



Interim Evaluation Report for Pilot Peer Support Programme

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1.0 Introduction

Change is an ever present feature of children's services; however, recent years have seen unprecedented demands for change, placing significant burdens on those managing and leading services. The *Every Child Matters: Change for Children Programme* (DfES, 2004) has required very significant re-organisation and realignment of services, with the aim of establishing better integrated delivery. Evaluative evidence to-date (Audit Commission, 2008; Laming, 2009) indicates that there is much work to do, to enact the vision of ECM. In the aftermath of the tragic case of baby Peter Connelly, Lord Laming's analysis of the progress of child protection in England clearly identified that further support was needed to ensure that agencies could deliver against the vision of Every Child Matters (ECM) (Laming, 2009).

This report made a number of recommendations regarding the need for better support to both senior and middle managers who play a critical role in workforce reform and the report's recommendations were accepted in full by the former government (DCSF, 2009). It is in this context that the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) launched the *Pilot Peer Support Programme*. As part of a broader programme of initiatives that aim to improve the quality and delivery of social work services, the overarching aim of this pilot programme is to stimulate networks of support and learning among children's services managers that will enable the spread of evidence-based approaches to workforce reform. The pilot programme aims to give managers space to reflect on and collaborate to tackle the challenges as described. The aims of the pilot fit with recommendations made by the Social Work Taskforce (DoH and DCSF, 2009) that include seeking new ways to deal with the pressing challenges of recruitment and retention in social work.

Research evidence consistently reports the value of formal peer support to improve the performance of professionals in both public and private sectors (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Farnsley, 2009; Overeem *et al.*, 2010). Within the public sector, a significant body of literature indicates widespread use of variants of peer mentoring within health settings to meet the developmental needs of professionals (Bridgham and Scarborough, 1992; Overeem *et al.*, 2010; Van Rosmalen *et al.*, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2010). Equally in school and university settings, there is a wealth of literature indicating the value of formal peer support (Ashwin, 2003; Van Rosmalen *et al.*, 2006; Kamler, 2006). However, initiatives in peer support within children's social care have been comparatively slow to develop. A *Mentor Plus* scheme has been set up to provide mentoring for Directors of Children's

Services who are new in post by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services; however, there are few examples of mentoring that are *peer* based. Thus, action on the part of the CWDC to both commission and evaluate a national peer support programme, marks a significant step forward in seeking to capitalise on good practice evident in other professional settings. Following a small-scale pilot exercise in the East of England in 2009, CWDC commissioned Tavistock Consultancy Service to deliver a national pilot programme that would run during the year of 2010.

Support that is offered through peers is qualitatively different from support that is offered through relationships of hierarchy, as is the tendency within many formal mentoring models. Notwithstanding differences in approaches, the defining opportunities within peer support are *exchange* and *mutuality*. The CWDC project combines elements of peer mentoring, peer networking and action learning that afford the possibility of augmenting the impact of more established methods of professional support (e.g. line management). Moreover, in aiming to facilitate regional relationships, the pilot programme will enable managers to foster relationships beyond the boundaries of local authority areas. The aims of the *Pilot Peer Support Programme* are clearly compatible with key policy documents that outline the skills, knowledge and behaviours for those leading integrated services. For example, *Championing Children* (DfES, 2006), the national framework for those leading and managing children's services, stresses the importance of sharing knowledge beyond agency boundaries (DCSF, 2008). This policy document lists schemes of peer mentoring and coaching, as well as learning networks, as central to professional development.

The evaluation commissioned by CWDC from Lancaster University forms an important and integral part of this national development. The evaluation will make recommendations that will enable the fine-tuning of the pilot programme and in addition, will enable the exploration of issues of sustainability and costs versus benefits to be explored.

1.1 The Pilot Peer Support Programme: summary and background

The national *Pilot Peer Support Programme* builds on a smaller pre-pilot in one regional area. To inform the development of the national pilot, the smaller project operated in the East of England between August and December 2009. The results of this pre-pilot were

reported by the CWDC in 2010¹. Twenty six people were involved in the programme. Of the 20 people who took part in the evaluation of this small pilot, ten said it has been very helpful and five, that it was helpful in meeting development and learning needs. In particular, participants appreciated the opportunity to meet others who were grappling with similar complexities in the workplace. Participants felt that there was much benefit in listening to others about how key practice and delivery issues were being resolved, with the programme providing the opportunity for knowledge exchange. The quality of the practical arrangements, general organisation and the venues, were highly rated.

To summarise the positive findings, participants valued the opportunity to:

- share information and experiences;
- address the common difficulties that were being highlighted as a consequence of Ofsted inspections;
- consider a range of pressures on service delivery arising from recent changes to legislation/regulation /media reporting;
- talk about issues without necessarily having to generate immediate solutions.

However, the evaluation also noted that:

- attendance figures did not achieve target numbers and this presented a challenge to the programme because peer support depends on consistent attendance. The immediate demands on managers within the workplace were identified as likely to limit the possibility for prioritising the programme over other demands. However, peer supporters were noted to be more able to achieve this priority, and this was an issue that CWDC were keen to explore further;
- the size of the geographical area covered by the regions resulted in considerable travel for some participants attending the one day event. This was seen as a disincentive given competing demands;
- attendance and engagement were seen to have had an impact on the nature of the interaction at events. Questions were raised by the CWDC report as to optimal frequency of events and the impact of frequency on maturation and sustainability of networks.

Following the conclusion of the East pre-pilot, the national *Pilot Peer Support Programme* was then rolled out across the county. Targeted at middle and senior managers in children's services (both local authority and third sector), the *Pilot Peer Support*

¹ The work/evaluation of the East pre-pilot is available from the CWDC in the form of an 'Analysis of Activity Report'.

Programme consists of two distinct elements. These elements are: a) initial training of a cohort of approximately 50 'peer supporters' and b) the delivery of three rounds of regional 'peer' networking events, scheduled during 2010. Tavistock Consultancy Services were commissioned by CWDC to deliver the full programme of events.

The initial training of peer supporters comprises a mix of didactic, practical and experiential learning and aims to train a cohort of peers who then facilitate the networking events. The newly trained peer supporters design and plan the subsequent networking events for their peers, although support and backroom services for these events is arranged by Tavistock Consultancy Services (e.g. equipment, booking of facilities). The networking events, informed by methods of action learning, aim to provide a larger cohort of children's services managers with the opportunity to explore and share challenges and solutions to every-day problems in the workplace. The networking events are supported by a *Moodle*² environment, to enable participants to maintain links with peers over the course of the programme.

Approximately 230 participants from 75 local authorities and 11 national voluntary organisations initially signed up to the programme. The CWDC initially contacted a pre-existing database of strategic leads within local authorities, notifying them that an expression of interest was required by 6 November 2009, with a project flyer attached. A letter went to the Department for Children, Schools and Families publicising the project and national voluntary organisations were notified through Children England. The programme was also advertised through Community Care magazine and the website of the CWDC.

The managers themselves were identified internally within the organisations taking part, based on CWDC's programme criteria. There were initially 94 expressions of interest from 82 local authorities and 12 other relevant organisations. One expression was rejected on the grounds that the organisation did not do work with children's social workers and the rest were taken forward. There was some reduction in the number of those initially interested, at the point of attendance on account of capacity issues within agencies.

The desired pilot programme outcomes are that:

² *Moodle* (abbreviation for *Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*) is an [e-learning](#) software platform or [Virtual Learning Environment](#) designed to help educators/trainers create online courses with a focus on interaction and collaborative construction of content.

- learning about 'what works' in workforce reform/remodelling is transferred between local authorities (and third sector organisations) – particularly in relation to reconfiguring social work roles, caseload management, effective supervision, and delivering social work in the context of service and workforce integration;
- participants report increased confidence/knowledge in leading and managing change to address current workforce challenges in social work, in the context of greater integration of children's services.

