



Working Paper

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**Practising Collaborative Leadership:
Reflection and Learning from the
Enabling Collaborative Leadership
Pioneer Programme**

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What Works Scotland (WWS) aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

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- learn what is and what isn't working in their local area
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- better understand what effective policy interventions and effective services look like
- promote the use of evidence in planning and service delivery
- help organisations get the skills and knowledge they need to use and interpret evidence
- create case studies for wider sharing and sustainability

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- Healthcare Improvement Scotland
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- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- Joint Improvement Team
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Education for Scotland
- SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

This is one of a series of papers published by What Works Scotland to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform. This paper relates in particular to the **Leadership** workstream.

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In summary

What is this report about?

This report describes an example of collaboration between a group of public service leaders to develop a learning and development 'offer' to support collaborative leadership in public services. The initiative is called the *Enabling Collaborative Leadership Pioneer Programme* (referred in shorthand as *Pioneer*) and the work has been taken forward by a multi-agency group, latterly known as the 'Design Team' (DT). This account reflects on the experiences of the DT in the first phase of their work developing and designing *Pioneer*.

Pioneer forms one part of a programme by Workforce Scotland- a collaborative initiative to develop the workforce across public service organisations. Workforce Scotland comes under the banner of the Scottish Leaders Forum: a network of senior leaders from central and local government, public services and the third sector.

Pioneer is explicitly experimental in its approach to working and learning in collaboration. Its central elements are: 'going to' and 'working in' the sites and locations of collaborative challenge experienced by participants; and facilitating Action Inquiry (AI) as an integral part of the approach to learning.

'Action Inquiry' (AI) is a shorthand term for an approach to individual and collaborative learning being applied in *Pioneer*. AI encourages the sharing of individual and collective reflections to help make sense of what is happening in a collaborative process, as it happens, in order to improve it. It offers an opportunity for conversations about the extent to which people are 'walking the talk', the difference they think they are making, and what evidence they have which gives them confidence the changes they see are an improvement.

How has this report been produced?

The authors of this report have been closely involved in *Pioneer* from early in its inception, specifically developing the approach to learning and evaluation. Our aim is to be sensitive to, and congruent with, *Pioneer's* principles and practice, particularly its emphasis on individual and collective reflection and learning through action. We have sought to put that into practice in the way we have undertaken the work presented here.

We adopted a Learning History (LH) approach to individual and collective reflection about *Pioneer*. A Learning History is an action research approach that emphasises the human experience of those involved and uses a participative process to stimulate wider learning from those experiences. The DT members were interviewed individually and then we subsequently facilitated a group discussion, for the DT to reflect on the insights from the interviews.

How did the Design Team work together?

The DT's diverse membership drew at the beginning from Scottish Government, Police Scotland, Education Scotland, NHS Education for Scotland (NES), the Improvement Service, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Scottish College for Educational Leadership, Scottish Social Service Council. (This changed a little over time but remained largely intact for the period of this report.) Most of the

members of the DT had responsibilities in their respective organisations for leadership, and/or organisational, development.

Members of the DT had different routes into their involvement in *Pioneer*. Some had worked together previously on public service collaboration, and their involvement in *Pioneer* flowed from that. Others were nominated by their organisation. Some had a strong sense of having to account for the progress and achievement of *Pioneer*: to an 'Executive Sponsor Group' set up to oversee it, to Workforce Scotland, or to their own organisations. For others, this was not felt so directly.

There were a number of distinct prompts that initiated the work of *Pioneer*, and DT members came with different 'frames' of meaning attached to the work. Despite this, it is clear there was a common ambition to contribute to the wider agenda of public service reform. And they seemed to share a recognition this could only be achieved by doing things differently, not repeating what had been done before.

The differences of view and experience in the DT were largely embraced and appreciated. This 'creative tension' was seen as a positive influence to the quality of their work. From the beginning, the DT took a deliberative and reflective approach to the work (applying Action Inquiry): exploring their individual assumptions, and testing them out with the group. They also worked through different assumptions about process, as well as content: discussing how they would work together as a group as well as designing what *Pioneer* would be.

They expressed a strong commitment to that approach, despite the challenges it brought. It was experienced at times as being difficult, requiring sustained personal commitment, and taking longer than some might have wished. But there was a strong sense that working through those differences in this way contributed to a strength of collaboration, and a quality of work and thinking, of a higher level than typically they had experienced in other settings.

What can we learn from this example of collaborative practice?

Many of the issues that the Design Team faced are mirrored in the wider public service context, among partnerships seeking to work across traditional boundaries and integrate different professional and service cultures.

The authors offer their reflections in a spirit of inquiry. They are made in the context of issues at the 'macro' level regarding the need for organisational culture change in public services; and more 'micro' concerns about individual working styles and preferences, the need for positive group process and the organisational and personal capacity that currently exists to meet these challenges.

The DT developed a collaborative practice which exhibits, in our experience, an unusual level of individual and collective inquiry and reflection practices and sophisticated relational and facilitative skills. Their readiness and desire to be actively learning and reflecting on the act of collaboration, in collaboration is highly unusual and still largely 'counter-cultural' to prevailing public service organisational norms and expectations in Scotland.

Their reflections highlight for us that it requires skill, sustained effort, self-awareness, personal commitment, honesty and truthfulness, sensitivity at an individual level, as well as clear organisational commitment and capacity to engage in this way.

