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Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Learning Away: Coordinators' Focus Groups

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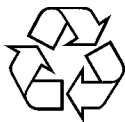
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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Learning Away is an initiative funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) from 2008 to 2015. It aims to support schools across the UK in significantly enhancing young people's learning, achievement and wellbeing by using innovative residential experiences as an integral part of the curriculum. A total of 60 schools (primary, secondary and special), operating in 13 partnerships, are involved in delivering Learning Away and each partnership is led by a Learning Away coordinator. Coordinators include headteachers, members of teaching staff and managers of education improvement partnerships. Within PHF, the initiative is supported by a project leader, two consultant schools' advisors and an administration and coordination team.
- 1.2 From PHF's perspective, Learning Away was much more than just providing schools with funding to deliver new or improved residential. They wanted to use Learning Away to actively facilitate the development of shared learning and knowledge building, as well as providing an appropriate mix of support and challenge to strengthen and improve schools' practice. PHF also wanted to develop a body of practice, knowledge and evidence relating to the use of residential experiences to enhance young people's learning and achievements and work in partnership with schools to achieve these outcomes. They also wanted to work with schools to influence residential practice more widely across the school system and for schools to develop an understanding of the value of delivering 'brilliant residential'.
- 1.3 PHF asked York Consulting, as independent evaluators, to undertake focus groups with Learning Away coordinators to explore the extent to which they felt the above aims had been achieved and also to develop a better understanding of coordinators' and schools' experiences and views of being involved in Learning Away.
- 1.4 This report provides the findings from two focus groups undertaken with Learning Away coordinators on the 11th (in London) and 12th (in Leeds) of November, 2014. Both focus groups lasted for three hours. The London focus group was attended by seven coordinators and the Leeds focus group by four coordinators. Overall, there were representatives from ten of the 13 partnerships involved in Learning Away (the partnerships not represented were Hanover, Radcliffe and Twickenham). Those coordinators who were unable to attend the focus groups on the day were given the opportunity to provide responses over the phone or via email (one coordinator provided comments via email).
- 1.5 It is envisaged that the findings from the focus groups will be used by PHF for their own internal learning in order to help shape their approach to programme support and delivery in the future.

2 FINDINGS

2.1 The focus group discussions focused on the following themes:

- schools' motivation for involvement in Learning Away;
- facilitators and challenges in securing support for, and embedding, Learning Away;
- views on the freedom to choose their own approach;
- views on the evaluation;
- support from the Learning Away team and their skills, knowledge and expertise;
- effectiveness of PHF in facilitating and helping to embed change, including which elements were most helpful and impactful and which were least helpful;
- how appropriate the Learning Away process/support was to the schools' context;
- the effectiveness of the different elements of support.

2.2 Each of the above themes is now discussed in turn. All quotations are from focus group participants.

Schools' Motivation for Involvement

2.3 Participants were asked what their school/partnership's motivation for getting involved in Learning Away was. They acknowledged that they were initially drawn to the programme because it presented an opportunity to gain funding, and particularly long-term funding. However, once engaged, they realised the opportunities the programme provided to work with and learn from others, and this was seen as a key motivational driver:

"Although the money drew the eye in the first instance, once we got to think about it in a deeper way, it was also about the opportunity to work with others".

2.4 The chance to work with schools with a similar mindset, both locally and nationally, provided an important impetus for involvement: *"It's the community of practice that was one of the draws"*. Schools saw Learning Away as a chance to maintain and develop existing partnerships, such as those developed through Creative Partnerships. Many of these partnerships were coming to an end, thus Learning Away was seen by schools as a way that they could carry on working together and also move their work forward.

2.5 Learning Away also came at a time when schools wanted to develop a more creative curriculum and pupil-led learning and schools saw residencies as a key way that this could be achieved. They also wanted to develop their existing residencies and link them to learning within the school, rather than seeing residencies as a 'bolt on' to what they did in school. Thus, Learning Away arrived at a point when schools wanted to move away from buying 'off the shelf' residential packages, take ownership of residential learning themselves, and integrate residential learning into the curriculum delivered in school:

"It was an opportunity to develop residential learning from the traditional three days away disconnected to the learning experiences of the pupils and wider learning experiences... to develop a culture and ethos within the school and link it to learning within the school, bringing it into the centre of curriculum development".

"We were already involved in residential and saw the benefits but they were 'add-ons': buying a package from outdoor learning centres. We wanted residential to suit our purposes more. Learning Away came at the right time. [Also], the offer of funding to develop that and work alongside other local schools was attractive".

- 2.6 Schools' motivation for involvement was also linked to their specific needs and context. For example, faced with the merger of two secondary schools, staff in one partnership wanted to develop a residential programme to break down potential barriers between students and staff: *"we saw it as an opportunity to make that process smoother"*.
- 2.7 For other schools, their motivation for involvement in Learning Away was to develop their residential programme to improve outcomes for students, for example, in terms of raising attainment, or improving links with families who were 'hard to reach', or students who were disengaged. Within two of the secondary schools, there was a clear objective to use Learning Away to develop their residential programmes to improve the attainment of specific groups of students, for example C/D borderline students.

Facilitators and Challenges in Securing Support for and Embedding Learning Away

Facilitators

- 2.8 Participants identified the following as facilitating support for, and embedding Learning Away within their school/partnership:
- commitment of the headteacher/ senior leaders;
 - focus on staff development;
 - funding (including funding for cover/planning and organisational support);
 - having someone to lead with time dedicated to the programme;
 - length of the programme/time;
 - students' and parents' buy in;
 - opportunities for coordinators and school staff to be involved in programme-level Learning Away meetings, presentations and conferences.
- 2.9 All participants were clear that the **commitment and support of the headteacher** was critical to the successful implementation of Learning Away:

"When you have the head saying 'this needs sorting' it makes a real difference... so I don't have a headache in terms of getting staff out [of school]... I wouldn't want to be in a position where I didn't have that and still be trying to achieve the goals of Learning Away – I don't think it would be possible".

