



Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times

Synthesis Paper

Resource

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Foreword

The phrase may be overused, but it is truer than ever that "*the only constant is constant change*". To embrace this, it seems to me, is a pre-requisite for those aspiring to, let alone already in, leadership roles. However, an appetite for a moving target alone is not enough. We must relish not only inconstancy, but also its partners-in-crime uncertainty and ambiguity. Long gone is the time when the answer to all our leadership challenges/woes (delete as applicable) was to get a helicopter view: stand back far enough, we were advised, and the apparent confusion will dissipate and, ultimately, the picture will become clear enough for understanding and solutions to present themselves. The trouble, we found, with helicopters is that they only give this clarity when the land below is settled and the air above it free of cloud. And this is not the world we are in.

This research is, therefore, both a welcome and necessary contribution to the cause of getting to grips with the multi-faceted and ever-evolving nature of leadership. By carefully interrogating the nature of both system leadership and leadership across systems, the report helps make sense of the theoretical underpinnings and the practical applications of both. And such findings are wholly apposite to those working presently in children's services. Whether through experience, research or both, more and more of us are understanding that the old laws of linearity, command and control, and heroic leadership are in urgent need of repeal. Firstly, children's services is (at least) one complex system in itself - and it then interacts with a whole set of other complex systems. Secondly, the children's services system is not the sole preserve of the Director of Children's Services. Responsibility for its leadership is distributed amongst directors, lead members, leaders, chief executives, LSCB chairs and the wider corporate leadership of the council and partners organisations. Different parts to play, for sure, but all with one vision to deliver.

And it is with this in mind that, as Chair of the Children's Improvement Board (a body dedicated to a continuously self-improving children's services system), I am involved in the early stages of a piece of work that seeks to understand how best to develop a shared learning space in which this multiplicity of leaders can, together, develop their understanding of the repertoire of leadership insights, approaches and styles that, if acted upon, will make the most difference to outcomes for children and young people. Further, as this research sets out, in designing an integrated learning programme, the focus needs to be on the so-called softer skills: influencing, enabling, adapting and, critically, consensus-shaping to achieve common cause. But favourite for me amongst all of these characteristics is humility: not to be confused with a renouncing of passion and commitment but, rather, a recognition that complex systems with their inherent mix of critical, tame and wicked issues demands a distribution of the leadership task that has little or no place for the hero innovator.

So, please read on. The leadership for the future is ours to shape in unison.



Mark Rogers

**Chief Executive, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council &
Past Chair (SOLACE), Children's Improvement Board**

Distilling 'systems leadership': executive summary

Introduction

This summary is a distillation of key messages from a multi-method study commissioned in 2012 by the Virtual Staff College (VSC)¹ on systems leadership, or leadership across multiple systems, for children's services. The study was carried out by a partnership of researchers specialising in the science and practice of social care implementation² and health management, based at the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation and the Centre for Health Enterprise at Cass Business School, City University London.

The research reviewed and built upon theory about the leadership of both whole systems and complex systems, but was also intended to be practically useful to those in leadership roles in public services. The synthesis paper brings together the findings of seven source papers of varying scope, each of which describe different elements of the research. These source papers include:

- secondary analysis of the international literature on leadership in complex systems
- qualitative depth interviews with 29 leaders working in public services across England
- a group of case studies of three real world leadership scenarios in locations across England
- four review papers and short case studies of systems leadership in child and youth services in the USA, Canada, Australia and Denmark

The design of the study, and the interpretation of its findings, was developed in collaboration with a co-production group of 14 highly experienced leaders and innovators in public and voluntary sector organisations, and with a Research Advisory Group convened by the VSC.

The messages from the study can be summarised in relation to three broad questions:

1. What is systems leadership: what lies at its heart, conceptually and in practice?
2. What is special about systems leadership: how (if at all) does it differ from other constructions of leadership and what messages are new or surprising?
3. What is the relevance of systems leadership: what can it add to current thinking and practice in relation to current debates about leadership of public services to children, families and others?

The detailed arguments and the evidence on which they rest are elaborated in the main **synthesis paper**, which starts on page 13.

What is systems leadership?

Concepts and definitions

There was a powerful consensus across all sources for the research that the current backdrop to leadership of public services presents extraordinary and perhaps historically unprecedented demands and challenges, combined with unparalleled opportunities to take advantage of the flux and create positive change. This is certainly true in the UK, but international perspectives suggested that the UK is not alone in this. Boundaries between organisations or agencies, and between the roles of key personnel at all levels are becoming ever more fluid and permeable as jobs and teams that were once separate are merged. Following the global financial crisis, the impact of successive waves of re-structuring and cuts to staffing numbers at all levels are beginning to take hold and are likely to intensify. There is proliferating complexity and unpredictability, and, according to many participants, a sense of being caught in a ‘perfect storm’ of increasing public need, demand and expectation, coupled with decreasing resource and capacity. Leaders talk of wrestling with persistent ‘wicked issues³’ that shape-shift and resist resolution, and which cannot be solved by single agencies acting alone. They also talk of ‘a one-time opportunity’ to make changes that can streamline services sufficiently to withstand the turbulence and ensure their survival and even improvement into the future. The need to lead more efficiently and effectively has never been greater, and yet in some fields senior leadership positions remain unfilled, with fewer rather than more applicants willing to take up the challenge.

Systems leadership builds on *systems thinking* but goes further, putting the theory into practice. In its simplest formulation, systems leadership is an attempt to effect change for the social good across multiple interacting and intersecting systems, resting on the assumption that better and more efficient public services can result from more joined-up working across multiple service sectors. Systems leadership has been identified as a potentially powerful response to the particular contemporary conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (referred to by some using the acronym VUCA) – indeed, as possibly the *only* response that may help leaders to navigate in such times. Other, more traditional or familiar forms of leadership – those focused around single organisational or agency remits, reliant on the deployment of resources over which leaders and managers have direct authority (so-called ‘command and control’ approaches), and using mandate derived from hierarchical position – are manifestly weak in the face of such conditions. Experience shows us that logic-based, linear approaches to problem solving are not an effective approach to wicked issues characterised by paradox, and the non-linear, ‘emergent’ nature of systems leadership both as a *construct*, and *in practice*, seems intuitively to be a better fit to the challenges of the present moment.

The findings of the study suggest that systems leadership is characterised by two key attributes. Firstly, that it is a **collective form of leadership**: systems leadership is ‘leadership as participation’ rather than ‘leadership as performance’, and although it is individuals and not systems that produce change, systems leadership by definition is the concerted effort of many people working together at different places in the system and at different levels, rather than of single leaders acting unilaterally. Secondly, systems leadership *crosses boundaries*, both physical and virtual, existing simultaneously in multiple dimensions. It therefore extends individual leaders well beyond the usual limits of their formal responsibilities and authority.

Systems leadership described in practice

The study suggested that at the heart of systems leadership in practice are shared values and intentions to improve outcomes for service users. This core is surrounded by a complex of interrelated dimensions. Although they overlap, these dimensions can be categorised as:

1. Personal core values (*ways of feeling*)
2. Observations, 'hearing' and perceptions (*ways of perceiving*)
3. Cognition, analysis, synthesis (*ways of thinking*)
4. Participatory style (*ways of relating*)
5. Behaviours and actions (*ways of doing*)
6. Personal qualities (an overarching way of being that forms the essence of both professional and personal style and approach).

Above all, and despite systems leadership aptitudes being put into practice by means of professional styles and behaviours, systems leadership was described as a **mind set**, or a way of thinking about and approaching the leadership role, rather than a set of technical skills or competencies.

1. Personal core values

Personal as well as professional values in respect of public services are fundamental to understanding systems leadership. They are described in the study both as critical drivers of individual systems leaders, and as essential to systems leadership, in that the ability of individual leaders to galvanise the intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) motivations of others is considered to be a hallmark of effective systems leadership. Systems leadership itself is about achieving coherence around a shared set of values or a shared vision. This is the dimension of systems leadership that engages feelings and emotions, and personal core values or "*what gets you up in the morning*", as one participant put it. These shared values or **ways of feeling** concern a determination to achieve better outcomes for people (that is, users of services) at place-based or population level, but also go wider than this, relating to values for public service broadly defined, including a belief in the value of co-operation and partnership. Values that coalesce at this higher level of analysis create a way to transcend the individual and, sometimes competing goals and agendas of contributing leaders and agencies, and allow the diverse groups engaged by systems leadership to work effectively together. This is the shared vision that brings people back to the table to continue with difficult work repeatedly and persistently, even when earlier attempts have failed.

2. Observations and perceptions

Those with experience of systems leadership also describe a perceptual dimension to the work – particular **ways of perceiving** (seeing, hearing or observing) what is happening in the surrounding context that is the beginning of putting systems thinking into the practice of leadership. The description of how this way of seeing operates has much in common with the metaphor of 'getting on the balcony' of the ballroom⁴, the better to view the whole dance floor, as developed in theoretical models of *adaptive leadership*⁶. However, systems leadership theory extends the metaphor by noting that in situations of extreme complexity, volatility and paradox, because of the instability and unpredictability of complex adaptive systems, it will never be possible to see the whole dance floor, even from the elevated vantage point of the balcony. Some parts will always remain out of view, either unseen or unknown. The 'big picture' will therefore contain an element of shadow and uncertainty that must also be taken account of during planning and decision-

making, alongside what is in plain view. In addition, the effective systems leader also sees many other things differently. These include how he or she views his or her own role (which will switch between being a follower and a leader, at different times); the nature of objectives and goals (fundamental to systems leadership is the idea that one's own organisational goals may often be secondary to, and even subsumed by, the wider goals of the collective); and the nature of risk and conflict (both of which are held to be inherently elevated in systems leadership, and which are viewed and used creatively rather than 'managed out'). **Ways of hearing** – and in particular the ability to seek out and listen attentively to 'other voices' was another key perceptual dimension of systems leadership that was stressed by participants in this research. Effective systems leaders were described as eagerly entertaining alternative and diverse perspectives, and ensuring that they sought these out where they were not immediately forthcoming. Systems leaders have to positively welcome challenge, and contradiction, hearing these as a relevant part of the mix of information necessary to good decision making, rather than finding them threatening.

3. Cognition, analysis and synthesis

Ways of thinking - aspects of cognition, analysis and interpretation, and abilities in 'sense-making' and synthesis - were also given considerable prominence in the various sources for the research. Systems leaders are required both to embrace complexity and ambiguity, and to make them understandable and tolerable for others. This requires 'translational' and interpretive abilities which were described in the literature and by participants in interviews and case studies in considerable detail. Thus, the intellectual work of systems leadership was described as hard and demanding. It relies on considerable aptitude for précis and summary and skills in the construction and communication of clear narratives and explanations that can condense complexity without oversimplifying, and that can 'tune out' background noise in order to isolate and focus on what information is most salient. It also requires endless curiosity and intellectual agility.

4. Relationships and participation

Systems leadership is described as a way of connecting with others which is participatory, collective and based in what can be achieved through relationships rather than based on individual and component contributions (ie, the sum of the whole is more than the parts). **Ways of relating** therefore become central to the practice of individual systems leaders. Attributes that most support the ability to build and maintain relationships are those of empathy and the ability to take the perspective of the other, not as an end in itself but as way to better align goals and vision. Acting at all times with transparency, honesty and authenticity, and being strongly reflexive and self-aware were emphasised.

5. Behaviours and actions

Technical skills were not at the forefront of descriptions of systems leadership, indeed, there was a strong sense that to focus too sharply on specifying the 'actions' of effective systems leaders was somehow to miss the point. Yet there are **ways of doing** that are fundamental to systems leadership and these are best framed as the behaviours and actions that enable and influence others to make change. What systems leaders themselves do is stimulate, facilitate and enable actions that are taken by others, both in other parts of the wider system, and within their own teams and organisations. For example, the concept of distributed leadership was at the heart of systems leadership; in other words, the idea that leadership does not derive only from positional authority, but comes from aptitude and willingness to take responsibility at all levels of the system. Systems leadership is *by definition* distributed, and systems leaders themselves create the conditions for distribution by enabling others through empowering and supporting them to take a leadership role. Influencing behaviours are those that have their basis in relationships: accumulating knowledge driven by curiosity about other agencies' perspectives and practices;

building and maintaining relationships on multiple fronts; and winning trust by delivering on promises, giving mutual support, and sharing power and credit. Specific *enabling behaviours* by systems leaders were also identified, for example, 'repurposing' existing structures and resources to fit new endeavours; creatively and skilfully using conflict to create energy; balancing risk with opportunity and using the consequences to open up new routes towards a common goal; and actively ceding power or resources, sometimes deprioritising personal or organisational interests in pursuit of a wider, common objective.

6. Participatory and personal qualities

Explicit in some parts of the literature and implicit in some participants' accounts was the idea that systems leadership involves a particular **way of being**, which becomes a central or unifying dimension of the model. We were able to identify a number of personal qualities attributed to effective systems leaders, which included attributes commonly found in many analyses of the qualities of effective leaders in general, such as energy, drive and determination; bravery and resilience; confidence and the willingness to take risks. But they also included some attributes *less* commonly found amongst the lists of the attributes of successful leaders: humility and magnanimity, for example; and patience. These qualities were described as the default operating system of systems leaders, required as a basis for the special ways of feeling, seeing, hearing, thinking, relating and doing that enable systems leaders to participate effectively in systems leadership.

What is new or different about the idea of systems leadership?

In understanding what is new or special about accounts of systems leadership in particular, as contrasted with other forms of leadership, it is important to first note the overlaps or commonalities. Systems leadership is probably best described as a close relative of adaptive leadership, and characterised by many of the same flexible, agile and nimble qualities needed by those leading complex organisations through change. Like adaptive leadership, accounts of systems leadership emphasise that working 'in the zone of complexity'⁵ or 'the zone of productive distress'⁶ requires a willingness to entertain ambiguity and uncertainty, and to act as a 'container' for these unpredictable elements for colleagues who may find change in these contexts challenging, stressful or threatening. Like adaptive leadership, systems leadership both thrives on, and is a response to, flux in the wider environment.

But what is different in the construct of systems leadership - leading across multiple systems rather than within single organisations - is the particular emphasis on mind set and approach, rather than actions and technique, including personal qualities as well as professional styles. It is much less about the specificities of process ('how' goals are achieved), since these must by definition be allowed to vary given the multiple players at the table; and much more about 'why' (the shared vision of what is important), and 'what is achieved' (the ultimate outcome). What is also, perhaps, counter-intuitive about systems leadership is that accounts of effective systems leaders are about as distant from the idea of the traditional 'hero leader' - fearless, forceful and uncompromising - as it is possible to get. Systems leadership was described as all about the skilful harnessing and holding in creative tension the energy in the wider system, rather than driving through change by sheer force of will and exercise of power. Systems leadership was described as being as frequently about 'willingness to give things away' as it was concerned with achievement of one's own goals or promoting of one's own agency agenda. In this respect, systems leaders were often not engaging in 'win/win' transactions (in the sense of 'you win, I win') but in a situation where an individual, whether an organisation or a person, might have to cede ground in order that the wider collective might benefit: *"to gain more, you have to give away"* (and thus, in a sense, 'we win, even if I lose'). Some participants talked of this as requiring the nurturing of a stronger spirit of public service that emphasises wider public service goals over the goals or working practices of the specific existing professions or agencies. Others suggested that existing human resource approaches to identifying

and nurturing future leadership capacity may need rethinking, and should place more emphasis on the professional styles and qualities that foster systems leadership, and less on those that conform more closely to more familiar, but arguably outdated, ideas about what makes a good leader.

That systems leadership is fundamentally ‘distributed’⁷ and arises in many places, not just at the peak of traditional triangular organisational hierarchies, may also add a further novel dimension. In this sense, systems leaders are charged not only with their own ‘succession planning’ in the narrow sense, but in nurturing and enabling multiple other potential and actual leaders, in real time, both within and outside their own organisational boundaries. The behaviour and attitudes of systems leaders will therefore vary depending on time, place and context, sometimes leading, sometimes following, depending on the circumstances. These ideas about the complexity of roles and action also led participants in the study to reflect differently on the time horizons of leadership achievements: what they described in systems leadership is a ‘long game’ as well as a ‘distributed game’, where patience and confidence and a degree of resilience were needed to accommodate the sometimes lengthy and/or unpredictable time lines over which systems change occurs, and rewards and payoffs are realised. Many people will be working towards the ultimate goal, but “*you have to recognise it may not be in your own lifetime.*”

Does an understanding of systems leadership contribute to thinking about public services?

