

# EVALUATION

CARE IN  
CONVERSATION  
COURSE 2024-5

careKNOWLEDGE

Think  Learning

**BARNARD'S**

Changing childhoods.  
Changing lives.

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# Introduction

*Sarah Leon, Digital Publishing Director, CareKnowledge*

Across health and social care, there has been a longstanding and repeated call for practitioners to be more professionally curious and capable critical thinkers. Reviews of serious incidents – such as child deaths – often cite an absence of these qualities as a contributing factor, pointing to missed opportunities to question assumptions, notice warning signs, or reflect critically on unfolding concerns and/or historical context.

This all felt incongruent with our own experience. We had already developed a distinctive webinar model, in collaboration with Dr Alex Chard, grounded in dialogical educational principles – promoting dialogue over presentations, and the co-creation of knowledge as opposed to one-way knowledge transfer.

The CareKnowledge team had been struck by the depth of feeling that was captured in the webinar feedback. Attendees spoke about the meaningful nature of the learning experience and the positive impact that thinking more deeply had on them. Far from shying away from complexity, practitioners seemed to want the opportunity to be challenged and to be immersed in thinking.

This led us to wonder: is the problem less about an absence of these skills, and more about how they are valued, supported, and sustained? Might the difficulty lie partly in the conditions practitioners work within – conditions shaped by risk, time pressure, emotional complexity, and conflicting expectations?

If it is harder to lead with curiosity, to pause and reflect, or to act with confidence in their own professional judgment in times of stress, do we need more emphasis on understanding the systemic and individual vulnerabilities of these crucial skills? If so, what can this teach us about countering these vulnerabilities to build resilience?

At the same time, we'd heard growing concern about burnout, moral distress, and disconnection – even as the language of relational practice becomes more prevalent and training opportunities continue to expand. This raised a further question: could these issues be linked? That is, are professional curiosity, critical thinking, and reflective values-led practice not only interdependent, but also under strain from the same pressures?

Is it possible that the structures and cultures around learning and practice are pulling people away from the relationships, values, and reflective spaces that have the ability to sustain them. Perhaps, over time, practitioners are not just stretched too thin – but are also distanced from the ethical foundations of their work, and from trust in their own judgment.

And might conventional models of learning – often shaped by compliance, prescription, and mechanical knowledge transfer – be a key part of the problem? Could it be that these approaches compromise the very instincts they aim to strengthen, by encouraging reliance on models over reflection, relationship, and professional judgment?

We know that telling practitioners to “be more curious” or “think more critically” is not enough. These capabilities require space to grow. They depend on trust, time, and emotionally grounded learning environments where thinking differently is possible, encouraged, and valued.

**At CareKnowledge, we instinctively felt all these threads were connected – and that if we wanted to see a different result, we had to offer a different kind of learning – content and experience.**

This led to a series of hopeful and energising conversations with Professor Nigel Tubbs and Dr Rebekah Howes of Think Learning – experts in creating philosophical learning experiences that deliberately move beyond transactional approaches to professional development. Their work invites deeper thinking, gentle challenge, and creative engagement with the ideas and values that underpin care. Together, we co-developed Care in Conversation, a short course which aimed to:

- **explore whether philosophical learning, critical thinking in action, could help reconnect practitioners and leaders with their own thinking and reflective capacities and with each other**
- **to support motivation, confidence, and a renewed sense of purpose**
- **offer an alternative to transactional training by creating space for structured thinking and dialogue.**

We are grateful to Jodie Pritchard, Barnardo’s Director of Learning & Development, who supported this vision and funded two pilot cohorts of the course.

We also owe our thanks to Kasey Senior, Service Manager – Practice Standards and Principal Social Worker Children in Surrey County Council's School and Families Directorate. The thinking contained in this introduction was born out of a series of thoughtful conversations with Kasey – she listened to our early thinking, challenged us to question our assumptions and shared valuable insights from practice and the social worker's experience.

## **About this report**

This report evaluates the pilot – what we did, why we did it, and what we’ve learned over the past six months. We invite you to join this ongoing conversation about how we might collectively create the conditions for reflective, courageous, and values-led practice to thrive.



# Learning and Deeper Personal Development

*Jodie Pritchard, Director of Learning & Development,  
Barnardo's*

Since joining Barnardo's, I have listened to colleagues across the organisation and taken what I've heard on board. What became increasingly evident was the intensity and complexity of the environments in which many of our teams, particularly within Children's Services, are operating. Immediate demands often leave limited space for reflective thinking or deeper personal development.

