

DEVELOPING OUTSTANDING SOCIAL WORKERS

What makes great first line leadership?

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1. Foreword

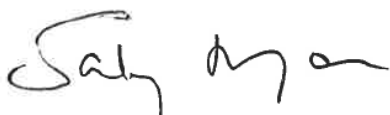
Frontline's mission is to transform the lives of vulnerable children by recruiting and developing outstanding social workers. To be outstanding, social workers need excellent leadership, constructive challenge and robust support. This ensures that the work they do with children and families is effective and has a positive, lasting impact.

In January 2015, Frontline received funding from the Department for Education's Innovation Programme to develop the Firstline prototype. This new leadership programme is designed to develop good social work managers into high-performing, considered and influential leaders who set high practice standards, focus on developing and improving their team members, and who contribute to rapidly improving the profession.

This report is designed to give a clear picture of the current state of play for first line managers (such as Team Managers and Consultant Social Workers) within children's social work. The findings confirm many of the hypotheses often heard anecdotally within the profession and provide the evidence to confirm these hypotheses. The report is an excellent foundation on which we can build the Firstline development programme with confidence.

Our findings evidence the importance of high-quality first line leadership and highlight the need for leaders to demonstrate a high level of confidence, skill and judgement in order to make considered decisions, hold their staff and partners to account and empower social workers to transform the lives of children and families. They must do so within a national landscape that is undergoing significant change and organisations that can inadvertently add further challenge to the job. Added to this is the day-to-day context in which the stakes are frequently uncomfortably high.

The need for focused development of this previously overlooked group is increasingly acknowledged. Firstline is an opportunity to develop a group of leaders with a deliberate focus on the areas where they can make the most difference to behaviours. We know that outstanding first line managers can improve social work practice and therefore transform children's lives. We also know that social work urgently needs more of these managers to become outstanding leaders. We now need to make this a reality.



Baroness Morgan of Huyton
Chair of Firstline Sub-Committee



Mary Jackson
Firstline Director

2. Executive summary

Firstline is an innovative new leadership programme for first line managers in children's social work - a vital group within the social work profession. The goal of the programme is to help good managers develop the skills they need to become outstanding leaders in their field.

To ensure Firstline is tailored to address the specific areas which will improve first line social work leadership, we have undertaken initial research to explore:

- What does 'great' first line leadership look like in children's social work?
- What, in the local authority context, helps or hinders first line leaders?
- What can organisations do to improve effective first line leadership?

In answering these questions we have heard from 169 leaders¹ in the profession, held in-depth interviews and focus groups with social workers and managers, and reviewed critical literature.

Key findings

The key insights from the research were strong and consistent:

- **The first line social work manager role is both vitally important and extremely challenging.**
The degree to which social work managers play a critical role in enabling high quality social work practice is stark. It is equally clear that the role is challenging. Good social work managers require:
 - A high level of intellect, to make considered judgements, at times with limited information
 - High emotional intelligence, to contain emotion and inspire confidence in teams
 - Strong leadership capabilities to manage in a challenging context.

This combination, coupled with the sophistication of emotional intelligence required, distinguishes this role from middle manager equivalent roles in other fields. Enabling excellent children's social work in a high-risk, resource stretched, pressured and politicised context requires not just good managers but outstanding leaders.

- **Outstanding first line leaders can create an energising climate for their teams that enables high performance, even when broader systemic conditions are challenging.**
Our analysis of the climate created and experienced by good and outstanding first line leaders evidences that, even when they are not experiencing ideal conditions themselves, they can improve the climate for the social workers they lead. Energising climate is associated with higher performance, which – in this context – means enabling social workers to improve the impact

¹ This includes academics.

they have on children and families.² This is an important, motivating and empowering message for first line leaders.

- **There are distinguishing features between good and outstanding leaders.**

All of the first line leaders we interviewed had a clear focus on children and families and demonstrated the emotional intelligence capabilities of empathy, self-awareness and a positive outlook. Outstanding first line leaders go beyond this by:

- Embracing their leadership role. They have a clear vision of what excellent practice looks like and they embed this in all that they do. They stretch and support their teams, creating safety and order
- Consciously managing power dynamics to empower their social workers and influence the system
- Creating the space for reflective practice while focusing on the broad context and long-term outcomes. They help others to develop, manage conflict, and provide constructive feedback to ensure high performance
- Combining intellect and emotional intelligence to project confidence, share expertise, and bring together the best of theory and practice knowledge to ensure excellent decision-making.

- **Certain conditions in the broader context enable first line leaders to increase their impact.**

First line leaders are more able to have a positive impact on their teams when they are experiencing an energising and enabling climate from their leaders. Key enablers that organisations can put in place identified by our research include:

- Stable, capable and well-defined teams. This ensures first line leaders are able to focus in a more considered way and spend less time fire-fighting
- Role clarity. Organisations that clearly define the remit of first line leaders help them focus on what is important and get the best from them
- Leadership development. A high-quality, coordinated development offer for first line managers supports the transition from social worker to leader
- Effective leadership at service and senior management levels. First line leaders benefit significantly from clear direction about what is important, and the trust and confidence of senior leaders.

² Outstanding first line leaders were more likely to create energising and high-performing climates and higher aspirations than their good counterparts. Climate is the environment created for the team as measured by the Hay Group® Organisational Climate Survey. Energising climate is associated with positive variations in performance and therefore can be used as a proxy measure for the impact of leaders on performance. We did not measure any outcome measures (impact on children and families) in this research as none are reliably collected in the system. See Appendix 4 for more information on the climate survey.

Implications for the Firstline prototype

The success of the Firstline prototype will rest on close collaboration with first line leaders themselves as well as local authority leaders. This will allow them to define and articulate a vision for first line social work leadership, and maximise the untapped potential of this crucial group. Doing so will stretch individual and organisational aspirations and create positive energy for change. The Firstline programme will equip individuals to create an environment that enables excellent social work practice for their teams, whilst acting as a catalyst for change by improving the wider system and quality of practice within their organisation. There is a very real opportunity to assist first line leaders to increase their impact by broadening their focus on, and confidence in, influencing beyond their team. To do so they will require support from senior leaders at a local level as well as permission to do things differently.



It's important that any development programme has a clear destination and vision. First line managers should reflect on how they're working towards their personal or case visions. They need a vision for themselves, their roles and their organisations. What legacy do they want to leave? The way I'm leading could change the way things are done in years to come."

