location of a children's centre on a school site) and children's centres that are part of a service for children and young people aged 0–19, or a combined centre for children and families (see also Mongon et al, 2009; SQW Limited, 2006).

In terms of governance, some children's centres have adopted mutual or co-operative models (including charitable status and social enterprises) that have the potential to involve the community to a greater extent and generate income to support sustainability. There are also a number of regional and national chains, including charities and social enterprises, which are responsible for operating children's centres across more than one local authority area. The involvement of chains appears to be expanding as local authorities increasingly seek to outsource services.

For this research, new models of children's centres are taken to be those that are part of a formal partnership across more than one setting, for instance through chains, clusters and hub-and-spoke models. From this perspective, the formal governance arrangements (local authority driven or commissioned) are viewed as being of secondary importance.

Early years teaching centres

Another development of interest is that of the early years teaching centre initiative pilot. The Pen Green Research, Development and Training Base and Leadership Centre is running a two-year pilot project to establish a national network of early years teaching centres run by outstanding children's centres and nursery schools across the country. The pilot aims to develop and promote different ways in which outstanding centres can train and support staff in other local early years settings, thereby fulfilling some of the key elements of system leadership. A total of 16 organisations (both individual settings and consortia) are involved in the pilot phase.

Models in our case studies

The research investigated the implications of these kinds of changes on centre leaders and deliberately sought to include some examples of new organisational models within our 25 case studies. We have particularly explored these within the case studies of hub-and-spoke and cluster models. Also, some of the single-setting case studies in our sample were in the process of adopting new models and structures. We included three of the pilot early years teaching centres in our sample.

Concluding comments

This chapter has outlined the main challenges facing children's centre leaders in the current context of change. To sum up, these challenges are:

- leading in a time of intense change
- maintaining high-quality services in the face of uncertainty and funding cuts
- keeping an appropriate balance between universal and targeted services

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- maintaining staff morale and motivation
 - managing limitations in the understanding by other agencies of the contribution made by children's centres
 - tackling barriers to effective data-sharing between partner agencies

The issues outlined above were reinforced by our case study interviewees. The following chapters (3 and 4) detail the leadership behaviours that help to overcome these barriers and ensure children's centre leaders are highly effective in their roles, both in their own setting's reach area (chapter 3) and beyond (chapter 4).

Highly effective leadership in children's centres

This chapter focuses on the behaviours of highly effective leaders. From a review of 55 pieces of literature (most of which originated in England or the UK), we identified core behaviours relating to effective leadership in children's centres. We explored these in discussion with case study participants and during workshops with users. This process enabled the team to check the relevance of these behaviours, and add to and refine the draft behaviours.

The research identified eight core behaviours. They are all dynamic behaviours, responsive to context and exemplifying 'ways of being' as well as 'ways of acting'. Interviewees corroborated these characteristics and provided examples of effective leadership behaviours.

In addition to the eight core behaviours, all the centre leaders we interviewed were involved in managing change in a fast-moving and somewhat unknown landscape. Indeed, the most effective centre leaders of all were **change managers**; being proactive and solutions-focused, actively managing change, taking the opportunity to reshape today's world to create solutions for tomorrow. They also had a high degree of **emotional intelligence**, demonstrated through resilience, optimism, motivation, intuition, and the ability to form strong relationships and work in partnership⁴ to make a difference for children and families.

Eight core behaviours of highly effective leadership

The eight core behaviours displayed by highly effective children's centre leaders are:

- having a clear vision to improve outcomes for children and families
- engaging responsively with families
- using evidence to drive improvements in outcomes
- using business skills strategically
- facilitating open communication
- embracing integrated working
- motivating and empowering staff
- being committed to their own learning and development

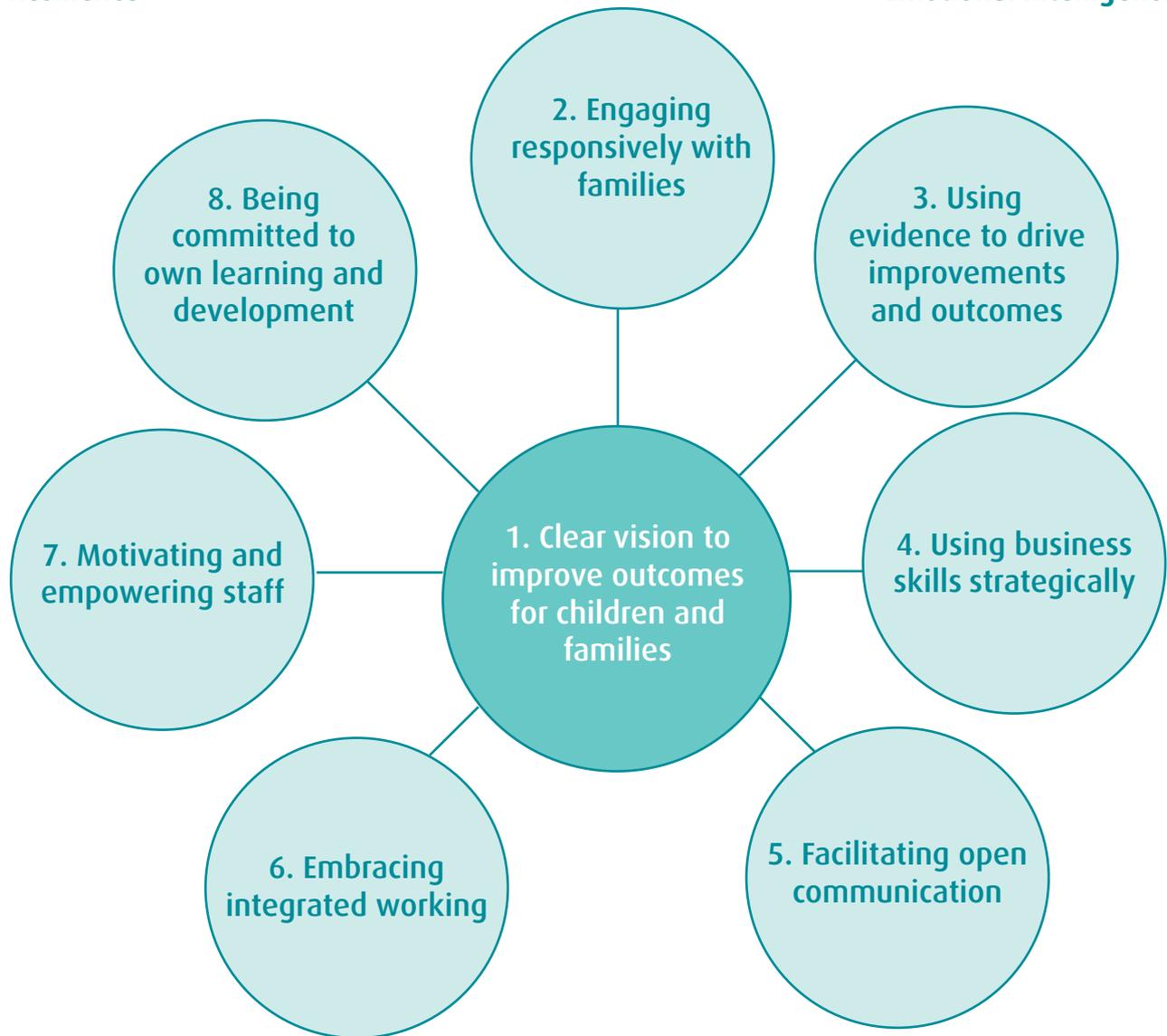
These behaviours are also shown in Figure 1 and explained in more detail below. We have provided a statement to encapsulate the behaviour, together with an explanation of its associated knowledge, skills and attributes.

⁴ Hargreaves (2010) identified the importance of 'partnership competence' in school leaders.

Figure 1: Core behaviours of highly effective centre leadership

Resilience

Emotional intelligence



Partnership competence

Change management

1. Having a clear vision to improve outcomes for children and families

As a highly effective leader I have a clear vision for this setting, which is related to the core purpose of children's centres and communicated to all who come into contact with the centre.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
Knows about policy imperatives	Communicates clearly and directly	Strong commitment to moral purpose
Has safeguarding knowledge and skills	Instils this child-centred vision in others	Principled, innovative and strategic
Knows about child development	Inspires support for child-centred vision from all staff	Positive, can-do attitude
Understands what families need to be successful	Leads and accepts challenge	Focused and self-assured

According to the Department for Education (DfE, 2011a), the core purpose of children's centres is to improve outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness.

This is supported by improved:

- parenting aspirations, self-esteem and parenting skills
- child and family health and life chances

Highly effective children's centre leaders have a clear vision for their setting linked to the core purpose, interpreted in relation to local needs. They are able to convey this inspiringly to all staff, and to others who come into contact with the centre, in order to **help drive direction and progress**.

Highly effective leaders are forward thinking in their vision, and proactive in tackling issues that stand in the way. They strongly believe in what they are trying to achieve and this is demonstrated in their behaviour and shared among staff and partners. This is supported by previous research studies which have identified vision and a proactive drive as key to leadership (see Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006; Canwell et al, 2011) together with the courage to 'challenge the comfortable' (Orr, 2011).

Highly effective leaders are **child- and family-focused** in their decision-making. For example, one children's centre leader demonstrated her vision by prioritising the children and families in the bottom 10 per cent of deprivation in the centre's reach area. Described by a colleague as having 'positive outcomes for children and families very strongly at the top of her agenda', this leader then ensured that all staff focused on reaching these children and families and knew which of them were receiving support from the centre.

Having a **shared vision** is important. One centre leader had taken responsibility for leading a cluster earlier in the year. Since her appointment, engagement figures have increased every month. She explained that she had achieved this by:

... everyone buying into that shared vision and understanding what their own remit is within that... being very clear and focused and taking ownership of what their role is. Once you've all bought into a shared vision, people do take responsibility, they'll take risks, they'll be creative with reaching those outcomes for families and children.

Some had found achieving a co-constructed vision more challenging, especially where teams are located across a number of sites, or where integrated working with other agencies is still developing. One centre leader, who is the integrated support leader for six children's centres in her locality, as well as leader of her own setting, described how she had worked to achieve a shared vision with others. Her strategy is for each children's centre in the cluster to provide similar core services, but to develop its own character to meet the needs of the community. She wrote a draft vision statement, which she invited her team and partner agencies to develop. A community midwife explained how the leader had involved her from the beginning:

The centre leader showed vision in seeing the importance of involving midwives early in the development of centres, because the midwife is an anchor in finding out where a problem may lie in a family.

A health visitor identified the leader's vision for children as evident in the 'colourful, playful, musical environment created for children'.

In children's centre C (part of a family centre with a nursery) the following mission statement is printed on the back of all staff badges:

The mission of our children and family centre is to promote the children's educational and social development and help families have and achieve high expectations for themselves and the community.

For Naomi⁵, the centre leader, this means that the vision belongs to all staff and is a way of ensuring that 'everything we do is linked to the children and families we work with'. For another member of the leadership team, the printed badges mean that the child-centeredness of the vision is foremost, so that Naomi can take her staff team and set forward to make a difference for children. A parent said: 'It's for the parents as well; the vision is child- and family/parent-centred'. Everyone we spoke to described how Naomi and her team were dynamic in taking this vision forward, as the deputy head of the centre's nursery explained: '[Naomi] has a very wide-angled lens; she captures everything going on, and her vision is to drive and develop change for the better'.

⁵ This is not her real name. We have used pseudonyms for centre leaders and other people named in this report in order to preserve their anonymity. We have identified centres by letter codes.

2. Engaging responsively with families

As a highly effective children's centre leader, I am accessible to families, respond to their needs and work with parents as partners.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Understands the impact of parental engagement on child outcomes</p> <p>Understands how to motivate and support parents</p> <p>Knows how to engage with the neediest families</p> <p>Understands case management</p> <p>Understands different cultural backgrounds</p> <p>Understands the reasons why some families don't engage</p> <p>Understands that the needs of families can change</p>	<p>Communicates well with parents</p> <p>Explains difficult situations to parents</p> <p>Encourages parents to help themselves and their children</p> <p>Responds to differing needs</p> <p>Is able to target interventions appropriately</p> <p>Has safeguarding knowledge and skills</p> <p>Has strategies for engaging those in greatest need of support</p>	<p>Values parents as partners</p> <p>'Mucks in' with frontline work</p> <p>Is flexible to changing needs</p> <p>Enables parents to feed back in a variety of ways</p> <p>Is committed to finding funding to support families' needs</p> <p>Is friendly and approachable</p>

Effective children's centre leaders recognise the importance of engaging with families and being **responsive to their needs** in terms of 'meeting them where they are at'. The most highly effective leaders also work to 'move them on' to achieve better outcomes through highly sensitive, supportive, non-judgemental and step-by-step approaches. Highly effective leaders also understand families' changing needs, and make sure that their service design and delivery are flexible enough to meet those needs (see also National College, 2010; Ofsted, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006).

It is important for centre leaders to be **visible to families** (which is a particular challenge for leaders of more than one centre). Leaders demonstrate this by engaging in the delivery of frontline activities (for example, by accompanying staff on home visits) and greeting parents upon arrival at the centre. This hands-on approach helps parents feel that the leader is approachable and provides role-modelling for staff. For leaders themselves, this frontline engagement provides a valuable reality check, as one children's centre leader explained:

For an effective leader, you've got to keep in touch with the ground level, with what's going on. I think it's really easy as a leader to move away from reality. You can move to a strategic level and you can focus on that, but you [mustn't] forget the grassroots.

Highly effective leaders have a high degree of **knowledge**, not only of **child development** and early intervention approaches, but also about **issues affecting parents and families** (eg, drug and alcohol misuse, mental health issues, domestic violence, unemployment and safeguarding children). They also have extensive knowledge of the other services and support available to families. Stories from individual parents reveal how centre leaders' belief in parents gives them confidence to make choices and brings about positive change. In one example, a parent who was suffering from postnatal depression when she first came to the children's centre was encouraged to share experiences with other parents. She said: 'I had no confidence whatsoever when I came here two years ago. But [the staff] have such a belief in you. They believed in me more than I believed in myself'.