This led me to consider alternative approaches to professional growth and development – approaches that move beyond conventional training models and instead make space for thoughtful reflection, ethical discussion, and building emotional resilience. I was particularly drawn to the potential of philosophical thinking as a means of supporting our colleagues not only to navigate complexity, but also to reconnect with the core values and sense of purpose that underpin their work.

Piloting *Care in Conversation* offered a valuable opportunity to test this idea in practice: could creating time for structured reflection and conversation enable colleagues to think more clearly, act with greater integrity, and work with greater compassion and conviction? This question lay at the heart of our decision to pilot the course and how we measured impact.

As you will see documented here, the response to the pilot has been consistently positive, with participants reporting meaningful impact from the early sessions onwards. Participation levels were excellent and feedback has highlighted not only the value of stepping away from the immediate pressures of delivery, but also the transformative effect of engaging with new ways of thinking – both individual reflection and in dialogue with experts and peers. Participants described increased clarity, a renewed sense of purpose, and a strengthened ability to focus with empathy and emotional resilience.

This early evidence of impact has affirmed our belief in the value of this approach. We are therefore continuing to develop and expand the offer, ensuring that more colleagues across Barnardo's have the opportunity to engage with philosophical courses as part of their development. As we scale access, we remain committed to ongoing evaluation – focusing not only on participant experience but also on the longer-term embedding of behaviours that support a reflective, values-led organisational culture.

At its heart, this work is about creating the conditions in which our people can think well in order to act well – in ways that are sustainable, compassionate, and rooted in the best interests of the young people, children and families we support.

# Philosophical Thinking: How (and Why) it Works

*Professor Nigel Tubbs, Think Learning*

Philosophical thinking began as a practice concerned with health. In Ancient Greece, two and a half thousand years ago, it took inspiration from the art of medicine. Medicine viewed health as a matter of balance between body and soul, between parts of a whole. Illness meant imbalance. The role of the doctor was to restore harmony.

Philosophers modelled themselves on this. Philosophy viewed health in terms of living well. Lack of understanding meant imbalance between body and soul. Philosophers treated this with learning and education. For them, the art of living well meant thinking well.

Today's leaders, managers, and frontline practitioners often find themselves in a similar position. Tasked with promoting wellbeing, navigating complexity, and guiding others, they are expected to be the doctors and philosophers of our time. But thinking (soul) and practice (body) are frequently out of sync, leading to burnout, poor performance, low morale, and high turnover.

The standard response? More training, tighter targets, and performance reviews. But these often miss a vital step.

Lasting change in practice starts with change in thinking. Changes in thinking are often most effectively achieved in carefully curated learning experiences where, through a mix of teaching, conversation, questioning and responding, it is the thinking of each person, in practice, that creates change. No one can think for another, any more than they can eat or drink for them. But what and how people think with others can be transformative, individually and collectively.

This course and other philosophical learning experiences are a chance to step back from constant decision-making, performance pressures, and competing priorities, and reflect on the deeper purpose and values that guide their work. It supports the development of clarity, ethical judgment, emotional resilience, and the confidence to lead with both conviction and care in complex, uncertain environments. For those attending, it is not just about gaining new tools — it is about rediscovering their capacity to think clearly, act with integrity, and practice in ways that are both effective and humane.

This is what our philosophical approach to professional development delivers: a living, 'learning culture'.

# Pilot Design

The *Care in Conversation* course was designed as a philosophical learning experience, offering a structured yet open space for participants to explore complex ideas and dilemmas related to their practice. The course was piloted with two cohorts of participants, each comprising a mix of frontline practitioners and managers. Each group took part in four 90-minute sessions over an eight-week period – cohort one from 5 November to 17 December 2024, and cohort two from 16 January to 27 February 2025.

In total, 23 practitioners took part in the pilots. To extend the learning and capture feedback, each cohort was invited to return for a 90-minute follow-up session approximately one month after completing the course. These sessions created further opportunity for reflection and helped shape the ongoing development of the course.

## How were participants chosen?

- Participants were all selected from two UK regions
- Staff were put forward following conversations about who might benefit
- Benefits were anticipated to include: moving from giving people answers to helping them reach answers themselves, development of management style, development of self-awareness.





