

Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme Evaluation

Research Report

June 2021



Acknowledgements

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Summary

Background

In April 2020, Solace and the Local Government Association (LGA) launched an Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme for those leading the response to the COVID-19 pandemic across local government in England. The programme was specifically aimed at chief executives, directors and professional leads working directly on managing the response to COVID-19. It aimed to provide support to individuals, amid the ongoing pandemic, as they began to prepare and implement recovery plans. Included in the offer was more than 200 pro bono hours of coaching, with many former senior leaders giving up their time to support the sector.

To capture and share learning from the programme, as well as to inform future support to councils, participants were invited to complete a survey and to nominate themselves as a potential case study candidate.

Methodology

Recipients were divided into two cohorts according to when they took up the Solace/LGA support offer. Cohort One recipients are those who had taken up the offer between April and August 2020 with Cohort Two being those who had done so between September 2020 and January 2021. An online survey was sent to all recipients of the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme.

For Cohort One recipients, the survey was available from 4th January to 19th February 2021. Fifty-nine responses were received from 134 possible participants, giving a Cohort One response rate of 44 per cent. Cohort Two recipients were sent the survey on the 7th May and had until the 1st June 2021 to submit a response. Of the 45 Cohort Two recipients, 22 responded, giving a response rate of 49 per cent. In total for both cohorts, 81 of the 179 recipients responded to the survey, an overall response rate of 45 per cent. It should be noted that an identical survey was sent to both cohorts. Throughout this report, the results of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 respondents are presented together.

As part of the survey, participants were invited to nominate themselves as potential case study candidates. Twenty-nine respondents from Cohort One and eight from Cohort Two self-nominated. In total, five case study interviews were conducted. Two interviewees were from Cohort One and three from Cohort Two. Whilst more respondents had offered to take part in this element of the evaluation, it was frequently difficult for participants to make space in their diaries to speak with a member of the LGA Research & Information team. This was symptomatic of the challenging circumstances in which participants were working.

Key findings

- All but one of the 82 respondents (99 per cent) reported being either satisfied (15%) or very satisfied (84%) with the Solace/LGA Emergence Coaching and Mentoring Programme.
- Ninety-eight per cent of respondents said the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme had been 'very effective' or 'fairly effective' in supporting them professionally in the context of the COVID-19 environment.
- Ninety-nine per cent of respondents said that the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme had been 'very effective' or 'fairly effective' in supporting them personally in the context of the COVID-19 environment.
- Eighty-seven per cent of respondents reported that the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme had been 'very effective' or 'fairly effective' in supporting their council in the context of the COVID-19 environment
- Ninety-eight per cent of respondents said that the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme met their areas of need or concern to a 'great extent' or a 'moderate extent'.
- All respondents (100 per cent) said that they would be likely to recommend Solace/LGA support offers in the future, with over nine in ten (92 per cent) reporting that they would be 'very likely' to do so.

Introduction

In April 2020, Solace/the LGA launched an Emergency Coaching Support Programme for those leading the response to the COVID-19 pandemic across local government in England. The programme was specifically aimed at chief executives, directors and professional leads working directly on managing the response to COVID-19. It aimed to provide support to individuals both as professionals and in terms of them personally, amid the ongoing pandemic, and as they prepare and implement recovery plans.

To capture and share learning from the programme, as well as inform future support to councils, the LGA's Research and Information team invited participants to complete an online survey and also to nominate themselves as a potential case study candidate. This report collates and presents all the responses received.

Methodology

The research was carried out using two methods: a survey of programme participants and a small number of case studies with participants selected through self-nomination. Participants were divided into two cohorts, depending on when they took up the Solace/LGA support offer. Details of this approach are outlined in Table 1.

Phase	Method	Cohort 1 Apr-20 to Aug-20	Cohort 2 Sep-20 to Jan-21
One	Open-ended survey focusing on key learning	January 21	May-21
Two	Four case studies on specific themes	April 21	June -21

For Phase One, an online survey was sent to all recipients of the Solace/LGA emergency coaching and mentoring support who took up the offer between April and August 2020. This survey was in the field from 4th January to 19th February 2021. A total of 59 responses were received from the 134 recipients, giving a response rate of 44 per cent. Two of the respondents who had self-nominated were then interviewed for case studies.

In Phase Two, the same online survey was sent to all recipients of the Solace/LGA emergency coaching and mentoring support offer who took up the offer between September 2020 and January 2021. For these recipients, the survey was available between the 7th May and the 1st June. Of the 45 Cohort 2 recipients, 22 responded to the survey, giving a response rate of 49 per cent. Two of the respondents who had self-nominated were then interviewed for case studies.

Eighty-one of the 179 recipients responded to the survey, an overall response rate of 45 per cent.

When asked if they would be prepared to be involved in Phase Two of the evaluation (case study work), half (49 per cent) of the Cohort One survey respondents said that they would. A lower proportion of the Cohort Two respondents reported that they would be willing to be involved, with eight of the 29 respondents (36 per cent) saying they would be.

Please note the following when reading the report:

- Where tables and figures report the base, the description refers to the group of people who were asked the question. The number provided refers to the number who answered each question. Please note that bases may vary throughout the survey.
- Throughout the report, percentages in figures and tables may not sum to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Survey Findings

Satisfaction with Solace/LGA emergency coaching and mentoring programme

All but one of the 82 respondents (99 per cent) reported being satisfied with the Solace/LGA emergency coaching and mentoring programme, with the majority saying they were very satisfied with the programme (84 per cent). One respondent was neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the programme, and none were dissatisfied. See Table 2.

Table 2: Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the Solace/LGA emergency coaching and mentoring programme?		
	Per cent	Number
Very or fairly satisfied	99	82
Very satisfied	84	70
Fairly satisfied	14	12
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	1	1
Fairly dissatisfied	0	0
Very dissatisfied	0	0
Don't Know	0	0

Base: all respondents (83)

Effectiveness of Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme in the COVID-19 environment

Respondents were asked how effective, if at all, the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme had been in supporting them professionally and personally, and in supporting their council, in the context of the COVID-environment. The results are shown in Table 3.

