

Leading for Longer

Factors impacting on the turnover of
Directors of Children's Services.



Acronyms used throughout this report

ALICSE	Advanced Leadership in an Integrated Children's Service Environment
AD	Assistant Director
ADCS	Association of Directors of Children's Services
CEX	Local Authority Chief Executive
CSSL	Children's Services Senior Strategic Leadership Programme
DASS	Director of Adult Social Services
DCSs	Directors of Children's Services
DFE	Department for Education
ILACS	Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services
LA	Local Authority
LGA	Local Government Association
LM	Lead Member
MMU	Manchester Metropolitan University
Ofsted	Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SOLACE	Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers
Twin-hatter	A role that covers DCSs and DASS
VUCA	Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity



Contents

1	Executive Summary	04
2	Introduction	07
3	Methodology	08
4	Characteristics of Respondents	10
5	Results and Analysis	12
5.1	Entry into the DCS Role	
5.2	Delivering the DCS Role	
5.3	Exit from a DCS Position	
6	Recommendations	31

1. Executive Summary

This study was designed to inform the sector about the factors that impact on the length of tenure of DCSs and to recommend actions to improve this.

The study was commissioned by The Staff College on behalf of the upon Consortium which is funded by Department for Education (DfE). It follows research highlighting the stability in children's services leadership teams as a key agent for improvement (Action Research into the Improvement in Local Children's Services, LGA and ISOS Partnership, 2016). Additionally, ADCS (ADCS DCS Update March '22) highlighted that the average current length of tenure of Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) is around 3 years. The report expressed concern about the stability of leadership in local authorities (LAs).

The target participants for this research included current and former local authority (LA) DCSs, as well as Chief Executives (CEX) and Lead Members (LM). All research was carried out in autumn 2022. Substantial quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the sector, leading to the decision to investigate the challenges to DCS tenure length and turnover rate using an appreciative enquiry approach with a focus on recommended actions to improve the stability of DCS leadership, increase the size of the DCS talent pool and avoid the potential future loss of talent.

Key messages

Succession planning and the pipeline of potential DCSs was a recurring feature of the research and allied to this was leadership development and support. This importance of being able to spot and nurture future talent was identified by serving DCSs, CEX and also LM even though there is no mandatory or single nationally recognised leadership development pathway leading to the DCS position. A key element in nurturing talent was around ensuring Assistant Directors (ADs) or other potential candidates had experience of a whole-council approach that bridges this gap between AD and DCS via a coherent, work-based leadership development approach. This was especially emphasised during CEX and LM interviews where the importance of being experienced in stakeholder engagement, political nous and whole council budget setting were identified.

Two interesting elements also emerged during the research which are linked to succession planning. Firstly was the emergence of the 'accidental DCS', i.e., a DCS who did not plan to become a DCS. This feeling of



being unprepared seems to have been exacerbated by the speed of promotion through the system that some DCSs experienced. Secondly, the diversity of the DCS cohort who participated in the study; **61%** are female and only **6%** are of ethnically diverse backgrounds. Both of these elements require greater consideration by local authorities and the government to strengthen training and wide reaching pathways into becoming a DCS.

Ahead of becoming a DCS, the research pointed to factors which potential DCSs could consider in order to prepare for the role. For example, before applying, getting to know and understand the council and CEX to determine if they would be a good match. Also, using a coach or mentor to help reflect on the new and challenging experiences they may encounter and seeking shadowing opportunities to broaden their exposure to different aspects of the role.

Once appointed to the role of the DCS, respondents valued mentoring and coaching highly, especially as a safe space for their professional learning. Of the DCSs that responded, **73%** had received coaching or mentoring support in the early stages of their role, and would welcome more structured and accessible mentoring and coaching provision, as well as access to “**softer informal training**” and work-based opportunities such as the opportunity to shadow a current DCS on the job. A further element of support welcomed by DCSs was the quality of peer and regional mentoring and coaching networks as these provided vital opportunities for DCSs and potential DCSs to speak “to peers about common challenges and opportunities in an open and confidential way”.

Making a difference to young people’s lives was a key satisfaction for many in being a DCS, but this was sometimes tempered by a local corporate and political environment as a significant challenge for DCSs, with lack of support from elected members being highlighted as an issue for DCSs but also for second- and third-tier officers who can be put off applying for promotion to DCS. Respondents called for more collaborative senior leadership across the LA, stating that “**a good rapport and relationship with the CEO and leader**” and the attitude of CEX are critical to the success of DCS recruitment and retention. They also stressed

the importance of the commitment and political support of the Chief Executives (CEX)/Lead Members (LM) for Children’s Services. Overall, it was the view of respondents that working in an LA where there is a lack of support or lower priority for Children’s Services affects the recruitment and retention of DCSs.

The local context was not the only challenging aspect of being a DCS which contributed to churn. DCSs referred to a lack of understanding by DfE in terms of the capacity issues and funding needs affecting Children’s Services. Respondents also spoke of the way in which central government silo working creates increased workload, with communications from a range of government departments resulting in a lack of a coherent policy focus on children. Aligned to this, respondents frequently cited the external inspection and regulatory regime as a major cause of frustration, with some stating that it caused them to leave their DCS post early. Several respondents spoke of the overload of different external inspections in Children’s Services, referring to Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS), Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), schools and care homes inspections amongst others, and the way in which the results of one inspection can impact on the service as a whole and results in blame.

Recommendations

Local Authorities

Based on the results, the following recommendations are made relating to the nature of the local corporate political environment:

- Create a more positive, supportive culture from the top;
- Ensure that any instances of overbearing behaviour, racism, misogyny and any forms of discrimination are eradicated so that people feel welcomed and valued in the workplace and that the pipeline of talent through to a DCS role is as wide as possible;
- Value Children’s Services and the role of the DCS;
- Ensure earlier talent spotting of people with potential;
- Recognise and promote DCS support strategies, such as ADCS regional working, networking and mentoring and coaching support;
- Adopt a whole-council approach to succession planning and leadership development which provides opportunities for more strategic, council-wide experiential learning;
- Develop supportive professional learning networks both inside the LA and beyond to develop leadership talent;
- Use the high-order communication and interpersonal skills identified by respondents in the talent-spotting process and in subsequent leadership development provision;
- Recognise the need for the DCS to be a role model in the leadership of professional learning with the abilities to provide leadership support.

Central government

Based on the results, the following recommendations are made relating to the role of central government:

- DfE to actively listen to DCSs and utilise their expertise;
- Enhance the government's priority focus on children;
- Reduce government silo working, reduce the negative effects of multiple government departments generating different policies and increased workload;
- Develop more coherent government policies around children;
- Improve funding for new duties;
- Reduce the damaging blame culture that has arisen through the negative reporting of inspection findings in the media;
- Make the inspection and regulation regime more proportionate for Children's Services.

All Stakeholders

Based on the results, the following recommendations are made relating to all stakeholders. Key themes include: talent spotting, skills and attributes, succession planning, leadership development, mentoring and coaching.

- Ensure earlier talent spotting of people with potential;
- Ensure that any instances of overbearing behaviour, racism, misogyny and any forms of discrimination are eradicated in all workplaces so that people feel welcomed and valued in the workplace and that the pipeline of talent through to a DCS role is as wide as possible;
- Nurture the talent pool across the full workforce and especially potential leaders from diverse backgrounds and colleagues from disciplines other than social work;
- Address the need for more coordination in the present 'messy' system of accessing training courses, leadership development, mentoring and coaching;
- Provide both formal training and experiential learning in the workplace to prepare candidates for the DCS role. This experiential professional learning includes structured shadowing of senior colleagues across the council and key system partners, mentoring and coaching;
- Explore the value of involving aspirant DCSs in multi-agency strategic projects in order to enable exposure to the corporate and political context and culture;
- Explore the long-standing regional leadership development programmes in terms of their interaction with and support for a council's own succession planning;
- Recognise the importance of peer and regional networks, which provide supportive leadership development in a mentoring or coaching culture;
- Provide more systematic and accessible leadership development support in LAs to address the gap between the AD role and promotion to DCS;
- National and local partners to recognise the challenges and successes of Children's Services and the role of the DCS.

Ofsted

Based on the results, the following recommendations are made relating to the place of inspection:

- Use a more constructive approach for the inspection of Children's Services.
- Reduce the damaging blame culture that has arisen through the negative reporting of inspection findings in the media.

"It has long been recognised that stable and effective leadership is a key ingredient for Children's Services improvement"

- Ofsted Social Care Annual Report, 2012-2013¹



2. Introduction

Most post-holders would agree that the DCS job is as rewarding as it is challenging, but it remains one of the hardest chief officer roles to fill and retain (Must Know: Children's Services, 2022¹). Anecdotal feedback to CEX and Lead Members from recruitment agencies suggests that the quality and quantity of applications for DCS roles are often significantly lower than for other local government roles of a similar level, although this cannot be definitively proven. The **upon** leadership development programme was commissioned by DfE in recognition of the significant challenges in attracting

and retaining talented leaders in DCS roles.

The purpose of the study is to inform the sector about the factors that contribute to the current length of tenure of Directors of Children's Services and recommend actions to improve this.

"Recruiting and retaining good staff are arguably the biggest challenges in the social care sector as well"

- His majesty's Chief inspector of Ofsted³

3. Methodology

This research was undertaken in autumn 2022.

The methodology included:



Desk-based research



Online questionnaires



Focus groups



One-to-one interviews

The target sample for this research was current and former local authority DCSs. To capture a third-person perspective, an online questionnaire and some focus groups were also undertaken with LA CEX and LM for Children's Services.

Desk-Based Research

To begin the study, desk-based research was undertaken, including an analysis of secondary research and existing data reports, for example, the [ADCS DCS Update March '22](#), and identification of what is currently known in the sector. The findings of the desk-based research helped to shape the lines of enquiry and questions that formed the online questionnaire.

Online Questionnaire

Current and former DCSs were invited to contribute to an online questionnaire which included a combination of quantitative (closed) and qualitative (open-ended) questions. This supported measurement and statistical analysis, as well as provided opportunities for more in-depth responses.

The questionnaire was designed to explore potential factors contributing to turnover and tenure that might be associated with the different phases of the DCS role, as follows:



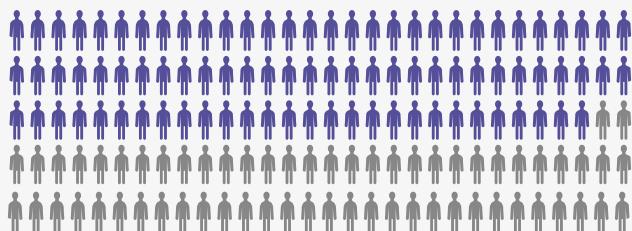
For each phase of DCS employment, the questionnaire enquired about factors that might have contributed to the levels of turnover within the role.