Serena came to England from Kenya five years ago. She had limited English and she did not feel confident going to children’s centre K. She made excuses that she couldn’t attend language classes because she had her children to look after, even though the centre had a crèche. However, she found the centre leader and senior staff ‘very encouraging, you become like part of the team’. She says the centre has boosted her confidence. She attended a parenting course, and learned a lot to help her understand children’s needs. She is now a member of the children’s centre advisory group:

The most important thing is that [the leader] is friendly and happy with people. She appreciates you and gives you time when you need it. It’s true of all the staff, whenever you need them. If you ask to speak to [senior staff members] then they will make time. They’re well organised. They know what parents want and are able to provide services.

Ensuring parents are **actively involved and valued as partners** is a considerable challenge. Many centres have parent forums but these may not attract the families most in need. One staff worker explained how staff in her centre decided to relaunch their parent forum because they found that parents attending the centre were ‘not representative of the local population’. This had been successful, as the parent Serena told us: ‘I attended a few children’s centres before. Every centre had divided groups [of parents]. But since the first day here I didn’t see that. That’s why I’m here to this day’. There is also the challenge of tempering parents’ views with what it is possible to provide. Sometimes the leadership team needs to feed back and negotiate with parents, to plan work that offers progression for parents and children.

Centres gave examples of how they enabled **parents to feed back in various ways** so that all parents have an opportunity to comment (see also Klavins, 2008). Examples included inviting oral comments, using feedback sheets and parent forums. One centre leader provided parents with a platform to challenge and hold the centre to account through various groups including parent forums, parent-led groups, the local advisory group and outcomes groups. As another leader said:

I don’t believe anyone can lead a service of this nature without knowing who the parents are, what their issues are, spending time with them in group activity, and forums – in formal and informal ways.

Several leaders gave examples of how parents were involved in running services. In one centre, 70 per cent of the workforce is made up of staff who started as **parent volunteers**. The centre leader worked with parents to develop a support package to train parents to Levels 2 and 3 in early years work. The centre provided staff mentors, and the leader helped parents to learn job-interview techniques. In effect, the children’s centre grew its own staff, including its part-time receptionist and four parents who have now qualified with EYFS degrees. As the leader said, ‘I do think engaging with parents is really important. This is their children’s centre and they should feel ownership of it’.

3. Using evidence to drive improvements in outcomes

As a highly effective leader I use a range of evidence to continually drive results and service improvements.

Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Understands data-handling</p> <p>Understands evaluation techniques</p> <p>Knows how to use evaluation to improve practice</p>	<p>Is able to interrogate evaluation data</p> <p>Has skills to compare trends over time</p> <p>Uses data critically and analytically</p> <p>Draws on evidence from wider practice</p>	<p>Is committed to using evidence for improvement</p> <p>Focuses on results and outcomes</p>

A relentless focus on achieving results and outcomes for children, rooted in a systematic and strategic use of evidence to drive progress toward these achievements, is a hallmark of a highly effective children's centre leader. As highlighted in the research literature, systematic evaluation and interrogation of data are crucial to developing effective services for children and families (Mongon et al, 2009; Ofsted, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006).

Highly effective leaders understand the need to **use evidence** to ensure the centre **fulfils its core purpose** and **supports families in greatest need**, for example by pinpointing the location of families who are not currently using the centre's services. As one centre leader explained: 'It's about using the data we've got, and looking at the different targeted groups that we need to work with and where to get this data'.

Leaders said that it was important not just to focus on attendance figures, but rather on **what difference are we making, and how do we know?** Highly effective leaders use a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data, and from a wide range of sources including parents, partner organisations and the centre's staff, to explore the difference their centre is making to children and families. They ensure that there are **systems in place to collect evidence**, such as using evaluation forms at the end of classes run by the children's centre. They ensure that local intelligence is gathered by centre staff in the course of their work. A children's centre leader highlighted how she does this in practice: 'I enjoy organising and setting up systems, using guides and prompts to help staff in collecting data'. This centre uses diagrams to record parents' progress as a result of the support they have received, including a target diagram which parents complete each term for every session they attend. Parents plot their level of confidence on the target map where the closer they are to the bull's eye, the more confident they feel.

A key challenge for children's centres is using data gathered later in a child's development to inform the contribution the centre has made to child development and school readiness. One children's centre is developing longitudinal case studies of children who use the centre over a sustained period of time to track the difference the centre makes to their lives as they grow older and start school. A number of our case study sites used results from the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) for this purpose (see page 26).

Centres X and J both use EYFSP results to track the achievement of children who have come through the centres compared with those who had not. In case study X, the primary school headteacher compares the EYFSP levels of children who have accessed the adjoining children's centre with those who have not and shares the data with the children's centre leader. The analysis shows that children from families who have accessed the centre are higher attainers than their peers. Centre staff are now interrogating exactly which activities their children have engaged with and how that relates to their later achievement (for example, do children who have been involved in a book buddies scheme attain higher scores in reading tests at school?).

In case study J, the EYFSP is viewed as a golden thread running through the centre's work. Jan is the leader of a cluster of children's centres, and the setting we visited was co-located with a primary school. She works closely with primary schools to identify the gaps in children's development according to EYFSP data, and explore where her children's centres can help to narrow the gaps. She has introduced a learning and development journal for children in the EYFS in her children's centre. This records how parents and children are responding to support, and is used directly by the children's centre team to inform future support and intervention. One particular area of concern at primary school was handwriting and pencil skills. The children's centre has developed a project on this aimed at improving children's motor skills (eg, helping children to develop a pincer grip) and preparing them for handwriting. Families have been closely involved too. Interestingly, this leader has a background in youth work rather than schools, but this has not hindered her ability to work with local schools.

Highly effective children's centre leaders are interested in **trends over time mapped against national indicators**. They establish a baseline for the centre's past performance and monitor improvements over time (for example, interrogating quarterly reports produced by local authority data officers). A deputy head of a nursery school on the same site as one of the case study children's centres explained that the centre leader's approach includes: using the data to 'understand trends and demands, (eg, "Is it to do with high levels of teenage pregnancy, smoking, domestic violence?") and then using that data to put on targeted services to enhance the life opportunities of the families we serve'. Using national indicators to inform approaches to

different programmes and activities is key.

Highly effective children’s centre leaders develop their centre’s own evidence-base of what **works in practice**. For example, one centre tailored its provision of parenting programmes to offer short, 1-2 hour sessions, rather than a full 12-week programme, based on the evidence of what has worked well in attracting local parents. The National College’s leadership self-evaluation resource is one tool that children’s centre leaders and their leadership teams can use to measure impact, challenge each other and develop action plans to improve performance (National College, 2012). Using this tool may also help to develop other core behaviours such as motivating and empowering staff, and leaders’ commitment to their own learning and development (behaviours 7 and 8 respectively).

Highly effective centre leaders also use the **wider evidence-base of what works** to inform their practice. One leader said she found the recent Allen (2011) review in early intervention instrumental in providing a solid evidence-base for her centre’s work, confirming the relevance of working in an outdoor space or forest school environment for young children.

In addition, highly effective leaders **communicate and explain** the key messages from their data analysis to a range of different interest groups. This includes communicating with parents, partner organisations and Ofsted inspectors to demonstrate progress and achievements, and with staff to provide feedback on successful approaches and motivate them to achieve even better outcomes in the future. One leader explained why she considered using evidence to drive improvement was a key leadership behaviour:

I am appalled to hear [other children’s centre leaders] saying “It’s really difficult to show we’ve made a difference”. Just because it’s difficult, it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try. There’s something fantastic about being able to show you’ve made a difference.

4. Using business skills strategically

As a highly effective leader I apply my business skills strategically to plan and manage the centre’s service delivery and achieve agreed outcomes for the children and families it serves.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Knows how to allocate financial and organisational resources to achieve strategic objectives</p> <p>Understands how to commission services effectively</p>	<p>Supports staff to manage their own budgets</p> <p>Promotes the children’s centre to strategic decision-makers</p> <p>Is able to assess value for money</p>	<p>Adopts an entrepreneurial attitude to service delivery and obtaining resources</p>

Highly effective centre leaders have **business acumen**. Their skills are financial and organisational, and include management knowledge and understanding. Key areas include the ability to manage overall budgets for service delivery, staff, buildings and other facilities, as well as helping staff to control their own budgets.

Highly effective children’s centre leaders understand that they have a duty to **deploy resources** where they will make the most difference for children and families. They apply their business skills to maximise opportunities to obtain further resources for their centre, and **monitor value for money** and decide where to cut back. As one local authority adviser said:

I think centre leaders need to be able to manage a budget. [They need to] understand best value, link inputs to outcomes and be able to support staff. To stay in budget while operating a successful centre is a huge challenge.

This calls for **entrepreneurial behaviours** in order to lead effectively, for example to identify opportunities to deliver services in a different way or to obtain funding through new revenue streams. As one leader explained:

I think you have got to be a bit entrepreneurial in this day and age. You have to see and grasp opportunities... and find alternative and creative ways around funding cuts.

Some leaders (particularly those from centres that are independent or have charitable status) described being 'thrifty' and 'creative' in their bids for alternative sources of funding.

Effective leaders understood the need to **market their services** and promote the work of the children's centre to strategic decision-makers. As one leader explained:

You've got to be a really good salesperson. You've got to market and sell yourself and your product and your belief all of the time. And you've got to market yourself to your seniors, the people who are the strategy makers, the senior managers, and that's what's really difficult.

5. Facilitating open communication

As a highly effective leader, I facilitate open communication and dialogue by, with and between all staff, agencies and the wider community.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
Understands that effective communication is key to helping people work together, and to effective partnership working	<p>Has a range of communication skills and modes to draw on (eg, oral, non-verbal, email, formal, informal)</p> <p>Listens and responds to staff concerns</p> <p>Engages in dialogue with local stakeholders</p> <p>Manages conflict</p>	<p>Values dialogue with staff and stakeholders</p> <p>Respects people with different views and means of expression</p> <p>Has an open-door policy</p>

Highly effective children's centre leaders are excellent communicators. They facilitate **open communication** among staff, agencies and the wider community. This includes communicating with parents (as outlined in behaviour 2 above). In terms of staff, they are accessible to all staff and have an **open-door policy** to enable staff to share any concerns they may have. They hold **regular meetings** with staff and other agencies which they use as a mechanism to share information, keep staff up to date and share good practice. They encourage an open and honest dialogue with partners and other agencies, with a two-way flow of information. Indeed, communication with partners and local stakeholders was particularly highlighted in the literature, so that partners too can communicate about and advocate for the children's centre (see McInnes, 2007; Orr, 2011). One centre leader felt that clear communication was particularly important in periods of uncertainty:

Day-to-day talks and communication are really important in this time of change because staff are nervy and communities are worried about where children's centres are going. It's about having clarity all the time, and keeping people up to date when there's new information.

Indeed, this leader has 'communication' as a standard item on all meeting agendas. This includes discussion of any communication difficulties and how to resolve them. Continuing to achieve regular communication with all parties was highlighted as a particular challenge for centre leaders who lead across a number of settings.

Naomi, the centre leader in case study C, places a strong emphasis on improving communication with staff. The centre had a period without a leader in post, so when Naomi arrived she felt it was important to emphasise communication. Her recent NPQICL assignment focused on this issue. The key reflection points from this assignment were the importance of having staff time together as a team, and having face-to-face, general catch-ups, and the opportunity to share good practice. Staff work in separate offices across a large building, so they value team meetings as an opportunity to come together. Naomi has established an open-door policy to encourage staff to raise key issues, such as how to meet the needs of a particular family, or to seek advice. She uses email to facilitate quick communication among staff. The deputy head in the attached nursery finds Naomi to be a very clear communicator, able to disseminate knowledge and information in a variety of ways including face to face and by email. He appreciates the range of communication strategies and modes she uses, and feels this range of strategies helps to engage the whole team.

As well as the mode of communication, the content and timeliness of communications are crucial. Parents appreciated it when staff responded to their queries either the same day or the next day. As one centre leader explained: 'It is important to communicate the right information to the right people at the right time – otherwise you have got a problem from the word go'. And in one case study the chair of trustees described her centre leader's approach in the following terms:

She has a policy that she will communicate as much as possible, as quickly as possible, so that there is a very healthy atmosphere around the centre. If you have a question then you can ask it and if it can be answered, it will be answered. Also a sense that if people are concerned about things, then she will try and find out as quickly as possible.

6. Embracing integrated working

As a highly effective children's centre leader I champion integrated working with teams from a range of professional backgrounds to deliver a more holistic service to children and families.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
Understands connections between services	Encourages partners to use their professional judgement	Is committed to interagency working
Understands how agencies working together can enhance and enrich their offer to parents and children	Develops a common language and vision	Fosters a no-blame culture, with shared responsibility among agencies
Understands the importance of trust	Is able to collaborate well with others	
	Is able to draw on a range of services flexibly, depending on need	

Proactively championing constructive and inclusive approaches to integrated working with teams from a range of professional backgrounds is a key behaviour of effective children's centre leaders (see Canwell et al, 2011; McInnes, 2007; Mongon et al, 2009). Highly effective leaders understand how the expertise of other services complements that of the centre and understand the professional backgrounds and working environments of other service providers. This is most effective when leaders **build a mutually shared understanding** where all partners appreciate each others' working cultures, the pressures and challenges they face, the priorities they work towards and the terminology they employ. Such genuine partnerships can be difficult to achieve since although children's centre leaders and staff can see the benefits of integrated working for the whole or wider good, they feel that 'other agencies can only see how it can work well when it works for them' – a sentiment noted by a number of children's centre interviewees (both leaders and staff).

Centre leader Jan (case study J) understood that integrated working is more effective when partner agencies can work towards their own aims, so she adopted an approach of asking different agencies **to do things slightly differently** in order to support the work of the children's centre. From the partners' perspective, this approach paid off. A health visitor we interviewed described the children's centre as 'the place that everyone likes to be', an attitude that emanated from centre staff and partners alike. This has the additional benefit that families see partners working together, thus modelling friendship (as she described it) and respect.

Integrated working is hard work, but as one children's centre leader said: 'It's the only way to move forward'. Key skills for integrated working include listening and working together, as a local authority officer (head of early years) said: 'It is about being humble, listening to their priorities, their perspectives, their difficulties and being quick to spot how you can help them'. Other key attributes include building trust between all partners (Coleman, 2011). Highly effective leaders are able to build genuine two-way/multi-way partnerships.