- Professionally: Just over two-thirds of respondents (69 per cent) said that the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme had been 'very effective' in supporting them professionally in the context of the COVID-19 environment. A further 29 per cent said it had been 'fairly effective' to this end. Only two respondents considered the programme to have been 'not very effective' in supporting them professionally in the context of COVID-19, and none considered it to have been 'not at all effective'.
- Personally: Three-quarters of respondents (77 per cent) said that the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme had been 'very effective' in supporting them personally in the context of the COVID-19 environment. A further 22 per cent of respondents reported that it had done so 'fairly effectively'. Only one respondent considered that the programme had been ineffective in helping them personally in the context of the COVID-19 environment.
- Your council: Most respondents (87 per cent) reported that the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme had effectively supported their

councils in the context of the COVID-19 environment; 46 per cent stated that the programme had supported their council ‘very effectively’ and 40 per cent considered it to have done so ‘fairly effectively’. Few respondents (two per cent) said the programme had been ‘not very effective’ in supporting their council in the context of the COVID-19 and nine per cent were unsure.

Table 3: In the context of the COVID-19 environment, how effective, if at all, was the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme in supporting...?

	You professionally		You personally		Your council	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Very or fairly effective	98	81	99	81	87	71
Very effective	69	57	77	63	46	38
Fairly effective	29	24	22	18	40	33
Not very effective	2	2	1	1	2	2
Not at all effective	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	0	0	0	0	11	9

Base: ‘You professionally’ (83), ‘You personally’ (82) and ‘Your council’ (82). Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Areas of need or concern for programme to address

Respondents were asked what areas of need or concern they wanted to address through the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme. The most frequent area respondents reported they had wanted to address during the programme was their personal wellbeing and resilience, areas that some respondents reported struggling with due to the current situation. Issues relating to work-life balance and sustaining effective leadership whilst dealing with personal pressures caused or exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis were examples of specific areas of concern held by a number of respondents. Relatedly, issues pertaining to workload management were flagged by just over one in ten respondents as an area of concern.

“Initially managing the personal impact of managing through the first stages of the pandemic and the impact that this had on service provision.”

Director

“Trying to keep on top of my growing workload and multiple changing priorities with constantly changing information, whilst managing outside work pressures caused by Covid and working from home with caring responsibilities.”

Head of Service

“Personal resilience and coping with the ever-changing demands of COVID on my organisation.”

Executive Director

The second most frequently cited area respondents said that they wanted the coaching to help them develop was their leadership skills and style. This commonly encompassed how they could alter or augment their approach to leadership in order to lead councils effectively through the pandemic.

“Adapting my style of leadership to respond to the unique challenges of the COVID crisis.”

Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director

“How to be a more effective leader.”

Head of Service

“Leading in uncertainty.”

Director

Further to this, just under one in five respondents explained that they had recently started in new roles or assumed new responsibilities and hoped to gain insight and support that would help them perform their new tasks successfully. For many of these respondents, the new roles represented a step up in terms of seniority, with several explaining that they were newly appointed Chief Executives.

“Personal support as relatively new Chief Executive in an area with high Covid rates and national media [scrutiny]”

Chief Executive

“How to step into Chief Executive role in lockdown.”

Acting Chief Executive

Having started a new role as a Head of ... Service in July 2020 (in the midst of the first lockdown) I was really looking for support in managing remote teams and the uncertainty of joining a new organisation.”

Head of Service

Beyond these issues, additional areas of need or concern that respondents said they had hoped to address through the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme included how to better manage relationships and communicate more effectively with elected members and senior council officers. Improving relationships and communicating effectively were considered particularly challenging given the current situation with most interactions taking place remotely.

“Building relationships with a senior management team and teams that report to me”

Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer

“Transferring from a Director to Chief Executive during a pandemic when all staff are working from home and how to communicate and meet staff on the front line.”

Chief Executive

One in ten respondents reported wanting support to improve their ability to think strategically and plan ahead. Whilst some of these respondents spoke of wanting to generally enhance their strategic planning skills others noted that during the COVID-19 crisis leaders had, in some instances, focussed almost exclusively on the emergency response. It was hoped the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme would enable them to think more strategically whilst continuing to support residents through the crisis. In this sense, respondents sought support addressing issues of conflicting demands; balancing emergency response, recovery planning, ‘business as usual’ and long-term strategic thinking.

“How to think strategically and act clearly and decisively in a time-pressured situation”

Head of Service

“Getting back to longer term, strategic thinking”

Director

Other respondents reported that they had hoped the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme would further their personal career development.

“Personal development related to my career.”

Head of Service

“Deciding whether to apply for a role I was covering on an interim basis.”

Interim Service Manager

A small number of respondents explained that they hoped to gain reassurance that their current approach was fit for purpose.

“Checking that my approach was satisfactory.”

Managing Director

Several of the comments mentioned areas of need or concern beyond these leading themes. These ‘other’ areas are listed in Table A1 in Annex A.

The extent to which the programme met participant expectation

As described in Table 4, three-quarters of respondents (75 per cent) said that the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme met their areas of need or concern 'to a great extent'. Just under a quarter of respondents (23 per cent) said that it had done so to 'a moderate extent' and two per cent reported that the programme had only met their areas of need or concern 'to a small extent'. No respondents said that the programme had not met their areas of need or concern at all.

Table 4: To what extent were your areas of need or concern met by the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme?

