

Public service leadership:

What works?



“Things happen if you empower people... if we want our communities to behave like this, our staff need to be able to behave like this in their jobs as well.”

Local authority chief executive

Introduction

As public services move forward into their next phase of reform it is clear that the leadership and management approaches of the past are no longer fit for purpose. Put simply, the traditional, hierarchical managerial approaches developed for the industrial revolution and, latterly, the knowledge economy, have had their day. We now require new thinking and new ways of working that move beyond hiring hands or brains to hiring hearts. This is a *human economy* where creativity, passion, character and collaborative spirit are the key foundations of success. (Seidman 2014).

The Christie Report (2011) provides a helpful context for thinking about the type of leadership required to move the system forward into a post-knowledge economy environment. One chief executive reflected on how Christie had provided a focus and clarity and helped them to reflect on their own leadership:

“Christie, I think, helps us to focus on what’s good about what we’re doing and getting underneath the surface of those types of issues and challenges. That has helped me to give, I think, greater clarity to how I communicate with leaders across the council and how I think about my own leadership focus as well.”

Local authority chief executive officer

We have found much support for the ideas and principles associated with Christie in the field. The challenge for the system is to turn this support and the momentum it has created into the widespread sustainable operationalisation of Christie.

We have also found considerable support for the idea of maintaining and growing social cohesion across the public services whilst reducing rules and regulation, to foster an egalitarian culture underpinned by mutualistic or self-improving public service organisations. These concepts provide a helpful lens through which to analyse and understand leadership and public service reform.

The purpose of this Policy Brief is to provide a summary of our key findings to date. Here we present a set of highlights, which are intended to inform thinking and future developments in public service leadership across Scotland. Specifically, we draw together the evidence from the research literature and our associated publications, relevant fieldwork within each of our four What Works Scotland case study sites, our community planning survey, interviews with senior public service leaders across Scotland and data collected during public service leadership workshops.

This policy brief is structured in two further sections. The first outlines what we have learned from our programme of work and the second section draws out some implications for the future development of public service leadership in Scotland.

What have we learned about public service leadership?

Here we present six key messages from the What Works Scotland programme of work on public service leadership.

1. The research literature provides a partial account of leadership practice on the ground

The research literature describes a scene where traditional forms of leadership coexist with emerging collaborative leadership practice that cuts across traditional political and geographical boundaries. Some, but only a relatively small amount of this, relates specifically to the Scottish context.

Understanding of leadership in the field generally reflects the contemporary characteristics of effective leadership found in literature. In some local authorities (LA) there were indications of leadership that went beyond existing understandings of effective leadership. For example, one local authority was working collaboratively to train and influence elected members, thus shaping the agenda rather than reacting to it and being led by elected members.

The literature suggests that collaborative activity can be highly political, contextually determined, and often underpinned by long-term personal relationships between key people involved. Incentives to collaborate tend to be focussed around responses to local challenges, the securing of increased resources, or concerns about meeting local and national targets. It is interesting to note there are few studies that have examined failed attempts at collaboration in any detail.

2. Local context plays a key role in determining the emergence and nature of new public service leadership practices

Where new and innovative forms of leadership practice are emerging on the ground they have to be understood in relation to their specific context. In some cases, national policy drivers and support for these developments play a role in pump-priming or sponsoring developments, for example, in the case of the Pan-Tayside Quality Improvement Collaborative, a pre-cursor to the Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC). However, in other cases, new practices can emerge organically in response to a perceived or identified need within the community or local authority. One head of service reflected:

“[Leadership] has changed so much because the requirement in there is confidence to step out, do things differently, make partnerships and collaborations and, again I think, engender the trust of the people round about you.”

Local authority head of service

Our findings suggest that although government sponsorship and perceived need can be important, both tend to lead to incremental change that is often harder to sustain, either because of lack of ownership of the change within the locality or because of lack of pace. Therefore, these mechanisms tend to be an insufficient catalyst for lasting and impactful change. We tend to see lasting and impactful change when the following drivers underpin government sponsorship or perceived need:

- **Local dissatisfaction with current practice and/or strong imperative for improvement.** This may stem from a public reaction to a crisis/system failure or professional desire to rethink roles, responsibilities and service provision to improve outcomes for all the community. The latter is often a response to engaging with the Christie agenda.
- **Vision and quest for an alternative narrative.** An individual (or small group) within a locality who recognises the inadequacy of current ways of working and has an alternative vision for how things might look and work in the future. Again, this is often in response to engaging with the Christie or broader public reform agenda.
- **Changes to local structures.** Irrespective of the cause of changes to local structures, when local arrangements change, new ways of working and forms of leadership can emerge. This often involves the creation of new teams and the blurring of professional boundaries. In some cases, this can be very positive, leading to exciting and innovative practices, whilst in others this can cause difficulties and be viewed as a negative consequence of restructuring.