Participants in the research, in all cases and all countries, stressed repeatedly that systems leadership is not some kind of ‘silver bullet’ for the public service challenges currently being faced. Systems leadership cannot magically create new resources or compensate for poorly managed or severely under resourced basic services. It also requires, at all levels, high calibre, well-prepared, intelligent people who share a commitment to creating public value⁸.

However, within the study it was possible to discern an emerging discourse about what makes for exceptional leadership in exceptional times, and what variations on existing models of leadership may be best suited to working for whole-systems improvement alongside individual organisational efficiency and effectiveness. The study identified a picture of the circumstances that are most permitting, and that are the optimal ‘authorising environments’⁹ for systems leadership. This picture included factors at many levels: organisational, systemic, political, personal, national and local. It resonated with an ambitious narrative about public service improvement, including how to create an optimal balance between localism and centralisation. It also resonated with a growing critique about public service and approaches to leadership within it, which has followed in the wake of national debates about the underlying causes of recent horrific failures of care in care homes for the elderly and vulnerable, in hospitals and in social work teams in various parts of the UK¹⁰.

First and foremost, participants stressed that single agencies can no longer respond effectively to wicked issues unless they work collectively and across the system. Single agencies have neither the budget nor the human resources to respond to the current level of expectation and demand; nor do they have sufficient know-how for solving complex multi-dimensional problems unless they pool information and skills with others. This, in a sense, is consistent with the now substantial evidence about what service users (and especially those with greatest needs) want and need from public services, which is not usually a ‘single service response’ (or commonly, a sequence of single service responses often over many years), but a joined up, multi-dimensional response to a series of interlocking issues.

In such a context, it was noted that leadership for change cannot anymore be exercised through command and control; this cannot work in contexts where authority is not recognised, and where control of resources resides elsewhere. Instead, influence and ‘nudge’¹¹ are required. According to the study, these are most effectively achieved by leaders whose personal styles and attributes build

strong relationships based on agreement around shared values; whose focus is on outcomes rather than compliance with processes; who can tolerate ambiguity and bring clarity to complex analyses; who understand that risk of failure inevitably accompanies experimentation and innovation; whose relentless curiosity and reflective style has led them to understand the perspectives of others; and who value the challenge that others bring to the table as strongly as they understand their own core objectives.

Understanding the parameters within which effective systems leaders can best operate inevitably leads to reflections on the fitness of the current environment to 'authorise' or encourage systems leadership to flourish. The study suggested that organisational or system cultures based heavily on regulation of compliance with process (so-called target-driven approaches) will not be conducive to the appetite for innovation that accompanies the best systems leadership, whereas those cultures that identify underlying values, high-level outcomes and overarching aspirations can actively support the effort. Organisation and system cultures that encourage questioning and challenge will create climates that enable more creative use of existing resource, and will allow different styles of leadership and management to emerge and be valued. Cultures that display intelligent tolerance of risk will both encourage experimentation, and will value, and be able to share more openly, the learning that comes from making conscientious mistakes.

Below, the figure shows one way of thinking about how the current UK context of public service, the practice of systems leadership and the attributes of systems leaders fit together in a nested, integrative model. In the following synthesis we explore these ideas further.

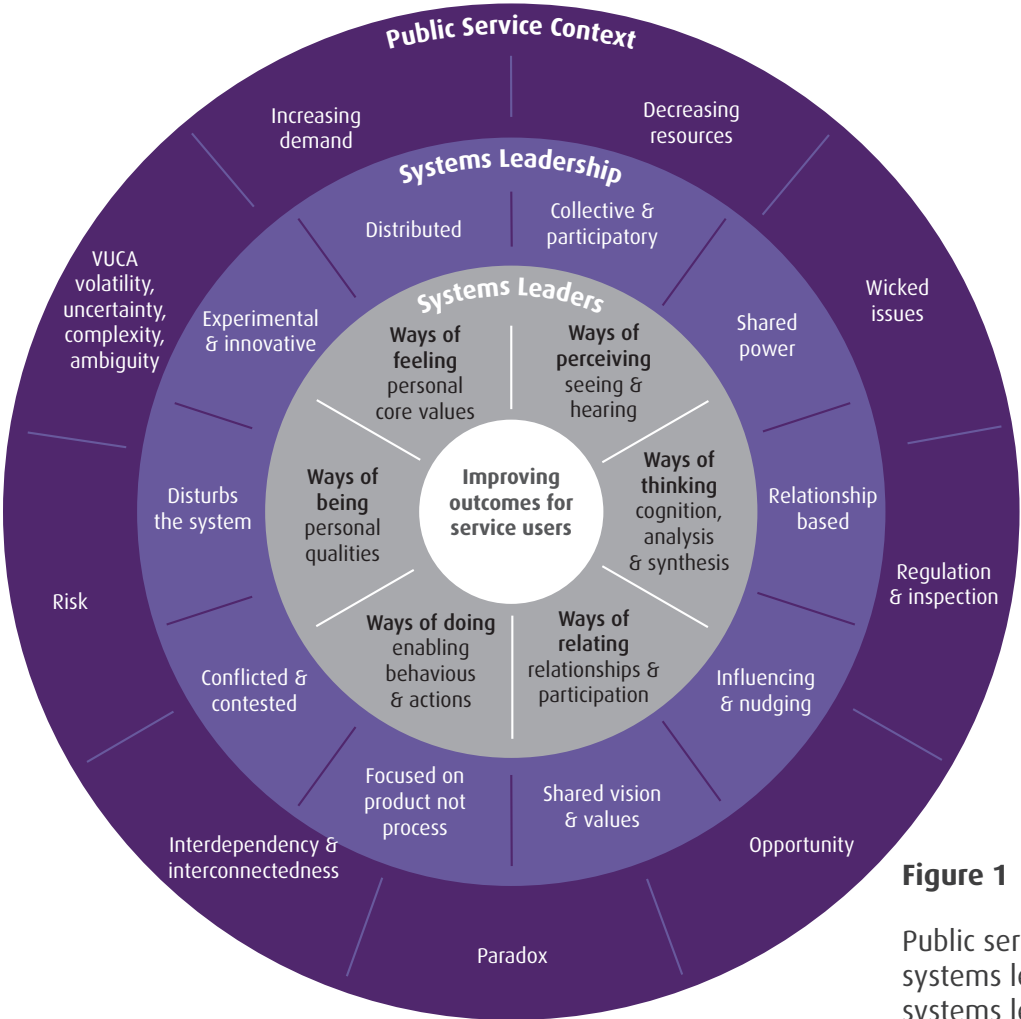
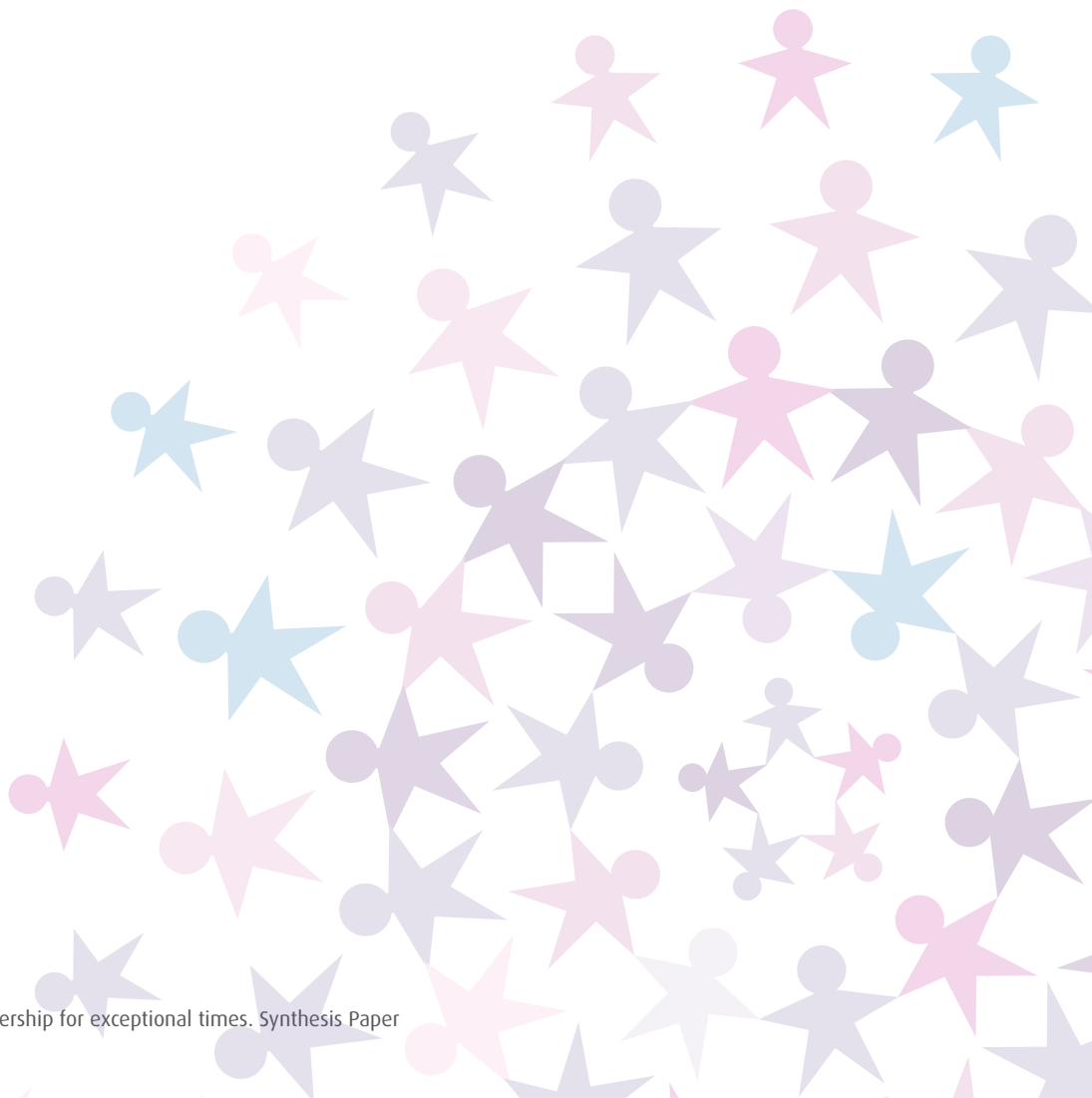


Figure 1
Public service context, systems leadership and systems leaders - an integrated model



Section One

Introducing systems leadership

Background

The contemporary context of public services

The leadership of public services in the UK in the present conditions presents extraordinary and perhaps unprecedented demands and challenges. Many commentators characterise the current circumstances as a 'perfect storm' of increasing public need, demand and expectation, and decreasing resource and capacity. The backdrop is one of proliferating complexity and unpredictability, against which services continue to wrestle with persistent 'wicked issues'^{12, 21} that shape-shift and resist resolution, and which cannot be solved by single agencies acting alone. Boundaries between organisations or agencies, and between the roles of key personnel at all levels are becoming ever more fluid and permeable as jobs and teams that were once separate are merged, and as the impact of successive waves of re-structuring and cuts to staffing numbers at all levels have taken hold.

Definition of systems leadership

Some might think that under these circumstances an understandable leadership response might be to retrench and focus inwards on core business within one's own organisational boundaries. This study suggests however that there is another and potentially much more effective response emerging out of these pressures. This is a cross-systems response, which tries to harness the energy in the turbulence, and galvanise collective responsibility for more effective use of diminishing resources. Increasingly known as **systems leadership**, it builds on 'systems thinking' (see Section 2), but extends this thinking into the practice of leadership.

The research study

In Autumn 2012, The Virtual Staff College (VSC)¹³, commissioned a partnership of researchers specialising in the science and practice of social care implementation¹⁴ and health management - to carry out research on this emerging leadership response, using, as a starting point, the definition shown in the box opposite. Systems leadership, according to this formulation, concerns leadership that extends beyond the confines of single agencies or organisations, stretching the remit and skills of leaders into places where their usual authority, derived from organisational position, may not be recognised.

Wicked issues

...complex and intractable problems that continue to evolve even as attempts to resolve them are applied, thereby eluding fixed solutions. - Keith Grint

Systems Leadership

Definition

...leadership across organisational and geopolitical boundaries, beyond individual professional disciplines, within a range of organisational and stakeholder cultures, often without direct managerial control.

Purpose

...the intention to effect change for positive social benefit across multiple interacting and intersecting systems. (Source Paper 1)

Aims and methods

A multi-method study linking theory and practice

The study builds on theory drawn from the international literature on systems and leadership, combined with description, contemplation and personal reflection from leaders in the real world in different sectors and roles in the UK and elsewhere. It explores the context of contemporary leadership challenges, the extent to which systems leadership is recognised as a construct and in practice, and describes how those in systems leadership roles exercise systems leadership. It has an emphasis on those working in child and family services in the public and voluntary sectors, but also takes a wider perspective in recognition that distinctions between child and adult services in the UK are increasingly subsumed in the broader category of 'services for people'.

Specifically, we set out to: **review the international literature** to isolate the core concepts, theories and evidence relevant to leadership across multiple systems; test those concepts against the experiential knowledge of those working in leadership roles in a range of public services through **twenty-nine in-depth, one to one interviews**; and explore whether and how systems leadership thinking and behaviours play out in **three 'real world' case studies in England**. The English case studies focused on: The evolution of work to support Troubled Families in the London Borough of Barnet from 2010 to 2012 ('*Barnet Troubled Families*'); the North-West London 'tri-borough' Integrated Care Pilot in health services ('*North-West London ICP*'); and Bradford's Total Place pilot ('*Bradford Total Place*'). We also asked expert colleagues in public service research and practice from **four international jurisdictions** to test the ideas in their own contexts, and provide a view on whether, and to what extent, the ideas we were developing on systems leadership in the UK were also emerging and impacting upon their own human services leadership theory and practice. The contributions came from the USA, Canada, Australia and Denmark.

A key feature of the study was its co-construction with a group of 14 experienced practice leaders in public and voluntary sector organisations. The group met during the course of the study to work with the researchers on the design, implementation and interpretation of the findings. The VSC also convened a Research Advisory Group, which contributed many insights and assisted with the practical execution of the work. These groups ensured that the work is grounded in real world experiences of those who practise systems leadership and that the meanings derived are co-produced.

Aims and methods of the research

- review the international literature and extract core concepts; (literature review)
- test concepts against the experiential knowledge of those working in leadership roles in a range of public services; (29 in depth qualitative 'strategic interviews')
- explore if, and how, systems leadership thinking and behaviours play out in 'real world' case study scenarios (leadership case studies in three English sites: Barnet, Bradford, North-West London)
- explore international perspectives through short reviews and case studies in four other jurisdictions (four international reports: USA, Canada, Australia, Denmark)
- co-construction with a group of leaders in public and voluntary services from the UK

Who is the research for?

This paper is not only intended for those who occupy formally designated positions of leadership in public and voluntary services. Effective systems leadership both enables, and is defined by, the distribution of leadership across a wide range of roles and levels. This paper is therefore intended for those in leadership positions whether formally designated or otherwise, and whether actual and prospective. A wide range of participants provided perspectives to the study and this paper will also be relevant to those who work in regulatory or improvement bodies as well as in direct service agencies; and to elected Members in local and national government as well as appointed officials. The research as a whole, including the detail of the source papers, should also be of relevance to researchers and students interested in improving the impact and effective implementation of services to children, families, and people in health and social care services.

Reading the synthesis paper

This paper is a **synthesis paper** from a project that combined a number of empirical elements, each utilising different methodologies. This synthesis paper aims to be high-level, concise and integrative rather than comprehensive. In addition, each empirical element is fully documented in its own right, in **seven source papers**, which are accessible by hyperlinks within the text of this core paper, or downloadable in pdf format. Interested readers are strongly encouraged to read the source papers, which contain more detail, many real world examples and more nuance than is possible in this synthesis. The synthesis paper moves through a sequence of research questions which were used to structure the enquiry and, at each stage, summarises the findings from the various empirical elements of the study that address that question or related issues. The paper includes extracts from the supplementary empirical outputs, including quotations from interviews. These are shown in 'pull-out' boxes, and page references/hyperlinks to the specific sections of the source papers are provided so that readers may scrutinise the detailed basis of the assertions that we make.