	Per cent	Number
To a great or moderate extent	98	81
To a great extent	75	62
To a moderate extent	23	19
To a small extent	2	2
Not at all	0	0
Don't know	0	0

Base: all respondents (83)

Additional value

When respondents were asked what, if any, additional value the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme provided them over and above their areas of need or concern, many explained that they greatly appreciated having the time and space to think and talk through the challenges they were facing. As well as appreciating the insight and experience of their coach/mentor when discussing the challenges they faced, there was a sense that the opportunity that the programme gave to reflect on these challenges, with the coaches as a sounding board, was valuable. Additionally, respondents described how the sessions provided an invaluable opportunity for participants to take stock, consider the lessons that they had learned during the pandemic and how to put this learning into practice at a personal and organisational level.

“Essential ‘time out’ and reflection, with ordinarily scheduling this was almost impossible.”

Service Manager

“Gave me a chance to really reflect on the impact of some of my own behaviours and how they may be detrimental to achieving my outcomes if not appropriately controlled.”

Head of Service

“It was a valuable and much needed space for reflection.”

Head of Service

“A different lens and perspective - somebody outside looking in”

Executive Director and Section 151 Officer

Further to this, improvements to personal wellbeing and self-confidence were noted as a key benefit of the programme for participants, and this transcended their initial areas of need or concern. These respondents frequently spoke of an enhanced personal resilience and a reduction in levels of personal concern, doubt, and self-criticism.

“Provided assurance that I was travelling in the right direction with my leadership as I was new to my organisation.”

Director

“On a personal level, the Coaching provided a very useful form of support to aid my resilience and to maintain my positive outlook.”

Chief Executive

“Made me realise my own value to the organisation and that I already have the necessary skills, I just needed to recognise that.”

Assistant Director

Other areas of additional, and occasionally unexpected, value highlighted by respondents as being provided by the programme included personal career development, improved leadership skills and style and the identification of the wider threats and pressures facing local authorities.

“It also provided an opportunity to consider how to build experience from the past year into future career development.”

Head of Service

“My coach really made me consider my personal ambitions and how to shift my thinking from that of a manager to a leader.”

Head of Service

“Gave me space and encouragement to reflect on what and how I had gone about leading in this challenging environment, supporting me to explore what that meant.... the three hours went too quickly but they gave me confidence as a leader.”

Chief Executive

“The space and time to reflect and consider what the issues were coming over the horizon e.g. EU Transition period.”

Director

Other comments highlighted areas of additional value and these are listed in Table A2 in Annex A.

Most effective elements of the programme

The quality of the coaches and mentors was an element of the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme frequently cited as being particularly effective. Respondents greatly valued the experience and knowledge of their coaches, with their insight and advice held in a very high regard.

“Experience of mentor was invaluable and very suited to me.”

Assistant Director

“Able to engage with an experienced CE who understood my position well and could listen with empathy as well as offer advice and possible solutions to consider.”

Chief Executive

“Speaking to someone who had ‘been there’ before.”

Chief Executive

Blocking out time to reflect on their situation and spend this time confidentially discussing their concerns and challenges with their coach was another element of the programme often deemed effective by respondents. Related to this, the external perspective offered by coaches during discussions was greatly appreciated by some. The space and time afforded to recipients by the three scheduled sessions to pause and take stock of their situation with an experienced, non-critical and non-judgemental mentor/coach was considered highly beneficial by many.

“An outside perspective who had the time to discuss how I was feeling and what I was struggling with. It helped me to support my teams better.”

Director

“Having the time to reflect and engage with an experienced coach which, given the pressure of the emergency, felt really important.”

Acting Head of Service

“Time and space to reflect with an experienced coach who had led in similarly challenging environments.”

Chief Executive

“Safe space to discuss outside of authority with a mentor who was experiencing similar issues”

Director and Section 151 Officer

The one-to-one nature of the programme was noted by some respondents as particularly effective. In the view of these respondents, this enabled the programme to provide bespoke, individualised support, elevating it above more generic leadership assistance.

“Ability for coach to listen and provide support that reflected my needs and was not generic 'leadership support'.”

Director

“Really drilling down the details of what I wanted to improve in a work setting was particularly helpful.”

Head of Service

Others valued the availability and flexibility of their coaches. The sense that the coaches were able to flex around their commitments and respond to their needs added to the efficacy of the programme in the minds of these respondents, as did the speed at which arrangements were put in place

“The coaching sessions themselves were fantastic but I also really appreciated the match-making process. I feel that the success of my experience hinged on this.”

Head of Service

“Speed in which the arrangements were put in place - came at exactly the right time for me.”

Assistant Chief Executive

The positive impact on personal wellbeing, resilience and confidence was held by some respondents as a significant positive of the programme. The coaching had served to reassure these respondents that they had been doing the right thing or that they had been carrying out their role successfully, leading to a renewed belief that they were well equipped to respond to the demands and challenges they and their organisations were facing.

“Personal resilience support and sense checking my professional thinking.”

Covid Chief of Staff

“Having someone to talk to that could provide an independent view; rebuilding my self-confidence.”

Head of Service

Several comments mentioned elements further to those highlighted above. These ‘other’ comments are listed in Table A3 in Annex A.

Suggested improvements

The majority respondents said they were unable to think of anything that would have made the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme more effective. Whilst some of these respondents did not qualify their answers, opting not to expand beyond comments such as “nothing”, others explained or implied that they were unable to think of improvements as they believed it could not have been improved and were entirely satisfied.

“Not sure it could have been. My mentor was excellent.”

Director

“I think it met its goal and provided invaluable support during the peak of the emergency.”

Acting Head of Service

“It couldn't [be improved] - it was brilliant and a real game changer for me.”

Director

Of those respondents who did offer suggestions, almost all suggested that the programme scope could have been increased. For the most part, this related to providing more or longer sessions with these respondents suggesting that there was a limit to the amount they could get out of three one-hour sessions. Other respondents suggested that the programme could have been made more widely available.

“The ability to access more than 3 sessions, I was fortunate that my organisation supported more than the initial 3 sessions.”