"You have to have that commitment from the top".

- 2.10 Where support from headteachers/senior leaders was not forthcoming, coordinators felt that they were 'working against the grain' and gaining support for and embedding Learning Away had been far more challenging. In these circumstances, coordinators were clear that if they left, the programme would not continue.
- 2.11 Linking Learning Away to **staff development** was seen as beneficial in terms of securing support for the programme, embedding it within the school/partnership, and ensuring it was sustainable, as well as benefitting the professional development of individual members of staff.

"We are trying to make it part of staff development... One of the TAs was the lead coordinator for our most recent camp... that has been about bringing people in where they have strengths that we might not have seen in school".

"The learning process has been trying to get others involved in the planning and the practical carrying out of it, so that we [heads] can step back".

- 2.12 Staff development opportunities were seen as one of the main reasons why staff recommended Learning Away to their colleagues. Staff recommendation was seen as particularly important in those schools where staff turnover was high:

"We have a couple of core staff but every time they tend to change, so the staff themselves spread the word and tell other staff how amazing it is. Developing the staff is what's kept us going. We have good quality staff who spread the word".

- 2.13 Coordinators stated that there was now an expectation that staff (and in some schools this was all staff) would be involved in residentials and that this was written into job descriptions, helping to embed the programme within their schools/partnerships further.
- 2.14 For partnerships with a number of schools involved, providing opportunities for coordinators to come together to review the programme and develop strategies to embed approaches was seen as beneficial. It was felt that within these fora staff gained strength and confidence from one another:

"We had quite a lot of staff saying 'it aint going to happen'... but they [school coordinators] got strength from each other and said 'it is going to happen'".

- 2.15 Furthermore, it was felt that having to convince sceptics of the benefits of the programme was a positive as it stopped those involved in the programme becoming too complacent:

"Having to convince people and get people on board helps you with your passion and drive cos you can become mundane in what you're doing".

"We had to prove it to her [new headteacher] and it made us pick our socks up and verbalise it better".

- 2.16 Coordinators acknowledged that opportunities for staff to come together and share learning would not have happened without the **funding** provided as part of Learning Away. Similarly, the **organisational support** provided by Learning Away coordinators (as a result of funding provided by the initiative) to support the planning and delivery of the residentials was seen as critical to its success:

"It [the residential programme] would be difficult to do without that [organisational support for schools]. They [schools] do like that someone else does the donkey work".

- 2.17 Therefore, the **funding** provided by Learning Away was seen as critical in helping to embed the programme and also to gain support for the programme. Funding supported the opportunity to create the time and space necessary to develop a successful programme and engage staff in the approach:

"Learning Away helped us focus on developing our residential programmes because it gave us time to focus on the work and funding to release teachers to take time out of the classroom and think about the best way forward".

- 2.18 It was felt that staff were more willing to engage with the programme because they knew funding was available to provide cover, not only for the residential itself, but also time for planning and preparation. Coordinators commented that staff supported the programme because they were given time to engage with it and were not expected to do this in addition to their existing workload. Involvement in the programme gave staff opportunities to see the benefits of the residentials (both on the residential and back in the classroom) and as a result it was felt that staff were keener to drive the programme forward and embed it as an approach within the school because they had seen the benefits first hand.

- 2.19 Funding was seen as a critical facilitator in terms of kick starting the programme but also in making it sustainable because it allowed schools and partnerships to test their approaches and develop alternative funding strategies for the future. It also meant that schools could use the Learning Away funding to target students who might otherwise have been excluded from residential activities because of financial reasons:

"Funding has allowed us to test the approach, realise the benefits and embed it and... come up with strategies to fund it in the future. Now the funding's gone it's not reducing any, in fact it's growing year on year... 'cos we had the breathing space with money to look at the funding strategy going forward... We couldn't have done that without the funding at the beginning. Funding's allowed us to make mistakes and learn from them".

"The fact that there was the funding there was a no brainer. You can target kids who you know wouldn't be able to afford it".

- 2.20 Coordinators observed that, as a result of Learning Away, their role had changed from being one person with responsibility for the programme and driving and pushing it forward, to handing over responsibility to a much wider cohort of staff including phase leaders and class teachers and really embedding the programme within the school/partnership. Coordinators felt they had been able to do this because Learning Away gave them the **time** to develop and build on their residential programmes and also provided **funding** for someone with a long-term vision of the programme to lead and drive it forward.
- 2.21 The **length of the programme** (five years) was seen as critical to its success. It was felt that this provided sufficient time and opportunities to build up the passion, drive and enthusiasm required to embed the programme, but also sufficient time to change mind-sets. It also gave schools the time and space to take risks and experiment with what they were delivering. It was felt that this had resulted in the development of residential programmes which were much more embedded within the school and the delivery of the curriculum more widely.
- 2.22 Having a dedicated leader was also viewed as important, there needed to be someone who had the capacity to lead the programme:

"Learning Away also gave someone the role to lead on the work so having a dedicated person or team who had time and space to lead something forward rather than the bolt on of 'it's time for my year group to go on residential, having the longer view of it and how it fits in better".

"Having that dedication of the person leading it and them believing in the residential is really important... it's been the crux of it for us".

- 2.23 Coordinators also felt that students played an important role in promoting and embedding Learning Away within their schools. Students told other students about their positive experiences so enhancing its reputation:

"The kids talk about what they've done to other children and then they come and say 'can we go? How do you get there? Why do you get chosen? So it's the kids talking about it and being positive about it that has really helped our residential develop".