More detail about the study and its core elements can be found in the following sections.

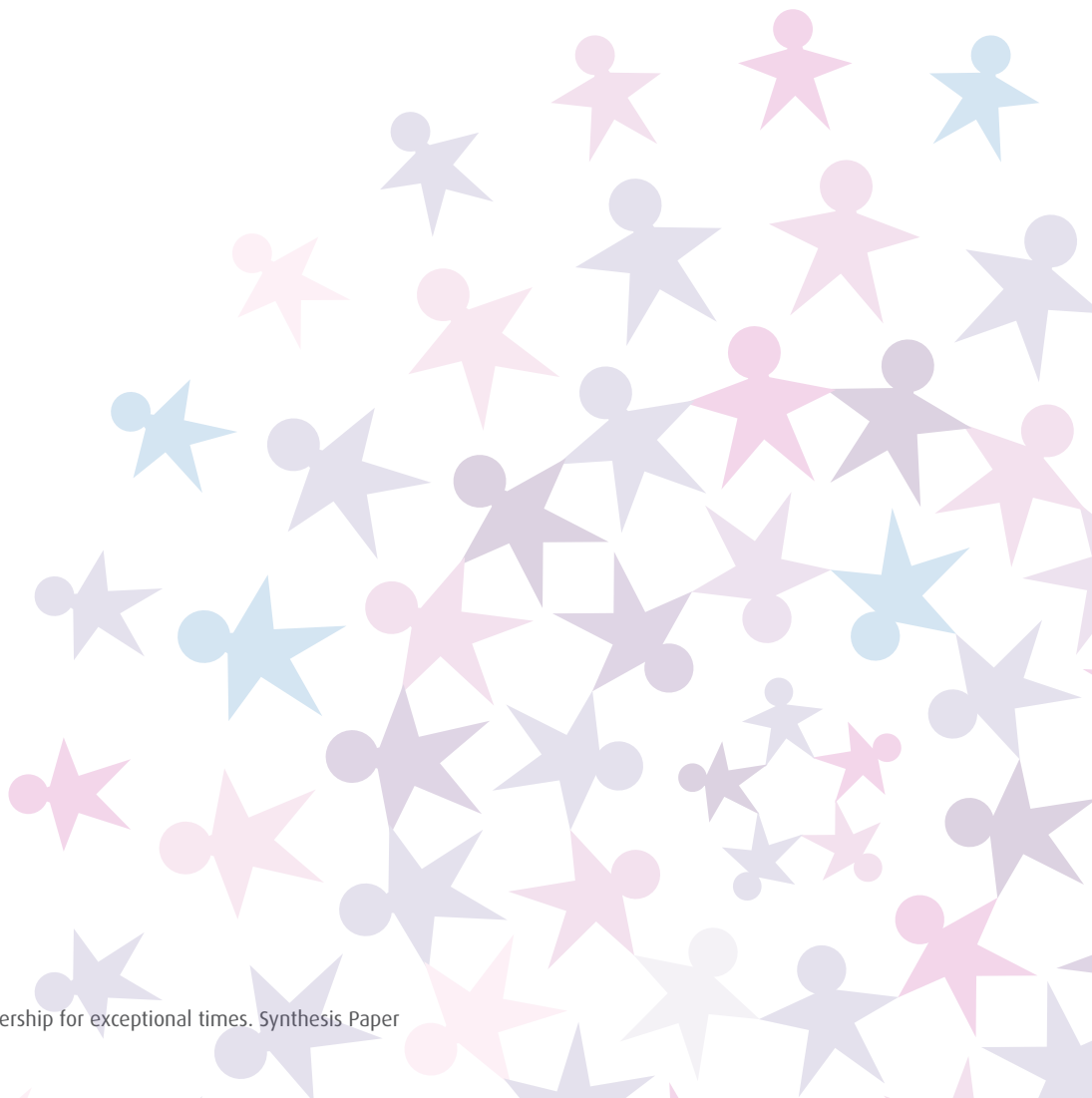
The range of participants in the study

Sectors/agencies

- Local authority corporate leads
- Local authority elected Members
- Children's social care
- Adult social care
- Health
- Police
- Probation
- Youth Justice
- Education
- Children's voluntary organisations
- Inspection and regulatory bodies
- Improvement bodies
- Professional associations

Job roles

- CEOs
- Directors
- Assistant directors, commissioning directors, heads of services
- Local government Lead/Cabinet Members



Section Two

Guide to the key elements of the study

Objectives

The overarching objectives of the research were to explore how systems leadership is defined and why it is important; what it involves in practice, its enabling and inhibiting conditions; how it links with improved outcomes; and how capacity for systems leadership could be developed.

Key elements

The research used a multi-method design with four key elements. Each element was intended to illuminate a different aspect of systems leadership: theory; practice experience; real world illustration in relation to a specific case example; and international perspectives. Each element is written up, in full with all quotes and references, in a different '**source paper**'. The key messages of the source papers are synthesised within this core '**synthesis paper**' which is intended as a concise and accessible overview of the main learning.

Literature review

A selective review of the international English-medium literature on whole systems, leadership in complex systems, and leadership as part of public service implementation was undertaken. Over 300 papers were reviewed and those judged most relevant are summarised ([Source Paper 1](#)).

Strategic Interviews

Twenty-nine in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out with strategic leaders operating in public service systems that include or connect with children's services ([Source Paper 2](#)). A sample profile was developed and potential participants nominated by the Virtual Staff College, the Research Advisory Group, the Co-Production Group and the research team. The intention was to interview people who operate as systems leaders and who were likely to recognise the concept and to have particular insights to share.

Source paper 1:

Literature Review

David Welbourn, Deborah Ghate and Jane Lewis, 2013

Source paper 2:

The views of systems leaders

Jane Lewis, Deborah Ghate and David Welbourn 2013

Leaders interviewed were working at different levels and in different sectors and roles, within seven groups:

- Local authority Chief Executives
- Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) including those with both social care and education backgrounds
- Directors of Children's and Adult Services (DCASs)
- Staff working at second and third tier in local authorities (posts such as Assistant Director and Head of Service): including in children's services, in central roles such as policy and commissioning and in strongly multi-agency areas of work such as the Troubled Families Initiative
- Third sector leaders working in child and family services
- Leaders in other public sectors: covering health, adult social care, probation, youth justice, and police¹⁵
- Leaders in wider stakeholder organisations: central government, Ofsted, the Office of the Children's Commissioner, and ADASS (the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services)

Leadership case studies in England

Case study areas were selected in collaboration with the Research Advisory Group and the Co-Production Group to represent a selection of 'systems leadership scenarios': real world examples of systems leadership initiatives in health and social care, designed to illuminate the workings of systems leadership in practice and its challenges as well as successes. The case studies were:

- Barnet Troubled Families
- North-West London Integrated Care Pilot (ICP)
- Bradford Total Place

All the case study initiatives were chosen by the group as likely to be examples of promising practice in systems leadership. Each case study was carried out in April-June 2013 using a mix of review of documentary evidence and three to five qualitative telephone interviews with key leaders involved in the local initiative. Brief summaries are given overleaf and, in addition to the source paper, a one-page summary of each scenario can be found online at www.virtualstaffcollege.co.uk/dcs-leadership-provision/systems-leadership and at the beginning of [Source Paper 3](#).

Source paper 3:

UK leadership scenarios

Jane Lewis, David Welbourn,
and Deborah Gbate 2013



Barnet Troubled Families

This is a case study of an initiative within an outer London borough that began life in 2010, and is now part of a high-profile national programme funded in part by central government. The aim of the work is to create an integrated approach (across multiple local agencies) to working with families who are prolific and costly consumers of a wide range of local public services including those associated with unemployment, crime and antisocial behaviour. The work, which aims to improve a range of outcomes for children, families and communities is led by the Council, and is now based in a specialist Troubled Families Division that co-ordinates a multi-agency team each holding a small number of cases that include clinical supervision. Over time, the initiative has included at least 13 separate divisions and agencies both inside and outside the local authority across social care, police, youth justice, probation, housing and health.

North-West London Integrated Care Pilot (ICP)

This case study focuses on a systems leadership initiative led by health in the newly created 'tri-borough' of Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster in central London. The pilot started in 2010 and is on-going. It targets elderly people over 75 and adults with diabetes and involves co-ordinating care by 95 GP practices, two local acute hospitals, community and mental health services, adult social services and key voluntary organisations. It has the aim of reducing emergency admissions to hospital, nursing or care homes by one patient each month per participating GP.

Bradford Total Place

Bradford, a metropolitan district council in the Yorkshire and Humber region, took part during 2009-2010 as one of 13 areas included in the pilot of Total Place. This initiative was a Government sponsored programme exploring the total public budget spent in a community as a means of stimulating new ways for different public services to work more effectively together. By exposing gaps and overlaps between services, it was hoped to reduce total spending whilst continuing to improve outcomes. The programme was discontinued following the general election of 2010 and the subsequent change of government. Bradford Council chose three thematic areas of 'transition' for vulnerable groups. These were: children leaving care; adult offenders leaving prison; and discharge from acute care of elderly people with mental health problems.

Leadership scenarios:

- exploring local multi-agency initiatives through a systems leadership 'lens'
- methods:
 - documentary analysis
 - qualitative interviews with 3-5 key leaders

Barnet Troubled Families:

Integrating work across multiple agencies with families who are most costly to public services especially related to unemployment, crime and anti-social behaviour

NW London Integrated Care Pilot:

Coordinating care across health, social care and voluntary sectors for elderly people and adults with diabetes to reduce emergency hospital admissions

Bradford Total Place:

A 'whole area' approach to budgeting and service design, focusing on looked after children leaving care, discharge from acute hospital services of elderly people with mental health problems, and adult offenders leaving prison

International perspectives

USA, Canada, Denmark, Australia

Four short pieces (**Source Papers 4a-4d**) were commissioned from a small group of international researchers and practice leaders working in the field of child, youth and family services in other countries with developed children's services systems. International contributors were asked to summarise the key features of their own system(s) for children's services and briefly review the literature on systems leadership (to the extent that it existed) in their own jurisdictions in order to explore the extent to which the concepts and practices emerging in the UK-based study resonated in other countries. Each contributor also carried out research amongst local policy and practice organisations in order to explore practical interest in, and manifestations of, systems leadership. These contributions have enabled the researchers to extend our understanding of systems leadership and have been incorporated into the analysis at key points.

A short overview of the four papers can be found online at www.virtualstaffcollege.co.uk/dcs-leadership-provision/systems-leadership/international-perspectives/

The full reports can be found on the Colebrooke Centres website at www.cevi.org.uk

Key to references

Source Paper 1	Literature Review
Source Paper 2	Strategic Interviews
Source Paper 3	Leadership Scenarios
Source Paper 4a	Systems Leadership in USA
Source Paper 4b	Systems Leadership in Canada
Source Paper 4c	Systems Leadership in Denmark
Source Paper 4d	Systems Leadership in Australia

Source Paper 4a:

Systems leadership for children's services in the USA

Melissa Van Dyke, 2013
National Implementation Research Network, University of North Carolina

Source Paper 4b:

Systems leadership for children's services in Canada

Brenda Moody, Aron Shlonsky, and Deborah Goodman, 2013
Factor-Inwentash School of Social Work, University of Toronto

Source Paper 4c:

Systems leadership for children's services in Denmark

Bianca Albers, 2013
Familie & Evidens Center, Copenhagen

Source Paper 4d:

Systems leadership for children's services in Australia

Ilan Katz, 2013
Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales



Section Three

The public service context for systems leadership

The context of complexity

A 'balancing' response to paradox

The primary importance of systems leadership rests in its perception as the best way of responding to the complexity of human systems: in other words, a recognition that working 'in the zone of complexity' requires complex responses. (Source Paper 4A). In that human systems are known to have analogies in living systems, the biological sciences and especially evolutionary biology demonstrate that non-linear and 'adaptive' behaviours are to be expected. If we accept the large body of writing which claims that modern systems are characterised above all by uncertainty and paradox (Source Paper 1), then we accept that system problems will likely be unresponsive to simple, linear, or technical command-based solutions (Source Paper 1) but will require skilful balancing of opposing forces in a kind of 'creative tension'.

Flux conditions as ideal for systems leadership

Some go further, maintaining that complexity is seen as the condition most ideal for systems leadership, because stable systems lack the incentive for change, risk-taking and innovation. Innovation scientists talk of the necessity of 'disturbing the system' in order to introduce change (Source Paper 1); another relevant construct, again drawn from biological sciences, is that of beneficial toxicity (the idea that living organisms to some extent maintain health only in the presence of mild levels of toxicity that promote the formation of protective antibodies), or the 'disequilibrium essential for growth and stability' (Source Paper 1). Leadership theorists view the creation of 'adaptive tension' as the condition that 'creates a sense of urgency to act and to elaborate strategy, information and adaptability' to achieve systems change (Source Paper 4A).

Paradox

...a state in which two diametrically opposing forces or ideas are simultaneously present, neither of which can ever be resolved or eliminated. There is, therefore, no possibility of a choice between the opposing poles or of locating them in different spheres. Instead, what is required is a different kind of logic, such as ...dialectical logic. (Source Paper 1)

"(The current level of flux is) a huge opportunity. All the rules are changing, and the point at which the system becomes solid again, everything's baked in, and then you can't change it for another decade. It's a bit like tectonic plates, shifting - while that is happening, people are open to doing things differently. You've got lots of new organisations who aren't particularly clear about how they're going to operate, so they don't have a fixed view. For me this is a huge, incredible opportunity."
(Public Sector Leader)

Allows redesign & repurposing of resources

Systems leadership is also a response to complexity, in the sense that it allows the redesign (or 'repurposing') of systems around service users and their needs and perspectives, creating coherence in place of incoherence. Basing services around people and their needs, rather than around agencies is increasingly recognised as the optimal way to tackle wicked problems and service duplications, and systems leadership explicitly recognises this. It means tackling component parts together rather than sequentially, recognising interdependencies, and creating something of which the whole is more than the sum of its parts ([Source Paper 2](#)). We discuss some concrete examples of how this is achieved in subsequent sections.

The social and economic context

A response to 'wicked issues'

In relation to wicked issues, the theory tells us that only cross-systemic approaches are likely to offer any kind of effective response. The experiential learning of the leaders to whom we spoke was indeed that the capacity to respond would only be found by combining effort and resources. Many interviewees thought that systems leadership was the *only* kind of leadership that could deliver under these circumstances, because it is the only form of leadership that can range broadly enough over the complex multidimensional web of causal factors, and the only methodology that allows for deep enough strategic interrogation of the relationship between wicked issues and the multiple agencies who try to respond to them.

"It is about galvanising the collective resource - money and expertise - from different parts of a system in order to achieve something that you couldn't necessarily achieve individually, or if you did there would be a lot of duplication and wasted effort. In current austerity times, ironically it's even more important that we do that." (LA second/third tier leader)

Case study: Bradford Total Place

An approach to tackling wicked issues

Leaders participated in large-scale, intensive multi-agency workshops aimed at identifying weaknesses in service response around a selection of the most pressing and costly local issues. Participants were clear that the problems faced by those making the greatest demands across services are wicked problems that cannot be addressed superficially or in separate service compartments. Leaders had to be committed to 'diving' deeply into the details, working intensively with other agencies, and listening attentively to the users' voices, with the uniting and primary purpose of achieving sustainable outcomes for individual users. ([Source Paper 3](#))

Systems leadership cannot do everything

Having said that, it is also clear that systems leadership cannot, on its own, solve wicked issues. It cannot remedy the absence of basic services and basic capacity: if the systems themselves are too depleted, even transformational leadership will have limited effect. Thus, whilst systems leadership may be especially useful, even necessary, in times of severe resource constraint, it is not a magical solution that will entirely offset the effects.