In order to maximise the quality and quantity of information that the DCSs provided, the questionnaire asked respondents to provide substantial details about their first DCS appointment in particular rather than asking DCSs to describe all of their DCS posts in detail. This decision was made in order to obtain full information about at least one DCS role per respondent, as describing multiple roles might have been too time consuming. This greater detail enabled the study to explore potential connections and correlations within the data to gain insights into the factors at play in DCS stability of tenure.

At the point of the study being commissioned, obtaining responses from **50-70** DCSs was considered an optimistic target. Therefore, the questionnaire exceeded expectations, obtaining responses from **116** current and recent DCSs. Many respondents also commented on the positive, cathartic nature of the study's reflective process, and several focus group contributors were encouraged by the discussion of issues with peers.

88/150

Out of a total of 150 current DCSs nationally, 88 (59%) participated.



28 former DCSs also contributed.

During the questionnaire, contributors were provided with an opportunity to volunteer for a focus group and/or confidential one-to-one interview. On completion of the questionnaire, all respondents who confirmed they wished to engage further in a focus group and/or interview were invited to do so. In total, **5** respondents wished to participate in a focus group, **18** wished to participate in a confidential interview and **46** were happy to be considered for both.

Focus Groups

A total of five focus groups took place, with **21** current and two former DCSs participating out of the **51** who originally stated in their questionnaire responses that they wished to engage in a focus group. Participation in all focus groups and subsequent interviews was by self-selection. A range of dates and times was offered to all those who volunteered, and those who had availability at those times contributed.

The key themes and findings from the questionnaire were collated and presented along with further prompts on which the focus groups could reflect.

(Notes for DCS Focus Groups).

One-to-One Interviews

To delve deeper into the factors contributing to the length of tenure and to identify actions that could improve the situation in the future, a small number of in-depth one-to-one interviews was carried out.

A total of seven current and two former DCSs were interviewed out of the **64** that stated in the questionnaire that they wished to engage in an interview.

Inclusion of CEX and LM

To capture further insight into the factors contributing to the length of tenure and turnover of DCSs, LA CEX and LM were invited to contribute to the research and provide a third-person viewpoint. A separate online questionnaire, with questions based on observations from the DCS questionnaire findings, was developed for this part of the research. From this questionnaire, we aimed to gather their perspective on the appointment of DCSs and to understand whether they considered the ‘pipeline’ supply of applicants at the point of entry into the role to be satisfactory.

On completion of the online questionnaire, CEX and LM were also invited to engage in a focus group. (DCS Turnover Research - CEX and LM Focus Group discussion topics). A total of **10** CEX and **23** LM completed the questionnaire, with four LM and one Chief Executive engaging in one of two focus groups.

Summary

In summary, substantial data were collected from the sector, leading to the decision to investigate the challenges to DCS tenure and turnover using an appreciative enquiry approach, with a focus on actions to improve the situation, i.e.,

“a collective inquiry into the best of what is, in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling” (Bushe, 2013).

The questionnaire process, followed by the focus groups and interviews, provided a range of instruments and opportunities to elicit the views of DCSs and enabled them to contribute a wide range of personal perspectives.

Due to the nature of the research, sensitivity around responses was considered from the early development of the questionnaire through to the focus groups and interviews. Consequently, the views provided in this report are not attributed to individuals; however, the authors can vouch for their authenticity.



4. Characteristics of Respondents

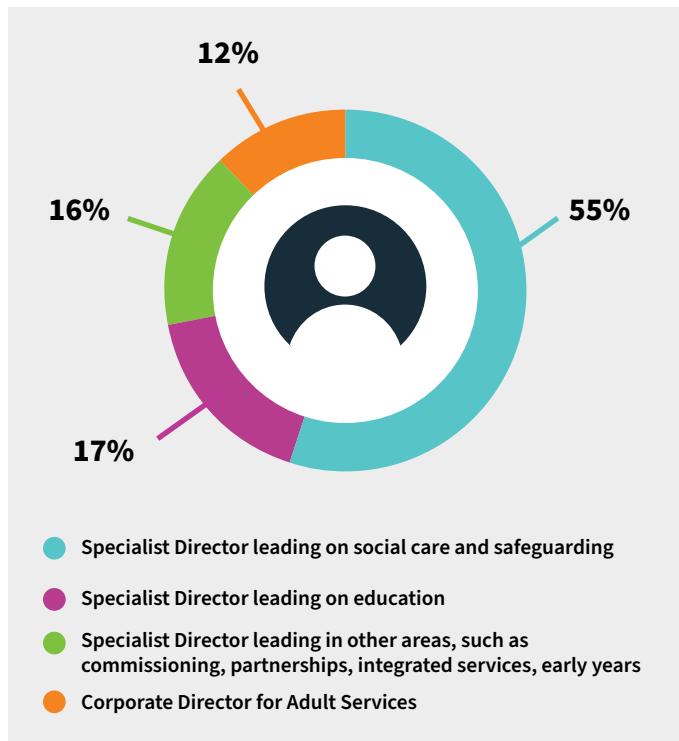
The following section gives details of the respondents to provide insight into the experience, location and characteristics of those that participated in the study.

Sector Background

Of the responding DCSs, over half came from a social care background (**64%**), with the highest proportion of those coming from the East region. The remaining **36%** had a background in education, local government or other, with the highest proportion of those being from the London region.

Previous Roles Held

Of the questionnaire participants, the role descriptions of their positions held prior to becoming a DCS for the first time were:



It is worth noting that **12%** of responding DCSs took up the role having previously been a DASS. This means that a significant proportion of current and recent DCSs took up the role while already operating at a similar strategic level rather than being promoted from a less senior position.

Number of DCS Positions Held

55% were either in their first DCS position or had only held one post.



29% had held two DCS positions.



10% had held three DCS positions.



5% had held four positions or more.



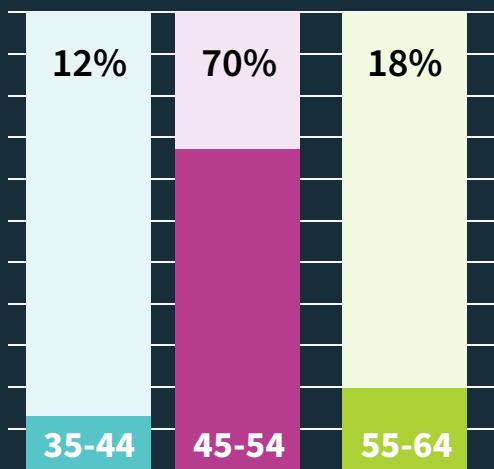
Almost a quarter of those that had multiple DCS posts, included at least one interim position. Of the **98** respondents who had held one or two DCS roles, **65%** had a background in the social care sector and **9%** in the education sector. Of the **18** respondents who had held three or more DCS roles, **44%** had a background in the social care sector and **28%** in the education sector.

Coaching and Mentoring



Of the responding DCSs, **73%** received either coaching or mentoring in the early stages of becoming a DCS for the first time. This study does not make a distinction between the different forms of support provided by coaching and mentoring; instead, it considers them together as forms of individual support. This support was provided less often in unitary councils (in **69%** of cases) than in other types of council (in **75–80%** of cases).

Age on Appointment to 1st DCS Role



Of first-time DCSs who were aged 54 or over at the time of their first appointment to a DCS role, 80% came from a social care background.

Of the DCSs aged 45 years or under at the time of their first appointment to a DCS role, 10–15% started their first post on an interim basis.

Of the respondents, 85% DCSs aged 45 years or under were appointed to their first post in an LA with an Ofsted Requires Improvement or Inadequate judgement, whereas only 55% of DCSs aged 54 years or more were appointed in these same circumstances.

Gender

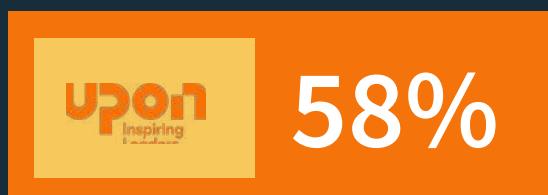


61% female

39% male



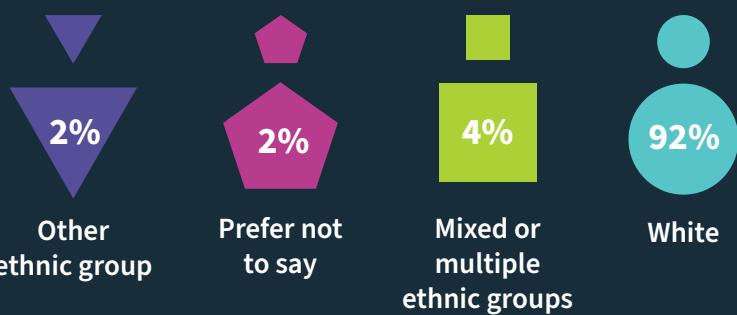
Training Leading to DCS Role



of respondents had completed the Upon Aspirant DCS programme or its equivalent at the time. There was no significant difference in the levels of participation in this training by people from different sector backgrounds. However, 92% of respondents who held their first DCS post in a county council completed the Aspirant programme, compared with less than 50% who held their first DCS post in other types of councils.

However, this is at odds with the number of participants who had completed the Upon programme during the last three years. In this instance, 24 participants (28%) were from a County, 37 participants (43%) were from a metropolitan authority and 26 participants (30%) were from a unitary authority.

Ethnicity



Twin Hatters

30%

of respondents ‘twin hatters’ in their first DCS position, i.e., holding the DCS and Corporate DASS roles concurrently.

This is quite a lot higher than the current national level of twin hatters (15%), reflecting a reducing trend within the sector. Notably, this scenario was far less prevalent in London and metropolitan borough councils.

5. Results and analysis

5.1 Entry into the DCS Role

Career Pathways

There is currently no mandatory, nationally recognised career pathway that leads to the DCS position and prepares candidates for it. Thus, the pathway to becoming a DCS is quite messy, nationally incoherent and somewhat chaotic, quite unlike that in other professions, where national leadership frameworks underpin a coherent approach.

Several ‘seasoned’ contributors commented on the national trends they have observed over the years that have influenced the career pathway of appointed DCSs:

- The very first DCSs, when the statutory role was created in 2004, were quite often the incumbent Directors of Education;
- The general trend over the next few years was for DCSs to increasingly come from more mixed backgrounds, social care in particular;
- The change that has occurred since Baby P and other high-profile child death tragedies is that many councils now seem to think it is ‘necessary’ for the DCS to have a social care background.

