



Autumn Leadership Programme 2021 Evaluation, six months on

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Summary

PINF's goal is to grow the capacity of the independent news publishing sector. This includes improving the knowledge, confidence and the connections among news publishers. To that end, PINF ran a programme of learning and coaching, every Tuesday morning for eight weeks in autumn 2021 for fourteen independent publishers.

We surveyed participants before, immediately after, and three and six months after the final session. Participants reported dramatically improved feelings of connectedness and supportedness after the course - and this feeling remained three and six months on.

There were also less dramatic improvements (as they started from a higher baseline) in feeling confident and inspired. There was some improvement in the feeling of having capacity to fulfil their roles. Again, these improvements remained when tested three and six months on.

The findings of the surveys were echoed in the qualitative findings. The clearest finding from this feedback being the value of the network or cohort, hearing from each other, learning from each other, and even going on to partner or engage each other in work.

The programme also asked participants to work on an ‘adaptive challenge’ (something without a quick technical fix) throughout the course, and there was less evidence of progress made on these specific challenges, though participants regularly reported using tools or lessons from the course in their business model work or agenda-setting work.

The lessons learned from this programme and its impact suggest prioritising connections and peer coaching in future iterations - potentially through an ongoing programme of quarterly events to keep the feelings of connectedness and the culture of sharing and supporting information, ideas and collaboration.

What was the programme?

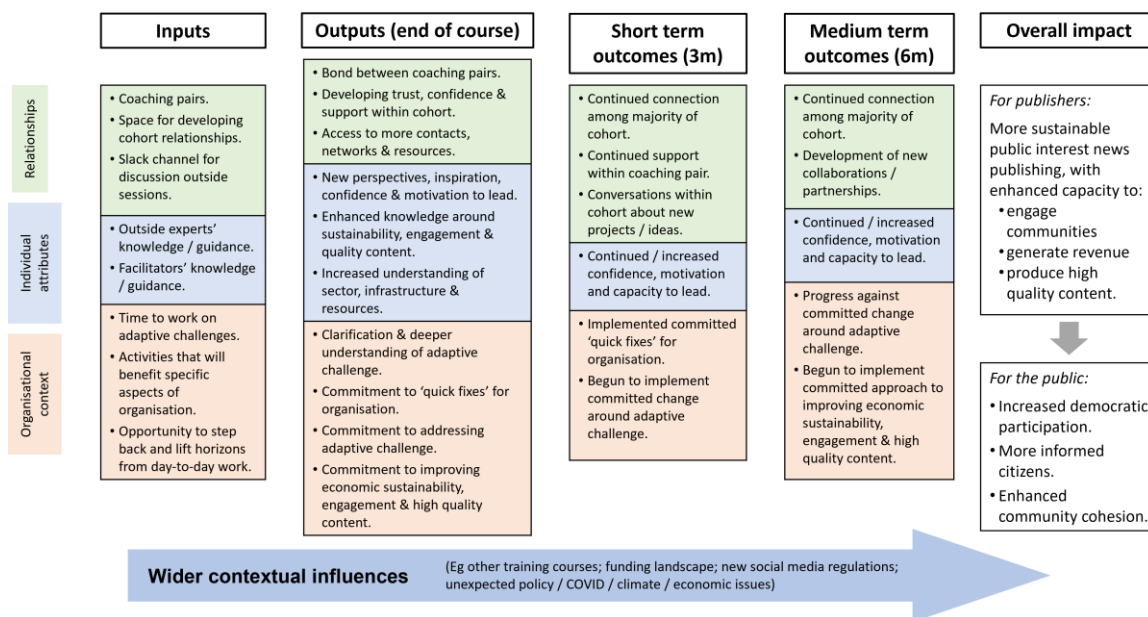
PINF’s Autumn Leadership Programme was an eight-week course of 2.5-hour weekly sessions for leaders of fourteen independent news publishers.

All sessions featured one or more external speakers who led discussions of best practice on topics such as brand, revenue and content – or gave their reflections on a career in the news publishing industry or their thoughts on the future of news publishing. All sessions also had time for a ‘coaching’ conversation between two participants, cycling through the group over the weeks so that each participant had a chance for a one-to-one with every other participant.

