

Accelerate 2025

Empowering social care leaders:
learning from the eighth cohort



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Empowering social care leaders: learning from the eighth cohort



Caroline Baria

**Director of Adults and Health,
Leeds City Council**

"Every year, participants remark on the irreplaceable benefits of coming together in a room with peers from different locations and backgrounds, to tackle common challenges based on a range of viewpoints and lived experiences."

The eighth cohort of Accelerate has wrapped up the formal part of its learning journey against a backdrop of reforms – notably local government reorganisation – meaning the need for outstanding senior social care leaders will only increase. With that in mind, we are delighted that the programme, now well established and with an expanding alumni network, continues to attract so many talented applicants. This year's fantastic group was drawn from all corners of the country, with participants ranging from heads of service to a newly promoted DASS.

While their perspectives and the change programmes they brought to Accelerate varied, all face the same structural pressures. Councils' longstanding financial challenges continue to increase, with one third of those with adult social care responsibilities having to request exceptional financial support from government for the 2025/26 year. Small wonder, then, that several cohort members mentioned building confidence around the financial elements of change programmes as a key motivation for applying – with at least one project held up by budgetary constraints.

Others faced delays to their change programmes because of unavoidable pressures relating to Care Quality Commission (CQC) assessments. With all 153 existing local authorities now having been assessed, the regulator's post-baselining approach – discussed in an early March announcement – will continue to direct the focus of council transformation programmes. The government's neighbourhood health and three shifts agendas, meanwhile, and recommendations from Baroness Louise Casey's independent commission into adult social care, are also likely to shape improvement and transformation initiatives in the short to medium term.

Against this backdrop, we are confident that personal passion and values, as well as a desire to develop as practitioners and leaders, will continue to draw people to Accelerate. Every year, participants remark on the irreplaceable benefits of coming together in a room with peers from different locations and backgrounds, to tackle common challenges based on a range of viewpoints and lived experiences. ADASS is committed to continuing to improve the diversity of participants and thereby enrich this experience for all as we move onwards.

I would like to thank everyone involved in continuing this work, especially our tireless partnership manager Cat Alabaster, and as ever our colleagues at Newton.

Introduction



Ed Bailey

**Director and Adult Social Care
National Lead, Newton**

It has been wonderful to hear the reflections from this year's cohort – and what they feel they have gained from Accelerate. Every one of these programmes has delivered improved outcomes for those who draw on support: from front-door redesign and reablement, to improving transition pathways, or new and innovative accommodation models. The progress demonstrated is both meaningful and grounded in real impact for residents.

Having got to know the group well, what has always stood out to me is how the participants reflected on their own development journey: gaining clarity, building confidence and finding new ways to bring people with them through significant change.

Many also – as has been the case for other cohorts – commented on the value of learning alongside peers and drawing strength, reassurance and ideas from other people meeting similar challenges across the country.

Once again, our thanks go to colleagues at ADASS. Together, we continue to work on the Accelerate programme's evolution, ensuring it reflects the realities of designing and delivering adult social care services that are more resident-centric, better connected across whole systems and pathways, and financially sustainable for the future.

I am looking forward to welcoming the next cohort for another successful year.

Creative thinking on young people's transitions

Fazeela Hafejee

Assistant Director for Adults with Disabilities, Bradford Council

Fazeela Hafejee says her career choices have always been driven by values and impact rather than following a set trajectory. She cites her work across Bradford Council and national organisations such as ADASS, Skills for Care and the LGA as demonstrating a consistent commitment to tackling inequalities and strengthening system leadership.

Fazeela says she applied to join Accelerate to enable her to channel a passion for human rights and justice into practical applications, and to gain skills to put change programmes onto a solid evidential footing.

The project she joined to work on, exploring how to improve young people's experience of transitions between children's and adults' services, connected to both of those aims.

"When young people reach 16 to 18, the challenge isn't about them," Fazeela explains. "Children's and adults' services operate under different legislative frameworks, with different duties, thresholds and expectations, that can create gaps or inconsistencies in how support is experienced."

"We've wrapped protective measures around them throughout childhood, and then almost overnight the system changes around them," she says. "It can feel as though they're expected to navigate a new world with very little warning, and that can be overwhelming." Fazeela points to the rising numbers of young people being placed out-of-area, the additional trauma this causes, and the "obscene" costs it generates for their home authority.