Many DCS respondents pointed out that, now, “***you are seen as a risk if you are not from a social care background***”, which inevitably “***reduces the talent pool to DCS***”. One DCS said that

“social workers and traditional professional development groups are most likely to be encouraged to progress; but what about other disciplines?”

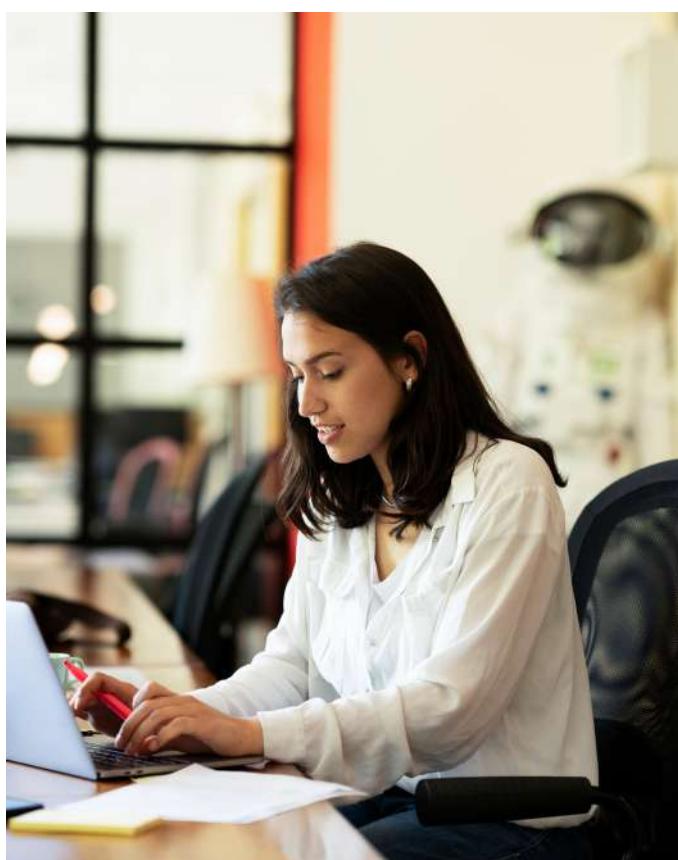
It was generally acknowledged by participants that any specific sector background should not be an essential criterion in the recruitment of DCSs. They spoke with conviction about how “***incredibly wide and diverse the DCS job is...you would need to be 95 years of age in order to be experienced in all areas***”.

While, clearly, career experience in the children’s professions provides a strong foundation for DCSs’ understanding of some of the work, the DCS role itself does not actually need technical expertise in service

delivery; it is a strategic leadership role, and the DCS has a senior leadership team which supplies the necessary expertise in the different service areas. Several comments were made about the need to attract people with potential to the role, rather than a particular professional background, as this suitability match is a more likely predictor of future success in the role.

Several DCSs, LM and CEX respondents within the focus groups elaborated on this issue, with some referring to the recent upon research report ‘[Pushing at an Open Door](#)’, which was commissioned by The Staff College and which researched the loss of potential DCSs with a senior education background and explored the ways in which this potential loss of talent could be addressed.

The report identified that some senior education leaders in academy trusts have developed the transferable strategic leadership skills necessary in the DCS role and could be encouraged to transfer into local authorities, and, thus, the report made recommendations for career development and workplace experiences that could prepare the wider sector for potential development into strategic roles within Children’s Services.



Case Study: Accidental DCS

An interview with one DCS provided an insight into the emerging phenomenon of the accidental DCS, i.e., a person who did not have a career path in mind and found themselves becoming a DCS either on a substantive or interim basis.

One DCS outlined their career path. Initially, as a Head of Service, they were asked to apply for an Assistant Director role when it became available, and they moved into that position. After being successful in that post, they were subsequently invited to apply to be a local authority's interim DCS, a post which they held for an extended period of time due to the interim nature of the council's Chief Executive role. Moving into this interim role allowed the council to secure some continuity, although the local authority was slow to move towards a substantive position. Eventually, due to the uncertainty around interim roles, the person decided to apply for a substantive DCS role elsewhere and secured this position, even though they did not want to move employment.

Having moved into an accidental position before securing a substantive role, it allowed the DCS to reflect on their career path and gave them the ability to support other DCSs in this position. The DCS reflected on the importance of both the ADCS programmes and also on the quality of the regional support from neighbouring DCSs who were in post. The DCS reflected that the quality of regional support was variable, with some areas having very strong, regional peer-to-peer support, and other local authority areas feeling as though they were in competition with their neighbours. This DCS reflected that support is also now being prioritised by ADCS. Allied to this was the importance of career structures and mentoring. The DCS reflected on the more structured career path within health, for example, when moving from practice to clinical roles. Similarly, the DCS discussed the structured approach within the police service. The DCS reflected on the need for local authorities to spot talent within their organisation and to redesign their approaches and develop 'step up' programmes, including mentoring and coaching, to help build resilience and better manage the jump between roles.

Bridging the Gap Between AD and DCS

While several sectors within the children's sector, such as the social care, public health and education sectors, offer professional and career development up to the level of Specialist Director (usually AD at the second tier reporting to the DCS), there is a wide gulf that exists between those AD positions and the role of the DCS.

DCSs identified the gap between the AD role with its more operational ways of working and the more strategic nature of the DCS role as a significant challenge to DCS recruitment. They identified from personal experience that "**the issue of developing system leadership skills and a strategic perspective is seen (by ADs) as a challenge**". One DCS reflected that "**one thing that put me off was having to know everything**". However, the DCSs were keen to offer suggestions to address the present weaknesses in work-based professional development and support for ADs. One DCS noted,

"We need to help them to understand what the role is, as it can feel like an incredibly big jump between Service Director and DCS".

However, others were also clear about the scale of this challenge.

This suggests a whole-council approach to leadership development, with the involvement of all Corporate Directors in a coherent, work-based leadership development programme. This need for a whole-council approach to leadership development is echoed by the DCSs who identified the need to give second-tier officers experience in other areas of Children's Services' as being key to bridging the gap between AD and DCS. One DCS in interview proposed that The Staff College offer a separate **upon** leadership course especially for education senior leads, "**it would be good and could offer more exposure to the area of working in the political and corporate arena**".

Succession Planning

It was reported by contributing DCSs that many of them did not aspire to become a DCS earlier in their career and that there was no structured approach to succession planning which encouraged this. Furthermore, they reported that this situation still prevails, and, although they might observe within their current workforce some who might be potentially well suited to becoming a

DCS, it is relatively uncommon for Children's Service professionals to aspire to become a DCS. In fact, a phenomenon which emerged from this study is that of the *accidental DCS*, i.e., a person who did not plan to become a DCS and, right up to the point of becoming one, had little intention of holding the role.

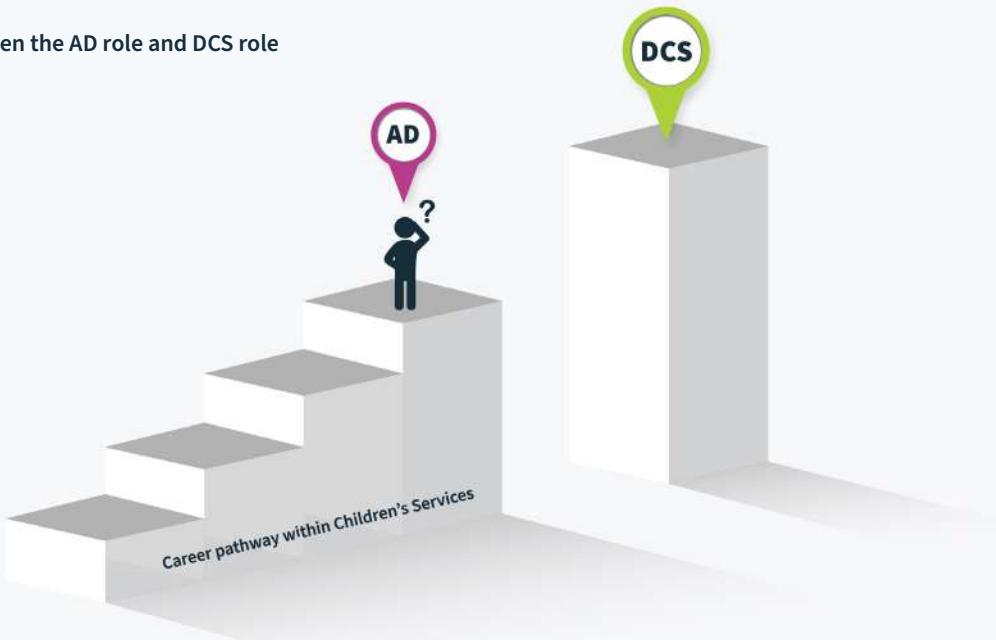
It would be of interest in future studies to explore whether the incidence of DCSs finding themselves in a role that had not been part of their career plan actually contributes in any significant way to turnover rate or tenure length.

The unpreparedness and unplanned nature of becoming a DCS seems to have been exacerbated by the speed of promotion through the system that some DCSs experienced. Several contributors explained how they found themselves in very senior roles (AD or even DCS) with still quite limited experience, and it seems quite feasible, as some focus group comments suggested, that this lack of experience might have contributed to the lack of DCS resilience and length of tenure. Furthermore, given the current workforce shortages in social care, it seems likely that more rapid promotion to senior levels might continue over the coming years.

Given the well-articulated point about the strategic leap required to become a DCS and the size of the gulf from the AD role, calls for a more organised approach to the development of people for the DCS role were issued by respondents with several of the DCSs who took part in the interviews considering whether specific training or qualifications should be mandated ahead of becoming a DCS. The point was made that the sector needs much clearer articulation and promotion of the DCS role in career terms to reduce some of the mystique surrounding succession planning and leadership development.

It was also suggested by DCSs, LM and CEX that talent spotting is not going on early enough to identify "**the right people**" to be developed into the DCS role. Survey responses suggested that there are a few examples of councils that are addressing the need for talent spotting and leadership development from middle leadership onwards and are clearly addressing the need for a coherent system of succession planning, but, largely, there was a call for "**seeing the potential in people**" at an earlier stage; there is a "**lack of mentoring and coaching and picking up bright young things at an early stage. We could do more, instead we burn them out**". This need to identify and develop talent earlier is potentially becoming more urgent as DCS respondents frequently referred to the age of their present senior managers and ADs, they are in their fifties "**and so they don't want to be in a pipeline**". This issue of the age

The gap between the AD role and DCS role



of candidates in the DCS succession planning pipeline is possibly worthy of further data collection.