We hope this account provides a resource for learning and reflection by others experiencing these kinds of challenges inherent in the practice of collaborative leadership. With this aim in mind we 'reflect aloud' at points through the discussion in a series of boxes, identifying questions that arise for us and which, we believe, are likely to have wider resonance. For ease, these reflections are brought together in Annex A.

Introduction

What is this report about?

This report describes an example of collaboration between a group of public service leaders to design and develop a learning and development ‘offer’ to support public service leaders in the practice of collaborative leadership.

The learning and development initiative is called the *Enabling Collaborative Leadership Pioneer Programme* (referred throughout in shorthand as *Pioneer*). It is part of a programme of work being undertaken under the ‘banner’ of Workforce Scotland, which is a collaborative initiative to develop the workforce across public service organisations. The design and development work of *Pioneer* has been taken forward by an interagency group, latterly known as ‘the Design Team (DT)’.

The Design Team is diverse in its make-up and reflects the organisations contributing to Workforce Scotland. At the beginning, members were drawn from Scottish Government, Police Scotland, Education Scotland, NHS Education for Scotland (NES), the Improvement Service, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Scottish College for Educational Leadership, Scottish Social Service Council. Most of the members of the Design Team have responsibilities in their respective organisations for leadership and/or organisational development.

This account reflects on the experiences of the DT in the first phase of their work, from when they first came together as a group in spring 2014 through to April 2015. This covers the period they spent initially developing and designing what the ‘offer’ on collaborative leadership was going to be; then their early experience of running ‘taster sessions’ to provide an opportunity for interested organisations to come and learn more about, and experience, the *Pioneer* ‘approach’; and first contacts with some organisations interested to explore the possibility of participating in *Pioneer*.

What is the purpose of this account of Pioneer?

The authors of this report have been closely involved in *Pioneer* from early on in its inception. Cathy Sharp¹ joined the DT as a ‘learning partner’ in August 2014. The learning partner role was seen as a flexible one, with a focus on creating and sustaining structures and approaches that support continuous learning and improvement. The role was not to act as a facilitator of group process for the Design Team.

Nick Bland² joined the DT in October 2014 to support an evaluation of *Pioneer*, with a focus on drawing out learning about effective collaborative leadership. There was a shared recognition of the complementary aims and ambitions of *Pioneer* and What Works Scotland (WWS)- specifically the WWS workstream on leadership, which is exploring the nature and contribution of leadership in public services to meeting the ambitions of the *Christie Commission*.

Our shared aim for, and approach to, *Pioneer’s* learning and evaluation seeks to be sensitive to, and congruent with, the principles and practice of *Pioneer*, and its emphasis on individual and collective reflection and learning through action. We have sought to put that into practice in the way we have undertaken the work presented here.

¹ From *Research for Real*: <http://research-for-real.co.uk/>

² From *What Works Scotland*: <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/>

We have worked together to ensure that learning and evaluation are an integral part of the *Pioneer* programme and to test a model of learning and evaluation driven by the practice of action inquiry. We see our role as being 'critical friends' to the Design Team; as participant observers and active contributors. In this, we brought distinct and overlapping interests; one of us has a primary interest in learning about what supports the practice of collaborative leadership and the other is specifically interested in how to locate knowledge co-production or inquiry-based learning and action at the heart of professional practice in public services.

This account shares the very real experience of working collaboratively in ways that reflect the current policy and organisational context of public services in Scotland. Our hope is that this builds on, and contributes to, the ongoing reflection and learning of the DT.

By sharing this experience more widely, we also hope it provides a resource for learning and reflection by others experiencing these kinds of challenges inherent in the practice of collaborative leadership. With this aim in mind we 'reflect aloud' at points through the discussion in a series of boxes, identifying questions that arise for us and which, we believe, are likely to have wider resonance. For ease, these reflections are brought together in **Annex A**.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the members of the Design Team for the collaborative spirit in which they have worked with us, and to our colleagues who have provided comments on previous versions of this report.

Background

Before we get into the detail of the collaborative experiences of the Design Team, it is helpful to understand the aims of *Pioneer* and its place in the wider policy context.

What is the policy context in which Pioneer is being developed?

Pioneer is being designed and delivered in the specific policy context of public service reform in Scotland. The *Christie Commission* report, published in 2011, sets much of the context for this public service reform. A central message of Christie is that public services need to get much better at delivering outcomes, enabling prevention and tackling inequalities.

The complex and interrelated nature of these issues require them according to Christie to be addressed through collaboration across government and public service organisations to achieve better outcomes for less money. The Commission report identified that the scope of collaboration should increasingly involve citizens in co-designing and co-producing services.

Evidence drawn from written submissions to the Commission, public discussion events and stakeholder meetings, demonstrates that some new approaches – characterised by collaboration between organisations and partnerships with people and communities – are making a real difference and can provide positive models for the future. However, these are isolated examples. A priority for government should be to ensure such approaches become the norm, benefiting individuals and entire communities.³

What is Pioneer?

Pioneer forms one part of a programme of work by Workforce Scotland- a collaborative initiative to develop the workforce across public service organisations. Workforce Scotland comes under the auspices of the Scottish Leaders Forum, which is a network of senior leaders from central and local government, public services and the third sector⁴.

