

Libraries Connected Peer Mentoring Scheme 2025 Evaluation Report

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1. Background and methodology

1.1 Scheme background

This peer mentoring programme for public library Heads of Service followed a pilot scheme which ran in 2022 as part of Libraries Connected's Learning Pathway for library staff.

Libraries Connected commissioned Penny Shapland-Chew, credentialed coach, mentor and supervisor (and former librarian) to partner with them to lead and manage the programme in 2025. This year, the scheme was opened to both Heads of Service and Emerging Leaders.

The programme was designed to complement the generous ad hoc support provided through the Heads of Service Network. Its purpose was to build resilient, strong, well-supported leaders by:

- Developing compassionate leadership and listening skills.
- Increasing mentee confidence, influencing skills and making time for reflection.
- Supporting leaders who may feel isolated.
- Offering practical help e.g. capital projects, restructures, service transformation, working with Councillors, budgeting, technical knowledge etc.

This report outlines the evaluation findings for the scheme.

1.2 Scheme structure and timescales

a) Scheme development (March 2025)

Becky Scott, Project Manager: Workforce development and skills for Libraries Connected was allocated as project manager for the scheme. Penny Shapland-Chew was commissioned to assist with the facilitation of the scheme, including training and support. Kevin Bolton was commissioned to undertake the independent evaluation of the scheme. The supporting documentation was updated, including the Handbook and Evaluation Plan.

b) Recruitment (March to April 2025)

A call for mentors and mentees was issued by Libraries Connected using their communication channels. This year, the scheme was opened to both Heads of Service and Emerging Leaders who may consider applying for a Head of Service role within the next 12 months or have current responsibility for a major project or large-scale change.

24 mentees and 11 mentor-eligible applications were received. Before the launch, introductions were circulated to mentees to help them inform their choice of mentor.

c) Matching and training (June 2025)

An online launch and training event was undertaken, where each mentor and mentee introduced themselves, outlining their experience and what they wanted to get out of the scheme. This included a training session in mentoring for both mentors and mentees.

Following the training, each mentee chose three mentors they wanted to be matched with. Becky Scott and Penny Shapland-Chew matched the mentees with their mentors drawing on the information shared in the initial applications as well as the mentees preferred choices. The mentees and mentors were informed of the match.

d) Mentoring (June-November 2025)

The pairs met 3-6 times over six months (the average was 5 meetings). Three 1-hour 'drop-in support' sessions for mentors were also facilitated by Penny Shapland-Chew during this period. Each session attracted 3-4 mentors. A final event was held in November where the mentors and mentees shared their experiences and learning from the scheme.

1.3 Evaluation methodology

The evaluation of the scheme included:

- **Outcomes evaluation**, which takes place during the scheme to establish its impact.
- **Process evaluation**, which takes place during the scheme with the aim of improving practice and understanding how outcomes were achieved.

Through the evaluation of the scheme, we wanted to find out and explore:

1. What new skills and confidence have the mentees developed as a result of the scheme? How have these been put into practice?
2. What new learning or knowledge have the mentee developed as a result of the scheme and the practical support? How have these been put into practice?
3. What new skills and confidence have the mentors developed as a result of the scheme? How have these been put into practice?
4. What lessons were learned from the scheme? What should the scheme do differently next time?
5. How many applications did the scheme receive? Who did the scheme attract in terms of career background and demographic (for both mentees and mentors)?

We also sought to collect unintended outcomes.

The following data was collected:

- Equal opportunities and demographic data for those who applied (n=22)
- Equal opportunities and demographic data for the selected mentees (n=10)
- An end-of-scheme questionnaire for mentors (n=7) and mentees (n=8)
- Attendance by the evaluator at the final event, where each pair presented how they benefited from the scheme.
- Feedback from the project staff on lessons learned.

2. Findings

2.1 Demographic

Equal opportunities and demographic data were collected from mentors and mentees during the application process. Once at the time of the application (mentees and mentors) and a second time once they had been selected (mentees).

For mentors (applications, n=10):

- 60% were female.
- 80% were white.
- 90% had a background working in public libraries.
- 80% had parents or guardians whose highest level of qualification was below degree level or no degree (when aged about 14)
- 10% had a disability as defined by the 2010 Equality Act

For mentees (selected, n=10)

- 90% were female.
- 90% were white.
- 90% had a background working in public libraries.
- 80% had parents or guardians whose highest level of qualification was below degree level or no degree (when aged about 14)
- 10% had a disability as defined by the 2010 Equality Act

2.2 Impact

This section is mainly based on thematic analysis of the open-ended questions from the questionnaires and the notes from the final event.

Confidence and self-belief

Mentees frequently reported increased confidence in their roles as leaders. In some cases, they highlighted greater confidence in recognising and trusting their own expertise and abilities.

"My confidence has increased in my role as a relatively new Head of Service. This focus on my professional development has also given me the confidence to take on a Regional role as Universal Offer lead."