The pilot programme is founded on the following principles:

- the pilot should be driven by the needs of employers of social workers supporting children and families;
- Assistant Directors/Heads of Service must be able to see clear benefits from their participation;
- individuals' participation in the pilot should be voluntary, but with the expectation that it is sustained for at least eight months, and up to twelve;
- arrangements for the pilot should complement, and not duplicate, existing regional or sub-regional arrangements for peer networking between local authorities and national continuing professional development opportunities for these managers;
- there should be sufficient flexibility within the overarching model to allow for variation to meet the needs of participating organisations;
- face-to-face networking opportunities should be available within a reasonable distance of participating local authorities;
- face-to-face networking should be supported by middle managers who have been trained to act in a peer support role;
- materials for facilitators that prompt and support learning around key topics identified by participants should be available and include examples of learning from others' experience – these should be accessible online;
- funding and monitoring arrangements should be as straightforward as possible.

1.2 The Lancaster University Evaluation: A brief summary

The evaluation, designed by the Lancaster University research team, comprises a mixed-methods approach, which includes a desk-based literature review, a full cohort electronic questionnaire survey, regional teleconference groups with both 'peers' and 'peer supporters', non-participant observation at programme delivery events and individual

interviews with workforce lead personnel. As the evaluation progresses, a sample of individuals who fail to attend or withdraw from the programme will also be interviewed. The evaluation aims to realise the following inter-related objectives:

1. to gain an understanding of senior managers' perspectives and experiences of the peer evaluation programme with respect to benefits versus costs;
2. to assess changes in managers' confidence and capacities with respect to leading change in workforce re-modelling;
3. to assess transfer of learning and development to the broader workforce, with respect to case-load management, effective supervision and the delivery of integrated services;
4. to identify and assess added value versus duplication, with respect to any overlap with existing regional or sub-regional peer networking initiatives;
5. to identify and assess process outcomes, to include those that emerge inductively from the evaluation;
6. to elicit data that will inform the development of the peer support programme.

Methods of Data Collection

(i) Electronic questionnaire survey:

A questionnaire was designed by the research team to elicit data at three intervals during the evaluation: baseline (February/March, 2010), midterm (September, 2010) and endpoint (February/March, 2011). At each interval, the self-report questionnaires comprise pre-coded alternative response and scaled response questions, plus a small number of open-ended questions. The inclusion of a small number of open-ended questions was considered particularly by the evaluation team, in order to progress beyond pre-determined knowledge. At each stage of data collection, questionnaires are/will be designed with both peers and peer supporters in mind.

The baseline questionnaire was subject to pre-test. Three subjects selected, who were not recruited by CWDC to participate in the national *Pilot Peer Support Programme*. However 'testers' were all senior managers in children's services. Testers were asked to treat the questionnaire as strictly confidential. The questionnaire was then subject to revision following pre-test. As the evaluation progresses, midterm and endpoint questionnaires will be subject to a similar process of pre-testing and revision.

Pre-testing focused on the following design questions.

1. Will the questionnaire elicit sufficient variation in participant responses?
2. Are language and concepts clearly understood?
3. Are categories appropriate?
4. Are participants able to answer the questions easily?
5. Is the format easy to follow?
6. Is the flow of information logical?
7. Can the instrument be completed in a reasonable amount of time?

These key questions will inform the review of the questionnaire as the evaluation progresses. Revisions to the questionnaire will also be based on findings from each stage of the evaluation. Careful attention has been paid in advance to how each piece of information collected will be used in analysis. Questions are grouped by topic. Consideration has been paid to the format of the questionnaire; specifically lay out and spacing between questions.

Cohort response rate at each interval of the electronic survey have been/will be tracked. The team also planned to follow up participants who fail to respond, with the aim of eliciting a 60 per cent minimum response rate at each interval. Further telephone contact will also be made with a sample of non-respondents to enable a 'resistant' population to be identified for follow-up interview.

Participants have/will return their self-report questionnaires to a confidential electronic mail box and individuals will subsequently be identified according to their ID number in electronic databases.

(ii) The baseline questionnaire

The baseline questionnaire has now been administered as part of the first round of data collection. This questionnaire invited participants to offer demographic details (**Part A: profile**). This profiling data has enabled quota sampling for the first round of teleconferencing taking place in June 2010. Demographic details have also enabled the research team to profile the full cohort of participants and identify any significant sub-groups. It has been important to identify regional groups, in order to establish regional variations during the course of the evaluation. Questions have been asked regarding **professional identity (Part B)**. The baseline questionnaire has also invited participants to respond to questions about attitudes and expectations (**Part C: motivation and**

expectations). These responses have enabled the research team to assess the impact of confounders (e.g. has a particularly resistant or poorly motivated group been, by chance, recruited to the programme?) and ascertain important information with respect to the planning of any future regional peer support initiatives that arise from the CWDC initiative. A final subset of questions invites Likert scale responses (**Part D: Baseline skills and confidence against national priorities for senior managers**). These questions will enable the research team to measure change over time and thus, the impact of the Peer Support Programme against national objectives outlined in key policy documents (*Championing Children*, DfES, 2006; *Leading and Managing Children's Services in England, A National Professional Development Framework*, DCSF, 2008). All data has been uploaded to a secure, password protected data-base. Initial quantitative analysis has been carried out to produce descriptive statistics using the software package SPSS.

(iii) Non-Participant Observation

Consistent with the principles of naturalistic research, the evaluation team planned to observe all peer support training events and a sample of the Networking events during the three rounds of events over the course of the pilot. The first round of this data collection is complete and has informed the production of this report. Non-participant observation is a method of observation commonly used by social scientists that involves observing subjects *in situ*; researchers take care to avoid intervening in the setting. The researcher aims to produce 'thick descriptions' of the setting/encounter, avoiding the use of *a priori* categorical or theoretical frameworks. In keeping with these principles, early observations have been loosely guided by the following themes: **process** (for example, style of delivery, content, participant engagement), **learning** (for example, participant engagement, evidence of change/learning, evidence of development of networks) and **satisfaction** (for example, participants' perceived benefits, intention to return). Field notes documenting the research team's observations will then be subject to systematic thematic analysis to provide a final summative report at the end of the evaluation. Reflections on this data are provided in this first interim report, arising from initial thematic analysis of this data-set.

iv) Qualitative Interviews

Informal conversational style interviewing took place at the peer supporters training and will also be carried out with peers at the network events during the breaks, to enable further qualitative data to be gleaned. These conversations will be recorded as field notes and added to the overall field note data set. Initial responses have informed the production of

this report (see section 4). Formal semi-structured interviews will also take place with workforce lead personnel. A sample of these interviews will be transcribed and subject to thematic analysis. Conversational interviews have been subject to initial thematic analysis and are reported here; interviews with workforce leads have been suspended on account of the general election.

(v) Teleconferencing

Three rounds of teleconferencing were planned as part of the initial evaluation design. The primary purpose of the teleconferencing is to elicit qualitative data that will complement the electronic questionnaire based survey, and that will enable the impact of the training/events to be probed. The use of teleconferencing builds in an action research element to the evaluation, given that these groups provide a further avenue for meeting and discussion amongst the cohort of participants. Peers attending the networking events will be drawn into nine regional groupings (at each stage). Given that numbers of peer supporters are too small to make region-specific groups viable, peer supporters will be drawn into cross-regional groups. This sampling strategy will enable regional differences to be probed, as well as enabling the particular experience of the peer supporters to be explored. The large, proposed sample size is designed to minimise the impact of attrition.

Each teleconference will last about 45 minutes and will be audio recorded. Following initial introductions, questions will then be posed to the whole group to prompt more loosely structured multi-party talk. Throughout the teleconference, it will be important to ask for examples, and to explore agreement and disagreement. Data analysis will follow principles of thematic analysis, working initially from the sample of full transcripts and then revisiting audios to substantiate themes and/or identify further themes. Three members of the evaluation team will participate in this analysis, given the likely volume of data and to enable inter-rater reliability tests to be performed. Teleconferencing was suspended due to the general election.

(vi) Tavistock Consultancy Event Records

The research team have also drawn on the event records produced by Tavistock Consultancy. These event records have been useful for tracking attendance and attrition for this initial evaluation report and enabling common topics of concern to be identified across regions. These records have provided numerical as well as some limited qualitative

data. It is intended that further material will be available via the *Moodle* web-site, to inform evaluation reports at the mid-point and end-point of the evaluation.