The DT produced a document in November 2014 that described the *Pioneer* ‘offer’ as aimed at those “already working within and sometimes beyond their own organisation to:

- Improve public services and achieve better outcomes working cooperatively with individuals and communities
- Seek opportunities to build effective collaborative relationships then manage those relationships to build trust, confidence and credibility
- Think beyond the constraints of current ways of working, actively seeking the views of others and encouraging creativity and innovation
- Use evidence to inform development and recognise the potential to build evidence from current practice
- Share knowledge and information to obtain best value from it across public services.”⁵

³ Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, 2011.

⁴ <http://scottishleadersforum.org/>

⁵ Pioneer ‘offer’ document- ‘Enabling Collaborative Leadership Pioneer Programme 2015, Briefing for teams – phase 1’.

Pioneer is explicitly experimental in its approach to working and learning in collaboration. In its first phase, the DT sought to test what kinds of approaches work best for different kinds of collaborations across different sites and locations. The intention was to take this learning into the design and delivery of later phases.

The central elements of *Pioneer* are:

- On-going facilitated Action Inquiry (AI) as an integral part of the approach to learning
- 'Going to' and 'working in' the sites and locations of collaborative challenge experienced by participants
- A peer learning network providing opportunities for *Pioneer* participants from different sites and locations to meet and learn from one another.

What is Action Inquiry (AI)?

'Action Inquiry' (AI) is our shorthand term for an approach to individual and collaborative learning being developed by the *Pioneer* facilitation and evaluation teams. AI encourages the capture and sharing of individual and collective reflections/insights to help make sense of what is happening in a collaborative process, as it happens, in order to improve it. It offers an opportunity for people to have conversations about the extent to which they are 'walking the talk', the difference they think they are making, and what evidence they have which gives them confidence the changes they see are an improvement.

Action inquiry builds on the idea of 'living life as inquiry' as an action research methodology⁶, and has been developed through a number of different approaches including those of action science⁷; first, second and third person inquiry strategies⁸; appreciative inquiry⁹ and systemic action research.¹⁰

⁶ Marshall, J (1999) Living Life as Inquiry in Systematic Practice and Action Research 12 (2)

⁷ Fisher, D. Rooke D. and Torbert, B (2003) Personal and Organisational Transformations through action inquiry, Edge Work Press

⁸ Reason, P & Bradbury, H (2001) Introduction: Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration, in Reason, P and Bradbury, H (eds) Handbook of Action Research, Sage

⁹ Ludema, J. D; Cooperrider, D. L. and Barrett, F. J., (2001) Appreciative Inquiry: the Power of the Unconditional Positive Question in P. Reason and H. Bradbury. (eds), Handbook of Action Research. Sage

¹⁰ Burns, D (2007) Systemic Action Research, Policy Press

What is the approach to learning and evaluation in Pioneer?

After some months working with the DT, in February 2015 we worked together to produce a 'framework for learning and evaluation' in Pioneer, summarised in the following extract.

Extract from learning and evaluation framework

Evaluation is an integral part of the Pioneer programme. As such, the aims and methods of evaluation will aim to be sensitive to and congruent with the underlying philosophy of the programme, and its approach to individual and collective learning.

It will provide a systematic method to gather evidence, and support learning and reflection by:

- the Pioneer Design Team on the experience to-date of working collaboratively to design, develop, and now start to deliver, the Pioneer Programme;
- participants on the programme, and the experience of the programme in developing their collaborative working; and
- public service organisations and how they can better support and encourage collaborative working

There are three proposed elements to evaluation:

1. Learning lessons from the collaborative design and development of Pioneer
2. Capturing the experience of participants on the Pioneer Programme, and its contribution to developing their collaborative working
3. Following up the longer-term impact of Pioneer with participants, and exploring the influence of their learning on collaborative working in their organisations

In developing this framework, we deliberately positioned it as contributing to, and appreciative of, the aims of *Pioneer*, and supportive of its delivery.

It was agreed with the DT we would undertake the first element from the learning and evaluation framework – to draw out learning on collaborative leadership from the initial experience of designing and developing *Pioneer* - in March and April 2015.

We adopted a Learning History (LH) approach to facilitate the reflection and learning by the DT as this seemed like a good way to provide a structured and systematic approach to individual and collective reflection on the experience of collaborating on *Pioneer*.¹¹

¹¹ Gearty 2014 Learning History, in Coughlan, D and Brydon-Miller, M, *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research* pp. 492-496, Sage

A note on methodology

A Learning History is an action research approach to capturing the learning from a project, initiative or event in a way that emphasises the human experience of those involved and via a participative process that is devised to stimulate wider learning from those experiences. (Gearty, 2014)

Nick conducted interviews with eight of the ten members of the Design Team in March and April 2015. This provided the opportunity for each of the members to reflect individually, in private, on their experiences of working together. From this Nick developed a set of themes that were found to be common across the interviews, and using anonymised quotes from DT members, we (the authors) formed a Learning History document.

This document was then shared with all members of the Design Team as a stimulus and resource for further personal reflection. We held a facilitated, structured group discussion with the DT in April 2015 for them collectively to reflect on the Learning History. The discussion followed a full cycle questions approach (allowing structured and equal time for Observation, Reflection, Planning, Action), based on the work of Yoland Wadsworth (2011)¹².

