

A STORY OF TRANSFORMATION

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
Reverse Mentoring Programme

Cohort 1
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Partnership 

EQUALITY
DIVERSITY
AND
INCLUSION
REVERSE MENTORING

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Introduction: Crossing the Threshold into a New Kind of Leadership

Every human system has moments when learning turns a corner when leadership becomes something deeper and more human, and when the voices often unheard begin to shape the way forward. For the Fife Health and Social Care Partnership (FHSCP), such a moment arrived with the launch of the **Insight Exchange Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Reverse Mentoring Programme**.

The programme began with modest ambitions: five mentoring pairs, a pilot to test whether reverse mentoring could create more inclusive leadership. Instead, the response was overwhelming. Over **40 staff members applied**, eager either to mentor or be mentored. Ultimately, **11 mentoring pairs** were formed each representing a small but powerful microcosm of the integrated authority's diversity.

The programme was purposefully designed to be more than a training initiative. Instead, it aimed to create *an experience*: an emotional, relational journey that leaders and staff would walk together. Both mentors and mentees completed training, preparatory interviews, and careful matching based on areas of lived experience such as **neurodiversity, disability, race, religion and mental health**. Throughout the programme, participants had midpoint check-ins with an Organisational Development and Culture Specialist, and each pair participated in a structured closing reflection.

In the end, **all 11 pairs completed the full programme**, a testament to the commitment of the individuals involved and the strength of the relationships formed. The post-programme evaluations captured in the dataset show a consistent pattern: profound personal insight, emotional learning, and multiple accounts of growth, courage, and transformation.

What follows is the story of this cohort not as a list of outcomes or bullet points, but as a journey. A journey taken by mentors who brought lived experiences into rooms where they were often unheard. A journey taken by leaders who chose to step into vulnerability. A journey that demonstrates how inclusion is not a destination, but an ongoing practice rooted in listening, empathy, and action.

PART I

BEGINNINGS: ENTERING THE SPACE

Chapter 1: The Call for Participation

The early days of the programme felt like a spark that quickly caught fire.

Leaders had anticipated limited interest, imagining they might need to encourage staff to step forward. Instead, something unexpected happened: staff from across the partnership nurses, administrators, support workers, clinicians, analysts, frontline practitioners volunteered in large numbers to become mentors.

Many shared similar motivations in their pre-programme reflections:

“I believe that real change starts with honest conversations and mutual learning. As someone with first-hand experience navigating systems as a Muslim mum-of-two pharmacist from an ethnic minority background, I bring a perspective that can help leaders see beyond policies and into the lived realities of diverse individuals”.

“I believe the best learning and understanding of groups and people comes from direct contact and understanding the lived experience. This leads to improvement in practices, including affirmative approaches, reduces negative bias and fosters more positive organisational culture, policies and procedures reflective of actual needs of groups they pertain and develops empathy.”

For mentors, the programme represented an opportunity rarely offered in workplace settings: a structured, safe, supported invitation to tell the truth about their lived experience.

For mentees leaders across FHSCP the motivation was slightly different. Their reflections often referenced responsibility and curiosity:

“I recognise the importance of continuing to challenge my own assumptions, expand my understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion, and grow as both a professional and an individual. I believe that listening to and learning from the lived experiences of colleagues from underrepresented or marginalised backgrounds is essential in becoming a more empathetic, informed, and inclusive practitioner.”

“I see it as an excellent opportunity to listen, learn, and grow. As a senior leader, I recognise that there are perspectives and lived experiences that I may not fully understand.”

“I want to be more aware of the challenges faced by people and better understand how our systems and practices might unintentionally exclude or disadvantage”

Something important emerges here: these leaders were not seeking validation they were seeking discomfort, challenge, and growth.

Chapter 2: Entering the Programme

Before any matches were made, all participants attended training sessions tailored to their role mentors for confidence, boundaries, and storytelling; mentees for listening, humility, and reflective leadership.

The training emphasised three core commitments:

- 1. Courageous Listening**
- 2. Respect for Lived Experience**
- 3. Shared Reflection and Growth**

Some mentors entered the training with nerves. One wrote:

“I worried whether my story mattered. But the training helped me see that my lived experience has real weight.”

Mentees, too, confronted early apprehension. One shared in their evaluation:

“I was nervous about saying the wrong thing. But the training reminded me that silence also harms.”

Thus, before the programme even began, a shared vulnerability was already present.

Chapter 3: The Matching

Matching was not random. It was relational and deliberate, based on:

- Mentor lived experience
- Leadership development needs
- Focus areas selected by each mentee
- Shared or complementary interests
- Role diversity

Once matched, the pairs were officially introduced, and the real work began.

PART II

BUILDING THE BRIDGE: THE MENTOR–MENTEE RELATIONSHIP

Chapter 4: The First Conversations

The first meeting of each pair set the tone. Many participants described these early conversations as both eye-opening and emotionally charged.