All research instruments have resulted from detailed consultation among research team members and have then been subject to peer review by CWDC, before establishing a final product. At each stage of data collection, the research team have/will further refine interview/teleconference schedules and questionnaire, to reflect a commitment to reflexive, iterative design. The mixed methods design will enable final triangulation of findings, through aggregation of the data-sets. All data-sets have been securely stored in electronic form and are accessible by password to the evaluation team.

2.0 Progress with evaluation activity (1 February 2010 – 5 May 2010)

Activity	Sample	Sample Target Achieved?	Notes
Desk-based literature review	Related literatures	N/A	Literature review submitted with May interim report
Electronic questionnaire survey: Baseline questionnaire administered	Full cohort of those signed up to the programme (225) were sent the baseline questionnaire.	91 from an approximate total attendance figure of 110 returned the baseline questionnaire	Response rate difficult to establish as full data is not yet available. Key findings reported in May 2010 report
Observations of Peer Support Training Events	All 3 events observed	Target observations achieved	Observations reported in May 2010 report
Observations of Network Events	3 Networking events have been observed to-date	Target observations achieved	Observations reported in May 2010 report
Analysis of Tavistock consultants' notes/registers from networking days	All reports from individual networking days	All reports received and analysed - although some registers missing	Analysis reported in May 2010 report
Workforce Interviews	Suspended	Suspended	During election period
Teleconferencing	Suspended	Suspended	During election period

Literature Review

3.0 Literature Review: methodology

The evaluation is underpinned by a detailed review of the relevant research literature. The CWDC programme combines elements of formal mentoring and networked peer-to-peer learning and exchange. The series of network events delivered throughout the year will also be supplemented by a *Moodle* virtual learning environment that aims to further foster a community of peers. Thus, a number of related bodies of literature have been drawn on to provide an overview of relevant debates and findings. Search terms have included peer* and peer support*, peer and mentoring*, mentoring*, coaching*, peer learning*, peer and network*, peer and community* community of practice* and action learning*. Key databases have been searched using Lancaster University's Metalib search engine, providing access to the data-bases of JSTOR, EBSCO, Web of Science, and the Social Sciences Citation Index. In addition, a number of manual searches of key journals have been undertaken, notably, *Mentoring and Tutoring* and *Action Learning, Research and Practice*. Manual searches have also been made of related sites, for example the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services. Literature has been excluded that focuses on informal peer support, rather the focus has been on studies describing or evaluating the variants of formal peer support.

3.1 What is Peer Support?

In order to maximise the effectiveness of formal peer support, it is important to understand just what defines *peer* from other forms of professional support. Within the literature, there is a general consensus that peer support relationships offer an important alternative to support that is offered on the basis of seniority or specialist expertise. What defines peer support is *mutuality* - the giving or receiving of supports in a relationship of exchange (Loke and Chow, 2007). As Kram and Isabella (1985) describe, mutuality may take the form of peers giving and receiving feedback concerning work related matters, that enable them to evaluate their own experiences. Through peer relationships, peers are able 'to provide confirmation to each other through sharing perceptions, values and beliefs related to their lives at work and through discovering important commonalities in their view points' (Kram and Isabella, 1985, p. 112). Thus, the concept of peer-to-peer support is a far cry from the

'protégé-mentor' concept that prevails within much of the mentoring literature, where hierarchy is a clear feature of the relationship (Allen *et al.*, 2004; Hopkins-Thompson, 2000; Mullen, 2005). While this may appear a very basic point, its practical relevance is clear for those setting up formal peer support programmes. A degree of matching is required to ensure that participants do identify themselves as peers. In regard to formal peer support for professional groups, matching would need to consider factors such as job role, professional experience and status. In addition, the literature identifies the importance of gender, stage of career development and a sense of shared difficulties as important in setting up formal peer support programmes (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Ashwin, 2003; Chao *et al.*, 1992).

When formalising peer support, commentators may use the language of peer mentoring, peer coaching and or peer learning. In practice, programmes that aim to formalise peer support will likely encompass elements of all three approaches. However, it is useful to delineate coaching, in a pure sense, from mentoring or peer learning. Coaching tends to denote a more focused approach to support, whereby all parties to the coaching work together to pre-defined and narrow goals (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Hanbury, 2009; Olivero *et al.*, 1997). For example, formal coaching programmes have recently been tested by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, specifically aimed at succession planning. In contrast, mentoring denotes the provision of support in a broader sense that leads to skill-based, informational and psycho-emotional development. *Peer* mentoring is a specific form of mentoring and overlaps with activities of peer learning. Offering broader forms of support, peer-based programmes are seen as uniquely placed to facilitate development in a broad sense, because hierarchy is *not* a feature of the relationship (Mullen, 1994; Clutterback, 1999; Kram and Isabella, 1995). Research suggests that the absence of a formal hierarchical dimension within the relationship will generally make it easier to achieve support, communication and collaboration. Peer relationships tend to be characterised by higher levels of trust and disclosure and this can provide a context for the greater personal development (Kram, 1983; Kram and Isabella, 1985; Mullen, 2005). Peers learn through reflective dialogue in what is often seen as a non-traditional, mentor-mentee relationship (Kamler, 2006).

Kram and Isabella's (1985) typology of peer support relationships is useful in understanding the variety of supports that can be offered between peers. They describe peer relationships as existing along a continuum of support, but characterised by three

distinct categories of relationships. The three categories are the 'information peer', the 'collegial peer' and the 'special peer'. Relationships that are largely based on the exchange of information (information peer) are clearly quite different from those of collegial peers, where the boundaries of support are broader and extend to the provision of emotional support, feedback and confirmation. The final category of 'special peer' describes relationships that Kram and Isabella see as characterised by very high levels of trust and disclosure, which although less common, can enable 'profound work on salient emotional tasks' (1985, p.121). Peer relationships in this latter category would offer support with matters over and above workplace concerns. The authors conclude that all three categories can support an individual's sense of competence and confidence in their professional role and improve professional performance. Each type of peer relationship provides a range of opportunities for growth, through the distinctive functions it provides. Although these categories might suggest relationships that are more finite than is likely in practice, the distinction is useful in enabling some delineation of the kinds of supports offered in peer relationships. Such typologies highlight the importance of carefully differentiating between the *kinds* of support being provided and the kinds of development being achieved.

3.2 Approaches to Peer Support

Formal peer support programmes can take many forms. The traditional peer mentoring relationship exists on a one-to-one basis, providing a fairly personal environment for sharing. This contrast with peer support that takes place in formalised *groups*, which may be variously described as peer mentorship groups, learning sets and so forth. Group-based peer mentoring has been used to good effect in a variety of settings (Carroll, 2005; Swap *et al.*, 2005; Jones and King, 2009; Linehan and Sullivan, 2008) In group settings, peer mentoring is often facilitated by peers who take on additional training and responsibility (Blair *et al.*, 2008; Budderberg-Fisher, *et al.*, 2004). Research suggests that a number of factors are key in establishing peer-based group mentoring that include formal commitment of the peers to the project, similar goals/ interests, commonalities in status and experience, proximity (working in the same building) (Blair *et al.*, 2008). Peer mentoring that is group-based does, however, afford the possibility of amplifying the efforts of mentoring for the benefit of many (Carroll, 2005).

The value of mentoring programmes that enable participants to connect or network outside their organisation has also been documented (Graham and Wallace, 2004; Farnsley, 2009). The concept of the 'learning network' has become more popular, particularly given the scope of the internet to create virtual communities for peer exchange and learning (Van Rosmalen *et al.*, 2006) A learning network is described as a self-organised unit comprising users, a set of defined learning outcomes or goals, plus a set of learning activities that sustain the interest and commitment of the group. Where such mentoring networks are successful, they foster longer term connections (Kamler, 2006). However, more difficulties appear to be reported within the literature regarding the development and sustaining of learning networks, particularly where mechanisms are not in place to support continuity of contact (Van Rosmalen *et al.*, 2006). A number of initiatives to sustain learning networks have adopted the *Moodle* environment (<http://www.moodle.org>). In the context of a well planned *Moodle* environment, such as that described by Van Rosmalen *et al.*, (2006), a range of focused activities can sustain engagement of a learning community. For example, through a wiki, participants are able to easily connect through purposeful activity.

