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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

'Our Time to Shine'—Development and Qualitative Evaluation of the Be a Leader Leadership Training for People With Learning Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Opportunities for people with learning disabilities to develop as leaders are rare, except through self-advocacy groups. A leadership training course for people with learning disabilities in Kent- Be a Leader- was designed to address this gap.

Method: The 6-month training was co-designed and delivered to six learners with learning disabilities and their co-learners, who learnt alongside and supported them. All learners developed a vision in an area where they wanted to demonstrate leadership. Interviews with the learners and co-learners before and twice after the course sought to understand their training experiences and how it prepared them for leadership.

Findings: Six learners and three co-learners completed the course. Attendance was good throughout. The training was found to be feasible to deliver and acceptable to learners. The interviews illuminated training barriers, facilitators and potential modifications. Learners expanded their motivation to change things for themselves and their peers whilst developing an understanding of leadership qualities, actions and skills. They experienced personal learning and growth. Leadership actions were taken by creating and working on a personal vision and goals. This led to realisations that change takes time and the need to persevere in the face of setbacks.

Conclusions: People with learning disabilities aspire to be leaders and part of the change they wish to see in the world. The Be a Leader course was challenging and may benefit from being delivered in stages to support people in learning at their own pace. Service systems need to provide credible opportunities for people with learning disabilities to use their leadership skills in meaningful ways.

1 | Background

There has been a long history of self-advocacy in the UK (Walmsley et al. 2022), a crucial means by which people with learning disabilities and autistic people have spoken up for themselves and developed leadership skills (Caldwell 2010).

The inclusion of people with learning disabilities on boards or advisory bodies of government, disability, and community organisations emerged in the 21st Century (Thompson Brady et al. 2009; Frawley and Bigby 2011; Friedman et al. 2016b; Curryer et al. 2025). In the UK, Government policy (Department of Health 2001) and funding were catalysts for leadership opportunities (Ramcharan 2005), providing forums for people to interact with statutory providers (Dearden-Phillips and Fountain 2005) and ensuring a range of interests were heard (Chambers et al. 2013). However, inclusion in strategic planning was not always achieved (Fyson and Fox 2013),

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Summary

- This paper is about the experiences of people with learning disabilities and their supporters who took part in leadership training.
- We talked to the learners and supporters in interviews.
- People with learning disabilities want to develop as leaders and to create changes that make their and their friends' lives better.
- Training is important to help people develop as leaders.
- People also need to be included in places and spaces where decisions are made. They need a chance to lead and work towards change.

leaving these opportunities open to criticism that they only enabled a transactional relationship. This may have stemmed from transactional leadership approaches, characterised by limited scope for organisational culture change and influence being constrained to fixed goals (Edwards and Turnbull 2013). Transactional leadership styles have been criticised as not being conducive to the co-production of public services (Schlappa and Imani 2018) and would certainly prevent people with learning disabilities from flourishing as leaders. Regardless, the sustainability of any form of participation in the UK began to erode alongside funding (Roberts et al. 2012; National Forum of People with Learning Disabilities 2011; Rouse et al. 2022).

A driver to develop leaders in the UK comes from a new government policy focused on statutory authorities co-producing services with the public (NHS England and NHS Improvement 2021). This opportunity requires people to exert influence and achieve what has been called 'transformational inclusion' (Friedman et al. 2016b). Achieving transformation means a shift to distributed forms of leadership (Bolden 2011), whereby people with learning disabilities (and others) can work collaboratively, rather than merely being consulted.

Realising leadership potential requires supporting the development of individual leaders with disabilities (Powers et al. 2002). Skill development opportunities (such as training) for governance roles have been seen as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to secure inclusion and to avoid tokenism (Thompson Brady et al. 2009; Frawley and Bigby 2011; Friedman et al. 2016b; Curryer et al. 2025). Leadership training programmes are not new (Balcazar et al.1996; Cunconan-Lahr and Brotherson (1996); Grenwelge and Zhang 2012; Schuh et al. 2015; Friedman et al. 2016a and 2016b; Zhang 2018; Tenorio et al. 2022); however, there is little evidence for leadership training within the UK context.