"Confidence in my abilities and to trust my judgement"

"Be more confident in myself"

"Belief and confidence in myself as a library leader."

"I think my discussions made me realise how much experience and knowledge I do have."

"More confidence in personal knowledge and expertise....Trust instincts."

"The sessions have reinforced that I do know what I am doing and should have confidence in my decision making."

"I came into this new into post and was a little unsure of what I was doing, however the sessions have reinforced that I do know what I am doing and should have confidence in my decision making."

"It helped me to rebuild confidence after returning [to work]....supported by a safe space for reflection..... helped me to reformat my thinking and re-establish myself as Service Manager."

"Confidence in dealing with senior officers... confidence in dealing with other staff in the services."

Time management and reflection

Many mentees highlighted developing skills around time management and prioritisation – at both the final event and in their questionnaire responses. Others reported the importance of self-reflection and providing space to think, which had also emerged strongly from the evaluation of the 2022 scheme.

"The programme enabled me to get a better sense of perspective and to take time to reflect on everything that I am, sometimes these things are hard to balance but I'm giving my very best each day.....Monthly meetings provided time to think, reflect and discuss"

"Being able to pause and assess work, projects, priorities rather than pushing forward. Seeing things in a different perspective to have a fresh look.... Better skills in time management."

"I haven't gained any new knowledge as such but the importance of time management has become very clear but is something that I need to develop and work on further."

"I learnt some techniques for practical management of time, some way i can protect my diary time and how to effectively manage competing requests. I learnt the power of saying no in a way that enables me to say yes but on my own terms"

"Being able to step back and assess."

"Having the time to explore ideas in more depth than at other events and meetings was extremely beneficial."

Sounding board

Some mentees highlighted the importance of having a peer from outside of their organisation that they could use as a confidential sounding board.

"a confidential sounding board for issues I've faced with a promise that we could continue to meet if needs be"

"It was brilliant being able to talk about the issues and challenges I'd inherited with someone who doesn't know my previous manager, which is not something I am able to do with peers regionally as they all know the person and the person now works at another regional local authority. The mentoring came at just the right time as without it I would have felt very isolated and alone and unsure with limited options to get help."

"V helpful to have someone outside my organisation to 'splurge to' where I don't need to consider the impact of what I say on the person as they don't work for me or with me."

"having an ally who understands my issues and concerns and had lived experience of it."

Active listening

Several mentors reported they developed mentoring and coaching skills, including the importance of listening.

"A good lesson in developing listening skills – listening with real attention, thinking of ways to prompt my mentee into thinking of how to solve a particular problem ... Learning how to give support without it being direct advice, (albeit using occasional examples of how I might carry out a certain action/ try to solve problems etc, or how I know other people/ organisations do these things)."

"As a mentor the art of listening and working together to solve problems or reach a conclusion have been important skills developed through the scheme"

"As a mentor, I've developed stronger skills in active listening and coaching, as well as greater confidence in guiding others without simply giving answers. The scheme has helped me improve my ability to ask open, adapt my communication style to different personalities, and provide constructive feedback. I've also gained confidence in my leadership and interpersonal skills, particularly in creating a supportive environment that empowers mentee to find their own solutions."

"Listening skills - being able to listen without giving feedback all the time. Helping leaders to find their own solutions"

"Through the scheme, I've gained new insights into effective mentoring techniques, such as using open-ended questioning to encourage critical thinking and self-reflection"

"To be able to share my experience to enable others to grow and develop. To reflect on my own practice as a manager and leader."

Different perspectives

Some mentors and mentees commented on how much they valued gaining insight into the practices of other library services and leaders. This also emerged strongly in the final event.

"Understanding library services and local government outside London."

"The scheme has provided me with the opportunity to learn from my mentee; to ask service questions and hear how they have resolved issues and tackled problems."

"We were from similar sized authorities but had different approaches to the way we work - this enabled us to find synergies but also learn new things of help to our services."

"I learnt a lot about their service during that time but actually a lot about mine too, i found the chance to think deeply on something for a hour very cleansing."

"Seeing things in a different perspective to have a fresh look."

Satisfaction

Satisfaction with the scheme from both mentors and mentees was generally high. Both the mentees and the mentors were asked to score how likely they were to recommend participating in this scheme to another Head of Service or colleague on a scale of 0-10. The average score was 8.8 for mentees and 9.0 for mentors.

2.3 Lessons learned

This section is based on the analysis of responses from the questionnaires, the notes from the final event and feedback from the project staff.

Scheme management

Overall, feedback indicated that the scheme was well run and supported. In particular, mentors praised the drop-in sessions and supporting resources. 100% of the mentors and mentees rated the training event as Very Good or Good (including 69% Very Good).

"Getting to know the mentors, felt relaxed and not nerve-racking"

"it was all very clear and well planned"

"I think it was managed well and i like the intro sessions and that fact that after that we were free to structure it how we felt best."