Through dialogue with statutory and community organisations, staff in children's centre H identified a recent and increasing need to support families with adult mental health issues. Sira, the centre leader, explained how a sense of common purpose helped to unite service providers:

All our partners and I think it is important that we have an understanding that we are all providing services for the same families. So we work together as opposed to in isolation.

The local adult mental health services team has agreed to refer their clients with children under five to the children's centre. This leads to a range of support being triggered, including a joint home visit with a member of the mental health team once the initial assessment has been completed, followed by a period of relationship-building with the family, and offering specialist family support work.

For Sira, the children and parents are key:

What we want to do is to engage that family in services and to build that relationship, because sometimes when a family has been diagnosed with mental health issues [the other services] forget that they are also a parent, and we need to focus on building that relationship between the parent and the child together.

Highly effective leaders have overcome challenges in **working well with health partners and schools**, although for many, improvements are still needed here and our interviewees reported particular challenges in working effectively with GP services.

Children's centre J is co-located with a primary school. As part of a strategy to combat anti-social behaviour outside school hours, the centre leader has recently invited Year 6 pupils to come into the children's centre to volunteer. This has developed the relationship between the school and the children's centre.

Highly effective leaders consistently take steps to **establish integrated working practices** and processes, such as the common assessment framework (CAF) or systems for referrals, and are not deterred by the barriers to doing so. Engaging with adult services in the CAF and Team Around the Child (TAC) models can be particularly challenging, and requires recognition of the value of children's centre services to the whole family. Leaders recognise the value of integrated working across a wide range of services which link to children such as those for children aged 0-5, for mums-to-be and for older age groups. A children's centre leader described her centre's connections with other services as follows: 'We've got tangible links here with midwives, CAMHS⁶, and the local children's hospital team on site, so we've got links with external agencies already'. The centre leader reported linking with the YMCA to engage potential young parents, and with local neighbourhood groups to understand what happens in the local community.

6 Children and adolescents mental health service

Such leaders are aware that **regular communication and face-to-face contact** between different teams deepens relationships, enables expertise to be shared, helps to speed up the process of resolving queries and facilitates the direction of families to the services they need. Previous research has also highlighted the value of regular information-sharing (McInnes, 2007; Together for Children, 2010).

One of the strategies highly effective leaders used was to **share resources, space and equipment** (or encourage the co-location of services) to support the delivery of additional sessions and services in the centre, for example by health visitors, midwives or speech and language therapists. A team leader for 0–19 year olds, employed by the local authority, reflected on how this works in practice: ‘When my staff are based in the centre they always feel very well supported – issues are always dealt with quickly and effectively – there is always the right room available for example’. Some children’s centres have purpose-built community rooms and individual consulting rooms, which enables the children’s centre to be a hub for multi-disciplinary service delivery. Children’s centres C and H, for example, have rooms to accommodate the following activities: sensory activities, antenatal checks and health visiting teams working with small groups of children and parents.

At a strategic level, an effective leader liaises with senior managers from different services and, at an operational level, with teams from different services. She or he enables staff from **different services to train and plan together**, finding opportunities such as away days to look at how teams from different services work, shadowing peers in a different service and joint training sessions (see also McInnes, 2007). From the partners’ perspective, joint training is seen as highly effective and innovative practice, as a local adult education provider noted:

We are not just seen as an add-on. [The children’s centre leader] provided two days of training at the centre for all partners in order to help them work more closely together. I thought that was innovative. No other centre has suggested doing such a thing. What we do together is mutually useful.

One leader summed up her attitude to integrated working in the following terms: ‘I call myself an integrated leadership practitioner. I just know that that’s the right way to work.’

7. Motivating and empowering staff

As a highly effective leader I create and sustain an empowered and motivated staff, through collaboration and continuous learning.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Understands the impact of staff motivation on morale and retention</p> <p>Understands that different people have different skills and strengths</p> <p>Understands distributed leadership and its practical application</p>	<p>Demonstrates trust in staff</p> <p>Delegates responsibilities to the team, while keeping a grip on performance</p> <p>Encourages autonomy and creativity</p> <p>Works collaboratively through teamwork</p> <p>Develops leadership skills in others</p> <p>Addresses underperformance</p>	<p>Values staff and recognises their capabilities and capacities</p> <p>Shows belief in staff</p> <p>Is committed to learning and development of others</p> <p>Is able to create and sustain commitment across the whole setting</p> <p>Grants staff freedom, but with effective supervision and support</p>

Highly effective leaders motivate and empower their staff both collectively and individually. They adopt a collaborative and inclusive leadership style, engendering distributed leadership and delegation. Indeed, distributed leadership has been shown to increase morale and self-esteem among children’s centre staff (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006).

Highly effective leaders **identify opportunities for individuals' professional development**, actively encourage staff to undertake training, and recognise the importance of allowing staff to reflect on their practice. They ensure professional development is both tailored to the needs of individual staff members as well as the needs of particular groups of children (Cummings, 2008; Ofsted, 2008; Ofsted, 2009). They are committed to equal opportunities for staff especially in relation to staff development.

One of the challenges that comes with leadership is the need to deal effectively with underperformance. As one centre leader said: 'The whole issue of managing staff teams and tackling underperformance is something people find difficult'.

Highly effective leaders **address underperformance sensitively**, with a no-blame culture, as one leader explained:

People can make mistakes as long as we learn from them. By being open and honest with staff, they'll tell you what's going on, what's upsetting them, and then you can address that in more of a positive way.

That said, highly effective centre leaders do not hesitate to address instances of genuine underperformance head on if required; as a manager of a family centre said: 'Children only get one chance, and they deserve high quality at all times. We need to enable practitioners to do their best at all times'. Highly effective leaders are supportive of all staff practically and emotionally, which is particularly important at a time of economic uncertainty and job insecurity.

From highly effective leaders and their staff, there is a real sense of **celebrating the workforce**; praise and thanks abound. As one leader said: 'It is important to play to people's strengths, and give people opportunities to shine'.

Whilst staff development can be an individual activity, effective leaders recognise the collective power of **shared and cascaded learning**, and particularly of co-constructed learning. Involving all staff at all levels, including administrative staff, in joint training is important. Several of the people we spoke to in one case study commented on their leader's success in encouraging a positive professional culture. As the locality manager said: 'The staff team is very tightly knit; they are empowered to be part of the decision-making and involved closely in putting the programme together'.

One centre uses a guardianship role model in which staff take responsibility for certain areas, including for training each other in these areas. In another centre, the leader has encouraged staff to share their learning through log forms which enable staff to note what they have learned on a course and crucially how they plan to put what they have learned into action and share it with the rest of the team. Every Wednesday afternoon is designated for a whole-staff meeting, with input from staff members on learning and feedback. This helps create a professional learning environment to which all staff can contribute. Highly effective leaders spot **leadership talent in others**, and put in place opportunities for training and work shadowing.

Karen, centre leader E, encourages all staff to think about how their job fits into the overall vision for the children’s centre, and as a result feels she has built capacity for resilience, challenge, new ideas and flexibility among the staff team. She has regular supervisions with her staff, and actively supports their continuing professional development (CPD). She spots leadership talent, and has a number of staff on Level 3 management courses ‘because I can see their skills and the fact that they want to lead’. Centre staff enjoyed being challenged by their leader to tackle new tasks and learn new skills, and thrived on being encourage to do ‘that little bit over and above’ to develop themselves. They were empowered to do so through appropriate delegation, training or shadowing opportunities and by being given time to learn and develop.

One member of staff told us how she had enjoyed tackling a difficult data task. At first she hadn’t known how to approach the work, but had sought advice from another staff member, and they had managed to do it together. She got great satisfaction from this problem-solving approach to her work, which she attributed to Karen’s leadership style:

If there are problems, Karen suggests different ways of tackling them, rather than sorting them out herself. She doesn’t take things off people. She pushes it back to the individual worker, so it’s about empowering us and developing our skills.

An early years specialist teacher for the local authority’s children’s centre services found that Karen promoted people’s strengths, and made sure that all team members were aware that they were the right people to take on specific responsibilities.

Despite the sense of passion and drive for empowering their staff, highly effective leaders keep a good grip on what is going on and do not let themselves be blinded to underperformance. As one staff member put it: ‘They manage from the head and not from the heart’.

8. Being committed to their own learning and development

As a highly effective children’s centre leader I continuously and actively seek out opportunities to further my learning, including learning from others.

Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
Understands child development and adult learning	Is able to adopt reflective, critical practice	Has self-awareness
Understands the principles of professional development	Is able to plan own development and learning	Is committed to continuous learning and development
Understands the principles of collaborative learning	Shares and develops practice with others	Is open to mutual challenge and support
	Learns from others	Is willing to learn from others
		Listens to feedback from others
		Is willing to try new things

Highly effective children’s centre leaders seek out opportunities to **further develop their knowledge and skills** in order to do a better job of serving children and families. They keep abreast of policy developments, and they **link theory with practice**. Many of our case study children’s centre leaders were undertaking or had achieved NPQICL, and some were working on Early Years foundation degrees or towards Master’s qualifications.

Highly effective leaders adopt reflective practice themselves, and encourage reflection in others. As an early years specialist teacher told us, the children’s centre leader is ‘very good at facilitating critical practice and asking appropriate questions as a critical friend’ and that reflective practice is ‘very much more part of training now’. In addition, self-knowledge was important – knowing yourself, and reflecting on your own learning and leadership styles (using tools such as the Myers-Briggs personality test and Belbin’s role

descriptors). Self-awareness is also highlighted as important in the research literature (McInnes, 2007). From our case studies, we found that leaders are able to **identify their own strengths and weaknesses**. Highly effective leaders are open to, listen to and act upon feedback from others. As a deputy head of the nursery in an integrated family centre setting explained:

The children's centre leader is always striving in her own professional development. She comes and asks me, 'What would I do, from an educational perspective?' She will then carry that forward to her practice and her staff, saying 'The nursery would like to work in this way, how can we in the children's centre support that?'

For some leaders, development was also about developing into new roles themselves. One children's centre leader has joined the senior leadership team (SLT) at the adjoining school. As the school headteacher explained, the centre leader is drawing on work she has done on NPQICL to support the school's work and vision.

Interestingly, children's centre leaders seem to have a tendency to put themselves last, and a number of leaders we spoke to felt that their own development was, naturally, last on the list. There is clearly a need to balance the leader's own professional development with that of their staff.

3.2 Concluding comments

This section has presented eight core behaviours of highly effective leadership in children's centres. Highly effective leaders demonstrate varying degrees of all of them, but they are also responsive to changing situations and contexts. The most effective leaders are entrepreneurial, innovative, motivational and dynamic, not only as individuals, but as leaders integrated with numerous partners: staff, agencies, communities, and above all families and children. As new organisational models for children's centres emerge, highly effective leaders are also starting to adopt aspects of system leadership, as explained in chapter 4.

System leadership

For children's centre leaders, system leadership is about leading across the foundation years⁷ to develop a self-improving system. It involves driving improvement and challenging each other with rigour.

The concept of system leadership was initially developed in the school sector to advance the vision of a self-improving school system. It can be argued that there is a need to promote self-improvement within the foundation years, and that highly effective children's centre leaders are well placed to fulfil the role of system leaders.

In 2010 David Hargreaves described how system leadership could drive a self-improving school system:

Increased decentralisation provides an opportunity for a new vision of school improvement that capitalises on the gains made in school leadership and in partnerships between schools. It would usher in a new era in which the school system becomes the major agent of its own improvement and does so at a rate and to a depth that has hitherto been no more than an aspiration.

Hargreaves, 2010:4

We were interested in the implications for children's centre leaders of substituting 'children's centre' or 'foundation years' for 'school' in the above quote.

Our thinking has been influenced by system leadership models built by researchers in the field of school and educational leadership, including: Hargreaves' (2010) four-layered model for a self-improving system (ie structure, localism, co-construction and system leaders); Fullan's (2004a; 2004b) emphasis on lateral and vertical capacity-building; Hopkins' (2008) three domains of action (namely, managing teaching and learning, developing people, and developing organisations). O'Leary and Craig's (2007) report *Lessons from the System Leadership Literature* seems particularly applicable to the foundation years' sector, as the authors highlight the importance of responding to multiple perspectives and taking a solutions-focused approach.

Yet it is relatively early in the development of children's centres to be thinking about system leadership and the notion of a foundation years' system is not well understood. From our discussions with children's centre leaders and local authority staff, it seems that some children's centre leaders are keen to address a remit wider than that of a single centre, its partner services and the families in its reach area, but identifying exactly which foundation years' settings and services are part of this wider vision is more difficult to define.

We began by seeing system leadership in terms of leaders working beyond their centres to secure improvements more broadly across the sector. Within this overarching perspective we were able to identify three main ways in which system leadership can operate: centre-to-centre, across other foundation years' settings⁸, and leading service development to improve outcomes for children and families.

1. Centre-to-centre leadership involves leaders working across centres to share and jointly develop good practice. This also involves centre leaders addressing underperformance and supporting each other to raise standards through, for example, mentoring and coaching. It is not to be confused, however, with centre leaders working collaboratively in a cluster, where each leader brings something to the table and develops a particular topic on behalf of the cluster, although there is a clear continuum between the two.

⁷ We recognise that, while the core work of children's centre leaders focuses on the foundation years, system leadership increasingly takes them into areas that go beyond this age group, as do new forms of service organisation (for example, where a children's centre is part of a 0-19 service).

⁸ This could also include settings for older children and young people, for children's centre leaders working in a 0-19 service and/or with adult services.

-
2. Leadership across foundation years' settings involves leaders working beyond their centres to lead work with other foundation years' settings, such as nurseries, childminders and schools, in order to secure greater coherence of provision across the sector. It is helpful to distinguish this from striving for integrated working in which centre leaders work with a range of partner agencies to ensure partnership approaches to services for children and families provided by the leader's own children's centre. Although leadership across the foundation years may incorporate this as one aspect, this type of integrated working is a core feature of effective centre leadership.
 3. Leading the system means centre leaders drawing on their experience and expertise to influence change in the sector and how services for children and families are shaped and developed. Drawing on their frontline understanding of the needs of children and families, and the extent to which service delivery meets these, centre leaders can powerfully relate this perspective to the bigger picture. They can influence significant policy development, locally and nationally, in for example housing, health, social care and the environment. The way in which centre leaders exercise this kind of system leadership through influence and impact does not necessarily operate solely in the context of a cluster or hub-and-spoke model. Individual leaders in a single setting can effectively contribute to system change in policy and service development, both locally and nationally.