A training programme in Kent, England, aimed to change this. In 2022, Bemix (a social enterprise) launched Kent's first leadership course for people with learning disabilities. Be a Leader is about equipping people with learning disabilities with the skills and knowledge to lead, govern, speak up, and champion the rights of people with disabilities. The training team sought an independent evaluation, and researchers from the University of Kent and Canterbury Christchurch University collaborated to plan a small evaluation to assess the feasibility and acceptability of the training, explore learners' experiences, and examine how these prepared them for leadership.

This paper presents the training development and findings from qualitative interviews. In producing this paper, we have brought together the written contributions of Steve and Ann-Marie, who wrote about the co-development of the training. The evaluation background, methods, and results were written initially by Lisa, with review and contributions from all. Contributions to the discussion were made by all and brought together by Lisa.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Design

The research design was a preliminary feasibility study of the Be a Leader training, also considering future implementation and emphasising participants' experiences.

2.2 | Background and Development of Be a Leader

The course was designed and run by Steve and Ann-Marie, trainers with lived experience and backgrounds in education and leadership within statutory services. They worked with Matt (then Chief Executive at Bemix) and Tricia (an independent consultant and founder of Tomorrow's Leaders, a National Leadership programme, and Gloriously Ordinary Lives).

With 22 years of experience behind him as a strong national self-advocate and leader of the self-advocacy movement in Kent, it has been a long-term vision of Steve's to make leadership training available to people with learning disabilities:

> *'I benefited greatly from attending a training called Tomorrow's Leaders. I have realised there is a need to increase the pool of leaders who can be seen, be heard and belong in all the spaces where decision making happens, affecting the lives of people with a learning disability'.*

Tricia supported Steve, Ann-Marie and Matt in planning and running the course, along with a group of local partner organisations, including people with learning disabilities and advisors from Kent County Council.

The format consisted of six modules, each with four face-to-face classes (delivered over 26 weeks). Classes were once a week, 10 am to 4 pm. Figure 1 gives a module description.

Each class involved activities and presentations from lead trainers and co-facilitators. Guest speakers, including leaders of the national self-advocacy movement, campaigners, the Labour MP for Kent, NHS healthcare representatives, and council commissioners gave talks, providing examples of how to apply learning. After each module, there were breaks for learners to

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Module	Content
1) History	- History of learning disability and self-advocacy movement Speakers- Self-advocate and Learning Disability England leaders
2) Law, Policy and Politics	- Overview Government, Law, Politics; What are the current structures – Who is in power? How can we influence? - Citizenship - Voting - Speaker-Local MP
3) Education, Health and Social Care	- What are the current structures of education, health and social care - Housing and Employment Care Act, Equality Act, Health and Social Care Act, Wellbeing agendas How to use skills to help others - Identify community supports and resources - Speakers from Job Centre Plus, Disability Advisor, Employer, Commissioner and University staff linked to these sectors
4) Leadership	- Leadership skills and styles - Values -Creating a vision for change - Forming and maintaining relationships - Speakers from County Council and Self-Advocate Leaders
5) Governance	- Learn about the structures, systems, and practices an organisation has in place to impact the lives of people with disabilities (including local, regional, national governing bodies; board of directors; charitable, private and state organisations) - Speakers – Self-advocate board members
6) Media Training and Communication	- Various formats for getting messages across: videos, pictures, social media, webinars, types of virtual platforms. - Campaigning - Communicating your messages to an audience - Presentation skills - Giving a live presentation - Speaker: Media and communications officer.

FIGURE 1 | Be a Leader modules and content.

complete projects. For example, following the Governance module, participants did a presentation on the governance of a chosen organisation.

A range of supports was available. Learners (people with learning disabilities) and a co-learner (someone they know well) learnt and worked as equals during the course. A personal profile and an action plan were developed by each learner-co-learner pair. Materials were developed based on learners' needs (e.g., audio, easy-read, or large-print materials). Immediate support was available if the course content was upsetting.

Trainers provided role modelling, feedback and mentoring. Learners were supported after graduation by one co-learner (employed by Bemix). They met once a week as a group to discuss progress on their action plans (a vision for leadership).