"The support throughout the project with the check ins has been really helpful. It has felt like a very collaborative, supportive and nurturing approach."

"I think the resources provided were excellent. The opportunity to drop into sessions if you needed to discuss anything with the organisers was helpful."

"The training provided a good base for taking the mentoring sessions forward. I think the drop ins for mentors was a great addition."

"I felt the handbook was a valuable resource and the mentor catch ups were helpful. I can't think of anything that was missing."

"The opportunity to attend drop-in sessions if you wished to discuss anything with the organisers was helpful. I only attended one as a check-in but knowing there was this opportunity meant i did not feel alone in the scheme, support was available."

"There was continual engagement from Libraries Connected. Everything was well thought through and explained."

"I would like to thank both Penny & Becky for their support and enthusiasm. Their professionalism shone through and they made everyone feel very welcome regardless of how new you were to being a mentor."

Matching

Project staff reported that they thought the matching worked well and the relationships had worked well in general. 100% of the mentors and 88% of the mentees who responded to the questionnaire felt appropriately matched.

"It was helpful to hear the pitches of each of the mentors. This gave an insight into their work history and particular interests. There were a number on the group who were ex [anonymised] staff or people i had worked with previously. They would have given good advice but i decided to go for someone new of a similar sized authority as mine which i think worked out well."

Mid-point meeting

A couple of the mentees and one mentor fed back that having opportunities for the mentees to meet together as a group would have been beneficial.

"maybe a catch up with mentees in the middle of the programme?"

"it would be useful to talk to peers who are going through similar issues and this may be a good place to have it"

"A drop in for mentees to discuss how it's going for them may be an idea for the next cohort."

Face to face

There was some discussion at the final event about the benefit of having at least one meeting in-person and this was also fed back by a couple of mentees on the questionnaire.

"I would have really valued the opportunity to meet in person at least once with my mentor. If this was built into the scheme it would have been easier to justify the long journey and travel expenses. It may be something we can arrange as a follow-up."

"I met up with my mentor face to face for the last session and showed them round my authority and some projects i had been working on during that time. It was very useful for both of us so i think that could be included in the next round as something to do."

Contributing to programme costs

We asked the mentees whether their library services would be prepared to pay for participating in the scheme in the future. The results were quite mixed and can be found in Figure 1 below. Comments included:

"My budget could cope but it would make the decision more tricky if there was a charge"

"[Anonymised] Council has huge saving targets"

"i think you would have to be clear on what participants would receive for the money and where the income would go to"

"I think this very much depends on the service and i would not want a fee to put off some heads of service who are perhaps are working under very challenging times from getting the help and support that they need."

"Training budget is limited and I think if the cost was too much we wouldn't take part and would look at other mentoring/coaching available internally for free that might not be as useful as working with others in the sector."

"I really hope the scheme can flourish and grow because it's so important that all the knowledge and experience gets passed on to create the generation of leaders in this ever changing world of public libraries."

Figure 1: If in the future Libraries Connected were to charge library services for participating in this scheme, what would be the maximum amount your service would be prepared to pay?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	£0		25.00%	2
2	£50-100		25.00%	2
3	£101-150		25.00%	2

4	£151-200		0.00%	0
5	£201-250		12.50%	1
6	£251-300		12.50%	1

3. Summary and recommendations

The evaluation has shown that the impact of the scheme is very strong. For mentees, they frequently reported increased confidence in their roles as leaders. In some cases, they highlighted greater confidence in recognising and trusting their own expertise and abilities. Many mentees highlighted developing skills around time management & prioritisation and the importance of having a peer from outside of their organisation that they could use as a confidential sounding board. Others reported the importance of self-reflection and providing space to think, which had also emerged strongly from the evaluation of the 2022 scheme.

For mentors, several reported that they developed mentoring and coaching skills, including the importance of listening. Whilst both mentors and mentees commented on how much they valued gaining insight into the practices of other library services and leaders.

Satisfaction with the scheme was high. Both the mentees and the mentors were asked to score how likely they were to recommend participating in this scheme to another Head of Service or colleague on a scale of 0-10. The average score was 8.8 for mentees and 9.0 for mentors. Overall, feedback indicated that the scheme was well run and supported. In particular, mentors praised the drop-in sessions and supporting resources. 100% of the mentors and mentees rated the training event as Very Good or Good (including 69% Very Good). Whilst 100% of the mentors and 88% of the mentees felt appropriately matched.

A couple of the mentees and one mentor fed back that having opportunities for the mentees to meet together as a group would have been beneficial. There was also some discussion at the final event about the benefit of having at least one meeting in-person and this was also fed back by a couple of mentees on the questionnaire.

It is recommended that Libraries Connected run the scheme again in the future. However, it should be noted that there is little appetite from library services to contribute financially to the scheme. Very little needs to be changed in terms of the

management of the scheme, although the introduction of a mid-term event or drop-in sessions for mentees might be considered.