The value of building a community of learners, across agencies has also spawned the notion of a 'community of practice' (Wenger *et al.*, 2002; Mullen, 2005; Blair, 2008). These communities are seen to energise their members through a shared sense of identity, common language of opportunities and challenges (Mullen, 2005). The term 'community of practice' is of relatively recent coinage, although the phenomenon arguably, has a far longer history. An increasing number of organizations in various sectors are now focusing on communities of practice as a key to improving their performance (Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Communities of practice are defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership of the community implies and *requires* a shared commitment and competence. In common with learning networks, communities of practice are sustained through relevant activities that have clear gains for participants. As Wenger *et al.*, (2002) describe, a website in itself is not a community of practice, nor are individuals who have the same job or title, rather definition rests on the interaction of individuals who share and learn together with a common goal. A community of practice shares in a repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems - in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

Communities can have a diverse membership - they are not limited by formal structures of hierarchy or role, rather they create connections among people across organizational and geographic boundaries. However as Wenger *et al.*, (2002) describe, without regularly

scheduled meetings (be they face-to-face or online), the possibility of building sustainable links and a unique 'community' perspective on problems and actions is undermined.

In the UK 'action learning' has been used as a development tool for developing skills, including leadership skills, in variety professional settings. For example, there is a wealth of evidence of effective use of action learning in health settings (Rayner, *et al.*, 2002; Thomas & Etheridge, 2004; Board & Symons, 2007; Graham and Wallace, 2004; Wilson *et al.*, 2003). Action learning describes a process in which a group of people come together on a regular basis to help each other learn from their experience (Dick 1997; Raelin, 2006; Ram and Trehan, 2006). The desired outcome of this form of learning is that participants can take more purposeful action on work issues that are not easily tackled by individuals attempting to generate solutions in isolation. The literature generally refers to 'action learning sets' (ALS), with these sets ideally comprising four to six participants, committed to shared learning and able to allocate time to the process. The focus of ALS in professional settings is on 'real-time' problems within the workplace (Raelin, 1997, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2010). The particular strengths of the ALS model is that for complex workplace problems, for which there are no ready solutions, action learning affords the possibility of generating new solutions through shared dialogue and collaborative learning.

The process of the (ALS) is described by Young *et al.*, (2010, p.107) as 'reflection, action and reflection on action by the group'. The authors write that 'the participation of colleagues who contribute their reflections on their experiences is germinal' (Young *et al.*, p.107). The power of the set is seen to lie in the types of questions used and the 'gift of time for reflection', which is granted to the problem holder (Young *et al.*, p.107). The set members are also encouraged to consider the process: was it effective, what questions worked well and what emotions had to be considered?

Ground rules are important to the function of ALS, in order to establish a 'safe' space for discussion and collaboration, and to enable critical challenge through supportive but nevertheless probing questions. To help establish a conducive environment, most ALS will be facilitated by a trained individual (Ram and Trehan, 2006). As stated, the purpose of the ALS is to explore and develop options that result in better working practices; however, personal growth achieved by members within the group can transfer to the workplace/and or enable participants to embrace other opportunities for learning outside the workplace.

3.3 Making Peer Support Work

There is a body of research that reports positive findings of peer support initiatives (Kram and Isabella, 1985, Blair *et al.*, 2008). In particular, the literature offers that reflective dialogue and collaborative learning can lead to the generation of new solutions to complex workplace problems (Raelin, 1997; Kamler, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2010). However, within children's social care, there is a dearth of relevant literature. In addition, within the broader evidence base, studies have tended to be focused on one-to-one mentoring, rather than other forms of peer support (Daresh, 2004; Grogan and Crow, 2004). In the context of one-to-one support, programmes work better where participants are based within the same organisation and there is a clear commitment within the agency to allocating time for this activity. Peer support also appears to work best at pivotal points in professional careers, for example, when individuals are new in post or seeking career advancement (Blair *et al.*, 2008). Research suggests that formalising peer support through the drawing together of peers who are geographically dispersed into variants of learning networks is more difficult, given the potential for variable agency commitment to programmes, the possibility for greater confusion/ dissent regarding objectives, movement of participants between jobs and the difficulty of sustaining personal commitment when relationships are far less immediate (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Learning networks that are geographically dispersed tend to be subject to a number of potentially negative variables that are difficult to control and thus, can render them fragile.

In evaluating any peer support programme, it is important to distinguish between 'one-off' impacts and longer-term impacts. Hanbury's (2009) analysis of the programme of leadership coaching initiative led by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services provides a number of important insights and recommendations. Although referring specifically to coaching in the context of succession planning, Hanbury's observations regarding cost/benefit questions and sustainability clearly have broader relevance. Specifically, he notes that where coaching is not embedded within an agency culture, as a key and indispensable component of effective professional practice, then well intentioned initiatives are easily 'de-railed'. This observation has been reiterated in a number of other studies (Mullen, 2008; Blair *et al.*, 2008). Hanbury notes that 'one-off benefits' that are not sustained, are difficult to justify on economic grounds. In the coaching study he also noted that the working lives of school leaders tended to be 'overwhelmed by the tyranny of the urgent' and recommended that any project needs to be afforded

'dedicated time which is inviolable' in order to succeed (Hanbury 2009, p15). Clearly these observations are highly relevant for other hard-pressed public services.

3.4 Ten key issues drawn from the peer support literature:

From the review of the literature, it is possible to condense findings from the studies included in this review, into the following ten key issues. These ten key issues provide important considerations for those designing peer support programmes.

1. A degree of matching is required to ensure that participants do identify themselves as peers. In regard to formal peer support for professional groups, matching would need to consider factors such as job role, professional experience and status, gender and shared objectives; research suggests that peer support has most impact at pivotal points in professional careers.
2. Peer support programmes are uniquely placed to facilitate development along a number of key dimensions, particularly where careful attention is paid to ensuring hierarchy is *not* a feature of the relationship.
3. Peers learn through 'reflective dialogue' in what is often seen as a non-traditional mentor-mentee relationship; reflective dialogue can generate new solutions to complex workplace problems.
4. Peer relationships are not necessarily homogenous. Typologies of peer support highlight the importance of carefully differentiating between the *kinds* of support being provided and the kinds of development being achieved.
5. Peer mentorship that is group based can amplify the efforts of mentoring for the benefit of many.
6. More difficulties are reported in relation to establishing and sustaining peer learning networks where peers are geographically dispersed. However, where such learning networks are successful, they can foster important longer term connections that would otherwise be unavailable.
7. The term 'community of practice' has gained currency. In common with other learning networks, new forms of technology can help to develop and sustain such communities through access to regular and consistent activities.
8. Action learning sets (ALS) work best with smaller groups that meet at regular intervals and where clear ground rules foster trust and collaborative exchange. Effective ALS can enable exchange concerning complex workplace issues, for which there are no ready solutions.

9. All forms of peer support will work better where formal peer support/exchange is embedded within agency culture and time allocated is inviolable.
10. Peer support programmes should consider how gains beyond those immediate to the day/event can be fostered.

4.0 Key Findings from Empirical Work

Reporting findings from the first phase of empirical work (1st February – 5th May. 2010),³ this final section of the report covers the following topics:

1. initial recruitment and attrition (statistics: table for peer support and network events);
2. group profile and motivation (aggregated questionnaire data and qualitative observations);
3. participant understanding of objectives;
4. duplication;
5. peer support training: process, learning and satisfaction;
6. network events: process, learning and satisfaction.

Aside from topics that relate specifically to the peer support and networking events, findings from the diverse data sets are aggregated. To-date, findings are based on the baseline questionnaire (interval one of the electronic survey), non-participant observation and informal ‘interviews’ at the peer supporters training and the networking events and event records produced by Tavistock Consultancy. **At this stage, the evaluation team provide early formative findings; detailed systematic analysis will be possible, upon collection of the substantive data-sets.**

4.1 Initial Recruitment and Attrition

Activity	Target Number	Number signed up	Number attending
Peer Supporters Training	60	55	41
Networking Events	300	229	111

³ Early findings concur with findings from the regional pilot in the East, along a number of dimensions. This report is available from CWDC as an ‘Analysis of Activity Report’. A summary of the findings from the East is provided in this report in section 1.2 ‘The Pilot Peer Support Programme: A brief summary and background’.