Participants were asked to bring an ‘adaptive challenge’, such as succession planning or changing audience demographics, things without a technical fix, to the course that they could work on each week. In the last session, participants made commitments to the group to have worked on some aspect of their work relating to something they had learned on the course by the time the course met-up again three months later.

What did we aim to achieve?

PINF aims to help ensure the social and economic sustainability of public interest news in at least one hundred local communities across the UK. We believe sustainability can be improved through greater knowledge, confidence and connections among news publishers. This will help with revenue, and also with social aspects like community engagement and inclusivity. We ran this programme with the following theory of change in mind:



How did we evaluate the programme?

The cohort were surveyed before, immediately after, three months after and six months after the programme. Participants were asked to score themselves from 1-10 on a range of attributes in order that we could track changes over time. Participants were also asked more open-ended qualitative questions.

Each week of the course ended with a 'reflections' moment in which the cohort documented their thoughts and feelings on the morning's session as well as their thoughts on the course so far and whether they could use any of the lessons learned.

We also tried to maintain an awareness of whether the cohort was meeting outside the formal programme or the formal evaluation, such as whether they were using the group Slack or organising calls or meetups separately.

We also recorded anything outside our control which could have influenced the evaluation – such as training programmes from other providers, or significant sector-wide changes.

What did we find?

There was an immediate impact primarily on individuals, and secondly on their organisations.

As shown in Figure 1, there was improvement across all aspects we were measuring in pre-course and post-course surveys. In some cases, such as with connectedness and support from others, these were very significant.

- "I was pleased to hear [speaker] being positive about our 'BLM Takeover' last year, as I was nervous about it beforehand, and concerned it may be perceived as tokenistic, but it really wasn't, by anyone, which was a real relief."

- "Talking to other people - I feel less alone (and marginally less incompetent) knowing other people in same boat as me."
- "Really enjoyed learning from others and seeing how they approached challenges in their newsrooms"

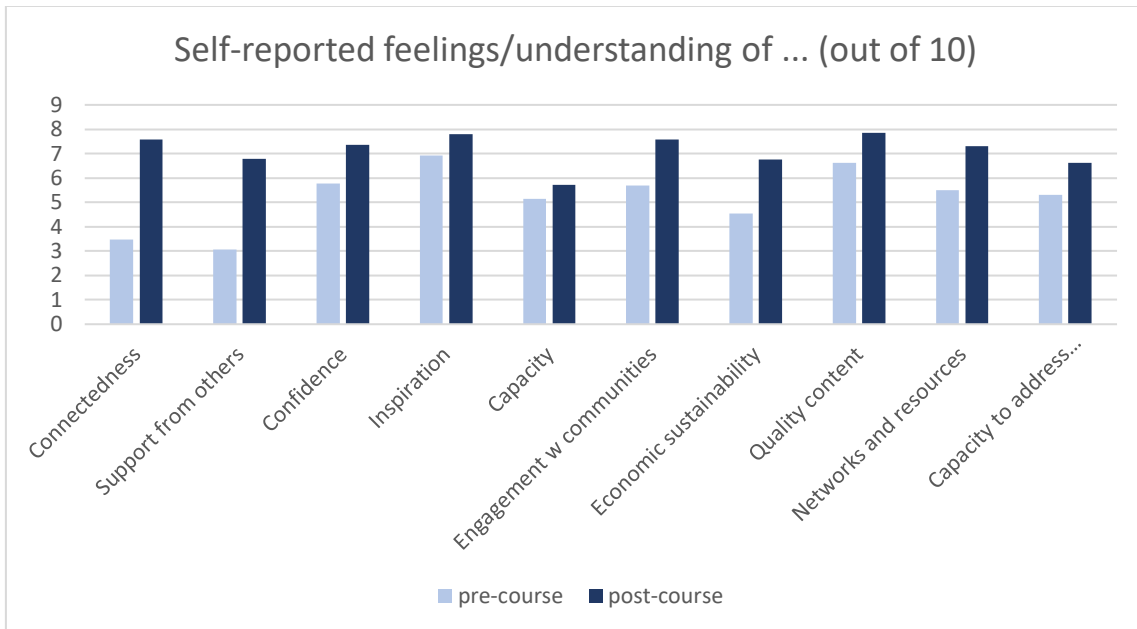


Figure 1: Chart showing pre- and post-course survey results

Participants learned tools for and ways of thinking that could be (often immediately) applied to their work. They reflected on the experiences of others in ways that improved their confidence. They often took learning back to their colleagues in their organisations.