2.3 | Participants

To be eligible for the training learners needed to (a) have a learning disability (and/or be autistic); (b) live in Kent; (c) be aged 18 + ; (d) have support to enable them to change things for the better (a co-learner); (e) have experience of creating change in their life or community; and (f) be passionate about creating change for people with learning disabilities.

The learners were invited to take part in the evaluation. These were three females and three males, aged 28–31; all were White British. All had known their co-learners for between 5 and 10 years. Co-learners were three females, aged 25–69; all were White British. They each had between 6 and 20 years of experience in organisations supporting people with learning disabilities. Two undertook the training within their paid employment, and one was retired and volunteered.

2.4 | Procedure

In early 2021, the Be a Leader course was promoted throughout Kent. Potential learners and co-learners were interviewed in person or online to determine commitment to the course.

Information about the evaluation was provided after learners had signed up for the training, due to the timescales in obtaining funding and ethical approval.

2.5 | Evaluation Team

Lisa led the evaluation, having applied for funding under the remit of a future research leaders' funding call from the Applied Research Collaboration, Kent, Surrey and Sussex. Lisa has a background in children's social care and has been working in research relating to learning disabilities and autism since 2008. Daniel had prior contact with the training team through other research and in past discussions about local leadership training. Daniel was a collaborator on the funding call and is a Registered Learning Disability Nurse and academic who also had contact with learners and co-learners when delivering a talk at one of the training sessions. Finally, Emilia joined the team as a Research Assistant. Emilia has worked with people with learning disabilities since 2016 in the supported employment sector and, since 2023, in research roles focused on learning disabilities. Emilia had no contact with the participants and had not previously had any contact with the training organisation, and, as such, brought an additional layer of independence to the analysis process. All authors have family members who have a learning disability and/or are neurodivergent.

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2.6 | Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with learners were conducted at three time points: the first at the start of the course, the second immediately after course completion, and the third 4 months later. Co-learner interviews were offered after the course and 4 months later. All interviews were arranged either directly by email or through a nominated supporter (typically the co-learner) and took place on Zoom with the first author, who was not known to participants. The first author met everyone at an in-person training session to help build confidence and rapport for the interviews, which were conducted individually, except for two people who opted to have a supporter present for at least part of the interview (typically not co-learners).

Three semi-structured interview schedules, one for each time point, were developed with input from Steve and Matt. The first schedule asked learners about their expectations and reviewed the application processes. The second covered their experiences of the training format and content. The final schedule covered the impact of the training on the learners' actions and the early implementation of their learning.

2.7 | Framework Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed and analysed using Framework Analysis (Ritchie and Spencer 2002), a pragmatic approach to applied research aimed at informing decision-making. The framework for analysis was developed based on the study objectives and refined following the development of the interview schedules and initial coding by Lisa and Daniel. Data were initially read and re-read to ensure familiarisation. Potential inductive codes were identified through noting initial impressions, key ideas and recurring themes. An initial framework chart was created by Lisa and checked with Daniel and Emilia. Indexing followed, with Lisa applying the thematic framework to the entire dataset while coding the transcripts. Then followed the charting phase, undertaken by Emilia (supervised by Lisa). Charting produced a summary of participants' narratives (guided by indexing already completed by Lisa). In some instances, short quotes are charted. Additional emergent and in vivo codes were added when new insights were identified in the data, following discussions amongst the team. Charting was undertaken in Microsoft Excel to produce a matrix (with rows representing participants and columns representing themes).

Once complete, the framework was reviewed, reflecting on the aims, namely those related to the feasibility and acceptability of the training and those related to preparation for leadership. As themes clustered around these organising principles, they were retained to interpret and map other themes. Looking across codes and participants in these two clusters, themes were drawn from the data and further refined and organised into main and sub-themes (as described below).

A meeting was held with learners and two co-learners to sense-check themes. Sense checking mainly validated the theme development and language used, but also emphasised the importance of highlighting divergent views; for example, in the theme relating to acceptability, the fact that training would not be suitable for everyone was given greater emphasis and was pivotal in considering implications for future implementation.