We see some signs of how this might play out in the real world in the illustration provided by all of our UK case studies, which each in different ways came up against practical challenges that at least for a while, held up progress. The international reviews each make the point that moving from leadership to action requires implementing **effective services**, and that poorly managed or poorly delivered services will still deliver poor outcomes, no matter how inspired their leadership (see especially [Source Paper 4A](#) and [Source Paper 4D](#))

Systems leadership as a response to ‘burning platforms’

In all of the case studies conducted to inform this research, both in the UK and elsewhere, the spark that had ignited systems leadership activity had arisen in response to a specific crisis – either unexpected and needing instant response, or anticipated and more slow-burning. In the NW London ICP, the impetus was an urgent need to control the rising costs of inpatient hospital admissions ([Source Paper 3](#)). In Barnet, like many of our strategic interviewees, case study participants stressed the burning platform¹⁶ (as it has become known in the management jargon) of rising social need and diminishing economic resource presently faced by all leaders of health and care services for people as a forceful prompt to systems leadership.

Systems leadership also as a response to ‘burning ambitions’

Interviewees were however at pains to stress that the imperative towards systems leadership does not come only from the negative forces of crisis and austerity. Many talked not just in terms of burning platforms but also about burning ambitions or aspirations¹⁶.

In the **Barnet Troubled Families** case study, for example, the clear narrative used to bring many partners to the table around a multi-systemic and multi-funded initiative was around *“being better, for less”*: not just reducing the costs of provision (though this was certainly part of the picture), but substantially improving the quality of what remained and thereby reducing demand in the first instance.

“... (A) bloated environment is not as conducive to system leadership as a more constricted environment where you’re up against it. (But) there may be a point at which it can actually be too tough. There’s a great place in which it is really tough, you’re really up against it, you’ve got to use all your creativity, you’ve got to use all your resource. And then that (final) straw breaks the camel’s back. And we are towards that end of the equation System leadership can’t do everything.”
(DCAS)

“Actually, we can’t deliver most of the big change programmes without other people and their organisations. We’ve probably pushed as much as we can with our own resource and yet, the problems are still there.” (LA second/third tier leader)

Does systems leadership improve outcomes?

A theory of change is not well articulated

Systems leadership thinking is driven by a strong focus on outcomes for service users. But does systems leadership *produce* better results for local people? Does it increase the probability of good outcomes? What do people mean by 'effective systems leadership'?

In fact, neither the literature review we carried out nor the empirical data drawn directly from practice suggested that the theory of change for how systems leadership connects with outcomes for service users is well developed, conceptually or in practice. Quantitative data connecting the practice of systems leadership with outcome metrics do not exist. In part, this is due to outcome research not having previously identified and measured systems leadership as potential causal agent. But it may also reflect the weaknesses of evaluation science, which has yet to fully identify the active ingredients of effective implementation with such a high degree of specificity.

But absence of systems leadership is associated with failure

Nevertheless, as the literature review makes clear, the management and business sciences have amassed a fair degree of strong qualitative case study data that suggest that an absence of systems leadership is often associated with service and system failure, and it has become almost a truism in analyses of critical incidents in failure of care that 'system failure' lies at the root.

Case Study: Barnet Troubled Families

A burning platform and a burning ambition

In 2010, Barnet Council was facing massive cuts and rising demand for services. Leaders agreed the Council would need a 'strategic and logical response' – which had to be not just about cutting services, but reducing and preventing demand by intervening early. This was *"a one-time opportunity to make lasting changes to the way we deliver children's services"* because *"(the Council) wanted to get out of this recession in good shape, across all public sector partners."* Thus there was both a burning platform and a burning ambition behind the work. (Source Paper 3)



Distinction between process outcomes and end outcomes for service users

It may be important here to distinguish between process or 'implementation' outcomes and outcomes from service use (so-called 'treatment' or 'intervention' outcomes). The study clearly showed that effective systems leadership plays an important facilitative role in creating the 'hospitable conditions' for services to be effective for end-users. This, we now know, may be even more important than having the 'right' services in place¹⁷. As the strategic interview analysis showed (Source Paper 2), an important way in which systems leadership can contribute to improved outcomes is through surfacing its common purpose and a shared set of goals, or by articulating the ambition for improved outcomes. This sharpens the focus as well as the use of resources by each organisation, dismantles silos and elevates these higher goals above individual organisational goals or parts of the system. It may even extend capacity. As one participant noted, these shared discussions across otherwise disconnected parts of the system *"Create insights... and if that's sophisticated enough in the way it is presented and the way it is analysed, then the issues emerge. Really big themes that touch people round the table."* (Source Paper 2)

Thus, if there is an emergent theory of change for systems leadership, a key element may be this: that in effective cross-systems approaches, leadership is linked to outcomes by means of increasing the participation of key stakeholders, whilst simultaneously regulating and reducing the destructive conflict between stakeholders that can otherwise undermine change initiatives¹⁸.

The **Bradford Total Place case study** shows how this was expected to play out in the real world. Although the one-year pilot could not validate the theory in practice, the final report from the pilot identified the potential to achieve substantial savings: as much as £8.1bn reduction in public spending across the three thematic areas being tackled. The savings were deemed achievable because the care model that was being created would share responsibility across multiple service areas for the life outcomes of the user, rather than individual outcomes within each service area.

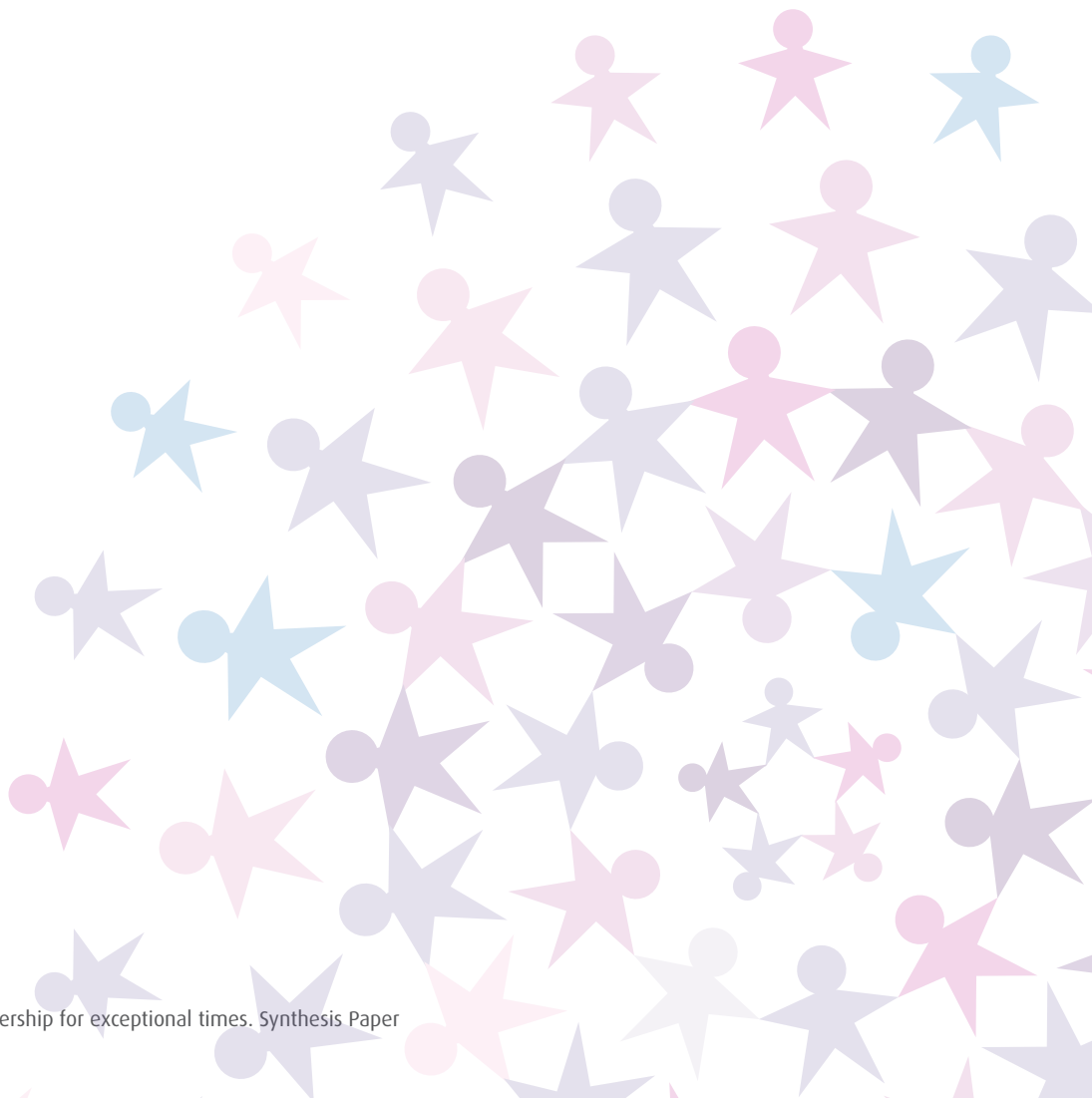
"The language of outcomes gives you permission to work in a particular way It's who's best placed to do what? ...So, it's changing the nature of those conversations that has the biggest influence."
(DCS)

Case study: Bradford Total Place

Getting to outcomes through systems leadership

The process of working together at depth to map out the consequences for the individual arising out of the usual unconnected service responses allowed local interventions to be shifted significantly upstream of where the more complex problems begin to occur.

The programme appears to have been successful in identifying both financial and outcome benefits, and the relevant costs and resource requirements for implementing change. It is abundantly clear from those interviewed that the local successes have been achieved by building a compelling purpose – a golden thread – around the inspiration of achieving better outcomes for individuals. (LS 3 p32)



Section Four

What is systems leadership?

Systems and systems leadership

In this section we review key messages from the literature relevant to understanding the core constructs behind systems leadership, and analyse the descriptions provided by participants in strategic interviews and case studies of how systems leadership is practiced in principle, and in the real world. To define systems leadership, it is helpful first to define some related terms in relation to **systems** and **systems thinking**. The literature review, and a prior paper by Welbourn and colleagues¹⁹, discuss this in greater detail.

Systems are distinguished from organisations by their degree of interconnectedness

The literature defines a system, as distinct from an organisation, by its degree of **interconnectedness** and **interdependency**. Systems (plural) in turn implies interconnectedness between one system and another. Thus one might speak of the 'health system', the 'social care system' or the 'child safeguarding system' as separate systems, each subsuming multiple organisations.

Complex systems and complex adaptive systems: unpredictability and self-adjustment

Further terms that are highly relevant to our definition of systems leadership are **complex system**, and **complex adaptive system**. A complex system is *"one in which even knowing everything about the system is not sufficient to predict precisely what will happen"* and a complex adaptive system is *"one in which the system itself learns from experience how to respond most effectively to achieve the desired goals, however much the external circumstances change."*¹⁹

Defining organisations and systems

At its simplest, an organisation could be defined as a self-contained entity where there is some degree of freedom insulating it from direct control from its external context... In contrast, a system is an interconnected and interdependent series of entities, where decisions and actions in one entity are consequential to other neighbouring entities. ([Source Paper 1](#))

Analogies with living systems; Non-linearity and adaptive qualities resist technical and logic-driven solutions

It quickly becomes apparent that when dealing with such systems, there are limits to the extent to which technical and logic-driven approaches (based on data, information, and calculation of probabilities) to leadership can be expected to be successful. The key parallels here, discussed further in the literature review in relation to the field known as systems thinking, are of living systems and organisms, with their characteristic non-linearity and adaptive (self-adjusting) mechanisms that seek and use feedback to reinstate equilibrium under conditions of external pressure and imbalance.

Power and force are less effective than influence and nudge

It also becomes obvious once we think of human systems in this way, that 'control' becomes much less useful as a concept, whereas 'influence and nudge'¹¹ assume greater significance as ways of achieving change. Where complexity tips over into chaos, command and control fails entirely, and it is the miniscule perturbations in the system that become amplified in the feedback system and that ultimately shape how the system evolves in the longer term.

Under pressure, simple systems become more complex

A further key insight relevant to the linkage between the notion of complexity of systems, and leadership of systems, is that *"systems that do not normally display the full characteristics of complexity can be readily tipped over into complex behaviours under adverse pressure from external factors"*²⁰ highlighting that in the current context, even what were once straightforward leadership challenges may now be much less so. In a sense, because of the interconnectedness and interdependency that are now the norm, the research suggests that every decision is a systems decision in the modern context of public services. In the opinion of many, systems thinking therefore underpins (or should underpin) all leadership thinking.

"For me, (it) is about understanding that an action, a decision, a behaviour in one link of the chain, or one bit of the Venn diagram that overlaps, only makes sense when it's related to a number of other decisions that have been made, either at the same time, or in the same space. So ...no decision is isolated. Each decision has intended and unintended consequences on the rest of the place, or the rest of the system"
(LA Chief Executive)

Systems leadership in practice

A collective activity

Systems leadership is, perhaps uniquely amongst other popular formulations for effective leadership, defined by being a collective activity, or *“a social process emerging through the interaction of multiple actors.”* (Source Paper 1) Thus, we talk of systems leaders, who together engage in systems leadership. In the review paper on systems leadership in the Canadian context, the authors similarly note, quoting a case study participant: *“Systems leadership is working as a collective to achieve something we couldn’t do alone.”* (Source Paper 4B)

Differences in scale, emphasis and purpose between systems leadership and leading in partnership: Power is shared, not pooled

Although some study participants spoke about systems leadership in terms of the related constructs of partnership and collaboration, it is relatively easy to distinguish what makes systems leadership distinctive. Strategic interview participants noted differences in scale, emphasis and purpose between ‘leaders working in partnership’ and true ‘systems leadership’. A key distinction made was that the relationships in systems leadership are based on achieving goals that go **beyond individual organisational goals**. Thus, whereas in partnerships leaders represent their organisation, in systems leadership they represent elements of systems. Partnership is seen as involving organisational goals which are aligned, but systems leadership as involving goals which are genuinely joint. Power is actively shared, rather than pooled for mutual convenience and benefit. As one participant in the strategic interviews commented, speaking of the properties of this form of power-sharing: *“There’s a brilliant (local authority) chief exec ... who talks about this so compellingly, and he says when you give away power you increase it manifold, because it’s (no longer) just your power.”* (Source Paper 2)

Ceding organisational goals and power

This might, at times, involve actively ceding organisational goals. The UK and international case studies showed how this plays out in real world initiatives, often requiring those who initiate an innovative project to step back to allow others to shape the work and take ownership, including of resources, as in the case study of the **North West London ICP case study**. In systems leadership, the sense of shared purpose was described in strategic interviews as *“neutralising”* organisational agendas. (Source Paper 2)

“If I say I’m going to work in partnership with you, if I say I’m going to collaborate with you, I’m doing it on my terms. If I say I’m going to share leadership with you - which is what systems leaders need to do: they need to share leadership - I’m doing it on our terms as we define them. That for me is the single biggest difference.” (Other Public Sector Leader)

Case study: North West London ICP

Ceding organisational goals and power

Although the integrated care pilot was initially developed and spearheaded by Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, they gradually ceded both leadership, ownership, and resources to a multi-organisational partnership in order to create a more equal partnership in which they were not dominant. What was right for the patients was not always right for the individual organisations, and Imperial in particular had to commit to a programme which would inevitably impact adversely on their long term income. (Source Paper 3)

Many systems leaders in both the UK and international research stressed the absolute importance of understanding the power of 'magnanimity' in this context, not as an end in itself but as a fundamental part of the working model of systems leadership, played out through willingness to cede individual organisational or personal gains in the common interest. All organisations ultimately gain because the collective goal is, in some way, beneficial to all – but it is a paradox of systems leadership that *"to gain more, you need to let go."* (Source Paper 2)

Different and special kinds of peer relationships

Relationships are also at the heart of systems leadership, and making and maintaining relationships across the systems 'web' is the key to achieving the goals. Through these relationships, influencing and nudging one another towards the collective goals can take place. As one Local Authority Chief Executive described it: *"On a number of levels, so whether it's just my own organisation or whether it's these wider partnerships that we operate within, my job is to do the knitting, to make the connections or help the connections be made - it can be both."* (Source Paper 2)

Although partnership working was also described as based on relationships, these tended to involve narrower, project-based goals rather than whole systems change, leading to (and requiring) less enduring relationships. Systems leadership on the other hand rests on peer relationships of a different kind: these are described as inherently more conflicted and less 'comfortable' than in partnerships, mainly because withdrawing when things get difficult, or because organisational goals are not being met, is no longer an option. They are necessarily characterised by higher than usual levels of trust and mutual respect, which have to be earned. Analysis within the strategic interviews (Source Paper 2) of the many comments made about relationships and their significance to systems leadership showed how much of the energy of leaders goes into this important element.

