Leadership in Practice
A series of briefing papers from the VSC about the impact of succession planning in the regions

Developing systems leaders

No.3
The debate about the future of local government has been all about whether it has a future, as council leaders and chief executives struggle to find the resources needed for anything other than their statutory obligations.

Publicly at least, less attention has been paid to the consequences of austerity for the leadership of local councils, even though the effects may be just as far reaching. No longer is a Council run by a group of chief officers with a professional background in delivering the services they now lead. Instead, the talk is of systems leadership, of the need for chief executives to recruit a smaller group of senior staff who are capable of making systems work better, and more efficiently, whatever they are designed to achieve. What matters now is not professional expertise but an understanding of place, and the ability to mould services around communities rather than the other way round. That, as much as the delegation of funding and resources from central government, is what is meant by the new localism.

Although some are uncomfortable with the term ‘systems leadership’, agreement is emerging about what it looks like. What is less clear is how ‘the system’ is going to support the emergence of the next generation of ‘systems leaders’.

Towards the end of its time as a grant funded initiative, the succession planning work, supported by the Virtual Staff College, had begun to move into this territory, and this briefing paper describes some of the emerging practice in the regions.

If there are lessons to be learned from this work, they are probably along the following lines:

1. **The ‘step up’ to senior leadership is significantly greater than in the past and even the best cannot do it without support.** Leadership development is essential and has to be provided through a partnership approach.

2. **Now more than ever, there is no substitute for actual experience on the job.** This can be achieved by placements, secondments, internships, joint working and any other strategies that encourage sharing of expertise.

3. **Aspiring systems leaders need to be exposed to the wider political and corporate environment.**

4. **Leadership development programmes need to focus on the mindset that is needed to operate as a systems leader,** rather than any particular set of skills or competencies.

“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: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times’ (Virtual Staff College, 2013)
In 2012, the VSC commissioned a key piece of research 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 implementation and health management, based at the Colegrove Centre for Evidence and Implementation and the Centre for Health Enterprise at Cass Business School, City University London (Deborah Ghate, Jane Lewis and David Welbourn).

The research was designed to answer three broad questions:
- What is systems leadership?
- What is special about systems leadership?
- What can it add to current leadership thinking and practice?

The diagram below provides an ‘at a glance’ summary of the findings of the report which is available on the VSC website.

At the centre, as you might expect, is ‘improving outcomes for services users’. Wrapped around this (the grey circle) are what the researchers describe as the ‘practice’ of systems leaders, their personal style. The purple circle describes some of the ways in which this kind of leadership operates, and the outer circle provides a reminder of the context in which it is all happening.

**Figure 1**
Public service context, systems leadership and systems leaders - an integrated model
The practice of systems leadership: 6 dimensions

1. Ways of feeling (personal core values)
   - values and commitment
2. Ways of perceiving (observations, and hearing)
   - observing ‘from the balcony’ as well as ‘from the dance floor’
   - allowing for the unseen and unpredictable
   - seeking and hearing diverse views
   - sensitivity to other narratives
3. Ways of thinking (intellectual and cognitive abilities)
   - curiosity
   - synthesising complexity
   - sense-making
4. Ways of doing (enabling and empowering)
   - narrative and communication
   - enabling and supporting others
   - repurposing and reframing existing structures and resources
5. Ways of relating (relationships and participation)
   - mutuality and empathy
   - honesty and authenticity
   - reflection, self-awareness and empathy
6. Ways of being (personal qualities)
   - bravery and courage to take risks
   - resilience and patience
   - drive, energy and optimism
   - humility and magnanimity

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
Patrick Scott talked to some of the key players in the regional team in the North West responsible for developing the next generation of leaders in children's services, Howard Cooper, formerly DCS in The Wirral, Maxine Froggatt, and Amanda Hatton. ‘What’, he asked, ‘do you think is required of the next generation of senior leaders in children’s services? Do they need to be different from the class of 2005, the group of DCSs who were appointed to implement the change sparked off by the Children Act?’