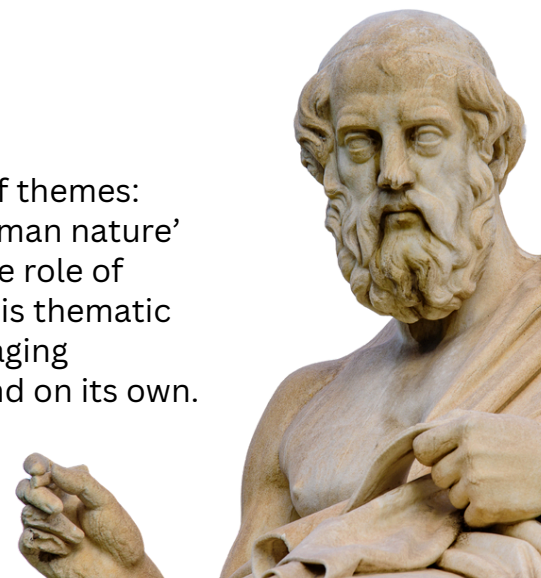
## More than a Course; a *Philosophical Experience*

Each *Care In Conversation* session centred on a shared text — short, thought-provoking readings that served as the starting point for dialogue. Participants read the text together at the beginning of the session, setting a common foundation for open discussion. Additional short extracts were introduced along the way to deepen or shift the conversation, helping groups engage with complex ideas in a manageable, accessible way.

The course was intentionally designed to be non-transactional. There were no pre-defined learning outcomes, no pre-reading, and no homework. Instead, it offered a space for critical thinking in action — an opportunity to slow down and explore professional dilemmas and assumptions through collaborative reflection. The tone was conversational, supported by light-touch facilitation that helped participants link philosophical ideas to their day-to-day practice without prescribing conclusions.

## Course Content

Over the four weeks, participants explored a sequence of themes: Plato's Allegory of the Cave (Week 1), the question of 'human nature' (Week 2), the dynamics of careful power (Week 3), and the role of careful principles in ethical decision-making (Week 4). This thematic progression offered both continuity and variety, encouraging cumulative reflection while allowing each session to stand on its own.





# Evaluation Process



# Gathering Feedback

The pilot study began to unlock the potential within organisations for thinking and reflecting philosophically together. Conversations showed just how committed Barnardo's practitioners and managers are to its narrative and values. Barnardo's colleagues embraced the opportunity to think and reflect philosophically about what they do. Even after four sessions they were able to tell us how it had impacted their practice; both in terms of their self-awareness and their work with families and colleagues.

*Dr Rebekah Howes and Professor Nigel Tubbs, Think Learning*



The feedback received speaks to the course's impact, not only on individual practice but on team dynamics and decision-making cultures. Participants reported a renewed sense of permission to pause, reflect, and work with the reality of uncertainty with confidence. What follows are excerpts from conversations with those who took part, offering insight into how the experience helped shift their thinking, reduce pressure, and reconnect with the collaborative and interpersonal foundations of their work.

In keeping with the spirit of the course itself, the post-course feedback sessions were designed as open, reflective conversations. Each began with a brief recap of the aims of the pilot and a reminder of the themes explored across the four weeks. This gentle re-entry helped reorient participants and created a shared starting point for discussion. From there, the space was opened up for participants to offer initial thoughts – what they made of the approach, and whether, or how, it had made a difference in their personal or professional lives. These reflections naturally led to deeper conversation about the course's distinctive style, particularly its non-directive, conversational format.

Participants also explored broader questions: What kind of impact can philosophical thinking have in a practice-based setting? Does it belong within the culture of an organisation like Barnardo's? These discussions surfaced thoughtful, often nuanced views, and played a key role in shaping the evaluation of the pilot and informing future possibilities.

In addition to the online evaluation sessions, participants were sent a survey link to capture their experience of the course. The survey asked 20 questions – eight multiple choice/rating style questions to establish key metrics and 12 open-ended free text questions designed to promote and capture reflections, experiences, and evidence of impact, in keeping with the course values.

While the surveys were completed anonymously, those completing them were asked if they were a manager or a frontline practitioner. This enabled us to take a view on whether the impact differed depending upon levels of experience.