International Case Study: Canadian NGO

Moving beyond organisational agendas

One case study from a non-governmental child welfare organisation, quoted the Executive leader of an NGO thus: *"Seeing with a broad lens and moving beyond self-protection is crucial. We need to collectively focus on what we want to achieve for the whole child across the whole system. A common vision and language based on shared values and beliefs is needed for change to occur."* (Source Paper 4B)

Strategic Interviews

The significance of relationships

Relationships in systems leadership are brokered by reference to shared outcomes and based on recognising mutual gain. They are about honesty, trust, respect, transparency and credibility; but also about empathy for, and understanding of, each other positions, pressures and organisational contexts. They become the foundation for being able to take risks together, to live in ambiguity and uncertainty, and to cede individual power for the greater good. Building and sustaining the relationships that underpin systems leadership requires time and commitment: while the swan apparently glides gracefully and effortlessly across the water, a great deal of energetic paddling is going on below the surface. (Source Paper 2)

Robust conversations, not cosy relationships

Effective relationships that underpin systems leadership were however viewed as very definitely “*not cosy and comfortable.*” (SL p11) On the contrary, participants stressed that relationships should allow disagreement, challenge and conflict and ‘robust conversations’. In systems leadership, this is a sign of the quality of the relationship and its fitness for the purpose of driving through change. Indeed, there was widespread suspicion of networks where relationships were too comfortable, and a view that the most productive relationships were often those that are difficult and that hold people in ‘creative tension’.

And in the **case study from Denmark**, a similar theme was highlighted, where strong prior relationships allowed participating leaders to face up to conflict, and work through it by means of ‘courageous conversations’²¹.

Value-driven relationships

Relationships in systems leadership are described as bound together principally by the **shared values** that participants hold in common, generally focused on the potential benefits to service users. Both the literature and the data gathered from the field strongly emphasised the significance of a value base in systems leadership (mirrored, for individual systems leaders, by strong personal core values; see the next section). Values are the engine of systems leadership, and exercising effective systems leadership requires engagement of people’s intrinsic, rather than extrinsic motivations. According to the literature, extrinsic rewards and motivators matter much less in driving innovation than allowing space for innovators to display their own autonomy and mastery, and the core challenge of systems leadership (and a core indicator of whether it is taking place) is the ability to generate this across the collectivity of leaders, and those being led. (Source Paper 1)

Coherence around a shared vision

In strategic interviews, this process is described as the development of “*a compelling vision*”, “*a common purpose*”, “*a moral purpose*”, “*a moral imperative*” and “*a shared narrative*” about objectives and intentions (Source Paper 2), with joint responsibility for the role in driving the vision acknowledged by each player. A guiding principle or set of values are seen as key to building the coalition necessary to achieve effective systems leadership.

“If I don’t think it’s going the right way, I have a robust discussion with them, but I (can do this) because I’ve built the relationship underneath. The same thing applies in any kind of systems partnership. You’ve got to be able to tackle the issues when they arise and it’s easier to do that if you know that underneath it all you’ve got a robust and good working relationship.”
(Stakeholder)

International Case Study: Denmark

Relationships, conflict and courageous conversations

Speaking of a cross municipality leadership initiative to create partnerships to deliver a suite of evidence-based programmes, the Head of a local Centre stressed the need to coordinate positions and perspectives within the partnership of leaders. This could sometimes be challenging: “*Surely, not all our discussions are quiet ones - sometimes we need to cross swords, weigh the specific local interest against the partnership interests, and see if we can reach an agreement*”. He noted that this was possible to do only because of strong, personal relationships that had been forged, able to withstand conflict in the context of mutual respect and understanding.
(Source Paper 4C)

A relentless focus on outcomes for service users, putting users at the heart of the vision

Moreover, a focus on shared objectives and **common outcomes** for defined groups of users that can **only be achieved collectively** by working across multiple entities was also described as a defining characteristic of systems leadership. Better 'systemic' outcomes for service users were relentlessly stressed in interviews and case study scenarios as both the ultimate goal of systems leadership, and the driving rationale. In some cases, and for leaders in some agencies, this came from a shift in organisational self-definition from 'agency' to 'part of the community'. One Canadian case study participant noted: *"Positioning ourselves as an agency that is truly part of the community has changed the way people see us. We are not only a child protection agency, but part of a broad community that serves children and youth."* (Source Paper 4C)

In case studies, all participants referred to the centrality of these ideas and how focusing on users' needs served to instil the necessary determination in groups working together to push past the practical and operational obstacles that arose in the course of driving through systems change. For some, the emphasis on the achievement of outcomes as only possible by means of whole-system alignment around common goals, entailed a focus on how 'the spaces between the systems' hold the key to unlocking better results (Source Paper 2). In other words, systems leadership allows a view of the 'whole system', including the gaps between what should ideally be joined up.

The significance of user perspectives and user voices

Several of the case studies showed how this can work in a real world context. They illustrated that in systems leadership, one of the most powerful transformational elements is the impact of hearing users' own accounts of what they want from services, and how services have often failed them. The role of **first-hand narrative** and the detail of **service users' stories** appears to be particularly powerful in unlocking understanding about how services can be better aligned across whole systems and re-enforcing determination to achieve this. In the Barnet Troubled Families case study, a key meeting involved senior leaders from a range of agencies and 'veteran' service users, long known to local agencies and perhaps considered beyond help by some. The stories heard were reported to be highly influential in creating a deeper conviction amongst agency leaders that joint systems leadership might be able to unlock otherwise intractable problems.

Case study: North West London ICP

Putting users at the heart of the vision

At the outset, local partners perceived the project as a bid for further dominance by the Trust and a threat to the independence of other providers, including the GP practices who are predominantly independent businesses. But these initial fears were offset by the recognition that the proposed direction was right for patients. It was said that this alone generated a shared desire to find a way forwards, and enabled the different parties to persevere, despite the fears and anxieties. (Source Paper 3)

In the **Bradford Total Place case study**, hearing user voices was central to the work, and described as 'life-changing' by some of the case study participants:

Outcomes not process: Not how things are done, but why they are done and what will be achieved

Related to this, systems leadership is distinctive in its focus on **product, not process**. In other words, the idea of shared vision is a vision for outcomes, not a model of the pathways or procedures by which these may be achieved.

To go further, in systems leadership there is a clear understanding that the **same outcomes may be reached by entirely different routes** by different parts of the system. Thus, although what is done (in terms of results achieved) is a driving and unifying force, this has somewhat more to do with values, principles and intentions - **why** things are done - and somewhat less to do with **how** things are done (the operational detail). So long as the 'why' is aligned across systems, the 'how' will naturally vary and the path taken matters less than the (anticipated) outcome. In a sense, systems leadership is viewed as a bridge between collective ambition to achieve specific outcomes and the specific tasks and behaviours that will lead to the desired outcomes.

This is not to say that procedures are not important elements of effective service delivery; just that in systems leadership, the emphasis is not task-focused or concerned with finding the single 'right way' to get to an outcome. Rather, is about organising many players, each of whom may take their own pathway, around a set of common objectives.

Challenges to the notion of 'best practice'

This challenges some notions of implementation 'best practice' and, of course, brings the discourse about systems leadership into conflict with the current preoccupation with target-driven regulation and inspection of quality. In the literature, we find forceful and explicit critiques of how target-driven regimes and 'deliverology' undermine systems leadership ([Source Paper 1](#)), and in the interview data we heard prominent criticisms of how prescribing 'the right route' to outcomes by means of measurements of single organisational or agency achievement made systems leadership almost impossible. We pick up this theme later in Section Six, in the discussion of how environment and culture 'authorise' (or not) the thinking and behaviours of systems leadership, and how the development of capacity for systems leadership may require different ways to assess suitability from the popular task-focused and competency-based appraisal systems that are now the norm for public sector employers.

Case study: Bradford Total Place

User perspectives and professional understandings

In each of the transition theme areas, the methodology involved a series of large-scale intense workshops designed to establish a shared understanding of how the transition was experienced by service users. This process was always a revelation to the various provider agencies who had historically viewed the services only through their own lens. As providers heard the distress caused by dysfunctional interfaces this experience was also profoundly emotional on occasions. Specific examples that emerged were used to debunk a number of myths, change priorities and create a more empathetic approach to users' needs. ([Source Paper 3](#))

"If you start with a consensus of what it is we're trying to do, then those conversations become a lot healthier. So you might still fall out about particular things but (those things are just) the means to the ends, rather than the ends themselves."
(Public Sector leader)

A prominent role for conflict

The prominence given to the place of conflict is key to understanding systems leadership. As we noted earlier, conflict of various forms is the inevitable outcome of the turbulence and paradox of complex systems, as organisations attempt to respond to, and resolve, the contradictions and opposing forces that surface. Strong values and the personal passion of individual leaders (see below) also bring conflict, given that in public service, the *value proposition*²² is rarely simple. These often surface around issues of control over money and resources, as all three UK leadership case studies clearly demonstrate ([Source Paper 3](#)). **The Barnet Troubled Families case study** illustrates several different aspects of conflict that arose over time and at different levels.

Disruptive innovation and disturbing the system

In systems leadership, conflict is seen not just as something to be ‘managed’ or regulated, but as an integral positive force, arising out of the inherently contested nature of the public value proposition. Many accounts of key leadership skills for complex environments, including work on *adaptive leadership*²³, refer to the central role of leaders in responding to and managing difference, conflict and dilemma. For example, Heifetz and colleagues⁶ refer to working *in the zone of productive distress*, noting that as in physical systems, in organisations a degree of disturbance to organisational equilibrium is optimal for development and adaptive innovation. If this is true within single organisations, it appears to be even more so in a whole-systems context, with its turbulent process of bringing diverse voices to the table and in identifying goals that transcend individual or organisational agendas. Systems leadership draws on notions of *disruptive innovation* ([Source Paper 1](#)) and the importance of ‘disturbing the system’ to create the energy for change. Conflict is therefore to be expected, harnessed, and even welcomed in systems leadership.

Case study: Barnet Troubled Families

Conflict

Conflict surfaced during the work, at institutional, professional, and personal levels. At the institutional level, this was described as *“very ‘British’ conflict: the sort where everyone says ‘yes’ at the meeting, but then don’t actually deliver”*. Data-sharing difficulties exemplified this dynamic and took a long time to resolve (and are described as still on-going). At personal levels, conflicts surfaced outright around ‘how far’ and how radically the systems leadership change agenda was ready to develop, despite shared commitment to the ultimate goal, and around resources and the right to control them. The case study illustrated how conflict is an anticipated and inherent element of systems change, and that effective systems leadership involves willingness to ‘face up’ to and acknowledge conflict, and sometimes to cede ground and allow different pathways to the ultimate goals, in order to allow the work to progress.

'Cooking' the conflict

Talking about their work, leaders who participated in interviews and in case studies referred frequently to the work of managing or regulating conflict. This can be delicate work requiring effective systems leaders to constantly reappraise the extent to which they wish to drive forward or hold back on a particular goal when working with other partners. In the **Bradford Total Place case study**, for example, the involvement of service users in helping redesign services, and the challenging nature of some of the stories showing how local services had failed users at key transitional moments were reported to have created some *"difficult moments of mutual blame at the beginning of the process"*. However, these were overcome by the strength of existing relationships – a real world example of what has been termed 'cooking the conflict'²⁴, and allowing a greater sense of understanding and mutual respect to emerge as the work matured. (Source Paper 3)

In the **USA case study of Smart Start in North Carolina**, the former president of the initiative commented insightfully (in the box opposite) about the ways in which systems leaders may accomplish this aspect of the work.

Systems leadership is experimental and innovative, therefore inherently risky

Conflicts also surface in relation to risk, and according to the study, systems leadership is inherently more risky than other forms of leadership. This is because leaders are often operating beyond the boundaries of their formal authority, and, as in all forms of innovation, often working without a secure evidence base of 'what works' to guide them. But risk also arises because responsibilities are shared and distributed to others who may have different thresholds for risk tolerance, or different ideas about what constitutes risk in the first place. In the case studies, there were concrete examples of how this plays out. For example, in Barnet, management of risk in relation to child safeguarding in the Troubled Families work created difficulties for children's social care services when sharing casework with other agencies. (Source Paper 3)

"Constantly, we make decisions about whether we prefer to make progress on our mission or we prefer to preserve the relationships. We're loathe to damage the relationship in order to make progress But the partnerships that produced the most value were the partnerships where the relationships were the most challenging. So they were not comfortable, but they were challenging and productive."
(Public Sector leader)

International case study: USA

Smart Start – North Carolina.
Cooking the conflict

Part of the role of leadership is to be involved in continuously engaging critical partners, seeking out their advice, and including them in the discussion. As relationships are established, a formal mechanism for communicating and "staying connected" becomes important, especially during times of transition. Along the way, old "wounds" will surface. (The former president of Smart Start) suggested, "Don't address the past pain, but build structures to get around it." Leaders need to make decisions for what is right, not for who will be mad. Based on her experience, interpersonal conflicts were based on misunderstandings about half of the time.
(Source Paper 4A)

Leading, or letting others lead

Whereas management is defined as relating to control over resources and processes in order to achieve an agreed set of goals and purposes, leadership has wider goals and relies on influence and the willingness of others to 'follow'. In systems leadership, this emphasis on the interchange between leading and letting others lead becomes critical ([Source Paper 1](#)): recognising the collective nature of systems leadership means understanding that 'no single player holds all the cards', and that power is permeated throughout the system(s). Thus in systems leadership, the leadership role is not static or permanent. Individuals move in and out of the leadership role; sometimes leading in the foreground, sometimes in the background.

This has been described in the literature as a *post heroic* representation of leadership: very different from the idea of hero leader, the miracle-worker who drags others towards change by sheer force of personality and charisma ([Source Paper 1](#)). As one Chief Executive noted: *"It's so important to try and create an understanding that everybody can make a difference, and should make a difference, has a responsibility to, and then give them the tools to do that. 450 line managers cascading what seven senior management team people are driving - it's going to have much more effect than seven of us trying to do it by force."*

Distributed leadership

From this vantage point, it becomes easy to understand why the construct of distributed leadership is also highlighted as a key facet of systems leadership. This is where leadership is exercised not just by those with positional authority, but by any individual whose vision, insights, perspective, and inclination to take responsibility for creating change allows, no matter where they sit in the organisational or systemic hierarchy. For example, in the **USA case study of Communities that Care**, the paper notes: *"By design, CTC is not about any individual, but it is about an assertive shift to the development of effective teams. The CTC process has been found to be much less effective when embedded within a hierarchical organization"* ([Source Paper 4A](#)).

This emphasises another strong theme in both the literature and the practice discourse about systems leadership: the role of both shared and independent responsibility for creating change, and the importance of creating the 'permitting conditions' within organisations for this to emerge.

Distributed leadership relies on good staff at all levels

Distributed leadership means a different approach to leadership from those who would traditionally have occupied the upper echelons of organisational hierarchy. It means letting go of detail, yielding control and authority. It means allowing others to develop and use influence in ways that might be different to one's own style or methods. Inherently it relies on developing excellent staff throughout the levels of the system.