These drivers for change can act independently or in combination in different proportions in different localities; they are context specific. Therefore, there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution or response that is guaranteed to be successful.

3. Innovative and traditional leadership approaches emerge in combination

It is clear from our case sites and engagement across the system that ‘new’, ‘collaborative’ or ‘collective’ leadership (should these things actually exist) are not sweeping across Scotland, replacing ‘traditional’ forms of leadership as they go. Even when new, what might be described as ‘leading edge’ policy developments create new structural arrangements, we see the replication of traditional leadership approaches as well as the emergence of new forms of leadership. That is not to say that traditional leadership in these settings is less effective in nature; rather it would appear to be shaped by the leader’s personality traits and the context within which leadership is enacted.

Our evidence suggests that where leaders work more informally with different parts of the leadership hierarchy within an organisation, moving seamlessly between levels, connecting, brokering, and bonding with individuals then a networked, non-hierarchical collaborative leadership perspective dominates. One chief executive highlighted the importance of flexibility and frameworks rather than rules:

“[we] can’t be governed by lots of rules. There needs to be some frameworks for sure, but they need to have enough flexibility to allow them [staff] to go out and make things happen and allow them to support other people to make things happen. We need to rethink how we allow our staff to be the very best they can. That’s about the ‘how’, and that’s about a journey that we’re on.”

Local authority chief executive officer

However, on the other hand, where we see strong formal structures with high levels of delegation we see less flexible leadership approaches in action. This is associated with a disparity of perceptions between senior and junior leaders where senior leaders tend to view the organisation more positively than their junior colleagues. The evidence suggests that strong formal structures with high levels of delegation and less flexible leadership remain dominant across the system.

4. New ways of working have further complicated management arrangements and patterns of accountability

The establishment of new ways of working across the system with developments such as health and social care integration and regional improvement collaboratives (RICs) in education, have complicated management arrangements and patterns of accountability.

In Aberdeenshire emerging approaches to system leadership include the strategic ambition of the Health and Social Care Partnership to build community capacity in health and wellbeing and tackle inequities. The internal structures are complex, and emphasis is placed on effective working both within the partnership itself, and with an external network of local public, third and community sector organisations.

In RICs new arrangements have shifted some decision-making ‘upwards’ to newly created groups. An example of this is the West Partnership where the regional leader has established a regional team of fellow education directors to lead on improvement (Glasgow), early years and childcare (West Dunbartonshire) and the learner journey (South Lanarkshire) across all eight LAs within the collaborative. This is perceived to have had an impact on the agency of other directors of education, quality improvement managers and officers. For the leaders of the collaboratives the lines of accountability have been a matter of debate. The *Governance Review: Next steps* (2017) publication stated that RICs would be:

“...led by a Regional Director, to be appointed by the Scottish Government and provide a direct line of accountability for the performance of the regional improvement collaboratives to Ministers. The Regional Director will report to the HM Chief Inspector/Chief Executive of Education Scotland.”

(Governance Review: Next steps, 2017, p. 35)

Like many elements of public service reform, the ambitions for implementation of policy have been mediated by professional voice. Negotiations between central and local government have woven a compromise whereby the regional leads (not directors) have been appointed from the current pool of directors of

education within the RICs rather than by central government. Furthermore, the regional leads report to LA chief executives but have their plans signed off by the chief inspector, indicating a dual set of accountabilities. The complexity of many of the patterns of accountability that are emerging are likely to undermine collaborative efforts. It would seem that a simplification of rules and regulations would enable the system to work more flexibly.

5. Leadership is an important area for development in community planning partnerships

Community planning partnerships (CPPs) provide an important space for supporting community planning and empowerment in Scotland. However, for this space to have optimal impact on outcomes, senior leaders must develop a shared vision and be able to articulate this vision across the partnership. Without this vision and an accompanying narrative success is unlikely.

Our CPP survey reported that only 29% of respondents thought that senior leaders articulated a clear vision for community planning. Interestingly there was no significant difference in responses by those working at local or strategic level, nor between managers and officers. Furthermore, only 30% of respondents thought that leadership arrangements across CPPs enhanced community planning. These findings highlight the need for urgent leadership capacity-building within CCPs.