System leaders need to **understand the relationship between centre and system leadership**. A number of centre managers and the staff we spoke to had a limited, and in some cases mistaken, understanding of the concept of system leadership. Some centre leaders and staff saw it in rather vague terms as 'being more strategic' or just as engaging effectively with partner agencies to improve services for their centres. So for instance one centre manager saw system leadership as part of achieving the work of the centre: 'As the family support workers are managed by the local authority, for me to meet our core purpose I need to engage in system leadership with the locality leadership team being managed by the local authority'. This would not necessarily count as system leadership in our terms, unless the engagement with the local authority brought about wider benefits to the system.

While we acknowledge that system leadership builds on the traits of effective children's centre leadership, we hope that the following behaviours will clarify the relationship and distinguish the key contribution of system leadership across the foundation years.

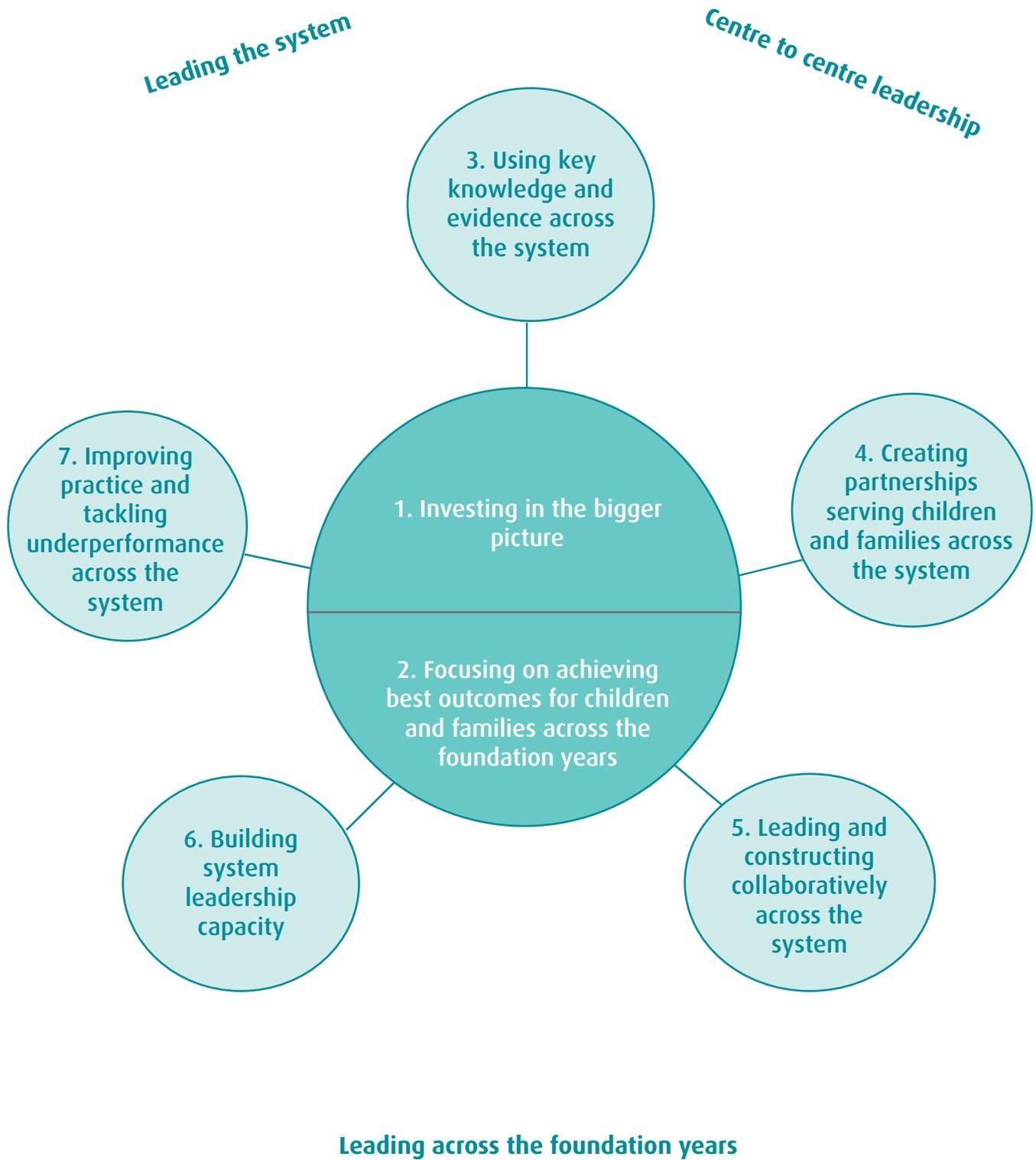
4.1 Seven core behaviours of system leadership

The following core behaviours are based on the literature review and discussions with interviewees on 15 case study sites, together with wider engagement with centre leaders during workshop sessions. The seven behaviours are:

- Investing in the bigger picture
- Focusing on achieving the best outcomes for children and families across the foundation years
- Using key knowledge and evidence across the system
- Creating partnerships serving children and families across the system
- Leading and constructing collaboratively across the system
- Building system leadership capacity
- Improving practice and tackling underperformance across the system

It is important to explain that these behaviours are built on strong leadership within children's centres, but are different in scope and ambition. These behaviours are also shown in Figure 2 and described in the following text.

Figure 2: Core behaviours of system leadership



1. Investing in the bigger picture

As a system leader I invest in the bigger picture and work to secure improvements across the sector.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Knows about what children and families need to be successful</p> <p>Knows about local policy and practice</p> <p>Understands how their centre fits within and contributes to the wider system</p> <p>Has an up-to-date knowledge of current drivers and developments in children's centres and across the foundation years</p>	<p>Offers robust challenge and appropriate support and makes changes when current approaches are not working</p> <p>Has facilitation skills which set people's work within the wider context</p> <p>Has collaboration and negotiation skills</p> <p>Has networking skills</p>	<p>Has a sense of moral purpose and mission</p> <p>Demonstrates passion and energy</p> <p>Has integrity and authenticity</p> <p>Builds trust and is a driver for change</p> <p>Possesses optimism and courage</p> <p>Is open and outward-looking</p>

The challenge for centre leaders is to embrace the aspiration of system leadership and a self-improving sector whilst maintaining the quality of their own centre's services. This requires leaders who invest in the bigger picture of securing best outcomes for families and children more generally, not just those in their centre's own reach area.

Demonstrating a commitment to an overarching intent, or **moral purpose**, is vital leadership behaviour in the foundation years. The research showed clear support for children's centre leaders sharing their passionate vision for and fundamental purpose of their work. This affirmation was apparent not just in the outlook and actions of centre leaders but also in that of others, including centre staff, partner organisations and local authority personnel. Within this outlook is the drive to address inequalities and intervene early to bring about long-lasting impact. It is characterised by a tenacious resolve to serve the needs of children and their families.

Our interviewees felt that this wider commitment was particularly important in these financially challenging times. As one member of a centre team said: 'If we don't do what needs doing, then no one else will'.

Underpinning this demonstration of overriding purpose are qualities such as passion, integrity and authenticity.

The research revealed that system leaders were committed to the bigger picture, **taking a wider perspective than** their own centre and reach area. One centre leader expressed this as 'caring for what happens to our children in our nation, our city, our community'. The development of cross-locality working helps foster this wider system approach where, as one centre worker reflected: 'it makes sense for children's centres to work with each other'.

Kay, the centre leader in case study L, explained her role in embedding a system for services to refer families for support. All the children's centres now use a standard form to alert other services of a family in need of support. This was recently adopted by the midwifery service for pregnant teenagers. The deputy children's centre manager described how Kay had achieved her vision of a better referral service:

She developed the 'request for a service' form in-house, here, several years ago, and that has clearly influenced what's now become a more embedded protocol across [the area] and that's now a given process... You've got to be able to see the end result, Kay is good at that and she assimilates all the good practice she's built up and embeds it.... takes other people's perspectives on and people then feel confident, within the system, to take it on.

As Kay explained, a recognition of the potential to share good practice across the system is critical to implementing such changes:

It's really important to look at how things develop. You might not be consciously doing system leadership but from little acorns things start to grow, things don't just happen, they happen because they're used and they're proven to be the way forward, although that's not to say they won't be refined and improved in the future.

Helping leaders and others gain this wider perspective is a significant challenge, partly because the way in which children's centres were originally established to serve their immediate local communities made it difficult for them to see their work in the context of outcomes beyond their centre. Nevertheless there are clear indications of a significant shift in perspective. As one centre worker reflected:

It is easy to get focused on your own reach area but if you are looking slightly wider to make sure all these children achieve the best outcomes, then I think it just helps, it helps to look at the bigger picture; because together you can do more.

The research suggested that this behaviour is instilled through a combination of having the right outlook and motivation, and taking particular actions. This included centre managers accepting they have a responsibility for leading the system. One saw this as 'bridging social capital' and another as 'a leader who has a desire to move out of their world and into the wider world - ie system leaders - to achieve different types of outcomes'. This is also linked to specific actions where centre managers keep themselves informed, updated and engaged on policy developments and then apply their rich experience and practice to wider contexts, such as networks, working groups and policy forums.

One local authority is in the process of reorganising all its children's centres in a hub-and-spoke model (case study X). The aim is to ensure that the work of centres targets the more vulnerable families within the overall universal service and to use resources more effectively across centres. There is an ambition to develop children's centres into collaborative learning communities.

As a local authority officer explained:

My feeling is that most centres are quite parochial and commitment to moral purpose does not extend beyond the centre to other centres... Promoting partnership, yes, not just with each centre's partners but with other centres... anything that can help collaborative centre leadership focus on what is happening outside the building.

It is a significant challenge to move from running effective services within one centre to a system leadership commitment which secures improvement more broadly across centres. This is being achieved through collaborative planning, coaching and mentoring between centre leaders, and applying and adapting their current skills in collaboration. As one centre leader put it:

System leadership will come from the present situation and it will mean swiftly upping that person’s skills. It means identifying good practice across all areas and being able to enthuse all staff across all children’s centres to take this on board.

Several interviewees suggested that there was a continuum of skills required for effective centre leadership and for system leadership in this respect.

2. Focusing on achieving the best outcomes for children and families across the foundation years

As a system leader I strive resolutely to achieve the best outcomes for children and families throughout the system.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Understands the main areas of inequality and what works in combating inequality</p> <p>Recognises the barriers and difficulties faced by children and families and understands what they need to be successful</p> <p>Identifies best practice within the locality</p> <p>Understands the financial and commissioning systems and identifies other resources and support</p>	<p>Prioritising</p> <p>Listening and counselling skills</p> <p>Ability to use robust quality assurance and accountability frameworks</p> <p>Flexibility to spot opportunities and manage within time and resource constraints</p> <p>Has appropriate business and financial acumen</p>	<p>Belief and commitment to families and children</p> <p>Resilience, determination and tenacity to see things through</p> <p>Disposition to give and accept challenge</p> <p>Organised, efficient and financially literate</p> <p>Entrepreneurial and able to innovate</p> <p>Empathic</p>

A key feature of the passionate commitment and moral purpose of children’s centre leaders is a determination to work with families and children to achieve the best possible outcomes. This brings with it certain implications for leadership including a profound appreciation of all that impacts on families, locally and further afield, and an ability to work through this complexity.

Centre managers need an understanding of the needs of families locally and beyond and an in-depth understanding of the range of social, cultural and financial challenges that families face. System leaders must also understand that distinct communities will have different needs. In particular there is an unswerving resolve to combat inequalities and provide a community anchor which helps build social capital for parents and their children. Typically one centre leader said:

I think the family workers provide very detailed, specific support to try to close those gaps and reduce inequality. I always talk about creating a sense of belonging and creating a feeling of social cohesion.

Understanding the way in which inequality works and the complexity of factors that contribute to this is a major challenge for leadership. This relates both to a centre and to securing positive outcomes for children and families more broadly across the sector. This complexity is increased in the current financial climate which poses difficulties for centres and families alike. The research recorded many situations of leaders managing in difficult circumstances and holding on to what is important, which drew on the personal qualities of remaining undaunted, not giving up in the face of challenges, and not being complacent about what has been achieved. These attributes of leadership are accompanied by the skills and knowledge that enable leaders to manage the complexity of need within budget constraints. Examples include centre leaders working proactively across centres and settings to address the needs of children and families over a wide area and to determine how limited resources can be deployed to best effect. For example, the staff in one centre wanted to ensure they were providing the best possible support for breastfeeding mothers, so they

researched national and local breastfeeding programmes. This revealed a gap in the local support provided to breastfeeding mothers within the first week of birth. As a result, the midwifery and portage team has prioritised the provision of support for breastfeeding for mothers immediately after birth.

In delivering positive outcomes for children and families, leaders also need to demonstrate behaviour which ensures effective and efficient services. This includes robust financial management and aligning resources to meet changing needs. In the complex and changing environment of children’s centre provision, the ability to be agile and flexible in shaping the scope and pattern of services within and between settings will be increasingly important.

3. Using key knowledge and evidence across the system

As a system leader I seek to embed evidence-based and innovative approaches to child development, parenting and early intervention across the system.

Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Knowledge of research and evidence-based practice to identify effective programmes and approaches</p> <p>Knowledge and understanding of child development, parenting and community development</p> <p>Knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum development</p> <p>Knowledge of early intervention</p>	<p>Ability to interpret evidence and data</p> <p>Monitoring, evaluation and assessment skills, including gathering, interpreting and applying evidence</p> <p>Ability to help others develop evidence-based practice and evaluation skills</p> <p>Ability to establish a level playing field and cut through unhelpful hierarchies</p>	<p>Disposition to be enquiry minded, reflective, questioning and analytical</p> <p>Having a respect for evidence</p> <p>Solutions orientated</p> <p>Openness to new approaches and thinking outside the box</p>

The centre leader gathers, uses and applies a wide range of evidence to ensure coherent and high-quality services for children and families within and beyond the centre. This role is pivotal in bringing together in one place information from across partner agencies and foundation years’ settings to inform the process by which provision is tightly focused to meet needs.