This report draws on the material from the interviews, the Learning History, the group discussion, and our reflections from attending Design Team meetings. A draft version of this report was shared with Design Team members for comment in January 2016.

¹² Wadsworth, Y. (2011). *Building in Research and Evaluation, Human Inquiry for Living Systems*. Allen and Unwin.

Discussion

In the following discussion, we consider the reflections of the Design Team on their experience of working together.

We have structured this discussion under a number of thematic questions about their collaboration, and use verbatim quotes from the interviews and group discussion throughout to illustrate points. The thematic questions are:

- How did the Design Team come to a common understanding of their work together?
- What helped develop 'shared meaning'?
- How did they work together?
- How did they organise their work?
- What did Design Team members contribute to the collaborative work?

How did the Design Team come to a common understanding of their work together?

Members of the Design Team had different routes into their involvement in Pioneer. Some had already worked together previously on an initiative encouraging public service collaboration, and their involvement in Pioneer flowed from that. Others were nominated by their organisation to be involved. Some members had a strong sense of having to account for the progress and achievement of Pioneer: to an 'Executive Sponsor Group' comprising members of the Scottish Leaders Forum set up specifically to oversee it, to the governance forum for Workforce Scotland, or to their own organisations. For others this was not felt so directly.

There were a number of distinct prompts that initiated the work of *Pioneer*. This meant that different 'frames' of meaning were attached to the work. For example, one of the prompts came from emerging learning from previous experience in Workforce Scotland of collaborative initiatives, the other from a suggestion from the Chief Constable of Police Scotland to Scottish Government for a cross-public service leadership programme. These two prompts for the work were understood quite distinctly:

There was an emergent collaborative model... and a command saying 'do this'. And the two things came together. You could almost look round the room and see who was inspired by which. And how that mixture has affected how we have worked through the process.

Despite these different prompts, it is clear the DT members came together with a shared sense of purpose, an ambition to make a contribution to the wider agenda of public service reform. And they seemed to share a recognition this could only be achieved by doing things differently, not simply repeating what had been done before.

[There was] a quite strong passion to get under the surface that could make a much bigger difference. We were given permission to do something and a real ambition to really push what that was.

We probably saw the world through different glasses...we vary a wee bit. But I think there was a commonality about wanting to do things differently.

The DT also reflected on a keen awareness, evident from the beginning, that they were a microcosm of collaboration and that they should 'walk the talk' in seeking to collaborate themselves. There was a readiness and a desire to be actively learning and reflecting on the act of collaboration, in the act of collaboration, as they went about designing an approach to learning about and developing collaborative leadership.

From the very early meetings it was recognised we are a collaboration, we are learning. That was a very self-conscious acknowledgment right from that start. And that gave people a bit more permission I think at the start to reflect. From the outset that was a shared understanding.

At the same time, there was a range of ideas about what Pioneer would be; what it would look like in practice for participants, to fulfil that shared aspiration. For example, there were discussions about the part some sense of a 'curriculum' in collaborative leadership might play, and how that might sit with an approach that focused on experiential learning.

I didn't imagine there would be such diversity of views probably... about what the learning needs to look like... about the formality of the learning approach, the curriculum; that we should almost think about accreditation of the curriculum. Rather than something that is experiential that has really been such a strong thread running through the design team discussion from the start.

Quite naturally, given these prompts and the different histories and styles of working across the organisations involved, there were a number of different 'frames' through which Pioneer was thought about and given meaning. Some of these frames appeared to reflect different personal and organisational approaches to learning, and different experiences of the styles and formats in which learning was commonly supported and encouraged.

So what helped develop 'shared meaning' across the DT?

The differences of view and experience present in the DT were not only recognised across the group, but also largely embraced and appreciated. There was a strong sense from the DT members that working through those differences through discussion and deliberation contributed to a quality of work and thinking felt to be of a higher level than typically they had experienced in other settings.

What's been interesting is it's been a genuine process of learning right from the start. People have had very different understandings, driven by very different motivations. At the very early stages we had really quite different views about what [Pioneer] might be.

That divergence of view around every aspect of what we have been trying to achieve has been a strength in many respects, that constant questioning and challenging really created a depth of thinking that is unusual but at the same time it's informed where we have got to.

It seems that pretty much from the beginning of their work together, Design Team members took a deliberative and reflective approach to the work: exploring their individual assumptions, and testing them out with the group. They expressed a strong sense of commitment to that approach and stance, despite the challenges that it brought (discussed below).

I'm amazed how often we have to talk over the assumptions we are making...nothing can be taken for granted in this process...it would be a weakness if we ignored it.

The depth of that kind of understanding and commitment to that genuine seeking to understand other people's views, genuinely engaging round the issues is really quite unusual in work situations.

For example, at the first DT meeting Nick attended in October 2015, he was struck by the explicit attention being paid to group process through the course of the meeting. It seemed to play a natural part of the meeting for people to notice and share their reflections on the way in which the meeting itself was proceeding, and the individual contributions being made. For example, one member of the group offered a specific reflection: that everyone was agreeing but wondered whether this meant there were other issues to which they were not paying attention, which might be possible sources of conflict. There was also a lot of explicit reference to individuals' own perspectives on the work and their preferred working styles. There appeared to be an apparent level of comfort with this approach.

