

Supporting ELC Leaders: Glasgow's Mentoring Programme

Glasgow City Council, in partnership with the University of Glasgow, has developed an innovative mentoring programme for Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) leaders. The programme is designed to support colleagues who are new to headship or to the Glasgow system.

It responds to the increasing complexity of leadership within ELC and aims to strengthen induction, improve retention, and build leadership capacity. The programme also supports succession planning across the service, while creating meaningful opportunities for research-informed professional learning.

What began as a relatively small project has grown into a significant professional learning opportunity for both new and experienced leaders, with benefits being felt at individual, setting and system level.



The Challenge

Leadership in ELC has become increasingly complex in recent years. The expansion to 1140 hours brought major benefits for children and families, but it also created new pressures for the system. Settings have grown quickly, expectations have increased, and many leaders have stepped into headship more rapidly than they might have done previously.

For those new to the role, this can feel overwhelming and isolating. As one programme lead reflected, "It can be a lonely place being an educational leader."

While Glasgow already had support in place to help people progress into leadership, it recognised a gap once colleagues reached permanent leadership posts. In other words, there was strong preparation for becoming a leader, but less dedicated support to help new heads thrive once appointed.

Through partnership with the University of Glasgow, this gap was also understood in terms of access to research and evidence: new leaders needed space not only for support, but for engagement with ideas, critical reflection and applied learning to navigate increasingly complex professional contexts.

The Idea

The ELC mentoring programme grew from an existing mentoring partnership between Glasgow City Council and the University of Glasgow for headteachers and senior leaders in schools. In July 2024, conversations began about whether a similar model could be developed for ELC. From the outset, this involved adapting an approach grounded in applied research and knowledge exchange so that it reflected the specific context of early years leadership.

The result was a structured mentoring offer for experienced nursery heads to support colleagues who are new to headship or new to Glasgow. Importantly, the programme is framed not as an optional extra but as an entitlement: new heads entering the system are entitled to mentoring support for a year, alongside their induction and line management arrangements. That language reflects a clear recognition, informed by research, of the importance of sustained support at key transition points in leadership.

How the Programme Works

The programme is built around a carefully designed mentoring model, developed jointly by council staff and university colleagues and informed by research on mentoring, leadership development and professional learning.

Experienced heads apply to become mentors through an expression-of-interest process. This is not simply about willingness; applicants are asked to reflect on what they would bring to the role, where they are in their own leadership journey, and what they hope to gain from the experience. Not all applicants are selected immediately, which helps protect the quality and integrity of the programme.

Mentors take part in an intensive training programme consisting of a two-day residential followed by a third training day. The residential element is a key feature, creating protected time and space for experienced leaders to step away from operational pressures, reflect on their values and leadership practice, and develop the skills needed to support others effectively.

Training focuses on core mentoring skills such as active listening, reflection and working with practice-based scenarios. These scenarios are drawn from real experiences in Glasgow nurseries and encourage mentors to explore complex situations, reflect on their responses, and consider how personal values and biases may influence their support.

The partnership with the University of Glasgow adds significant depth to the programme. University colleagues provide online learning materials, professional reading and ongoing learning opportunities through an online platform, enabling participants to access and engage with current research as part of their day-to-day professional learning. Senior academic staff contribute directly to training, offering research-informed inputs on leadership and on key issues such as race, intersectionality and wider social challenges.

This sustained engagement with academic research represents a key form of knowledge exchange, supporting leaders in applying evidence in practice while also creating opportunities for the university to engage with and learn from the realities of ELC leadership. Once trained, mentors are matched with new heads by Glasgow's senior ELC team, based on professional knowledge of both the mentors and the needs of those entering the system.

Mentoring meetings are usually held away from nursery settings to protect time and avoid interruptions. The model also has a clear exit strategy: mentoring is normally offered for one year, with the option of a short extension in specific circumstances.

What Difference Is It Making?

Although formal evaluation is still ongoing, early feedback has been very positive. For new heads, the programme has provided a supportive and trusted relationship at a critical point in their leadership journey. Colleagues have described the experience as transformational and have spoken positively about the difference it has made to their onboarding into Glasgow.

For mentors, the benefits have been equally significant. Experienced leaders have described feeling valued and having the opportunity to step back from the demands of daily leadership to reflect more deeply on the kind of leader they are. Many have spoken about wanting to “give something back” to the system, particularly those nearing retirement who are thinking carefully about the legacy they leave behind and the importance of supporting the next generation of leaders.

The programme has also helped build a strong peer network among mentors. What might have started as a training opportunity has become a professional community, creating space for experienced heads to continue learning and growing themselves.

There are also early signs that this is also having a positive ripple effect within settings. More reflective and intentional leadership appears to be supporting improvements in practice suggesting emerging impact at setting level.

What Comes Next?

To date, Glasgow has trained 25 mentors across a system of approximately 110 nurseries. A second phase is also being developed. Group mentoring for deputies, known as mentoring circles, is being designed to support succession planning and peer learning for those earlier in their leadership journey. This phase will continue to draw on applied research and enquiry-based approaches, with some trained mentors developing facilitation skills to support this work.

Glasgow’s experience suggests that supporting ELC leaders through structured, relational approaches is not an added extra, but a core part of building a resilient and sustainable system. The partnership with the University of Glasgow has enabled the integration of research, practice and professional learning in ways that demonstrate clear potential for impact. By investing in people at key transition points in their leadership journey, the city is strengthening capacity not just in individual settings, but across the wider service.

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