2.8 | Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Kent ethics committee (Project ID: 0819). Information about the study was shared with participants via an easy-read information sheet, which confirmed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and data protection were also explained. Participants could ask the researcher questions. Informed consent was received from participants before any interviews commenced. Whilst member checks of the analysis were completed, the learners and co-learners did not review the manuscript prior to submission, although they were provided with initial evaluation reports well in advance of preparing this manuscript.

3 | Results

3.1 | Recruitment to the Training, Attendance and Retention

Seven learners and co-learners were initially recruited. One pair was left after the first session, and two further co-learners were made redundant, leaving them unable to continue. Attendance was high, with 92%–100% of all classes attended. All absences were planned or due to sickness.

Of the learners completing training in full, five were interviewed at the start, all six were interviewed immediately after, and only five were available again for interview at the 4-month follow-up. Three co-learners were interviewed after the course, and one at the 4-month follow-up.

3.2 | Qualitative Analysis

A summary of the themes is presented in two clusters (firstly, related to the feasibility and acceptability of the training, and secondly, related to preparation for leadership), as seen in Figures 2 and 3. Main themes are summarised using *italicised subtitles*, and within text, **bold font** highlights the related sub-themes. Verbatim quotes are used for illustration, along with a code to denote learner (L), co-learner (CL), and the interview time point: T1 (before training), T2 (after training) and T3 (4 months on).

3.3 | Feasibility and Acceptability

3.3.1 | *Preparing to Be a Leader*

Prior to undertaking the course, learners shared their **hopes and concerns**. They were open-minded about what they hoped to get from the course, which may also reflect uncertainty about what to expect.

> *I'm hoping I will learn … how to be a better leader.*
>
> L, T1

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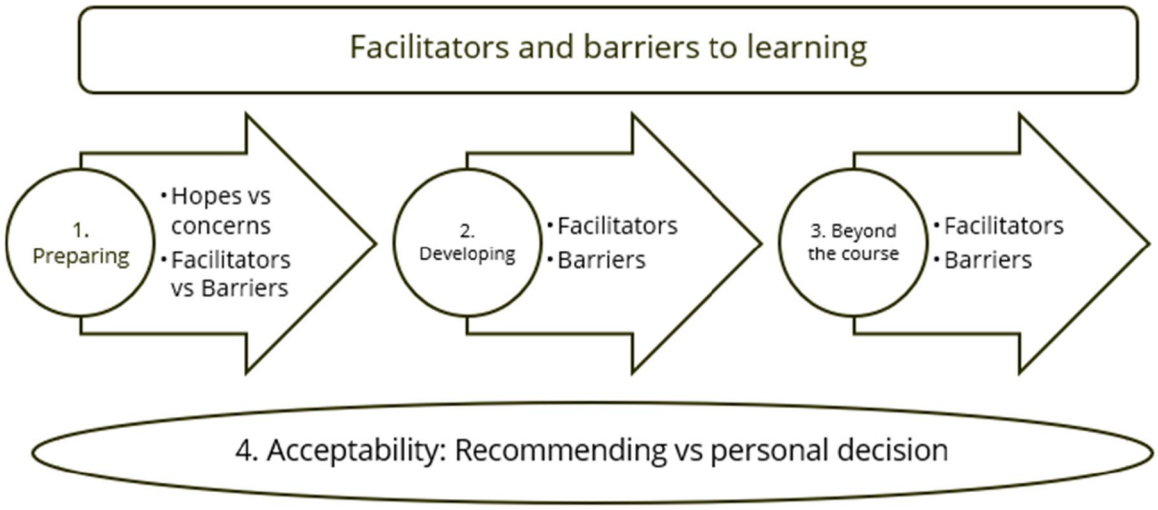


FIGURE 2 | Themes relating to feasibility and acceptability.