The research showed the importance of centre leaders **drawing on a breadth of knowledge**. They need a strong understanding of child development, coupled with an understanding of the features contributing to deprivation, the benefits of early intervention and the wider foundation years’ environment. However, this does not mean that leaders have to be education specialists, social workers or have a specific early years background, but rather that they have a sufficient grasp of these areas and a command of relevant data.

Clearly the effective use of data is a common characteristic in both single-centre leadership and system leadership. Both types of leader would be adept in analysing local authority data and other data from partner agencies, but system leaders would be more likely to engage with a wider range of data from a broad spectrum of settings and with information on regional and national trends to inform their work. Expertise in the intelligent use of data is a key tool for centre leaders modelling services across a wider area, especially those operating within a hub-and-spoke model.

System leaders use data to inform the delivery of services for children and families across settings in the wider locality. This is about **collectively assessing data** and has clear implications for building the capacity for system leadership across the sector. For example, one urban local authority is bringing together centre leaders to develop collaborative learning centres across the borough, using data from a range of sources to inform this. Another example in a rural context is where data is being analysed effectively and used to co-

ordinate the delivery of respective services across different sites. The local authority leader described how the centre leader played the key role in convening meetings ‘where not only people who work at the centre but also others like myself attend, and we looked at self-evaluation forms and as a group made contributions which he took away and used’. While this study found limited examples of joint practice development of this nature, there are nevertheless encouraging markers of the emergence of a form of system leadership, consistent with Hargreaves’ vision for a self-improving system (Hargreaves, 2011).

Jill (case study N) manages two children’s centres. The centres have separate governing bodies, budgets and development plans, but they are closely aligned, with staff working across both sites. She uses a range of data to inform her leadership of the two centres and her engagement with other centres throughout the local authority.

Jill taps into those who know the community and uses this information, together with local authority data, to create a unified picture of need in the locality which in turn determines the scope of services provided. The children’s centres’ advisory groups carried out a joint exercise which involved each centre writing down its performance indicators and then plotting a graph to show where they overlapped. As Jill explained:

This raised awareness of everyone as to where there was crossover in service delivery.

The local authority has an in-depth knowledge of centre activity; when local authority staff see good practice they ensure it is shared and encourage one centre to help another centre that is struggling. So Jill has provided peer-to-peer support and mentoring. She has also taken part in an action learning set which comprised six children’s centres from across the local authority sharing information and evidence.

4. Creating partnerships serving children and families across the system

As a system leader I facilitate multiple perspectives, joint approaches and coherent partnership working to serve children and families across the system.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
Knowledge of the professional and cultural influences on key partners	Emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills	Commitment to multi-agency working
Understands the policy and financial context for foundation years’ settings and services	Team and relationship building	Commitment to partnership and collaborative approaches
Knowledge and understanding of family- and child-centred service provision	Networking skills	Respect for the professional territory of others
Knowledge of change management strategies	Persuasion and negotiation skills	Openness and tolerance
Knowledge of good practice partnership models	Ability to recognise own strengths and limitations	Flexibility
		Determination and persistence

This behaviour is about children’s centre leaders ensuring joined-up working between partners so that children and families are best served. Centre leaders work with a whole variety of agencies, each of which has its own professional culture and infrastructure, and the challenge is to ensure that the needs of children and families drive services.

The centre leader plays a key role of holding the ring in providing services to children and families. In fulfilling this role, centre leaders need to understand other professional backgrounds and ways of working in order to facilitate a shared understanding of how their work comes together to focus on the child. As one centre leader observed, it’s about ‘being able to work with professionals, and bring together people who would not normally work together’. This role of creating a collaborative culture can become a shared goal,

as one partner agency worker commented: 'Everybody has got a responsibility for bridging social capital'. Identifying key allies is important, as one centre leader explained:

Know your allies. It's about finding somebody that also has that same vision, passion, drive and energy to want... to change things.

Reaching these shared understandings needs constant reinforcement, and it can be frustrating to have to re-establish relationships with new colleagues. One deputy leader described how she and others had worked hard for years to achieve 'levels of constructive co-working with health colleagues', but things changed when a new senior manager was appointed with a different management style and priorities. This meant that the centre leader had to build up her relationship with the new manager: 'It felt like we had to start right back again to get her on board'.

The effective relationship forged with partner agencies will result in partners taking responsibility for areas of activity and, rather than passing on problems, start to find solutions for themselves. This is a particular challenge in a time of reduced budgets. One centre leader observed that reduced budgets had prompted partner agencies to withdraw into what they regarded as their core work, rather than investing time in partnering activity. He responded to this situation by attempting to:

negotiate ways of engaging partner agencies and other settings that will not necessarily cost them more money but will be to their advantage in their practice and efficiency.

Investing in partnership activity beyond the centre requires a shift from the traditional role of ensuring high-quality services in one centre to working with others so that this standard of excellence is achieved across the system. The research provided examples of centre staff working across a number of settings, and in some cases across local authorities, to ensure outreach work benefited families throughout an extended area.

Anne leads children's centre Y, which is managed by a small local Christian charity. Based in a deprived area of a large inner city, the centre serves a multicultural population, with over half having a rural Pakistani heritage. Anne's challenge was to bring people from such diverse backgrounds and different faiths to work together to improve the lives of families and children. Along with her staff and partners, she set about gaining an in-depth understanding of the area and its community. She recruited an army of volunteers, so many that she now employs someone to co-ordinate their work. This not only increased ownership of provision but also built social capacity and extended the resource base for service delivery.

Anne has an open-door policy and 'leaves a lot of room for people to take responsibility for new strands of work or develop something they feel is going to be important'. Volunteers are invited to take part in planning and decision-making. The result is that over 90 per cent of families who have children under the age of five use the centre. There is a shared understanding of the centre being a partnership with the local community and empowering others. Anne described how she had to learn to feel comfortable with not being in control and instead embracing the role of facilitator so that there was widespread distributed leadership. As the volunteer co-ordinator explained:

I guess it's looking at outcomes creatively and really breaking them down into the factors involved, rather than sticking to old mind-sets that are based on service provision... and see yourself not just as a service provider but as a collaborative with the community. So it is seeing it less about doing something **to** the community, I guess that's the worst; doing something **for** the community is a bit better but not brilliant; doing something **with** the community is what I think we have got to aim for.

5. Leading and constructing collaboratively

As a system leader I ensure a collaborative approach to service planning which brings mutual benefit across the system.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Understands collaborative and distributed leadership techniques</p> <p>Knows about the drivers and priorities of partner agencies</p> <p>Understands consultative approaches and techniques</p>	<p>Facilitation, networking and negotiation skills</p> <p>Skills in building appropriate collaborative forums with parents and children</p> <p>Skills in dealing with ambiguity and building vision and ownership over time</p> <p>Conflict resolution</p>	<p>Willingness to share knowledge freely and not be possessive</p> <p>Positive outlook and openness to new ideas</p> <p>Disposition to establish common purpose and mutual benefit</p> <p>Tolerance and respect for others and their views</p> <p>Is empathic and trustworthy, extending appropriate trust to others</p>

Centre leaders help make services effective by involving staff, parents and partners in how they are planned and delivered. Creating a collaborative culture and putting in place arrangements by which this happens are important parts of the role.

Finding ways to develop a shared vision of the purpose of children's centre work is a core part of a children's centre leader's role. But system leaders need to extend this to people working in other settings. One centre leader who managed a number of settings described the challenge of building **a shared vision across centres** and recognised that this needed to be continuously replenished over time. He described how staff turnover and changing circumstances affecting individual centres can begin to jeopardise a commonly held vision. In response to this, he invests considerable energy in establishing a culture of trust and distributed leadership, and in continuously walking and talking core values:

This is where the achievement of outcomes (across centres and settings) is not dependent on the direct presence of the leader but on that leader's values, vision and principles, on the environment, on the practitioners' behaviours and on how decisions are made.

System leadership entails **planning and shaping services** across settings and throughout the locality. As children's centres emerge from reorganisation, centre leaders will have responsibilities for embedding new patterns of provision throughout the area. One manager of a family support team illustrated this role:

I think that the centre leader will be good at being part of the leadership team of the wider locality; she sees it is not just about our centre's project. It's broader than that; it's about working with other centres and sharing resources.

One of the deputy managers in an established cluster explained how her role required her to develop a high level of expertise to be able to manage a complex range of interactions with centre staff and services:

I manage a team that works across all 4 centres and so I meet with 3 different lots of health visitors, 2 different midwifery teams, 30 pre-schools, over 10 infant schools.... So in terms of interagency working, having a cluster approach is much more complex in terms of managing those relationships, because of course all those health visitors and midwives have different managers who are from different places... I enjoy it, it's very challenging.

Sarah manages a family and community centre (case study K) located in a deprived inner-city area. Since taking up her post two years ago, she has worked collaboratively with other centres and settings in her own and a neighbouring authority to develop services for disadvantaged families. As Sarah explained:

I meet with other children’s centre leaders in both areas. We’re trying to support each other informally, and to work out how to share resources, for example, by referring parents to services provided by another centre, or by one centre offering NVQ Level 1 and another offering Level 2.

The area suffers from high unemployment, so Sarah has created a post of training and employment manager to help parents develop the skills they need to get a job. The manager has met with leaders and outreach workers in five other centres across two local authorities. Children’s centres in the area were facing a common difficulty in finding well-trained and reliable staff. In response to this, the manager developed a one-year training course in childcare. This benefits local families and other children’s centres because it provides a pool of high-quality candidates for childcare positions. The manager said: ‘It’s been immensely successful. It has reduced our expenditure on agencies to get temporary staff and it provides local jobs for local people’.

Some leaders provided examples of **leading across the foundation years**. This may take place through working in networks or groups which bring together managers of a range of early years’ settings. As one centre leader explained:

I run a foundation stage leadership forum and invite managers and supervisors of all those settings. They set the agenda but we influence quality through training, sharing and raising the value of the profession.

Another said: ‘I see myself very much in that forum as... taking a leading role in the early years’.

6. Building system leadership capacity

As a system leader I promote development opportunities across the foundation years’ workforce, and help to develop the leaders of tomorrow.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
Understands how CPD and performance management contribute to workforce and leadership development	Ability to spot talent, and recognise and develop system leadership potential	Committed to distributed leadership
Understands how to create a collaborative learning culture	Skills in creating development opportunities for others	Committed to own learning and that of others
Knows individuals’ capacities and interests	Coaching and mentoring skills	Respects the different qualities and ideas people bring
Knows about workforce development and leadership opportunities	Skills in flexing leadership structures to meet changing circumstances, staff potential and the needs of the service	Being outward looking, politically astute and well informed on policy development
Understands how a leadership culture can be developed across the system	Skills in engaging with and influencing key groups, networks and policymakers	Is accessible and has an open-door philosophy which is translated into daily practice for children, families, the team and partner agencies

This behaviour is about how centre leaders contribute to staff development across the system. It includes their contribution to developing system leadership potential, investing in talent-spotting, mentoring, coaching and providing development opportunities for staff from across the sector. One particular strategy

we noted was for leaders to distribute leadership responsibility as widely as possible in their own centres, thereby developing leadership responsibility in others.

Mark oversees a group of four centres serving a large rural area, and his workforce operates across all four centres (case study M). Rural poverty is an issue, as demonstrated by the fact that one of the centres is located in one of the 30 per cent most deprived wards in the country. To ensure the effective running of the group, the manager has invested in developing his multidisciplinary staff team, including demonstrating his high level of trust in his two deputy managers by giving them substantial delegated responsibilities to manage the day-to-day working of respective centres and make decisions about the development of service provision. One member of staff reflected: 'It is about having a set of values, about working with others... which includes a commitment to enablement'.

Cross-centre working presented particular challenges for engaging with a wide variety of partners, and coherent provision for children and families was secured through sustained and distributed leadership. Ofsted reported that this model allowed staff to work in different locations according to their experience and skills. Leadership was outstanding and the level of expertise across the programme team was very high.

Centre leaders highlighted their centres' contributions to training and professional development. This is a key feature of early years teaching centres. As one leader explained, she was keen to identify: 'how we can use this teaching centre status to feed into the wider district and offer training and support' and another said: 'A key role [for me] as a system leader is to establish strong and reciprocal early years networks'.

Rachel leads children's centre P (also an early years teaching centre). Her approach illustrates the three aspects of system leadership identified at the beginning of this chapter. She oversees a fully integrated nursery school and children's centre which sits within a local achievement partnership (LAP), comprising 19 primary schools, 2 secondary schools and 3 children's centres. Rachel, her deputy and staff actively work in the LAP and beyond on peer support, and sharing good practice with other centres. They do extensive training for schools and staff in a range of early years settings on integrated working, curriculum development and securing better outcomes for children across the foundation years' sector.

Until recently, a private company was responsible for running education in the authority. When it was decided to return this to local authority control, Rachel saw an opportunity to influence future developments. Several new groups were created and Rachel immediately recognised an opportunity to promote joined-up practice:

There was one [group] called the early learning strategy group that I immediately knew I needed to be on and I've been able to push the early years teaching centre vision through that with headteachers of primary schools. We've been asked to think about how we can use this teaching centre status to feed into the wider district and offer training and support.

For Rachel, system leadership entails facilitating collaborative development across a range of foundation years' settings, and searching out opportunities to exercise influence on political and policy developments:

We have to make sure that we meet the right people and are seen in the right places. There are seven in our consortium for the early years teaching centre; my deputy and I have worked together the longest and are the most experienced, so we are the lead and have really been able to push things forward.

7. Improving practice and tackling underperformance across the system

As a system leader I share successful practice and address underperformance across settings as part of a self-improving system.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Understands the hallmarks of successful practice</p> <p>Knows about standards and performance frameworks across the foundation years</p> <p>Understands the elements of underperformance and how they can be addressed</p> <p>Understands the dynamics of a self-improving community</p>	<p>Ability to offer robust challenge and appropriate support</p> <p>Skills in using quality assurance and accountability frameworks</p> <p>Skills in monitoring, reviewing and evaluating practice, including own leadership</p> <p>Coaching and mentoring skills</p> <p>Emotional intelligence and ability to work collaboratively across settings</p>	<p>Disposition to identify and tackle underperformance</p> <p>Disposition to give and accept challenge</p> <p>Disposition to work with others to improve performance</p> <p>Willingness to question existing practice where appropriate</p> <p>Openness to new ideas and approaches</p>

Centre leaders are beginning to see their role as taking the lead in foundation years thinking, development and improving standards. This involves being proactive in engaging with schools and other providers to improve outcomes across the whole system; as one leader said:

We've actively gone out to schools to try and engage them in what we do... it's building on the three pillars to the foundation years; it starts at pre-birth and we have been proactive in that.