- "We will use this exercise in all our business decisions from now on."
- "I am hoping to use this exercise for all the ideas coming up for the 'business plan'/adaptive challenge, especially with the team on working out what we should focus on/what is achievable"
- "Very helpful in starting a thinking process of what our organisation is all about"
- "Certainly going to use the next team meeting to discuss our joint objectives and goals"
- "Presentation on framing problems will be very useful in structuring a strategy afternoon that I'll be facilitating soon"
- "I think I'll try, after this presentation, to understand better the problems we're facing rather than jumping straight to solutions."

The survey results suggest there was less impact on the participants' ability to work on their specific adaptive challenge.

Over time, this impact lasted – with evidence of the effect on individuals and organisations at least six months on.

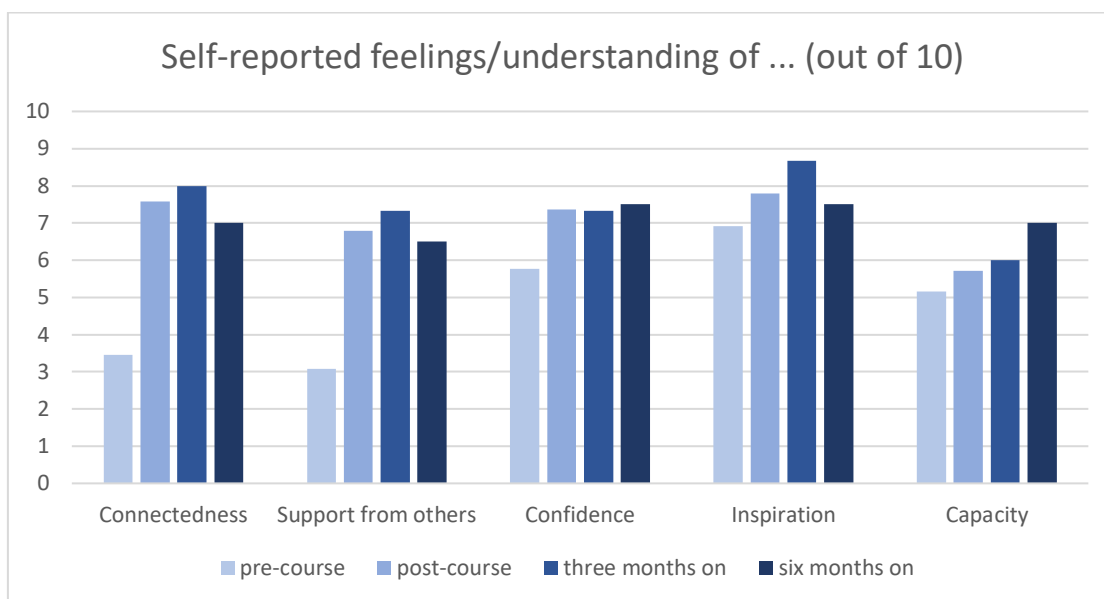


Figure 2: Chart showing results of questions asked in all four timepoints

Many participants were positive about their experience and grateful for having had the opportunity – this feeling clearly remained, even slightly improved, three months on, and remained six months on (though with a smaller survey completion rate).

Several participants suggested that the thinking that the course inspired continued to influence their decision-making and their actions – others that they are still reflecting on some of the aspects they started thinking about on the course.

- One participant reported that their entirely new business plan reflected many aspects of learning from the course, including on subjects like membership and quality vs quantity of stories.
- Another said: “[the] branding session has stuck in my mind and [the question of] how you tell your story when most of the public don’t understand what indie publishing means...”

There was an immediate impact on individual and organisation relationships within the cohort.

As shown in Figure 1, people immediately felt more connected and that they could access more support from the group. The qualitative feedback echoes this:

- "Great to hear about the business experience of other members of the group"
- "Yes, as above - last couple of weeks I got more from breakout groups and chatting to others than some of the speakers"
- "Glad to be part of this group: lots to learn from others in some similar boats"

- "It is good to spend time together in a way that normal day jobs don't allow, the sector is pioneering new ground and sharing ideas is so useful"

The impact on relationships has lasted at least six months.

