



The
Inspiring Leaders
Network

A DECADE OF IMPACT

Celebrating the Journey of the
Shadow Board Programme®

July 2025

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Celebrating 10 Years of the ILN

This year, we are proud to celebrate 10 years of the Inspiring Leaders Network (ILN) a decade of working in partnership with the NHS and our wider healthcare community. It is a milestone that offers both an opportunity to reflect and a moment to honour the incredible individuals and organisations who have trusted us to support their leadership journeys. Our success over the past 10 years is grounded in the genuine relationships we have built with healthcare colleagues. Our values integrity, humility, passion, courage are lived every day by our team and reflected in the trust placed in us by our NHS partners.

The Shadow Board Programme has become one of our proudest achievements. It has engaged hundreds of talented senior leaders. This report captures the voices of those participant, individuals whose reflections offer compelling evidence of a programme that genuinely transforms. Their words speak to enhanced collaboration, increased readiness for executive responsibility, and a renewed sense of purpose in complex and pressurised systems. As the NHS continues to navigate extraordinary challenges, the need for compassionate, courageous, and systems-minded leadership has never been more critical. It gives me immense pride to present this Impact Report on the Shadow Board Programme® a flagship development programme and organisational development intervention, designed to cultivate a new generation of strategic, confident, and collaborative leaders across the NHS and wider system.

As we look ahead, let us continue to make space for reflection, challenge, and ambition because the future of the NHS depends on leaders who are not only prepared but inspire.

With heartfelt thanks,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kirstie". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'K' and a trailing flourish at the end.

Executive Summary

The Shadow Board Programme® developed by the Inspiring Leaders Network (ILN), marks a decade of impactful leadership development across the NHS. This immersive and experiential programme addresses a critical gap: preparing senior leaders for executive roles through real-time engagement with board-level governance and decision-making.

Programme Highlights

- Over 75 programmes delivered across 60+ NHS organisations.
- 900+ senior aspirant leaders developed.
- 16% of alumni from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.
- 600+ Action Learning Sets and 300+ Shadow Board sessions facilitated.

Impact and Outcomes

Participants showed a **33% increase in self-assessed capability across 23 board-relevant competencies**. Notable areas of growth included:

Strategic insight and system-level thinking.

Confidence in boardroom challenge and accountability.

Understanding of governance, assurance, and financial drivers.

Personal and Organisational Transformation

Participants reported:

- Greater confidence, clarity, and ambition for executive roles.
- Enhanced capability in paper writing, strategic analysis, and assurance reporting.
- Broader appreciation of system interdependencies and cultural leadership.
- Strong peer networks fostering ongoing collaboration and shared purpose.

Organisational Benefits

- Improved board literacy and leadership pipelines.
- Inclusive leadership development with visible impact on equity.
- Strengthened internal collaboration and culture of accountability.
- Tangible improvements in paper quality, challenge, and assurance.

Participant Reflections

- Described the experience as transformative, empowering, and motivating.
- Praised the delivery team for creating safe, reflective learning spaces.
- Emphasised the Shadow Board and Action Learning Sets as standout components.
- Expressed strong willingness to recommend the programme, often calling it a career-defining development experience.

Participants Voice

“This was the best development programme I’ve ever been on. It made me see that executive leadership is not only achievable, but something I want.”

Absolutely invaluable. It helped me realise I am ready to think at board level.”

“This programme lit a spark in me, I now see executive leadership as something I want and can achieve.”

“The space to explore ideas without fear of judgement was empowering.”

Conclusion

The Shadow Board Programme® bridges the experiential gap between operational and executive leadership, supporting strategic readiness and cultural transformation across the NHS. It serves not just as a development programme, but a system-wide intervention driving inclusive, resilient, and capable leadership for the future.

OUR STORY SO FAR

OUR MISSION

The programme was born out of a clear and pressing need. Despite the increasing complexity of NHS leadership roles, many senior leaders step into Executive positions with limited formal preparation for the unique responsibilities, pressures, and dynamics of board-level working. Over the years, numerous NHS Executives have shared with us that a programme like this providing real-time, experiential learning would have made a significant difference to their own development. The Shadow Board Programme® was designed to fill this gap: offering participants a safe yet stretching environment to engage with live board agendas, develop strategic insight, and understand the nuances of Executive leadership.

Delivered in real organisational settings, this is not a simulation. It is authentic, practical, and developmental experiential learning at its most meaningful. Participants step into the reality of boardroom life, gaining insight into corporate governance, risk management, system leadership, and strategic decision-making. Through this, they not only deepen their understanding of the Executive function, but also build the capabilities and mindset required to lead with integrity, influence, and impact.

OUR PURPOSE

The stories and insights shared within this report speak to the power of the programme not just as a leadership development tool, but as a catalyst for cultural change. Participants consistently report increased confidence, greater strategic awareness, and a stronger sense of readiness to take on Executive roles. Many go on to assume senior positions within their organisations and beyond, carrying with them the learning, relationships, and experiences gained through the programme. As we look back over the past decade, and forward to the next, the Shadow Board Programme® remains a testament to what is possible when organisations invest deeply and intentionally in their leaders. This report is both a celebration of its success and a recognition of the continued importance of supporting aspiring Executives to grow, lead, and shape the future of health and care.

60+ NHS
ORGANISATIONS
EMPOWERED THROUGH
THE SHADOW BOARD
PROGRAMME®

PROGRAMME DESIGN



1

Inclusive and diverse identification of 12 - 15 participants from within the organisation or system

2

Learning modules delivered within the organisation by a team of highly experienced practitioner, all with NHS Executive Director/CEO experience

3

Four facilitated and observed shadow board meetings are held the day before each of the organisations board in public, using live papers and chaired by a Non – Executive Director

4

Individuals participate in four facilitated Action Learning Sets (ALS), to create a safe space to build relationships, create community, and reflect, learn and grow

WIDESPREAD IMPACT

COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT

Over 60 NHS organisations and partners have worked with us to establish a shadow board and develop diverse and inclusive senior leadership and capability including:

- Acute, mental health, community and ambulance trusts
- ICS and place-based partnerships
- NHS leadership and development bodies
- National reach, from Yorkshire to London, Manchester to Wales

Together, they represent a **powerful cross-section of the NHS** united in **growing future board-ready leaders and fostering inclusive, strategic thinking across the system.**

Key Achievements

- 10 years of delivering high-impact leadership development
- 60+ organisations across the NHS and wider healthcare system engaged
- 75+ Shadow Board Programmes successfully delivered
- 900+ senior aspirant leaders supported through the programme (representing the equivalent leadership capacity of over 120 NHS boards)
- 16% alumni participants from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds
- 300+ module days delivered
- 300+ facilitated Shadow Board sessions
- 600+ facilitated Action Learning Sets

This isn't just a development programme it's a ***movement towards more inclusive, strategic, and future-facing NHS leadership.***

900+

Senior leaders
developed

75+

Shadow Board
Programmes

16%

Alumni from global
majority heritage
background

300+

Modules
delivered

300+

Facilitated live
shadow board
sessions

600+

Facilitated Action
Learning Sets



Celebrating a Decade of Leadership Development



Evaluating Impact Through Participant Self- Assessment

A central component of the Shadow Board Programme's success lies in its evidence-based approach to personal and professional development. To evaluate the programme's impact, all participants were invited to complete a comprehensive self-assessment both at the start and the conclusion of their learning journey. This approach enabled the Inspiring Leaders Network (ILN) to not only track growth and improvement, but also to tailor each programme to meet the specific needs of each cohort.