"You realise that any notion of fixed form and shape... that top-down 'command and control' type thing doesn't work. You flip the traditional triangle of leadership, and the leadership is at the bottom, to create the conditions that allow the right things to happen" (DCS)

"To me, system leadership is distributed leadership. If you don't have one, you don't have the other. You've probably got system management or something else." (DCAS)

"It took time (for me) to let go and to have confidence in people this is really key: I can only do this if I've got really good people, and they are exceptionally good." (LA second/third tier leader)

Section Five

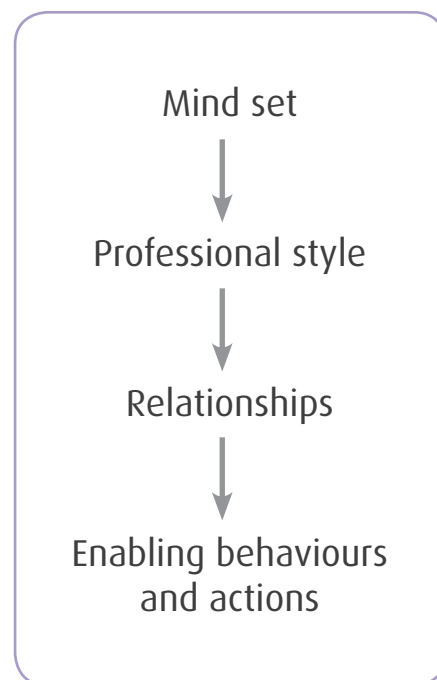
Practicing systems leadership

A mindset rather than a technical approach

We have already noted that systems leadership is a primarily collective activity and much more about 'leadership' than it is about 'leaders'. Yet of course it is individual leaders who put systems leadership into practice. In the literature and in the descriptions offered through case studies and by participants in interviews, a strong picture emerged of the qualities, characteristics and aptitudes of individual leaders that best support the approaches described in the previous section. Some have called this a '**mindset**'; others, a '**way of being**'. Both terms emphasise that systems leadership is a set of values, and a way of thinking about and inhabiting the professional leadership role. This is played out through a professional style, rather than a set of technical competencies. (Source Paper 1). Some accounts, for example, talk of a 'skill set' (knowing how), that embraces 'mind set' (knowing why) and 'heart set' (caring why). (Source Paper 1)

Yet of course, leadership that remains all in the mind (or in the heart) is unlikely to achieve transformational change. The practice of systems leadership is, according to the research, characterised by a number of clearly identifiable behaviours that take the systems leadership mind set into the realm of the practical and the concrete. Mind set and orientation lead to personal and professional styles that are played out in interactions and through specific behaviours, and it is through these interactions and behaviours that the intentions of systems leadership become actions that are influential on the systems in which they occur. The 'doing' aspect of this is, however, fundamentally about enabling others and empowering other parts of the system to make their contribution towards achieving the common goals. If we were constructing a theory of change or a model of the pathway to outcomes for systems leadership, we might identify **influencing through relationships** as the intermediate 'mechanism of change'.

Many of the qualities and aptitudes identified as characteristic of particularly effective or skilful systems leaders are strongly resonant with existing accounts of leadership qualities (for example, the Resourceful Leader the construct of the 'adaptive leader' and the National Leadership Framework for Directors of Children's Services). The accounts given in relation to leadership across multiple systems to some extent integrate these other frameworks.



But a key insight from the research is that there are some subtle differences of emphasis that add to our understanding of what may constitute exceptional leadership, as appropriate for the context of exceptional times. The accounts from this research thus included a proliferation of terms like *reflective*, *reflexive*, *magnanimous*, *empathetic* and even ‘servant’ (Source Paper 1) – words not always immediately associated with the word ‘leader’. Concomitantly, we noted the contrasting absence of terms like ‘forceful’, ‘powerful’, ‘uncompromising’, ‘single-minded’ and so on. The best systems leaders are not described in terms of charismatic heroes or divas, but as thoughtful, calm personalities who are as confident working in the background, supporting and enabling others, as they are in the limelight, ‘leading from the front’.

Six dimensions of systems leaders

The study suggested that at the heart of systems leadership in practice, as it is described in the literature and as it is experienced by leaders themselves, sits a shared concern with improving outcomes for service users. This is embedded within a complex of six intersecting dimensions, shown in the box opposite. These dimensions range from the emotional, or ways of feeling (personal core values); through ways of perceiving and ways of thinking (including how leaders observe and make sense of the context in which they work); to ways of relating including aptitudes and style in relation to participation and relationship building; and thence to ways of doing (meaning the actions and behaviours that are used to enable others in the system to work collectively towards the common goals). These coalesce in a group of personal qualities: a sixth dimension or an overarching way of being.

Dimension 1: Ways of feeling

A relentless stress on personal core values

Personal core values are stressed both in the literature and in the first hand accounts obtained for this research as a key driver for individual systems leaders. Systems leaders were described (and described themselves) as driven by an overriding interest in the needs of service users and in quality of public service. As one local authority Director of Services for adults and children noted: *“You’re only here to work for children. Our best systems leaders (need) an absolute ruthlessness because children who come through the system, they only come through it once. It’s being absolutely driven - absolutely driven - by the outcomes we want for children.”* (Source Paper 2) Case studies also stressed this dimension repeatedly, linking the driving force of personal commitment and emotional investment in the work to the necessary energy and resilience required to stick with the difficult process of driving through changes that could take several years to come to fruition, as for example in the **Barnet Troubled Families case study**:

Systems leaders – Six dimensions

1. personal core values (ways of feeling)
2. observations, ‘hearing’ and perceptions (ways of perceiving)
3. cognition, analysis, synthesis (ways of thinking)
4. participatory style (ways of relating)
5. behaviours and actions (ways of doing)
6. personal qualities (an overarching way of being that forms the essence of both professional and personal style and approach).

Case study: Barnet Troubled Families

A relentless stress on values

Over the course of three years the project went through three different incarnations, each time requiring increases in scope and scale: *“If I didn’t believe in the work I don’t think anyone would believe in me (and) I would not have had the energy required for it...!”* (Source Paper 3)

Dimension 2: Ways of perceiving

What is observed and heard

For individual systems leaders, certain ways of perceiving – including what is observed, and what is heard, were thought indispensable. As in adaptive leadership, a construct that is very closely aligned to systems leadership although it is concerned with leadership of organisations, ‘getting on the balcony’ is essential for systems leaders. Heifetz and colleagues, the developers of the analogy, explain that the balcony concerned overlooks a huge dance floor. It is only from this high vantage point (and not just from being a dancing participant) that an individual can see how the whole event is unfolding. But the balcony analogy assumes that the ‘whole dance floor’ can be viewed from the balcony, whereas in systems leadership, we know that there may be multiple dance floors, and the unpredictability of complex systems may keep some of these out of view, no matter how high the balcony. Thus for systems leaders, whilst on the balcony they must also constantly visualise the aspects of context that are out of view. Other aspects of perception, including what is heard and how it is heard are also key for systems leaders. Participants in the research spoke of the importance of being able to hear challenge as a positive rather than subversive contribution to the process of systems leadership, and of the necessity for sensitivity to diverse voices and diverse perspectives in how systems leaders consider and sift what is, and is not relevant, to their work. But this is not just an intellectual process; in some cases, exposure to expanded perspective that systems leadership allows can be profoundly transformational at both the personal and professional level, changing values and ‘heart set’ as well as commitment to certain styles of working, as the example of the **Bradford Total Place case study** showed:

Case study: Bradford Total Place

Ways of perceiving

Leaders described the Total Place programme as a “*life-changing experience*” both personal and professional, with a total commitment to a new, more inclusive way of working. “*I am not prepared to go back to the old way of working.*” “*It was almost as if you had been converted.*” “*It was like immersion – you’d either been through it or you hadn’t.*” Attitudes, behaviours and relationships were different amongst those who had been involved in the service design workshops, exposed to the powerful narratives generated by service users, and involved in the intensity of the deep-dive process by which evidence was gathered and alternative, more effective solutions were developed from the perspective of service users, rather than providers. (Source Paper 3)

Dimension 3: Ways of thinking

Cognition, analysis, & synthesis

The intensely cerebral nature of systems leadership 'in practice' was a strong message from the research: for individual leaders this is rigorous and demanding intellectual work, suited to those who think carefully and deeply, and who have strong abilities in analysis and synthesis ([Source Paper 1](#)). These are required to underpin the enabling skills of 'sense-making' and supplying the narrative (see below) that deconstructs complexity and enables others to act in support of systems change. Previous studies have also described one of the hallmarks of 'whole systems' leaders as an open-mindedness and a "*constant curiosity*"²⁵. Some participants spoke for example in terms of the need to find out as much as possible about others in the system in order to understand their positions and constraints; another used the term "*bricoleur*"²⁶ (the creative amalgamation of multiple sources) here. Our research also suggests that effective systems leaders need considerable willingness to learn, as well as intellectual flexibility.

International review paper: Australia

Ways of thinking - constant curiosity and the importance of being well-informed

The review of systems leadership initiatives in Australia notes that in examples of effective systems leadership, leaders needed to understand the drivers and concerns of each discipline and sector in order to engage them in ways that are likely to change their behaviour... Influencing across sectors involves doing the groundwork to understand the context in which different professions work, so that innovations are implemented in ways that complement current practice rather than replacing existing practices. ([Source Paper 4D](#))

Dimension 4: Ways of relating

Empathy

The ability to build and maintain personal relationships was stressed as a key - if not the key - attribute of good systems leaders. This is necessary to support the participatory nature of systems leadership, and in order to be able to exercise **influence** effectively in situations where the exercise of force or power is irrelevant or ineffective. This was not described simply as the social skills of networking and keeping in touch, or about making connections for the sake of it. It resides in the deeper skills of building relationships based on mutual respect and empathy, to appreciate and better understand the standpoint of others, and built to last and capable of withstanding the conflicts that systems leadership inevitably exposes.

“You need the ability to relate to other people’s issues. You’ve got to be able to stand in the other person’s shoes...”
(Stakeholder)

Integrity and authenticity

This required those engaging in systems leadership to have the highest regard for integrity and transparency. Engagement in systems leadership is not about thinking in terms of playing tactics (though some do describe tactical behaviours; as discussed in the Strategic Interviews analysis); it was seen as calling for a high level of honesty – keeping promises, being open about limitations and constraints, *“putting your cards on the table”*, being clear about the bottom line. These were seen as key to earning and building the trust on which effective relationships are built. Focusing on, and remaining authentic to, the shared values; objective and moral purpose was seen as important. This involved modelling the qualities and behaviours in one’s own actions in relation to staff and partners, and being transparent and earning credibility at all times. (Source Paper 2)

Dimension 5: Ways of doing

Enabling, influencing and supporting others

Technical skills were not at the forefront of descriptions of systems leadership; indeed, there was a strong sense that to focus too sharply on specifying the ‘actions’ of effective systems leaders was somehow to miss the point. Yet there are ‘ways of doing’ that are fundamental to systems leadership – and these are best framed as the behaviours and actions that enable and influence others to make change. What systems leaders themselves do is stimulate, facilitate and enable actions that are taken by others, in other parts of the wider system, and within their own teams and organisations. Indeed, in some countries other terms such as ‘facilitative’ or ‘integrative’ leadership, are used in preference to ‘systems’ leadership. (Source Paper 4A)

Repurposing existing resources

Once again, referencing the term *bricolage*, participants described, and the case studies illustrated in a real world context, another of the behaviours of the 'enabling' systems leader. This may be best described as the ability to think laterally and eclectically in order to use what exists to create something new. This is essential to 're-purposing' existing resources when new resources are unlikely to be found, and an example of how this works in practice can be seen again in the **Barnet Troubled Families** case study where the system leaders involved made a collective decision to reframe the purpose and remit of an existing governance structure in order to speed up a process of establishing the governing frame for a new initiative. (Source Paper 3)

Analysis and interpretation of complexity

The skill of systems leadership, highlighted both by the literature and by our own empirical data, is described as predominantly intellectual and cognitive rather than technical and task-focused or competency-based. It includes, in particular, strong abilities in interpretation and analysis.

The ability to distil the essence of complexity was stressed by many participants. This included: the ability to precis; to make sense of complexity and interpret it for others, without being overly reductive or simplistic; and the ability to construct coherent narrative to bind systems leadership players together around a core purpose; and to communicate that narrative convincingly and clearly. As one third sector leader noted: *"Leadership (now) for me actually is about how you provide certainty in very uncertain times, or you try to sound like you know what you are talking about, anyway! (It's about) making people feel optimistic and believing."* (Source Paper 2)

Sense-making and constructing narrative

Case studies showed clearly just how important and how complex is this construction of narrative. There may not be just 'one narrative'. Thus systems leaders are engaged in the tough job of making ambiguity bearable for their colleagues and partners; and finding ways to flex the narrative around the differing concerns of contributing organisations, who may have different priorities and who may be more or less receptive to certain messages. This is not simply 'PR': it is not about finding a snappy sound bite, but inspiring others to continue to work towards change even in the absence of clarity about the precise way in which it will unfold. It is complex and demanding work that requires leaders to first 'tune out' background noise. The narratives derived will then need to be constantly revisited and checked against the unfolding context. The **USA case study of Smart Start, North Carolina** illustrates the process.

"You're finding a new language, seeing new contexts I love the expression *bricoleur* Kind of getting cracking, finding where the change is going to happen, who's there, getting alongside it, pushing it, you know. So it isn't that I've got a fixed idea really of how, except that I've got a kind of idea that you learn by doing. And that the old models are even less likely to work than they used to." (DCAS)

International case study: USA

Smart Start – North Carolina.
How narrative works

Everyone must understand the role they play in the change effort. As roles and responsibilities are clarified, leadership behaviours are distributed throughout the system. In Smart Start, strong local leaders learned the benefits of training community members on the importance of quality programs for young children; if community members understand the issues and their roles, they are able to participate in creating a better system of supports for young children. To encourage involvement, they created incentives to participate. There is no reason to bring someone to the table if they cannot see their vested interest; it is important to explain the benefit to them: *"what is in it for me?"* (Source Paper 4A)

A clear narrative...

The research revealed clearly the complex task of creating, flexing and sustaining a convincing narrative across multiple systems in order to keep many players engaged. In the **Barnet Troubled Families** case study, thirteen different agencies were involved in the project. To engage as many partners as possible within the relevant agencies, both the Chief Executive and the DCS spoke of the importance of creating *“a strong, clear narrative and then deploying it at every available opportunity, consistently”*. The project lead noted that it was important to show that a ‘full range’ of priorities were being addressed, and that no important agendas were being overlooked in the process. The co-coordinator noted: *“They (partners and staff) came on board because I made it clear that we were serving three masters: ‘true’ troubled families as defined by the Troubled Families Initiative (ie, a narrowly defined, high cost group, familiar to the criminal justice partners); a wider group of families ‘with multiple and complex needs’, familiar to social care and health partners; and all families ‘at risk’ of escalation to higher need (‘classic cases’ supported through early intervention and prevention work and would be the core populations familiar to local community-children’s centres).”* (Source Paper 3)

...but not one single narrative

In fact, in systems leadership *“everyone has their own narrative”* (Source Paper 3) and this may need to flex to accommodate the different practical realities that operate across systems. Thus, each system leader at the table will need to find his or her most compelling narrative for accessing buy-in and commitment within individual agencies.

Case study: Barnet Troubled Families

Sense-making and creating a narrative

The narrative was described as having two elements: articulation of the problem (high costs of service, yet poor outcomes for users), and identification of the solution as public sector partnership (improved outcomes; shared saved downstream costs). All partners shared the vision of improved outcomes for families and communities. However, a narrative centring on the pay-offs to agencies associated with potential resource savings achieved less buy-in for some partners. In part, this reflected the differing extents to which partner agencies could control their own internal resources. It was less meaningful to those agencies unable to exert tangible influence on local budgets; for example the police and health, compared to children’s services. The case study showed that strong systems leadership should not over-emphasise the development of a ‘single narrative’, no matter how compelling. The ‘public value proposition’ in practice and at local level was more complex than a simple narrative allowed. (Source Paper 3)

Dimension 6: Ways of being

Personal qualities – a unifying dimension

Explicit in the literature and implicit in some participants' accounts was the idea that systems leaders embody a particular **'way of being'**, which then becomes a central or unifying dimension of the model. These included attributes commonly found in many analyses of the qualities of effective leaders in general, such as energy, drive and determination; bravery and resilience; confidence and the willingness to take risks, as well as some less commonly emphasised qualities.

Bravery, courage and risk

Courage, personal bravery and its close cousin, risk-taking, were mentioned in a range of contexts: the bravery to take bold, innovative decisions and be willing to 'disturb the system'; the bravery to take unpopular decisions that might go against one's own organisational 'ego' or expectations; and the willingness to take risk, both personal and professional, featured strongly in many of the more personal accounts of systems leadership in practice. Although some authors prefer the term 'fearlessness' ([Source Paper 1](#)) to describe the qualities of effective systems leaders, bravery may be a better word to capture the more complex qualities described by participants in the study, requiring both understanding and assessment of risk, but the courage to continue in spite of it, in the face of anxiety²⁷. One Director of Children's Services noted: *"It means finding way to manage the absence of those straight lines, and to be able to live with uncertainty."* ([Source Paper 2](#)) Another joked: *"Was personal risk at stake? God, yes! How do you find the courage? It depends how close you are to paying off your mortgage!"*

Personal resilience

The need for personal resilience was strongly stressed in interviews and case studies: the long time scale and scope of the task call for courage and steadfastness. Interviewees described the need to accept knock-backs, to be determined to keep going, to *"hold your nerve"* or *"play the long game"*, to continue to push and challenge in the face of entrenched positions or barriers. Systems leadership involves holding disparate groups together through conflict, encouraging and supporting people when they get cold feet, sticking at it. It also involves developing a 'thick skin' and being able to de-personalise conflict and challenge.