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## Feedback sample details

### Feedback session attendees

	Spoke in feedback session	Attended but observed only	Total
Participants	15	2	17

### Feedback survey form responses

	Frontline practitioners	Managers	Total
Respondents	7	7	14

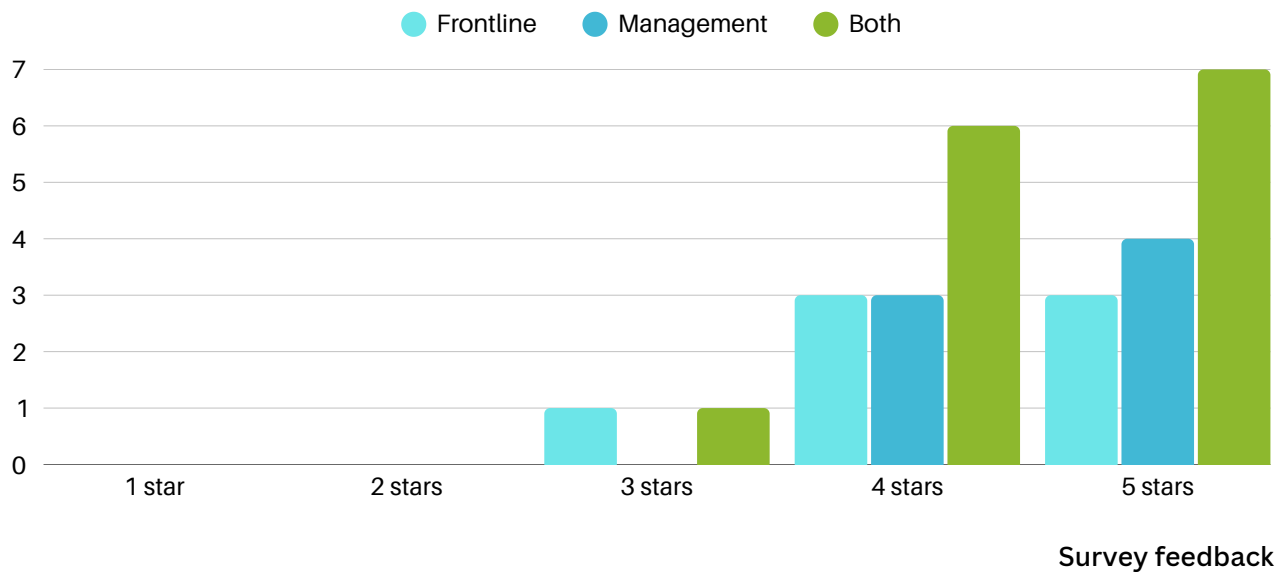




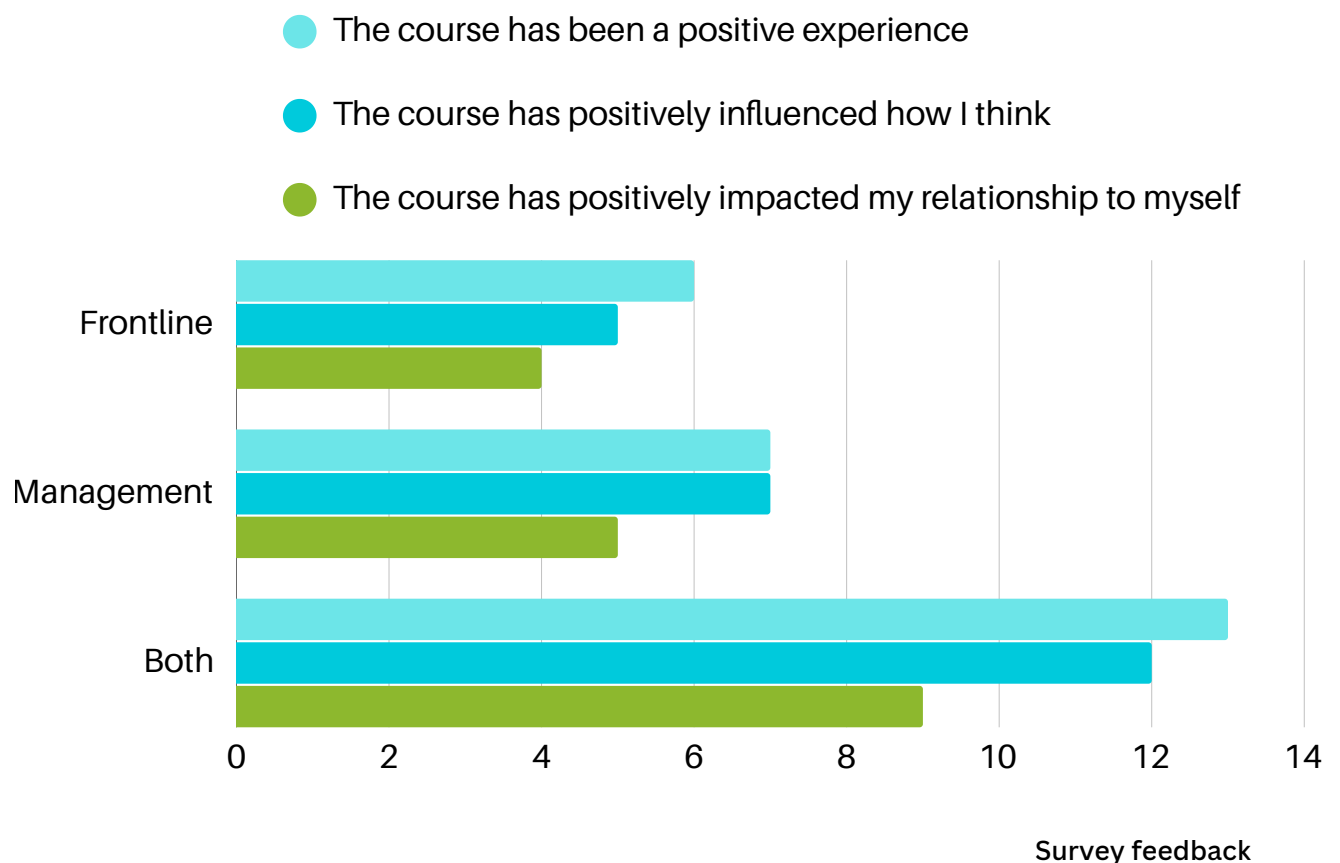
# The Feedback: On the Course as a Whole