Participants were asked to rate themselves against 23 core areas of board-level knowledge and experience. These areas reflect the breadth and complexity of executive leadership in the NHS and wider healthcare system, and cover domains such as corporate governance, strategy, finance, quality, risk, systems thinking, communication, and inclusive leadership.

Using a consistent scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing low knowledge/confidence and 10 representing high), participants provided baseline scores before the programme began. These were then revisited at the end of the programme, allowing for a clear measurement of progress. The scores were aggregated and averaged to assess the overall change in perceived knowledge and capability across each of the 23 areas.

The questions were carefully constructed to ensure alignment with the key competencies expected of Executive Directors, including:

Strategic & Governance Understanding

- Understanding the board's strategic role and function
- Understanding of a director's responsibilities
- Well-Led Framework and good governance
- Familiarity with financial, operational, and quality metrics, and their strategic implications
- Clarity on governance frameworks and Board Assurance Framework (BAF)
- Board powers and delegation

Systems & Organisational Knowledge

- A deep appreciation for system-wide collaboration, organisational culture, and inclusive leadership on local health economy
- Quality, financial and operational challenges
- System factors and benchmarking
- Organisational strategy alignment
- Key NHS initiatives and priorities

Practical Board Experience

- Confidence in challenge, scrutiny, and accountability at board level
- Subcommittees
- Information flows
- Risk management
- Supporting functional directors at board level

Inclusive & Cultural Leadership

- Values, Nolan Principles
- Equality, diversity, and inclusion
- Staff engagement metrics

Communication & Challenge

- Presenting board papers
- Constructive challenge
- Balance of challenge and support

The insights gained through this self-assessment process are twofold: they demonstrate the effectiveness of the programme in **accelerating leadership readiness**, and they provide participating organisations with a **tangible measure of growth and capability within their senior leadership talent pipeline**.

Headline Evaluation Outcome

Across the organisations for which data is available, the Shadow Board Programme® has demonstrated a measurable and significant impact. Participants' average self-assessed scores improved from 6.47 before the programme to 8.60 after completion, representing a **33.12% increase in knowledge, confidence, and capability across the 23 evaluated areas, with some organisations experiencing over 50% increase**. This uplift reflects not only enhanced understanding of executive-level responsibilities but also a notable shift in readiness to operate at Board level. These results affirm the programme's effectiveness as a high-impact development intervention for senior aspirant leaders.



Understanding Impact Through The Lens of Participant Experience

Aspirations for Development and Desired Outcomes from the Programme

Across NHS organisations, participants who applied to the Shadow Board Programme® consistently described it as a timely and powerful opportunity to grow, reflect, and prepare for future leadership roles. Their motivations while diverse in wording revealed shared ambitions around capability building, career progression, and making a meaningful impact. Several distinct themes emerged from their feedback.

Strategic Exposure & Executive Insight: A key driver for many participants was the desire to gain deeper insight into how executive boards operate. There was a strong appetite to better understand strategic decision-making, financial governance, risk management, and how board-level assurance is structured. Several individuals acknowledged that although they had previously attended board meetings or supported board members, they lacked clarity about roles, responsibilities, and board dynamics. The programme was seen as a unique opportunity to 'lift the lid' on executive-level thinking and experience real-life board activity, without the risks of immediate accountability. Participants hoped to learn how to contribute more confidently and effectively at that level, especially in relation to decision-making beyond their immediate functional areas.

Leadership Development & Career Progression: Many participants applied to the programme with a clear ambition to progress into more senior leadership roles, including Director-level and Executive Director positions. They saw the Shadow Board as a crucial developmental step offering practical insights, exposure, and preparation that aligned with their career goals. Some were in interim or acting-up roles, while others were proactively seeking to bridge the gap between middle management and board-level leadership. A number of individuals had been nominated by senior leaders, reinforcing the programme's value as part of organisational succession planning. The experiential nature of the programme was cited as especially helpful for those wanting to test their readiness and build leadership confidence in a structured, supportive environment.

Confidence Building in a Safe and Supportive Environment: Another frequently mentioned motivation was the opportunity to build confidence in a safe, developmental space. Many participants recognised that, while they had strong operational skills, they had limited experience in contributing to high-level governance discussions or presenting to a board. The Shadow Board offered a setting where they could learn how to challenge constructively, present strategic papers, engage in debate, and see how executive teams manage complex issues. For some, it was also a chance to observe and practise boardroom behaviours without the pressure of being in a formal executive role. This supportive, reflective environment was seen as critical in developing the courage, voice, and presence needed to operate at senior levels.

Understanding Governance and Organisational Impact: Participants expressed a strong desire to better understand how their work and services connect to the trust's wider strategic priorities. There was a common theme of wanting to understand the 'bigger picture' and how board decisions are made, how systems interact, and how governance frameworks translate into practice across departments. Some highlighted the importance of learning how the Board Assurance Framework (BAF) functions, or how to navigate board committees and cross-organisational working. Others hoped the programme would help them think more systemically and strategically, enabling them to move from being functional experts to organisational leaders who could influence change across entire systems.

Representation, Inclusion & Inspiring Others: Several participants particularly from underrepresented or global majority backgrounds spoke of wanting to bring diverse perspectives to the boardroom. They saw the programme not only as an opportunity for their own growth but also as a way to challenge traditional pathways to leadership and serve as a role model for others. Representation at the top of organisations mattered deeply to these individuals, who saw inclusive leadership as key to delivering high-quality care, promoting fairness, and creating cultures where all staff could thrive. Their applications were often underpinned by a dual motivation: to develop themselves and to open doors for others.

Curiosity, Reflection & Professional Exploration: For many, the decision to apply stemmed from a sense of curiosity and a desire to understand whether a board-level career was right for them. The programme was valued as a space for reflection on leadership style, career ambitions, and organisational impact. Several participants described it as a chance to connect with peers across functions, learn from others' experiences, and gain clarity on their own aspirations. For some, the programme helped confirm their interest in executive leadership; for others, it provided insight into the demands of such roles, helping them consider alternatives or prepare more intentionally.

In summary: The motivations shared by participants reveal the far-reaching value of the Shadow Board Programme. It supports both organisational capability and personal transformation. Whether applicants were focused on immediate career progression, long-term aspirations, or simply learning more about how boards function, all recognised that this unique experience would enhance their leadership confidence, strategic insight, and impact across the healthcare system.