Amanda Hatton: Perhaps I can start us off by reflecting on one of the main differences that I see, and that’s the whole business of managing without a blueprint. There’s been a cultural shift since 2005 towards localism and self determination, with the expectation that you should rely more on your own professionalism to provide the guiding principles you need as a leader. That’s not an easy thing to do because it requires you to resist the pressure to provide simple and straightforward solutions irrespective of how complex the problem may be.

Howard Cooper: I agree with that. I’ve just been asked to comment on a research paper written by David Cracknell and Rob Hulme from the University of Chester. They interviewed all the DCSs in the North West in 2008 and again in 2013 in order to explore this question. In the research paper, they describe the earlier group, the Every Child Matters group, as ‘commissars’. We, and I was one of them, were instructed and empowered by the Children Act and the Department for Children, School and Families, the DCSF as it then was, to act as system leaders, to provide moral authority and generate change across the system by going well beyond our formal powers.

The word they use to characterise the role of the DCS as it is currently conceived is ‘auctioneer’. The reason for this is the current emphasis on the devolution of power to local authorities and the shift towards commissioning as a way of providing local authority services. I am certainly with them on that. To an increasing extent, DCSs have a range of other responsibilities, some of them quite bizarre. The slimming down of senior leadership structures and, in some cases, the

“I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles; but today it means getting along with people.”

Mahatma Gandhi
introduction of matrix management, has meant that DCSs are no longer isolated from their colleagues in anything like the way that was the norm in 2005. If I’m honest, it was possible to act as leader of a separate department then. You’ve got to be much more networked in to the local authority now. The bit in their analysis that I don’t quite buy is this. I think that DCSs still have to exercise moral leadership. There is a folk memory of Section 1 of the Children Act and Every Child Matters that is very powerful.

**Amanda Hatton:** It also raises the interesting question of whether the DCS needs to be a technical expert in one of the relevant professions or whether it is enough to see the job as a general management role. In one sense that question has been round for a long time… ‘Can education manage social care? Can social care manage education?… but there is an important issue, for me, about creativity and innovation. Do you need the technical knowledge in order to be able to innovate safely? I don’t know the answer to that.

**Howard Cooper:** I’m on the fence. I don’t think it is black and white. Back in 2005, when people were saying you couldn’t run social care if you weren’t a social worker (which I wasn’t) my answer was that I believed you could, though, of course, that was only true if you had good people around you who did understand social care. But we’re not beyond learning. I can understand what the key issues are and I can certainly understand how systems work and find ways of moving the workforce forward. When I talk to DCSs now who have come from a non-children’s background, it’s not very different. If they understand organisations and they care about kids, and if they have an ability to learn and a willingness to use dispersed leadership, I don’t see a problem. Not so long ago, I was talking to a DCS coming into a very challenging authority with no background in children’s services, and she understood what needed to be done, arguably with greater clarity than if she had had a specific professional background.

**Amanda Hatton:** What that suggests is that DCSs today do need a slightly different skill set. I have been reading a lot about self leadership recently, and the need for leaders both to build their own resilience and to support others in doing the same. If you haven’t read Susan Cain’s book ‘Quiet’, you should. The section that struck me most forcefully was the one dealing with her concept of ‘restorative niches’. What she says, in essence, is that if you are out of your comfort zone, you have got to know where your safe place is and where you can find support. If you are coming in as a DCS without the professional background, then you need to be really good at the ‘restorative niche’ stuff. It’s back to Maslow really – you need to have your basic needs met before you can be creative and innovative.

**Patrick Scott:** That brings us back to the question of how you develop the qualities that you say are needed by the next generation of senior leaders in children’s services. You can’t do it just by filling people’s heads with technical and professional knowledge.

**Maxine Froggatt:** That’s the question we’ve had to keep asking ourselves since the leadership programmes started in the North West over 3 years ago. There are three big changes. First of all, we have moved a mega-distance from the view that all you need is to know a bit more about safeguarding or education. Now, it’s all about transferable leadership skills. That’s one thing. The second is this. Imagine the reaction we would have got three years ago if we had said ‘You will be doing this in your own local authority, but you will also be looking out for everybody else’. They would all have said ‘No chance, I’ve got enough to do’. Now, we are saying that the new breed of leaders have got to be more outward looking. You can’t bury yourself in your own authority. The third big change is about accountability. We are now saying is not just about listening to your children and families, but really co-creating something that families want and need. These are all huge leaps in the culture.