Weaknesses in the talent-spotting process can also be seen in the lack of diverse backgrounds of talented people coming forward to be a DCS. Although DCS focus group attendees celebrated the diversity of the DCS group in terms of gender, with over half of DCSs that took part in the questionnaire being women, the challenge of attracting DCSs from diverse ethnic backgrounds is considerable, with only **6%** of DCSs that engaged in the study coming from this demographic.

Some focus groups also highlighted how, in their first-hand experience, how race and gender can very quickly become weaponised in corporate life, and this can double the loneliness and vulnerability of being a leader within the sector. Such first-hand experiences cannot be ignored and all stakeholders should use this as an opportunity to reflect on their workplace cultures to ensure that racism, misogyny and any forms of discrimination within the workplace are not tolerated. In addition to being unacceptable, it may also lead to losing staff and reduce the future DCS pipeline.

The need for positive action to expose second and third-tier officers from ethnically diverse backgrounds to targeted professional development opportunities is clear and echoes the upon research 'Breaking through the mistrust' which focusses on increasing ethnically diverse leadership in children's services. One DCS identified the strong talent management in operation across their council and spoke of their needs identification processes and the reverse mentoring scheme in operation, "**12 staff of colour help to mentor**

leaders to develop an understanding of structural racism". This council has a "**strong young staff networking culture**" and planned pathway support for "people with ambition".

Overall, in relation to succession planning, respondents suggested that there should be:

- Greater investment in development, in particular, investment in succession planning by council leaders and politicians to grow aspirant DCSs for the future;
- Talent spotting at an earlier stage;
- Encouragement and promotion of a variety of routes which can lead to the DCS role.

While the personal mentorship and guidance provided by serving DCSs to senior team members who they consider well suited as future DCSs were reported to be very strong, there were few examples of highly coordinated succession planning strategies to support those assuming the DCS role.

That having been said, although improvements to preparation, training and induction might be helpful, the indication received from contributors to this study was that these alone would not have substantially affected the length of their tenure and their decisions to stay or leave. Furthermore, the increased use of interim DCSs in recent times is an important factor to consider, as 'parachuted' interim DCSs, for example, may not be the most appropriate role model for aspiring ADs. The stability of DCS tenure may be necessary first, in order to establish a coherent and effective system of succession planning and leadership development across a council.

Leadership Development and Training to Become a DCS

The upon Aspirant DCS programme attracted unequivocal praise in the questionnaire, with a few DCSs stating it to be the most important training they have ever participated in.

The most impactful features of this programme cited most often were:

- The focus on adaptive and systems leadership – the Aspirant DCS programme “*created the space and time to think and develop adaptive leadership skills and systems thinking*”;
- Networking with others – this networking included being with other aspirant directors, creating “*a brilliant network of other soon-to-be DCSs*” and a “*network of peer support that is still in place today*” and provided rich discussion and “honest reflection from existing and former DCSs about the realities of the role”;
- Hearing from those already in the role;
- The opportunity for problem-solving through action learning sets;
- Training that is “*bespoke to the role providing awareness of legislative requirements, approaches linked to OFSTED and DFE, strategic triangle, Volatility, uncertainty, complex and ambiguous (VUCA), wicked issues etc.*”;
- The number of expert speakers – there was “*high quality input from a range of academics that helped shape my thinking*”.
- In the focus groups, it was suggested that the programme was helpful for developing personal leadership perspectives, but some respondents stated that it did not sufficiently expose or prepare participants for some of the practical realities of the DCS role. At least one DCS said that the programme is good in that it has “*DCSs speaking...but nothing prepares you for the complexities of real life*”.

Furthermore, of the DCS respondents, only **58%** had completed the programme or its equivalent at the time, suggesting possible issues of access or prioritisation by line managers earlier in the career of the aspirant DCS. Several DCSs expressed their disappointment at not being able to access this leadership development provision. This is likely to be a historical issue given that

the current programme has now been operating for several years.

It is worth noting, however, that, of the **42%** of respondents who had not completed an aspirant DCS programme, none suggested that the absence of such training was a significant factor contributing to tenure or turnover.

Respondents highlighted the following aspects of the DCS role as those which aspirant DCSs would benefit for training on

- ▶ Working within the political context;
- ▶ Leading transformation;
- ▶ Budget-setting process within the council, plus related financial training;
- ▶ Working in the corporate environment and working as a team with other directors;
- ▶ Training and development on the wider responsibilities of a Corporate Director post rather than just the specifics for the DCS role;
- ▶ Induction into portfolio/policy areas where the DCS has little prior experience;
- ▶ Partnership working, especially with health partners;
- ▶ Legislative aspects, e.g., adoption, fostering, role of courts;
- ▶ Developing strategies for managing in a hostile environment;
- ▶ Managing inspection processes;
- ▶ Central government engagement;
- ▶ Network development;
- ▶ Identifying risks and developing measures to mitigate;
- ▶ Resilience and media training;
- ▶ Training about de facto governance roles, e.g., sitting on a company board;
- ▶ More Action Learning Set work.

Other DCSs spoke of the importance of ADs “**carrying out multi-agency strategic projects to get exposure to the corporate context and culture**” in order to develop the skills of partnership working in a political environment. These strategic partnership leadership skills were identified by DCS, CEX and LM as key skills and qualities required for the DCS role. This type of experiential, work-based, multi-agency project leadership is a feature of The Staff College leadership development programmes.

In the interviews, DCSs also referred positively to the long-standing ‘Leaders for London’ programme,

the North West Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) accredited leadership development programme and the East Midland’s Advanced Leadership in an Integrated Children’s Service Environment (ALICSE) and Children’s Services Senior Strategic Leadership (CSSSL) development programmes. These positively evaluated regional leadership programmes are potentially worthy of further exploration in terms of their interaction with and support for a council’s own succession planning and also in terms of the involvement of DCSs in this type of regional leadership development provision.

Case Study: CSSSL Programme

Leadership programmes were closely aligned with talent spotting. For example, one region operates a Children’s Services programme for people at Head of Service level to help with their professional learning and also with the talent pipeline. This programme is purposely employed before people secure Tier 2 posts to help ensure that they are better equipped for those roles and also to support the talent pipeline. Pivotal to this programme are the DCSs and their Children’s Services senior team, who identify people at Head of Service level to participate in the programme, which lasts several months.

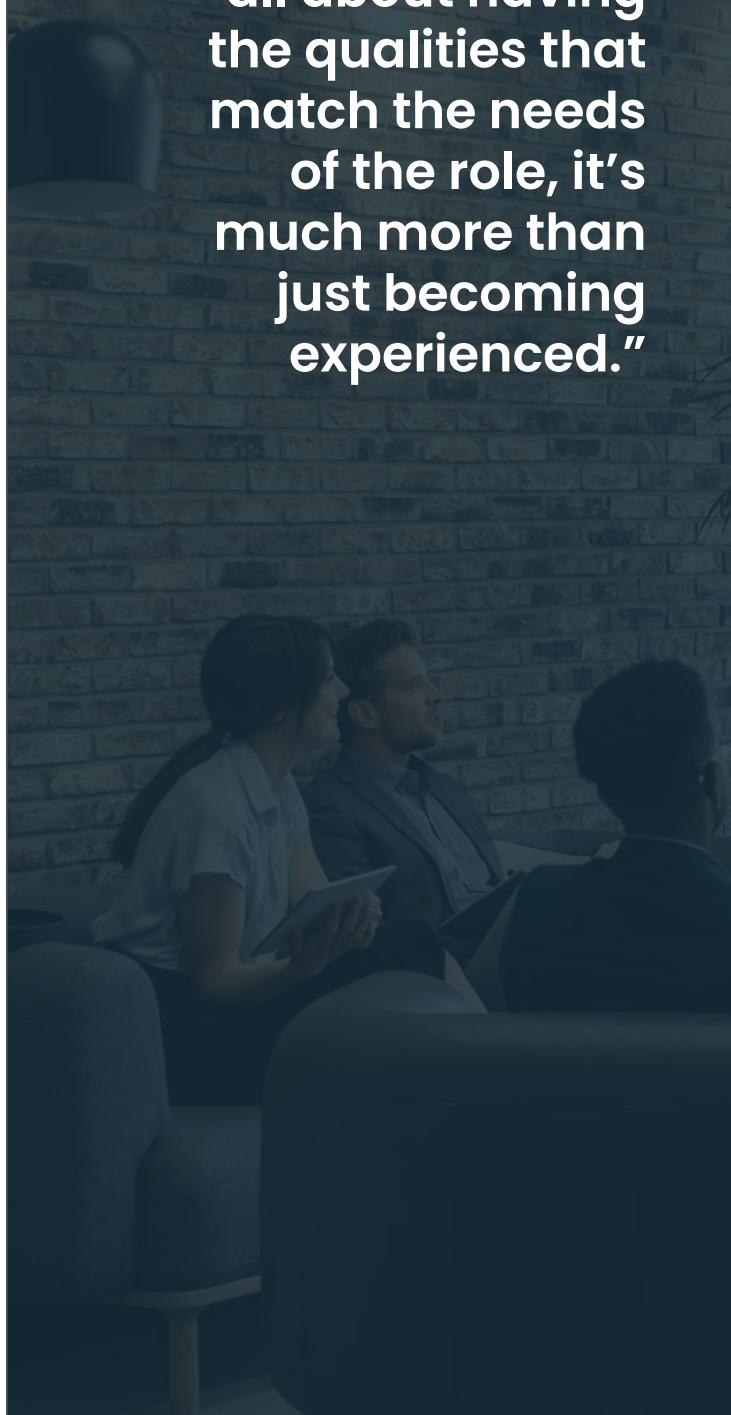
The region’s DCSs provide workshops alongside regional council Chief Executives and other key stakeholders, and participants are supported via professional coaching. Whilst some technical and specialist sessions are provided, the majority of the programme focuses on general leadership qualities and also operating in a political environment. Feedback from both participants and from the DCSs was hugely positive, with a number of participants securing Tier 2 posts within the region.