Head of Service

“It was difficult to cover much ground in three sessions.”

Head of Service

“Is this something that could be more widely available, an ongoing service, I would be happy to recommend to colleagues and peers.”

Service Manager

“Be longer - would have valued an ongoing programme.”

Director

Other respondents made additional suggestions regarding how the programme could have been improved or left comments explaining that they did not get as much from the programme as they had hoped. These ‘other’ comments are displayed in Table A4 in Annex A.

Key insights and learning

When respondents were asked what key insights or learning they had taken away from the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme, many spoke of an increased awareness of the importance of their personal resilience and wellbeing, largely attained by arriving at an improved work-life balance. For these respondents, the programme had instilled a greater appreciation that improvements in these areas can impact positively on performance and, crucially, increase the sustainability of their personal efforts. In a similar vein, a number of respondents explained that they had come away from the coaching with a greater sense of self-confidence.

“Not to be too hard on yourself and look after your own wellbeing otherwise you aren't able to help others.”

Director

“Reminder to senior managers about focus on personal resilience as important for organisational resilience”

Director

“Trusting in my own decision making - and also taking time to reflect and focus on my own needs a bit more, in order to add more value to what we are doing overall.”

Director

“Feel more confident in my own judgements and expressing those at the highest levels of the organisation.”

Acting Head of Service

A greater awareness of their personal leadership style was stated by several respondents as an important insight they had taken away from the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme. Many of these respondents also flagged learning about different techniques and approaches to leadership as a key take-away from the programme.

“It helped to identify and act on motivation to extend professional leadership capability.”

Director

“Techniques to aid my leadership, understanding of how I come across to others.”

Service Manager

For other respondents, the practical and specific support provided by the coaches represented key aspects of learning and insight gained through the programme. Often these respondents had come into their sessions with specific issues and

reported that their coaches had provided valuable insight that had helped them address these challenges.

“Knowledge on Leadership required for successful Regeneration programmes, assurance and support on how to tackle planning issues, access to a mentor for difficult issues.”

Director

“Some specific methodology and models re decision making.”

Assistant Director

How to better manage relationships was amongst the key insights and learning that respondents reported they had taken away from the programme. This included potential steps to improve relationships with both elected members and senior council officers as well as strategies for building and sustaining team relationships remotely.

“Tips on how to manage key senior relationships.”

Covid Chief of Staff

“How to build relationships remotely and how to integrate into a new team whilst dealing with an emergency.”

Director and Monitoring Officer

“My own approach to volatile and difficult members.”

Director

In addition, respondents noted they had come away from the programme with strategies to better manage expectations, workloads, and their time.

“Using the team around me and not to take everything on personally.”

Chief Executive

“The need to take more control over my own time/calendar and find time to prioritise my work over other demands.”

Head of Service

Other key insights or learning included an increased awareness of the importance of personal development as well as the benefits of, and ability to, think more

strategically; looking further ahead and placing a greater focus on longer term challenges, aims or objectives.

Several comments outlined insights or learning in addition to those mentioned above. These 'other' comments are listed in Table A5 in Annex A.

Example of any positive change resulting from the programme

Similarly to the preceding question, when respondents were asked to provide an example of positive change resulting from the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme, many spoke generally of improvements to their personal wellbeing and resilience. This includes the establishment of a better work-life balance.

“A personal action plan that supported better time management and a better work life balance which has been crucial to sustaining me throughout the pandemic.”

Director

“Greater awareness of managing my own self-care and resilience.”

Head of Service

“Taking more time to consider my position and wellbeing.”

Deputy Chief Executive

Many respondents spoke of an improved sense of self-belief. Some of these respondents outlined how such improvements had resulted in a renewed commitment to their role, lifting their energy and motivation.

“Confidence in leading in volatile and complex situations.”

Director

“I definitely feel the difference in how I operate and I feel more empowered.”

Head of Service

“Greater positivity when considering roles and my approach to them”

Council Solicitor

Other examples of positive change highlighted by respondents related to the implementation of a more strategic approach and a greater focus on longer term planning as well as examples of personal professional development. Beyond these instances of actualised personal professional growth, other respondents highlighted

the setting of career goals and the formation of plans to fulfil them as a positive change resulting from the programme.

“Developed and used effective techniques feeding into strategic and operational decision making.”

Director

“Achieved internal promotion to Executive Director of Place.”

Director

“I now have a plan in place based on my personal and professional goals and know what I have to do to achieve them.”

Service Manager

Examples of improvements in leadership and improved communication and relationships with colleagues were also outlined by several respondents as positive changes attributed to their participation in the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme.

“I feel much more confident operating at a senior level within the organisation and understand leadership styles better and therefore can engage more appropriately based on those styles.”

Acting Head of Service

“My communication style has subtly shifted, particularly focusing on personal empathy with my workforce.”

Chief Executive

Further to the above, a few respondents explained that their coach had provided recommendations and support for specific programmes or challenges and that they had seen positive outcomes as a result of following this advice.

“Had an issue over Christmas on flooding (in addition to COVID) which was exactly what I had discussed with my mentor and put a lot of her words and suggestions into direct action.”

Head of Service

“I have established an Invest to Save Fund, with cash injection following the suggestion of my mentor. This has already been earmarked to fund a number of CO2 reduction programmes as part of the 2021/22 budget.”

Director

Three respondents added that since their participation in the programme they had received positive feedback and even messages of thanks from staff and colleagues.

“Employee communications have improved significantly, and I regularly receive thankyou messages from staff and colleagues.”

Director

A small number of comments contained positive examples of change in areas beyond those listed above. These ‘other’ comments are shown in Table A6 in Annex A.

Likelihood of recommending future offers

All respondents said that they would be likely to recommend the Solace/LGA’s support offers in the future, with the vast majority (92 per cent) reporting that they would be ‘very likely’ to do so.