Table 1.

From analysis of event records produced by Tavistock Consultancy, the number of participants who signed up to the Pilot Peer Support Programme (225) was significantly lower than the initial target specified by the CWDC (300). In addition, there was further attrition in regard to the number actually *attending* both the peer supporters training and networking events. When comparing figures for the peer supporters training and the networking events, conversion rates between ‘sign up’ and attendance are much higher for the peer supporters training (table 1). Clearly, those electing to train as peer supporters are a self-selected group and from observations at the events, demonstrate the highest levels of motivation.

As interviews with workforce leads and with ‘non-attendees’ have at this stage been suspended, it has been difficult to establish the reasons for the levels of attrition. Analysis of the limited data available in the form of formal apologies to Tavistock Consultancy Services indicates the following reasons: moving jobs, individuals not yet in post and immediate work pressures. Immediate work pressures were the largest category of reasons given and included demands of Ofsted inspection and senior management meetings that could not be moved. For example, in the East region, of 22 potential participants, 13 did not attend and cited immediate work pressures as the reason. With respect to the relevant literature, research clearly finds that where ‘time’ allocated to peer support initiatives is not inviolable, this presents a clear threat to programmes. The questionnaire data also indicates that the concept of peer support is not well embedded within regions. At this stage, because teleconferencing has not commenced, it is difficult to draw further clear conclusions about the impact of organisational culture on participant commitment to peer support. In addition, the relationship and interface between CWDC and target agencies (that is, the extent to which CWDC initiatives are communicated widely within agencies) needs further probing in the interviews and teleconferencing.

Participation will need to be addressed if the outcomes aimed for the programme are to be achieved. We recommend that methods for enhancing participation should be discussed by the programme providers. The teleconference data collection work, although not part of the formal programme of delivery, may contribute indirectly to sustaining the current cohort of participants.

4.2 Group Profile

The evidence base pertaining to peer support suggests that peer exchange works better where participants are able to clearly identify each other as *peers*. The project has, part by design and part by chance, elicited a cohort that share much in common. As the bar chart below indicates, derived from the baseline electronic survey, a large number of the total cohort participating in the programme, are children's services managers who are within 12 months of starting a new post (although the majority have been in previous management posts).

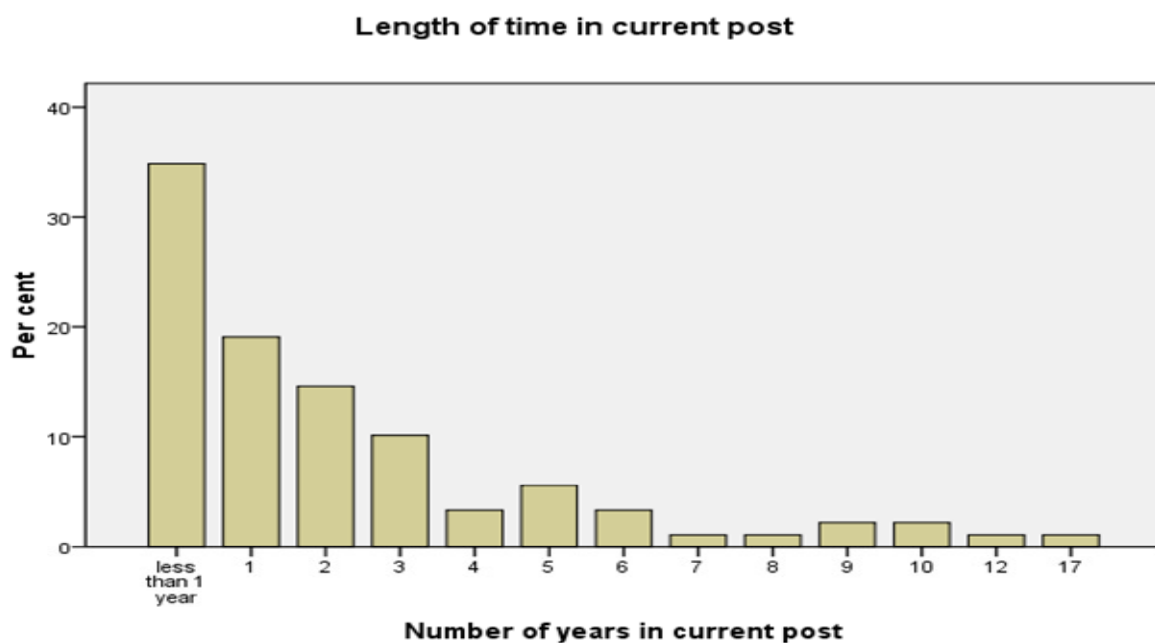


Figure 1

In addition, the group are mostly white, mostly local authority workers, with 55 per cent females and 45 per cent males. With respect to age profiles, 50 per cent of the cohort are aged 41-50 and 34 per cent are aged 51-60. These figures are based on a response rate (to baseline questionnaire) of 91 out of a total figure of 111 attendees and hence give a relatively accurate picture of the profile of the full cohort. Moreover, this finding is substantiated from non-participant observation of both the peer support training and network events. In a number of the regional and sub-regional groups, participants commented on the value of the learning and activity that was taking place given the homogeneity of groups along a number of dimensions:

Within our organisation we have a hierarchy. Within the group [here] we do not and that makes the difference....

That many participants were in the first year of a new post is an important finding, and from the review of the literature, peer support is particularly useful when participants are at such pivotal points in professional careers.

Given that the majority, but not *all*, participants shared similar characteristics as described, the cohesion of a small number of regional/sub-regional groups appeared undermined by difference. This was of particular note where there were marked differences in professional statuses within the group. In one particular group, participants conveyed to the non-participant observer that there were difficulties in sharing and disclosure on account of the presence of an Assistant Director within the group. In another group, a number of participants were front-line team managers, a number were in more senior positions. This composition created a tension within the group, as the team managers did not see themselves as having sufficient strategic power to make changes.

Given teleconferencing has not commenced, it has been difficult to probe the experience of minority groups within the programme, for example those coming from the third sector or participants from minority ethnic groups.

4.3 Motivation and Participant Objectives

In any evaluative study, it is important to establish the presence of confounders. In this instance, poor motivation on the part of participants would have been a clear confounder. Responses to the electronic questionnaire survey do *not* indicate that poor motivation would undermine the programme, with only two per cent of respondents indicating low levels of motivation.

How would you assess your motivation with regard to participating in the peer support programme

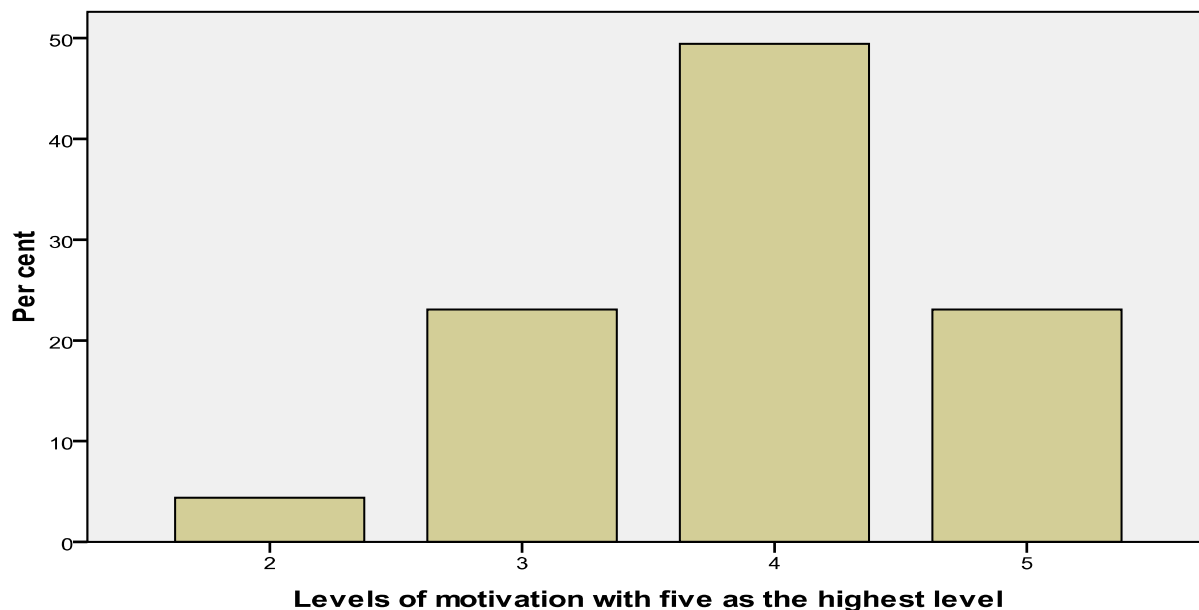


Figure 2⁴

Motivation scores are generally high with the majority scoring three and over (see figure 2). This may link to expectations regarding the utility of peer support with 95 per cent of participants also stating that they expected learning to transfer to the workplace. This finding also supports CWDC's pre-programme consultation with children's services managers that found clear support for peer support initiatives.