This is not without its tensions given the nature of the mixed economy of providers in the foundation years; as another centre leader observed:

A challenge for children's centres is working in effective partnership with day-care providers because they are private independent providers and this potentially causes competition with children's centres.

Heather, the system leader in case study U, acts as a peer mentor to leaders in other foundation years' settings. She visits leaders in their settings as well as maintaining email and telephone contact. One children's centre manager explains the peer support she has received:

Heather came out to support me, as a new children's centre leader, to put together a development plan for the whole centre, she helped me put things into perspective, I just needed someone to say 'yes you're doing all right'.

Heather's peer-mentoring support is particularly welcomed by those who are developing their management skills. As a nursery manager from the private, voluntary or independent (PVI) sector setting put it:

You can get to be a manager with a Level 3 qualification but it doesn't make you a good manager... [Heather] has visited our setting and is always at the end of the phone... so to have somebody that has the expertise that you can ask [about issues such as] tribunals, legal issues etc is fantastic and gives me confidence as a manager to be a bit more 'Yeah, I can do this'.

Being well informed and politically astute are important system leadership skills. One manager talked of her centre leader as ‘making every effort to keep informed’ and using the fruits of her insight to ‘share strategic top lines and give staff policy direction. It’s really useful having someone who’s involved at a higher level nationally’.

Others demonstrated their ability to keep an eye on the future in order to ensure that their colleagues are well informed and keep ahead of the game. One leader described this as ‘keeping up to date with research, interventions, policy and lots of reflective practice’. Another described his desire to influence policy and practice:

It’s taking your experience out into those other places which is much more about diplomacy, politics and advocacy and having to tread out in a world where people are going to challenge you and your credentials for being able to influence others.

One leader, who had received a national honour for her work, had influenced how public money for a building programme was being spent: ‘For me, the important thing was that it should be centred around really good early years’ education provision’.

Anne (centre leader Y) is clear that she has leadership responsibilities that extend beyond her own centre, particularly in terms of helping improve standards in the locality at large. As one of her staff reflected: ‘Anne is interested not only in the centre’s early years’ provision but also in schools’ provision. It’s not just about this children’s centre; it’s wider than that’.

Anne’s centre was judged ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted and she organised and hosted a conference at her centre to model and share effective practice for people who run settings in a number of local authorities. Anne explained:

We looked at raising quality with people who feel quite alone, like doing a few hours of play in a church hall once a week, and do not know what best practice looked like. It was a very effective way of reaching people who were not in touch with mainstream good practice.

Anne trained a member of staff to deliver a parenting programme who then became the first person in the city to gain accreditation to train others. This person was much in demand ‘as a consultant for other children’s centres to teach them how to do it really well’.

Anne’s team has a shared commitment to improving the system. The manager of the family support team summarised this:

It’s not just about the centre and it’s not just about Anne, it’s about families everywhere, and we will achieve more by working together with other centres and other settings than we would on our own.

Addressing underperformance is an important characteristic of a self-improving system. However, although there were numerous examples of leaders providing mutual support and sharing good practice, we found fewer examples of one centre leader helping another to address underperformance (for example, poor provision identified in an Ofsted inspection report). The reasons for this may be structural, in that many current leaders have no formal responsibility for working with underperforming leaders.

Centre leaders who were working to address underperformance in other settings drew upon skills of mentoring and coaching. This may take place through informal arrangements whereby outstanding centres share policies and practice and host visits, or it may be through formal local authority arrangements. One centre leader helped another centre devise its post-Ofsted inspection action plan and provided support for ‘nurseries and other pre-school settings in my area, including one that was deemed inadequate and is now judged to be satisfactory’. Another described how she helped a leader in a neighbouring borough whose centre ‘scraped’ a ‘satisfactory’ Ofsted judgement by bringing ‘her whole staff to my centre to look at systems and files’.

Leaders in the pilot early years teaching centres understood that tackling underperformance was an important part of their contribution to a self-improving system. Centre leaders were sensitive about the need to foster mutual learning, while avoiding the sense that their role is to 'bail out others'. As one leader explained:

It's about rolling out good practice and also sharing things that aren't necessarily good practice, like learning from your mistakes.

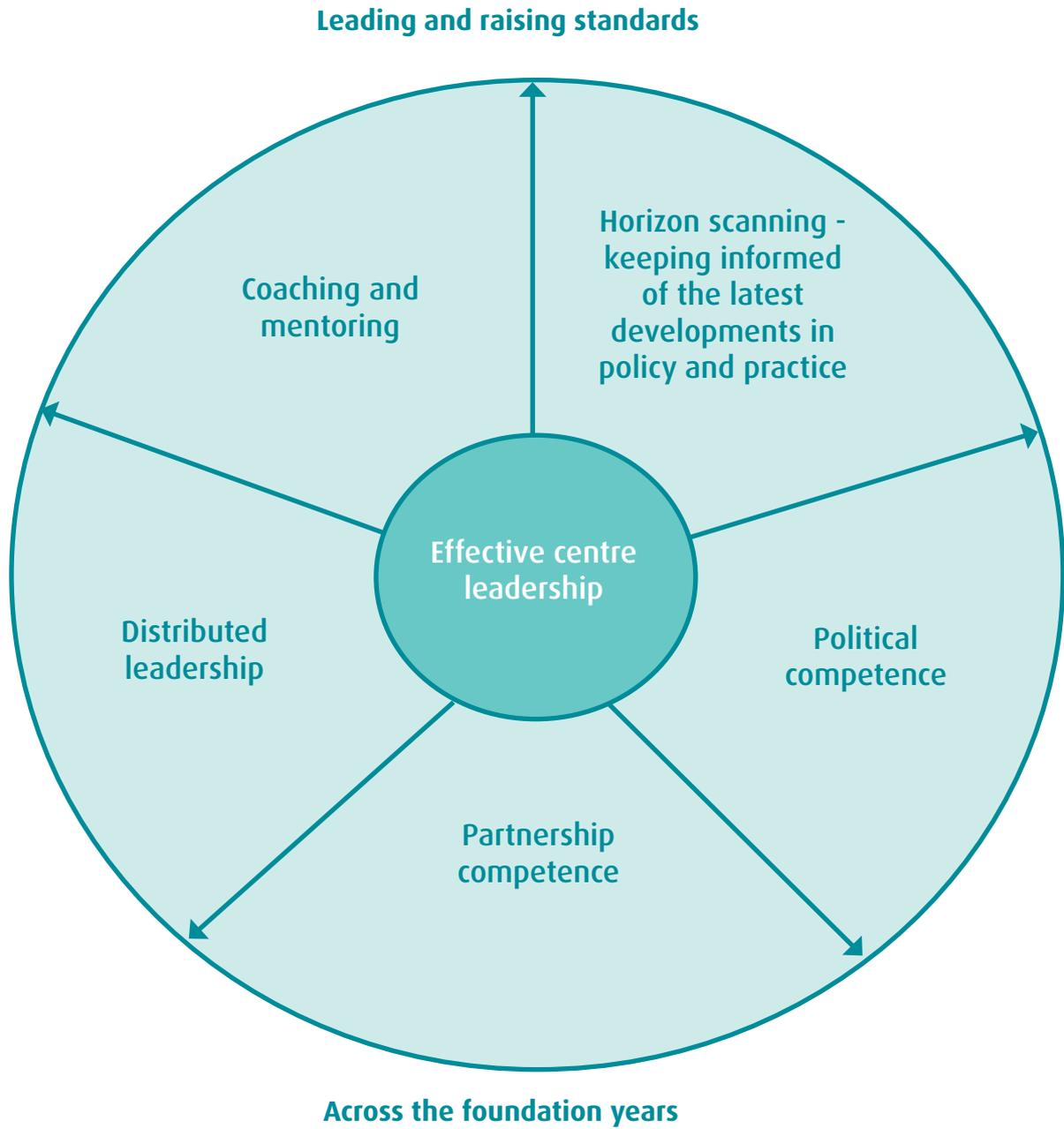
4.2 The relationship between effective centre leadership and system leadership

Several centre leaders said they saw system leadership as growing from the skills needed to manage the centre, with certain traits such as partnership working and distributed leadership bridging behaviours between the two. One leader felt that once he had gained recognition from Ofsted for the high standards in his own centre, he was able to establish three kinds of system leadership activities (as set out at the beginning of this chapter). However, a few identified potential tensions between the two roles:

There is a tension between proving your centre's worth and trying to be a system leader, with the former pulling you inwards to focus on your own centre's performance and the latter requiring you, as a centre leader, to look across the whole foundation years' system to see how it is performing as a whole.

The relationship between effective centre leadership and system leadership, including five key 'bridging' behaviours, is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Bridging behaviours between leaders, children's centres and system leadership



4.3 Concluding comments

Children's centre leaders are not familiar with the concept of system leadership, and although many are involved in some aspects of the role, it is not well established across the foundation years. In particular, the potential for highly effective centre leaders to help address underperformance and drive up standards in other settings is in the early stages of development. Formal structures such as chains, hub-and-spoke models and clusters, together with the early years teaching centre pilot project may provide the circumstances in which children's centre leaders are more commonly called upon to exercise system leadership in the future.

Where next for children's centre leaders?

This chapter focuses on the key issues for children's centre leadership, both now and in the future. It includes information on the leadership models and concepts used by centre leaders, their views on NPQICL, the current leadership challenges and solutions and the leadership skills needed in the future.

5.1 Leadership concepts and models used by children's centre leaders

We asked children's centre leaders which leadership concepts and models they found most useful in their work. Centre leaders said they used a number of concepts and models to guide their leadership. The most popular were:

- distributed leadership
- situational leadership
- reflective practice
- emotional intelligence

By far the most popular concept among our interviewees was **distributed leadership**. As one leader said:

If you communicate your vision and message to people, they can very much come up with their own ideas of how they are going to achieve it. It's not a matter of telling people what you want them to do.

Leaders commonly described the process of building trust across the staff team, helping individuals to become more confident, empowering staff and giving individuals their own areas of responsibility. One centre leader explained:

I have a distributed leadership style where staff take responsibility for key areas. If they are not confident, I will identify the area and say 'This is your strength' and they will take responsibility for everything relating to that area. Everybody knows what everybody's role is.

Some felt they were in the early stages of achieving distributed leadership, whereas others reported that their staff had already developed their leadership capabilities. One described this as having 'a team around you that are all leaders in their own right... because you have enabled them and empowered them to have that responsibility'. The ultimate test of this for several leaders was whether the centre could function really well without them; as one said: 'I hope we have set up systems which mean it doesn't matter if I'm not here'.

Several leaders mentioned **situational leadership**, which involves having a repertoire of leadership styles to choose from. One said: 'We've been learning about different models as part of my training course. They're all useful really - I've taken something from all of them'. Several spoke of adjusting their style to suit the circumstances; as one explained: 'It's important to accept that you are never one style'. She went on to explain that she needed to be quite autocratic at times, even though her preferred style was to consult and delegate responsibility to others. A third commented: 'It's important to have an understanding about which leadership model to adopt in different circumstances'.

Reflective leadership was mentioned by a few leaders, who stressed the importance of reviewing the consequences of their own behaviour and actions. One explained how NPQICL had prompted her to become more reflective:

Having completed the NPQICL last year made me reflect more on my own behaviour and how I work as a leader. One of the things I have started to do is stepping back and observing; doing a lot more reflecting and observation than I used to do before.

A few mentioned **emotional intelligence** (originated by Daniel Goleman). One said:

Emotional intelligence featured in my NPQICL. One of the biggest revelations to me was that I used emotional intelligence more than I led myself to believe... and my colleagues thought I was emotionally intelligent.

Other leadership concepts and authors mentioned by individual children's centre leaders were: values-based leadership (John Adair); the Pen Green Centre's 'tartan' model (identifying interweaving strands of responsibility); integrated system leadership (a National College course); 'leading beautifully' (Donna Ladkin); and leadership books by Margaret Wheatley, Carol Aubrey and Janet Moyles.

5.2 Views on developing NPQICL

The National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) is a National Qualifications Framework postgraduate qualification (Level 7) for children's centre leaders. The National College is currently reviewing the content and format of the course. We asked centre leaders and other centre staff for their thoughts on this.

Centre leaders and other staff who have completed NPQICL **praised the programme and valued it highly**. Many stressed that NPQICL had been both professionally useful and had made a profound contribution to their personal development, speaking of how it had 'recognised', 're-affirmed' and 'legitimised' their work. As one deputy manager commented: 'It supported me to believe in myself. It reaffirmed my approach to joint working and multi-agency working'. One centre leader described the influential effects of taking the course in the following terms: 'It was a life-changing course... the principles are embedded in my practice now'.

Leaders singled out some specific content and elements of the programme that were particularly valuable. These were: the collaborative experience of fellow professionals coming together in leadership learning groups, and the opportunity to be reflective with each other and to network. Similarly they emphasised the importance of being able to visit other people's centres and settings and to share good practice. They praised the quality of the tutors, mentors and course delivery staff. A number described the residential experience as 'excellent'.

Only a small minority of centre leaders made any qualified or critical comments. One suggested that NPQICL was 'not for everyone', on the grounds that it is 'a very reflective course; it's experiential learning'. One had withdrawn from the programme, saying she had found it 'nebulous' and lacking in focus. A few people also pointed out that any qualification can only make a contribution to effective leadership, since individuals must also have the appropriate aptitude, skills and personality.

Several centre leaders were **concerned that the course might be drastically shortened** in future, which would remove the very elements they identified as most valuable: namely, collaborative learning, reciprocal visits and reflective activity.

Centre leaders and their staff **wanted NPQICL to have status** within the sector and within the academic community. One local authority leader reflected that NPQICL 'used to be on a par with the NPQH' but thought that it had lost status, and called for better integration between NPQICL and NPQH. Others considered the qualification to be at Master's level and did not want this to be eroded. One interviewee called for it to be 'a proper academic discipline that is recognised and accepted'. Centre leaders felt that this was tied up with recognising the status of children's centre work, and the early years' sector generally, as being on a par with other parts of the education and social care workforce. This was also felt to be important in giving centre leaders a sense of 'self-esteem and self-identity as academics and scholars'.