First line leader

3. Research methodology

We conducted extensive research to help Firstline develop a prototype programme that is specifically tailored to meet the needs of first line leaders in children's social work. Specifically, the research was designed to help define:

- What does 'great' first line leadership look like in children's social work?
- What, in the local authority context, helps or hinders first line leaders?
- What can organisations do to improve effective first line leadership?

Sources

The research consisted of the following elements:

Review of key academic research and public reports

This helped us understand what is already known about what good first line management in children's social work looks like. Papers included *The Munro Review of Child Protection (2011)*, *Rethinking Children's Social Work (2014)*, and *Reclaiming Social Work (2013)*.³

Interviews with social work leaders

We interviewed 12 national social work leaders, including the chief social worker for children and families, top social work academics, directors of children's social work, and family court judges.⁴

Interviews with first line managers

We spoke to 20 high-performing first line managers from seven local authorities. The managers were asked to give their views on the factors within a local authority that had an influence on their efficacy, and we also conducted in-depth three-hour interviews to explore what they did, said, thought and felt when they were working at their best.⁵

We ensured our sample was high-performing in the following ways:

- Authorities were asked to recommend their high performers
- Capabilities demonstrated by interviewees were coded against a tried and tested framework.

This allowed us to draw on a body of knowledge to compare what we saw effective first line managers doing in the children's social work context with what we would expect to see in jobs of this level in other fields.

On this basis, interviewees were placed into one of two categories: good or outstanding.

³ See Appendix 7 for a full list of reports and papers.

⁴ See Appendix 2 for a full list of interviewees.

⁵ See Appendix 1 for a detailed description of Hay Group's behavioural event interview method and Appendix 5 to view Hay Group's capability framework used to thematically code them.

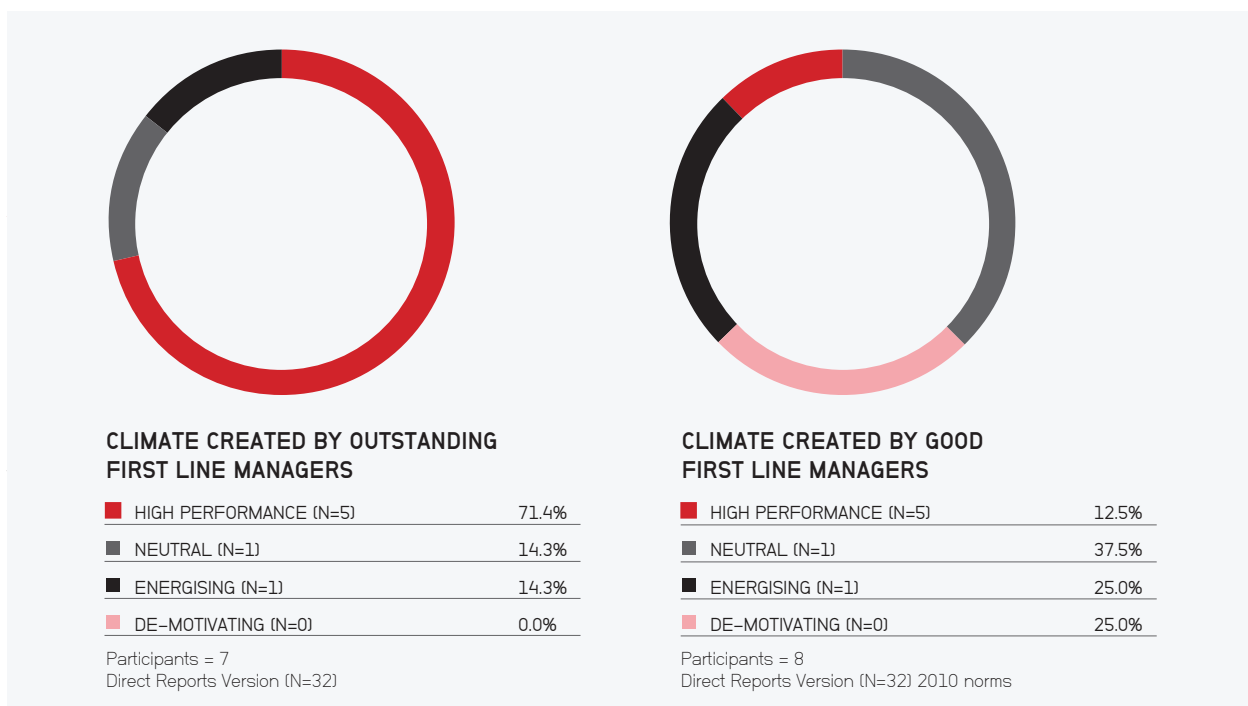
Testing our findings

We then tested our assessment of what distinguishes outstanding practice from good practice by collecting feedback from the first line managers' teams. Hay Group's climate survey measures the conditions that a manager creates within their team. An energising climate, as measured by this tool, is linked by research to increased engagement and performance in team members.⁶ The survey results confirmed our selection of good and outstanding first line managers (See Fig 1).⁷

We triangulated our findings about first line managers by testing them against both current role demands and aspirations for the future of children's social work in the wider context. To do this we drew on the views of our group of representative leaders, current literature, and on Hay Group's understanding of trends in effective leadership.

We tested our findings more broadly in focus group discussions with 39 social workers and first line managers. We also took advice from a technical advisory group, and from key stakeholders in the profession.