The peer support literature suggests that formal peer support is very effective when individuals are new in post because at this point motivation levels are higher. This may account for the 'enthusiasm' for the programme, given the group composition (see Fig 1). Further analysis of the data across the course of the evaluation will examine whether levels of motivation are sustained across the programme. In addition, there will be further differentiation of sub-groups with respect to levels of motivation (for example, those new in post, peers, peer supporters, regional groups).

⁴ None of the respondents returned a level '1' assessment.

How clear are you about the aims & objectives of the peer support programme

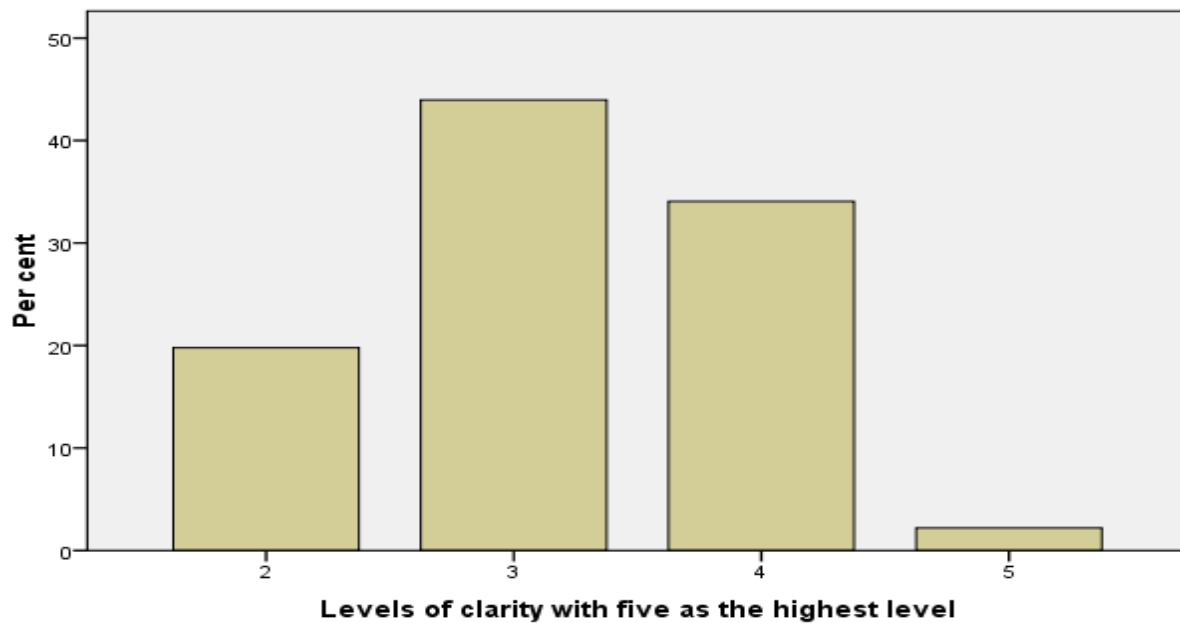


Figure 3⁵

Participants reported that they had a fairly good view of the aims and objectives of the programme, with responses converging around scores three and four. Responses to the survey data also indicated very high levels of convergence in regard to participants' preferences against the range of objectives probed. For example, 87 per cent of participants wanted to form regional contacts and networks, 85 per cent wanted to explore complex issues, 73 per cent wanted to gain specific knowledge through shared expertise. Given that one of the overarching aims of the Pilot Peer Support Programme is to extend managers' networks, the very high percentage of managers concurring with this objective (Figure 2) is a very positive result. These preferences will be explored in more detail through further data collection activities. However, at this point, participants' objectives underscore the importance of giving priority to setting up the *Moodle* and examining the possibility for stimulating and sustaining activity on the *Moodle* site.

⁵ None of the respondents returned a level '1' assessment.

What are you hoping to gain from peer support; extend regional contacts & networks



Figure 4

4.4 Duplication

50 per cent of the cohort very clearly indicated in the questionnaire survey that no formal peer support opportunities were available within their region. In only 25 per cent of questionnaires returned, did participants describe variants of formal peer support opportunities in their regions. A percentage of respondents were unclear or unaware of peer support opportunities. Thus, at this stage it does not appear that the Pilot Support Programme is significantly duplicating peer support opportunities available nationally.

4.5. Peer Support Training: process, learning and satisfaction

Three peer supporter training events were delivered by Tavistock Consultancy Services across England during February 2010 and all three were observed in part or in full by the evaluation team. As stated earlier in this report, observation followed principle of naturalistic research, following the prompt themes of 'process', 'learning' and 'satisfaction'. Tavistock Consultancy Services were seen as experienced and highly skilled trainers and facilitators by the participants. There were some initial 'teething' troubles concerning the peer supporters' expectations and lack of clarity surrounding the purpose of the programme; however, these were quickly resolved. It appeared that despite the Tavistock team's clear efforts to supply detailed information to participants, informal 'interviews' at the first peer support training event found that a number of participants felt that they lacked

information prior to the event about process and objectives. In part, participants attributed this to the number of CWDC initiatives operating within local authority areas, and confusion within individual organisations about aims of the diverse programmes. To remedy this problem, the Tavistock team reviewed their plans for the training days to ensure that information concerning process and objectives was explicitly stated at the outset of the training.

Tavistock Consultancy Services delivered a programme of peer support training that clearly enabled participants to describe new found skills in facilitation. At this early stage, a tentative conclusion can be drawn that the Peer Support Programme did appear effective in terms of giving peer supporters confidence to lead change. For example, at one event, a participant stated:

I am really beginning to see that change is possible and that we as a group can lead change...I actually feel very hopeful about my service... that I have the capacity to engage my staff team in moving towards changes that will make a real difference to the lives of children and their families..

This observation will be further probed in subsequent rounds of teleconferencing and in the electronic survey.

The Tavistock Consultancy approach to the delivery of the programme was influenced by principles of action learning, and comprised didactic, experiential and reflective learning. The Tavistock team sought to provide the group with the opportunity to experience being part of a peer support group themselves, as well as considering their future role as peer supporters and network event facilitators. The stimulation of reflective dialogue to explore obstacles to challenges currently faced by managers within children's services is a style of delivery/learning that is much documented within the peer support literature and seen as an effective method of stimulating *peer* learning and exchange.

Initially a number of participants felt that it would not be possible to achieve the **high standard of facilitation** modelled by Tavistock's team; however, confidence appeared to grow over the course of the two days. Exercises that encouraged participants to explore their anxieties appeared to aid confidence building. For example, a small group activity designed to help peer supporters examine the underpinning principles they felt needed to be in place for peer support, stimulated some interesting discussion and led participants to

generate principles such as 'reframing problems to look for solutions', 'providing a shared space to reflect' and 'doing not moaning'. Another small group exercise allowed regional groups to think about potential pitfalls on the networking days and develop strategies for how they might resolve or cope with them. Participants were encouraged to find their own solutions to such anxieties. For example, when participants expressed anxiety about their facilitation skills, the Tavistock team asked the group to discuss the skills they currently use/require to fulfil their role as senior managers. This enabled participants to appraise their own strengths and appreciate the transferability of many of their existing skills. The **inherent confidence building** that such activities engendered was clear to the research team. For example, one participant, who had vocalised concerns about her role, commented: *we are peers not educators and we won't have all the answers*. While offering didactic input derived from theoretical material concerning opportunities and resistance to change, the Tavistock consultants clearly made it their business to communicate with participants from a collegial rather than 'expert' position, thus modelling skills of peer learning and support. Tavistock's team regularly checked back with the participants that they understood, felt comfortable with the process and wished to move on to the next activity. This was valued by the participants one of whom commented: *...the way they handled the feedback has been really helpful*.