"They're at your door saying 'how do I get to go on it? There's a buzz with the kids talking about it. That's what makes the difference. It doesn't matter how much you publicise it, it's when the kids are talking about it that makes a difference".

- 2.24 Similarly, coordinators commented that parents promoted the residential programme to other parents. They observed that there was an expectation amongst parents that if their child attended a school involved in Learning Away they would have access to opportunities which were not available to students in other schools.

- 2.25 **The opportunities for coordinators and school staff to be involved in programme-level meetings, presentations and conferences** also helped embed the principles of Learning Away within schools and partnerships. Coordinators suggested that participation in Learning Away meetings and 'away days' gave them and their colleagues the time and space to come together to develop their thinking, something which was impossible to do within the constraints and competing priorities of the school day. These events also provided invaluable opportunities for participants to learn from others and helped them develop their own practice. Similarly, the opportunity to hear inspirational presentations by 'experts in the field' provided coordinators with the impetus for developing their own residential programmes, as well as convincing colleagues of the value of the approach:

"I had other staff from the cluster at the event who were questioning what it was all about. Having a couple of [inspirational] presenters like that helped them engage in the journey that the rest of us were already on".

Challenges

- 2.26 The main challenges in gaining support for, and embedding Learning Away, identified by coordinators were:

- engagement of schools;
- engagement of staff and staffing residentials/ raising awareness and buy-in (particularly in secondary schools);
- lack of support/engagement from heads/senior managers;
- staff turnover and changing roles;
- embedding Learning Away within the school /sustainability.

- 2.27 **Engagement of schools** was raised as a challenge by coordinators, either primary schools struggling to engage secondaries, or secondaries struggling to engage primaries. Furthermore, in some partnerships drop out of schools from the programme had been an issue. Primarily, this lack of engagement or disengagement was felt to result from schools not seeing the benefits of engagement in the programme or facing challenging circumstances, which prevented their involvement. Primary schools in particular found engaging secondaries to be a particular challenge:

"The frustration for us is we do all this work for the secondaries' benefit. We did an evaluation on transition and what's having an impact and Learning Away has come out again and again. It's still making a difference to them even when they're in Year 8 – they are still talking about it. All the things they tell us they worry about, it makes a difference. Why aren't secondary heads grasping this?"

- 2.28 The **engagement of staff** was seen as an ongoing challenge, particularly within some of the secondary schools. Similarly, some secondary school coordinators acknowledged that, despite positive outcomes, Learning Away was still **not embedded within the school ethos**. Secondary school coordinators also said that access to staff within the secondary context was difficult and that they were never in a position where they could access or have influence over the whole staff team:

"It's still not as high on the agenda as it should be. It's not as embedded in the curriculum or subject areas as it should be".

- 2.29 Nevertheless, in some instances it was felt that being part of the Learning Away programme helped maintain schools' commitment to, and engagement in, the work:

"We had quite a battle to get it off the ground and embedded in school but having PHF hanging over you [helped]. It means no one else can dictate the direction you take it in 'cos you've already set your objectives and can use that in school to say 'we're committed to this, therefore we must stick with that commitment' which is valuable for us".

- 2.30 It was noted that residential could be difficult to staff as they were challenging to deliver and also impacted on the workloads of staff (in terms of providing cover) who did not attend the residential. Schools had responded by changing start times and getting staff to provide cover overnight so that those who ran the residential during the day could have a break:

"We changed the start times of ours 'cos people were having to get up in the morning having camped all night and teach the next day".

- 2.31 As support for the programme from headteachers and senior managers was seen as a key facilitator, **lack of support from headteachers and senior managers** was felt to be a massive challenge. Without the support of these key staff it was likely that the programme would struggle to continue:

"I'm not hopeful. I know for a fact if hadn't been a change of head it would've gone from strength to strength".

- 2.32 **Staff turnover** (and changing roles) was a further issue identified by coordinators, particularly at the secondary level. One coordinator had three headteachers in five years and had been waiting a year to meet with the current head to discuss the programme. In addition, some staff noted that they were being line managed by colleagues who knew nothing about Learning Away so these coordinators felt very isolated with little support in school:

"The big hindrance has been when people have left. You realise so much is down to the individual and people who are imbued with the way of working and the programme as well".

- 2.33 When asked if there was anything PHF could have done differently to support schools and partnerships more, the majority of participants said that they felt PHF staff had done everything they could to support them. This included meeting with headteachers of new schools coming into the programme and undertaking presentations to staff.

- 2.34 One coordinator felt that it would have been beneficial if PHF staff had done a presentation with staff right at the beginning of the programme to gain support and help embed the programme. Other coordinators said PHF staff had met with staff from all the schools involved right at the beginning of the programme and felt that this had been extremely beneficial and recommended it going forward.

Views on the Freedom to Choose their own Approach

- 2.35 Coordinators felt that one of the main strengths of the programme was that they had the freedom to choose their own approach to delivering their residential programme. It was also noted that the balance between this level of autonomy and the level of input from PHF was appropriate. They stated that the PHF team provided guidance and support when it was required but they were not directed by the team. It was suggested that this reflected PHF's confidence in their approach:

"We did exactly what we wanted to do, which was fine with them. They didn't ask us to change anything".

'We've done exactly what we wanted to do and they provided the support when we needed it'.

- 2.36 Learning Away was viewed as a true partnership. This was in contrast to previous experience of working with funders, who it was felt, often had a hidden agenda:

"There has been a genuine willingness to work on the basis of what fits for your school and community".