Case study: North West London ICP

Courage and risk

Each of the partners described the risks involved in moving together away from the traditional way of working. Given the levels of uncertainty and turbulence around the restructuring required, many individuals took personal risks to 'break the mould' at a time of vulnerability. Individual leaders found that they had on occasions to have the *"courage to let things run"* in the interests of the greater whole, rather than intervening early. This was, and is, especially bold in the light of the increasing scrutiny and risk aversion of the current NHS culture. ([Source Paper 3](#))

"It means not losing confidence in your colleagues or in yourself when things don't go the way you'd hoped or thought, or people have not delivered. Rather than going back in to the bunker and saying 'I've tried that and I'm not doing that again!', going back around the loop again in terms of saying 'that hasn't worked, why hasn't it worked, what could we do differently?'" (DCS)

Patience, maturity, taking the long view

Another aspect of the mind set of systems leadership is **patience**, or at least, the preparedness to play the long game and take the long view. This might mean viewing progress on a particular project as something separate from one's own professional life-span; something that might take a long time, or that may fall to those who come later to take forward.

As one UK Third Sector leader put it: *"You need to recognise that it might not be in your lifetime or your tenure."* (Source Paper 2) And as an international case study participant in Denmark noted: *"If I were to point to barriers or challenges, it's especially the ability to stay focused in a politically steered system and a busy every day work life. Another one is to prepare yourself and your organization for a long haul and not a project that is finished after 14 days. So it's about being in it for a long time, sticking with it."* (Source Paper 4C)

This was described by some as an attribute of maturity and experience; that effective systems leaders need to be able to appreciate that not everything succeeds first time, but that there will be chances, if not for you then for others, to try again when the circumstances are more propitious.

"Well, I think the big thing is about the long game. This is not, 'I'll speak to you because I want this now'. This is about, 'Where are we trying to get to?' (I)t takes a bit of time; you need it to gel. Relationships are really important. There are some knock-backs and some wins but give yourself at least a three-year vista. It's been a big learning for me because the higher up organisations I've got, the more I've realised that you need to look back a bit longer to see the effect that you've had." (DCAS)

International case study: Australia

The National Framework for protecting Australia's children. Playing the long game

In this case example, the more sophisticated, systems-minded leaders engaged in co-design of a new a cross-systems policy framework considered that 'the paradigm shift is in the process rather than the product...'. The case study notes that the more astute leaders were 'careful not to overplay their hand, and to be content with small but significant successes rather than push for significant changes or resources which would have required high levels of risk taking'. (Source Paper 4D)

Magnanimity and humility

‘Ways of being’ for effective systems leaders described both in the literature and by interviewees in the study especially emphasised the importance of containing both personal and organisational ego. Participants stressed that effective systems leaders are not afraid to acknowledge that they do not have all the answers, or to put their own interests behind those of the collective. This, coupled with magnanimity to cede power and credit to other parties at the systems leadership table was seen as a vital attribute. One leader working across health and social care systems noted: *“That is the biggest cultural inhibitor in the health service - that we are still very much based on this kind of charismatic leadership, hero leadership stuff. I’ve never met a good leader who wasn’t charismatic! (but) ... I’ve seen very quiet, humble charisma.”* (Source Paper 2)

As the USA case study example in the box opposite shows, this is not however all about ‘being nice’ for the sake of it: it is a strategic way to build allegiances.

‘Magnanimity’ in this sense manifests itself practically in different ways, and again, surfaces as the concept of ‘letting go’ in order to gain. It might be about giving up specific organisational targets because they work perversely against a wider collective ambition. It might be about transferring budget, letting go of funding or securing income for another organisation. It might be about yielding influencing or profile, or a decision about who leads an initiative or a component of it (as we saw in the **North West London ICP case study**). This also means seeing successes as collective rather than individual. Systems leaders were therefore described as constantly prepared to renegotiate their own role, stepping forward and back between leading and letting others lead, as necessary to further their collective goals.

Not a fixed recipe

Ingredients of systems leadership in practice may vary

It is important to note that the six dimensions outlined earlier are not intended to be a fixed recipe for effective systems leadership, but more like a flexible framework for understanding the relationships between what are considered to be the most important ingredients. Certainly, the literature that describes attempts to identify, through empirical testing, a ‘specific formula’ for effective systems leadership generally fails to convince (Source Paper 1). The dimensions described above are inherently overlapping, and the qualities and attributes within them should probably be thought of as *integrated*, and *compensatory*⁹, meaning that that they complement one another, and (especially relevant when we consider that we are talking of groups of leaders working collectively) recognising that strengths in one domain may, to some degree, compensate for weaknesses in another.

International case study: USA

Systems of Care –
Westchester County

As with many system change efforts, some of the most important connections are with individuals who are not yet “on board” with the change effort. These leaders discussed their strategy of “sneaking ahead” of key stakeholders who were not supporting the work by engaging them “as if” they were supporters of the work and “as if” they shared the commitment to the core values. As they included new partners and accomplished key goals, they intentionally gave the credit away. These leaders began by acknowledging past accomplishments before discussing next steps for improvement. (Source Paper 4A)

“Being magnanimous is about letting go. This idea that the modern public service leader, place or systems leader, needs to understand, politically, managerially and professionally, is that ceding power, by letting go to others, and conceding that others may have better ideas of how it can be delivered, is the most powerful move you can make. We have to lead our way out of this (crisis) and, above all, that means giving up power and currency, which is one of the toughest things for the leadership ... to gain more, you need to let go. I think that’s a very, very powerful paradox that’s going on at the moment.” (LA Chief Executive)

Section Six

Enabling and inhibiting conditions for systems leadership

The authorising environment

Commentators on health services (but who could just as well be talking of other areas of service provision), talk of 'genuinely exceptional structural challenges' and in noting the high unfilled vacancy rates for senior leadership jobs, note that such jobs "*may be becoming unacceptably hard*"²⁸. Systems leadership is a response to, and is made necessary by, complexity and turbulence in the external environment. It therefore has to be undertaken "*without waiting for the planets to come into alignment*" (Source Paper 2). But even granted that flux in the environment is the 'given' on which the construct of systems leadership rests, can we identify any factors in the systemic context that are more, or less, facilitative of effective systems leadership, and of systems leaders undertaking this challenging work?

The research suggested that there are indeed aspects of the wider environment, both systemic and organisational, that can make systems leadership more or less difficult, and more or less likely to succeed, in producing positive change. In reflecting on these, there is strong resonance with the work of Moore²⁹, whose *strategic triangle* posits three independent forces that enable or constrain leadership success: *operating capacity* (which constrains practical feasibility); *purpose and mission* (the 'public value proposition'); and *authorising environment* that gives or withholds legitimacy and thus rewards or discourages particular actions. Much of the literature and most of the reflections of participants in the study lead back in some way to these ideas, and especially to that of the authorising environment. This is a construct that is particularly helpful in framing the characteristics that underpin systems leadership, and provides the context for systems leaders to flourish.

Requires latitude and discretion around the leadership environment

It will be clear from earlier sections of this core paper that, above all, what authorises systems leadership is '**latitude**' in its strict, dictionary definition: freedom from narrowness; liberality of interpretation. The climate or regime in which public services agencies operate create norms that give latitude or permission for the thinking, experimentation, risk-taking and enabling behaviours and actions that comprise systems leadership.

"There is a point where it becomes so diffuse that you say 'I'm not sure what's happening here'. So there is something about having sufficient discretion around your systemwe are leading at the moment where we don't know what's round the corner." (Third sector leader)



The political context

Local government

The political context, both local and national, was described as playing a substantial role in creating or withholding the authorising conditions for systems leadership.

The research showed that support from local politicians could be a powerful enabler of systems leadership in local authorities. Having political support and knowing that leaders would stand by the strategy in the face of controversy and challenge is key to enabling staff engaged in systems leadership to innovate and take risks. One third sector leaders noted: *“You lose the ability to galvanise different resources in favour of a cause when you lose the political angle That might be their relationship with the leader, the local strategic partnership...or it might be political resources outside, or it might be just their own passion and their ability to communicate with the media or other groups or on the national stage Those political connections, when harnessed in the right way, can be extremely powerful in raising an issue, getting something unblocked, raising profile.”* (Source Paper 2)

To be fully enabling, as the quotation above suggests, local political leadership also has to contribute to systems leadership; politicians are also systems leaders. They can do this for example by making relationships, being willing to cede territory to other partners, and by rising above the local political identity and ‘ego’ of the local authority. The **Barnet Troubled Families case study**, for example, showed how local political system leaders can speed up systems change, especially when elected and appointed officials work in effective partnership together. (Source Paper 3)

Local political leaders therefore need to be adept at knowing when they need to intervene or challenge at an operational level and when to allow space and autonomy to officials. Negotiating this balance in changing circumstances was seen as a required skill for enabling systems leadership, for political leaders as well as for senior officials.

“You need political leaders who work across and who make links with others, with business, for instance, with other big systems like the health and wellbeing board ... the criminal justice system. Where political leaders have made links with key people in other parts of the local area, that can create conditions to get leverage or to get support for particular things.”
(LA second/third tier leader)



Central government

In the UK, central government was described as structured in ways that militated against their own practice of systems leadership: the strong vertical lines of authority within Whitehall departments can obstruct the development of distributed leadership, and the lack of horizontal integration of departments, each with competing agendas, means that boundaries lack the requisite permeability. In terms of enabling others, the best way for central government to create 'permitting conditions' was seen largely to lie in creating frameworks or incentives for local systems leadership. For example, the statutory requirement for local services and agencies to cooperate for the benefit of children and young people³⁰ was seen as important for creating a supportive platform for systems leadership. Indeed there were times when participants said they would welcome a stronger push or legislative force from central government to incentivise or remove blockages to systems leadership, (for example, around information sharing ([Source Paper 3](#))). Ongoing difficulties in unlocking mechanisms for effective local pooled budgeting were also noted. These prevent the full range of levers being used by local agencies when working together, in spite of initiatives such as Total Place ([Source Paper 3](#)) and Community Budgets (which were seen as otherwise very supportive of systems leadership approaches; ([Source Paper 3](#))), as both the **Bradford Total Place case study** and the **Barnet Troubled Families case study** showed.

Central governments were also described as having a vital role in challenging and holding local organisations to account. But thereafter, the key role of central government was seen as creating space for local systems leadership to: focus on strategy, not operational issues; avoid legislating for the fragmentation of structures vital to connectivity of the whole; and, as far as national policy initiatives were concerned, to define outcomes rather than processes. ([Source Paper 2](#))

Also, given that systems leadership is often a long-run process before the benefits are visible, the undermining effect of central government starting, and then interrupting local systems leaderships initiatives just as they have begun to get established, was also highlighted as major inhibitory factor. Localities are often agile in reframing work to accommodate the shifting emphasis of central policy initiatives, as shown in both the **Barnet Troubled Families case study**, where work that started off under one national programme survived and even thrived on the journey to its third incarnation three years later. But in the **Bradford Total Place case study** example, although the legacy of the change in thinking has been profound, the progress to the actual tangible, even cashable outcomes of systems leadership has been permanently interrupted by the premature cessation of the national Total Place programme.

Case study: Barnet Troubled Families

Sharing budgets locally

Central government's failure to develop true localism was cited as a major inhibitor to 'true systems leadership' because in the opinion of one senior lead, this prevented genuine pooling of budgets that gave control over resources to the partnership boards of local joint initiatives. This reduced the level of genuine shared governance and, therefore, genuine systems leadership. The differing degrees of centralisation and complexity in the control held over resources and budgets by the range of local agencies that need to work together was an on-going challenge. *"It's a simple proposition – we identify the main families who are costing us all so much, share budgets to do work with them and get the overall costs down, (and) we'll all be better off – but organising that is a complete nightmare. For example, police budgeting in practice is managed by the Met at London-wide level, and so your average Borough Commander is not interested in getting into that game... So you immediately hit a brick wall and have to think again about how this stuff (systems leadership) works."* ([Source Paper 3](#))

The regulatory context

Regulation and quality assurance

This study strongly suggests that current approaches to regulation, inspection and quality assurance are considered by some to be important inhibitors of effective and true cross-systems working. Here, the discussion focused on Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission.

The concept of, and early work towards, multi-agency inspection by Ofsted had been generally welcomed and seen as the right direction of travel. But, generally, there was a view that inspection and regulatory bodies need to be more embracing of risk and innovation and more open to developing a more systems-cognisant inspection model, less focused on compliance with process and more focused on over-arching and systems-level outcomes and on promoting a learning culture. ([Source Paper 2](#)) This is in spite of universal acceptance that the monitoring of outcomes and the holding of providers to account was an essential element of the production of high quality services.

Case study: Bradford Total Place

Responding to changing national policy

By far the greatest sense of difficulty arose from the abrupt change of direction when the political direction was changed. This frustration was a combination of the way in which the change took place, and the abruptness with which the very promising direction was shifted. Even so, invited to reflect on the legacy of Total Place, all of those interviewed describe the programme as a transformation point personally, and for the way they continue to work in partnership to the greater benefit of the community. ([Source Paper 3](#))

“I don’t think (CQC) is consistent with systems leadership. I think it has its own rules and it sees itself as ploughing its own furrow. It is interesting that you can be registered as a registered manager with CQC or you can be registered as a nurse or dentist, but you can’t be registered to provide integrated services in any way, so it is somewhat behind the curve in terms of integrated services”. (Other Public Sector leader)

The organisational context

'Systems-minded' cultures

Individual agencies and organisations can also do much to support systems leadership in practice, as well as to develop capacity (see below). But many research participants observed that rather than being celebrated and supported for their attempts to exert whole systems leadership, they were instead required to operate 'under the radar' until a tangible success had been achieved, especially if the most senior leadership had not yet 'got' the concept of systems leadership. For example, the **USA case study of children's mental health Systems of Care** notes of the three founding leaders based in Westchester, New York: *"in the beginning, their work together was not 'officially' sanctioned and on-going meetings were discouraged. They attempted to work for some time without calling attention to their efforts 'until we received state and county awards for our work and ultimately a 6-year federal grant'."* (Source Paper 4A)

Cultures that reward the attributes of systems leadership

The optimal authorising environments for systems leadership within organisations are those that reward the thinking, qualities and skills we highlighted in Section Four and Five. In particular, they tolerate risk within limits, understanding that there is no innovation without experimentation, and no experimentation without failure. These are also more likely to support the development of distributed leadership, and develop performance appraisal frameworks that value work that contributes to the good of the whole rather than judging effectiveness on the basis of tasks performed and competencies demonstrated.

Cultures that control organisational ego and reward 'public' service.