Fig 1. Comparing the climate created by outstanding and good first line managers



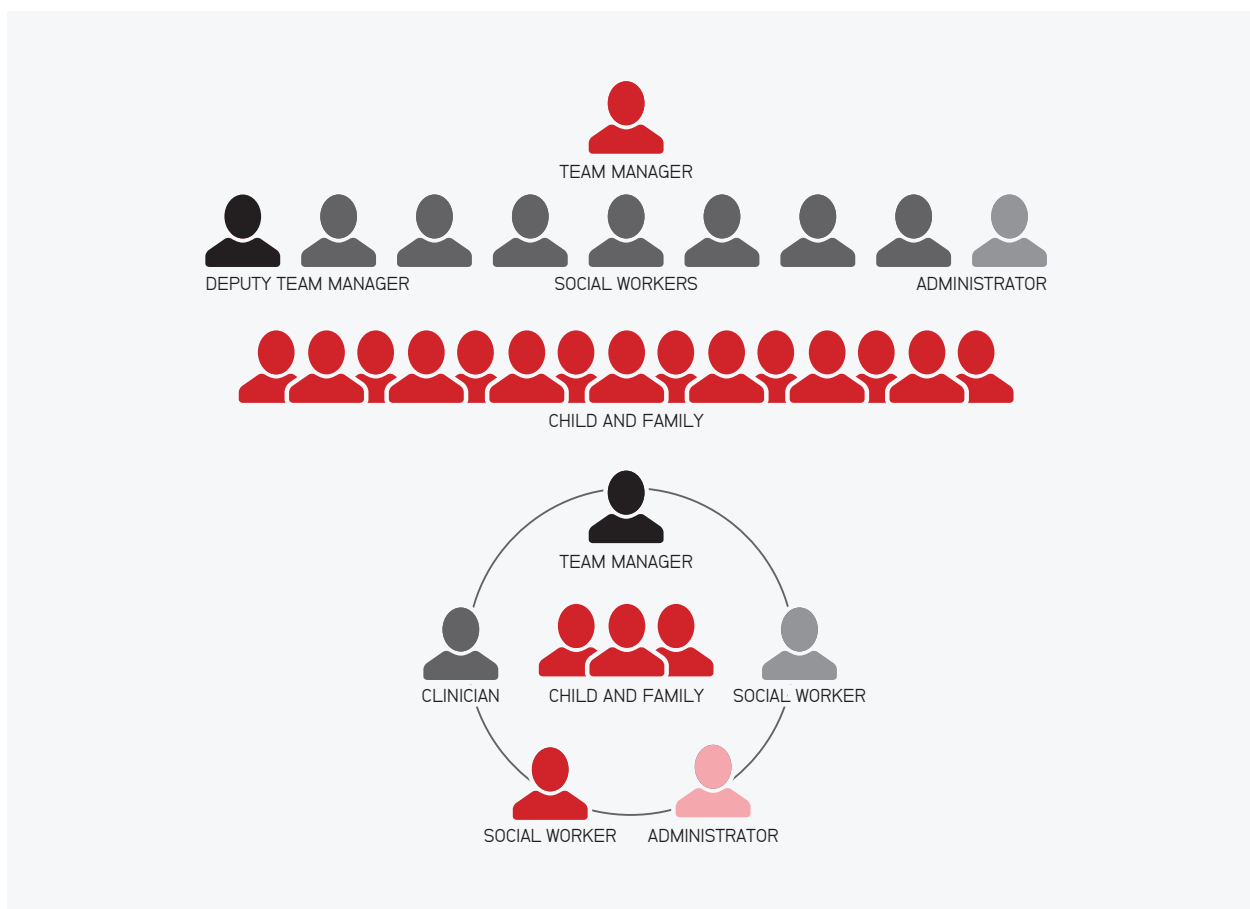
⁶ See Appendix 4 for more detail on Hay Group's climate survey.

⁷ See Section 4 below, and Appendix 4 for further detail and explanation. Please note not all first line managers completed Hay Group's climate surveys, hence the smaller sample size in these charts.

4. The first line manager role in children’s social work

We define first line managers in children’s social work as those who directly manage front line social workers. In practice, this can include a variety of roles which can be broadly distinguished by reference to two different staffing structures: the traditional team, managed by a Team Manager, and the systemic unit, managed by a Consultant Social Worker (see Fig. 2).

Fig 2. Different types of first line manager roles



Our analysis of job descriptions and stakeholder interviews suggests these roles can entail a broad range of accountabilities, with different emphases depending on the role. However, they have a number of responsibilities in common (see Fig. 3).

Fig 3. Common accountabilities for first line manager roles

- Creating job clarity and a clear vision of successful children’s social work practice for their team
- Prioritising and allocating work
- Making decisions and managing risk based on a sound analysis of information
- Coaching, supervising and developing their social workers and their team’s practice
- Developing policies and processes in particular areas of practice
- Directing or modelling work on cases where appropriate
- Liaising and building effective collaborative relationships with local partners (head teachers, GPs, police, health workers, courts, etc.)
- Planning, managing and reporting on the use of resources and on performance (people, budgets, facilities, time, etc.)
- Setting standards and holding teams and individuals to account
- Working directly with children and families as a senior professional
- Conducting administrative tasks.

In practice the first line manager role is often broadly and loosely defined. This results in a wide and challenging range of accountabilities, and often leads to a lack of clarity about what is required and what should be prioritised.

There is, however, more clarity about the fundamental elements of the first line manager role.⁸ Stakeholders, first line managers and social workers gave consistent messages, highlighting two core accountabilities that are common to all children’s social work first line manager roles. It is through paying targeted attention to these, that first line managers have the greatest impact.

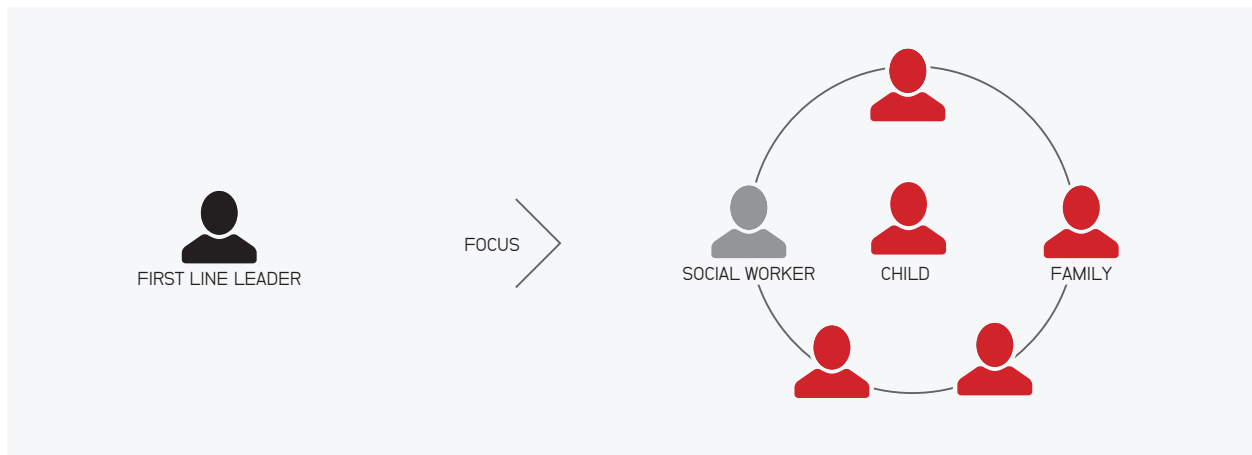
Enabling social workers to deliver excellent practice

The first line manager is crucial in enabling social workers to practice excellent social work (see Fig 4). This represents a significant shift in focus when making the step up from individual social worker to first line manager.⁹

⁸ We used Hay Group’s job analysis methodology to identify common accountabilities in the role and compared this with what stakeholders and the literature highlighted as the main accountabilities required for the role to deliver what the system needs. First line managers and social workers emphasised a focus on enabling social workers to deliver excellent practice. System stakeholders and current literature added an important role requirement for managing and influencing across the network.