Bradford's adult services came together with partners for a deep dive into the cohort in that age bracket with the most complex needs, to explore barriers to improving their circumstances, especially around accommodation, and solutions. These included looking at dual Ofsted and CQC registrations, and establishing 'bespoke' registered addresses that could become private tenancies. "By the time we'd finished, we'd had three discharges – and the money involved was phenomenal," Fazeela says.

"I'm quite tenacious, and I still probably would have done this," she adds of the project. "But had I not joined Accelerate, I don't think I'd have had the structure around it, I might not have got the governance right and could have ended up running myself ragged. It's about sitting back and thinking: what are the strands of my transformation project, how do we get people involved, and how do we as leaders take the learning and embed it?"

Fazeela adds that her participation has also helped her get advice on another major project she is running – around restructuring mental health services – from peers at a range of local authorities around the country. Different geographical perspectives are important in helping to holistically address sector challenges, she points out, adding that Newton and ADASS must think creatively about how to ensure a breadth of candidates benefit from the programme.

Noting that "across 153 local authorities, to the best of my knowledge I'm one of very few – and possibly the only – visibly Asian Muslim woman in an AD role", Fazeela emphasises the importance of ensuring that people in head-of-service positions remain actively engaged in development and progression pathways. "If you don't already have people represented at senior levels, you have to think intentionally about how to build and sustain a genuinely diverse talent pipeline. That means ensuring those already in head-of-service roles are supported, visible, and encouraged to step into opportunities," she says.

What is the Accelerate programme?

The Accelerate programme develops the ability of directors and senior leaders in adult social care to deliver strategic and organisational change.

Designed by ADASS and Newton, the programme is aimed at directors and assistant directors of adult social care services. There have been eight cohorts, from 2018 to 2025.

Each participant brought a real-life, high-priority major change project to the Accelerate programme, which was their focus during the course.

The programme divides into four modules that mirror the stages of a major change project.

Each module consists of a two- or three-day residential where participants deepen their understanding of Newton's change methodology, hear from guest speakers, and share and debate ideas.

The four stages are:

- **Assess** – Identifying and quantifying the opportunities for change, including how to work with stakeholders, measuring success and planning next steps.
- **Design** – Refining the opportunities, designing and piloting new ways of working, including designing effective pilots.

- **Implement** – Delivering the solution with local teams and measuring benefits, including communicating and embedding change in behaviour.
- **Sustain** – Supporting teams to sustain the changes permanently, including sustainability planning and how to keep change going in challenging times.

Participants are also paired with a programme partner who, together with the peer support from others on the programme, offers an additional source of advice on effective change. The Accelerate programme is now entering its ninth year.

'It's a no-guesses approach: have a hypothesis, but test it'

George Roscoe

**Deputy Director of Assurance,
Strategy and Improvement,
Islington Council**

George came to the 2025 Accelerate programme looking to build on a positive statistic – the above-average 29% of Islington residents accessing care who do so via direct payments. His proposed project entailed digging into the situations underlying the numbers to improve the quality of services purchased by the direct payments, and thereby outcomes for citizens.

"The overarching question was: 'Are the right people using direct payments?'," he recalls. "There are probably some people who could really benefit who aren't using them, and also some using them who aren't getting the full benefits – and in certain cases are potentially not safe."

Getting an answer to this question has been made harder by an issue common to many local authorities – data quality – which made conducting effective analysis a stiff challenge.

"One thing I found really powerful about Accelerate is that it's a 'don't guess' approach: you can have a hypothesis, but test it."

While Accelerate has not been a panacea for the resulting delays in the project, George points to an auditing tool developed during the programme as representing a real step forward. "I've developed 'what good looks like' principles – that the right people are using direct payments, which means they're delivering value for money through a balance between autonomy, effectiveness and safety," he says. "The tool addresses those."

George adds: "One thing I found really powerful about Accelerate is that it's a 'don't guess' approach: you can have a hypothesis, but test it. Often, when people are faced with really difficult problems, you're like, 'Oh, it's probably this' and then you work on that assumption and continue as you are."