The DT also decided to undertake specific activities that appear to have helped surface different assumptions and understandings of what Pioneer could or should be. One example of this, undertaken very early on, was a specific day facilitated by someone external to the DT. This occurred before either of us became involved in Pioneer, but some DT members identified it as having played a useful part in moving to a collective understanding of the different views and perspectives present in the DT:

There was a facilitated workshop...she got us to look from other people's perspectives. That was a really useful day. Helping me get clear in my own mind how other people were approaching this.

There was an external facilitator, came in and did a day with us... that kind of collaborative 'what's this going to be' it's not going to be a traditional programme so what's it going to be, and why is that? A sort of collective process to starting to see what was emerging from our different takes of what this ought to be.

A few months later, in November 2014, a couple of members of the DT facilitated a specific discussion to test-out and make explicit what DT members were assuming about the approach they were taking with Pioneer. This was recorded in a specific document which identified where there was a shared collective understanding, and where differences remained. The DT did not subsequently pursue a formalised or systematic working through of those remaining differences.

Thinking aloud 1

How can a collaboration genuinely value and most effectively work with, or through, inherent differences to develop its own shared meaning?

What role can be most usefully played by external facilitation?

How did the Design Team work together?

The DT also worked through different assumptions about process, as well as content: discussing how they would work together as a group as well as designing what *Pioneer* would be.

There was a broad appreciation of the benefits of the differences across the DT about what *Pioneer* should be, and how they should work together. This process was experienced at times as being difficult, and taking longer than some might have wished. Nonetheless, this ‘creative tension’ in the group was seen to be a positive influence to the quality of their work, as illustrated in the following quotes.

There feels a much greater freedom and willingness to be wrong and to be challenged and find somebody else’s idea is better than yours.

People get working in an organic, enquiring collaborative way people prepared to be honest and listen, there is some skilfulness.

There’s been some tensions in the group but we’ve largely seemed to be able to overcome them

We think this perhaps reflects on the level of ‘maturity’ the group had reached – arguably quite quickly- in their relationships with each other.

Some DT members reflected on the importance of maintaining that sense of challenge in the way they worked. There was a suggestion the DT reached a stage where the group dynamic had become perhaps too consensual, and that this could inhibit the quality of their work together. Some members of the group considered the risks this might present, for example:

Nobody was challenging anything, almost as if it was too comfortable. There was no sort of differing opinions in the room...I think that has moved on a little bit recently

One member of the DT reflected on what they saw as a positive impact on the group dynamic they attributed to the arrival of new members of the team.

It was a recognition that we had perhaps got a bit comfortable... we needed a bit of a challenge I think. It was good to have other people come into the process and see it from another viewpoint and point out some things and create a different dialogue.

One DT member reflected further on this point in the later group discussion we facilitated: noting how far the DT had developed as a group, while acknowledging the potential for further development in mutual understanding.

What it captures really well are there are so many different perspectives in this and we still maybe haven’t nailed them all down yet quite right. But having said that, it’s very clear from this as well we have come on a really huge journey and we seem to have a really good understanding of each other but I’m not sure if we understand how we got that understanding of each other either, and that’s the bit that comes out for me.

For some members of the DT, taking a reflective and deliberative approach to their work came more naturally than for others.

There were different experiences around the table about how you would do business... 'we've got to act, we can't ponder', [in contrast to] 'we have to reflect, discuss more'.

Some DT members reflected that their working style had not 'fitted' with the emerging way of working in Pioneer. It had taken them some time to understand and adapt their preferred way of working.

I came in with a very clear action focus. It didn't engage people ...It took me a while to understand what that new approach was, letting people talk things round till they come to a conclusion themselves, rather than be directive.

As the DT worked through the approach they were going to take in Pioneer, a commitment to pursuing a more formal Action Inquiry (AI) approach started to emerge. For some members of the DT, this was an unusual and discomforting way of working which was experienced as somewhat of a challenge.

We were a bit waffley at times, going round in circles a little bit. And I think it's partly a product of a positive thing that we do which is action inquiry approach.

We've developed in that way [action inquiry] because that's the way the majority are comfortable in doing.

Thinking aloud 2

Are there any short cuts to talking about and valuing differences in collaborations more openly and readily?

To what extent do people 'go with the flow' or absent themselves so as not to provide challenge that may feel uncomfortable, interrupt group norms or take up time in a meeting?

It was evident that 'action' and 'inquiry' were understood as distinct activities by some members of the DT, and that it was difficult to pursue as an integrated approach to learning in action. As such, the relative time, effort, and value put to each were frequently assessed.

If we are trying to deliver something and always asking ourselves questions about next steps...it's all important stuff and I get it, but there's a sense of the need to crack on and make a difference because people will judge us no question.

The above quote illustrates an explicit recognition of the wider context for the work of Pioneer and a sensitivity to obligations and expectations present outside the group in the wider policy context, felt as the need to be seen to materially 'deliver' in traditional terms.

Some other DT members also made reference to the influence the wider environment- specifically the organisations from which some DT members were drawn- had on the contributions being made to Pioneer. There was a recognition that some DT members felt a requirement to reflect or represent the 'agendas' or wishes of their organisations in Pioneer, and that this was not about

personal agendas. Again, it was not clear how much this was made explicit to the DT as a whole. There was some mention made in DT meetings but little discussion.