- 2.37 When asked what their response would have been if PHF had provided stronger direction, coordinators suggested that they would have resisted this. Whilst recognising the need for accountability, coordinators were clear that in order for the programme to be successful it had to be responsive to the context in which they were operating:

"Everyone needed to work within their own context and not be told what to do. It's got to meet the school's needs, not funders' needs you're not jumping through hoops".

"When you're battling against so many things to get it off the ground, if that was another battle we had to have, it wouldn't have worked".

- 2.38 Importantly, there was flexibility within the programme to adapt to changing contexts and coordinators knew that PHF would be supportive of the decisions they made:

"When things haven't worked we have developed a new approach ourselves but with the knowledge that that's fine we don't have to ask permission to do that".

Views of the Evaluation

- 2.39 Participants' attitude and response to being part of the evaluation were mixed. Those who had actively engaged with the evaluation process appeared to have gained more from it. Examples were provided of coordinators using evaluation data (e.g. questionnaire and focus group data), in both their own professional learning and that of their school. Evaluation data had been used in displays/exhibitions and provided evidence of the impact of the programme to headteachers, Ofsted and central government:

"Having that evaluation data is really useful to show heads the difference it has made... We can give them subject data and quantitative data but the evaluation evidence can give them the bigger picture in terms of the impact on staff and students"

"When we access pupil premium money we have to evidence impact so the evaluation has made it easy to evidence impact... If we'd not done the evaluation we would've struggled to evidence the impact".

- 2.40 A number of coordinators felt that their school/partnership's involvement in the evaluation had been valuable, particularly in relation to developing approaches to evidencing impact in school and some schools had continued to use some of the tools provided by the first evaluators. Individual headteachers said that involvement in the evaluation had made them more focused on evaluation and evidencing outcomes than they were prior to involvement in Learning Away:

"As a headteacher five years ago I wasn't having to answer that 'so what?' question. It has shifted our thinking – so not thinking after we've done something 'how are we going to evidence that?' Instead, we are thinking all the time 'how am I going to show that? What's the best way to present this? How will we find out what students think?' It's strengthened pupil voice... it's made me look at pupil voice differently".

"When doing it [evaluation] you always put it off, but when you're presented with data or outcomes, that's great and really useful".

- 2.41 Participants also felt that involving students and staff in the evaluation facilitated their engagement in the overall programme, raised the profile of Learning Away within school and gave them a better understanding of how the residential was connected to the delivery of the curriculum within school. Coordinators commented that students benefitted from being involved in the evaluation in terms of being able to voice their opinion and feeling valued that someone wanted to know what their opinion was:

"The fact that you're asking them to complete the survey about the residential they've been on. They feel it's connected to something going on in the school, rather than just an away".

"The focus groups and case studies have worked really well... it has got the children and staff fired up about it and people talking... and sitting in and listening to them has been really insightful".

"The children love it when they [schools' advisors] come and speak to them. They love telling someone new about what they are doing. It also raises the importance of it – someone from outside coming to see you".

"It's been really good having someone else speak to the children – they won't be as honest with us... It's a much more even playing field where they can say whatever they think/feel".

- 2.42 A small number of coordinators felt that they had not got as much out of the evaluation as they would have hoped. They would have liked to have had more feedback and evaluation tools that they could continue to use beyond the evaluation:

"I'm frustrated that we're not using a tool that we can continue using and could be embedded as an evaluation tool. That would've been a really valuable thing that PHF could have built in... it's something we could've used beyond the evaluation".

- 2.43 Participants also felt that there had been more to the evaluation than they expected at the outset, in terms of workload, demands and challenges. However, they did acknowledge that expectations were now more manageable. At the beginning of the programme, coordinators identified a number of challenges in relation to the evaluation process:

- **Lack of clarity about the evaluation process:** there was a view that PHF had not clearly thought through how they were going to evaluate the programme at the start of the process. Coordinators would have welcomed greater clarity about what they were signing up to at the beginning of the programme, for example in terms of data sharing. Similarly, it was highlighted that schools had already developed evaluation strategies as part of their initial bids but, in the main, these had to be abandoned when external evaluators were commissioned:

"Suddenly things changed a couple of months in ... We had to abandon the processes schools were used to because we couldn't expect them to do all of this [evaluation activity]".

- The **unrealistic expectations** placed on schools by the initial evaluation process: *"We found it impractical and inflexible. There was too much expected of schools"*.
- The **challenges of undertaking evaluation activities** whilst on the residential and the **nature of those evaluation activities**:

"Practically, doing the evaluation stuff at camp was a pain. You're trying to do things a different way and then suddenly you have to do something that's pen and paper".

- 2.44 In terms of engaging with the evaluation, the following logistical challenges were identified:

- difficulty accessing surveys online (a particular issue for some primary schools);
- difficulty accessing students to complete surveys once they were back in school, e.g. having to get them out of class (a particular issue for secondary schools): *"it's been horrendous trying to get students out of classes as teachers just refuse"*;
- staff not being given time to administer surveys or support students in completing surveys, and the time taken to chase non-completions;
- using identification numbers on surveys (whilst recognising the need to be anonymised);
- that some students required one-to-one support to complete surveys.

- 2.45 Notwithstanding the above challenges, coordinators felt that using surveys to gather the views of students was an effective approach:

"It's just so much more straight forward and easier to administer".

"Our students like that it's online 'cos some will do it on their phone".