Shifts in Thinking and Perspective as a Result of the Programme

One of the most significant impacts of the Shadow Board Programme® is how it fundamentally transforms the way participants think about leadership, governance, and their place within the NHS system. Through immersive experience, reflective learning, and real-time board engagement, many participants reported profound shifts in mindset and perspective. Their responses reveal not only individual growth, but a collective evolution in how aspirant leaders interpret strategy, accountability, and system-wide influence.

From Operational to Strategic Thinking: A powerful and recurring theme was the transition from a largely operational mindset focused on immediate priorities and divisional issues to one that embraces strategic, long-term thinking. Participants spoke of gaining a 'bird's-eye view' of the organisation and beginning to **think beyond their usual remit**. Rather than concentrating solely on team or department performance, they now approach decisions with a **whole-organisation or even system-level lens**. Several highlighted a new ability to anticipate the longer-term implications of decisions, appreciate organisational interdependencies, and consider external drivers such as system pressures, regulatory frameworks, and national priorities.

A Deeper Understanding of the Board and Governance Structures: Participants consistently reported that the programme offered unparalleled insight into the structure and function of NHS boards. They learned about the concept of a unitary board, where executive and non-executive directors work collectively and share responsibility and began to see governance not as bureaucracy but as a framework for trust, assurance, and ethical leadership. This experience allowed participants to **engage meaningfully** with concepts like the Board Assurance Framework (BAF), risk registers, and the difference between assurance and reassurance. Many now understand how executive boards use structured evidence to make decisions and how vital it is that information presented is both succinct and robust. As a result, several participants now consider more critically how they themselves write and present information thinking about audience, clarity, and strategic framing.

Confidence, Challenge, and Constructive Curiosity: The programme empowered participants to feel more confident in high-level discussions and better equipped to challenge and support constructively. Many noted that they now question differently **more analytically, more critically, and more confidently** especially in relation to information presented in papers and discussions. Some participants described how they've stopped taking reports at face value and instead dig deeper to interrogate meaning, gaps, and underlying assumptions. Several credited the programme with improving their ability to identify meaningful triangulation of data, ask better questions, and use benchmarking or external comparisons to inform judgement. This confidence extended beyond board simulation sessions and into everyday working life. Individuals felt **more able to support executive colleagues, influence up the chain, and communicate more assertively** when representing their services or speaking to trust-wide issues.

Greater Awareness of Responsibility and Impact: Another striking shift was the heightened appreciation of the weight and complexity of board-level responsibility. Some **participants described feeling humbled or even overwhelmed by the gravity of decisions made at this level, particularly in terms of the implications for patient safety, workforce wellbeing, and system sustainability.** Participants acknowledged a clearer understanding of the risks boards manage, the balance between assurance and innovation, and the challenge of navigating public scrutiny. A few noted how this new perspective deepened their empathy for those already in executive roles, as well as their resolve to contribute to effective leadership that balances ambition with accountability.

A Systems Perspective and Broader Integration: Many participants came away with a stronger appreciation for how their own work connects to and is impacted by wider system forces. They noted that the programme illuminated the importance of collaboration with external partners, the value of cross-organisational thinking, and the need for integrated care. This systems perspective allowed participants to better understand how pressures in one area can ripple across multiple domains, and how true leadership requires awareness of these dynamics. Several described **changes in how they approach partnership working, emphasising a greater sense of responsibility to align local actions with system-wide strategies.**

Reflection on Career Trajectory and Readiness: The immersive nature of the programme prompted many to reassess their professional direction. For some, it **confirmed their readiness to seek board-level roles and gave them confidence to apply for executive positions.** Others appreciated the exposure but recognised the immense responsibility that comes with such roles, expressing caution about timing, work-life balance, and the emotional resilience required. Importantly, even those who chose not to pursue executive ambitions felt more capable of contributing to board-level dialogue, **better prepared to support their own directors,** and more informed as leaders within their own spheres of influence.

Authenticity, Inclusion, and Representation: Several participants highlighted how the programme helped them see the value of their own perspectives particularly those from underrepresented or non-traditional leadership backgrounds. They reported feeling **more confident to bring their authentic selves into senior discussions and more aware of how diversity of thought contributes to effective governance.** Some voiced concerns about representation such as the absence of Allied Health Professionals or psychologists on boards and felt motivated to challenge the status quo and promote more inclusive structures. For many, the experience **deepened their belief in the importance of equity, lived experience, and curiosity** as tools for leadership.

Practical Application in Daily Practice: Finally, participants shared numerous examples of how their thinking has already changed day-to-day behaviours. Many now **write better board papers**, structure briefings with a clearer audience in mind, and consider how their teams contribute to strategic aims. Others reported changes in how they prepare for meetings, mentor junior colleagues, or advise others on issues of governance and accountability. Perhaps most significantly, participants described becoming **more reflective leaders** more likely to pause, ask, and listen whether they are in the boardroom or not

This collective reflection confirms the transformational power of the Shadow Board Programme. It not only develops technical knowledge of governance and strategy, but it **deeply influences the way NHS leaders think, act, and engage with complex leadership challenges**. The shift from siloed operationalism to confident, strategic systems leadership is clear and the ripple effects are already visible across services, organisations, and future leadership pipelines.

Understanding Organisational Functions and Key Business Drivers

The Programme significantly enhanced participants' understanding of how NHS organisation's function and the business drivers underpin their strategy and operations. Many participants arrived with existing knowledge some from senior operational roles and found the programme either confirmed, expanded, or transformed their understanding through real-time experience, expert input, and critical engagement with governance processes.

Deeper Understanding of Board Functions and Structures: Participants consistently reported a much clearer and more nuanced understanding of how the board operates and what functions it performs. Through exposure to board papers, committee structures, assurance frameworks, and executive decision-making, many felt their knowledge of **governance was sharpened and their appreciation of the complexity of board responsibilities deepened**. This was particularly true for those unfamiliar with non-clinical domains such as finance, strategy, digital transformation, or risk. Several commented that they now understand not only what drives decisions but also how assurance is built and communicated. The programme created a rare opportunity to connect theory with observation many referenced how observing real board meetings allowed them to contextualise what they had learned in taught sessions.

"The taught sessions, in conjunction with the board papers that we used for the shadow board meetings, helped me to have a clearer understanding of the organisation and the external and internal drivers."

Some found the experience helped reinforce knowledge they already had:

"I already had a good understanding of the functions and drivers and feel this has confirmed my understanding."

Greater Clarity on Business Drivers and Strategic Priorities: A strong theme was how the programme demystified the organisational drivers influencing NHS strategy and delivery financial sustainability, workforce pressures, risk, regulatory requirements, and alignment with national and system-wide agendas.

Participants now have a clearer sense of how day-to-day service decisions connect to broader strategic goals, such as those defined in the Integrated Care Strategy or in response to regulatory frameworks. Others described gaining insight into external and political influences that shape decisions, expectations, and pressures to meet the local population health needs. The programme helped participants better connect frontline service delivery with the wider strategic aims of the organisation, including financial pressures, workforce constraints, quality goals, and political or system-wide influences.

"This programme connected the dots for me, what the board sees is the distilled version of everything we do."

"I now have greater awareness of the issues impacting the organisation, internal and external."