I think there have been organisational wants and desires woven in at various places

Everyone's dealing with 'the political' in their own organisations

At times, others returned to a concern with the issue of 'top cover' and securing authorisation for working in the different way that they were, with an implicit concern for the risk this was perceived to involve.

Thinking aloud 3

The issues and tensions experienced by the DT seem to us to be interesting and highly pertinent to the desire to work differently in public services in Scotland.

In particular to questions around how progress is measured and evaluated and the influences of existing performance management cultures and systems.

How did DT members experience the pace of collaborative working?

The issue of different working styles and preferences – as individuals, and also stemming from different organisational cultures - played out particularly in DT members' views and experience of the pace of working as a group, and the time it took to develop and design Pioneer.

For some, while appreciating what was being achieved in DT meetings, they experienced the pace of work as slow. There was a sense that the focus on inquiry and reflection – recognised and valued in its own right – was still at the expense of progressing the 'real work' of getting to a final design of Pioneer and then implementing it as a 'concrete deliverable'.

It's really seemed to have taken a long time....I'm an 'activist' I would probably have said let's just start this.

I do always think there is a positive outcome from all the meetings. It's the pace of things that seems to be so slow.

However for some DT members, *insufficient* time had been spent on the design process itself, on thinking through what the Pioneer offer should be.

I think I would have slowed it down and invited a bit more critical comment, in the design process...It didn't feel there was as much rigour as there might have been, let's go round, let's just test that.

In other terms, there was a sense that the DT had moved relatively quickly, particularly in the quality of the relationships built up between members over the first nine to twelve months of their collaboration.

The Pioneer group has managed to get to a place [others] have only managed to get to after 2 or 3 years together

Once the Design Team had begun to engage with people expressing interest in taking part in Pioneer as a 'test site' for its approach, some felt this led to an increase in activity and pace.

There's been an awful lot of action since January. I think that has been prompted by the test sites springing up...it speeds up people's responses to it

Thinking aloud 4

These questions of pace and 'progress' seem to us to illuminate a tension between established ways of working - in which the preference is usually to plan thoroughly before implementation or delivery - and a more 'emergent' model that seeks to take some kind of innovative action relatively soon in order to test the ideas in action in a more iterative and experimental approach.

How can we promote, nurture and sustain an emergent process? And live with the unknowns, the expectations and anxieties of ourselves and others?

How did the Design Team organise their collaborative work?

Another aspect of working through how they would collaborate was how their collective activity should be structured or organised, and how that might support a more 'emergent' approach. For some members of the DT, there was an initial lack of structure, which was felt as uncomfortable and contributed to a sense of lack of direction.

It was about creating the opportunity for colleagues to come together and let's see what happens kind of thing. What happened was chaotic and messy

The deployment of external project management support – delivered skilfully, sensitive to the DT's desire to work differently- was felt by many to provide a means of addressing these issues.

[we] suffered from not having a consistent project management approach...it would have kept our eye on progress.

A bit of order to the chaos, that's been lacking. Having that PM [project management] capacity from the start to put a structure around things might have made more of a difference.

[Of the project management contribution] We were really needing it at that point, could probably have done with it a bit earlier. The folk who have come in have added to the process rather than made it more difficult.

Having [the project manager] was great, able to bring order and work in a collaborative way was a particular talent. There was enormous progress made with things.

How did DT members contribute their time to the collaborative work?

There was widespread recognition among group members that not everyone was able to put the same amount of time into the work of designing Pioneer.

Some members were sensitive to, understanding and appreciative of, the differing and competing demands that DT members were trying to cope with, separate to their involvement in Pioneer. Other demands could impact on when, and how much, DT members could commit to Pioneer; these demands were not static but increased and decreased over time.

Not everyone is able to dedicate as much time as they need to or would like to at certain points, you know waves of capacity.

People are dipping in dipping out, dipping in dipping out.

Some DT members reflected their organisations had placed a boundary or ceiling on the level of their commitment to Pioneer. But it was not clear what specific constraints that placed on them or what negotiation or compromise they were having to undertake with their own organisations. DT members would make clear when they could or could not attend meetings, but there were few opportunities made, or taken, to discuss or communicate how individual DT members were managing these tensions.

People have different levels of commitment with core jobs, different levels of release into Pioneer.

But it was also striking how many members were reflective about their own ability to 'commit'. Some had clearly reflected on, and come to a conclusion about, the level of involvement they could commit to and sustain. But it was not clear that this had been discussed with, or communicated to, the wider DT.

I have made a personal commitment to get to as many meetings as I can.

Some members were explicit about the conflict they felt between what they were able to contribute in practice, compared to what they would ideally have liked to achieve. They felt this had an impact on their productivity or impact in the group, or in the quality of the contribution they made.

How much time is it that people commit to Pioneer? ...I have found it difficult to put in lots of work between meetings, to make things happen as much as I would like.

I recognise I could do my role better with more time to commit to it so that has been a frustration.

In the absence of some discussion and explanation about how individuals were trying to cope with this issue, it appears some judgements were made about whether the contributions being made to Pioneer were equally shared. It is apparent this was felt negatively by some.

There is almost a bystander effect when working with lots of people...it sometimes feels like people are happy to step back and let one person take it on...it doesn't feel very collaborative sometimes.

There is some people who come along to the meetings and that's it...there's half the group who are really taking things forward and the other half who are there but not really properly committed.