Support from the Learning Away Team and their Skills, Knowledge and Expertise

The Learning Away Process and Support from the Team

- 2.46 Coordinators were extremely positive about the Learning Away process and the support provided by the Learning Away team. As previously highlighted, Learning Away was seen by participants as a true partnership between the Learning Away team and the schools involved. Participants also commented positively on the support provided by PHF's administration and coordination team, particularly in relation to managing financial issues and reporting. They said that any queries were promptly responded to.
- 2.47 The following aspects of support from the Learning Away team were particularly valued by coordinators:
- The team provided an important **sounding board** for participants, someone with expertise to provide information and answer schools' questions and queries, as well as supporting coordinators in promoting and developing the programme and brokering key relationships:
"They were always willing to come in and talk to the head and were really good at helping us drive it through".
"Just having someone who's got that experience to advise you".
 - The team helped schools **develop their own thinking and ambition** about residential learning, at the same time as keeping them on track with the overall aims and objectives of the programme:
"If I'm having a meeting with [Learning Away Team advisor] it makes you really think about how you plan... what you've done and what you want to achieve, what's good about it, how we can make it better? It really focuses your thinking on what the next stages of the programme are".
"Especially when there's so much going on in a school – it [support from the team] brings you back and sets you on the right path".
 - The programme provided participants (schools and PHF staff) with sufficient **time to develop relationships** and a **true partnership approach**: *"They gave us the space and time to say 'we're in it for the long run with you', that's been particularly important".*
- 2.48 Furthermore, it was felt that the team had **realistic expectations** and a good understanding of the **schools' context**. Coordinators stated that the team maintained sufficient contact with partnerships without asking to meet too frequently and *"if things were not working or it was a bad time for people they have been happy to rearrange"*. Providing partnerships with different locations for meetings and giving them a choice of dates for meetings, were identified as examples of good practice. It was felt that this reflected the team's flexible approach to working with partnerships and their understanding of the schools' context.
- 2.49 The team's willingness to respond to questions or queries and repeat key learning points were valued. Similarly, it was felt that the team and the whole approach of Learning Away was one where partnerships could experiment and try new approaches without the worry that if they were not successful that their funding would be withdrawn:

"They've been fantastic as an organisation, they've not been overly demanding".

"They provided the support you needed without being overbearing and had lots of patience".

"You can try something and say 'it's not very good, it's not had the intended consequence'. They don't say they'll pull the money or we have to withdraw from the programme, you never get a sense of that. Genuinely it was 'don't worry, why don't you try...? Have you thought about other activities going on?..."

- 2.50 The involvement of the same staff throughout the programme and the mentoring role they provided were both seen as unique features of Learning Away. This meant that schools felt well supported throughout the programme:

"I don't think I've been involved in many bids that have stretched out for that length of time and have had consistency of people, which is unique in my experience".

"The consistency is important [schools' advisor] has been with us since day one. Other funders, people come and go, or there's no named person, you speak to whoever answers the phone, whereas [schools' advisor] was there from day one, right to the end of the project".

"The mentoring aspect of Learning Away was unique. We often get asked for evaluations and impact measures, but very rarely do you get someone who is on your side".

- 2.51 Generally, coordinators were extremely positive about the Learning Away process. However, one coordinator suggested that at the beginning the process/approach was a little too open and fluid, but that as the programme had developed it had become much more focused.

Reporting and Financial Returns

- 2.52 In terms of reporting and completing financial returns, there was some variation in views. A number of coordinators said the process could not have been any better, it was straight forward and consistent and the level of reporting was not too onerous. In addition, they felt that PHF staff were understanding about addressing any inconsistencies in reporting and supported schools to ensure that returns were accurate. It was also felt that PHF had been very flexible in terms of dealing with underspends or reassigning budgets when schools dropped out of the programme.

2.53 In contrast, a small number of coordinators said they had found the reporting challenging because the financial information asked for changed from year to year. As a result, some coordinators thought they had gathered the right information to complete the returns, only to find that the information requested had changed. They felt schools should have been told at the beginning of the year what information they needed to provide for the end of year report, rather than waiting until the end of the year and then finding out that they needed to provide different or additional information.

2.54 In addition, one coordinator said they struggled to provide the financial information requested in the right format because of the way they received their invoices from residential providers. This meant that it was difficult for them to break down costs into separate cost headings and, as a result, they did not feel that their final reports were always an accurate reflection of their spending:

"You do your best guess but... if I've had a bill for £1,000 which included everything I've put it under 'accommodation'. Then I get another for activities and food so I put it under 'activities' but it also includes food, so it's not truly representative of what's gone on. It's been a headache trying to work out the best way to provide that information over 20 residentials".

2.55 A further challenge identified by one coordinator was the difficulty they had in accessing data from individual schools to provide information for the PHF reports.

2.56 Despite the above challenges, coordinators felt that PHF had responded to their concerns and that the financial reporting had improved over the duration of the programme, now reports were much shorter, more concise and less repetitive. It was also felt that the timings of reports had improved: *"They realised what were not good times for schools and changed accordingly"*.

2.57 Coordinators also felt that they would have liked to have received feedback from PHF about when the resources, such as case studies, that they had written were going to be used. It was felt that the timeframe for turnaround was quite lengthy:

"I'm badgering my coordinators to do case studies and then they don't appear on the website. One wrote theirs and it was on the website three days later but not others. That's created a bit of discontent in my group: why is her's on and mine not?"

"It's frustrating when you've done the work and don't hear anything back. Feedback on that it's been received and when it's going on the website would be good".

The Expertise of the Team

2.58 The **skills, knowledge and expertise** of the Learning Away team (the project leader and two consultant schools' advisors) were seen as key to the successful delivery of the programme. The team were described as *"genuinely altruistic"*, which was seen as a rare and valuable trait. Coordinators commented that the personalities and skills of the team had helped develop a **Learning Away community**, which they wanted to stay involved with and inspired them to continue developing their work in this area:

"They [the team] help make the community and make us excited about coming here. Their personalities and skills are part of the reason we want to come back and stay part of the project".