Table 5: How likely would you be to recommend the Solace/LGA’s support offers in the future?

	Per cent	Number
Very or fairly likely	100	77
Very likely	92	71
Fairly likely	8	6
Not very likely	0	0
Not at all likely	0	0
Don’t know	0	0

Base: all respondents (77)

Suggestions for new forms of support,

Many of the respondents who commented on what forms of support they would like to see the Solace/LGA provide in the future called for ‘more of the same’, i.e. a continuation or extension of the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme. This was either through the provision of more sessions to existing recipients or widening the scope of the offer so that a greater range of officers could benefit from the programme. This included the suggestion that a similar programme of support be offered to aspiring future council leaders. Some of respondents were particularly keen on the idea of a sustained mentoring programme.

“Extended programmes for future leaders Assistant, Directors, etc.”

Director

“Continue this coaching offer please!”

Chief Executive

Beyond calling for an extension of the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme, respondents suggested the Solace/LGA could

establish some form of network or system of peer support whilst others suggested a series of webinars or workshops.

“Leadership webinars with COVID-19 examples.”

Assistant Director

“Some workshops on personal resilience.”

Director

More than a quarter of respondents reported that they did not have any potential new forms of support in mind, however, some made suggestions as to the nature, rather than form, that future support could take. This included the suggestion that support programmes be delivered remotely or as targeted and concentrated blocks.

“Access to courses through remote/digital means as the norm.”

Head of Service

“Short sharp bursts are very effective”

Director

A number of ‘other’ comments were received and are listed in Table A7 in Annex A.

Other comments

At the end of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to provide further comments about their experience of the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme. Respondents used this to voice their gratitude to those who had organised the programme and to leave messages of thanks to specific coaches/mentors.

“Just thank you for a timely, high quality, well designed response.”

Deputy Chief Executive and Director

“Thank you for the support. It has been incredibly useful to me. I really enjoyed the support and guidance offered by [coach’s name]”

Director

“I am very grateful to LGA and Solace for this timely support.”

Director

“Thank you for having the insight to offer this opportunity. I am so grateful.”

Director

Respondents also took this opportunity to provide general praise for the course and their coaches with several reiterating the benefits of the coaching.

“I really benefited from the support and dedicated time to reflect on leading during the crisis. The mentoring also helped me to develop strategies for sustaining leadership through exceptional times.”

Director

“Excellent coach who provided support over and above the workplace challenges I originally sought support for.”

Director

“it was really helpful to have space to reflect in the middle of crisis response.”

Director

Case Studies

During the survey participants were invited to nominate themselves as potential case study candidates. Interviews were conducted with five recipients of the Solace/LGA emergency coaching and mentoring support offer. These five case studies are outlined below.

Case Study A

Recipient A – A London Borough Council

Head of Service at a London borough council.

Challenges: At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, the recipient, like many senior officers in authorities, had little idea of the extent to which the pandemic would impact the lives of individuals. As the situation developed and the scale of the crisis became apparent so did the challenges and pressures the recipient would face over the coming year supporting their local residents, communities and staff.

As the pandemic developed, the challenges and pressures emerged from multiple sources. These related to not only having to manage their business as usual (BAU) tasks needing to be completed within an altered context but also dealing with new demands, for example, conducting virtual council meetings. In addition to this were the challenges and pressures emerging from the new roles assigned to the recipient as part of the council's response to the COVID-19 crisis. Amongst other additional responsibilities, the council's Food Hub was added to the recipient's portfolio in the early stages of the crisis; this was a service area they had little knowledge of. Despite their limited experience the recipient successfully implemented a support scheme to aid the council's economically vulnerable residents through the pandemic.

Although an overall success, the recipient noted that they frequently became hampered by having to deal with the minutiae the day to day running of the food hub

and often spent three or more hours a day at the food hub packing boxes. As a result, they found himself spending the majority of their time pragmatically ensuring tasks were completed rather than thinking more strategically, taking stock, and identifying opportunities to improve processes or mitigate future risks. Additionally, the amount of time spent at the food hub restricted the time available to spend on other areas of their portfolio.

Impact: During the coaching sessions provided through the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme, the recipient and their coach identified that they had fallen into an 'operational mindset', spending a great deal of time on the ground to the extent that they, at times, was losing sight of the bigger picture. The coach helped lift the recipient out of this mindset and recognise that they couldn't take personal responsibility for every aspect of the food hub; tasks such as packing boxes, whilst vitally important, were best left to others and that their time and energy could be put to better use considering the wider strategy and focussing on the organisation and efficiency of the food hub.

Legacy: The learnings from the recipient's experience with the Food Hub and the coaching sessions bore fruit when it came to the planning of the 2021 election in the council. In previous election years, the recipient had involved himself in many of the smaller details of the operation, for instance conducting the staffing allocation himself. Following their sessions with the coach and utilising their experience with the Food Hub, during 2021 election planning the recipient felt confident delegating such tasks to the capable team in place thereby creating capacity for them to focus on the planning and policy and to lead on the strategy.

Lessons Learned: The coaching strengthened the view that it is crucial for senior leaders to assess situations from a level of extraction. This provides a perspective that enables the identification of opportunities for improvement and the mitigation of future risks. Another key lesson the recipient took away from the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme was to not underestimate the potential benefits of coaching and mentoring. In the recipient's view coaching not only has the capacity to benefit one's professional life but also can act to influence and improve behaviours generally.

Case Study B

Matt Prosser – Dorset Council

Matt Prosser, Chief Executive of Dorset Council.

Challenges: As a Chief Executive during the COVID-19 crisis Matt was under immense pressure. Not only was he ultimately responsible for the continuation of day to day council services in a radically changed environment but also had to oversee the implementation of numerous support schemes to aid vulnerable residents through the pandemic. In order to achieve this, Matt and the wider Senior Leadership Team at Dorset Council worked relentlessly, often working more than 90 hours a week during the first three months of the pandemic.