"It has helped me to see how all of what goes on day to day gets distilled down to the key functions that the Board needs to have assurance and oversight of and how at the moment our financial context is a key driver."

Increased Appreciation of Interdependencies and System Context: The programme supported a more integrated view of how organisational functions and do not operate in isolation. Participants reflected on how various functions finance, HR, digital, quality, operations are interconnected and collectively shape board decisions. This systems awareness extended beyond their own organisations, helping participants see how Trusts sit within wider health and care systems. Many now have an improved understanding of how Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), partner organisations, and wider political and economic drivers impact how organisations function and are led.

"It's helped me realise just how interconnected our services are with system-wide planning and delivery."

"Appreciation of the wider Integrated Care System and how the different parts need to work together."

"The programme helped me to understand the wider functions of the Board both within the organisation and at system level and how it aligns with the local health economy."

For some, this was the first time they could step outside their functional area to see how decisions are shaped at the highest level:

"Widened my understanding by taking myself out of my comfort zone in Operations and into new areas."

Exposure to Board-Level Decision-Making in Action: Being part of the shadow board meetings allowed participants to appreciate the complexity of decision making, witness the dynamics of challenge consensus at senior levels. Also, to navigating competing priorities clinical need vs. financial constraint, short-term delivery vs. long-term sustainability.

"Being in the Shadow Board gave me real insight into how decisions are made what gets challenged, what doesn't, and why."

"The preparation for the board meeting and in-depth analysis of the papers has been critical to my understanding."

Others reflected on the importance of subtle dynamics:

"Helped me understand the responsibility and how boards work and the subtle dynamics that can occur."

This real-time experience enabled participants to **better understand the nature of board scrutiny**, the role of executive and non-executive directors, and how board papers are critically appraised for assurance. Several said the process of reading, presenting, and challenging board papers forced them to **think strategically and appreciate the importance of alignment, clarity, and data-driven evidence**. This sharpened their awareness of how board-level communication differs from operational reporting and encouraged more thoughtful engagement with decision-making.

Enhanced Understanding of Roles and Responsibilities: Participants gained clearer insight into the roles of executive and non-executive directors, the structure and function of board subcommittees, and the distribution of responsibility across governance layers. Many noted that they now better understand how decisions cascade through the organisation and how board-level conversations shape the priorities of directorates and teams. Others described how they are now more aware of their own contribution to these processes even outside the boardroom by better aligning their work to corporate objectives and engaging more effectively with directors and senior teams.

The programme clarified the specific duties of executive and non-executive directors, governors, and board subcommittees. Several participants reported a much clearer view of how governance works in practice.

"I never really understood the role of NEDs before, however I now understand the power of independent challenge and the balance they bring."

"Allowed me to see how decisions are made by Board and understand their decision-making."

"Clarity by experts who have shared how it is and understand the core functions of all members in a unitary board."

Consolidation and Confidence Building: For some, the programme confirmed and consolidated prior knowledge particularly for those already in Associate or Deputy Director roles. However, even those with experience found value in applying knowledge in practice, challenging their assumptions, and stretching their thinking. For those already operating at senior levels, the programme validated and strengthened existing knowledge while building confidence to contribute at board level.

"I thought I knew a lot already. I didn't realise how much more confident I could be until I tested myself in this space."

Others gained confidence in challenging board-level assumptions and engaging with governance more strategically:

"It's helped me to question why some items become a focus of interest when others continue to go under the radar."

Many participants described how this experience boosted their confidence: to question board content, to appreciate and interrogate financial or HR data, and to participate in governance discussions they might previously have felt excluded from.

Practical Learning and Lived Experience: Crucially, participants valued that this was not purely a theoretical exercise. They highlighted that learning was brought to life through board paper reviews, peer discussion, input from experienced chairs and directors, and action learning sets. Participants appreciated the practical nature of the programme, which combined experiential learning with structured modules, action learning sets, and expert facilitation. It was repeatedly described as engaging, real, and safe for exploration.

"Reading and presenting board papers was more impactful than I expected it made it all very real."

"The modules broadened my knowledge and generated discussion the shadow boards increased my understanding of how the board functions and what drives it."

"It's been remarkably practical in its approach rather than being an academic review, we've lived it and tested it."

Several praised the safe space to ask questions they wouldn't usually ask in a professional setting, helping them learn across disciplines and gain new insights. For many, this hands-on learning created opportunities to ask questions they wouldn't normally be able to explore in their roles:

"More in-depth overview and the opportunity to ask questions that you wouldn't ordinarily ask in a professional meeting or forum."

Strategic Reframing and Future Leadership Insight: Ultimately, participants left the programme with an enhanced ability to think like board members, not just operational leaders. They now better understand what information is needed to support decisions, how to interrogate business cases and strategic proposals, and how governance ensures accountability for delivery and safety.

"This helped me think like a board member not just in terms of knowledge, but in strategic focus and mindset."

"Through the whole process from both the facilitators and course members I gained a much better appreciation of the many different pressures and viewpoints across the organisation."

"It gave me a broader range of experience and knowledge."

Some found the clarity and challenge provided by the programme ignited new ambition:

"The programme has really helped me understand the role of executives and the relationship with the board and made me feel I could be ready for that step one day."

Many described a shift in how they interpret their role as **contributors to whole-organisation success, not just leaders of isolated services**. Others noted that they are now more capable of preparing for executive leadership by understanding the interplay of board assurance, system influence, and strategic planning.

This extensive development in understanding reflects one of the programme's core strengths: it enables future leaders not only to understand the what and why of organisational function, but also to confidently step into the how ready to shape, lead, and govern the future of the NHS with clarity, purpose, and integrity.

Personal Reflections and Emotional Impact of the Programme

Feedback from participants paints a powerful and uplifting picture of the programme's impact on both professional identity and personal outlook. The experience was widely described as **transformational**, not only expanding participants' understanding of organisational strategy and Board functions, but also **shifting how they saw themselves within the broader system**.

A Significant Boost in Confidence: The most prominent theme was a surge in confidence. Participants repeatedly mentioned feeling **more capable of engaging at Board level** whether that meant presenting papers, contributing to strategic discussions, or offering challenge in a constructive and informed way. Many spoke of having felt intimidated by the formality and scale of Board processes in the past, but now felt 'more at ease,' 'more assured' and 'better prepared' to step into those spaces.

Several commented that they now see themselves as 'more competent and able to function at executive level' with the programme helping bridge the psychological gap between their current roles and those they aspire to. Even those with previous exposure to senior forums said the programme helped to crystallise knowledge and build fluency in Boardroom expectations and language.

A Sense of Empowerment and Visibility: For many, this increase in confidence was closely tied to a deeper feeling of empowerment. Participants felt more assertive, more ready to speak up, and more likely to contribute their perspectives in strategic settings. The programme encouraged them to trust their instincts and experiences, and to see themselves as leaders whose voices belong in high-level conversations. This was further reinforced by a strong sense of being seen and valued. Participants appreciated the opportunity to step into a high-profile, high-expectation environment and to be trusted with responsibilities usually reserved for senior staff. Many noted how meaningful it was to receive feedback from senior leaders, and to hear directly from Executive and Non-Executive Directors about their leadership journeys and decision-making processes.