From the dataset:

“Being able to safely discuss tricky areas to address as a manager.”

“Meeting a mentor and beginning to understand private struggles.”

“My Mentee is such an amazing person... open and kind.”

“What began as mentoring became a shared journey between two human beings.”

A strong theme emerges: safety.

Mentors described feeling listened to sometimes for the first time in a workplace relationship. Mentees described the experience as disarming: leaders were asked not to lead, not to fix, not to direct but to listen.

This reversal of power created a unique dynamic. One mentor shared:

“I am usually the one being told what to do. Here, the leader was asking me.”

For many leaders, this demanded a shift from authority to humility. As one expressed:

“It was strange and beautiful to sit in a meeting where the other person was guiding me.”

Chapter 5: Stories That Needed to Be Heard

As the relationships deepened, mentors began to share more openly. Across the programme, four major themes appeared.

PART III

FOUR JOURNEYS OF LEARNING

Chapter 6: Neurodiversity

Understanding the Unseen World

Several mentors disclosed experiences of neurodivergence ADHD, autism, dyslexia, sensory sensitivity. Their stories often focused on the workplace barriers that others never notice:

- Complex forms
- Last-minute changes
- Bright or noisy environments
- Systems that assume one “right” way to think or work
- Social norms that feel impossible to decode

One mentor described:

- *“I spend most of my energy trying to appear normal. I come home exhausted.”*

For mentees, these stories sparked deep reflection.

A mentee wrote:

“I am more understanding now of those who are neurodivergent.”

“I learned how much strength it takes for some colleagues just to come to work.”

Another mentee said:

“I didn’t realise how many barriers are invisible. I see my team differently now.”

Conversations around neurodiversity often became practical:

- How to adjust communication
- How to reduce sensory overwhelm
- How to introduce flexibility
- How to recognise masking

As one mentor wrote:

“Together we talked about everything what is hard, what helps, and what could change for all of us.”

Chapter 7: Race and Religion

The Conversations That Were Always Needed

Discussions about race and religion were described by many as “difficult but necessary.” Some mentors shared painful memories around discrimination sometimes overt, sometimes subtle.

One mentor said:

“[Having] the ability to have an open and honest conversation about race. People are often scared and feel they might cause offence. However, I just feel we need to be able to talk about [these] things to see how we can do better.”

Some mentees admitted they had never truly considered how race and religion shaped daily work life.

A mentee reflected:

“There was a moment that 'shifted' my perspective during a conversation with my mentor, when we were discussing religious festivals. She shared her personal experiences, highlighting both subtle and more obvious challenges she had faced in the workplace and with colleagues. These were things I hadn't previously considered or been exposed to, and it made me realise how important it is to understand and respect the someone's background and beliefs.”

Another offered:

“Comparing backgrounds, life experiences, and work journeys has helped me gain a better understanding of factors that may influence others, especially those I might not encounter or be exposed to. This has broadened my perspective and increased my awareness of some of the challenges of others”.

The topic of positive discrimination came up in several pairs.

One mentee described:

“We discussed perspectives on positive discrimination and how it can feel to some, supportive, to others, tokenising.”

These were emotional conversations. Some mentors found it difficult recounting their experiences. Some mentees admitted they felt shame or sadness at what they had never noticed.

But overwhelmingly, pairs reported growth:

“I understand now how to be a better ally.”

Chapter 8: Disability

From Awareness to Action

Mentors with visible and invisible disabilities shared stories that altered the way leaders saw the Partnership.

A mentor explained:

“People think I’m coping because I smile.”

“I often don’t ask for help because I don’t want to be seen as a burden.”

Mentees were deeply moved by these accounts:

“Meeting my mentor helped me understand private struggles I had never been aware of.”

“I knew my mentor through previous work, and I never knew they had a physical disability, through conversation I understood how much their employer has supported them to incorporate her disability and I wondered if my employer would have done the same?”

Many pairs moved quickly from empathy to action:

- Improving building accessibility
- Adjusting shift expectations
- Reviewing policies on workplace adjustments
- Challenging norms around “fit” and “capability”

Chapter 9: Mental Health

Listening Without Judgment

Mentors shared deeply personal mental health histories trauma, anxiety and depression.

These conversations often centred on emotional labour.

One mentor said:

“I always feel I have to be twice as strong.”

A mentee reflected:

“The power of listening and acknowledging, listen and make people be heard and valued, you don't need to find an answer, it is just about making the person feel seen and included. You really can't judge a book by its cover. Your childhood does have an impact on you however it does not define you and changes can be made for the positive. Resilience and adaptability- it doesn't have to be done a certain way because we always do it that way.”

Another mentee added:

“I really enjoyed talking with someone passionate about inclusion.”

These conversations helped leaders recognise:

- The weight of cumulative stress
- The power of empathy in leadership
- The importance of psychologically safe teams

Many leaders wrote that this area of learning changed them the most.