Alongside a dramatically increased workload and constantly changing demands, Dorset Council's move to homeworking placed a considerable burden on Matt. Staff

were permitted to work flexibly and encouraged to adapt their working hours around caring commitments and home-schooling. As a result, pressing queries and requests were sent around the clock and Matt could see them coming in often from 4 o'clock in the morning until gone midnight, responding as swiftly as he could in the environment.

Further to these challenges, Matt explained that he felt unprepared for the challenges Dorset faced at the start of the pandemic, noting 'not many people had a global pandemic in their risk register'. Whilst presenting himself as confident and knowledgeable, without any frame of reference there were moments of self-doubt and the disconnect between his public persona and private thoughts led to the experience of 'imposter syndrome'.

Impact: The sessions provided via the Solace/LGA emergency coaching and mentoring support offer represented an invaluable outlet for the building pressure. Described as an 'oasis of calm', the hours with the coach provided a space for Matt to offload in a safe environment; an opportunity to take a step back and talk through the pressures faced. Whilst valuable in itself, this venting also served to outline the nature and scale of the challenges faced to his coach, a highly experienced Chief Executive, practised in emergency planning. Together Matt and his coach were able to work through a number of these challenges, reflecting on the decisions taken and considering future risks.

Talking through the challenges faced and decisions taken during the pandemic alleviated Matt's doubts surrounding his decision-making ability. The input of the coach led to the acknowledgment that one does not become a poor decision maker overnight. This led to a renewed confidence in the decisions and actions taken during the pandemic as well as his ability to respond to future challenges.

Legacy: For Matt, the coaching represented a vital opportunity to reflect on and think about the decisions he and Dorset Council took in what was, hopefully, a unique year. It is believed the process of considering what went well and what could have been improved or done differently will stand the organisation in good stead in dealing with future emergencies.

Lessons Learned: As noted previously, the coaching imparted an appreciation that one does not become a poor decision maker overnight. In challenging situations, it is vital to have confidence in your own ability and appreciating this can help bolster confidence levels. Additionally, in challenging times, one needs to find a release, something to do for an hour or so a day that helps take your mind off the tasks at hand. For Matt this was running but anything that can destress was recommended.

Case Study C

Recipient C – A London Borough Council

Recipient C, Director at a London borough council

Challenges: At the start of the pandemic, the recipient faced significant challenges stemming from the need to make immediate and unexpected changes to the ways in which council teams operated, with the majority of the workforce moving to home

working. As well as changes to their personal working environment, the council's move to homeworking demanded an amendment to how the recipient managed their teams.

In addition, the recipient faced further demands relating to the implementation and operation of new support schemes designed to aid vulnerable residents through the pandemic. Notably, the recipient led on the shielding programme put in place to protect the council's most vulnerable residents during the crisis and was directly involved in the delivery of food boxes to these isolated residents.

These challenges resulted in an unprecedented situation with council staff unexpectedly and suddenly having to deliver new services and support schemes in an unfamiliar and unique working environment. Whilst the recipient found this experience rewarding and, like all council staff, focussed on the job at hand, their workload increased drastically and was so busy during the early stages of the pandemic that they had neither the time nor the space to process what they was doing or to reflect on this in any detail.

Whilst the immediate emergency of the COVID-19 crisis subsided after a time, considerable challenges remained. For example, as the council moved towards business as usual, leaders had to balance the delivery of the ongoing COVID-19 support schemes with day to day service provision and longer-term planning. The recipient highlighted this an area they found challenging to negotiate.

Impact: Having been part of Cohort 2, the recipient did not receive support from the Solace/LGA emergency coaching and mentoring offer until the spring of 2021, a year after the initial lockdown and immediate emergency response period. This was, however, considered a positive as at the point of the initial lockdown the recipient had neither the time nor space to reflect on the actions and decisions they had taken. The fact that the mentoring came a year later was viewed as a strength of the programme, whilst the current situation is still challenging and far from business as usual, there is a little more space to consider and reflect. In this sense, the coaching provided an opportunity to review actions taken at the height of the crisis. Reflecting on this period during the sessions was highly valuable and helped the recipient adjust their current approach, becoming less focussed on crisis management and to begin looking forward and planning for recovery.

Articulating what they had done to an external and impartial listener also enabled the recipient to better understand how much they had done and achieved during the crisis and also to more fully understand the challenges they had faced and the positive aspects of their activities since the lockdown. The external nature of the mentor was also of benefit as this offered a fresh perspective on their role.

Whilst the three sessions provided by solace would have been positive in themselves, the recipient noted that they might have had a limited impact. The three free sessions, whilst very useful for helping to discuss the broad context and for considering some issues, restricted the extent of meaningful engagement. To this end, the recipient decided to continue the sessions with their mentor going forward.

Legacy: The sessions enabled the recipient to develop their own confidence and become more assured of their ability to face challenges and tackle a wide range of

complex issues. The space and time afforded to the recipient by the programme gave the recipient the opportunity to improve their dealings and relationships with their colleagues. She noted that this would have a positive impact on the colleagues with whom she works and increase their usefulness and effectiveness as a member of the senior leadership team at the council.

Lessons Learned: The coaching and mentoring sessions taught the recipient the importance of taking stock and reflecting on actions and practising, to debrief on what went well and what could have gone better. This enables individuals and organisations to learn from their experiences, to build on success and avoid future shortcomings. Beyond this, the recipient also took away a greater sense of confidence and trust in their skills, knowledge, and instinct.

Case Study D

Helen Bailey – Sutton Council

Helen Bailey, Chief Executive of Sutton Council.

Challenges: Managing uncertainty was amongst the greatest challenges Helen and Sutton Council faced at the start of the COVID-19 crisis. In Sutton, as in many authorities, the impacts of the pandemic were totally unknown. It was, for example, unknown how long it would last or how it would affect staff and residents in the short and longer term.