**Amanda Hatton:** Yes, it’s about the ability to network. It has always been important but it’s even more important now.
Maxine Froggatt: Even those on the leadership programme that found themselves being pushed out of their comfort zone when we asked them to work across local authority boundaries recognised that it was important and, on reflection, realised not only that it was good for them but also that the programme itself was their new network. That’s one of the most important ways in which you can help to develop the new breed of leaders. Back in 2005 when you brought people together, it often turned into a kind of therapy group, or, even worse, just an excuse to have a good moan. Now, the only reason for bringing all those public resources together in the same room is to find ways of delivering services better, by working collectively. Think about the data workshops we have run in the north west. They have been all about telling it the way it is. People could have got very defensive, but they didn’t.

Howard Cooper: So the hypothesis is that if and when those second tier leaders become directors, it will be more in their bones that you collaborate and share than it was previously.

Amanda Hatton: And that’s what we saw in the regional projects, isn’t it. For some of those involved, it wasn’t a comfortable place to be, but looking back I think they would now acknowledge the value of seeing what was happening elsewhere, and the opportunity to work differently.

Maxine Froggatt: Yes. I think of somebody like Harriet Wilkins who was really good at implementation planning, and did a number of placements in other authorities to improve their planning process.

Patrick Scott: What’s was in it for her?

Maxine Froggatt: I think she would say that it is a number of things. It’s partly about being reassured that what she has been doing in her own LA is right. And it’s really built her confidence to discover that she has something to offer others who may not have mature systems in place. That’s also been the experience of Tracy Ryan who did the diagnostic work on early help with a couple of local authorities and has gone back to her own with much greater confidence as well as a wider professional network.

Howard Cooper: The big picture example of all of this is Halton and Cheshire West, of course, where they are sharing a DCS. There is no question of those authorities amalgamating. They keep a separate identity but have a lot of interaction.

Patrick Scott: Last question. Do you feel optimistic that the next generation of DCSs will be up to the job as it evolves into something quite different from what they imagined only a few years ago?

Howard Cooper: Yes, I do. Certainly. One caveat, though. The leadership of local government is all beginning to look a bit like football management. When I started I never for one moment thought that I could be hounded out of office. Now that’s not quite routine, but it happens…with people of high calibre. People aspiring to the top jobs now need a high degree of personal resilience.

Amanda Hatton: I totally agree. My caveat is that you won’t get people stepping forward unless you make the job more attractive. We need to learn from other professions and do more work lower down the structures. The gap between tiers is wide and getting wider. The step up to Director now is massive. We need lots of mentoring and peer networking.

Maxine Froggat: The future’s bright. Looking at the talent coming through in the North West, we shouldn’t have any shortages of people to identify as potential leaders in the future.

Harriet Wilkins, a participant on the Aspirant Leader Programme (ALPs) was placed with an LA in intervention. She worked with their team to prioritize actions, set challenging targets and identify success criteria. Her success has meant further requests of this type from other LAs. Harriet also led a small cross regional team to evaluate the first round of DCS Peer Challenge Summits. A regional report was prepared for ADCS and changes made to the December round as a result.

Tracy Ryan, an ALPs participant was placed with a small cross regional group to develop and deliver a diagnostic for Early Help. This was conducted as part of the regional peer challenge and support process and involved desk top enquiry, focus group interviews and both verbal and written feedback to the LA. Tracy used the opportunity to broaden her knowledge and skills and to develop a network with other leaders in the region. The receiving LA gained a forensic insight into their early help strengths and areas for development. The diagnostic is now available in the region.
DCSs in the East of England knew that even though they were all facing similar challenges, they were working in isolation when it came to finding solutions. What’s more, many of the most intractable problems were the ones faced by their middle leaders, arguably those least well placed to effect real change to the way in which the whole system worked. The answer was to create multi-authority development teams, combining middle and senior leaders, as a way of bringing on the next generation of leaders at the same time as improving practice. In the school sector, they are starting to call this kind of approach ‘Joint Development Practice’, a term coined by David Hargreaves (‘Leading a self improving school system’, National College, 2011).