⁹ Some first line managers’ roles may also manage their own cases directly. However, this is viewed as social work practitioner accountability for the purposes of this research, rather than a distinctive leadership accountability.

Fig 4. First line managers focus primarily on social workers and their practice, rather than children and families



“

I had great supervisors. They were supportive and gave lots of feedback. The good ones were interested in me as a social worker more than the families. Their job as a manager isn't to fix the families, but to support the people in front of them by asking 'what are you currently doing with the family, who are you closest to, what are your challenges?'

Social worker

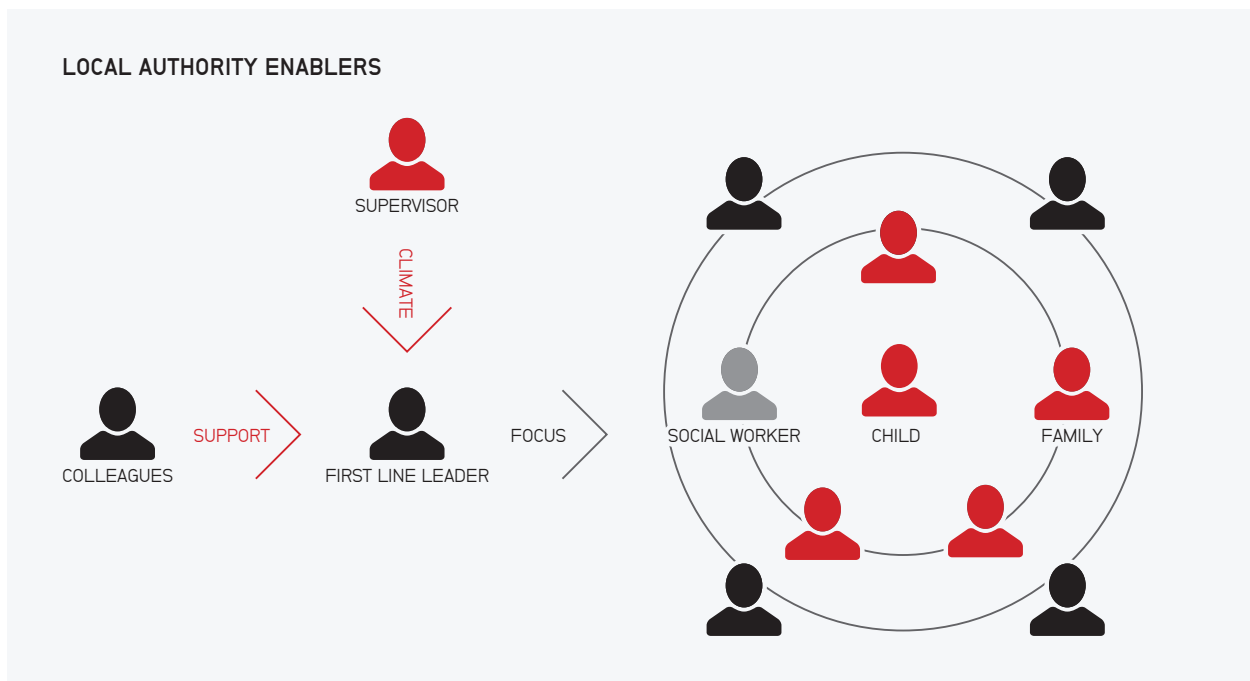
In an emotionally charged and pressured context, this involves providing a 'protective' space for emotional and practical support, offering real clarity about what good looks like, and focussing attention on developing and challenging social workers to do an excellent job.¹⁰ In essence, it means not only supervising practice, but also creating the environment within which social workers can be successful.

¹⁰ Munro (2011), Forrester et al. (2013).

2. Influencing the network

The first line manager also adds value by holding a pivotal position between social workers and the broader context. The role promotes effective interactions with the wider group of healthcare, education, policing and judicial professionals who constitute the team around the child, while also facilitating collaborative relationships with peers and other parts of the local authority to ensure that the best practice choices are made with the resources available (see Fig. 5).

Fig 5. First line managers focus on the context around the team



“

So much of the task is about connecting the needs of children in the round; so that the great team leader needs to be confident in working in multi-disciplinary teams. They have to be proactive in helping partners understand us and the nature of social work.”

Annie Hudson

CEO

The College of Social Work

Role demands

The combination of contextual pressures and the nature of the work makes the first line manager role both challenging and sophisticated when compared with first line management roles in other fields.¹¹

Social work managers hold a pivotal position managing a stretched service in an often risk-averse, political and bureaucratic context.¹² The inspection regime, complex and high caseloads, variable levels of administrative support and a lack of autonomy all have the potential to reduce the professional focus of the role and turn first line managers into task managers. The need to manage the noise in the system and remain focused on what counts, only serves to increase the level of leadership capability required.¹³

Additionally, the role is challenging because of the nature of the work itself. There is a clear consensus that if children's social work is to deliver what is required for the future it must focus not only on managing cases to comply with protocols and deadlines, but also on applying professional knowledge to deliver outcomes for children and families.¹⁴ When children's social work is imagined in this way, it is clear that the first line manager role requires a high level of sophistication. In order to manage the type of risks and decisions, and the level of emotional content involved, first line managers need a combination of high emotional and intellectual intelligence. It is this combination that differentiates first line leadership in children's social work from roles at a similar level in other professions, and makes strong leadership capabilities essential in fulfilling the role effectively.¹⁵



Residential work and social work team management are two of the hardest jobs in the system..”