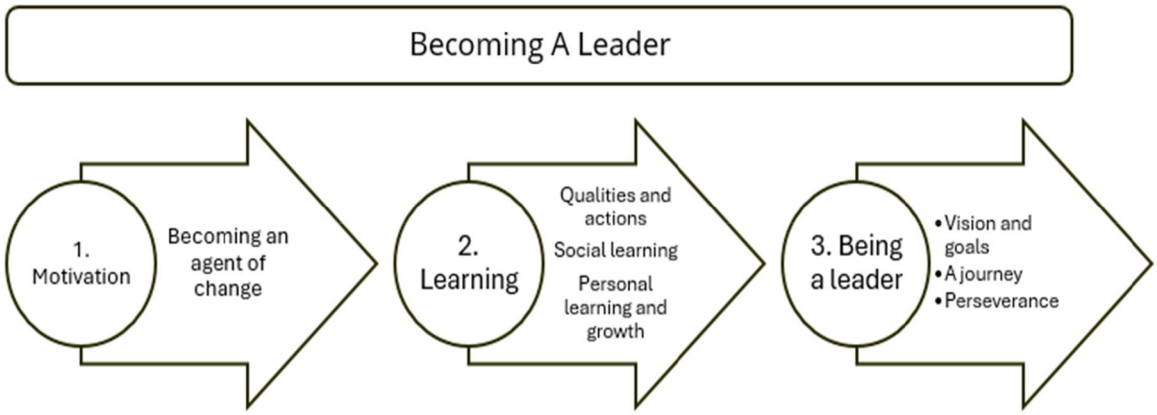


FIGURE 3 | Themes relating to Becoming a Leader.

> *Because you just got the titles of the modules, there was nothing else about it, really...So I was like, okay, I'll give it a go.*
>
> CL, T2

Some hopes focused on areas they wanted to see change in their own lives, such as gaining respect or confidence and taking on new challenges. There were hopes for making new connections and friendships.

> *...more improvements of my performance... finding ways of dealing with issues and making people have more confidence [in me].*
>
> L, T1

Facilitators in the early stages included: positive comments about the application process, requirements for getting onto the course, and support with the application.

> *It was easy. Just had to explain why I wanted to do the course.*
>
> L, T1

The initial **barriers** centred on finding a co-learner and the format of the application form.

> *I was struggling to find a co-learner... that was quite stressful... no one being able to step forward and help me, it was really hard.*
>
> L, T1

> *... it only showed one question and answer box, you type in what you're going to say for your answer then you press next. And then that question and answer goes [it disappears].*
>
> L, T1

Another barrier at the start was fear of potential misunderstandings: either not being able to understand something during the course, or of what they say or do being misunderstood.

3.3.2 | Developing as a Leader

Learners mentioned that **facilitators** included the trainers' approach, the availability of support, and learning alongside

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supporters on an equal basis. Support was a theme in Caldwell (2010) study, which found that the presence of a key support person was pivotal in the development of self-advocate leaders.

> *Having a co-learner is great, because you can speak to them after the session.... And you know that person, cos you've chose. And, you do the homework and you show your homework, and then they can guide you.*
>
> L, T2

> *They're not even [there] to co-learn, but they're there to be taught as well... I think is a very good opportunity for them... it's opened up the co-learners to things that they never thought they could learn.*
>
> L, T2

Facilitators mentioned by co-learners were the course structure (which built confidence) and hearing how the health and social care systems work from guest speakers. Having guests was encouraging, showing everyone that their voices will be heard.

> *... with enough information for people to start to realise... they could ask to be part of how ...decisions are made, rather than just argue about them afterwards.*
>
> CL, T2

> *you just gave you a feeling that there's a purpose...you can do this. And there will be people that listen.*
>
> CL, T2

The **barriers** revealed were the loss of co-learners or having to share a co-learner, the course duration and length, travel to the course, some aspects of the learning environment (e.g. needing more quiet space for focused work or lighting in the room), the pace of delivery and accessibility of materials (e.g. wanting more reference information). Further, tensions or conflicts arose within the group (which could be emotive).

> *I think I understand ... a lot of it. But it was just a lot of talking... So, if you wanted to soak it in your mind, it was really difficult to remember everything.*
>
> L, T2

> *There's been troubling instances..., but nothing really upsetting for me... no one got hurt. Just people got a bit emotional.*
>
> L, T2

Co-learners also mentioned that supporting more than one learner could be challenging and noted difficulties engaging learners in coursework. One felt they would have liked to see more preparation for emotional responses that could be elicited by the content, yet these experiences also created opportunities for personal growth.