We asked: How would you rate the course overall, out of five stars?



We asked: Which of the following statements do you agree with?



## “ In the Participants’ Words

I took something away from each session. It was about growing and developing as a person and this is something I think everyone should be able to do. It should be rolled out to all staff.

It also had a knock-on effect. Before Christmas, there was a very stressful situation at work. But I didn’t react in the way I normally do. I stopped and took time to think about what to do. The result was different when I came back because I dealt with it better than what I would have done.

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I generally think in quite black and white terms... this has pushed me to think differently. I'm very reactive. Whereas over the past few weeks we've looked around things. I've realised I do need to take time to stop and reflect to be able to make the right decisions.

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It’s made me realise that I need to take time to think decisions through more and not manage in a reactive way.

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I very much enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on my practice, it has given me a better understanding of myself and my purpose and role in Barnardo's, it's enabled me to see my worth as a person and practitioner.

It's reminded me that I need to have that time to sit back and reflect on my ways of work and that what I do is important. Reminded me of why I came to work for the organisation.

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It has made me think – to give myself permission to think and to allow myself the time. It has made me consider the impact other things such as commissioners and outputs have on our role and what we can do to overcome some of these challenges in the best interest of the children/young people we work with.

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Time well spent. Made me think about things I may take for granted. New strategy is to have a notepad and to wait until the end to follow up so listening better to colleagues.

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You want the decisions you make to be fully informed. This comes from thinking, from taking stock. Thinking more helps to find the best options. It's important to give yourself permission to sit and think.

I am generally reflective however it has reinforced that aspect of my practice and reminded me of the value of thinking philosophically about what I do.

There can be pressure to 'make' change happen and the course has reminded me of the interpersonal nature of the work and that it is a collaboration which is a relieving thought.

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We're so busy managing more and more services. We often have to rush to make decisions. But rushing doesn't have the desired effect. Doing the course gave me space to take time back. My team are doing that more too; not rushing to make a decision, to realise there are different options. The pressure's been lifted slightly and my team have seen a difference.

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I had no idea what it was or why I had been asked to do it, and was really worried about taking the time out to complete all 4 (5) sessions. Then I thought back to an excellent CareKnowledge webinar on Care in Conversations I attended late summer and how much I had learned and reflected on since, and taken to my team, and realised that I had been given a fantastic and unique opportunity for developing this thinking and learning, which again I can share with others – and I am so thankful I had the sense to see it this way!



We're so busy and putting boundaries in is really difficult. It's important to practice taking more time, to slow down.

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I initially struggled with the course because I'm a doer not a thinker. The first half hour of each session I found difficult because of the reading, and I didn't always know what it was all about. But once the conversation started I started to get something from it.

It taught me to reflect more, to take time to think about the visits to families I make. It made me get my own personal notebook so I can write reflections down after visits, on how I'm feeling after a visit, especially those which can be quite traumatic. It helps me to check in on myself and my emotions, to 'offload', then reflect. My notepad has become really important since I did this course.







# The Feedback: On the Conversational Approach of the Course



# “ In the Participants’ Words

The exchange of ideas in the conversation was an ‘exploration’ rather than everyone having to give their fixed opinions. It’s more a way to work things out without risk of saying the wrong thing. Useful to open people to thinking and communicating differently.

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It’s an odd course in some ways. Every session has been interesting and its been about the interaction between colleagues, the conversation, where you hear them talking and hear their views.