His participation in the programme has helped Islington take a more precise approach to the knotty problem, George continues. "It's enabled me to be more targeted around what I've been doing, and to focus on what the crucial data points, KPIs and financial deliverables are," he says. "It's easy to try to bundle too much into a change programme, to the point where it becomes impossibly big and unwieldy – this has helped me to be much more ruthless about what we're setting out to do."

'We've been able to demonstrate why we're doing things'

Jason Brandon

**Deputy Director and Principal
Social Worker, Hampshire**

"Since 2010, we've had to apply quite a rigid, systematic set of transformation programmes to right-size ourselves and address savings targets," says Jason Brandon, adding that this has involved access to external consultants at various points.

"To be empowered to have the methodology myself, to be able to understand how to address savings" was, he goes on, a major motivation for applying to join the Accelerate programme. Hampshire was facing a significant backlog of unmet need at its front door, a situation that was having knock-on impacts in the form of risk management, staff anxiety and turnover. Jason had originally brought a proposal to build on work to improve the service via the increased use of digital tools.

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Coming into the Accelerate programme, he recalls having useful chats both with the Newton team and peers such as Susanne Knoerr and Laura Choake, which helped clarify his thinking.

"I found myself taking a step back," Jason recalls. "Given the amount of energy already being expended via the corporate team and a commissioned external consultant – and such was the pace of need to address – I realised my attention would be best focused further down the process, to our waiting lists."

The urgency of this focus was only sharpened by an impending CQC inspection that was due to look at this area of services.

"I needed to ensure there was a robust improvement plan, comprehensive methodology, with some objective outcomes, to bring our waiting list down incrementally towards the objective of having no one waiting by spring 2026," Jason explains. "Accelerate enabled me to come back into the organisation and set up a workstream, to illustrate all we'd done up to then, and bring in KPIs to understand the resources required to lean into a greater volume of assessments."

While the target of eliminating waiting times remains a challenging one, Jason says the Accelerate methodology has helped facilitate significant progress. "It has enabled us to bring staff with us as well: we've been able to demonstrate what we're doing and why we're doing it".

'It's eye-opening gaining a countrywide network'

Susanne Knoerr

Operational Director for Adult Care and Support, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

"It just aligned," recalls Susanne of her decision to apply for Accelerate. "I knew I was going to be in my job for the foreseeable future, I was just starting a major project with the front door, I saw the programme and thought, 'That would be a really good development.'"

Susanne's project was an ambitious attempt to manage need at Barking and Dagenham's front door by introducing artificial intelligence to manage tasks, while increasing occupational therapist capacity and rotating experienced practitioners through teams to build expertise. The aim was to free staff from repetitive jobs and create more time for strengths-based triaging, hopefully enabling people to access services with fewer delays.

Susanne, who had come to the UK from Germany in 2004 and had 20 years' practice experience in London, had managed change projects before. "Some of the learning from those was around how difficult it can be to implement a vision, and the need to have scaffolding around your ideas," she says. "Accelerate struck me as something that would be helpful, because I needed to build that structure with the right elements to move forward."

At the outset, it seemed the course structure would dovetail neatly with the intended timespan of the project. However, two barriers intervened – a shortfall in financial backing that delayed some components, and a Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspection that occupied the council for several months.

"I ended up applying learning from the modules on smaller parts of the project – while some things got stuck, others did move on quite swiftly and there was always something I could focus on," Susanne says. "For example, we have fully implemented plans around reablement and I learned a lot from my Accelerate partner with regard to how we can capture the benefits and actually put a pound sign on them."

She adds that the financial confidence she has gained has put a renewed bid for funding on a more solid footing. "The tools work on all sides," Susanne says. "There are some you can use with frontline staff, getting them on board through storytelling and homing in on the person-centred benefits of change, and then it's also being able to demonstrate that if I do something here, it will reduce costs over there."

The biggest boost for her personal development though, Susanne concludes, has come from the peer support the programme fosters.

"Having a group of people who are very much in my situation, dealing with the same issues in other places, has helped me understand what I need to do," she says. "Even in London this can sometimes feel quite a lonely job – it's eye-opening having a network across the country."