Qualities Needed to Become an Effective DCS

The study explored the qualities that serving DCSs identify as those most necessary in potential DCSs and, consequently, the qualities that the system should be spotting and developing in the leaders of the future. This list of qualities was developed incrementally through the series of focus groups in the study:

- ▶ The ability to see all sides of a situation and look from others' perspectives;
- ▶ A consistent positive attitude;
- ▶ Ability to look for strengths and solutions in situations;
- ▶ Not 'silo'-ed in their thinking;
- ▶ Inquisitive, asking questions and providing challenges;
- ▶ Able to enjoy problem solving and able to break down complex situations;
- ▶ Able to hold their ground on important issues;
- ▶ Can champion the needs of children and families within a corporate context;
- ▶ Will strike a good balance between innovation and tradition;
- ▶ Highly motivated to see progress;
- ▶ Personally resilient, can cope with high emotional challenge and manage stress;
- ▶ Understand how to take an organisation to another level;
- ▶ Can earn the trust of others;
- ▶ Is comfortable not knowing everything and is not consumed by 'imposter syndrome';
- ▶ Able to question, front reports, communicate with a wide audience and build confidence;
- ▶ Has an interest in the wider corporate and political aspects of the system.

"I can spot a potential DCS in my teams, often when they are still quite early in their careers. It's all about having the qualities that match the needs of the role, it's much more than just becoming experienced."



As one DCS put it, “**It’s not about your expertise, it’s about asking questions and mobilising people**”. The importance of being a good communicator and “**taking the team with you**” were seen as key attributes by DCSs, CEX and LM. One Chief Executive referred to the importance of “**the ability to provide good support and challenge through critical thinking and questioning**”. Another referred to “**someone who does not know everything; but asks questions, isn’t shy and retiring...is inquisitive and challenging**”. Similarly, respondents referred to the importance of being able to “**demystify your technical expertise, for example, the social care or education side of your role, in linking with the corporate agenda**”. This ability to ‘demystify’, or, as another put it, “**the ability to boil down wicked issues to something simple**”, is required in order to communicate effectively with a wide audience. As one Lead Member identified, “**the DCS has to command the respect of so many different people, for example all senior members of our team, teachers in schools, wider partners in health, the chief constable and chief exec**”. These responses highlight the high-level, strategic nature of the communication skills required at DCS level.

An important second area of interpersonal skills needed by DCSs identified by respondents concerns the ability to network, “**demonstrating strategic relationship management and good emotional intelligence**”. This important strategic skill is symbolic of the gap between working at AD level and at DCS level. As one DCS put it, “**some ADs can be technically good, but there is a need to look for those who can network across the corporate arena**”. DCSs suggested the need to identify talented colleagues who “**look outwards, influence, use system leadership, and work with people positively**”. Respondents were clear about the need to work with partners across the system in order to achieve joint solutions and success for children. As one DCS said, “**the wisdom is across the wider system**”. Therefore, colleagues with strong networking, strategic relationship management and problem-solving skills and good emotional intelligence are seen as key talents to be spotted early in their Children’s Services career and developed as future leaders into the DCS role.

Thirdly, respondents referred to the importance of being able to manage stress and uncertainty and be “**level headed and resilient in the dominant blame culture**”. This resilience was regarded as key in the stressful working culture identified throughout this report. DCSs referred to the need for “**resilience**

to battle corporately for Children’s Services” and how “**working with Members is very different at Tier 2 level in terms of advocating for children and resources**”. This point, again, highlights the gap in skills development at AD to DCS level identified as a challenge in this report and suggests that building resilience in a challenging political environment is an important area for AD leadership development. DCS respondents referred to how “**it’s tough at the top**” and the need to “**put yourself outside your comfort zone**”. One summarised that you need to be “**not inflexible but with strength and big conviction**”. Another referred to the importance of identifying someone with the talent or potential to “**stick up for values and hold their own when people are shouting you down...often in relation to budget**”. These views refer to the importance of the skills and attributes of tenacity, stamina and personal values needed in a potential DCS.

Finally, respondents referred to the importance of DCSs being able to put themselves in others’ shoes and look at all sides of a situation. The qualities of empathy, or emotional intelligence, are, therefore, also important interpersonal attributes to consider in the talent-spotting arena and are potentially more challenging in terms of leadership development.

It was raised in the focus groups that activity should take place early in the career pathway to develop and promote these aforementioned qualities. Although the current aspirant and new DCS programmes are very effective at developing personal principles for leadership and could be expanded to explore these suggested qualities, these happen quite late in the career pathway to DCS.

Some DCSs suggested that a new strand of succession planning activity could be introduced alongside the existing sector-based leadership programmes to promote and develop these qualities in emerging leaders. They suggested that improved training might contribute to better preparation for the role and, subsequently, extend tenure.

The feedback from LM and CEX also illuminated a variety of qualities which they regarded as being important for the DCS to succeed. Some of these qualities were technical, such as the ability to understand legislative changes, but many were more personal.

Qualities LM and CEX regarded as being important for the DCS to succeed:



Technical qualities

- Good grasp of how the LA system works, report writing and how to develop and support a strategic approach to the statutory delivery of work under the current economic climate and legislation;
- Flexibility to change systems as legislation changes and ability to lead on major transformational change, shaping and influencing cutting-edge thinking and innovative practice;
- Ability to deliver change at pace and make decisions quickly while taking all evidence into account;
- Ability to lead a performance management culture which delivers high-quality outcomes;
- Politically aware but non-partisan – it is important they recognise the role of the LM and see them as part of the team;
- Professional competence with the ability to range from the strategic to the tactical and back again;



Working with others

- Wide experience and understanding of working with parents, teachers, social workers, councillors and fellow officers;
- Effective at partnership working, be child and family centred, trauma informed and truly restorative;
- Ability to work well with partner organisations, statutory and non-statutory, keeping children at the heart of decision making;
- Relationship building – DCSs need support within and outside the council to be successful;
- Ability to be a servant leader;
- “A rhinoceros hide but with highly tuned antennae”;
- Be part of the ‘team’ and respect the workforce, the support works two ways and recognise there may be some resistance to “new” ways of working;
- Strong leadership both functionally and corporately, strategic vision and oversight to deliver improved outcomes for young people;



Personal qualities

- Highly developed networking, partnership, advocacy, influencing, negotiating and presentation skills.
- Good, professional judgement, commitment and creativity;
- Good skills including strong communication, to be able to reach all parts of the service, getting along with staff and supporting teams working in difficult circumstances;
- Emotional resilience, strategic breadth and ability to work as part of a strategic directorate team - it is crucial that DCSs do not adopt a ‘silo’-ed or embattled approach.
- Calm to the point of being unflappable but not robotic;
- Compassion, dedication, honesty and knowledge of the area and factors affecting the area and elected members;
- A positive contribution to the future of the service and improvement ideas;
- Vision and tenacity.

Individual Support when Starting First DCS Role

Coaching or mentoring was recognised by DCSs to be one of the most important forms of support in the early stages of being a DCS, with around **73%** of DCSs receiving coaching support early in their first DCS role, often through the ADCS matching scheme. Unfortunately, it was also mentioned that, currently, leadership development through mentoring and coaching is getting more challenging, especially post COVID, due to staff shortages and exhaustion; "**I did a lot of political instruction with them but we are now so short staffed I don't see them so often**".

The greatest impact of coaching or mentoring for DCSs early in their careers was in:



Safe reflection



Managing emotions



External sense checking



Coping with new experiences within the role.

Coaching support was seen to be "**always helpful on a personal level**" and was acknowledged as providing a 'safe space' for a first-time DCSs. One said, "**this (mentoring) provided a helpful space to help me understand the corporate part of my role**". Another spoke of "**a safe space to consider some of the tricky challenges of the role, my style, leadership approach**". One also stated, "**a listening ear, ability to try out scenarios and talk with someone who had done the role before**". One DCS recorded how they were coached by an external coach and mentored by an experienced DCS. They said that the coaching "**was critical in helping me to prepare for the role in terms of personal confidence and resilience**". Another said, "**I was mentored by a recently retired DCS who I had total confidence in and**

it helped me to test out my responses to situations". Another DCS had an executive coach "**paid for by my employer. Her support and challenge was the greatest factor in applying for the (DCS) role and surviving**".

Overall, however, as with succession planning and leadership development, DCS, CEX and LM respondents agreed that there is a need for more structured and accessible mentoring and coaching provision. One DCS said, "**we need more formalised coaching roles structure and we need more training on how to be a mentor and there is not much available in the way of how to find a good mentor, more is needed**". Contrasting views were offered regarding the 'right' time for such coaching to begin. Some mentioned that such opportunities ought to be available earlier in the career pathway. However, one DCS referred to being recruited as a very new AD to the Aspirant DCS programme by The Staff College and questioned whether this might have been *too early*. "**Don't push them too early**" was the message, and others agreed that there are benefits, such as being able to build resilience, to having long periods at AD level working next to a strong and stable DCS.

Some respondents also referred to the additional need for "**softer informal training**", which gives support for improved work-based or experiential leadership development opportunities for ADs and other colleagues across the council. Amongst these work-based opportunities, DCSs identified the value of shadowing senior colleagues, i.e., "**properly shadowing the DCS, on the job**"..."**to understand how to operate in Children's Services team and at Board level**" and the importance of mentoring and coaching to "**provide a safe space to discuss challenges with an experienced DCS; and to help with understanding the corporate and political context**".

Finally, the importance of peer and regional mentoring and coaching networks was recorded strongly. Respondents referred to the value of "**speaking to peers about common challenges and opportunities in an open and confidential way**".