Responding to changing expectations and demands from central government was a further source of uncertainty and represented a challenging aspect of Sutton's response to the crisis. Primarily, these challenges related to the implementation and operation of new schemes to support residents through the pandemic. In the early stages of the pandemic, the support central government expected councils to provide to residents and communities changed frequently and Sutton received a lot of new and at times contradictory instructions. Making sense of this information and understanding what did and did not need to be done was demanding and served to complicate matters. In addition, following government instruction, the majority of the council's workforce shifted to home working early in the pandemic. Whilst staff adapted well to this change, it was not without issues and sometimes served to compound other challenges. Notably, remote working complicated the communication and collation of information from government which was coming into the organisation in different ways from various governmental departments.

The ongoing nature of the COVID-19 crisis has also been a source of challenge. As Helen noted, most crises last for a short period of time and have well defined objectives. In contrast, Sutton has been responding to the pandemic for well over a year. This has necessitated the balancing of business as usual (BAU) with the emergency measures and additional services implemented to support residents through the pandemic. This is an additional dimension of the COVID-19 crisis that has made it particularly challenging.

Impact: As a Cohort 2 recipient, Helen did not receive support from the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme until well into the COVID-19 crisis. However, it was noted that during the early and mid-stages of the

pandemic senior colleagues at Sutton Council had provided a great deal of mutual support to one another. Whilst this had proved effective, as the crisis persisted staff became fatigued and the effectiveness of this system of support waned; it was this at this point that Helen received support from the programme.

The sessions provided via the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme created a space for Helen to talk through the pressures and challenges she was facing with an experienced Chief Executive, someone who had faced comparable problems and really knew the demands of the job. This empathy added greatly to Helen's experience of the programme and enabled the coach to provide valuable and meaningful insights. Furthermore, during the sessions the coach was able to provide confirmation that Helen's decisions and leadership had been sound and logical throughout the crisis, boosting her confidence and positivity.

In Helen's experience, major decisions or problems in times of crisis often have clear solutions, with the more minor issues, often relating to relationships with staff, residents or elected members, being more difficult to resolve. The process of talking through these challenging but less pressing issues helped Helen approach them with an increased clarity. This process also helped Helen to put these issues in perspective and her coach offered valuable insight into whether she had the right sense of proportion with respect to the competing demands she faced.

Legacy: Whilst Helen was confident the coaching would have a long-term impact on her ability to lead in an emergency, she was unsure how this might manifest. In the shorter term, it was noted the coaching had led to a clearer-sighted approach when planning recovery and had helped her become more decisive. In this respect, the coaching may help smooth Sutton's transition back to business as usual.

Lessons Learned: The Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme reminded Helen of the importance of talking through the issues and challenges one faces and not taking leadership responsibility as a solitary one. In addition, the sessions resulted in an increased acknowledgment that one cannot foresee all threats and risks. Prior to the sessions Helen was critical of the fact she did not foresee a number of events and trends during the course of the pandemic. The sessions helped her become more forgiving of this and, whilst in retrospect she may have done things differently, there is a greater recognition that she did not know then what she knows now.

Further to the above It was noted that it is not always easy for Chief Executive's to take advantage of offers that provide personal support. In Helen's view, within councils there is an expectation for Chief Executives to be the finished article and therefore paid for professional development opportunities are difficult to justify. This is believed to be a threat to the sector and efforts should be made to emphasise the wider benefits of such support. The fact that the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme was free for senior leaders was considered a great strength and meant there were no dilemmas regarding using the council's budget to pay for training or support that leaders personally benefited from.

Annex A: Answers provided to open text questions

Table A1. What areas of need or concern did you want to address through the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme?
Other
Challenging professional and personal situation due to COVID-19 and changing government structures,
COVID-19 emergency response.
How to be a more effective leader with the team I manage, how to manage more challenging staffing issues, personal development related to my career.
Managing staff restructure due to loss of income due to COVID-19.
Personal support as relatively new Chief Executive in an area with high COVID-19 rates and national media etc.
Resilience and support for peers.
I had to put a workplace apprenticeship MSc on hold because of the pandemic and it was very useful to be able to maintain contact with practice tutor through the SOLACE scheme.
Governance in an emergency.
Managing the budget gap while everyone is focused on COVID-19.
Support in leading professional network through pandemic.
Maximising opportunities arising from the pandemic to improve the health & wellbeing of our community and the sustainability of Leisure services
Transformation, Financial challenges, regeneration
Relationships with the system
Getting corporate collaboration and engagement on Covid Recovery work and enabling me to take a step up to Executive Director role
Conflicting demands on resources as a result of Covid

Table A2. What, if any, additional value did the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme provide over and above your areas of need or concern?

Other

The conversation quickly moved from my immediate concern into other areas that needed discussion, e.g., member/officer relationships.

Ways to deal with difficult situations and have constructive conversations with the team's wellbeing.

Looked at managing an ever-increasing workload during COVID-19.

My mentor took a holistic approach so touched on areas I didn't initially expect to delve into but were, nevertheless, incredibly useful for me and focused me in a purposeful way.

Helped focus on what the areas of need where.

Useful overview.

Additional mechanisms in terms of influence and direction in my current role.

I developed an instant good rapport with my coach and requested additional sessions from my organisation

Greater awareness of my own drivers and how these affect interactions

Leadership skills, dealing with political issues

As someone who stepped up to the Head of Service role at the start of the pandemic, a better understanding of what I could contribute to the senior leadership team

Table A3. What, if any, were the most effective elements of the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme?