Stronger Relationships and Peer Support: Another key outcome was the building of peer networks and a feeling of collective solidarity. Working alongside colleagues from across the Trust gave participants a greater appreciation of diverse roles and perspectives. It also allowed them to learn in a psychologically safe space, where they could stretch themselves without fear of judgement. Several participants commented on how much they enjoyed learning 'with and from' others. The programme helped to break down silos, foster cross-functional understanding, and forge relationships that would continue beyond the course. Many described feeling 'more connected' and 'part of a wider leadership community', and said they now had a renewed appreciation for the collaborative nature of strategic work.

Refocused Ambition and Career Clarity: For a significant number, the experience prompted deep career reflection. It provided insight into what senior leadership looks like in practice, including the pressures, complexity, and trade-offs involved. Some said it had reaffirmed their desire to progress to Director-level roles, while others found clarity about alternative pathways or recognised the value of their current positions. Importantly, the programme gave participants permission to be ambitious, and showed them that executive roles are within reach or at least, worth considering. For some, it challenged long-held assumptions about what it means to be ready for leadership.

Feeling Included, Informed and Motivated: The programme also helped participants feel included and engaged in the bigger picture of organisational strategy. Exposure to real Board papers, meetings, and the mechanics of governance allowed them to understand how decisions are made, and how their own work contributes to the Trust's overarching goals. Many described feeling more aligned with the organisation's direction, and more motivated to influence it positively.

hey also felt better informed not only about Board-level topics like finance, risk and assurance, but about broader system pressures, priorities, and politics. This strategic lens enhanced their ability to anticipate challenges, link local decisions to national drivers, and think critically about how to shape services for the future.

A Space for Challenge and Growth: While the majority of reflections were positive, some participants acknowledged the emotional challenge of stepping out of their comfort zone. For a few, the experience highlighted areas where they felt less confident or exposed gaps in their knowledge. However, even these moments were framed as constructive and growth-enabling, thanks to the programme's supportive design. Several described the process as **stretching but safe**, with opportunities to learn, test ideas, and take risks without fear of failure. This balance of high expectation and high support was repeatedly credited for helping participants grow into more capable, resilient leaders.

Empowered for the Future: Taken together, the comments reflect a cohort that emerged from the programme more self-assured, informed, and inspired. Whether participants planned to pursue Board roles or not, the experience helped them better understand their own potential and value. Many described feeling energised by what lies ahead and grateful for the opportunity to grow in such a meaningful, structured way.

Organisational Benefits and Wider Impact of the Programme

The programme has brought clear and wide-ranging benefits to the organisations involved, with significant impacts felt at both an individual and system level. A central theme was the programme's role in identifying and preparing future leaders, often described as a form of talent acceleration and succession planning. Many participants felt more confident and equipped to step into executive roles, and organisations were able to observe this growth in real time. As one participant remarked, *'I think the programme has helped the organisation develop future leaders and provided the opportunity for new ideas that may not have formed part of the decision making or discussions at Board meeting.'* This early identification of leadership potential was particularly noted among groups traditionally underrepresented at the Board level, contributing to a more inclusive pipeline for future executive appointments.

The programme has also had a tangible impact on Board literacy and organisational understanding. Participants consistently reported increased knowledge of governance, risk, assurance, and Board-level communication. This translated directly into stronger contributions to meetings and papers. As one participant explained, *'It will benefit the organisation in terms of the quality of board papers I would be involved with in the future and how we provide assurance to the board.'* Another stated, *'It's improved the assurance at different levels in the organisation, thus improving patient care, everyone on the programme has commented on how they've improved their skills and knowledge to challenge appropriately to gain the correct assurances.'*

Many highlighted that this depth of understanding enhanced their ability to connect frontline and Board-level strategy, improving both internal alignment and delivery.

A frequently cited benefit was the creation of stronger internal networks and peer support, which has enabled more joined-up and collaborative working across departments. Participants valued the opportunity to learn from colleagues in other areas of the organisation, noting that 'the programme has strengthened the collective work of the deputies involved, given us a voice and responsibility to use that.' One participant summarised this clearly: *'Our group of peers have bonded. It has brought a group of like-minded individuals together who want to continue reviewing papers and asking the curious questions for the board to consider.'* These networks, now embedded, are expected to endure beyond the programme and contribute to ongoing organisational cohesion and performance.

The impact of the Shadow Board on the Trust Board was noted by many as a positive development, though there was also reflection on how this could be deepened in future iterations. Where the connection was strong, participants felt their contributions had been heard and acted upon. *'Feedback from the Shadow Board was taken to Trust Board,'* one participant shared, the cohort have all used this as a way to ensure that the Board's needs are understood better when writing papers and interacting with Execs.' However, some felt that more structured routes for Shadow Board insight to shape Board-level decisions could strengthen the value even further: 'I'm not sure we achieved this; more feedback needed to go from Shadow Board into Board itself.'

Finally, the programme appears to have had a lasting impact on organisational culture, confidence, and morale. The investment in people was seen as both practical and symbolic demonstrating trust in staff and fostering a culture of growth. As one person said, *'It's been an obvious benefit learning and reflection for me, but also clear that the organisation gained the challenge of our Shadow Board and something of an awakening.'*

Participants spoke of feeling *'valued and empowered'* and *'more connected'* not just to their peers, but to the mission of the Trust and the priorities of the Board. In the words of one respondent: *'The programme made me a more informed leader around board functions, so I can apply it in meetings and discuss with peers and colleagues developing a pool of future leaders.'* In summary, the programme has not only developed individuals, but contributed to broader system goals: deepening leadership capacity, fostering inclusion, improving Board literacy, and laying the groundwork for future success. Participants are now not just better informed they are better connected, more confident, and more able to support their organisations at the highest level.

Perceived Value and Time Investment in the Programme

Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly affirmative when asked whether the programme had been a valuable use of their time. Words like **absolutely, definitely** and **most useful and impactful** were repeated frequently, reflecting a deep appreciation for the experience and its influence on both personal and professional development. One participant stated, 'It's been a key part of my personal development' while another described it as **the most useful and impactful development programme I have been on**. The consistency in this sentiment across participants highlights the strength and relevance of the programme design.

Many emphasised the development of tangible skills and confidence, particularly in areas such as analytical thinking, understanding Board-level processes, and contributing at a strategic level. A particularly telling comment noted, *'I have gained so many new analytical skills and have formed relationships with people within the organisation who I would not have ordinarily crossed paths with.'* This demonstrates how the programme also played a role in breaking down silos and improving cross-organisational collaboration.

The programme's networking and relational value was also repeatedly praised. Several participants mentioned the value of peer learning and the formation of new internal networks: *'really valuable and good networking opportunity'* and *'the network of staff worked together really well during the programme.'* This peer support was not only professionally enriching but also helped build a stronger sense of community among emerging leaders. Participants found the programme enriching, transformational, and highly worthwhile. The phrase **Yes, most definitely and would recommend to others** captures the widespread endorsement. In essence, the programme not only met but often exceeded expectations providing meaningful learning, expanded networks, and a sense of genuine value for time invested.