'Candid conversations help build your confidence'

Prashant Agrawal

Service Director for Integration and Collaboration, Bedford Borough Council

Asked about what impact taking part in Accelerate had on implementing change at Lincolnshire County Council, where he was working as a head of service when he applied, Prashant doesn't miss a beat before replying. "Just defining the problem statement, making it precise and concise, was the biggest help!", he says.

Coming into the programme, Prashant, who started his career in NHS before moving to local government where he has two decades' leadership experience, had a two-paragraph definition. This was whittled down over a few hours into a simple question – 'do people who require extra-care housing have access to it?'

The quest for answers led Lincolnshire to carry out a deep dive audit of 90 cases, and to findings that almost 10% of those could benefit from extra-care housing, if it were available. Developing such homes is, of course, a long-term goal. But extrapolating the numbers, the exercise has begun to make the case that the council could save millions of pounds annually, currently spent on residential placements, while potentially improving citizens' quality of life.

While the Accelerate methodology has underscored Prashant's "go-to position" – using robust data to build evidence – he says the course has proven beneficial in other ways, which helped him successfully apply for his current role with Bedford Borough Council. "Probably, that would not have been possible without this programme," Prashant says.

Personal growth happened for me partly because of the focus on change also being about storytelling, and how that helps bring people along," he explains. "Reminding myself that matters too has been important for me."

"Personal growth happened for me partly because of the focus on change also being about storytelling, and how that helps bring people along," he explains. "Reminding myself that matters too has been important for me."

Prashant adds that he loved the informality of the residential sessions, which enable conversations between peers, trainers and guest speakers to continue beyond the confines of the classroom. "On the last day I was talking to a visiting DASS about their personal journey, and hearing experiences expressed candidly really helps dispel some of the myths and barriers you might carry in your own mind – you grow in confidence as a person," he says.

'I've got a framework I can rely on'

Laura Choake

Director for Adult Social Care and Prevention, Newcastle City Council

Laura Choake started Accelerate in an unusual position. She had just been promoted from a head of service role – which she had been in less than a year – to director of adult social services (DASS), all while still in her thirties.

"It kind of crept up on me," she says. "I was finding my feet in the head of service role when the DASS left. I had thought about being a DASS at some point – but not in the immediate future. I was encouraged to give it a go by a few people and after a lot of deliberation I thought, 'I'll go through the process, it'll be good learning' – and then ended up getting the job."

Unsurprisingly Laura, who was promptly tasked with an almost £9m efficiency target and a CQC assessment, recalls "doing lots of reading, building links with other DASSes, and looking for whatever development opportunities were going to support me". The peer support and networking Accelerate offers felt "as important as the content itself", she says.

Delivering the savings involved redesigning the adult social care front door, plus other changes around intermediate care responses, and responses for people with sudden escalations of need. "As we started to unpick the processes, we found that as systems had evolved over time there were handoffs that didn't need to be there. These were slowing down people's access to the quick interventions that might prevent long-term care and support needs, and made the user experience quite clunky."

While the project was already underway by the time Laura started Accelerate, she says the programme "gave us a real rigour" around using evidence, not guesswork, bringing staff along with change and focusing on outcomes. This also really helped with the CQC assessment as "it taught us how to ask questions of our data that we'd never asked before", Laura explains.

"The Sustain module, in particular, covered things I don't think we had thought enough about," Laura says. "Getting the right data, and the principle of focusing on the 20% of activity that will make 80% of difference – that really helped crystallise how to make sustaining change feel manageable."

Almost a year into doing things differently at the front door – which has involved building a multidisciplinary team and responding much more rapidly to referrals – Laura says tangible effects are emerging. "Feedback has been really positive, and some of the hard metrics have been good too – around hospital and care home admissions being avoided, and all sorts of reductions in need," she says.

"With the support of Newton, we've been able to demonstrate there's approximately £12 million potential saving in this project – although a lot of that is cost avoidance versus cashable savings," Laura goes on.

The networking element has also been a big part of making the long drive from Newcastle feel worthwhile. "It was so reassuring to hear everyone is dealing with the same issues," she says. "Most people were qualified social workers, which is different to my own background, so it was great to get their perspective and learn from them."

Heading into 2026, Laura concludes, "I've got a framework I can apply – and that's helped relieve a lot of the pressure and stress I put on myself, because I now know I've a way of breaking things down and getting a solid solution at the end."