Again, figure two clearly shows that the feelings of connectedness and supportedness have remained, although a smaller portion of the cohort (just under a half) completed the survey, and those who did come back to complete the survey may have done so because of that connectedness.

There is also evidence in the qualitative responses of lasting changes to behaviour that demonstrates the value of those relationships. Connections made during the course resulted in joint activity, continued meetups, sharing of information, even contracts and business being done between some members of the cohort. In the open-ended aspects of the survey, the main finding to come across spoke to the value of the network and connections.

- Anecdotal evidence from email exchanges between PINF and the participants suggests that the group is still alert to learning opportunities, to opportunities to come together (particularly online) and to share lessons, such as with an event on small dollar donations co-hosted by the US-based Institute for Non-profit News.
- Two participants have employed someone as a result of introductions made through the group, another is engaging the services of a participant in the group to help with ad sales.

There were some outside factors to which some of this impact could be attributed, but these are relatively slight.

One participant was on another news publishing course, a part-time remote MA programme with another small international cohort of publishers. And several publishers were members of other digital groups, such as ICNN's facebook page, but these groups existed before the course too. Otherwise, there were no obvious extraneous interventions that would explain changes – we believe we can attribute most findings to the impact of the programme.

Some more specific lessons were learned about the nature of running a programme like this:

- The length of sessions (2.5hrs) was chosen to allow for a good ratio of time together while minimising interference with the day jobs. In fact, in many of the reflections from participants, the desire to spend more time on the one-to-one coaching sessions, as well as with Q&A with the speakers, was clear.

- There were some requests for reading or exercises to prepare for certain sessions in advance, though these participants also recognised they might not have time to complete such tasks.
- The sessions worked best when speakers could advise on practical matters, especially if they could directly respond to issues currently faced by participants, and do so ideally from a position within the news media context. Sessions were seen as less useful when they were led by people from outside the media world (e.g. one session was led by the head of an architectural practice).
- Generally, the course over Zoom worked well. One participant said: 'I continue to be amazed by what is possible in the participatory sessions online'. It allowed a truly nationwide cohort (from Portsmouth to Glasgow) to meet each week.
- It was impossible to find a shared digital comms tool that everyone preferred – we asked everyone in advance of the course, but each of the popular platforms were rejected by at least one person. We chose Slack as the least bad option, and this was lightly used by some participants, but some feedback suggested that Facebook or WhatsApp would have seen more use, pointing to other examples in the sector.
- In surveying participants, we asked them to choose pseudonyms so that we could track individual-level changes over the course, but the pseudonyms proved difficult for the participants to remember and was arguably too granular for our needs. The mean score across the cohort has been the most useful number.

Conclusion and next steps

Overall, we believe the programme had impressive results borne out by the strength of survey responses and the evidence of ongoing collaboration outside the programme. Whether the organisations that the participants lead are now *more sustainable* will only become apparent over the longer term.

By some distance, the clearest benefit to the participants was in the connections they made, the sense of togetherness and of having a group to go to for advice or even collaboration.

We now consider that an ideal programme of support to publishers would provide both an intensive course to build trust and connection especially, and then a rolling programme to ensure that bonds are maintained and that learning and advice can continue to be shared. The intensive programme could be similar to the course described in this evaluation – eight weekly sessions for 10-15 publishers per year. Participants would receive a small stipend to attend and an award upon completion of the course to allow for post-course work on a particular challenge. The rolling programme would then be made up of all alumni of the intensive course, growing in number each year, and consisting of quarterly meetups involving further skill-shares, training, coaching and networking. These would be a mix of offline and online events. We believe this would keep the connective

tissue of the network strong and create the conditions for participants to keep learning from their peers.

While fundraising for PINF is ongoing, we do not currently have the resources to run such an ideal programme. Instead, we plan to run the 'rolling' element of quarterly meetups, which will begin after the summer, based on topics suggested by the alumni of the courses in 2020 and 2021.