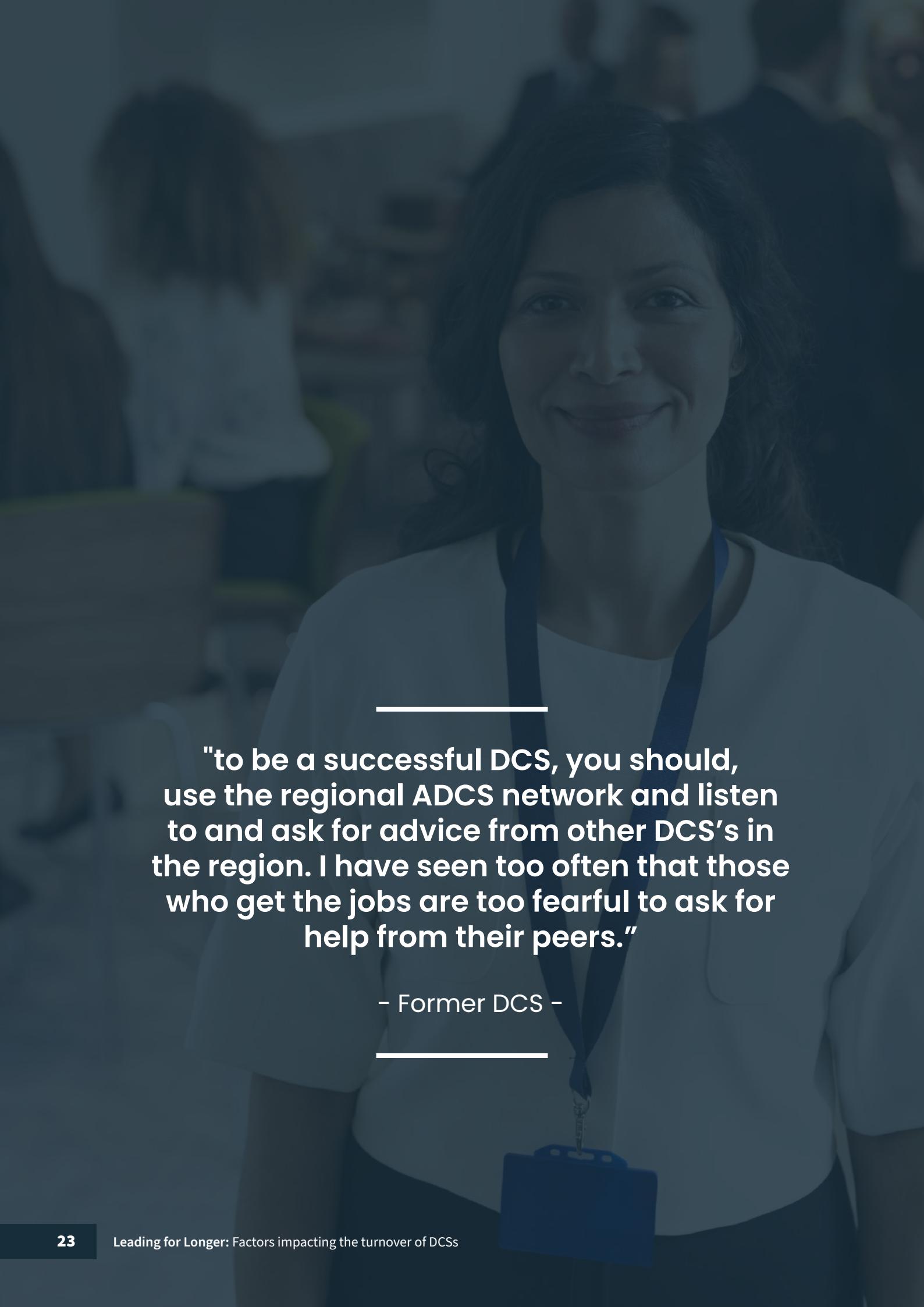
This need for high-quality and accessible shadowing, mentoring and coaching support for ADs who are making the leap to the DCS role again indicates the need for a systematic approach to leadership development across the council and high-quality, work-related leadership support. There was some evidence of DCSs having these nurturing leadership development qualities. For example, one shared that "**seven of my ADs have become DCSs which must be a record**".

Advice to Potential DCSs

The questionnaire asked DCSs to reflect on the process of becoming a DCS for the first time and the early stages of working in the role in order to establish whether there is learning from experience and hindsight which may contribute to improvements in the sector.

Over 300 separate suggestions and pieces of advice were provided relating to this early phase of the DCS role and which might contribute to resilience within the role.

-  **01** Establish a strong peer-support network with other DCSs and do not hesitate to reach out to them;
-  **02** Get to know the council well, in particular, the Chief Executive, before you apply, during the recruitment process and in the early stages of the role, and walk away if you do not find a good match;
-  **03** Get a coach or a mentor to help you reflect on the new and challenging experiences you will encounter;
-  **04** Seek shadowing opportunities to broaden your exposure to all the different aspects of the role;
-  **05** Remain self-aware, look after yourself and understand the limitations of the role;
-  **06** Seek leadership development to prepare for the role, in particular, the programmes for aspirant and new DCSs;
-  **07** Learn as much as possible about the local political landscape and how to carry out your leadership role in this environment;
-  **08** Prioritise getting to know your senior teams and building a great team that works well with you and has a shared vision;
-  **09** Remain professionally curious to learn about every aspect of the DCS role;
-  **10** Try to obtain experience or training in new technical areas, e.g., transforming services, budgets and financial management.



"to be a successful DCS, you should, use the regional ADCS network and listen to and ask for advice from other DCS's in the region. I have seen too often that those who get the jobs are too fearful to ask for help from their peers."

- Former DCS -

5.2 Delivering the DCS Role

What became clear in the study is that the dominant factors that contribute to DCS turnover are most closely linked to DCSs' levels of satisfaction and frustration in delivering the role. DCSs became most animated when discussing their satisfactions and frustrations with their role, and both the survey responses and the focus group discussions featured a balance of these positives and negatives.

Satisfactions

There was a palpable sense of the honour and privilege of being a DCS and the deep satisfaction the role can provide in improving the life chances of children.



Frustrations

There was an intensity of frustration with significant aspects of the role which impede DCSs from leading the most impactful services.



Satisfying Aspects of Being a DCS

Based on the views of responding DCSs, the most satisfying aspects of the role can be classified into six general themes, as follows:

	Form of Satisfaction	% of DCS responses
1	Having a positive impact on children and families	33%
2	Creating and contributing to an effective and improving service environment	31%
3	Helping colleagues and partners to work effectively	22%
4	The variety, challenge and influence of the role	8%
5	The stimulating policy environment	6%
6	Being part of a peer network	2%

All satisfactions highlighted by DCSs are associated with making a positive impact, as illustrated by this selection of comments below which were taken from the survey

"The opportunity to set a tone, build a culture of psychological safety and curiosity."

"Helping children and families to resolve issues."

"Championing children, young people, family and community at the heart of local government and wider public service institutions."

"The ability to make a real difference to culture of an organisation and outcomes for children, young people and their families."

"Autonomy to make major change and impact on the lives of 1000's of children."

"Establishing a culture where people can shine and deliver for children."

"It is work that matters for children. It makes a difference. Colleagues are committed, expert and active. It is intensely interesting, challenging and fulfilling, even when very difficult!"

Frustrating Aspects of Being a DCS

The discussions about the frustrations that DCSs have with the role were often animated, but, in almost every case, their frustrations did not seem to be unreasonable or petulant; they were borne instead of the disproportionality of circumstances which had an adverse impact on the effectiveness of their role. For example, all DCSs agreed that there is a role for inspection in the system, but almost every comment about the current Ofsted arrangements criticised how much capacity they consume, how inspections are just too varied and frequent and how Ofsted judgements are given such significance that they can damage organisational culture and careers.

There was clarity and high consistency in the ‘free text’ responses (almost 300 responses in total) that were provided on this topic. The six themes below encompass almost every view that DCSs expressed with regards to frustrations they felt in the role:

	Form of Frustration	% of DCS responses
1	Council-based bureaucratic, political, financial and workload pressures within the role.	33%
2	Disappointment with national government policy commitment to Children’s Services.	25%
3	Frustrations about the status of Children’s Services within the council and with health partners.	22%
4	The disproportionate impact of inspection and regulation.	13%
5	The blame culture which sometimes plays out in the media and with politicians.	4%
6	The lack of freedom to operate in the role and undertake the work that is most important.	4%

The following quotes submitted in the survey illustrate some elements of the DCS role that give the greatest frustration:

“Too often, political decisions ignore professional advice and are not evidence based and too much time is spent managing the political and corporate machine; there is a lack of effective corporate support functions.”

“Having to constantly fight the corner for children’s services in corporate meetings/policies; especially around budgets and the assumption that placements issues are easier to solve than they actually are.”

“Things are made more difficult by the lack of mental health provision, the impact on vulnerable children of ill thought through changes in government policy (e.g. academisation), a broken SEND system and a difficult political environment.”

“It is frustrating that we are so financially constrained, yet government policy allows and encourages private profiteering in workforce and placements.”

“National policy makers that don’t understand the reality of children’s lives and put barriers in place through legislation and regulation.”

“It can be very difficult to watch the way that the media covers the tragic deaths of children in a way that seeks to blame - thus has a terrible impact on morale for staff doing an incredibly challenging role. Some national policy and government responses can also play into this narrative.”

“To meet the ambitions we have for the next generation we need real focus on workforce of the future and sufficient, high quality placement options.”



Nature of the local corporate political environment

DCS questionnaire respondents, focus group attendees and interviewees stated that the corporate political context and the DCS's relationship with their CEX and LM were critical factors in terms of their level of satisfaction with the DCS role. DCSs spoke convincingly of the importance of "*a good rapport and relationship with the CEO and leader*" and of how the role and attitude of CEX is critical to the success of DCS recruitment and retention. They explained that the culture of the corporate organisation originates from CEX and LM and is "*permeated across the whole organisation – including the section 151 officer*". They emphasised the need for a local authority with stability, commitment and an understanding of what is needed to support Children's Services.

Some DCSs referred to how the corporate culture "dominates the first six months of your career, with concerns of how to position oneself and how to conduct reporting". They argued that "*this preoccupation with the corporate can make you take your eye off the ball*", or, in other words, how "each step of your corporate career can take you further away from the

detail of the children".

DCSs referred to the frustrations in the volume of work, including corporate meetings and the lack of time to "*carry out the strategic part of the role and stay in touch* with operational children, young people and families".

Overall, there was general agreement about the fundamental significance of the corporate political culture throughout a DCSs career. As one said, "*the corporate is the biggest challenge, as it shapes so much of what happens in your career*". From the start, therefore, as one DCS stated, "*you need to decide how much skin to give to corporate service...*". This need for 'political savviness' is needed to prepare new DCSs for "*working in a challenging political environment*" and is an important area for individuals, the LA and training providers to consider.

DCS respondents also provided insights into "*the importance of the corporate interest, commitment and political support for children's services*". DCSs spoke of how "*the views of elected members regarding the importance of children and young people in the local community*" are highly important. This need for clear commitment to the Children's Services agenda and for "*more interest in children's services in the wider council and partnership, including NHS*" permeated

DCS responses. DCSs identified strong frustrations related to situations where there was a dominant focus on the corporate side of LA business, and Children's Services were given a low priority. Therefore, the level of priority that the corporate environment gives to Children's Services is critical for protecting the vulnerable and for retaining DCS in post. DCSs said that "how children are championed is key" and "valuing children should be uppermost".

The importance of strong partnership working and a collaborative senior leadership team in the LA was identified by DCSs as part of a good LA culture that builds DCS resilience and contributes to DCSs staying in post longer. They spoke of the value of "the support of CEX and LM, good deputies and strong partnership working". Others spoke positively of corporate political environments where they experienced:

- A good council culture;
- Supportive CEX;
- Lots of corporate support;
- A whole-council approach to Children's Services developments;
- The respect of colleagues and politicians;
- Good investment in Children's Services.