Time out to reflect and exchange ideas about challenges and solutions was highlighted as a particularly positive aspect of the process by participants:

We know how to change things in theory but because we don't have the time to sit back, plan it, reflect on it then it does not happen.

It feels as though something has been invested in us. To sit back and share ideas with different people. It's giving us permission to go and see what it is that is stopping us making change.

That participants were drawn into **regional and sub-regional groups** for some activities seemed particularly useful. Over the course of the two days, participants appeared to quickly gel within their groups and were able to focus on the very real practical challenges within a local context. The early creation of the regional groupings by Tavistock Consultancy appeared to assist in the rapid consolidation of ideas and demonstrated early potential for the transfer of learning to the workplace, post the event.

During the peer support training, time was set aside for the peer supporters to **design and plan** the network events. Planning the networking day appeared to consolidate learning for participants, as they began to think about activities that would enable them to enact and

transfer their new found learning and attitudes to change. At each point participants visibly drew on their learning and experience of the training to inform their decision making, reflecting on difficulties they had faced and considering how they may respond to challenges similar to the ones *they* had presented to the Tavistock delivery team. Given the necessarily full programme peer supporters had a relatively short time in which to plan their first networking day. Comments during the short interviews carried out during breaks; suggest that this did cause some anxiety. This was particularly the case in regions where peer supporters were geographically spread making subsequent planning meetings very difficult. Participants commented on how they felt they needed time to get to know each other and build trust in order to successfully co-facilitate. This was further compounded by the tightness of the timetable, with very little time between training events and the first networking days.

Overall, the peer support training was **generally well received** and in the majority of cases there was considerable enthusiasm to take the Peer Support Programme forward. At the end of the training the following comments were made:

*It really reassures me [attendance at the event] as I'd forgotten what I **can** do!
I'm all fired up by it!*

However, participants also cautioned that they feared learning would be lost when they were back in the workplace - indicating the need for something more than a simple 'one off' event.

We are managers again as soon as we get back and then we are into fire fighting again

4.6. Peer Support Networking Day: process, learning and satisfaction

Three regional peer support networking days were observed by members of the evaluation team. Observations followed principles of naturalistic research, following three prompt themes of 'process', 'learning' and 'satisfaction'. The research team aimed to achieve rich field note descriptions as described in section 1.3 of this report.

Although **attendance was lower** than had been anticipated at all three events observed, there remained a great deal of enthusiasm among the peer supporters who quickly adapted their events to accommodate the change in numbers. Disparity in the size of the groups formed in each region will impact on the evaluation in terms of their comparability. The reasons given for attending the networking events reflected those provided in the electronic survey; for example, accessing networks of peers; picking up/sharing new ideas

about good practice. Participants clearly conveyed that they valued the possibility of building shared solutions *in situ*, through the work of the events. Here, clear resonance can be observed between the findings of the national pilot and the pre-pilot in the East. There was evidence on the networking days that peer supporters **adopted an approach that reflected their experiences on the Tavistock Consultancy run peer support training**. The programme for the pilot networking events had been given out at the peer supporters training and certainly some regional groups drew heavily from it in their planning, feeling that given the time constraints this was the best approach. At the network events, Tavistock consultants provided a supportive mentoring role to the peer supporters, offering feedback on the facilitation skills and providing general support for the process. They also ensured that the peer supporters had space to reflect on the day and facilitated an analysis of both the supporters own performance and group dynamics. This latter task was crucial given the programme's modus operandi is group based support.

Establishing ground rules at an early stage appeared to stimulate ready discussion of even sensitive topics. For example, participants described being able to: *speak it as it is, openly and without fear*. This point was reiterated at other networking events. For example, on the subject of 'change' one participant commented that: *There's a difference between what should happen and what does happen – let's be honest about real challenges to change*. Clearly the peer supporters were able to create a 'safe space' for exploration of day-to-day challenges, a space that was valued and not always available within the workplace. However, participants also volunteered that the possibility of a 'safe space' could easily be lost where groups did not comprise individuals readily seen as peers (e.g. presence of an Assistant Director or a first line manager). Participants also welcomed the time that the event provided to reflect on day-to-day challenges in the workplace. A key difference between the peer supporter training days and the networking days was the more pronounced difficulties that peers attending the networking days described with the Tavistock action learning process – although this was not evidenced at all networking and needs further probing across the course of the evaluation. Comments were made during the breaks which reflected uncertainty about the overall agenda and purpose of the day. This appeared to remain an issue for a number of the participants over the course of some, but not all, networking events, with a number of participants stating that they felt that they needed to know what the potential outcomes of the events would be, in order to give priority to attendance at subsequent events. The urgency for concrete outcomes, and possibly a more traditional means of arriving at conclusions and action

points, meant that peers experienced some irritation with the use of ice breakers and the 'light touch' early engagement techniques. There was no overt resistance to the activities, but, at some of the first network events, some activities were seen as trivial and serving to detract from the 'real issues' needing to be addressed, such as workforce retention. For example, a participant stated: *I enjoyed the morning, but can we do something a bit more focused?* In spite of these comments the majority, if not all, seem to appreciate and acknowledge the need for a shared reflective space by the end of the day. General satisfaction levels need further probing over the course of the evaluation.

Given there is critical emphasis on the group process within this pilot, this factor has been, and will be, given further detailed scrutiny in the evaluation. This was the first networking event and as such the first time this group of people had experienced sharing and reflecting together. It is to be expected that some resistance or anxiety would be manifest. At one event of peer supporters training, the participants discussed some of the inherent difficulties in trying to be both a peer and a supporter. There appears to have been regional differences in how they addressed this tension with some keeping to the facilitator role and others more clearly identifying themselves as peers contributing in a similar way to the rest of the group. Again it will be interesting to see how responses change and develop across the course of the programme. Taking all the comments into account, it is clear that many participants are familiar with highly structured decision-making environments and on the one hand value the opportunity to follow topics as they emerge, but at the same time want to feel that they have achieved '*something concrete*' at the end of the day. Participants at the networking events wanted some kind of measurable output/outcome in order to justify their time '*away from the office*'.

From reports provided by Tavistock consultants of the individual networking days, and the evaluation team's observations of the three events, it is clear that peers raised a number of **common topics** for discussion. Common topics raised for discussion were: recruitment and retention of quality staff, workload and staff morale (including Newly Qualified Social Worker Pilot [NQS] and caseload issues for new staff), support and development opportunities for managers, integrated working (definition and directions), tensions in managing family support and child protection (including risk management), the negative media coverage relating to social work, the impact of IT systems, disempowerment, a lack of time to reflect on practice, budget constraints/the political context, using research in practice and commissioning. The majority of the issues raised also closely related to those

noted by the peer supporters during their training, indicating the commonalities of challenges both between peers and peer supporters and across regions.

Participants worked enthusiastically within both large and small group discussions, all of which were focussed on the day-to-day challenges they faced in the workplace. There was evidence of sharing of ideas and strategies, resulting in **new learning**. During breaks in the schedule, participants described to the evaluation team that they found the sessions useful with respect to '*picking up new ideas*', forging new links with peers from other local authorities, and with third sector peers where they were present. Nevertheless, some participants expressed concerns that the priorities of the participants were too varied to agree a focussed agenda and that they concerned about implementing new learning '*back at the day job*'. In order to sustain and build on learning at the first round of events, the *Moodle* environment needs to be established as soon as possible, so that further sharing can take place. The participants indicated at the events that they would be willing to exchange local policy and strategy documents, and the *Moodle* environment could potentially provide the vehicle for this exchange.