Annex 1: Programme topics

Week	Subject or topic
1	Introduction
2	Leadership styles
3	Audience and community
4	Sustainability
5	Inclusivity
6	Brand
7	Innovation sprint
8	The future

Annex 2: Survey responses at a glance

Participants were invited to complete a similar survey at four times:

- Before (early September 2021)
- After (immediately after the end of the last session, late November 2021)
- Three months on (February 2022)
- Six months on (May 2022)

We asked five identical questions in each of the four surveys:

Question 1	“Please rate how connected you currently feel to others working in similar positions in your field.” (1 = not at all connected; 10 = extremely connected)			
Time	Before	After	Three months on	Six months on
Mean av. score	3.5	7.5	8.0	7.0
Question 2	“Please rate how much support you currently feel you receive from others working in similar positions in your field” (1 = none; 10 = very high level of support)			
Time	Before	After	Three months on	Six months on
Av. score	3.0	7.0	7.0	6.5
Question 3	“How confident do you currently feel in your ability to fulfil your role?” (1 = not at all; 10 = extremely)			
Time	Before	After	Three months on	Six months on
Av. score	6.0	7.5	7.5	7.5
Question 4	“How inspired do you currently feel in your role?” (1 = not at all; 10 = extremely)			

Time	Before	After	Three months on	Six months on
Av. score	7.0	8.0	8.5	8.0
Question 5	“How much capacity do you currently feel you have to fulfil your role?” (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)			
Time	Before	After	Three months on	Six months on
Av. score	5.0	6.0	6.0	7.0

We asked another five identical questions in the before and after surveys only:

Question 6	“How much knowledge do you currently feel you have around how to help your organisation improve its engagement with communities? ” (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)		
Time	Before	After	
Av. score	5.5	7.5	
Question 7	“How much knowledge do you currently feel you have around how to help your organisation improve its economic sustainability? ” (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)		
Time	Before	After	
Av. score	4.5	7.0	
Question 8	“How much knowledge do you currently feel you have around how to help your organisation generate high quality content? ” (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)		
Time	Before	After	
Av. score	6.5	8.0	
Question 9	“How much understanding do you currently feel you have of the networks and resources available across your field?” (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)		
Time	Before	After	
Av. score	5.5	7.0	
Question 10	“How much capacity do you currently feel you have to address the adaptive challenge you identified for your organisation?” (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)		
Time	Before	After	
Av. score	5.5	6.5	

*Figures rounded to the nearest half number.

Annex 3: Survey questions

Closed questions

Questions 1-5 were asked in each of the four total surveys. Questions 6-10 were only asked in the first two surveys.

1.	Please rate how connected you currently feel to others working in similar positions in your field (1 = not at all connected; 10 = extremely connected)
2.	Please rate how much support you currently feel you receive from others working in similar positions in your field (1 = none; 10 = very high level of support)
3.	How confident do you currently feel in your ability to fulfil your role? (1 = not at all; 10 = extremely)
4.	How inspired do you currently feel in your role? (1 = not at all; 10 = extremely)
5.	How much capacity do you currently feel you have to fulfil your role? (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)
6.	How much knowledge do you currently feel you have around how to help your organisation improve its engagement with communities? (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)
7.	How much knowledge do you currently feel you have around how to help your organisation improve its economic sustainability? (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)
8.	How much knowledge do you currently feel you have around how to help your organisation generate high quality content? (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)
9.	How much understanding do you currently feel you have of the networks and resources available across your field? (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)
10.	How much capacity do you currently feel you have to address the adaptive challenge you identified for your organisation? (1 = none; 10 = very high amount)

Open questions

These questions were only asked in the 'before' survey:

What are you hoping to gain from the programme?

What is the adaptive challenge you have identified for your organisation, and why?

These questions were only asked in the 'after' survey:

What do you think you have gained from your experience of coaching pairs?

What was the most useful part of the programme for your learning?

What was the least useful part of the programme for your learning?

What aspect(s) of the programme could be improved and how?

Any other reflections on how the programme was delivered?

These questions were asked at three months and six months on.

To what extent have you been engaging with others in the cohort since the end of the programme? Please comment on:

- how many people you're in contact with;
- the relationship with your coaching partner;
- what mechanisms you have been using to keep in contact with others;
- challenges around keeping in contact;
- anything else around this topic.

Do you have any examples of conversations you've had about new ideas or collaborations with others from the cohort? Please give details about what these are and how they have developed.

What progress (if any) have you made in starting to implement your committed change around the adaptive challenge identified for your organisation?

What has helped with you starting to address your adaptive challenge?

What has been a barrier to you starting to address your adaptive challenge?