Impact of the Programme on Current Role Effectiveness

Stronger Strategic Thinking and Organisational Awareness: A dominant theme throughout the responses was a significant increase in participants' understanding of the organisation's strategic direction and Board-level functioning. Many now feel better equipped to think strategically and connect their own work with wider Trust priorities. One respondent commented:

"It's really helped with the streamlining of strategic decision-making. I also feel more confident in presenting new ideas in a way that demonstrates value to the Trust Board."

Numerous participants described how the programme helped them **connect the dots** between different directorates and functions, allowing them to contribute to decision-making processes more effectively and to challenge constructively at senior meetings.

Greater Confidence and Influence in Senior Forums: Confidence was frequently cited as a key benefit. Many participants said they felt more assured presenting papers, supporting executive directors, or deputising in senior forums.

"I feel much more equipped to do my current role. My line manager has commented on the positive difference the programme has had on me and the way I work."

"I now have more connections within the Trust. Understanding in greater depth the finance/strategic side of things has helped when planning operational plans for my teams."

The opportunity to observe and experience Board and sub-committee operations first-hand was widely seen as invaluable, especially in demystifying the expectations placed on senior leaders.

Improved Communication, Writing and Presentation of Papers: One of the most consistently praised outcomes was the improvement in writing, structuring, and delivering Board papers and reports. Participants reported a greater awareness of the need for clarity, brevity, and assurance rather than reassurance. As one participant explained:

"I don't take information at face value now and interrogate this much more. I think more about assurance versus reassurance, and the 'so what?'"

Another remarked:

"I now know what I need to include in report writing so that it is succinct but valuable in conveying information."

This shift in mindset, from operational reporting to strategic messaging, was seen as a critical skill that the programme helped to cultivate.

Broader Role Understanding and Empathy: Many participants gained a richer appreciation of roles outside their usual remit, particularly the responsibilities of Executive Directors and Non-Executive Directors. This led to a broader systems perspective and improved collaboration. Some mentioned increased empathy for the challenges others face and a more holistic view of the pressures across the Trust, which has in turn enhanced their leadership approach.

Enhanced Networks and Peer Learning: The value of networking and peer support emerged repeatedly. Participants described building relationships with colleagues they wouldn't normally engage with, which led to stronger internal networks and more collaboration:

"It has helped me build my network, which is hugely helpful. I now engage a wider network and consider the Trust's conflicting priorities when planning activity."

These connections were particularly valuable for those in corporate roles, enabling a better appreciation of clinical demands and vice versa.

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Development of Reflective Practice and Personal Growth: Participants also spoke about the programme's impact on how they think and reflect as professionals. There was frequent mention of increased self-awareness, curiosity, and a desire to keep learning:

"It's made me more purposeful in all aspects of my work and more cognisant of the need for strategic synergy."

Several participants noted how their thinking had evolved, from purely operational to more strategic considerations. Others mentioned becoming more reflective in how they communicate, ask questions, and consider team development.

Aiding Career Progression: While the programme was designed to help people in their current roles, many reported it also helped prepare them for the next step in their careers. Some participants had **already been promoted during or following the programme**, often into Executive roles. Others found it useful in interview preparation, career planning, or deciding whether an Executive Director role was right for them.

In summary, the programme did not just provide new knowledge it shifted how people think, communicate, lead, and challenge within their roles. As one participant aptly put it:

"It's helped me to become more strategic, more confident, and more curious—exactly what I need to keep growing in my role."

Participant Perspectives on Contribution to Board-Level Decision Making

A large proportion of participants felt that their involvement in the programme particularly through the Shadow Board enabled them to contribute meaningfully to Board-level thinking and decision-making. While the direct impact on decisions was sometimes hard to trace, many respondents were confident that their feedback had shaped how papers were received and discussed by the Board. Participants described a sense of satisfaction in knowing that their input had been taken seriously. Some even saw changes to Board papers following their critique, demonstrating that the programme gave them a real platform for influence:

"Our insights and recommendations were taken seriously, and I have seen a board paper presentation changed based on our feedback. It's rewarding to know our perspectives are valued."

Others appreciated how their contributions provided the Board with alternative viewpoints and helped sharpen thinking, particularly on the clarity and purpose of reports:

"We challenged areas in papers that the Board may not have considered otherwise. This went on to influence their discussions."

Several respondents cited seeing 'clear evidence' that feedback was passed up to the Board by the Shadow Board Chair or Non-Executive Directors, and then discussed at formal Board meetings:

"Yes definitely. Our Chair was brilliant and actively ensured our relevant comments were fed into Trust Board discussions and listened to."

A Platform for Challenge and Assurance: Many participants viewed their role as critical friends offering constructive critique of the Board's materials and approach. They described how their questioning led to deeper discussion or reassessment of the information being presented, ***by challenging board papers that did not provide the level of assurance needed.*** This opportunity to challenge and question helped foster a more robust culture of scrutiny and accountability, one that participants felt better equipped to uphold in their everyday roles.

Shifting Mindsets and Greater Awareness: Even when the impact on decision-making was indirect, many reported a significant shift in how they now think about Board-level leadership. For some, the programme prompted a deeper appreciation of strategic priorities and better preparation for stepping into senior leadership roles. Others felt empowered to engage more meaningfully in their current work, with one participant noting *'the programme contributed to my role as Company Secretary when deputising at Board... I was able to challenge more confidently.'*

Opportunities for Greater Impact: Despite the many positives, a number of participants expressed a desire for the Board-to-Shadow Board feedback loop to be stronger and more time allocated from the Trust Board to receive and review feedback. Several called for more structured opportunities to present directly to the Board or for the Shadow Board to be formally included in board development sessions or scenario planning. This would have, in their view, created a more visible and sustained feedback mechanism.

In summary, participants overwhelmingly felt that the programme enabled them to contribute to Board-level thinking, particularly through the Shadow Board experience. While the degree of direct influence varied, the programme clearly strengthened participants' ability to analyse, critique, and shape organisational decision-making. The feedback revealed a **growing confidence among staff to contribute to complex discussions, challenge constructively, and understand what 'good' looks like in Board-level communication.**

Participant Reflections on Feeling More Connected to the Organisation

Stronger Connections Through Networking and Collaboration: A core theme across the responses was the power of networking. Many participants described how the programme created space for cross-functional collaboration and forged new relationships across departments, levels, and geographies.

This opportunity to network was not only seen as beneficial for operational alignment but also as personally empowering, boosting confidence and creating support systems:

"Opportunity to work alongside colleagues I wouldn't have done and made connections with Exec and Non-Exec Directors that I wouldn't have done otherwise."

"I feel connected to our executive directors understanding their challenges, governance processes, and their development journeys."

Greater Understanding of Organisational Strategy and Structure: Many participants indicated that the programme enhanced their understanding of how the organisation functions, from board-level decision-making to day-to-day operational realities. The insights into board processes and strategic objectives helped people see how their roles connect to the wider mission. Attending public board meetings and participating in Shadow Board sessions allowed staff to see first-hand how key issues were escalated, assessed, and addressed.