Clare Chamberlain

Director of Family Services

Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea

¹¹ See Appendix 3 for a comparison with other first line leader roles.

¹² See Appendix 7 and 8 for more detail on the context.

¹³ Broadhurst et al. (2009); Broadhurst et al. (2010); Department for Education (2014); Forrester et al (2013).

¹⁴ See Appendices 7 and 8 for stakeholder views.

¹⁵ See Appendix 3 for a comparison with other first line leader roles.

Role impact

The first line leader role, defined in this way and delivered by someone with the right capabilities, has real power to transform standards in social work practice. Our analysis of the climate created by outstanding first line managers confirms they are able to raise the motivation, engagement and performance of their teams. This is an important, encouraging and empowering finding.

What is climate?¹⁶

Climate is a measure of conditions that predict high performance as measured by the Hay Group climate diagnostic tool.

All readers of this paper will have vivid memories of the atmosphere at school. Some of our memories will be about the school in general – its culture. But often our more powerful memories are about what it felt like to be in a specific teacher’s class – what we call the climate.

If you visit a school you are surrounded by its culture. It is expressed in the buildings, what people wear, what the reception area looks like, and how you are greeted by staff and pupils alike. You can also get a strong sense of what is valued in the school culture by looking at their website. It can take years to alter the culture of a school because of the enduring power of myths and memory to shape the way people think and behave.

But enter a classroom and you experience something different and distinctive. The climate of a work group can change at the moment one teacher walks out and another teacher walks in. Climate is intangible and powerful, just like culture. But climate is created in the social unit of a class or a team, and it can feel radically different in two different Spanish classes in the same year – or in two different children’s social care teams in the same local authority.

The difference lies in the way in which the first line managers create conditions that help people to focus their energy productively. Hay Group has developed a benchmarked survey that compares team members’ actual experience of six important conditions with what they would ideally want in their work group.

- **Clarity** – they feel that they have a clear common purpose
- **Standards** – they feel their goals are motivating
- **Rewards** – they feel that their contribution is recognised
- **Responsibility** – they feel that they can take decisions
- **Flexibility** – they feel that obstacles are not put in their way
- **Team commitment** – they feel that the team is in it together

Climate predicts outcomes as varied as pupil progress in schools, retention of officers in the armed forces, drug errors on hospital wards, and stock loss in retail stores.

¹⁶ ©Hay Group Holdings, Inc. 2015.

Outstanding first line leaders were better able to create a climate conducive to high performance, shield their social workers from contextual pressures and create higher aspirations¹⁷ than their good colleagues.¹⁸ This included, on average, creating greater clarity for their team than they were experiencing. When we consider the capabilities they demonstrate in Section 5, we see this is connected with their clear focus on leading their teams, rather than managing activity.

Reading Hay Group's climate survey graphs¹⁹

Hay Group's climate survey consists of a 47-item questionnaire that is completed online by participating leaders and their teams. The analysis of their answers produces two key charts:

- The climate the first line managers experience from their line manager
- The climate the first line managers create for the team they lead.

Each chart shows a comparison of how the climate feels now compared to what the manager or their team would ideally like the climate to be. It is the gap between these two measures that indicates what the manager or the team needs from their line manager to unleash discretionary effort. Scores are normed against 59,152 leaders from 1,577 organisations. Gaps of over 20 between the actual and ideal on the **percentile score** axis, or actual scores below the 35th **percentile score**, both represent a potential loss of motivation.

Even when looking at the good first line managers rather than the outstanding ones, all but three improved on the climate they experienced from their own managers.

The graphs in Figs 6 and 7 highlight the climate that both good and outstanding managers experienced from their line manager and created for their teams. In most cases the local authorities taking part in the research had representatives from both the good and outstanding categories.

¹⁷ As indicated by the higher ideal lines, on average, than their good colleagues.

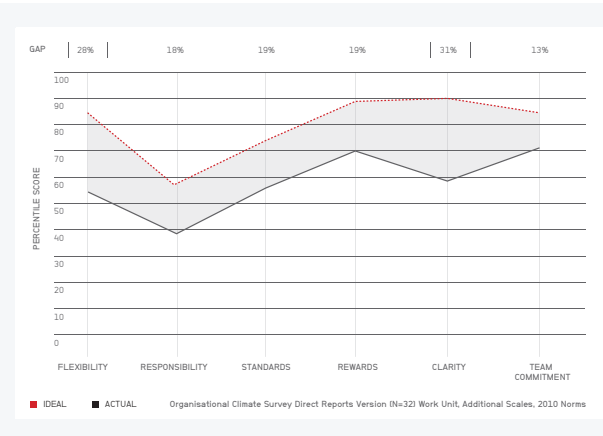
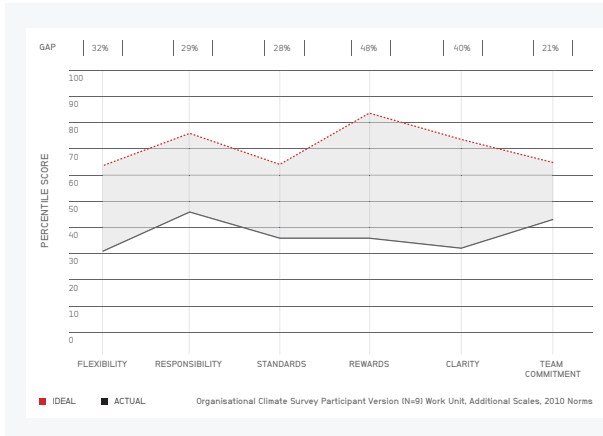
¹⁸ Some first line managers did not have social workers reporting directly to them, and others had only just taken on teams, so we have data (in whole or in part) for 16 of the first line managers – the climate data from this research are summarised in Appendix 4. The one outstanding first line manager who did not create a positive climate worked in a role across teams, so their climate data are unreliable as a measure of their direct impact.

¹⁹ ©Hay Group Holdings, Inc. 2015.