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The course was also a safe way to think and talk about things. By using the readings to initiate conversation, without asking me for personal or professional stories, the session was ‘depersonalised’, ‘neutral’, which helped to open up the conversation more carefully.

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Very different to other sorts of training which always want to bring you back ‘on track’. This course helped us to see where conversations might go. It let the conversation flow and go off in different directions.



# The Feedback: On the Course Content





## “ In the Participants’ Words

I really liked the content. Plato’s cave has really stuck with me, personally and professionally. Its helped me think about how I approach situations. I found I could connect the dots between what Plato was talking about and the families I work with, as well as with my own world. I’m asking the question, why might people be seeing things that way...

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I enjoyed every session but particularly week two and three. Thinking about the care and then the caring with power was good.

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Plato's cave, and dilemmas around subjective concepts of knowledge, life quality, enlightenment. Human nature — why do we — why do I care, what are my limits on this. Power uses and communication and intent... It is and will all help me get through each day with better and healthier and more positive and balanced perspective, and to appreciate the difference I and we can make to all by our work with one or few.

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I think some of the areas... were quite familiar subject matters [that] we talk about in our small therapeutic team, monthly clincial supervision and fortnightly peer supervision. But very helpful to have a new way into it. There is a real value to this course.

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Generally it was all educative and enjoyable but the session on power was particularly useful as was the metaphor of Plato's Cave.

The session I found most useful was the one that got us to reflect about why we care for others and the impact this has on us as practitioners. It emphasised the importance of self-care and helped me consider ways I can connect with families better and communicate my care.

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I enjoyed the session on power in particular because when you've been in a role for a long time, you can take it for granted. You can stop thinking about it when it is important to remember what impact my power has in the work I do with families. Especially because for some of the people it will be their first experience of us.

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The material at the start of each session was helpful to guide discussion. I've also looked to see how I might use the resources in my teams to help find ways of being more creative. I would be good to have the resources to take away and use with teams.

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I now want to use some of the content and resources as a starting point for discussions with my team, to foster a different way of looking at things. It would also be good to use some of it with the families I work with.

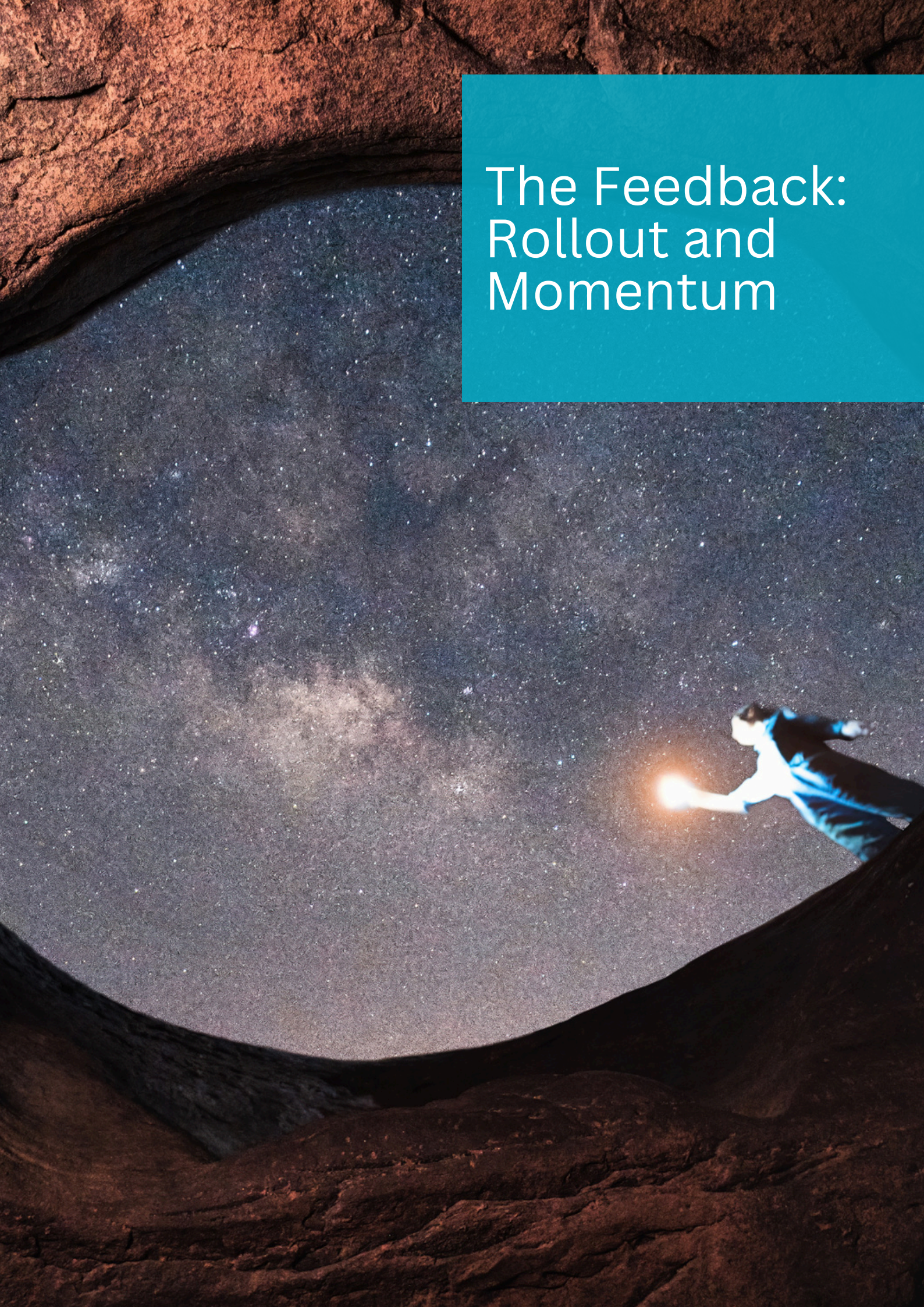
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Lots and lots of positives. I've spoken to my AD about it. Been a CSM for 21 years. This is really different. I'm looking at how I can use the resources in my staff teams.