5.0 Conclusions: progress against the programme objectives.

At this point in the programme, it is not possible to draw final conclusions about the programme's progress against stated objectives or intended outcomes. However, a number of interim conclusions can be drawn with reference to the key evaluation questions:

1. Is learning about 'what works' transferred between local authorities?

There is some clear evidence that there is transfer of learning during events. Topics covered on the networking days, such as workforce integration, converge with the programme's stated objectives regarding priority issues for discussion/learning and appeared to facilitate sharing among participants from diverse agencies. This initial finding is consistent with observations from the East pre-pilot. However, participants also vocalised concerns regarding obstacles to the transfer of this learning to the workplace. Drawing on findings from the review of the relevant literature, the late implementation of the *Moodle* environment may have undermined further transfer of learning following the initial round of networking events. Further data collection will

probe the transfer of learning between local authorities and the impact of the *Moodle*, once it is established.

2. Do participants report increased confidence/knowledge in leading and managing change to address current workforce challenges in social work, in the context of greater integration of children's services?

A number of participants did describe development of personal confidence; this was vocalised during both the peer support and networking days, but at this stage it is not possible to conclude that this finding applies to the full cohort of participants. The greatest shift in confidence levels were observed during the peer supporter training on account of motivation coupled with a willingness to engage with the Tavistock methodology. Subsequent rounds of the electronic survey questionnaire will enable conclusions to be drawn about the extent to which growth in confidence is generalised, whether development is sustained and the extent to which increased confidence impacts on the workforce. The self-assessment measures that participants record in subsequent electronic questionnaires will also provide further evidence of the extent to which the programme has facilitated and sustained positive change/development.

3. Are participants able to see clear benefits from their participation?

Participants attending the networking days expressed some ambivalence about the benefits of participation, although they did give examples of clear benefits when pushed, such as the value of time to reflect and the value of making contacts across regions. This finding is consistent with observations from the East pre-pilot. More benefits to participation were vocalised by those attending the peer supporters training, who were also enthusiastic about the value of peer support and their role as facilitators.

4. Is individual participation in the pilot voluntary, and will it be sustained for at least eight months, and up to twelve?

Although participation is for the majority of participants, voluntary, attrition rates between sign up and actual attendance suggest that there will be problems in sustaining commitment. An early finding is that time allocated is not inviolable and this is a factor in terms of sustainability. This finding is consistent with observations from the East pre-pilot. In addition, very small numbers in some regions will need to be addressed by CWDC and Tavistock Consultancy Services.

5. Do arrangements for the pilot complement and not duplicate, existing regional or sub-regional arrangements for peer networking between local authorities and national continuing professional development opportunities for these managers?

Data collected to-date do not suggest any significant duplication and it may be that the programme strengthens ongoing initiatives within regions. Enthusiasm and motivation reported both in questionnaires and at events suggests that participants welcome this opportunity to develop peer support and the possibilities that are opened up for peer support within the workplace.

6. Is there sufficient flexibility within the overarching model to allow for variation to meet the needs of participating organisations?

At this stage, it has not been possible to draw conclusions about the needs of different organisations. However, there was a general difficulty expressed by participants attending the networking days in particular, about adapting to the action learning model. The peer supporters demonstrated the highest levels of adaptation and satisfaction – a self-selecting cohort who may have a higher level of commitment to the programme overall. Tentatively, the principle of *peer* support appears to be established as effective, but the action learning approach may need some adjusting to suit the needs of the target population. This will be explored further through the next round of data collection.

7. Are face-to-face networking opportunities available within a reasonable distance of participating local authorities?

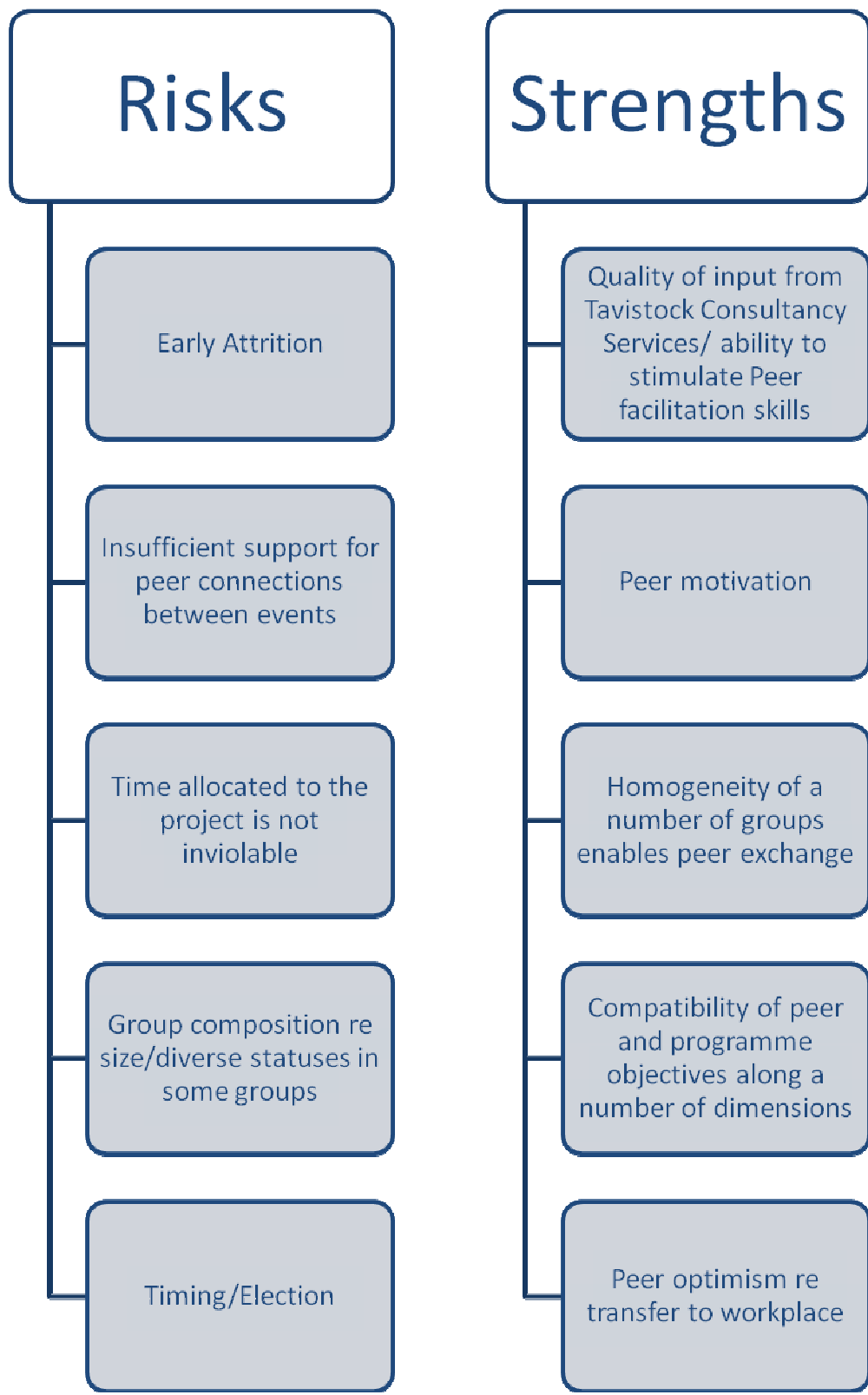
The majority of participants have not cited any barriers to participation arising from the location of the events. This finding is inconsistent with observations from the East pre-pilot, where geographical distance from events was seen as a barrier to participation.

8. Are face-to-face networking events supported by middle managers who have been trained to act in a peer support role?

The initial peer support training events have been largely successful in training the peer supporters. However, those attending the networking events demonstrated some resistance to the action learning model that informed those events.

9. Are materials for facilitators that prompt and support learning around key topics identified by participants available (to include examples of learning from others' experience) and accessible online.

Tavistock Consultancy provided very good quality hard copy information packs to all participants, containing key reading material. Implementation of the *Moodle* learning environment has been delayed.



Strengths and Risks - a summary

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7.0 The Evaluation Team

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