"I certainly feel more connected to the organisation. My thinking has shifted to organisational strategy, system partnership, financial viability, and risks aligned to the Board Assurance Framework."

Informal Interactions. A Gateway to Humanising Leadership: Numerous comments highlighted the importance of informal moments, such as the 'hotspot' interviews, in creating a more authentic connection with senior leaders. These moments helped demystify roles and allowed participants to see the human side of leadership. Participants stated they **felt more connected because of the honesty displayed...hearing their professional journeys was really helpful to see how they had come to their current roles**. These stories not only humanised leadership but also inspired participants to think about their own development journeys.

Peer Solidarity and Shared Purpose: A significant number of responses reflected a strengthened sense of belonging through the relationships formed with peers on the programme. The cohort experience helped staff realise they were not alone in facing challenges and that they share a unified commitment to patient care. Some noted that the connections were particularly impactful given their limited previous contact with other areas or functions. Overall, the programme significantly increased participants' sense of connection to the organisation through three primary mechanisms:

- **Expanded networks** – across teams, roles, and seniority.
- **Stronger organisational insight** – particularly into strategic drivers and board-level decision-making.
- **Humanised leadership** – via direct engagement with executives' personal and professional journeys.

This collective impact not only empowered individuals but reinforced a broader sense of shared purpose and organisational alignment.

Programme Components That Provided the Greatest Value to Participants

The Shadow Board: A Standout Learning Experience: By far the most frequently cited component, the Shadow Board experience was seen as transformative. Participants valued the opportunity to engage with real board-level content in a safe yet realistic environment, allowing them to simulate executive-level decision-making and receive structured feedback.

Action Learning Sets (ALS): Peer-Led Reflection and Support: Many participants found these particularly valuable for creating space to reflect on challenges, gain multiple perspectives, and learn from peers in a psychologically safe setting. This format was often described as building trust and camaraderie, enabling people to grow in confidence and clarify their thinking around current work-related challenges.

High-Impact Modules: Governance, Finance, Strategy and Leadership: The taught modules were highly appreciated, especially those covering finance, governance, and leadership. These sessions were said to demystify key board-level concepts and provide practical tools for strategic thinking and assurance reporting. Participants also praised the leadership and humanity modules for focusing on the human impact of board decisions and for offering space to think more broadly about people, resilience, and wellbeing.

Networking and Peer Relationships: Many participants reported that one of the most unexpected, yet valued benefits was building strong relationships with peers. The programme structure allowed for informal networking, structured group work, and shared experiences which fostered trust, support, and a sense of belonging. These connections often continued beyond the programme, strengthening cross-organisational collaboration.

Feedback and Real-Time Reflection: Numerous participants highlighted the value of receiving structured feedback, particularly during or after shadow board sessions or paper presentations. Feedback helped them better understand board expectations and identify areas for personal development. Participants stated that:

"Feedback from presenting at the shadow board meetings gave the most insight into areas of strength as well as areas to develop."

"Real-time and follow-up feedback was also really helpful. It supported improvements immediately."

A Holistic and Blended Approach: Importantly, many participants emphasised that the combined structure of the programme, integrating teaching, practice, reflection, and relationship-building, was what made it so effective **'the part that was most unexpected was that we found ourselves to be a worthy team.'** Participants consistently described the programme as safe, stretching, and deeply valuable.

Impact of the Programme on Participant Engagement in Their Work

Renewed Purpose and Strategic Connection: A significant number of participants reported that the programme deepened their connection to the wider purpose of the organisation, helping them to see their work in a broader strategic context. Many described a renewed sense of meaning in their roles, particularly after understanding how Board decisions are made and how their contributions fit into the Trust's priorities. *'It has reiterated the reason that I do the job I do and helped me feel more engaged and connected to the organisation's purpose.'*

Several described this impact as **reinvigorating** or **re-energising** with the experience helping them overcome day-to-day frustrations by offering clarity and context.

Confidence and Empowerment: For many, the feeling of engagement was tightly linked to increased confidence and a stronger sense of personal value. Exposure to the Board, learning from senior leaders, and understanding executive decision-making helped them feel more empowered in their roles *'I feel more positive about the future and appreciative that the Trust is willing to invest in and develop staff.'*

Several participants described how this personal growth encouraged greater initiative, particularly in how they contribute to organisational improvement or challenge constructively.

Emotional and Relational Engagement: Some participants spoke of feeling more emotionally connected to the Trust thanks in part to peer relationships and shared learning experiences. Being part of a supportive group of future leaders enhanced feelings of belonging and purpose. *'As a group, we have connected in a much more meaningful manner—and this will be of huge benefit going forward.'* *'It's helped me feel more connected and valued.'*

This social and emotional engagement was a valuable side effect of the programme and was often tied to Action Learning Sets and Shadow Board interactions. Most participants reported that the programme increased their engagement by:

- Connecting their role to the wider organisational purpose
- Increasing confidence and personal value
- Deepening understanding of strategy and governance
- Creating meaningful peer connections
- Offering time to reflect on their role and impact

Even among those already highly engaged, the programme provided new insights, clarity, and professional growth.

Perceptions of the Programme Delivery Team

Consistently Positive Feedback: An overwhelming majority of respondents rated the delivery team as excellent, engaging, knowledgeable, and professional. Many expressed that the quality and delivery of the programme hinged significantly on the team's skill in creating an inclusive, respectful, and thought-provoking environment. The word **excellent** appeared dozens of times across responses, often accompanied by comments such as *'Excellent – all of the team were engaging, encouraging, supportive and professional.'* and *'Absolutely amazing! Friendly, fun, realistic, approachable, knowledgeable.'* This consistency suggests the delivery team made a strong, positive impression across all participant groups, regardless of role or background.

Knowledgeable and Insightful Facilitation: Many participants praised the team's breadth and depth of real-world experience, particularly their backgrounds as former or current Executive Directors. Their ability to connect theory to lived practice was highly valued, *'they were all excellent, bringing different perspectives, which was helpful'* and *'very knowledgeable in their fields and very effective facilitation of the sessions.'*

Participants appreciated how the facilitators brought authenticity and relatability to discussions, often sharing both the rewards and challenges of executive leadership. This openness helped demystify senior roles and created an environment where learners felt safe to ask, 'silly questions' and explore unfamiliar territory.

Supportive, Safe, and Encouraging Environment: Another dominant theme was the psychological safety and supportive atmosphere the delivery team cultivated. Multiple participants noted how the team made sessions feel inclusive, safe, and even fun. *'Fantastic! Really engaging and made it very inclusive. A safe environment to learn and share'* *'they created a space where everyone could contribute, and every member had a voice.'* The team's approachability and willingness to provide personal feedback was frequently cited as one of the most meaningful aspects of the learning journey, *'feedback was invaluable, it really helped me think differently about my future.'* *'they supported us through every step of the programme.'*

Flexible, Personable, and Adaptable: The diversity of styles and experiences within the delivery team was seen as a major strength. Participants appreciated the flexibility in facilitation, the space to pursue curiosity, and the authenticity each team member brought. *'Excellent, really open, honest, and thought-provoking...they allowed us to follow our intrigue and explore different ideas.'*

Many described the facilitators as genuine, warm, and humble, noting how this built trust and fostered deeper learning. Others were impressed by the facilitators' ability to respond to group needs in real time rather than rigidly sticking to a script.