# The Feedback: Rollout and Momentum





**We asked:** What would you tell a colleague about the course?

**They said:**

It's an opportunity to reflect on practice, gain perspective around why and what we do under the umbrella of Barnardo's.

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I think that people need to understand that it requires participation and to deeply think about topics. If someone is not prepared to do that I wouldn't encourage them to attend as it can impact the dynamics of the group.

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It helps you grow both personally and professionally...Leave your doubts at the door and embrace the course for what it is and I am confident they will love it like I did.

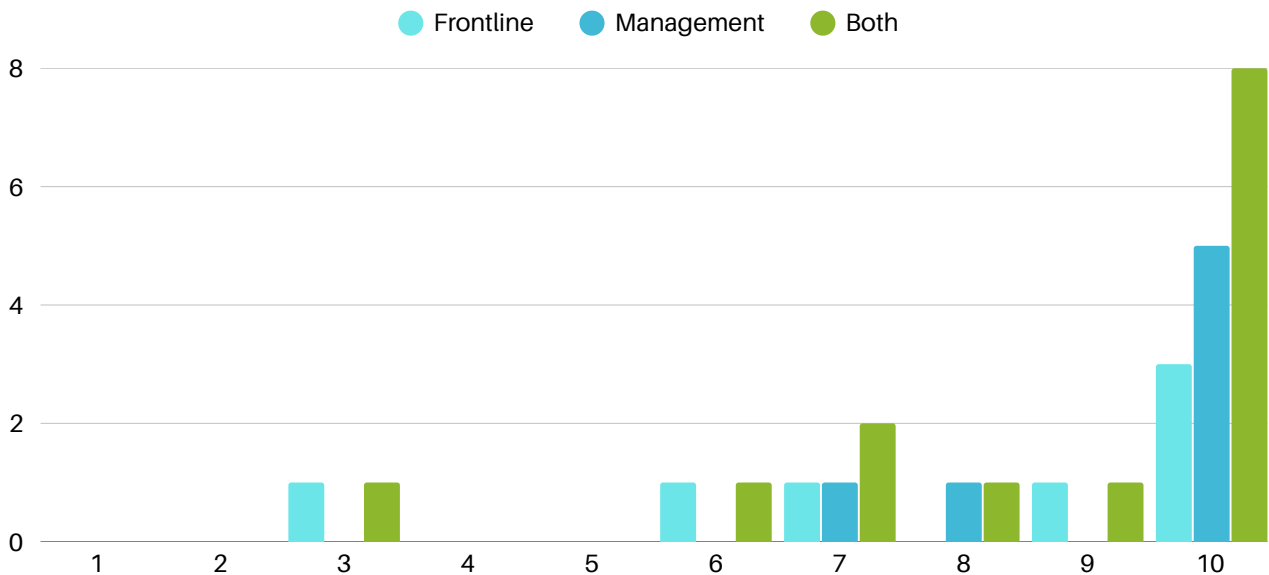
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Time well spent. Keeps you curious and wanting to understand others.

