



## CASE STUDY



**“I see the organisation differently now”**



### The Impact of Reciprocal Mentoring for Inclusion

## Background

As part of its commitment to becoming a more inclusive, values-led organisation, Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) piloted a Reciprocal Mentoring Programme.

This programme was designed to support genuine inclusion and belonging—not just through policy, but through courageous, human conversations. It aligned closely with OCC's People and Culture Strategy and its commitment to social justice, equity, and integrity.

Before launching this pilot, Oxfordshire County Council had previously trialed mentoring schemes to support inclusion. While those efforts were well-intentioned, they didn't deliver the transformational impact the council hoped for. However, OCC remained confident that mentoring, done thoughtfully, could be a powerful tool for change. That belief led them to partner with West Midlands Employers (WME) to explore a new approach: reciprocal mentoring, focused on mutual learning and lived experience.

This fresh approach has proven highly successful, unlocking new levels of connection, understanding, and leadership development across the organisation.



## > What Is Reciprocal Mentoring?

Reciprocal mentoring is different from traditional mentoring. Rather than a senior mentoring a junior, both individuals take on the role of mentor and learner in a mutually respectful relationship.

While this relationship is fundamentally equal and reciprocal, we're using specific terms to distinguish the two roles in our programme:

- **Aspiring Leaders:** Colleagues who bring insights from their lived experience, particularly relating to protected characteristics.

- **Established Leaders:** Leaders and managers committed to learning from these experiences to become more inclusive in their approach.

The pilot focused on colleagues who had experienced workplace disadvantage due to their race, religion, disability, or sexuality. Together, participants explored the dynamics of power, privilege, and organisational culture through honest dialogue.

## > Why It Matters

This wasn't just a learning opportunity, it was a catalyst for cultural change.

Participants shared stories that don't often get told in the workplace. They were heard, acknowledged, and supported, not just by peers, but by senior leaders.

"It was the first time I didn't have to explain or justify who I am. I could just speak." — Aspiring Leader

"This wasn't always comfortable—but that's the point. You can't grow without a bit of discomfort." — Established Leader

*"I feel better equipped to challenge behaviours that don't align with our values."*

## > Pilot with powerful results

The programme was undertaken over 12 months, with a launch bringing everyone together to explore issues of inclusion and exclusion in a challenging but safe way.

The partnership was supported by a practical handbook and regular 'live labs' which allowed individuals to build a trusted community and support networks.

From the outset, this was a pilot programme—designed to learn, evaluate, and grow. And the learning has been powerful.

Thanks to the overwhelmingly positive feedback, OCC is now committed to extending the programme to reach a broader group of colleagues. Importantly, the next phase will broaden the focus beyond protected characteristics to gradually include colleagues with any lived experience of disadvantage.

## > Impact

Quantitative and qualitative feedback from participants shows just how impactful the programme has been:

- 100% of respondents said they gained a better understanding of different lived experiences
- 93% felt more confident in understanding organisational dynamics
- 80% reflected deeply on their own power and privilege
- 100% believe the programme should be expanded
- The majority said their wellbeing had improved as a result
- Many reported that career progression at OCC now feels more attainable

*"I genuinely think this will change how I lead."*

## > What Participants Gained

For Aspiring Leaders:

- Confidence and visibility
- A chance to speak candidly and be taken seriously
- Connections to decision-makers they might not otherwise meet

For Established Leaders:

- A clearer view of how inclusion (or exclusion) is experienced on the ground
- Tools for inclusive leadership
- Deep personal and professional insight

For the council:

- Stronger cross-organisational relationships
- Increased trust in leadership
- A wave of advocates for equity and inclusion

*"Oxfordshire approached this work with a deep commitment to evidence informed design and were thoughtful and committed partners. I particularly felt heartened by the increased confidence, acts of courage and mutual support we saw through this programme."* Rita Symons, WME Associate and Lead Facilitator.

## > What's Next

Encouraged by the pilot's success, OCC is planning to scale the programme to support more managers and teams across the organisation.

However, this will be done thoughtfully and deliberately. The council is clear: this is about quality, not quantity. The subject matter is personal, sensitive, and complex—it demands time, care, and the right environment.

While not yet a formal part of day-to-day operations, reciprocal mentoring is already shaping the way leaders think, feel, and act. It's becoming a cornerstone of OCC's approach to inclusive leadership development.

*"This scheme could be part of BAU for all—induction, leadership development, team building."*  
(Pilot participant suggestion)



## > Where the CEO Comes In

A standout element of this pilot was the visible leadership from the top. OCC's Chief Executive not only championed the programme but participated directly as an Established Leader.

*"This experience has made me reflect on how I lead. Hearing the real and diverse experiences of our colleagues, and having honest conversations about power and privilege, has made me a more active listener and responsive leader. I'm proud of what we've started and excited to see the scheme grow with future cohorts of aspiring leaders."*  
Martin Reeves, CEO

## Final Reflections

This programme has shown what's possible when people are supported to bring their full selves to work and when leaders are willing to listen, learn, and lead with empathy.

Reciprocal mentoring is not just about understanding difference; it's about valuing it. As OCC expands this work, it does so with humility, intention, and a deep belief in the power of human connection to create lasting change.

*"I see the organisation differently now—and I think the organisation sees me differently too."* Aspiring Leader