PART IV

MIDPOINT: THE TURNING OF THE JOURNEY

Chapter 10: The Midway Check-ins

At the programme's halfway point, each participant engaged in a one-to-one check-in with the Organisational Development and Culture Specialist.

Several trends emerged:

- 1. Relationships had deepened faster than expected.**
- 2. Most pairs were meeting more often than recommended** because conversations felt valuable.
- 3. Leaders had begun making changes in real time.**
- 4. Mentors reported feeling empowered and seen.**

Some challenges also emerged:

- Scheduling conflicts
- Difficulty staying in the mentee role
- Emotional discomfort (especially around identity topics)
- Wanting more time together

Mentors expressed:

"I never thought I would feel this comfortable speaking to a senior leader."

Mentees acknowledged:

"This is harder and more emotional than I expected."

But none reported wanting to disengage. Instead, the midpoint became a catalyst for even deeper dialogue.

PART V

ACTS OF LEADERSHIP: LEARNING PUT INTO PRACTICE

Chapter 11: What Leaders Began to Do Differently

Post-programme evaluations revealed clear evidence of changed leadership behaviours.

Leaders reported:

- Conducting team meetings differently
- Changing how they allocate tasks
- Adjusting communication styles
- Questioning assumptions
- Challenging discriminatory comments
- Reconsidering interview and recruitment practices
- Developing better workplace adjustments
- Introducing more check-ins with staff

One mentee summarised:

*“Taking part in the Reverse Mentoring Pilot, has **been one of the most transformative experiences of my leadership journey.** In my role, I am accustomed to leading teams, setting direction, and supporting others’ development. However, this initiative invited me to pause, listen, and learn in a completely different way”.*

This shift from positional authority to relational leadership is the heart of inclusive practice.

Chapter 12: What Mentors Gained

While the programme was designed to support mentees’ learning, the mentors’ journey is equally powerful.

Mentors reported:

- Increased confidence

- Feeling valued
- A sense of contributing to organisational change
- Skills in articulation and advocacy
- Strong relationships with leaders
- Renewed motivation in their roles

One mentor wrote:

“I didn’t think I had anything important to offer. Now I know I do.”

Another said:

“This has made me braver.”

This is perhaps the most profound testament: reverse mentoring lifted voices that the system too often doesn’t manage to hear.

PART VI

THE ENDING AND THE BEGINNING

Chapter 13: Closing Conversations

The programme ended with a final reflective session for each pair, an opportunity to look back at their journey.

Many described the closing conversations as emotional; several described them as “bittersweet.”

Mentors shared gratitude:

“I feel heard.”

“This has meant more to me than you know.”

“Thank you for listening.”

Mentees shared humility:

“You changed how I see the world.”

“I will carry this learning forward.”

“I want to be a better leader because of you.”

Chapter 14: Tangible Actions Taken

Across the 11 pairs, leaders documented concrete actions taken during or after the programme:

- **Revised workplace procedures** to improve inclusivity
- **Built accessibility improvements** into team plans
- **Encouraged staff storytelling sessions**
- **Advocated for greater representation in leadership**
- **Created prompts for inclusive conversations at team meetings**
- **Implemented flexible working approaches**

These were not hypothetical ideas they were real changes implemented by real leaders in response to real stories.

Chapter 15: Recommendations From the Cohort

Participants proposed recommendations for future cohorts:

1. Expand the programme to more staff.
2. Include more senior leaders to increase impact.
3. Encourage journaling to capture reflections.
4. Maintain small, high-quality pairings (maximum 18).
5. Build in structured reflection tools.
6. Allow optional group sessions for shared learning.

Most importantly:

“My advice to future participants is to approach the reverse mentorship programme with openness, curiosity, and honesty. It’s a unique opportunity to learn from someone with different experiences and perspectives.”

*“For **mentors, don’t underestimate the impact of your voice.** For mentees, come with a willingness to reflect and to be challenged in a constructive way. The more you engage and ask questions, the richer the experience will be for both of you.”*

“Continue. This programme changes people.”

Conclusion

A Journey That Continues

The Reverse Mentoring Programme became more than an initiative it became a catalyst for organisational transformation.

It showed that:

- Inclusion is relational.
- Leadership is listening.
- Diversity is strength.
- Lived experience is expertise.
- Empathy is a leadership skill.
- Change happens one conversation at a time.

Across the cohort, the story is consistent: mentors and mentees stepped into a brave, vulnerable space together. They shared truths, challenged norms, explored identity, and imagined new possibilities for a more equitable HSCP.

Growth emerged not from similarity, but from difference.

Courage emerged not from authority, but from honesty.

Leadership emerged not from power, but from connection.

This programme has shown that a more inclusive FHSCP is not only possible it is already being built, pair by pair, conversation by conversation, heart by heart.

And this is only the beginning.

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