6. Appropriate incentives, checks and balances are needed for the commitment to working across boundaries to become routine practice

Our research suggests that there is a strong commitment to partnership working and collaboration within Scottish public services. However, there is a range of structural and procedural barriers that can prevent effective collaboration. Where leadership is effective these are often overcome at the local level but where leadership is less strong or confident these tend to remain in place and, at times, are amplified. Some of the common barriers relate to patterns of accountability (see also finding 4 above) when working across political and geographical boundaries; others relate to different metrics and performance indicators across geographical and professional boundaries. Resources are often cited as the limiting factor curbing the aspiration of collaborative endeavour and competing national and local priorities can also act as barriers. One head of service reflected on the challenge of working across silos:

“[The] public sector still works so much in silos and, you know, I think that will always be the enemy of what we’re discussing... I think that’s why there is such an emphasis still on the softer skills because, I think, very often it does take that approach to jump these barriers around organisational governance structures, accountability, following the public pound, you know...”

Local authority head of service

Where leaders are flexible and move themselves and staff across boundaries we see more effective collaboration. Another head of service reflected on the changing nature of leadership in their LA:

“[Leadership] has changed so much because... there is confidence to step out, do things differently, make partnerships and collaborations and again I think engender the trust of the people round about you.”

Local authority head of service

Doing things differently, including the movement of staff around organisations, enables a flow of ideas and practices, and increases understanding of the challenges faced by other colleagues in the system. The development of empathy promotes a collaborative spirit and relational trust that sits well with the ideas about human economy and social cohesion that were raised in the introduction. If we are to develop authentic collaboration within the public services, it is vital we pay increased attention to developing positive sustainable relationships and empower professionals to have ownership of developments. Furthermore, establishing effective collaborative leadership requires an ‘authorising environment’ and a supportive risk-taking culture.

Commentary: Where next for public service leadership in Scotland?

We have concluded that public sector leadership needs to move on from the system management approaches of the past to a new approach that develops social cohesion. This new leadership must evolve ‘hand in glove’ with the development of flatter, more collaborative, less regulated, networked mutualistic public service organisations. Grid group theory (Douglas, 1982) helps us to understand where our public sector organisations (Hood, 1998) are in this framework and allows us to map progress towards an egalitarian culture underpinned by self-improving organisations (Figure 1).

For mutualistic public service organisations to lead the change, rather than rely on national prescription to deliver change, we need to develop leaders with the necessary credibility, capacity and expertise. They will have to deliver change whilst sustaining their own team/department/organisation or service and engaging authentically with the communities they serve. This is a future where partnerships, networks and federations working laterally with shared, coordinated and distributed leadership across many types of boundaries will provide both the delivery of services *and* the challenge and support for improvement of services. It will include the development of sustainable, environmentally sound and socially just practices and capacity-building through professional learning and leadership development.

	Low social cohesion	High social cohesion
High social regulation	<p>Fatalistic culture <i>Uncertain nostalgic organisations</i></p>	<p>Hierarchical culture <i>bureaucratic, managed organisations</i></p>
Low social regulation	<p>Individualistic culture <i>market-based state-funded organisations</i></p>	<p>Egalitarian culture <i>mutualistic self-improving organisation’</i></p>

Figure 1: Socio-cultural perspectives on public service reform

Put simply, in the future those working in public services will frame and lead provision of their services and will set the direction for and support service improvement in partnership with those engaging with the service. Co-production with service users will become the norm. Not only will this involve moving decision-making much closer to the point of delivery, it will strengthen organisations against the potential for ‘producer-capture’ - the tendency for any organisation to start operating in the interests of those who work for it – and ultimately put Christie into operation.

There are some encouraging signs that these new ways of working are beginning to emerge in some parts of the system. Working with CPPs, What Works Scotland has supported collaborative action research in four local authority areas to generate and use evidence to improve and reframe practice. This has also involved re-thinking roles and responsibilities to lever cultural change by linking leaders at different levels across a range of services and encouraging them to develop a localised agenda for the system improvement.

The findings presented above suggest that, with external support and sophisticated professional learning opportunities, public service leadership can rise to the challenge and support the development of a system where self-renewal is generated from within the services themselves in partnership with the communities they serve. These insights begin to raise the profile of the challenges. They also provide some indications of how we can move to a more coherent approach that permeates all services in a context of diminishing resources and ever increasing expectations.

See all What Works Scotland leadership resources at whatworksscotland.ac.uk/category/topic/leadership

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This policy briefing was written by **Professor Christopher Chapman**, Co-director of What Works Scotland (University of Glasgow).

What Works Scotland is a Scottish Government and ESRC-funded research collaboration aiming to improve the way local areas use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.