Finally, a culture that controls 'organisational ego' may also be more suited to nurturing systems leadership. One local authority Chief Executive commented: *"(In public service), lack of corporateness is hard-wired. We need a new narrative for public service professionals who are not committed to a specific agency but to (a wider vision of) public service"* (Source Paper 3) Organisations which define their public value proposition in broad rather than narrow terms; are happy to contribute to a market rather than determined to lead it; measure success by the quality of their work and not the scale of their operations. These are the cultures that favour the development of systems leadership. Clearly, these are different attributes to those celebrated and rewarded in the commercial sector, and in key respects, this suggests that public service should be wary of modelling itself too closely on that of the business world. As Moore³¹ pointed out, producing public value is more complex than producing profit. (Source Paper 1)

"(One of the blocks to systems leadership) is regulators. I think Ofsted are particularly poor in being very traditional and reinforcing the old ... insular ways. (Take for example) safeguarding children. (This used to be only about local authorities, but) everyone's spent the last five years making theirs a partnership arrangement (that goes wider than the LA). So is Ofsted reinforcing that? No. And because they're making pretty much everyone 'inadequate', then actually it's causing retrenchment and people become more insular and less about the system, more about what (only the local authority) do....So that's really, really unhelpful the way the regulatory framework works and I think a very poor example by Ofsted."
(Other Public Sector leader)

"We're having to train and encourage and equip our managers to create an environment in which their staff can make judgements and to say we value you as a leader not because of your ability to make great judgements but your ability to create an environment in which your staff can make great judgements."
(Third sector leader)

Some participants commented that the developing market for provision of public services, in favouring competition over collaboration, might not be conducive to systems leadership participation by those (like many voluntary organisations) who compete for contracts to deliver services. The review paper from Australia also noted a similar issue, describing the tensions created by the dual needs of 'squeezing value' out of providers, who also need to be viewed as collaborators on the systems leadership effort:

"People come to work in the voluntary sector because they feel passionately The downside of it is, that passion can be quite primitive when it comes to thinking about other organisations We're all now having to compete head-to-head for work There is nothing really, other than campaigning, that encourages us to work together(T)here are no incentives for us to share commercial information because we are competing with each other. We are competing for staff. We are competing for ideas. The problem has (got worse because) ... we're all running on three year contracts.'
(Third sector leader)

The context of place

Lastly, 'place' is an important aspect of the authorising conditions for systems leadership. Although some participants who worked in national rather than place-based contexts argued that systems leadership could (and should) operate at a national level, a focus on place-based or locality-based initiatives was generally seen as a defining characteristic. Generally, systems leadership was seen as a local rather than a national endeavour, partly because local democratic accountabilities were seen as a key driver of systems leadership (Source Paper 2), but partly because national structures were seen as too rigid and too disconnected to influence outcomes.

It is perhaps not co-incidental that two of the UK case-studies were focused on, or had grown out of, place-based initiatives (**Bradford Total Place**, and the 'Community Budgets' origins of the **Barnet Troubled Families** work). Some argued that place-based approaches were conducive for, and susceptible to, systems leadership approaches not just because they allowed partners to build on existing networks and relationships, but because they created a frame within which it was easier to see mutual interests coalescing around ideas of community and population.

International review paper: Australia

The tension between 'partnership' arrangements and contractual arrangements has emerged as a key challenge for cross sector leadership issues in Australia, and has undermined a number of well-meaning initiatives. This is particularly the case when there are financial or policy pressures on the funding agency. In these situations the impetus to squeeze value for money from NGOs or other sub-contractors becomes a more powerful driver of leadership behaviour than the requirement to work in collaboration. Yet paradoxically partnership working is increasingly important in the delivery and planning of services. (Source Paper 4D)

"When you look at yourself as a place, systemically ... you're not really bothered who does it, you're bothered about it getting done and you're bothered about it getting done in the right way. If you think like that, it's then far easier to have conversations about pooling budgets, far easier to talk about integration ... So, for example, I transferred £150 million and 1000 staff into a new healthcare trust because that's the best place for that service." (DCAS)

Section Seven

Developing systems leadership capacity

This study suggests that in order to nurture the capacity for systems leadership in organisations and in individuals, we may need to expand the frame of what ‘good leadership’ involves. Conceptualising systems leadership as a way of thinking and as a way of being, rather than as a set of learned competencies may be a good starting point. In this section, we explore potential strategies for supporting existing leaders in this work and developing greater capacity for future systems leadership. Some of these were suggested by participants; others are implicit in the findings.

“It needs to be part of one’s learning and be named as part of learning, just like being a ‘strategic manager’ or ‘finance manager.’”(LA second/third tier leader)

Starting at the systems level

‘Naming’ systems leadership to make it explicit

Given that systems leadership is, by definition, a collective activity, done with other leaders and not by single leaders acting alone, consideration of how to develop capacity probably needs to **start at the systems level** rather than at the individual level. There may be relatively little value in devoting resource to training individuals if the organisations in which they work cannot value the contributions of systems leadership, and the aggregate system remains more or less impervious to attempts at whole-systems leadership. This would begin with the ‘naming’ of systems leadership, making it explicit as a style of working. The importance of this in the UK at the current time, given the emergence of many new groups of local leaders – such as GPs and Clinical Commissioning Groups – was emphasised by many interviewees. Practically, it implies different parts of systems joining together to consider what cross-cutting skills and approaches would be most effective in joining up constituent elements of human service systems. They would then collectively design approaches to develop and support individual leaders to be effective in this work. The value of training with peers from a wide range of professional groups, rather than reinforcing professional identity and silos, was emphasised by participants in the study. Formal learning also creates a cohort of people across organisations with a common language of systems leadership, relevant for the work of building a collective, cross-systemic will to engage with, as well as, practice systems leadership.

Developing individual capacity

Having said this, it is of course not systems (or even organisations) who produce change, it is the individuals who work within them³².

Limits to the extent that systems leadership can be learned...

It is clear from the analysis of systems leadership in practice that some personality types and professional styles will be more or less suited to the particular demands of systems leadership. This may limit the extent to which the individual capacity to be a systems leader can be taught or learned. It was felt by many that there was not much scope for developing those for whom the **'ways of being'** necessary for systems leadership run entirely counter to basic preferences, styles, values and characteristics.

... But ways of thinking can be nurtured

However, it was widely felt that the **mindset** or **'ways of thinking'** of systems leadership can be nurtured and developed. The **'ways of doing'** systems leadership can also almost certainly be supported through incorporation of systems leadership thinking into leadership development and training activities and by the development of practical tools and resources. These could support the intellectual tasks associated with effective systems leadership, as well as the implementation of systems leadership activities.

Non traditional qualities and aptitudes rather than technical skills and competences

What became clear in this research was that individual development based around competencies and technical skills was not seen as the way forward. Some interviewees even went as far as to suggest that systems leadership requires such a distinctive approach, that the competencies and skills traditionally sought out and valued in leadership recruitment might require reappraisal. Those who make good systems leaders are those who **challenge** and **disturb the system**, and may not be compliant with processes in which they do not believe. These may not be the same people who have traditionally been considered promotable to leadership roles. As one interviewee noted: *"... you have to help people acquire a different set of behaviours to those that previously have made a manager very, very successful... Conversely, some of those people that managers used to see as a real pain in the arse - really constantly challenging the process because they couldn't see that the process added any value, and it got in the way, it stopped them having the appropriate relationships with their service users - they are actually now rising to the fore*

"When (we introduced a new service model focusing on outcomes rather than processes), the thing that most surprised (the service) was... what they've seen is a complete turnaround of their high performers ... and (t)heir low performers rising to the top Those people who have been on (their) radar as the highest performers were those people who could just engage with and deliver to a process. You've got this bunch of people who've been given a framework and they just did it: boom, boom, boom. Take the framework away from them and they've found that there are some real skills deficits ... in terms of that ability to ... move outside of the box, and to just be able to be more reliant on their professional judgement (DCS)

because what they've always been good at, but the system didn't encourage it, is their ability to engage with and generate those appropriate relationships, know when to push and when to step back, when to give a bit of license and when not to: those sorts of things." (Source Paper 2)

Powerful experiential learning

The mind set of systems leadership, its curiosity and openness, and its appreciation of complexity and diversity may be helpfully nurtured by a mix of traditional learning and exposure to a diversity of ideas and experiences. **Experiential learning** was the most powerful form of individual development. Secondments, shadowing, job swaps and other opportunities to work in different parts of the system were seen as valuable in this respect. Opportunities to work with, and learn from, people struggling with the same sorts of issues, and **peer support** from people who had successfully provided systems leadership, were valued as well as their role in mentoring, coaching and action learning sets.

Value of coaching and mentoring

Work related **coaching and mentoring** may be one of the best ways of supporting new leaders to acquire skills in the 'ways of doing' systems leadership, according to the study's findings. Placements and exchanges that specifically identify the elements of working that rely on systems thinking and systems leadership would also be potentially useful ways of developing the skills to engage in systems leadership activities.

The usefulness of theoretical frameworks

But **theory** was, to varying degrees, also seen as important by practising systems leaders – although balanced by opportunities to interpret and apply it in one's own setting and through interaction with others. People had valued their exposure to strong theoretical thinkers and international experts in formal learning settings and in their own academic learning or reading, or had sought out experts in different areas to develop their own thinking and practice. Some interviewees cited specific thinkers, including Moore, Seddon and Heifetz, as helpful to their own practice of systems leadership. Part of the value of exposure to theory was said to be that it enabled one to reframe, reflect on and better understand what had been learnt experientially.

"(I've) probably benefited from being professionally trained in a number of areas. I've seen all sorts of theoretical perspectives. But what I've learnt most by far is from working with talented people. Just the leaders that I've worked for, you've heard me talk a lot about (named colleagues) and I've learnt by watching their behaviours and seeing what works and what doesn't." (LA second/third tier leader)

"You have to nurture them as well ... because we're all learning these skills I don't learn by somebody giving me a book I learn by being able to practise, somebody saying to me 'Have you thought about doing it this way?' And 'What if-?' So I think you have to mentor, coach people; you have to give them leadership development opportunities" (Other Public Sector leader)

Formal peer development programmes helpful for many. Practical tools for the systems leader are needed

Finally, both aspirant and established leaders talked very positively about **formal development programmes**, for example those provided by the Virtual Staff College, the National College of School Leadership, the Cabinet Office and the Leaders for London programme, although this style of learning did not suit everyone, and not many formal programmes as yet cover systems leadership as a distinct topic. Arguably, these programmes could be developed to include both theory and practical tools for systems leadership – for example, skills in ‘systems mapping’ and stakeholder identification; identifying differences in stakeholder and organisational cultures; aspects of relationship-building across systems; analysis, précis, and narrative construction; communications, negotiations and influence across boundaries; working with ambiguity and in the zone of complexity; working without power; harnessing conflict and so on.



Section Eight

Final thoughts

It is clear that responding to the current climate of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in public services creates pressures and demands on those in position of leadership that cannot easily be resolved by traditional command and control, or even more flexible, adaptive leadership. Paradox is the new norm, and the definition of paradox is that it does not respond well to logic and linearity and creates tensions that must constantly be kept in balance.

The emergent construct of 'systems leadership', which both integrates some familiar styles of leadership, and adds some new ones, resonates widely with those in the field. It appears to create a useful framework for viewing leadership challenges in complex contexts through a different lens. It fits well with many of the most useful frameworks for theorising change, but is also flexible enough to accommodate the natural evolution of these when applied to real world situations.

But systems leadership is by no means a silver bullet. Can it create transformational change? Our case studies and the stories of interviewees suggest that it can, but also show that this is hard and sometimes unrewarding work. It may take many years to bear fruit, and where credit – if it comes – is shared by many players and rewards may accrue in unexpected places and not necessarily exclusively to those whose efforts and vision have brought about change.

Moreover, and importantly, even transformational leadership cannot compensate for ineffective services on the front line. Systems leadership can only properly add value to an environment where operating capacity is not so stretched that it cannot carry out its basic functions. Systems leadership is described by one of the participants in this study as 'management enabled leadership' and it rests on adequate management as well as quality at the operational level. The system needs to be managed and safe in order for systems leadership and experimentation to be possible. At times, for some participants, this had meant getting more involved in operational detail or putting off collaborative or systems based working until an area of work had been secured. The case studies, in particular, also show that no one gets it right all the way through, and there may be false starts, dead ends and disappointments.

"I think the first thing for me is that you can't lead unless things are managed. So, I've come to places that are not very good and I've spent most of my early time in those places managing because until things are safe and right, you don't really have the freedom to lead." (DCAS)

As [Source Paper 4d](#) noted, analysing the evidence from evaluations of systems leadership initiatives in Australia: *“Overall these findings show that, especially in place based initiatives, systems leadership has been crucial to implementation and therefore to outcomes for children and young people. However, in each case, leadership in and of itself was not sufficient, either to drive through structural and cultural changes (or) to improve outcomes for children and young people. These evaluations indicate that children’s outcomes appear to be related to the quality and availability of services rather than more distal factors such as leadership or collaboration. Only if collaboration leads to actual improvement in the services children and families receive is it likely to lead directly to improved outcomes.”*

As one of the first substantial empirical investigations into the subject, this study may be helpful in ‘naming’ a phenomenon that clearly is already happening, but is not widely acknowledged or discussed. Interviewees in positions of leadership across the country expressed the hope that it might begin to ‘sound the alarm’ against what were seen as failing policy approaches. These included over-prescription of process and a culture of compliance rather than a deep focus on what makes for quality services (ie, values); organisational cultures that celebrate ‘hero-leaders’ rather than those with more thoughtful insightful styles; and public processes that claim to support innovation and experimentation - but only if it carries no risks. As one Chief Executive put it, expressing the challenge as well the opportunities of systems leadership:

“The definition of systems leadership is spot-on – it’s what it’s all about: it’s about systems and how you can create a narrative for those people involved in those systems, that they are going to buy into. It’s about how you make the ‘softer’ side of those things work, behind the scenes as it were. And it is incredibly difficult!” ([Source Paper 3](#))



Appendix 1. Systems leadership at a glance

Systems leadership is described as

- a necessary response to volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, and to resource pressures
- done within and across organisational and geopolitical boundaries, beyond individual professional disciplines
- done within and across a range of organisational and stakeholder cultures, often without direct managerial control of resources
- a collective rather than individual endeavour
- distributed across many levels and roles
- having outcomes for service users at its heart

Systems leadership is achieved through

- influence and 'nudge', not formal power
- alignment around common vision or purpose: improved outcomes for service users
- a focus on the outcomes and results, not the process
- strong but robust and honest relationships
- a mind set, rather than specific actions and behaviours

Individual systems leaders practice through personal styles based in

- Ways of feeling (personal core values)
 - values and commitment
- Ways of perceiving (observations, and hearing)
 - observing 'from the balcony' as well as 'from the dance floor'
 - allowing for the unseen and unpredicted
 - seeking and hearing diverse views
 - sensitivity to other narratives

- Ways of thinking (intellectual and cognitive abilities)
 - curiosity
 - synthesising complexity
 - sense-making
- Ways of doing (enabling and empowering)
 - narrative and communication
 - enabling and supporting others
 - repurposing and reframing existing structures and resources
- Ways of relating (relationships and participation)
 - mutuality and empathy
 - honesty and authenticity
 - reflection, self-awareness and empathy
- Ways of being (personal qualities)
 - bravery and courage to take risks
 - resilience and patience
 - drive, energy and optimism
 - humility and magnanimity

Systems leadership flourishes when

- the authorising environment, whether organisational or systemic, tolerates risk and accepts multiple pathways to outcomes
- there is willingness to cede organisational goals for collective ambition
- positional authority is not the only source of legitimacy
- it builds on local and place-based initiatives and networks
- Qualities, motivations and personal style are more important than specific competencies and skills
- Relationships are central to leading through influence and allowing challenge and difficult conversations
- Challenge, conflict and 'disturbing the system' are integral

End notes and references

- 1 The Virtual Staff College designs and organises professional development opportunities for those in principal and senior leadership positions in local authority children's services, children's trusts and partnership arrangements and advisers and practitioners working in the leadership, management and delivery of services for children, young people and families throughout the UK
- 2 Implementation is concerned with the study and practice of delivery of effective services to people
- 3 Rittel HWJ and Webber MM (1973) 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning': Policy Sciences 4 (2) 155-169
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- 6 Heifetz R., Grashow A. and Linsky M (2009) The practice of adaptive leadership Boston: Harvard Business Press
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- 14 Implementation is concerned with the study and practice of delivery of effective services to people.
- 15 Due to unforeseen circumstances, no education leaders were able to participate in an interview

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- 18 See also Source Paper 4a which reviews literature that theorises first, second and third-order effects which may accumulate over time as cross-sector collaboration evolves (Source Paper 4A)
- 19 Welbourn D., Warwick R., Carnall, C and Fathers D (2012) Leadership of Whole Systems London: the King's Fund
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- 26 A bricoleur is some who uses 'found objects' to create something new, in a creative way; bricolage is used to mean the solving of problems by multiple methods.
- 27 Susan Cain, in a recent book Quiet (2013) notes that the prevalent culture of disdain for fear may have been the single most powerful explanation behind the recent collapse of the financial sector (Cain S. (2013) Quiet: London Penguin)
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- 32 Jim Wotring, quoted in A Metz and L Bartley (2012) Active Implementation Frameworks for Program Success

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