- 2.59 The ability of the team to support school staff to question their approaches and develop their thinking was seen as critical in terms of achieving successful and sustainable models of delivery:

"Some of their [schools' advisor] questioning was so skilled: asking heads 'how do you intend to keep it going?' Thinking about it, they were getting heads to question what they were doing".

"Without [schools' advisor] we wouldn't be in the position we are in now. They've not done it for us, but they're very skilled at planting the seed... [They've provided] lots of things to go away and think about, rather than telling you what to do, or directing you".

"They did the brilliant thing where they had the answers in mind. We've come up with that answer but we've not known that was the answer".

"They've helped us think more deeply about the things we do".

- 2.60 Similarly, the team's **ability to listen** and their understanding of individual **schools' circumstances and contexts** meant that coordinators felt that the team had helped them develop a model of delivery that was tailored to their needs and met the objectives that they were trying to achieve:

"Listening has been [schools' advisor]'s strongest point. They totally understand my context, remember what I've done, listen to what I'm saying and are considered in their responses. You could've had anybody doing that, but unless they truly get where you're coming from then the stuff they're offering you isn't going to truly fit".

- 2.61 Coordinators also felt that the experience of the team, particularly having worked in schools themselves, meant they were well placed to provide relevant advice and support tailored to meet the specific needs of individual schools. In addition, the team's expertise and experience in developing residential programmes and learning outside the classroom (LOtC) meant they were able to link schools into relevant networks and help them develop relationships with professionals in the field. For one coordinator, it was clear that without the involvement of the team and their contacts and links, their residentials would not have taken place:

"In order to get where we want to be we've got to make those contacts and [schools' advisor] has them. So they'll say 'have you thought about talking to this person or going to this conference?' They're plugging you into the networks, other professionals and ideas".

"The fact that they've been there and done it – they've been in a secondary school and developed a whole residential programme. They understand what you're on about because they come from an education background, they have worked on a daily basis in schools. They understand you can't always respond to emails and that there are 101 things that will take priority over PHF and Learning Away".

"Without [Learning Away Project Leader] we wouldn't have had our residentials. Without their contacts we wouldn't be camping at [name of location]".

How well placed was PHF to take on the Learning Away Agenda?

- 2.62 All participants felt that PHF was very well placed to take on the Learning Away agenda and the reason given for this was the calibre of the staff involved and the Learning Away team in particular:

"PHF got in the right people to do it, which placed them very well to do this work".

- 2.63 From the outset, it was felt that PHF provided staff with both the capacity and knowledge to take the programme forward *"they were in a good place"*. However, one coordinator did feel that there was a shift in approach and the programme became more focused once the project leader joined the team *"there was something missing beforehand"*.
- 2.64 Again coordinators said that PHF staff had a good understanding of the school context and how schools worked, which was felt to be important. They said that PHF staff appreciated that every school was different and had different problems and *"that made our life a lot easier"*. Similarly, coordinators valued the specialist expertise the Learning Away team were able to provide and reiterated that the expertise of the staff was what made the difference in terms of developing their expertise in the field of residential learning and LOTC:

"When I talk to other professionals in the field you can see that they are very highly respected people in the field. People listen to what you're saying because you bring those names into the conversation..."

Effectiveness of PHF in Facilitating and Helping to Embed Change

- 2.65 Participants were asked how effective PHF had been in facilitating and helping to embed change within their school/partnership, and more widely. Coordinators unanimously felt that PHF had been extremely effective in helping them to embed change. Where change had not been embedded this was felt to be beyond the control of those involved, for example new headteachers who were no longer supportive of the programme.
- 2.66 When asked which elements of PHF support were seen as most helpful and impactful, coordinators identified the following:
- the support and commitment from the PHF team and the partnership approach to working that was developed between PHF staff and the schools involved;

- the opportunities Learning Away provided for schools to come together to learn from one another both locally (within partnerships) and at the programme level (i.e. within Learning Away);
- the passion and expertise of the Learning Away team which they shared with schools, enabling school staff to develop their own expertise in residential learning:

"Really effective: they haven't done it for anybody but providing the support and the reflection time for you to work out what to do next has been great".

"There's been a level of involvement from them that there isn't for other funders... It's not like we've received some money and we're reporting to them, it's like a journey we've all gone on together and they're as passionate about it as we are... It's like a team".

"It feels like a partnership approach. Some funders it doesn't matter as long as you say you've done what you said you'd do but with these they understand everything and they know what you're going through and know how hard it is and what the positives are".

2.67 Participants highlighted the following changes that had occurred as a result of being involved in Learning Away, which they felt highlighted the effectiveness of the programme:

- **Changed residential practice and embedded residential learning within the curriculum.** Seeing staff linking up residential learning with what they were doing in school and actively linking it to skills development within school. For example, developing a leadership model where older students are involved in running residentials as well as developing coaching activities in school. In some partnerships the focus on residential learning had led to a much wider focus on LOTC which was being embedded in all aspects of curriculum delivery:

"Learning Away not only helped embed residentials within the school: they're a given and happen in every year group and are still developing... But now we are looking much wider and looking at embedding LOTC in its widest sense in every year group and using the outdoors on a daily basis".

"Residentials are embedded. They happen and are planned and coordinated by the class teacher and that is the expectation. Whereas, five years ago there was one person planning and coordinating all the residentials. There are teachers whose TLR is LOTC/Learning Away residentials. As a team of schools we're driving that forward and is one of the school's highest priorities".

"Its impact was quite profound. To move from residentials to learning away is the move that's happened. Staff are planning [residentials] in relation to the curriculum and [looking at] the overt relationship between the skills the young people are developing and how that feeds into the development of the leadership programme and the skills and talents of the young people".