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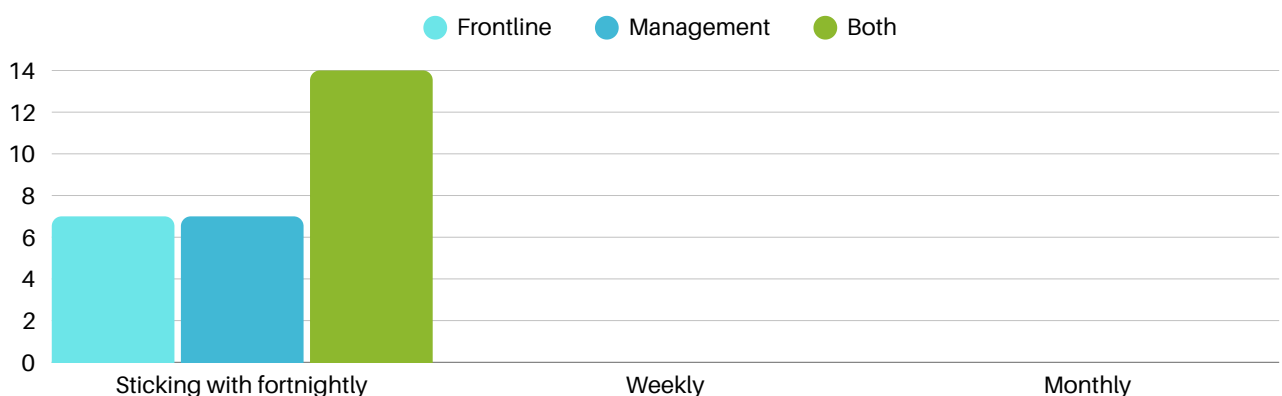
The facilitators were knowledgeable about the subject and the content was beneficial to our every day work in Barnardo's and changes we might consider.

We asked: How interested would you be in future opportunities to continue with this kind of learning?



Survey feedback


We asked: In terms of meeting frequency, which do you think you would have preferred?



Survey feedback



# Conclusion



As the Director of a region in Barnardo's I was delighted to see the real and meaningful difference members of my team experienced as they engaged in philosophy-based learning. They reported back a different way of learning that they felt both energised and stretched them to consider other perspectives, ways of communicating and thinking.

*Nadine Good*

*Director Children's Services, North, Barnardo's*



The *Care in Conversation* pilot was designed to test whether philosophical learning could strengthen critical thinking, professional curiosity, reflective capacity, and a values-led practice within the high-pressure environment of Barnardo's Children's Services. Its core aims were to:

1. **Reconnect practitioners with their thinking and reflective capacities**
2. **Foster motivation, confidence, and purpose**
3. **Offer an alternative to transactional training by creating space for structured thinking and dialogue.**

Findings show that these aims were met in meaningful ways:

- **Reconnection with thinking and reflective capacities:** Participants described a renewed ability to pause, think deeply, and work with uncertainty rather than act reactively. Some participants came to see themselves as thinkers for the first time ('I'm a doer, not a thinker' became 'I can be both'), while others came to see the importance of thinking and became proactive in supporting their own reflection and wellbeing, for example, starting personal notebooks to capture not only what had happened in their work but also how they were feeling, particularly after challenging visits.
- **Motivation, confidence, and purpose:** Feedback revealed increased clarity about personal values, strengthened ethical judgment, and a reinvigorated sense of professional worth. As one participant put it, *'It's reminded me of why I came to work for the organisation... it's enabled me to see my worth as a person and practitioner.'*
- **Distinctive approach to learning:** The questioning, conversational style, anchored in the reading of shared philosophical texts, was valued for enabling exploration without fear of 'wrong answers,' encouraging dialogue between people with differing roles and responsibilities, and creating a safe space to discuss complex or emotionally charged topics. One participant said it was *'very different to other sorts of training which always want to bring you back 'on track'. This course helped us to see where conversations might go. It let the conversation flow and go off in different directions.'*

In addition to these results, it became clear that there was broader organisational relevance. Participants reported ripple effects, bringing thinking practices back to their teams and influencing a more thoughtful, less pressured decision-making culture. In some cases, this led to tangible differences in outcomes, such as the handling of a stressful situation more calmly and effectively or encouraging colleagues to slow down and resist rushing to decisions.

Overall, the pilot demonstrated that philosophical learning can create the conditions for thoughtful, reflective, values-led practice to thrive, aligning with Barnardo's aim to cultivate a culture where colleagues 'think well in order to act well' for the benefit of children, young people, and families. The success of the pilot has justified plans to expand access and embed this approach more widely across the organisation, with further evaluation to track longer-term cultural impact one year on.