> *... you had the other times where people ... would be angry [due to topics]... took you through every emotion possible. But in doing that, it kind of made people realise how to cope with their emotions.*
>
> CL, T2

There were reflections on how learners were applying their newfound sense of power, suggesting that it could be asserted too strongly. This indicates learning needs related to applying new skills in context.

3.3.3 | *Learning and Leading Beyond the Course*

Learners talked about their experiences of working on their own vision and goals, and support beyond the course. **Facilitators** to taking actions were linked to having support, for example, knowing who (and how) to contact to open opportunities. Attending the course led to new opportunities for some of the learners, most notably some got involved in teaching (simulations) for Nursing Students, and one person joined a local NHS Trust transformation programme as a co-chair.

However, support was also a **barrier**—because people needed to seek new supports or because they were missing the structure and support of the course. Not having regular meetings and peer support was challenging, and some lost momentum.

> *... we haven't had that sort of time on a Friday ... to be there and working on the vision and goals, it's been harder to find time.*
>
> L, T3

3.3.4 | *Acceptability: Recommending vs Personal Choice*

Five of the learners and the three co-learners suggested they would recommend the course to a friend/colleague, thus indicating the course was acceptable. The reasoning ranged from fun and enjoyment to being with like-minded people. More specifically, development, inspiration and creating change for oneself and in services were mentioned.

> *Because it's very insightful. I learnt a lot more about the history.... I knew, bits of it, that people with learning difficulties were locked away in asylums a lot of the time. And how far we've come with that, but I didn't know about eugenics...*
>
> L, T2

> *...I would recommend it because it's just, you want to be a leader, and you want to change something for yourself [or] social services.*
>
> L, T2

> *...what it gives you is a chance to, instead of hear that something's happened...this is your chance to learn how you can join in the decision making .....learning how to*

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have the confidence to do that, how to make your voice heard, and how to contact people...

CL, T2

One person felt the course wasn't right for them (although they learned a lot and were glad they'd completed it). They felt others needed to make a personal choice based on understanding the commitment. They felt that past learners could advise but not make recommendations.

4 | Learners' Preparation for Leadership

4.1 | Motivation to Be a Leader

Central to learners' motivations were ideas about **becoming an agent of change** and becoming an advocate or role model. Some had ideas about how they saw themselves leading, such as attending local government board meetings or putting things into practice in organisations they were already part of.

...when I complete the course... I can help others like [name] and help out with discussions and how to make it more effective...

L, T1

I'd like to be able to go to board meetings and get my voice heard and get other people's views heard that maybe aren't as confident.

L, T1

Sometimes this motivation arose from past feelings of powerlessness, as in participants in Caldwell (2011), who'd experienced stigma that informed their approach to leadership.

I know what it's like, people trying to control you. And I want that to change. I don't want people being controlled, I want to give back to society and make people's... lives better. Even if I can just make a little bit of a difference.

L, T1

4.2 | Learning to Become a Leader

Research into self-advocacy leaders has shown the importance of interdependence (Gilmartin and Slevin 2010; Caldwell 2011). By attending the course, learners developed their ideas about what it means to be an agent of change, gaining clarity about the **qualities and actions of leaders**, including a focus on creating change in their own lives and within systems and on supporting others in having a voice.

Now it's our time to shine at the end of the day. We want to learn new things about ... governance and being leaders together. Like working together with things....

L, T2

...realising I can't do it all on my own...It might not have completely happened in my lifetime. But if I can start, then someone... could build on that and keep pushing...

L, T2

...people started to say, "Oh, I wonder if we could work on that together". So suddenly, instead of it being one person, there was a much bigger force...

CL, T2

Learning to become a leader involves **social learning**. Learners talked about the learning alongside a co-learner and the peer support that developed over time.

...[they] keep you focused on that vision and keep saying to me, "you can do this", and "you will do this".

L, T3

Weeks et al. (2006) found that people with learning disabilities can be good trainers because of their expertise in accessing services and in knowing what is important in their lives. All learners valued that the training team consisted of trainers with and without learning disabilities. Learners felt this made them feel equal. There was also a sense that being taught by trainers and leaders with learning disabilities role-modelled what was possible (including overcoming challenges).