Fig 6. Good first line managers climate – composite charts²⁰

Climate experienced (n=9)

Climate created (n=32)



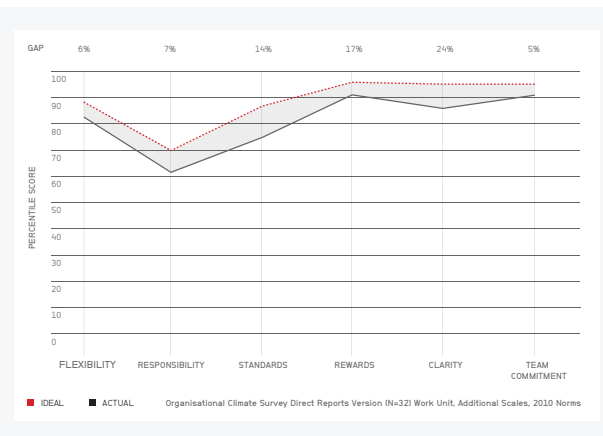
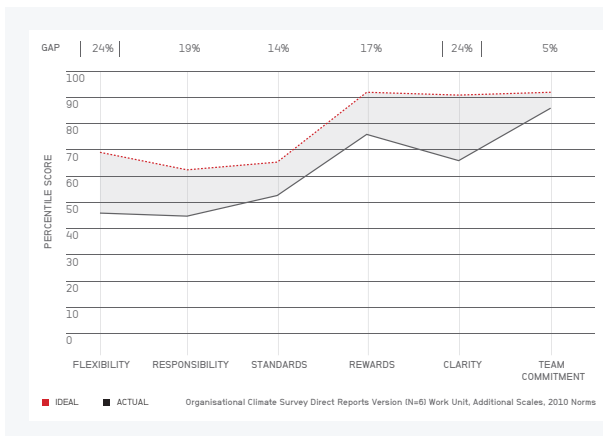
Good first line leaders on average experience a demotivating climate, with gaps of over 20 percentile points on all dimensions. Many of the individual actual scores were also below the 35th percentile.

Most good first line leaders made improvements in the climate for their social workers, some by a considerable amount, although three did not. There is a significant drop in the aspiration in the team to take responsibility (autonomy and risk-taking), and there was an important lack of clarity (both role clarity and team vision).

Fig 7. Outstanding first line managers climate – composite charts²¹

Climate experienced (n=6)

Climate created (n=32)



Outstanding first line leaders on average experience an energising climate, with gaps of over 20 percentile points on two dimensions. However, they were hampered by a lack of role clarity.

All but one of the outstanding first line leaders created a high performance climate for their social workers, and improved on the climate they experienced. There is a dip in team members' aspiration to take responsibility (autonomy and risk taking) but all other dimensions are high and have no significant gaps.

²⁰ ©Hay Group Holdings, Inc. 2015.

²¹ ©Hay Group Holdings, Inc. 2015.

What does this tell us?

With the challenges in reforming children's social work long discussed, and an overwhelmingly negative public dialogue about the sector, we are interested in the extent of the role effective first line leadership can play.

Our analysis suggests first line leaders can play a crucially important part in improving practice in children's social work. Conceptually we find that at its core the role – however it is defined – is accountable for ensuring excellent front line practice. Practically, our research demonstrates that first line leaders can have a real impact. When they have the right capabilities first line leaders have the power to create a high-performing environment for the social workers they lead.

To have this impact however, first line leaders need to be clear on their remit and focused in the right way. The children's social work context is challenging and will remain so. The system does not simply need task managers but real leadership if it is to have a significant positive impact on outcomes for children and families. This means first line managers who do not just focus on ensuring processes have been followed or timescales have been met, but who also help social workers understand what good practice looks like and make considered decisions that deliver good outcomes.

When the role is seen as a leadership role rather than a task management job, it is challenging, exciting and potentially transformative in enabling excellent first line practice. These are important and empowering findings and make a powerful case for supporting the development of excellent first line leadership.

5. What does outstanding first line leadership look like?

To define the capabilities that have the most positive effect on outcomes, we explored the differences between what good and outstanding first line leaders do in their roles.

We conducted a thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews with 20 first line leaders to identify what was distinctive about the way each first line leader led their teams. We used this analysis to sort the leaders into good and outstanding categories and confirmed this selection by reference to the climate feedback from their social work teams.²²

Our conclusions also took into account capabilities required for the role that were identified by stakeholders, but not seen consistently, even in our outstanding first line leaders.²³

We highlight four key themes that demonstrate what outstanding leaders do in practice below, and thus how good managers can become outstanding leaders.²⁴



The heart of good first line leadership is emotional intelligence expressed as empathetic challenge. Social workers need to know that their boss has a feeling for what it is like to work with families and what is going on with families, so that they understand the challenge. However, the team leader must also know how to challenge social workers to deliver a good service to children and families. In this, they model reflective practice, and help their team members to tease out alternative views of family situations in order to make good decisions even better.”

Richard Williams

Director of Special Projects and Innovation (formerly Director of Children’s Services, Torbay Council)

²² See Section 4 on climate, above.

²³ See Appendix 8 for a summary of the main themes identified by stakeholders.

²⁴ More detailed information on the specific capabilities is included in the capability model in Appendix 5.

What differentiates good from outstanding?

Some important capabilities – namely a clear focus on children and families and the core emotional intelligence skills of empathy, emotional self-awareness and positive outlook – were present in all first line leaders and not strongly differentiating. In other words, they are the essential baseline behaviours for doing the job well.

Overall, outstanding first line leaders consistently displayed higher average levels of sophistication in their leadership behaviour than their good comparator group, combining different capabilities with a clear attention to the impact they and their teams are having.²⁵ Our analysis demonstrated that outstanding first line leaders add sophisticated and focused attention in four key areas:

1. Embracing leadership.

Outstanding first line leaders wholeheartedly embrace their leadership role. They have a clear vision of what excellent practice looks like and what impact social work can have and embed this in all that they do with the team. They set direction, create clarity about how each individual contributes to the work of the team, encourage everyone to learn and do their best and give feedback when they do not. They prioritise work, build trust, inspire learning, provide stretch, probe evidence, and celebrate progress.



They involve and empower the team through inclusion in decision making. They are committed to performance excellence and have a clear vision for the team.”

Team member of outstanding first line leader

The volume of work and the time pressures experienced in children’s social work mean that all of our first line leaders made choices about where they needed to focus their energy and that of their social workers. Good first line leaders were more likely to focus on task accomplishment, whilst outstanding first line leaders were more likely to balance the ability to deliver results and meet deadlines with a focus on enabling and stretching their social workers. This contrast is reflected in the climate survey results where good first line leaders were less able to create clarity and high standards for their teams.