The DCSs agreed to identify at least one leader from within their organisation who had an interest in the project area and could be released for up to three days to be part of a cross local authority project team, facilitated by Lyn Frith, on behalf of the Virtual Staff College.

The project themes emerged from the local authority self-assessment processes:

- Reducing the number of looked after children by developing new processes and approaches.
- Narrowing the Gap in education outcomes for particular groups such as care leavers and low income families.
- Improving educational attainment, particularly in the Early Years and at Key Stage 2.

Lyn facilitated all three project teams and led the initial face to face meetings to agree the scope of the project and to support the production of a project plan which was submitted to the DCS group for approval.

In the case of the project about looked after children, the team decided to use Outcomes Based Accountability™ (OBA) as a tool for understanding the best ways to reduce the numbers of looked after children within the context of a complex political and economic climate.

**Case Study 1:**
**Common problems, shared solutions**

**Outcomes:**

The project outcomes were agreed as:
- strengthening leaders’ awareness and understanding of effective evidence-based practice,
- strengthening leaders’ capacity to meet the challenges within these project areas,
- informing the decision-making of the regional DCS group in order to deliver improvements in performance.

The team started by compiling a data base of the most appropriate quantitative data, as well as gathering qualitative information which could help to explain the story behind the data. They tracked down evidence of ‘what works’ locally, nationally and internationally, and held two ‘Turning the Curve’ workshops to explore the complexities relating to the ‘wicked issue’ of reducing the numbers of looked after children.
What is ‘Outcome Based Accountability’?

The Mark Friedman Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) approach starts with outcomes and works backwards, step by step, to means. It provides a framework for planning and performance managing services. Key features of OBA include:

- population accountability, which is about improving outcomes for a particular population within a defined geographical area,
- performance accountability, which is about the performance of a service and improving outcomes for a defined group of service users,
- the use of performance management categories which distinguish between ‘How much did we do?’, ‘How well did we do it?’ and, the most important category, ‘Is anyone better off?’.

OBA is also a way of securing strategic and cultural change, moving organisations away from a focus on ‘efficiency’ and ‘process’ as the arbiters of value in their services, and towards making better outcomes the primary purpose of their organisation and its employees. Some distinguishing features of the approach are:

- The use of simple and clear language
- The collection and use of relevant data
- The involvement of stakeholders, including service users and the wider community, in achieving better outcomes

Lessons Learned

The findings were shared across the region, but clearly the main benefits were for those involved. Answering the question ‘What does good look like?’ cannot be done simply by poring over case studies or listening to experts. It’s about working together over a period of time on a common problem. Lyn identified this as a key feature of the work, ‘the team members valued the opportunity to learn from one another through supportive and challenging discussion’. The team members were ‘learning from one another’ and ‘building trusting relationships’ so that they were happy to share sensitive and challenging information. The role of the facilitator is clearly key to this and Lyn particularly valued the opportunity for face to face sessions with team members.

From this came the sense that the work was also developing the participants as leaders. They gained experience of what it means for policy to be informed by evidence, including the difficulties of gathering useful data, and they had to work together despite coming from very different local authorities, a key skill for those aspiring to be systems leaders.

“I wanted to ensure the wider dissemination of these thematic project reports both inside the LA and across the wider region. They are very valuable and I am impressed by the level of cross-authority collaboration.”

Martin Pratt, DCS, Luton.
Anna Wright, formerly DCS in Reading, and Di Smith, regional lead for succession planning in the South East, describe the internship programme they set up on behalf of the DCS group in the region...