It was nice to have some teachers that have autism or learning difficulties and understand our experience and it feels like they're more inclusive to the course, not just... abled people...

L, T2

...it definitely made me feel like I was an equal.

L, T2

... it was co-produced, that's the best bit about it. And it was co-produced in a very equal way.

CL, T2

Some of the social learning arose from navigating group dynamics, in particular, differing opinions.

So, lots of different opinions that might be around about a topic, and I guess hearing different opinions, makes you challenge what your own thoughts are.

L, T2

Learners' spoke of the impact of the training. Most referred to **personal learning and growth**, such as increased confidence. This is not to be underestimated, as increased confidence contributes to the development of personhood and voice (Caldwell 2011).

I think I'm a lot more confident. I mean, when [he] came to the course, asking for co-teachers, and he asked for

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someone to be a chair on a board meeting. I was like, Yeah, I'll do it.

L, T2

.... more confidence I have to actually pursue my passion in trying to make the schools or the mental health system a little bit better than it has been.

L, T2

The development of identity among self-advocate leaders has been discussed in the literature (Caldwell 2011). One learner talked about gaining a greater understanding of themselves, including exploring how they viewed their disabilities.

It does help me to learn me.... it helps me seeing who I am, what I am...That's a powerful thing...

L, T2

The powerful nature of these reflections resonates with the process of transcending negative or discriminatory experiences to develop a new personal identity (Gilmartin and Slevin 2010) and the concept of transformational learning (Freire 2000).

Overall, there was a sense of pride and achievement among learners (a common experience in personal transformations; Gill 1997).

...I ...always blocked myself, saying "I can't do this". "I can't do that"... No, I can do it. Luckily, they did push me to do it. And I achieved, I achieved what I thought I was never gonna have.

L, T3

I was pleased with myself. And now, I'm ahead in the world.

L, T3

...the best part of the course for me was when you started to see people begin to understand why they were doing it... that empowerment.

CL, T2

4.3 | Being a Leader

The Be a Leader course was seen as a catalyst for change. People moved from being learners to leaders by creating a **vision and goals** and working towards them. Visions combined shorter-term achievable goals and a longer-term vision, which would give learners something to work towards (see examples in Figure 4). Through the graduation process, learners were able to share these, a public declaration and a garnering of support.

There was a sense that learners were on a **journey** which had just begun. Many had taken steps towards their goals after graduation, but this was seen as just the start.

It made me feel like, actually, yeah, I know what I want to do. And I know in time I'll be able to achieve it.

L, T3

Learners-

- Educating professionals, e.g. social workers or Nursing Students.
- Being part of research
- Writing a book (raising issues related to disability and travel).
- Working with the education system to make education more inclusive.
- Being a peer mentor.
- Creating inclusive sports opportunities for women with disabilities.

Co-learners-

- Arrange a job fair for people with learning disabilities at a local shopping centre.
- Improve employment opportunities
- Produce information for parents following a diagnosis about support and opportunities.
- Be part of campaigns and consultations and co-work with people with learning disabilities to be at the decision-making table.

FIGURE 4 | Examples of learner and co-learner vision and goals.

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Given the challenges some learners faced, perseverance was essential. Some took this in their stride, accepting that it would take time, or talked about being self-motivated.

> *...never give up on that idea and find ways of convincing the services to be better.*
>
> L, T3

> *I'm kind of motivated myself and what I'm working on.*
>
> L, T3

Following the course, one person reported a loss of confidence and questioned whether they were a leader. This resonates with the risk of "fallen leaders" (Caldwell 2010).