There were mixed views about **who should be eligible** for NPQICL. A number of centre managers argued that it should be opened up to centre staff who do not have graduate qualifications, although this was balanced against the views of those who wished to keep its status as a postgraduate course. For example, one leader said: 'We've got very good people at Level 3 and 4 standards, but to go for NPQICL is too much

of a jump'. Another recounted the case of a neighbouring centre leader who had enquired about the course but had been turned down because she did not have a first degree. These comments highlight potential confusion among some centre managers about the minimum requirements for participation on the programme. Individuals without a graduate degree are in fact able to join the programme, subject to the satisfactory completion of a graduate skills assessment to demonstrate they are able to work at a Master's level. This requirement is important in reconciling the potential tension between adopting an inclusive approach to participation on the programme with the need to protect its academic rigour.

Several said it was a shame that more colleagues in partner agencies, particularly in health, did not take the course because of the value to multi-agency working that can come from professionals learning together. A few leaders commented on the opportunity NPQICL gave for developing system leadership across the sector, and one local authority area leader said it was a shame that other local authority colleagues were not able to access the programme because they had not previously been centre leaders.

Leaders felt there should be clear progression routes both into and beyond NPQICL. They also wanted NPQICL to be an ongoing development, with an opportunity to return to the programme after a period of reflection. After studying NPQICL, one centre leader took part in a longer piece of action research on system leadership and characterised this as a progression route from the qualification, saying:

It was almost like a progression from NPQICL. NPQICL teaches you to work in collaborative partnerships but [taking part in action research on] system leadership teaches you to lead collaborative partnerships.

Despite valuing much of the present **content** of NPQICL, centre leaders said this should be regularly reviewed to ensure it keeps abreast of current issues and developments across the sector. For example, one leader commented: 'Some of the activities need to be revised and brought in line with what is happening now' and several interviewees recommended that the course should offer a module on financial management. The chair of a children's centre advisory board underlined the need for NPQICL to cover financial management and business skills, saying the current qualification 'doesn't always prepare centre leaders for hard, operational work such as managing business and financial planning'.

There were several comments on the balance between theory and practical work. Although some felt the course already offered an appropriate balance, many argued for an even greater focus on how the learning can be applied in practice. Some suggested adding more practical content, including such topics as: 'how to do your self-evaluation form, what the framework requirements are and reaching hard-to-reach families'.

Leaders also specified particular topics that should be covered more explicitly in the course. Prominent among these were knowledge and understanding of: the foundation years, family support, extended services, and integrated, multi-agency working. Dealing with health and safeguarding issues were mentioned by some leaders, as was guidance on how to manage stress. Leaders recommended that the programme content should also cover management and counselling skills, theories and models of leadership, and an underpinning knowledge of policy and the political context; as one leader said: 'It should reflect on government policy and the commissioning process and the ways centre leaders can influence what is happening'.

Centre leaders generally **welcomed the proposed NPQICL format** of a core with optional modules. One said that if the programme were to become more modular then this would provide opportunities for coverage of areas such as team management and capacity-building and others said it could help in exploring a variety of different leadership models and provide appropriate pathways for people with different career backgrounds and experience. When commenting on the inclusion of system leadership, one leader argued that this should feature as a core element rather than an option in order to raise awareness of what system leadership entails.

Interviewees said that NPQICL should provide challenge, in-depth exploration and creative ways of learning. Leaders said that having more online activity offered different ways of studying and, together with the modular framework, would enable the programme to adapt to different learners' needs and backgrounds.

However, many leaders stressed their concern that changes to the format of NPQICL might be at the expense of other much-valued elements, such as time for reflection, and the opportunity to talk with other leaders who have the same problems, although some thought that online learning could help to facilitate these.

5.3 Current leadership challenges and solutions

Centre leaders, their staff and partner agencies identified a number of major challenges facing them in the development of leadership approaches in the current environment. They also indicated a range of ways in which they and others are endeavouring to address these challenges.

Challenge 1: Remaining positive in a time of great change

Centre leaders are having to become increasingly outward looking and exercise leadership across children's centres and foundation years' settings, thereby becoming leaders of the system. At the same time they must cope with their own and their staff's job insecurities, while also ensuring standards of services are maintained and improved: 'Centre managers are not being supported enough in the current climate' (centre manager); 'If things change all the time how can you improve?' (deputy centre manager); 'When you want so much from a centre leader it doesn't seem safe and other professional choices seem very appealing' (centre member of staff).

Solutions

- Some centre leaders view periods of change as an opportunity for them to harness energy and forge a new direction. They see restructuring and decommissioning as an opportunity to raise the profile of the foundation years and bring in new energy and direction.
- Centre leaders are developing skills in juggling priorities, handling pressure, saying no where appropriate and empowering others.
- Centre managers and their teams are maintaining their sense of moral purpose in securing the best outcomes for children and families in the foundation years.
- Centre leaders are starting to be proactive in leading the system so that they influence emerging agendas and structures and feel more empowered.
- Centre leaders are engaging in horizon-scanning so they can prepare for new requirements and keep a focus on longer term sustainability.

Challenge 2: Improving status and training

Interviewees said that other people sometimes perceived the leadership of children's centres as being lower in status than school leadership. They felt that progression routes to centre leadership are poorly developed, particularly from some sectors such as nursery nursing. Recruitment and succession planning are seen as major challenges and there is a concern that when current early years staff retire, there will be a lack of suitable people to replace them. NPQICL is valued but staff feel that it is not given sufficient professional status compared with other qualifications, such as NPQH. One chair of trustees said: 'We need to raise the status of early years generally; there's a feeling that centre leaders are the slightly poorer relations of headteachers'.

Solutions

- Some local authorities are actively emphasising the importance and status of those working in the foundation years.
- Settings are beginning to provide joint training for leaders from different professional spheres: the foundation years, education and social care. Some groups of centres are providing staff with opportunities to shadow centre managers and experience the nature of the job.
- Those studying NPQICL have an opportunity to share experiences and use their influence, as one centre leader explained: 'Having leaders get together in groups in the NPQICL is powerful in helping to influence and change policy'.

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- Centre leaders are acting as mentors to their peers and coaches to new leaders.
 - Centre leaders contribute to succession planning by spotting talent, helping staff plan their careers and providing professional development programmes.
 - Centre leaders are forming professional learning networks to take forward their own development and exercise influence on policy and practice.

Challenge 3: Ensuring positive impact and improved outcomes

A major challenge is to ensure improved outcomes for children and families, particularly the most vulnerable, across the foundation years. Some centre staff are concerned about the introduction of payment by results (PbR) and, while they understand the reasons for a policy emphasis on targeting vulnerable groups, worry about the threat to universal services and the risk of stigmatising families. Centre leaders see improving standards and addressing underperforming staff as one of the most challenging aspects of their job.

Solutions

- Centre leaders, their staff and partners have improved skills in the use of data and have confidence in using data effectively to provide both support and challenge.
- Robust arrangements are in place to identify and address underperformance and action taken is followed up.
- Staff work effectively across centres and settings to build capacity within self-improving collaborations.
- Centre leaders are improving outcomes by working in closer partnership with foundation-stage coordinators.
- Centre leaders become adept at sharing and using data collaboratively to secure system-wide improvement.

Challenge 4: Practical barriers to developing system leadership

As discussed in chapter 4, the concept of system leadership is not well developed among centre leaders and their staff. Some confuse it with working with “partner agencies, or community engagement or with one centre taking on specific responsibilities within a cluster. Others see it as being the preserve of local authority managers rather than children’s centre leaders”.

Other barriers to system leadership are a perceived conflict between a leader’s focus on his or her own centre and devoting time to leading across the sector and a sense of competition between service providers. In relation to sharing best practice and supporting other centres, there is a need for some external validation of a centre’s performance. However, there is a lack of well-established benchmarks to identify highly effective leaders (although Ofsted inspections can provide a useful indication of this). It also seems that some aspects of the system leader role (especially leading across foundation years’ settings and addressing underperformance) may be more difficult to establish than others, with the vision of becoming a ‘self-improving system’ appearing overly ambitious to many, given the current starting point. One centre leader commented that there is a potential difficulty in the current line management arrangements for centre leaders, drawing attention to the difficulty of ‘having to line manage somebody who is committed to system leadership when you are working within the constraints of the local authority (which my manager has to do)’.

However there are signs that some centre leaders are engaging in system leadership activities across centres and settings. A few are also proactively leading the system and contributing to professional discourse and policy development.

Solutions

- Centre leaders (and their line managers) respond positively to the call to become system leaders when they begin to understand what it entails.
- Centre leaders see the expectation to develop as system leaders as a positive opportunity. They accept responsibility for contributing to positive outcomes for children and families beyond their own reach area.
- Centre leaders are gaining an understanding of the commonality and distinction between behaviours required to lead a single centre and system leadership behaviours.
- Centre leaders are convening and leading forums for professionals who run a range of foundation years' settings.
- Centre leaders are increasingly seeking out opportunities to exercise influence and leadership across foundation years' settings, and to lead the development of the profession.
- Centre leaders are creating their own physical and virtual networks to generate a shared professional voice and are developing their ability to influence the system.
- System leadership practice is being developed through the early years teaching centre initiative pilot.

5.4 Leadership skills needed in the future

The foundation years' sector is now under much greater scrutiny, **responding to multiple policies and delivering on multiple agendas**. These include: the 'core purpose' (DfE, 2011a); supporting families in the foundation years (DfE & DH, 2011); early intervention (Allen & Duncan-Smith, 2008; Allen, 2011; Field, 2010); safeguarding (Munro, 2011); child development and school readiness (DfE, 2011a; Tickell, 2011; DCSE, 2010); targeting the neediest families (DfE & DH, 2011; DfE, 2011b); and increased accountability through, for example, changes to the Ofsted inspection criteria and PbR (La Valle et al, 2011). There is also a potential role for children's centres to provide a gateway to the large-scale expansion of free places for disadvantaged two year olds⁹. Future leadership behaviours and skills will need to reflect these agendas.

In addition to this, we considered the experience of those operating in or contemplating new models, especially formal clusters and hub-and-spoke arrangements. Some of these had resulted from restructuring, whereby existing centre leader posts had been made redundant. There was an increased sense of accountability, which was not always coupled with increased autonomy. For example one centre leader felt that the cutbacks experienced in her 'spoke' centres had reduced her role to little more than site management, and others referred to the tensions between spending time getting to know parents and travelling to spoke centres. As one service provider commented: 'Children's centre leaders will be less hands-on, not so much on the ground level and this is a shame because having a knowledge of the community and local needs is important'.

Centre leaders were realistic about the prospect of further reductions in public funding for children's centres. They also identified the potential for other services to be reduced or remain at current levels in the face of increased demand. This raised concerns about other services not being available, with the danger of centres trying to deal with high-risk situations (eg, safeguarding children at risk) or of children and families falling through the gaps. As one children's centre leader said: 'We will have to adapt and adjust to the financial climate that we find ourselves in, and do our best with what's available to deliver the services'.

Another key challenge for the future was a concern about the supply of the next generation of centre leaders. As one local authority representative said:

⁹ The government has announced an expansion in the number of free places for disadvantaged two year olds from 20,000 places in 2012 to 260,000 places in 2016.

In terms of up-and-coming leaders, I think we have a real gap. I am not sure that we have got a raft of people who would be ready to move up. In part that's because the role of the leader... is so complicated and has such a breadth of duties and responsibilities. It is very hard to have a deputy... It's not just about formal training. It is about shadowing, the opportunities to be part of those worlds and doing some of the coaching and mentoring work. I think there has got to be a real emphasis on the professionalism around this and pulling people in so there is a proper career route and structure for people.

Interviewees pointed out that many of the people who were leading phase 1 Sure Start centres were approaching retirement, and they identified a gap in the supply of new centre leaders. There was a call for an apprentice system or a clearer career pathway to centre leadership, coupled with a greater focus on succession planning to identify the leaders of the future.

We asked centre leaders, staff and other professionals what skills they thought centre leaders would need in the future. They identified the following areas, most of which they had already identified as key to their current role, though they stressed that these skills would be even more important in the future:

- supporting the most needy families while maintaining universal services
- dealing with increased accountability, demonstrating impact and value for money (including financial, data management and research skills)
- dealing with reductions in funding and finding alternative sources of income
- managing and developing staff, including the ability to engage in robust conversations about underperformance
- getting even better at working in partnership with other services and settings
- system leadership (especially being able to adapt to new models of organisation, such as hub-and-spoke centres)
- managing change and maintaining focus on improving outcomes for children and families, while dealing with multiple agendas (including keeping positive, communicating openly with staff, parents and partners during periods of uncertainty, exercising good judgement, being resilient and managing stress)
- providing opportunities for future leaders, including talent-spotting, career development, responsibility, shadowing, coaching and mentoring, as well as formal qualifications

5.5 Concluding comments

This chapter has presented information on the current and future issues shaping children's centre leadership. It has highlighted the importance of distributed leadership and reinforced leaders' keen appreciation of the value of NPQICL. These leaders acknowledged the current challenges to their role and identified the ways in which they were attempting to address them. They recognised the importance of adapting to meet new policy agendas and identified a key set of behaviours and skills that would be required in order to meet current and future requirements. They also drew attention to the need to plan now in order to secure the next generation of children's centre leaders.

Conclusions and recommendations

Children's centre leaders are leading in a complex and fast-changing landscape. This report has presented vivid examples of how centre leaders are grasping opportunities to achieve better outcomes for children and families, with support from staff, parents, partners and policymakers at local and national level. We were privileged to meet so many inspiring leaders in the course of this research.

This section provides recommendations, for national policymakers, for local authorities, and for children's centre leaders themselves.