This is in stark contrast to the substantial number of DCS respondents who identified a culture where elected members do not collaborate and support one another and where there is a culture of "you're on your own". Many DCSs described how the corporate political culture "does not feel safe" and how there is a need "to improve how members support officers as well as hold them to account". This lack of support from elected members was identified as a challenge for DCSs but also for second- and third-tier officers who can be put off applying for promotion and succession to DCS. This issue, therefore, affects the building of an effective talent pipeline to DCS.

The Role of Central Government

DCSs spoke vividly of their frustrations with DfE, in particular, with the perceived lack of DfE commitment, perceived lack of listening and the perceived lack of understanding surrounding the reality of Children's Services capacity issues and funding needs.

This lack of DfE understanding of Children's Services crises was given by many DCSs and CEX/LMs as a source of frustration. One DCS said that "**policy stops us from doing things effectively and these frustrations**

take away the joy of the job". Others spoke of the constant emails from DfE and other agencies. "**Lots of information provided with little version control... from mailboxes not people**". They argued that "there should be less micromanagement from the centre".

DCS and CEX/LM respondents cited that the DfE bidding culture for securing funding competitively takes time and affects partnership relationships. Some DCSs felt they are "**treading water a lot of the time**" through the lack of government direction and lack of clarity especially in relation to social care. DCSs spoke overwhelmingly of the crisis in social worker recruitment and the workforce agency funding crisis, as well as the lack of placements and the need for "**safe and quality reviews in residential care**".

DCSs stated that the increased workload in relation to SEND needs to be recognised, as well as the need for "**extra money for extra burdens**". They spoke of the need for DfE to provide clarity and assurance on the SEND budget. One said, "**the feeling is that we can't go through another budget cycle...SEND and the care review crisis problems reveal DfE is not listening to the DCSs**".

DCSs spoke about the silo working of central government and how the different departments do not join up or talk to one other "**even though the regional structure requires it**". They argued that central government should consider what would assist partnership working, and several DCSs said that the government should look at health services as they are not focussing on children and young people at the moment. They argued that the government "**should direct health to partner better with joint funding**" to reduce DCS stress and frustration. DCSs went further and argued that "**there is no home for children in government at present... it is spread across several departments**". One said that DfE should be renamed to include children and social care within the department. They also spoke about how the link with the Regional Schools Commissioner (now Regional Directors) is poor.

Finally, DCSs revealed their frustration with DfE not listening and "**ignoring the expertise DCSs have**". They suggested that DfE could do more to keep DCSs in post for longer by harnessing their expertise across a range of projects. One suggested that DfE should encourage DCSs to enter Ofsted. Others said, "**central government should talk to DCSs about what to do better, the government should ask 'a talented bunch of DCSs' to advise them about national policy**".

The Place of Inspection

DCS respondents asserted that the “**destructive inspection regime, poorly delivered**” was a major cause of frustration and damage, causing some DCSs to leave their posts early. Several noted that “**we (children’s services) are the most highly regulated profession in the country**” and list ILACS, SEND, schools and care homes inspections as amongst those areas which are highly regulated. They pointed out the damaging effects of this regulation; “**when one goes down, the impact is across all the rest of the service**”. DCSs supported the need for external inspection and regulation but felt strongly that there should be a radical overhaul of this system, moving to a more proportionate and helpful inspection system for children and communities. Some noted how police inspections are very different in their delivery, as well as the inspections within the NHS regulatory systems.

DCSs expressed severe concern over the fear factor generated by Ofsted and the present inspection regime, with several referring to how colleagues regard the DCS role with fear due to the punitive nature of the inspection system. They expressed a sense of frustration with external governmental inspection pressures which limit their freedom to operate in the DCS role and within Children’s Services. The desire for less intervention and greater trust and the desire to be more valued permeated DCS responses throughout the research.

Recognition and the media

DCSs referred strongly to the sense of honour and privilege they felt in the role and their ability to make a difference to the lives of children and their families. However, the apparent lack of recognition of the challenges surrounding Children’s Services in some national policies, including those relating to inspection and in local council commitment, had a strong impact on the sense of satisfaction DCSs felt in the role. This lack of recognition in a challenging political environment potentially affected DCS length of tenure.

The need for a culture where DCSs feel valued was expressed strongly, particularly in the DCS focus groups. Several said that there is a need to recognise how tough the job is and that “**we need to celebrate the good work done**”. Respondents provided insights into the lack of support on budget and pressures related to difficult cases and case review. The “**constant blame attributed to Children’s Services and DCS when things go wrong**” and the desire for “**political appreciation not scapegoating**” were identified strongly as desired features of both local and national political contexts. DCSs proposed “**moving from a blame culture to a learning culture**” as being key to reducing DCS frustrations and improving stability of tenure. One said, “**the system and organisation should work together, not be isolationist. It should come together and work as a whole, rather than blame children’s services**”. They called for “**a better public narrative around our roles**”, “**less hostile mood music around Children’s Services**” and “**a move away from national blame culture when things go wrong**”.

Interestingly, 52% of CEX and LM rated “**the impact of the blame culture**” as a highly significant factor leading to DCS turnover, but only 28% of CEX/LM recognised the DCSs’ “**frustrations about the status of Children’s Services within the council and with health partners**” as being highly significant. DCSs spoke strongly about the need for a supportive culture both inside and outside the council so that DCSs feel valued in their role rather than being blamed or scapegoated. The “**constant blame attributed to Children’s Services and DCS when things go wrong**” and “**political appreciation not scapegoating**” were identified as a desired feature of both local and national political contexts.

Interestingly, the desire for more celebration and recognition of success with less blame was scored weakly by DCSs (at 8.3%) in the questionnaire. This compares with the stronger weightings given by DCSs to the importance of “**greater understanding, support and stability from local corporate and political colleague**”, followed closely by the need for “**a more positive Children’s Services policy by central government**”. The stoicism of DCSs is possibly evident in these responses.

The lack of recognition of the real challenges facing DCSs is often exacerbated by the present disproportionate and negative inspection and regulatory regime and the resultant negative reporting of inspection findings in the media. Respondents made important points about the media, stating that “**it’s the way the findings are delivered and reported that causes the biggest problem**” and suggesting that this impacts negatively on DCS stability of tenure.

A more constructive approach to the inspection of Children’s Services would influence the way in which findings are reported in the media and reduce the damaging fear factor and blame culture associated with inspection. This would contribute to the stability of DCS tenure and encourage the recruitment of talent to the DCS position.

5.3 Exit from a DCS position



In the study, the responding DCSs reflected on 112 occasions when they had left a DCS position within their careers.

The breakdown of these reasons is:

- **55%** moved to another DCS role;
- **17.5%** moved to another role (to Chief Executive, DfE or third sector. Just one respondent had moved back to an AD role);
- **15.5%** retired;
- **12%** moved to private work.

It is not possible to tell from the survey data whether these DCS exits were for positive reasons for the individual or whether they were detrimental to Children's Services. When asking LM and CEX about this, they described DCS departures within their experience as follows:

- **66%** of the exits were initiated by DCSs for positive reasons;
- **34%** of the exits "***became necessary due to circumstances***".

Case Study: Talent spotting & succession planning

Succession planning and talent spotting were recurring themes in many interviews, and this was particularly highlighted in an interview with a council Chief Executive and a council Cabinet Member for Children's Services.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services clearly linked succession planning with council values and also with the high profile and importance of Children's Services within the council's priorities. Allied to this, was the recognition of a stable political culture. Together, these factors lead to a clear Children's Services vision which staff buy into and support by effective performance management systems with regular reviews. Through these systems, staff have a number of opportunities to undertake different roles, which helps to retain staff and also provides them with opportunities to gain broad experience. This approach was echoed by the council Chief Executive, who reflected on the importance of experience beyond a person's specialist role within Children's Services. In particular, the Chief Executive was keen to ensure that people within a talent pool are exposed to experiences around strategic prioritisation, multi-agency partnerships and the reality of political decision making within the overall council budget. Whilst both the Cabinet Member and the Chief Executive were clear around the need for the talent pool to be identified and exposed to wider experiences, both reflected on the importance of the people within the talent pool having relevant experience and qualifications relating to working with children and families.

6. Recommendations

Within the questionnaire, DCSs were asked to identify changes that would increase satisfaction or reduce the frustration and likelihood of them leaving a DCS position. These appear below.

Identified Changes	
Greater understanding, support and stability from local corporate and political colleagues	25.6%
A more positive children's services policy by central government, incl. its grip on challenging issues, e.g. placements, workforce, SEND, health links, Care Review, Early Help	18.2%
Greater sufficiency and certainty of budgets/resources/finances	15.7%
More proportionate regulation regime	11.5%
Improved working arrangements	9.8%
More celebration and recognition of success, with less blame	8.3%
More freedom and flexibility to innovate	4.3%
Greater sharing of responsibility and accountability with key partners, e.g. health, schools	3.5%
More peer support	3.1%

Based on these results, the next section of this report makes proposals for potential improvements to DCS tenure length and turnover rate. These are catagorised as follows:

-  **Nature of the Local Corporate Political Environment**
-  **The Role of Central Government**
-  **The Place of Inspection**
-  **Talent Spotting, DCS Skills and Attributes**
-  **Succession Planning, Leadership Development, Mentoring and Coaching**
-  **Recognition and the Media**



Recommendations

The Nature of the Local Corporate Political Environment

A summary of the points raised by respondents in relation to ‘the nature of the LA corporate political environment’ and how it affects DCS satisfaction and stability:

The corporate political culture in the LA is led by CEX and LM and **permeates the working environment of the authority.**

A positive rapport and relationship between the DCS and the CEX and LM are important.

Working in a **challenging corporate political environment** influences the attraction, recruitment and retention of DCSs.

This emphasis on the **importance of LA culture** echoes the findings of the upon research on the challenges of attracting education leaders into LA senior leader and DCS posts.

Corporate interest and commitment and political support are important for Children’s Services and for DCS satisfaction and succession planning in LAs.

There is need for a culture where **DCSs feel valued in their role** and are not blamed or scapegoated.

Strong partnership working and a collaborative senior leadership team in the LA are important for building resilience and reducing isolation in the DCS role.

Recommendations

Based on these results, this study, therefore, suggests the following proposals for a change in the CEX and LM leadership of the corporate political culture with implications for DfE, LGA, Solace and ADCS, leading to improvements in DCS tenure length and turnover rate:

- CEX and LM to create a more positive and supportive working culture from the top. This proposal has implications for the leadership training provided by Solace;
- CEX and LM to ensure that any instances of overbearing behaviour, racism, misogyny and any forms of discrimination are eradicated so that people feel welcomed and valued in the workplace and that the pipeline of talent through to a DCS role is as wide as possible;
- CEX and LM to recognise and value Children’s Services colleagues and the role of the DCS more highly;
- DfE to address the damaging blame culture resulting from the way in which inspection findings are reported in the media;
- ADCS and The Staff College to continue to provide training for aspiring and new DCSs in the skills of working in a challenging political culture;
- CEX and LM recognise and promote DCS support strategies such as ADCS regional working, networking and mentoring and coaching support.