> *I've lost a lot of confidence. I don't know what to do. I felt much better on the course.... I just don't know what I can change. It's made me try. It's made me think... I'm not a leader.*
>
> L, T3

5 | Discussion

Co-producing and delivering Be a Leader has begun to realise Steve's vision. It was possible to deliver the course with good learner attendance and retention. Retaining co-learners in a volatile service sector was more challenging. Key to the training was role modelling leadership. Learners' attendance and perseverance towards goals communicated their commitment, indicating that the training is broadly acceptable. Areas where future implementation could better support their and others' engagement were shared. By attending the course, learners have developed skills, confidence, and a deeper understanding of what it means to lead, as well as an increased capacity to work with others and navigate differences of opinion. They have access to new knowledge, which has inspired their passion for creating change. Learners have taken their first steps in embodying leadership through creating a vision and working towards goals, alongside new roles for some. A final key finding is that some learners managed to sustain leadership activities post-course, whilst others struggled. In this sense, the establishment of transformational leaders is not fully realised. Tichy and Devanna (1986) refer to three acts of transformational leadership: (1) recognising the need for change; (2) creating a vision and mobilising commitment; and (3) effecting change. The learners could be said to have fully achieved the first act and partially achieved the second. They created a vision, yet mobilising commitment from others was challenging, albeit understandable given that many were trying to influence from outside of organisations. Regarding Act 3, effecting change, this is unknown as the evaluation of leadership impact was beyond the scope of the project.

These findings should be situated in the current policy context and the cost-of-living crisis in the UK (Morris et al. 2023). With the erosion of Government support for Department of Health (2001), there is no clear system to support leaders. As Steve puts it:

> *'I was from the golden generation with the Valuing People strategy, brought up with different opportunities and priorities. We used to have strong self-advocate groups and a National Forum. I started at the [county] County Council board level, then on to the Regional and National Forums. Health and Social Care professionals would attend to listen to what people with learning disabilities were wanting. There are no more national forums, no way to get to government and lobby and make changes, other than through national groups like Learning Disability England'.*

There are many obstacles to becoming a leader, especially a lack of opportunities. Training is one part of the solution, and requires sustained investment, as those leading courses in the USA attest (Schuh et al. 2015). Wider system opportunities, supports, and a culture of inclusion are necessary to ensure training can be applied (Powers et al. 2002; Caldwell et al. 2009; Beckwith et al. 2016; Curryer et al. 2025). When working within existing organisational structures, attention should be given to a critical relational perspective or distributive forms of leadership (Schlappa and Imani 2018) to enhance value and minimise co-creating disvalue (Cluley et al. 2021). Payment for leadership roles is also important to combat economic challenges and inequalities (Petri et al. 2021).

After reviewing the evaluation findings at a workshop, the training and evaluation team felt it was important to adapt the course. A revised training offer with three levels has been developed. The differentiated levels recognise that people need support to be leaders in their own lives (developing self-determination) before they can lead within systems and organisations, and thus, ensuring that younger people develop their self-determination is vital to this process. Self-determination is considered foundational to self-advocacy, and both are essential for effective leadership (Ryan and Griffiths 2015). However, in leadership, there is also a shift to representing collective views (Johnson 1999), which future leaders must attend to (Mathie et al. 2014; Amann and Sleigh 2021). This may require fostering understanding across disability groups and emphasising intersectionality and diverse cultures in leadership training.

5.1 | Limitations

Limitations include the small sample size, constrained by an initial pilot covering one county in England. A further challenge was discerning the learner- and external-factor contributions to difficulties in sustaining leadership activities after the course. This should be a focus of future work to better understand the reasonable adjustments and other facilitators of success in leadership endeavours.

Whilst the qualitative approach offered a rich understanding of experiences, it did not adequately capture the knowledge gained through the course, primarily due to a gap between the course content and the interviews. Future evaluations may consider reviewing knowledge gains at different time points and exploring knowledge application in leadership roles. However, exposure to new knowledge through the training clearly motivated learners.

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The training impact on learners over time was not evaluated due to funding limits. Longitudinal research may help clarify leadership and employment changes over time, including how learners develop in roles and how they perceive their contributions to system, policy, or practice changes.

Finally, within the funding limitations, it was not possible to fully co-produce the research; future research on leadership should also attend to the development of people with learning disabilities as research leaders.

6 | Conclusion

People with lived experience need to be seen and heard in leadership roles, where they can make powerful contributions towards changing things for the better, for everyone. People with disabilities can influence how services are delivered and when changes should be made. A training course like Be a Leader will help people develop the knowledge and skills needed to contribute as leaders.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained from [institution] University of Kent ethics committee (Project ID: 0819).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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