The delivery team received exceptional acclaim across all feedback, with particular recognition for:

- Their authenticity, openness, and encouragement
- Deep executive-level experience and insight
- Ability to create a safe and inclusive learning environment
- Tailored, thoughtful feedback to individuals and groups
- Friendly, professional, and engaging facilitation styles

In the words of one participant: *'They were exceptional—professional, honest, and thoughtful. Their support and insight helped bring the whole programme to life.'*

Participant Willingness to Recommend the Programme

A Resounding Yes: The response to this question was overwhelmingly positive. Nearly every participant said, 'Yes' with many adding enthusiastic qualifiers like *'Absolutely'* *'100%'* *'Definitely'*. This clear consensus illustrates the perceived value and impact of the programme across a broad spectrum of participants. *'I would say it's a must for aspiring directors.'* Several participants went beyond a simple endorsement and described the programme as *'essential for leadership development, especially for those aspiring to senior roles.'*

Highlighting Key Benefits: Participants mentioned numerous reasons for their strong recommendation, including:

- **Networking and peer learning:** *'The network we created... was exceptional'*
- **Strategic insight:** *'It really opens your eyes to board-level thinking'*
- **Confidence building:** *'I gained so much confidence and clarity'*
- **Career development:** *'It's helped shape my thoughts about my future direction'*
- **Personal growth:** *'I feel I've come away more motivated and connected to the organisation'*

Several also said the programme was ***one of the best learning and development experiences they'd had in their careers***. The programme received an almost unanimous endorsement, with participants describing it as enriching, empowering, and deeply impactful for current and aspiring leaders alike. Whether in terms of strategic understanding, personal development, or leadership capability, respondents made it clear that they see the programme as a worthwhile investment for others across the NHS.

Final Thoughts and Endorsements

Participants repeatedly described the programme as **eye-opening, valuable, and confidence building**. Many recommended it not only for those aspiring to board roles but for any senior leader seeking to develop a strategic mindset and a deeper understanding of the system. Most participants expressed an overwhelmingly positive experience and expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to join the programme, often describing it as one of the most valuable and enriching development experiences of their careers; *'probably the best development programme I have done...I have thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it.'* Many noted how the experience had stretched them outside their comfort zones, helping them to grow as leaders and broaden their understanding of organisational strategy, governance, and board dynamics. *'This has been a fantastic programme... I have greatly benefited both personally and professionally' 'It has helped me to focus on my own development at a time when that could be easily forgotten.'*

A common theme was the professional confidence gained through exposure to board-level thinking and processes. Participants valued the mix of taught content, shadow board participation, and reflective sessions. Participants described it as *'a great opportunity to test out my thinking about becoming a board member...I can honestly say I have changed the way I work... I now think more strategically.'* Even those who were uncertain about pursuing an Executive Director role said the programme gave them clarity about their direction and new ways of thinking.

Peer relationships and internal networking was one of the most widely appreciated aspects, having the chance to build strong peer relationships across divisions and function. These connections not only fostered trust and learning but have already translated into improved collaboration on operational work streams.

Growing Aspirations for Executive Leadership

One of the most profound impacts of the programme has been its role in **igniting or reaffirming participants' interest in pursuing Executive Director roles**, crucial in the current climate. Many participants reflected that the structured exposure to board-level discussions, alongside practical insights from current and former Executive Directors, offered a realistic and inspiring view of senior leadership. Exposure to real-world board dynamics, decision-making processes, and strategic thinking not only demystified senior leadership but also made it feel more accessible. Several participants commented that, while they may have previously felt uncertain or hesitant about their readiness or suitability for such roles, the programme helped shift that perspective. By engaging directly with executive-level challenges, preparing, and presenting papers, and receiving feedback from experienced facilitators, **participants were able to see themselves operating confidently at that level.**

One attendee shared, *'The programme helped me prepare for my next role... it made me feel ready in a way I wasn't before.'* For some, it was a turning point providing clarity on career aspirations and reinforcing their capability to contribute at that level. One person described how the experience made a *'once distant ambition feel tangible and achievable.'* For some, this shift in mindset translated into concrete action, including job applications and promotions. Others valued the programme for helping them reflect on whether an Executive Director role aligned with their values and professional goals. Overall, the programme demystified executive leadership and made it feel more accessible, relevant, and rewarding.

Conclusion

The Shadow Board Programme® has clearly demonstrated its value as a developmental platform that nurtures the next generation of senior NHS leaders. Perhaps most significantly, the programme helped to demystify the boardroom environment, making it more accessible and less intimidating for senior managers aspiring to executive roles. It has encouraged more reflective, strategic mindsets, while also building a broader understanding of system-wide pressures and interdependencies. The exposure to diverse perspectives both from peers and experienced executive and non-executive leaders was frequently cited as transformative. For many, the programme didn't just refine skills it shifted how they think, communicate, and lead.

In an era of increasing system complexity, financial constraint, and workforce pressures, the NHS urgently needs leaders who can navigate ambiguity, foster integration, and communicate a compelling vision. The Shadow Board Programme® directly addresses this need by **building leadership capacity from within and by bridging the experiential gap between operational roles and executive decision-making. It also plays a pivotal role in supporting talent pipelines, succession planning, and greater inclusion across senior leadership structures.**

At a time when recruitment into executive roles is becoming more challenging, developmental programmes like this provide an essential opportunity to grow confidence and readiness internally. Many participants have already taken on more senior responsibilities or gained the insight to clarify their leadership ambitions. The overwhelmingly positive feedback and measurable personal growth observed in this cohort reinforce the case for expanding and sustaining the programme.

Ultimately, the Shadow Board Programme® offers not just individual development but also organisational and system benefit. **It supports a culture of strategic awareness, inclusivity, and leadership accountability values which are not just desirable, but absolutely essential in the NHS of today and tomorrow.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



The
Inspiring Leaders
Network

I want to take a moment to extend my deepest thanks to the exceptional team at ILN. This programme simply would not exist without your unwavering passion, commitment, and belief in the power of developing others. You have brought not only expertise, but also energy, care, and thoughtfulness to every aspect of our work. I am endlessly proud of what we have built together, the meaningful spaces we've created where learning feels genuine, safe, and inspiring. The consistent and powerful feedback we receive from participants is a true testament to your authenticity, empathy, and dedication. Together we have shaped something truly special something that has made a lasting difference.

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To the many NHS leaders who have engaged with us: thank you for your trust, your openness, and your hunger to grow. Your honesty, commitment to your colleagues and communities, and belief in the programme is what gives it its heart.

**WE THANK YOU
FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT IN
OUR PROGRAMMES**