In early 2012, the DCSs in the South East agreed to develop an internship programme. They had recognised that it was a big jump to move from third tier manager to assistant director and that it was a challenge to help these managers develop the experience and confidence they needed to apply for second tier posts. The aim of the internship programme was to create a credible pool of candidates with the necessary desire, knowledge, capability and experience to be considered for Assistant Director posts.

The DCSs agreed that they would allow third tier managers out of the local authorities for 20 days to undertake a piece of work in another authority. This could be completed as a block, as 2 days a week for 10 weeks, or in any way that worked for everybody concerned. We had been asked to make it all work in practice, so we advertised widely for applicants for the internship programme. All the authorities and the 200 managers who had engaged with the 4 cohorts of the succession planning programme were circulated with details of the scheme, an application form and a sponsor form. We wanted to ensure that the applicants had the support of their line managers, mainly Assistant Directors, for two reasons. We needed to ensure that they would be supported to manage the time involved in the process, and we wanted to be confident that anybody who was recommended would be able to manage the process of undertaking a placement for a piece of work in another authority.

The second task was to invite all the local authorities in the region to identify two projects that could be completed by an intern. We suggested that these should be projects that could be completed in 20 days and would enable the intern to get some experience of working at an AD level in another local authority. 17 applications were received from third tier managers. Because some managers had applied from the same authority, the number reduced to 14 because the local authorities felt that they could not support so many managers being out of the LA at once. We asked the LAs to decide which managers would go forward first. 3 more managers were picked up in a second round of internships started 6 months later. These managers were sent details of the 27 projects identified by 11 of the local authorities in the region. The applicants were asked to provide the project lead with their choice of 5 preferred projects in rank order. The project lead gave each applicant an individual telephone interview. The purpose of the interview was to establish exactly what the intern wanted to get out of the programme and to help them think through the issues and challenges they would be likely to encounter in implementing a project in another LA. The interview was also to ensure that the intern felt confident at operating in a new environment and had considered the impact of the internship on their day to day work.

The applicants gave a host of different reasons for wanting to undertake an internship, ranging from ‘to try out leadership skills in a new context’ to ‘as a way of learning more about the way in which the political interface works’ to ‘have more influence over the way things are done’.

Following the interviews a matching process was undertaken to link the intern with a suitable project. We then set up a telephone conference between the project sponsor and the intern. This served a number of purposes. The first was to introduce the intern and sponsor and to establish what the intern was hoping to get from the project. The second was to ensure that
the project brief was clear, that there was agreement about the desired outcomes for the project and that the success criteria were fully understood. Questions such as, ‘if this project really works for you, what will it achieve?’ were helpful in getting to the nub of the issue. It was also important to understand the stakeholders with an interest in the project, including politicians, and the risks involved. The conference also covered practical issues such as the need for a security pass, desk and admin support and clarified that each authority would get a £2500 grant to support the internship. The conference also explored what shadowing opportunities might be made available to the intern as part of their placement in the authority. At the end the intern was asked to confirm they felt the project was clear and they were comfortable with the brief. The minutes of the conference provided the basis for a Project Identification Document.

Projects presented at the SE learning event...

- **Improving mathematics achievement in East Sussex**, Ian Elkington, Bucks
- **Evaluation of the Waverley Pilot - Surrey Family Support Programme**, Jennifer Williams, West Sussex Sean Rafferty, Surrey
- **School Services Review in Slough**, Phil Osborne, Surrey
- **Developing a Quality Assurance Strategy for West Berkshire**, Sam Bushby, West Sussex
- **Developing options for commissioning traveller education services**, Simon Dear, Isle of Wight
- **Mapping support for disabled children in West Sussex**, Tim Davis, Southampton
- **Small Rural Schools in Milton Keynes**, Martin Goff, Hampshire

These conferences identified a range of issues that needed to be addressed. In about two thirds of the cases, the project sponsor had a very clear view of the project and had thought through the answers to the questions. The brief was very clear and the success criteria were explicit. These conferences went very smoothly. In other cases, circumstances had meant that the brief had changed and the initial project was no longer current. There had been a three-month delay between the submission of the projects and the telephone conferences, due to the preparation needed and the challenge of fitting conferences into people’s busy diaries. In these cases, there was sometimes the need to redefine the project or even in some cases to explore what other opportunities there were for the intern. At the end of the conference the project lead encouraged the sponsor and intern to set up a meeting to specially plan how the days would be scheduled and the activities needed to complete the project.