- **Strengthened existing partnerships and developed new ones:** resulting in schools involved in Learning Away partnerships engaging in other projects and programmes because they had those existing working relationships. Other schools had joined the programme because they had seen the benefits of involvement. In a number of partnerships Learning Away had also been used as a way of developing more cross-phase working:

"[Next year] we will have children from 11 schools rather than the initial five, so it has gained momentum. Our vision for this has really grown – that it'll be part of the offer for all Year 6 students in our town that they will get this experience and that will be a fantastic legacy".

- **Developed a community of practice:** Learning Away provided schools with opportunities to come together on a regular basis to share their learning and practice. It was felt that PHF had built a community of schools involved in Learning Away. Coordinators saw these as invaluable opportunities for them to be inspired by their colleagues and made them more ambitious about what they were trying to achieve, as well as questioning what they did. For example, at the beginning of Learning Away running a residential for coordinators as part of staff development was particularly impactful for those involved in terms of developing their understanding of the benefits of residential learning, as well as providing them with the time, space and the right context in which to plan their residential programmes:

"What we learnt from other partnerships makes you think and makes it so much more real when you're talking to someone about it – you think 'I could do that'. We test things out that we've talked to you [another partnership] about".

"It [Learning Away] became much more ambitious as we heard what others were doing, for example more focused on raising attainment. From that we looked at the leadership development programmes and then linked it into interdisciplinary learning So it evolved into something with richness, which in the first instance, was not there".

2.68 Other impacts identified focused on:

- **Schools becoming more evaluation focused in their approaches,** for example identifying which elements of their practice have the most impact (both on the residential and back in school):

"As a group we've developed a language that is more evaluation focused... It's changed how we work".

- **Schools providing opportunities for students who were unable to access residential learning:**

"We're now thinking about the ones that don't go away... if we hadn't been involved in Learning Away that wouldn't have happened – it made us think about joining up more".

- **Changing working relationships between staff:** coordinators observed that those staff who were involved in residentials had much stronger relationships with one another back in school and this was reflected in their willingness to work together and support each other:

"They will do anything for each other – all those barriers that are normally there are broken down... They'll do anything for anyone 'cos they've all been in that situation and worked together as a team when they've been away and sat up all night".

- 2.69 Coordinators were unable to identify anything else that PHF could have done to support them in embedding their approach, they stated that the team were always willing to provide support and come in and talk to headteachers and other members of staff.

Appropriateness of Learning Away to the Schools' Context

- 2.70 Coordinators felt that Learning Away was appropriate to their school/partnership's context, particularly in terms of **helping schools' respond to curriculum changes**. Coordinators stated that they were using their residential programmes to help them deliver curriculum changes and that residential learning fitted well with the aims and objectives of the new curriculum. Furthermore, in a number of schools, residentials and their impact on students had been identified as a strength of the school by Ofsted:

"It's definitely helped us with the new curriculum".

"You look at the [new] curriculum and think 'that can be done on residential or 'that's what we do on residential'".

"We recently had an Ofsted and they highlighted Learning Away as a valuable contribution to learning".

- 2.71 Learning Away had helped **schools respond to changes in circumstances and at times of crisis**, for example when schools went into special measures or responding to falling rolls. Learning Away had allowed schools to refocus their programmes to meet their changing needs and circumstances:

"It's having someone on your side and providing reassurance, seeing it in a bigger context".

"[Saying to the headteacher and governors] you have to look at this as a model [Learning Away programme] that will help make sure you get children coming through in Year 7".

- 2.72 Coordinators felt that the programme had **helped schools to develop more ambitious residential programmes** because of the professional contacts of the Learning Away team and the professional expertise they were able to provide from the field of residential learning:

"For me as a head it's having someone who's not school based... someone who's outside to be able to look at the project and have that overview. It helps put it in perspective and see how you fit as part of the bigger whole".

Effectiveness of the Different Elements of Support

- 2.73 Participants were asked how effective they felt the different elements of support (e.g. the money, the grant structure, advisor support, collaborative events etc.) had been in engaging and meeting the needs of pupils and school staff; developing new, improved residential practice and embedding it in the long term; and fostering partnership working across partnerships.
- 2.74 Coordinators' responses showed that what they felt was most effective about Learning Away was that the programme brought together the different elements of support and this was what made the difference and contributed to the above outcomes. Thus, the funding provided by Learning Away was seen as critical in supporting partnerships to develop new or improved residential practice. The five year timeframe was seen as important in giving schools time to develop and test their models and embed them within the culture of the school.
- 2.75 The way the funding had been structured, i.e. the implementation grant for three years and the support grant for five years, was felt to have helped partnerships develop sustainable models of residential practice. The availability of the support grant also meant that school staff were able to undertake collaborative activity, which it was felt, helped improve residential practice at both a school and partnership level, as well as fostering partnership working:

"The support grant element of the funding has enabled the project to be successful because we've been able to give time to people to attend meetings and time for people to come on residential".

"Because of the support grant we could take a day off school and go and finish the work together. Without the support grant that couldn't have happened".

"The funding structure made you think about how you were going to sustain it and helped make the model more sustainable".

"Without the grant we wouldn't be in a position now where we have a sustainable model".

- 2.76 Similarly, coordinators suggested that partnerships had been able to use the funding from Learning Away to establish or develop residential programmes that met the needs of their students more effectively. The funding had enabled them to target particular issues or needs within their school, such as cross-phase transition or student disengagement. However, in addition, it was suggested that the collaborative events and opportunities provided by Learning Away helped to improve their practice and provide even more effective residential learning opportunities for these students.

"We had a school refuser who wouldn't walk through the school gates. We managed to get her to go on the residential. After the residential she came back to school and got 5 A-Cs. All those priorities can be addressed through residentials".