For national policymakers

- Policymakers need to ensure that policy across the foundation years (including across education, health, employment, housing and social care partners) is as joined up as possible by developing joint policies, encouraging joint working and data-sharing.
- Following the recommendations of the Nutbrown (2012) review, policymakers need to consider ways of promoting the status of children's centre staff and leaders.
- Centre leaders expressed concern about the future supply of leaders, given the age profile of current leaders. Therefore, national policymakers need to focus on the children's centre leader pipeline, including identifying clear and more systemic career pathways to leadership (whilst avoiding closing down the varied routes into leadership which bring highly skilful and creative people into the workforce).
- The status of the children's centre workforce may be enhanced through an increase in local autonomy being promoted by central government. However, policymakers should be mindful of the balance between increased accountability and autonomy to ensure appropriate demands are placed on centre leaders.
- National and local policymakers will need to support the capacity of children's centres to deliver on the rapid expansion in free places for disadvantaged two year olds, including their role of broker with other providers in the private, voluntary and independent sectors. Similarly, they will need to consider the implications for the sector of a national payment by results (PbR) scheme.
- Policymakers should promote and build on the key learning from the early years teaching centre initiative pilot so that the wider sector can benefit, especially in relation to the conditions required to support system leadership.
- National policymakers should consider the behaviours of system leadership for the foundation years set out in this report, and how to support and nurture those behaviours across the sector. In particular, the National College could promote system leadership and explain the expectations of centre leaders.
- New models for children's centres will require increasing collaboration, for example between centres in a cluster. Ofsted's agreement to take clusters into account in future inspections is a welcome development. It would be helpful to distil the learning from these inspections in order to provide examples of best practice in cluster working. In addition, the National College should consider how best to capture the leadership learning from the increasingly diverse models of children's centre structure, operation and governance.
- The National College should consider how to build on the behaviours and achievements of highly effective children's centre leaders. This could include consideration of its relevance to other educational sectors. For example, there may be learning about partnership working and parental engagement which could be useful to school leaders.
- Policy makers should build further on the encouraging examples of joint practice development identified

in this study, by promoting partnerships and networks which encourage both the sharing and utilisation of knowledge by children's centre leaders.

- Children's centre leaders welcome opportunities to be kept informed and to exchange information with others. The Children's Centre Leaders Network has an important role in this. The DfE could also helpfully provide a website or information service to ensure leaders have access to the latest policy developments in the early years and their implications for leaders.
- The current reviews of NPQICL, the qualifications framework and the National Standards are an opportunity to lay the foundations of an early years qualification that has status and academic recognition.
- Specific attention should be given to establishing progression routes to and beyond NPQICL; this should include more provision for potential and emerging leaders, and post-NPQICL programmes.
- Centre leaders currently act as mentors to their peers and coaches to new leaders. This should be built on to establish a framework that develops emerging leaders and lays the foundation for a self-improving system.
- The review of NPQICL should consider partnership with higher education so that the award can retain Master's accreditation.
- The development towards a core and modular structure is broadly welcomed but care should be taken to ensure that this does not restrict creative approaches to learning or experiential and collaborative learning. System leadership should be a major element in NPQICL, and should feature as part of the core.
- Centre managers strongly valued the opportunity to visit each other's centres and this should continue to be a feature of NPQICL, perhaps as a facilitated professional community.
- Online learning is welcomed and this should be the vehicle for creative learning approaches.
- There should be more practical and applied elements within the content of NPQICL, including what good practice looks like; how to self-evaluate effectively; effective safeguarding practice; and strategies for reaching the neediest families. Other key elements recommended for the content coverage within NPQICL include:
 - theories and models of leadership
 - management skills
 - counselling skills
 - more research and evidence-based work
 - understanding of early years and foundation stage issues
 - understanding and managing multi-agency working
 - understanding policy and practice, including how to recognise and navigate the political context

For local authorities

- As children's centre leaders are leading increasingly varied settings, local authorities should consider providing specific professional development and support tailored to these different settings (eg, the implications of working in a chain, or how leadership might be affected by a federated governance structure).
- Local authorities need to support children's centre leaders with access to all the relevant data they need, and by ensuring they work with centre leaders to access and interrogate local information, not only on key information such as live birth data, but information particularly relevant to local needs such as the impact of housing, or the operation of loan sharks.
- Local authorities should communicate an explicit recognition of the current pressures on centre managers (eg, job insecurity, financial uncertainty and the system leader challenge), and consider what they can do to help preserve morale.

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- All children and families should have access to excellent-quality services in the foundation years. Local authorities need to strive to reduce the variability within and between children's centres, including by drawing on the expertise of highly effective leaders.
 - There is a need for robust local support and challenge, including support for new leaders, encouragement of excellent centre leaders to share best practice and become system leaders, and support for underperforming leaders to improve the quality of their work.

For children's centre leaders

- Children's centre leaders should consider the eight behaviours of highly effective centre leaders for self-assessment and with their staff teams. They should consider their own expertise and skills and identify any behaviours that are not well represented so they can seek to address them in future.
- Children's centre leaders should consider whether they wish to take on aspects of system leadership. For those who have achieved excellent standards in their own centres, system leadership provides an opportunity to use their skills to achieve improvements across the system. Those wishing to develop their involvement in system leadership can use the seven behaviours of system leadership to guide them.
- Children's centre leaders should explore further the potential to share and jointly develop good practice with their peers, to promote improved outcomes for children and families.
- Children's centre leaders should make the most of the networks and links that already exist in the foundation years' sector (eg, across clusters, NPQICL, through the National College Children's Centre Leaders Network) to support each other in this time of change and uncertainty. This could also include making use of existing resources for leadership development (such as the National College's (2012) online leadership development resources for children's centre leaders). They should also make new links wherever possible, including with their local children's centre leader(s). In addition, leaders should consider their own health and welfare and identify strategies and support to help manage stress.
- Highly effective leaders have a role in developing leadership in others. However, this appeared to be less commonplace, compared with the other many motivational and staff development outcomes we heard about in this study. Children's centre leaders should consider how they can contribute to leadership succession planning and sustainability. Current leaders have a wealth of experience and skills to offer, and could play a greater role in spotting talent, and coaching and supporting the next generation of leaders.

The above recommendations are designed to build on the excellent practice identified in this research and secure even greater progress in meeting the needs of children and families, especially those who have most to gain from highly effective children's centre leadership.

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Appendix 1: Reviewing the literature

We agreed the following parameters, search terms, and search databases and websites with the National College for strand 1 of the project, the rapid review of recent evidence relating to effective leadership in children's centres.

Parameters

To be included in the review, sources conformed to the following agreed parameters:

- publication dates: between January 2003 and July 2011
- type of literature: published and semi-published literature
- type of evidence: empirical research and evaluation evidence, policy, discussion of theory and practice
- geographical scope: originating in the UK, except in the case of specific recommendations
- focus: children's centres, foundation years, leadership, system leadership

Search databases

NFER's librarians conducted systematic searches of the following databases, catalogues and websites, for effective leadership in children's centres:

- library databases (ie BEI, ChildData, Social Policy & Practice, BEIFC)
- grey literature (eg, conference reports)
- practitioner journals (ie Nursery World, CYPNow)
- government and associated websites and gateways (ie DfE, National College, LGA, Ofsted, CREC, C4EO, NCB, NFER)
- selected author searches (ie Allen, Field, Tickell, Anning, Siraj-Blatchford)

We also considered recommendations from experts (eg, via the National College) identifying influential research or policy in this field, including work conducted outside the UK.

For system leadership, we considered recommendations direct from the National College, publications available on the National College website, and expert recommendations.

Search terms

Leadership	Foundation years
entrepreneurial leadership leaders leadership leadership attributes leadership behaviour leadership development leadership effectiveness leadership knowledge leadership qualities leadership skills leadership strategies management strategies management styles NPQICL	child day care children's centres day care centres day nurseries early years centres early years settings Sure Start children's centres Sure Start centres early childhood settings
Integrated working	Challenges
agency cooperation integrated services integrated teams integrated working joint working multi agency teams multi agency working multi professional teams partnership working	capacity building change management change strategies child protection early intervention evaluation impact improvement improvement programmes monitoring outcomes safeguarding school readiness

Process for review

We undertook a four-stage process to reviewing sources:

- auditing all identified sources to a spreadsheet, to record information about the source including: the reference, web location if available, about the source (brief overview of aims, methods and themes being explored), sector/setting focus (eg, children’s centre, nursery school, early years general), leadership focus (eg, effective leadership, system leadership) (180 sources)
- prioritising sources for review, focusing on those relating to effective leadership in children’s centres, and system leadership in the foundation years supplemented by system leadership in other sectors; and allocating prioritised sources to the review team to consider the evidence on children’s centre leadership, school and other sector leadership, system leadership, and policy
- reviewing sources against standard headings, namely: i) leadership strategies and behaviours, ii) leaders’ knowledge, skills, attributes and technical management skills; iii) challenges; iv) practical issues and barriers; v) leadership skills needed in the future; and vi) implications for leadership development, workforce development and for policy on system leadership
- analysing and synthesising the evidence through coding, thematic grouping and drawing out quotations

Appendix 2: Selecting the case studies and ethical conduct

This research set out to explore highly effective leadership and system leadership through case studies, in a total of 25 case studies. In order to enable sufficient exploration in the fast-changing environment in which children's centre leaders work, the research team and National College agreed to focus the case studies in the following ways:

- five case studies of highly effective leadership in single-centre settings
- five case studies of good/improving leadership in single-centre settings so that researchers could understand leaders' journeys towards highly effective leadership and unpack some of the challenges leaders face
- 15 case studies exploring new and emerging organisational models for children's centres including multi-setting contexts and where leaders work across settings and the wider system

Each case study involved interviews with the children's centre leader, children's centre staff, staff from other agencies, local authority staff and parents. All 25 case studies explored the nature of highly effective leadership. The 15 case studies of new and emerging models also explored system leadership.

Table 1 outlines the criteria agreed with the National College for identifying and selecting case studies. For each of the three types of case study, we drew up a long list of potential case studies, from which we made a final selection (with reserves) to reflect the variables shown. In cases where selected children's centres were unable to take part, we contacted a reserve setting with similar characteristics so as to maintain the overall mix of settings involved.

Ethical conduct

The research was carried out in accordance with NFER's Code of Practice (2011). In particular, the team used the following procedures:

- Research participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research through written information sent with the initial request to participate. Interviewees were again informed about the purpose of the research at the beginning of all interviews.
- The research team asked all participants for their active consent to take part and for their interviews to be audio-recorded.
- All information identifying case study participants (personal data) was kept confidential and not divulged to anyone outside the research team.
- We informed participants that we would not name any centres, local authorities or individuals in our report.
- In response to a request from one participant to have their centre's participation in the research acknowledged, we asked all participating centre leaders whether they wished their centres to be included in the acknowledgements. We asked leaders to check with their colleagues (eg, local authorities and/or governing bodies/ advisory boards, as appropriate) if they needed to do so. We did not name any centres without the express consent of the leader concerned.
- In the vignettes illustrating leadership behaviours, we used pseudonyms for individuals and adopted a letter-code system for settings.

Table 1: Case study sampling frame

Type of case study	Focus	Sampling criteria	Breakdown of variables to be considered
1. Highly effective leadership case studies (5)	Each focusing on a single-centre setting and its leader and leadership	<p>Children’s centre Ofsted inspection (June 2010–June 2011): outstanding overall, with outstanding for leadership and management, and outstanding for capacity for sustained improvement</p> <p>Daycare Ofsted inspection (if applicable) (June 2010–June 2011): outstanding overall, with outstanding for leadership and management, and outstanding for capacity for sustained improvement</p>	<p>Across these 10 case studies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — urban/rural/coastal: a mix — male/female: if possible, at least two male leaders — lead agency: at least two local authority-run; at least two commissioned out to private, voluntary or independent sector; at least two school-run — phase 1, 2 and 3: a mix — population served: to include consideration of levels of deprivation, BME communities, etc
2. Good/improving case studies (5)	Each focusing on a single-centre setting and its leader and leadership	<p>Children’s centre Ofsted inspection (June 2010–June 2011): good overall, with outstanding for leadership and management and/or for capacity for sustained improvement</p> <p>Daycare Ofsted inspection (if applicable): good overall, with outstanding for leadership and management and/or for capacity for sustained improvement</p> <p>Or, if centre had not yet been inspected by Ofsted (as at October 2011), selection informed by local authority RAG ratings (which in turn are based on SEF data) and discussion with relevant local authority officers</p>	
3. Existing and emerging children’s centre models – case studies to explore leadership within and across the system (15)	Each focusing on leadership in the setting and its wider context (eg, organisational context; wider system)	<p>Range of organisational models and contexts, including: clusters, hub-and-spoke models, locality manager models, school campus models and early years teaching centres.</p> <p>Selected on the basis of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — children’s centre Ofsted inspection: outstanding overall, with outstanding for leadership and management, and outstanding for capacity for sustained improvement — daycare Ofsted inspection (if applicable): outstanding overall, with outstanding for leadership and management, and outstanding for capacity for sustained improvement — or, if centre had not yet been inspected, selection informed by conversations with local authority and advisory group staff to ascertain the extent to which this was an established or interesting emerging model. Both were considered in the long list of potential case studies 	<p>Across these 15 case studies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — urban/rural/coastal: a mix — male/female: if possible, at least three male leaders — lead agency: at least four local authority-run; at least four commissioned out to private, voluntary or independent sector; at least four school-run — phase 1, 2 and 3: a mix — population served: to include consideration of levels of deprivation, BME communities, etc

The dataset

This report is based on the following case study/interview data:

- Type 1 (highly effective centre leadership): 5 case studies
- Type 2 (good/improving centre leadership): 5 case studies
- Type 3 (system leaders and new models): 15 case studies

Case study interviewees:

- 25 children’s centre leaders (ie the case study leader)
- 28 local authority staff (including locality leaders)
- 60 senior and frontline staff within the case study setting
- 37 partner agency staff
- 12 parents
- 6 other leaders of children’s centres or foundation years’ settings

Table 2: Interviewees in each type of case study

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Totals
children’s centre leaders	5	5	15	25
local authority/area staff	5	4	19	28
children’s centre senior and frontline staff	8	12	30	50
partner agency staff	6	6	25	37
parents	4	2	6	12
leaders from another foundation years’ setting	0	0	6	6
Total	28	29	101	158

The National College exists to develop and support great leaders of schools and children's centres – whatever their context or phase.

- Enabling leaders to work together to lead improvement
- Helping to identify and develop the next generation of leaders
- Improving the quality of leadership so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed

Membership of the National College gives access to unrivalled development and networking opportunities, professional support and leadership resources.

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