On February 2013, 9 months after launching the projects, we held an event to feedback the learning from the projects. The presentations were of very high quality and many provided evidence of some significant change and learning has occurred as a result of the projects. This is what some of the interns themselves said about the experience:

- ‘There was a massive learning opportunity from being embedded in another authority, particularly to understand the difference in scale of 43 versus 420 schools.’
- ‘I’ve worked in a large county for years and years and it made me want to work in a unitary.’
- ‘I hadn’t realised how much the internship would give me for self reflection. I had time for research and questions about the area. You don’t normally get that.’
- ‘I learned about project management. The strategic bit pushed me. I was outside my comfort zone.’
- ‘I now schedule my diary differently. I can cut through things more quickly. I ask different questions.’
- ‘Great preparation for next steps, I will probably have more confidence in applying for another role.’

**Schools supporting schools in East Sussex**

Ian Elkington, a senior school improvement adviser in Buckinghamshire led a project in East Sussex focused on improving mathematics achievement. Originally the project brief focused on the task of helping the LA to evaluate the impact of the support the LA had been providing to improve achievement in mathematics, but the project quickly changed to an intervention strategy and Ian became the catalyst for two school clusters to agree a process for sharing best practice in mathematics teaching between schools. This built on work headteachers were doing already using appreciative enquiry. As part of this work Ian helped secure additional investment of £28,000 to support the work of the clusters. Ian’s involvement built momentum for the systems change the LA wanted to achieve, which was for schools to take more responsibility for their own and each other’s improvement.
The last session of the conference focused on sharing learning about the process of developing the internships. We asked first about critical success factors, these included:

- The fact that the project was explicitly embedded in a succession planning programme and the commitment to building capacity for the future and not leaving this to chance.

- The importance of understanding the difference between working in a big county and a small unitary, particularly for somebody contemplating making the move.

- The experience of how different cultures work, and how the external eye can sometimes see things that aren’t obvious to the insider. A great example of this was the way an intern with a community engagement expertise helped a sponsor look at SEN with a different lens.

Quality Assurance in West Berkshire

Sam Bushby, a team manager of integrated services and child protection advisor in West Sussex led a project on improving quality assurance for children’s services in West Berkshire as a follow up to their OFSTED inspection which identified that the LA whilst having good quantitative audit data, qualitative information needed further development to demonstrate the impact of interventions in making a difference to children and young people. Sam not only undertook a review of existing practice by taking a diagonal slice across the service, she also reviewed best practice nationally and a stakeholder review which included police and the health service.

So what did we learn?

- It was important to set the right expectations from the start. In some big authorities the intern was not sponsored by an AD and the project was not at AD level. Learning still occurred but it didn’t enable the intern get a sense of doing an AD role.

- Having clarity about the project at the start was felt to be very helpful. A clear brief which had been approved in advance by the LA was really important, though it was important to be flexible too.

- There is no substitute for being made to feel really welcome - having a desk a pass, admin support to guide you and in one instance a car parking place were very much appreciated, as were introductions to people who were in the same setting. Some interns sense of belonging to the LA was stronger than others, and some connected so well it felt like they really had ownership of their host authority and its work.

In conclusion the project supported development in the region by meeting two goals, one was to help develop the credibility, confidence and skills of managers in the region interested in senior roles, the other was to help host authorities improve an area of work they had identified as important to them. There was clearly learning by both the interns and host authorities and a wider sharing of practice between authorities than had been originally anticipated. The Internship model is now seen in the region as a good model for further sector led improvement work.

Stuart Gallimore DCS West Sussex summed up the success of the initiative as ‘a cracking learning opportunity not only for individual personal development but it also brings back learning into the LA. It shows we don’t have to employ expensive external consultants when we have the expertise in the region to deliver first rate work.’

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