

Fiona Morrison, Childhood Practice manager at [CALA](#), talks about her experience of mentoring within the service and the different ways that CALA has used mentoring to support practice development.

## About CALA

CALA offers a one-door approach to a broad range of childhood practice and family support services. They are a large childcare and family membership organisation offering universal services in the Highland and Moray areas of Scotland. They also have members in other parts of Scotland.

## How CALA developed mentoring

CALA first started to develop mentoring when it was involved in a working group with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) which piloted the [Recognition of Prior Learning](#) (RPL) resource. CALA's initial RPL project was trialled in 2011 with myself as manager and an Out of School Club practitioner who was anxious about undertaking formal accredited learning, a Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) level 3 in Playwork. Due to high numbers wishing to access the programme she had been placed on a long waiting list which increased her anxiety.

Working closely with [Highland and Moray Accredited Training](#) we developed a supportive process using the RPL materials to help this first candidate identify her personal skills, achievements and strengths, mapping her own early learning in a way that eased her very gently into the more formal SVQ process when it commenced. I worked closely with the worker and early on we developed a strong and trusting mentoring relationship. For me, this was one of the greatest benefits of this piece of work.

Following review, the RPL developments have become an integral part of the CALA induction programme. All practitioners who are required to register with the SSSC and achieve a qualification to do so are offered the opportunity to participate in the RPL project. They are made aware of the support and guidance that is available to them on taking up employment with CALA. To help strengthen this approach CALA now includes this specific support responsibility within its Childhood Practice Manager remit.

Each RPL candidate requires a carefully planned bespoke support programme. The tools and paperwork to be found in the guidance for mentoring in childhood practice could have been tailor made to help us with this work. As each small step is agreed, records are kept outlining the candidate's way forward, providing us with our first review point when we next meet.

Building on both CALA's and my personal mentoring experience has enabled us to develop the RPL project as a more robust workforce support. The benefits of the programme include:

## How the Care and Learning Alliance (CALA) use mentoring to support their work

- anxiety is alleviated around approaching formal learning after a period away from study
- it helps new staff identify experiences and skills they already have and can draw on
- it builds a foundation to develop reflective practice
- it enables early identification of gaps in skills or knowledge that a manager can then use as a basis for a development plan while waiting for an accredited course to begin.

Using the mentoring toolkit ensures we maintain a consistent good standard of practice, keeping simple but effective records that are drawn up in agreement with the staff member.

### How CALA is using and developing mentoring

Not all the steps in learning need to be big, but they are always significant to the employee.

In one setting I have been working with a candidate, new to childcare and with no childcare qualifications at present, who is very keen to engage in learning and development as a pathway into the early learning and childcare profession. Her role requires her to achieve the SVQ level two in Social Services (Children and Young People).

By using mentoring processes and helping her develop reflective thinking she has already identified some of the challenges she faces and worked with me to develop a simple learning plan around e-learning. This will be important as she moves to an online Vocational Qualification course. Her confidence is visibly growing and she is now talking about progressing in time to a level three SVQ thereby improving her opportunities to continue to work in childcare.

My personal learning around mentoring continues to enhance my own work responsibilities and recently has helped me to secure an informal role of coordinator, advising and supporting colleagues as they take forward this focused support for new employees. Recognising this important development CALA has set aside an additional budget to meet this extra work.

My next goal is to progress a more formal quality review ensuring that CALA managers are confident in their supportive role and that we continue to meet the mentoring guidelines around setting targets and goals at the individual pace of each new member of staff.

Learning for other managers has been around supporting their candidates to be able to identify appropriate personal learning goals, followed by planning how they can take these forward to achieve positive outcomes at a pace tailored to meet individual needs. We support candidates to understand the importance of accurate critical reflection in order to achieve improved outcomes for people accessing our services and also in putting their personal experience into practice to support others to begin the accurate critical reflection process.

Time management is a skill that is developed over time through dedicated time being provided to the candidate on a weekly basis to work on their portfolio. Mentoring also

contributes to quality improvement skills being developed as candidates learn and develop at a pace appropriate to the individual while also establishing effective, open and honest relationships.

For the organisation, the learning and development of the individuals participating in mentoring leads to more effective teamwork and open and honest collaboration where individuals feel supported and valued within the workforce.

An area for review in the future would be how mentoring has impacted on the retention and recruitment of practitioners within the organisation.

## How mentoring made a difference to me

I was fortunate enough to be mentored myself as part of the Synergy mentoring project while engaged in learning and development with the BA in Childhood Practice. The support and guidance offered by my mentor helped me develop my personal reflective practice, set my own short term goals and priorities and overall gave me confidence in my personal leadership to use this learning experience in a number of exciting new ways. These included:

- ❖ recognising and promoting the values of the mentoring process internally within CALA and Direct Childcare (our sister organisation that provides childcare cover or support staff as and when required) and externally
- ❖ recognising the value of support tools such as the [Continuous Learning Framework](#) and how to use them to help inform and improve practice
- ❖ using mentoring tools to support staff teams in building on their accurate self-assessment skills
- ❖ building on my own accurate critical reflection skills to improve practice
- ❖ recognising the importance of collaboration and actively promoting this within my practice
- ❖ building on my confidence to support practitioners within my staff teams as well as my peers in the organisation; relating to their personal learning and development and aspects of practice
- ❖ leading the recognition of prior learning project within CALA and Direct Childcare
- ❖ recognising the needs of, and being able to provide tailored support to, the individuals that I support recognising the skills I need to plan the development of my own practice and that of others, and developing these skills building on quality improvement skills and supporting others with their quality improvement in practice.