'I realised I had grown as a leader'

Paul Coles

Service Director for Adults' Commissioning, Somerset Council

"Around the time I did my final presentation, [trainer] Matt came up to me and went, 'you've really changed – he'd really noticed a difference in me,'" says Paul Coles.

Until that point, Paul adds, he hadn't stopped to reflect on his personal development over the course of the Accelerate programme. But afterwards, he looked back on his analysis as part of an interviewing panel for another senior post, and his approach to leading his team – including feeling more confident delegating decisions – and realised: "I've really grown."

Meeting people from London boroughs, and from the North, gives you a new perspective – we're tackling the same problems, but doing things slightly differently – and that was really refreshing."

Facing Accelerate's challenging first module, Paul recalls feeling grateful to have had "a baseline I could work from" due to the consultancy previously leading a transformation programme in Somerset. This, he adds, had whetted his appetite for building a "granular" knowledge of Newton's methodology into his personal toolkit.

Paul, who is considering applying for DASS roles at some point in the future, wanted to apply the learning to two separate workstreams he was responsible for. These were around improving Somerset's reablement offer for working-age adults, and redeveloping several of the county's redundant care home sites to increase its levels of specialist and general needs accommodation.

Pressures and capacity issues within his council meant he had no expectations that either change project – both of which are still in the design phases – would progress in line with the four stages of Accelerate's methodology. But he says that for the most part, the value the programme has brought to his future practice has gone "beyond expectations", in particular the experience of learning alongside peers.

"It's easy to become a bit insular in a region like the South West," he says. "Meeting people from London boroughs, and from the North, gives you a new perspective – we're tackling the same problems, but doing things slightly differently – and that was really refreshing."

'A lightbulb moment I might not have had otherwise'

Nic Roper

Assistant Director for Mental Health, Learning Disabilities and Autism, Suffolk County Council

"We started out not having a great understanding of what the problems were – it felt like there were a lot of myths, and 'we think this', 'we think that'," reflects Nic Roper on Suffolk County Council's efforts to improve its preparing for adulthood services.

"People with lived experience were telling us there were problems – that was one consistent theme – but we were struggling to prioritise what to do first," she adds. Nic had come into Accelerate off the back of a "whirlwind" couple of years during which Suffolk had been a CQC-assessment pilot area, after which she was asked to cover two AD roles for a period of time. "Carving out time for learning and development inevitably gets put to the bottom of the pile," she says, "which is one great thing about having to physically go away [to the course] for a couple of days at a time.

"Taking part in the programme gives you ideas and approaches for tackling some really knotty problems, as well as a network and a sense you're not on your own,"

Like many participants, Nic notes that the first elements of the programme pose a steep learning curve. But, she adds, having to apply theory quickly means it sticks.

"The course really helped me focus in on transitions into adult social care – 14- to 25-year-olds with Care Act eligibility, so those people with the most complex needs," she says. "That gave me something to get my teeth into and own, with children's services taking a lead on the wider preparing for adulthood model, with our support."

After discussing her situation with Accelerate facilitators, Nic planned to audit the last 50 young people who had transitioned into adult social care, tracking their experiences back to age 14. "This way of approaching the audit was a lightbulb moment that I don't know if I would have had working alone," she says. "Doing it this way made it a joint responsibility between children's and adults', and it was totally evidence-based and outcomes-focused."

Nic explains the exercise highlighted a lot of "brilliant" practice, but also clearly picked up areas where things were going wrong. This included adult social care not getting involved early enough in young people's lives, meaning opportunities to plan proactively were sometimes missed. "When we see people too late we can miss the chance to support the person to be independent- and also end up spending more on care and support – a double whammy," she says.

Capacity issues and the return of the CQC in late 2025 have slowed the project's progress. But drawing on previous feedback and a new co-production exercise, four main themes – around practice, services working together, commissioning and parents, carers and families – have been identified and fed into a plan for improvement. The local mental health trust is also looking at repeating the audit exercise to further understanding of young people's journeys through the system.

"Taking part in the programme gives you ideas and approaches for tackling some really knotty problems, as well as a network and a sense you're not on your own," Nic says.

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Preparing Leaders for Change

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