Recommendations

The Role of Central Government

A summary of the main points raised by respondents in relation to 'the role of central government' and how it affects DCS satisfaction and stability:

DCSs felt that **DfE does not listen or understand** the capacity or funding needs of Children's Services.

Central government silo working leads to a lack of coherent policy focus on children and increased workload from a range of government departments.

DfE lack of clarity over policy direction, and DfE email overload and bidding culture takes time, creates frustration and affects partnership working.

New duties create new workloads and need extra funding.

DfE ignores the expertise of DCSs and should use their talents more effectively to advise on policy and engage in a range of national projects.

Recommendations

This study, therefore, suggests the following proposals for changes in central government policy and practices in relation to Children's Services and DCSs, with implications for central government and DfE, leading to improvements in DCS tenure length and turnover rate:

- 👉 DfE to actively listen to DCSs and use their expertise and talents better;
- 👉 Improve the government's priority focus on children;
- 👉 Reduce government silo working and the negative effects of multiple government departments generating policies around children;
- 👉 Government to improve funding for the new duties.



Recommendations

The Place of Inspection

A summary of the main points raised by respondents in relation to ‘the place of inspection’ and how it affects DCS satisfaction and stability:

The present inspection regime is **destructive and poorly delivered**.

Children’s Services is the most highly regulated profession and is overloaded, and this regulation needs to become more **proportionate and constructive**.

Ofsted generates a strong fear factor for DCSs **and influences recruitment and retention of DCSs**.

The way the inspection findings are delivered and **reported in the media** causes the biggest problem for DCS stability of tenure.

There is a need to make inspection and regulation **a helpful process** for children and communities.

Recommendations

This study, therefore, suggests the following proposals for changes to the present Children’s Services inspection regime with implications for DfE/Ofsted leading to improvements in DCS tenure length and turnover rate:

- DfE should ensure that the inspection and regulation regime becomes more proportionate and constructive for Children’s Services departments;
- Ofsted should adopt a more constructive approach to the inspection of Children’s Services which will then influence the way in which the findings are reported in the media and reduce the damaging fear factor and blame culture associated with inspection.



Recommendations

Talent Spotting, DCS Skills and Attributes

A summary of the main points raised by respondents in relation to ‘the importance of talent spotting potential DCSs and their skills and qualities at an earlier stage’ and how it can improve the recruitment pipeline to DCS:

Talent spotting is not happening early enough to identify the ‘right’ people to be professionally developed into the DCS role.

It is important to see the **potential in people**, this does not relate to their professional background but, instead, to the set of skills and attributes needed as DCS.

DCSs, CEX and LM identified the following high-order interpersonal communication skills and personal qualities as necessary in the DCS role:

- **Being a good communicator** with critical thinking and expert questioning skills and the ability to demystify and boil down complex issues in order to communicate effectively with a wide range of colleagues;
- **The ability to network** across the corporate arena and positively work with a range of partners;
- **Resilience** and the related skills of **tenacity and stamina**;
- **Emotional intelligence** and the ability to demonstrate **empathy**.

There is a need to address the loss of talent in terms of cultural diversity and **a lack of DCSs from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds** through targeted leadership development.

There is a need to consider the loss of talented colleagues from **disciplines other than social work** (see also upon research ‘Pushing at an open door’ into the factors influencing the transfer of education leaders across to senior LA roles and the DCS role).

Recommendations

This study, therefore, suggests the following proposals for an earlier talent-spotting process in councils using the DCS skills and attributes identified in this research, which might potentially lead to improvements in DCS tenure length and turnover rate. These recommendations have implications for the working of councils:

- 👉 CEX to ensure earlier talent spotting of people with potential;
- 👉 CEX ensure that any instances of overbearing behaviour, racism, misogyny and any forms of discrimination are eradicated in all workplaces so that people feel welcomed and valued in the workplace and that the pipeline of talent through to a DCS role is as wide as possible;
- 👉 Use the high-order communication and interpersonal skills identified by DCSs, CEX and LM in talent-spotting processes and in subsequent leadership development provision;
- 👉 Address the loss of diverse talent into the DCS role, especially identifying the talent of leaders from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds and providing targeted leadership development;
- 👉 Council and DfE to address the loss of talent of colleagues from disciplines other than social work.



Recommendations

Succession Planning, Leadership Development, Mentoring and Coaching

A summary of the main points raised by respondents in relation to ‘the importance of more systematic succession planning, leadership development, mentoring and coaching provision’ and how it can potentially improve the recruitment and retention of DCSs:

There are weaknesses in the **succession planning** processes within councils.

There are **variations in succession planning**, leadership development and mentoring and coaching practices across LAs, and respondents identified areas to consider when **promoting a more systematic approach**.

It is important to **develop supportive professional learning networks** both inside the LA and beyond in the development of leadership talent.

Respondents said that **more coordination is needed in the present ‘messy’ system** of accessing training courses, leadership development and mentoring and coaching.

The lack of a **systematic and accessible leadership development** approach in LAs contributes to the **identified gap between the AD role** with its more operational ways of working and the more strategic DCS role.

DCS responses indicated that there is a **need for a whole-council approach** to succession planning and leadership development which provides opportunities for more strategic, council-wide experiential learning.

Respondents were clear about the need for **formal training** to prepare for the DCS role and also the additional need for **softer informal training** in the workplace. This experiential professional learning includes **shadowing senior colleagues, mentoring and coaching**.

There is a need for the DCS to be a **role model in the leadership of professional learning** and to be able to provide leadership support.

Only 58% of DCS respondents to the survey had completed the **upon Aspirant DCS programme**, or its equivalent at the time, suggesting possible issues of access. This leadership development programme was **rated very highly** by respondents in terms of the network of peer support generated, the quality of expert speakers employed to promote critical thinking, the space and time to develop adaptive and systems thinking, the opportunity to engage in problem solving action learning sets and the training bespoke to the strategic challenges of current political and legislative requirements.

Some respondents referred to the **value of carrying out experiential learning through multi-agency strategic projects** in order to gain exposure to the corporate political context and culture.

The long-standing regional leadership development programmes are potentially worthy of further exploration in terms of their interaction with and support for a council’s own **succession planning and involvement of DCSs** in this type of leadership development provision.

Despite some access to mentoring and coaching, overall, there is a call for **more structured and accessible** mentoring and coaching training and provision.

Mentoring and coaching are highly valued by respondents as a safe space for their professional learning.

Peer and regional mentoring and coaching networks are important for providing supportive leadership development.



Recommendations

Succession Planning, Leadership Development, Mentoring and Coaching cont.

Recommendations

This study, therefore, suggests the following proposals for more systematic, clearly structured and accessible succession planning, leadership development, mentoring and coaching provision, which might potentially lead to improvements in DCS tenure length and turnover rate. These recommendations have implications for the work of councils and training providers such as LGA, ADCS and The Staff College:

- CEX to develop supportive professional learning networks both inside the LA and beyond to develop leadership talent;
- Councils addressing the need for better local co-ordination of access to training, leadership development, mentoring and coaching;
- National agencies including, LGA, ADCS and The Staff College working together to consider what can be done to better co-ordinate their offers of training courses, leadership development, mentoring and coaching;
- Training providers to provide more systematic and accessible leadership development support in LAs to address the identified skills gap between the AD role and promotion to DCS;
- CEX to promote a whole-council approach to succession planning and leadership development which provides opportunities for more strategic, council-wide experiential learning;
- Councils and training providers to promote both formal training and experiential learning in the workplace to prepare candidates for the DCS role. This experiential professional learning includes structured shadowing of senior colleagues across the council, carrying out multiagency projects to enable exposure to the corporate and political context and mentoring and coaching;
- CEX to recognise the need for the DCS to be a role model in the leadership of professional learning with the abilities to provide leadership development support;
- The Staff College to address possible issues of access to the highly valued **upon** Aspirant DCS programme and consider targeted programmes to address issues of cultural diversity and potential loss of talent.
- Councils and training providers to explore the long-standing regional leadership development programmes in terms of their interaction with and support for a council's own succession planning processes and which encourage the involvement of DCSs in leadership training.
- Councils and ADCS to recognise the importance of peer and regional networks, which provide supportive leadership development in a mentoring or coaching culture.



Recommendations

Recognition and the Media

A summary of the main points raised by respondents in relation to the lack of recognition and valuing of Children's Services and the DCS role and the need to reduce the damaging blame culture that sometimes plays out in the media and how it can potentially improve the recruitment and retention of DCSs:

There is lack of recognition of the challenges surrounding Children's Services and a **lack of recognition and valuing of the DCS role** by national and local partners, including the media.

DCSs reported a lack of recognition of the challenges and crises in Children's Services by DfE, a **lack of coherence in government policy and a lack of funding around the child**.

A **damaging blame culture** has arisen, often due to the negative reporting of inspection findings in the media.

There is a need for a **supportive culture both inside and outside the council** so that DCSs feel valued in their role rather than blamed or scapegoated.

All respondents identified the **importance of emotional resilience** for DCSs in the light of the personally and professionally challenging environment in which they operate.

It can be argued that, if the challenges and successes of Children's Services and the role of the DCS **are recognised more positively by national and local partners**, then this would contribute to increased DCS satisfaction in role and potentially improve DCS recruitment and retention.

Recommendations

This study, therefore, suggests the following proposals to address the lack of recognition and valuing of Children's Services and the DCS role and the need to reduce the damaging blame culture that sometimes plays out in the media, which may potentially lead to improvements in DCS tenure length and turnover rate. The recommendations have implications for the work of government, Ofsted, the media and local councils including CEX and elected members:

- National and local partners, including the media, should recognise the challenges and successes of Children's Services and the role of the DCS more positively;
- Adopt the earlier proposals in this report for improvements to the government and local council prioritisation of Children's Services;
- Ofsted to reduce the damaging blame culture that has arisen through the negative reporting of inspection findings in the media;
- Develop a supportive working culture from CEX/LM and across the council and beyond.



"I absolutely love the job and am pleased that this is what I do for a living - making positive change for children and families."

"The joy of the role, being a DCS whilst challenging, is a real privilege."

"Knowing that I am making a difference to children and improvements happen through my leadership in my own directorate, across the council and partnership"

- Current DCSs -

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