Some DT members expressed a concern with, and some internalised conflict about, what they might instinctively seek to bring to the group, or in how they might seek to contribute. They made decisions not only about what they did do, but arguably as importantly, about what they did not, based on an assessment of what would contribute positively to the group. This did not appear to be made explicit to the wider group (or perhaps even to their own organisations), and thus may have gone unnoticed, or interpreted differently.

I genuinely don't want to push the pace but I genuinely feel I need to push the pace. But I don't do it.

Some DT members reflected on this further in the later group discussion:

The bit that interests me... is that there's still quite strong opinions coming through in this, still quite strong observations about how we could do this better, we could still do this bit, we're not where we should be etc but the appetite for continuing and doing this also comes through. So there are frustrations but by the same token people understand this is right, this is what we need to be doing.

I've got a couple of observations...It tells us we can do more as a group to work better together because we have surfaced some things that show differences or different perspectives and I guess we can work on those and try and address ones that are problem areas and build on ones that people are positive about but probably want to see more happen.

Thinking aloud 5

How can individuals check out their attribution of motivations and behaviours of others; and share their own personal challenges and compromises to strengthen collaborative working?

What kind of skills, processes or structures can support sharing?

Different skill sets- different abilities to contribute

Another factor that appeared to influence whether and how people contributed to *Pioneer* was their individual skills and abilities, and the confidence they had in how that helped. This was very different across the group. In the end, the approach taken fitted more easily with the knowledge and expertise of some members than it did for others.

I think what was an eye opener for me was the skill sets that some others in the group have got...those guys have got a pack of cards I don't have...tools and resources that are by and large new to me...Seeing the talent that's there is really good.

I have personally learned a lot...it has taken my understanding to a whole new level

What a privilege it is to work with genuine peers, I'm not used to that. There aren't that many folk around who have that interest in what collaboration is below the surface.

Thinking aloud 6

What are the skills and capacities that are needed for collaborative working? How might these be discussed and made explicit to help improved collaboration? How can they be developed further?

The energy and emotion of collaborative working

DT members reflected on the mixture of emotions attached to the experience of working on *Pioneer*. At times the work could feel particularly emotionally intense; at other times highly energising.

It's been hard work, emotionally draining. It's been all of those things, quite intensively so at times. There's a particular intensity about it all – learning about collaboration while designing learning about collaboration.

It's quite energising to be in a group with people who similarly want to make a change, perhaps with slightly different motivations, different experiences, perspectives, but that common excitement about releasing the potential in people, empowering folk.

Some feelings were favourably compared to previous experiences of collaborative working, particularly about the quality of the relationships between DT members and the levels of trust.

I think the Pioneer experience has been less fraught than the other one [prior collaboration experience].

Others related to their experience of the higher levels of openness and personal engagement that was asked of them in this way of working:

There's been trust there that's a big issue, which there wasn't there in the other example [of collaborative working]

Thinking aloud 7

It is unusual for accounts of collaborative working to acknowledge the emotions involved and we reflect that existing research reports contain very little about this important aspect of group relations, even where the findings acknowledge the difficulties and challenges of the partnership.

This seems to us to be an important dimension of understanding successful collaboration and as participants in *Pioneer* we are also interested in how the *Enabling Collaborative Leadership* programme can work to help people in other sites to have different kinds of conversations, sooner than they might otherwise do so.

Our reflections

What can we learn from this example of collaborative practice? What can usefully be shared from this example with others?

Many of the issues that the Design Team faced are mirrored in the wider public service context, amongst partnerships seeking to work across traditional boundaries and integrate different professional and service cultures.

To conclude, we offer our own reflections on the collaborative process the Design Team have experienced. This work continues to evolve and these reflections are based on the account presented here. Our reflections are tentative and exploratory, offered in a spirit of inquiry. They are made in the context of issues at the 'macro' level regarding the need for organisational culture change in public service and more 'micro' concerns about individual working styles and preferences, the need for positive group process and the organisational and personal capacity that currently exists to meet these challenges.

The Design Team developed a collaborative practice which exhibits, in our experience, an unusual level of individual and collective inquiry and reflection practices and sophisticated relational and facilitative skills. Their readiness and desire to be actively learning and reflecting on the act of collaboration, in collaboration is highly unusual and still largely 'counter-cultural' in terms of prevailing public service organisational norms and expectations in Scotland.

Their reflections highlight for us that it requires skill, sustained effort, self-awareness, personal commitment, honesty and openness, sensitivity at an individual level, as well as clear organisational commitment and capacity to engage in this way.