- 2.77 In one partnership, funding from Learning Away had provided the impetus to test out a model of residential practice which was now embedded within the whole local authority:

"We now have 100s of children going on residential that would never have gone on residential before. I don't think it would've have happened if there hadn't been that kind of experience five years ago where a group of schools were confident that the local authority could deliver in partnership with us".

- 2.78 As previously identified, Learning Away had a profound impact on some school staff. The funding, ideas and expertise presented by Learning Away allowed schools to explore alternative models of delivery. This had proved successful in identifying the talents and skills of staff who previously might not have had the opportunity to get involved in residential programmes. It had also helped to embed an ethos of residential learning within the school/partnership. Thus, the opportunities for staff development presented by the programme were seen as particularly significant, including opportunities for staff to engage in partnership events and meetings.

"One of the best things for us has been staff from different schools working together...I feel there's a community cohesion built up and we are all doing it for the good of children in the area. Five years ago there were a lot of staff who wouldn't think about going on residential, but now they are in the minority".

"When staff come back they have more confidence, e.g. to do day trips on their own and try different things in the classroom".

- 2.79 The expertise of the Learning Away team had also helped to develop the knowledge, skills, confidence and expertise of school staff:

"None of us were experts, none of us knew what we were embarking on. So, to have that team behind you so you could rely on them when you wanted to and learn when you needed to, that's been really good. I don't think we'd know what we know now had that team not been there to support".

"Having those meetings and realising there were others going through the same things and having the same uncertainties we were having helped as well we didn't feel isolated".

- 2.80 When asked which elements of the support had been most helpful coordinators said that they did not think it was possible to separate the different elements of the programme out, as they were all inextricably linked:

"If you took away the grant you probably wouldn't have gone for it in the first place... you needed the money to get that momentum to convince people. You also needed the support of a network of people... I don't think I could separate them out".

"Everything's pulling together to make you focus on what you're doing and enabling you to do what you need to do".

"We would not be anywhere near down the line without that all together – without the people involved, the money being there etc."

- 2.81 Thus, it was felt that the funding, the timeframe (five year commitment allowing them to develop approaches and relationships), the support and expertise from the PHF team and the opportunities for collaborative learning, were all necessary for the programme to be effective.

3 CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 The focus group discussions provided a wide range of evidence to show that PHF had successfully worked in partnership with schools to develop their expertise in delivering residential programmes.
- 3.2 The collaborative opportunities presented by Learning Away and the expertise provided by the Learning Away team were highlighted as having impacted significantly on the development of residential programmes and had supported schools to develop more ambitious programmes of delivery. Schools felt that it was a true partnership approach and that the expertise of the team had moved their learning on to another level.
- 3.3 There is evidence that schools' were initially drawn to Learning Away by the opportunities the programme presented for securing funding, particularly longer-term funding. However, once engaged, schools recognised the value of the opportunities presented by Learning Away, particularly working with, and learning from, others (both other schools and the PHF team), to improve and develop their residential practice and develop their curriculum more widely.
- 3.4 Focus group participants identified a series of common factors seen as key in supporting the embedding of programmes within schools. These were: the collaborative/partnership approach promoted by Learning Away, the commitment of headteachers, the expertise of the team and the staff development opportunities that the programme presented. Where Learning Away had not been embedded within schools, this was often seen as being linked to the lack of support/ engagement from headteachers, (suggesting that once heads are on board opportunities for successfully embedding the programme are much more likely).
- 3.5 Attitudes to involvement and engagement with the evaluation appeared to be shaped by levels of engagement – those who were actively engaged appeared to have gained more from the evaluation. Coordinators also suggested that they would have liked greater clarity about what was expected of them from the evaluation at the beginning of the programme.
- 3.6 On balance, participants felt that Learning Away had been an extremely valuable learning experience for all those involved, had achieved significant outcomes and were keen to continue developing work in this area.

Lessons and Implications for PHF

- 3.7 The following 'lessons learned' from Learning Away provide important insights for PHF when designing future programmes:
 - The **expertise, knowledge, contacts and capacity of the Learning Away team** were critical to the success of the programme. Without this level of experience and input the programme would not have been as effective as it was. Using 'experts in the field' clearly made a significant difference to the schools involved, in terms of developing residential practice, but also impacting on the confidence, expertise, knowledge and skills of school staff and their ability to share their learning more widely. The role of the project leader in maintaining the momentum and focus of the programme was also important.

- The **consistency of the PHF staff** throughout the programme and the **mentoring role** they provided were both seen as unique features of Learning Away. This was seen as a key strength of the programme which should be maintained.
- The importance of the project leader and advisors **meeting with staff involved in delivery** (not just the coordinators or equivalent) right at the beginning of the programme to gain support for, and help embed the programme within schools, was identified. The willingness and capacity of the project leader and advisors to be able to provide similar opportunities when new staff and schools came on board was also important to ensure that the momentum of the programme was maintained.
- Ensuring that an **evaluation strategy** includes opportunities for tools to be developed which participants can continue to use beyond the evaluation should be considered. This also helps to develop the evaluation skills and approaches of participants/schools.
- There is a need to ensure **clarity about the evaluation process** from the beginning of the programme, so that participants are clear about the expectations being placed on them. There might also be the need to tailor evaluation approaches to meet the needs of individual schools, whilst recognising the need for a common evaluation strategy for the overall programme.
- The **length of the Learning Away programme and the structure of the funding** clearly helped partnerships develop sustainable models of residential practice. The availability of a dedicated support grant facilitated opportunities for collaborative learning, fostered partnership working and provided important opportunities for staff development.
- Participants would have valued **additional feedback** from PHF about when resources they had developed were going to be used.