Stretching good managers to become outstanding could include supporting individuals to:

- Consider their role as a leader and how this connects with their values and sense of purpose

²⁵ See Appendix 5 for the generic competencies used to analyse the interviews.

- Draw on their longer-term vision of practice excellence for the team, to make active daily choices about priorities, practice and social work decisions.

2. Empowering and influencing

Outstanding first line leaders display an acute awareness of the power dynamics in unequal relationships and use this carefully to maximise their impact. They pay particular attention to ensuring others feel safe, respected and in control, as the best basis for them learning and changing. They model this in their interactions with others both to help their social workers feel strong without rescuing them, and to model the dynamics of the relationship they expect them to create with the children and families they work with. This focus on empowering rather than rescuing differentiated outstanding from good leaders.

Even the best first line leaders showed little focus on, or skill in, influencing peers, senior managers, elected members or partners in the wider context of their community. They were sometimes frustrated because they had not prepared the ground, understood organisational dynamics or built a relationship. Given the inter-agency working required by the role this represents a real opportunity to unlock first line leaders' potential and increase their impact.

Stretching good to outstanding could include helping first line leaders to:

- Extend their perceptions of where and how they can have an impact, and gain further understanding of how to influence in complex systems
- Develop more sophisticated influencing strategies with a specific intention to maximise their impact.

3. Taking a broader perspective

Outstanding first line leaders are able to stand back from the specifics of a child in a family. They bring a wider perspective, and instead focus their attention on the social worker. They hold a safe, but appropriately challenging space in which the social worker is empowered to support the family to make progress. They focus on the longer-term outcomes for the child and family and development for the individual, not just the specific issue at hand.

There was also a stand-out difference in the way the good and outstanding groups approached difficult conversations, particularly managing poor performance – something that preoccupied many of the first line leaders we spoke to. Some managed issues well, while others lacked confidence in tackling them or felt unsupported by their organisations. The outstanding first line leaders used their longer-term perspective to set clear standards and tackled poor performance with a real focus on meeting those standards and improving practice. All of the first line leaders found conflict and performance management challenging, but outstanding first line leaders were able to bring conflict to resolution more often despite their feelings of discomfort.

Stretching good to outstanding could involve helping first line leaders to:

- Explore how they create a high performance culture and their role in setting standards

- Develop their skills and comfort levels in having challenging conversations and managing conflict within their professional network.

4. Combining intellect and emotional intelligence to base decisions on best practice

Outstanding first line leaders combine emotional intelligence capabilities (such as empathy, relationship building and self-awareness) with advanced professional knowledge and the intellect to use theoretical and practical knowledge flexibly and sensitively. They contain emotion safely and project a sense of calm professionalism that helps others feel in control. These capabilities are used to lead and get the best from the social workers by focusing their efforts on making real progress for children and families.



She is approachable, orderly and purposeful, in that she has a strong sense of purpose in the work we do, and is good at reminding us what that is. She is good at managing difficult and uncomfortable situations in a diplomatic way – whether it is with a client or a colleague. She does this in a sensitive and tolerant way. She is committed to excellence in her approach to work and how she mentors her workers.”

Team member of outstanding first line leader

Again, the distinctive thing about the outstanding first line leaders is the combination of both emotional intelligence and strong cognitive ability. This underpinned rigorous and disciplined thinking under pressure, and enabled first line leaders to create a sense that things are under control, even in taxing situations.

Only a few of our outstanding first line leaders, however, explicitly integrated practice research or theory to support their social workers’ thinking. Where they did so, it helped them influence others, manage risk, and focus on the best outcomes for children and families in a rigorous, but open-minded way. They had the humility to learn from colleagues in their team, local authority, or externally to promote a learning culture.

Stretching good to outstanding could involve supporting first line leaders to:

- Challenge and question the assumptions, theories and biases they bring to decisions. This could include how they approach the management of risk, the timeframe they focus on and their breadth of thinking
- Develop individual and team supervision skills that allow them to challenge others’ assumptions and integrate broader approaches that constantly improve established practice and raise standards.

6. What helps or hinders first line leaders in the local authority context?

Individual effectiveness is always a combination of personal capability and organisational context. The climate analysis demonstrates that first line leaders can improve the environment for their team, even when they are not experiencing ideal conditions themselves. However, it also suggests that first line leaders are more able to have a positive impact on their social workers when they themselves are experiencing an engaging climate from their leaders – on average the good first line leaders in our research were experiencing a worse climate than the outstanding. When organisational enablers are not in place, energy is being lost on activities that are not directly enhancing social workers' practice or helping children and families. If organisations can support first line leaders effectively, all their leadership energy can be productively focused.

In considering this question we only looked at what could be impacted by individual Children's Services Directorates, without broader system organisational or regulatory change or significant resource increases. We did so with a focus on providing realistic and targeted insight for local authorities and the development of the Firstline prototype.

We carried out a thematic analysis of enablers across the information we gathered, theming our findings against a generic organisational effectiveness model.²⁶ We identified consistent themes across the data and then, in order to test and prioritise them, we paid particular attention to what first line leaders themselves said and to how these enablers related to the challenges for first line leaders as discussed in Sections 3 and 4. Finally, we drew on Hay Group's broader body of knowledge relating to organisational development, change and individual engagement and enablement. This helped us both to consider the role of enablers in meeting core challenges and to prioritise some areas for focus that will have the biggest impact.

We used this analysis to create:

- A model which describes the organisational conditions which create a high-performing environment for first line leaders.
- Some priority recommendations which focus on addressing fundamental blockers for first line leaders and the biggest levers for changes.

Organisational conditions that create a high-performing environment for first line leaders

Table 1 contains the enablers identified by the research. This is an aspirational model and we do not suggest that all conditions need to be in place for effective first line leaders to be able to operate with impact. However, having a range of conditions in place will support first line leaders to have the maximum impact.

²⁶ See Appendix 6 for the thematic analysis of the enablers and disablers.