Other
Focusing on the future.
Having three sessions provided some continuity and an opportunity to try things in between meetings. The experience of my coach challenged my thinking (my head was buzzing after our second session!), but also gave reassurance that I was not alone with what I was facing.
Insights, tools, techniques.
Reflecting on a timeline of my life events was useful.
Action planning, forward thinking and stake holder mapping.
speed of coaching match and right level of coach matched.
That is connected to experiences coaches and there was an ability to extend the arrangement.
The coach I worked with was able to challenge my views in a way that helped me arrive at the best solution for me.
The coaching sessions themselves were fantastic but I also really appreciated the match-making process. I feel that the success of my experience hinged on this.
The timing of it was 'just right' and needed at a critical moment for myself personally, it provided a safe space to reflect, learn and develop, to focus on that key element of resilience, managing the challenges and difficulties as well as recognising the achievements within the COVID-19 situation.
Utilising the skill of the coach/mentor in addressing the topics I wanted to address at the start of each session. In-between sessions reflecting and reviewing approaches to specific issues.
Being coached to produce a timeline plan to map opportunities against capacity and hearing first-hand experiences to shape my thinking.
Pointing me to key thinking and self-assessment tools
It came at an ideal time to be able to pause and take stock after an intense and pressurised period which is still ongoing but continuing to evolve. It was helpful to have support for leaders who have been focussed on supporting their teams, residents, colleagues etc
The reflective sessions were fantastic, including open discussions about career plans, aspirations, and journey
Interview techniques and self-reflection challenge. Practical steps to approach Covid Recovery work
Credible leaders with the ability to skilfully respond with coaching or mentoring support through active listening

Table A4. How, if at all, could the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme have been more effective?

Other
I found it difficult to make the time because of the extraordinary demands on my time.
Would be easier to ask a little while ago. I am keen to pause and relook at coaching after COVID-19.
Perhaps a wider selection of coaches available – it appeared quite limited.
Didn't really offer any new insights/opportunities to address key concern.
Perhaps the opportunity to share the experiences and network with other delegates on the programme.
It didn't feel very COVID-19 specific, however, I think everyone was feeling their way through it at the time. Perhaps less experienced leaders might have found those elements more useful? I enjoyed it and found it useful not due to it being a COVID-19 inspired thing but more because it provided support and an outlet during a very stressful period.
Earlier in the pandemic

Table A5. What key insights or learning have you taken away from the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme?

Other
Knowledge on leadership required for successful regeneration programmes, assurance and support on how to tackle planning issues, access to a mentor for difficult issues.
The importance of coaching and mentoring others.
Leadership skills vs managerial skills, that it's OK to carve out time for personal development and really thinking long and hard about delegation and how to do it correctly.
Permission to say that this is a really tough time. Practical support and challenge.
Feel more confident in my own judgements and expressing those at the highest levels of the organisation. I also felt that I took more time to prepare for meetings and therefore gained more from them than I would have done, had I not had the opportunity through the programme.
Insight into how to flex my established style to meet the challenges of an enduring emergency response.
Coaching is a leadership and professional must do – like regular exercise!
Longer term coaching would be beneficial.
It's good to talk and share experiences.
"Importance of not always being a people pleaser!"
"Clarity of purposes, communication and cultural impact."
"Lots of small and highly contingent thoughts."
"The need to take more control over my own time/calendar and find time to prioritise my work over other demands. Moving towards acceptance that I can't do everything and need to identify people who can support me to get things done."

Table A6. Please provide an example of any positive change resulting from the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme.

Other

The coaching gave me the confidence to lead in a discipline I have never worked in before, leading to the approval of the business case for the district's largest and most prominent town centre regeneration programme of the last 10 years (and next).

Felt more able to constructively challenge of our approach to just working longer hours.

It helped with prioritisation and building resilience in my wider team.

This is difficult to quantify although it has been beneficial in a range of ways. I have signed up for further sessions which I think will help to identify and embed change

Table A7. What new forms of support, if any, would you like to see the Solace/LGA provide in the future?

Other

Workforce planning.

Coaching for recovery as we move out of this phase of the pandemic response.

More of a focus on business psychology.

Thought action learning sets seem a good idea.

I'm looking at the springboard opportunity.

Future budget pressures.

Annex B: Questionnaire

Please amend the details we have on record if necessary.

- Name _____
- Authority _____
- Job title _____
- Email address _____

Overall, how satisfied, or dissatisfied are you with the Solace/LGA emergency coaching and mentoring programme?

- Very satisfied
- Fairly satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Fairly dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- Don't know

How effective, if at all, was the Solace/LGA Coaching and Mentoring Programme in supporting the following, in the context of the COVID-19 environment?

	Very effective	Fairly effective	Not very effective	Not at all effective	Don't know
You professionally	<input type="radio"/>				
You personally	<input type="radio"/>				
Your council	<input type="radio"/>				

What areas of need or concern did you want to address through the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme?

To what extent were your areas of need or concern met by the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme?

- To a great extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a small extent
- Not at all
- Don't know

What, if any, additional value did the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme provide over and above your areas of need or concern?

What, if any, were the most effective elements of the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme?

How, if at all, could the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme have been more effective?

What key insights or learning have you taken away from the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme?

Please provide an example of any positive change resulting from the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme.

How likely would you be to recommend the Solace/LGA's support offers in the future?

- Very likely
- Fairly likely
- Not very likely
- Not at all likely
- Don't know

What new forms of support, if any, would you like to see the Solace/LGA provide in the future?

We are dedicated to sharing learning across councils. Please indicate if you would be happy to work with us to create a short case study of your experience of the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme, to share with others.

- Yes, I would be happy to create a case study
- No, I would prefer not to create a case study

Finally, if you have any other comments about your experience of the Solace/LGA Emergency Coaching and Mentoring Support Programme, please use the space below.

Once you press the 'Submit' button below, you will have completed the survey.

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this survey. You are in control of any personal data that you have provided to us in your response. You can contact us at all times to have your information changed or deleted. You can find our full privacy policy here: [click here to see our privacy policy](#)



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