The experiences of the Design Team show the real challenges of learning and reflection in action. The ambitions articulated by action science seem to us to be pertinent:

"Effective groups resolve difficult problems by taking innovative action relatively soon. As the participants question each other's underlying programs or the credibility of their ideas they maintain high levels of interpersonal openness. They accept that while openness is potentially or actually embarrassing, threatening, or frustrating, openness is necessary to increase trust and individuality in their group. Individual participants may deny the difficulties involved in carrying out their challenging plans but the members freely challenge, test, and correct the claims. By possessing high levels of action science skills, their minimally defensive interpersonal and group relations enable the group members to innovate and respond productively."¹³

The DT found it difficult to consistently sustain inquiry into their collaboration. Inquiry was seen as 'in tension' with the necessary focus on the 'real' work of designing and delivering Pioneer. The DT acknowledged the importance of reflection for surfacing and exploring the inevitable differences that will be present in any collaboration. Yet, even where there is explicit inquiry and reflection, it appears particularly difficult to capture the learning 'at the time', and to make use of that to inform future action. Although there were lots of complaints about 'too much talk' (rather than 'action'), it is arguable that there was still a lot that remained unsaid, or was seen as undiscussable. It is

¹³ Based on the work of Chris Argyris, <http://www.actionscience.com/>. Learning occurs when participants detect and correct gaps between descriptive claims and practical outcomes, or between intentions and results, thoughts and actions, theories and practices; produce what they claim to know. Action science calls this "reducing gaps between espoused theories and theories-in-use."

evident that for some DT members at least, they self-censored and chose not to raise, or repeat, concerns or issues that continued to sit with them.

These kinds of choices and compromises may not have been deliberate or made with a high degree of self-awareness about whether their reasoning might be usefully shared with the wider group. Some choices appear to have been regarded as being done consciously in service of the group, some a more pragmatic recognition that their view was in the minority. Additionally, there was what might be termed the 'politeness' factor: that despite apparently good working relationships built on quite sensitive understandings of individuals in the DT, the group remained reticent or unable to raise and discuss what appear to us to be issues central to their collaborative effort.

In seeking to develop and deepen collaborative working, there is some skilled and subtle sensitivity to decisions about when and how to speak up, or remain silent, to serve as a positive contribution to the collaborative effort. And it would seem often difficult to judge, at the time, how that contribution is affecting the dynamic and effective working of the group.

The pressure or expectation from the wider system, organisational cultures of practice, and personal working preferences (theories-in-use) appear to have a tendency to push individuals and groups towards 'productive action' and 'delivery' and away from the time and space for reflection and learning (espoused theory).

We reflect that even in a group committed to reflecting on their own collaboration, the interviews conducted for the learning history process served as a way of 'taking people out' from the work setting and creating a 'safe space' to voice apparently undiscussed thoughts and feelings. This stands in contrast to reflection that might be done 'in the room', in ways that allow people to express their thoughts and feelings and to have their voices heard, with minimal defensiveness.

We take from the experience of Pioneer that reflection and 'double-loop' learning¹⁴ is a crucial element of collaborative working. We are aware that it chimes with findings from other work on collaboration and partnership working¹⁵ and a practice perspective of leadership which emphasises collaborative agency through engaged social interaction:

"Change in organizational life occurs when people begin to talk differently, whether it be about the content of the conversation or its dynamics. Their talking may bring to light previously unnoticed patterns and allow the parties to fashion a scenic sense of their new circumstances.....change occurs more from people speaking differently rather than arguing well."¹⁶

We hope this account of the practice of collaborative leadership can serve as a resource for reflection and learning by others engaged in, or aiming for, deeper collaborative action to deliver better outcomes by public services.

¹⁴ Argyris, C., & Schön, D., 1978, *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*, Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley.

¹⁵ Williams, P., 2012, *Collaboration in Public Policy and Practice*, Policy Press; Cook, A., 2015, *Partnership Working across UK Public Services*, What Works Scotland.

¹⁶ Raelin, J. A (2014) Imagine there are no leaders: Reframing leadership as collaborative agency, *Leadership* published online 25 November 2014, DOI: 10.1177/1742715014558076

Annex A: Thinking aloud

Thinking aloud 1

How can a collaboration genuinely value and most effectively work with, or through, inherent differences to develop its own shared meaning?

What role can be most usefully played by external facilitation?

Thinking aloud 2

Are there any short cuts to talking about and valuing differences in collaborations more openly and readily?

To what extent do people 'go with the flow' or absent themselves so as not to provide challenge that may feel uncomfortable, interrupt group norms or take up time in a meeting?

Thinking aloud 3

We notice that the issues and tensions experienced by the Design Team seem to be interesting and highly pertinent to the desire to work differently in public services in Scotland.

In particular they raise questions around how progress is measured and evaluated and the influences of existing performance management cultures and systems.

Thinking aloud 4

Questions of pace and 'progress' seem to us to illuminate a tension between established ways of working - in which the preference is usually to plan thoroughly before implementation or delivery - and a more 'emergent' model that seeks to take some kind of innovative action relatively soon in order to test the ideas in action in a more iterative and experimental approach.

How can we promote, nurture and sustain an emergent process? And live with the unknowns, the expectations and anxieties of ourselves and others?

Thinking aloud 5

How can individuals check out their attributions of motivations and behaviours of others and share their own personal challenges and compromises to strengthen collaborative working?

What kind of skills, processes or structures can support sharing?

Thinking aloud 6

What are the skills and capacities that are needed for collaborative working? How might these be discussed and made explicit to help improved collaboration? How can they be developed further?

Thinking aloud 7

It is unusual for accounts of collaborative working to acknowledge the emotions involved and we reflect that existing research reports contain very little about this important aspect of group relations, even where the findings acknowledge the difficulties and challenges of the partnership.

This seems to us to be an important dimension of understanding successful collaboration and as participants in *Pioneer* we are also interested in how the *Enabling Collaborative Leadership* programme can work to help people in other sites to have different kinds of conversations, sooner than they might otherwise do so.

We welcome feedback about any aspect of this report and the ideas within.