Table 1. Organisational conditions that create a high-performing environment for first line leaders²⁷

Enablers	Organisational conditions
Meaningful vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A clear sense of purpose focused on outcomes for children and families that is aligned with social workers’ sense of what they are here to do (moral purpose) ▪ A positive and ‘can do’ attitude from leaders linked to high standards and expectations
Coherent model of practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A clear vision and model for excellent practice ▪ A shared understanding of risk tolerance and management ▪ Clear policies, procedures, work flow and information systems which support effective prioritisation, timely action and confident decision making
Stable, well-designed and capable teams²⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A sufficiently stable workforce with permanence in key positions (underpinned by a coordinated and effective workforce development strategy) ▪ A sufficient number of capable social workers to manage the case load (underpinned by recruitment, retention and performance management policies) ▪ The right resources, including effective administrative support
Autonomy to make decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clear structure, roles and delegated authority that allow first line leaders to apply professional judgement and make best use of time and resources at a local level ▪ A focus on learning when things go wrong rather than attributing blame
High performance culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clear standards and ongoing constructive challenge ▪ Prompt and supportive action to address poor performance ▪ Recognition of great work and improvements in performance
Learning culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ongoing supervision that allows first line leaders to reflect, step back, challenge their thinking and build their resilience ▪ Training, development and information sharing opportunities ▪ Supportive working relationships within and across teams ▪ Encouragement for partnership working and positive external relationships

Effective senior leadership is a key lever in creating these conditions. It is senior leaders, after all, who set the vision for children’s social work and then define structures, allocate resources, focus attention, support and challenge accordingly. First line leaders themselves focus strongly on supportive leadership as an enabler, and good first line leaders were both less likely to experience a positive climate from their leaders than outstanding leaders, and more likely to identify disempowering and unsupportive leadership as a challenge.

²⁷ Whilst creating good teams could be seen as a core accountability of the role there is a level of instability or insufficient resources that means the first line leaders will be stretched too thin. This also gets in the way of first line leaders ability to focus on influencing and engaging with the broader partnership context.

²⁸ Supervision was mentioned as a key enabler by all participants. We have positioned it within a learning culture but it runs throughout the enablers.



We all believe social work matters, there is buy-in from the heads of service, good consultation and excellent communications. We do the best social work we can, so leaders make sure good ideas don't get lost, clear the way for teams, and move things forward. And the local authority knows that we deal in high risk and creates an environment to enable good risk management."

Rory Patterson

Director of Children's Social Care
Southwark Council

Recommendations – priority areas for focus

We propose a number of priorities from within the conditions that we identified: in other words, the most critical that need to be in place to give first line leaders the chance to perform well. These priorities address the core conditions identified by first line leaders to allow them to create the time, focus, autonomy and capabilities to do the right thing for children and families, even when processes and systems might not be fully enabling.

- **Create sufficiently stable, well-designed and capable teams that give first line managers the space to undertake important activities such as supervision.**
All of the first line leaders we spoke to considered themselves to be 'too busy' – even those who were outstanding. However, there is a clear tipping point beyond which it is difficult for them to do any more than fire-fight. To create the stability and capability required there should be a real focus on performance management, recruitment and development strategies against clear standards.
- **Define the first line leader role clearly and with sufficient and well-defined delegated authority, to allow them to be first line leaders rather than task managers.**
This means creating clarity about what is important and considering those tasks that are not a good use of their time and how they could be delivered more efficiently.
- **Support first line leaders to make the transition from social worker to first line leader and help them fully understand 'what good looks like'.**
We have established this is a tough job; simply expecting individuals to step into this role without targeted leadership development is therefore risky.
- **Focus on developing effective senior leadership with a clear vision of excellence.**
We know from broader organisational change theory that changes in broader processes and

practice tend to follow changes in vision and leadership.²⁹ Likewise, it highlights that clarity on what is important and supportive leadership can help first line leaders to make the right choices, even if they also have to work round processes or broader system disablers to get things done.³⁰ In practical terms, this means ensuring service managers are able to provide effective supervision for first line leaders which supports, challenges and encourages learning and provides a forum for two way communication.

Ensuring these foundations are in place for individuals will support the Firstline programme to develop outstanding leaders. These leaders will have the capacity and organisational commitment at senior levels that allows them to operate differently, to share learning and to focus on extending their influence upwards and outwards, and to lead their team effectively. An important question to return to as the prototype programme is tested will be the level to which these conditions need to be widespread and consistent within the organisation to support not only individual change, but broader impact.

²⁹ *“Transformational change occurs as a response to the external environment and directly affects organizational mission and strategy, the organization’s leadership, and culture. In turn, the transactional factors are affected – structure, systems, management practices, and climate. These transformational and transactional factors together affect motivation, which, in turn, affects performance.”* Burke, W Warner & Litwin, George H, ‘A Causal Model of Organizational Performance and Change’, *Journal of Management*, Vol 18, No 3 (1992), 523. This framework underpins the Hay Group 7 levers organisational effectiveness model which is drawn on in our analysis.

³⁰ *“Defining clearly behaviours that are required helps organization members know how to act even when work processes, systems, roles/responsibilities and metrics suggest something else or send conflicting messages”,* Deshler, Reed, ‘How to beat the odds of change failures?’, *Strategic HR Review*, Vol 14, 1/2. May 2015.

7. Implications for the Firstline prototype

Developing outstanding first line leaders

There is a lack of clarity surrounding the first line leadership role. Whilst it rests with organisations to define the role, the Firstline programme can play a part in articulating and communicating a clear vision for leadership that supports first line leaders and organisations to stretch their aspirations and create positive energy for change.

Developing outstanding first line leadership will require a transformational programme that supports first line leaders to be clear on their role, their vision and the impact they want to have as individuals and as an influential group within their organisation.

The challenge and opportunity for Firstline will be in enabling first line leaders to create an environment that produces excellent practice in their teams, whilst also acting as catalysts for broader change. There is a real opportunity for these leaders to increase their sphere of influence by broadening their focus on influencing beyond their team. This will mean there will need to be a sufficient level of capability and stability within their teams to allow them to extend their focus from purely supporting, developing and stabilising the team.

Creating a tipping point for broader change will also require support for first line leaders to act as change catalysts at a local level. This will mean commitment from local senior leaders to engage them in the change agenda and share learning, alongside clear permission to do things differently. Finally, there is a key question regarding the scale of the Firstline programme. If communities of first line leaders can create a tipping point at a local level, then how can a tipping point be created within the broader system? Sufficient numbers will be required to turn islands of excellence into widespread change. In the meantime, careful consideration will need to be paid to how learning can be shared across organisations.