



**Collective  
Leadership**  
FOR SCOTLAND

# HOW DO WE KNOW WE ARE DOING GOOD WORK?

**Conversations about  
the impact of our  
collective leadership**

Cathy Sharp, Dot McLaughlin,  
Janet Whitley and Karen Lawson

September 2022

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

---

2

Many people have made important contributions to the thinking and practices that underpin this report. The facilitation team and the participants in CLfS programmes, in particular the Police and Local Government Pilots, the Leadership Campfires Festival, the Illuminating Leadership Festival, the Leadership and Facilitation Programme, the Creative Bravery Festival and the work undertaken by InspirAlba have provided important insights and depth of understanding of the practices, opportunities, and challenges of collective leadership.

Verena Albrecht has undertaken additional data analysis, administrative support and overseen the production of the report. Joan O'Donnell has provided invaluable theoretical insight, well-judged editorial guidance, and enthusiastic support.<sup>1</sup> Her own forthcoming report for CLfS will contribute further to the issues raised here. Kristy Docherty and Brigid Russell are the authors of the Scottish Institute for Policing Research evaluation on which one of the case studies substantially relies.

Further credit and thanks are due to Ailsa Clark, Aimee Spence, Amanda Spark, Chris Bruce, Conor James, Gabrielle King, Jenny Robinson, Joe Raelin, and Keira Oliver.

All the readers of the first draft provided wise and valuable reflections and comments, any errors of interpretation or omission remain our responsibility as authors.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joan has completed a PhD placement with the CLS team.

# CONTENTS

3

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Practices of Action Inquiry</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Guide for Readers</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1. Background and Introduction</b>	<b>13</b>
Collective Leadership for Scotland	13
Context and orientation	14
<b>2. Learning 1: Practising Learning and Change Together</b>	<b>17</b>
Navigating new territories for evaluation through action inquiry	17
<b>3. Learning 2: Co-creating our Pathway to Impact</b>	<b>23</b>
Creating expectations about impact: a way of thinking about outcomes	23
Creating different conditions for working together	23
Developing action confidence	26
<b>4. Learning 3: Embedding learning through collective sensemaking</b>	<b>29</b>
What can we do with our stories?	29
Deeper Dives: data sources and approach	34
<b>5. Learning 4: Motivation, Participation, and Shaping Expectations of Impact</b>	<b>38</b>
Enhancing opportunities for learning	40
<b>6. Learning 5: Our Impact and Learning from Case Studies</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Case studies</b>	<b>48</b>
[A] Place-based collective leadership: the Police and Local Government Pilots	48
[B] Leadership Campfires Festival, September 2021	53
[C] Illuminating Leadership Festival, February, and March 2022	55
[D] Leadership and Facilitation Programme	57
<b>7. Learning 6: Deeper Insights About How to Create Impact</b>	<b>60</b>
The challenges of convening, co-missioning, and action inquiry in a locality	64
Creating brave spaces: developing a group ethic through action	70
Developing co-inquiry through story gathering and collective sensemaking	72
<b>8. Summary and conclusions</b>	<b>74</b>
Overview of impact	74
Seeking systemic change	76
Action inquiry as a deliberate learning strategy	77
Implications for convening and facilitation	78
<b>Annex: Details of programmes</b>	<b>80</b>

**Collective leadership feels timely and important in an uncertain, fast changing, and challenging world. This report comes at this heightened moment of urgency and appetite for renewal, bringing potential to do things differently in public services and communities.**

The opportunities and challenges of true collaboration-in-practice, in the absence of blueprints, mean that it has never been more necessary to change ways of working and foreground learning.

As outcomes remain important, and time and resources are scarcer than ever, the approach of collective leadership makes the creation of impact a shared, conscious, and actionable choice. A pathway to ultimate impact at scale is co-created through dialogue about expectations and contributions, and by design, not assuming change will happen because we have good intentions.

Collective Leadership for Scotland (CLfS) has a strong vision and enjoys continuing active interest, drawing together participants from a variety of agencies working in public services. People are looking for fresh thinking, space and time for reflection, connection with others, a chance to think about how to tackle difficulties, and to test out what it takes to do, and continue to do, the work of collaborative public service. These motivations are deepened and brought into sharper focus by the pandemic, with an added interest in developing skills in online facilitation.

---

**Whatever the constraints and pressures, there are valuable, ‘apparently small’ things that can be done differently.**

---

CLfS contributes to building a critical mass for system change, to help to sustain the ambitions of the Christie Commission and the delivery of the National Outcomes for Scotland. There remains further potential to realise wider and deeper impact amongst organisations, communities, and wider systems. The conclusions of this report are likely to have wider resonance beyond interests in the CLfS programmes.

This report deepens understanding of some of the challenges of commissioning, convening, and the scope for deeper impact through building reflective and relational leadership practices. It also outlines social and experiential sensemaking and facilitation practices to strengthen the action inquiry approach as a deliberate learning strategy, building cultures that support new forms of collaborative inquiry and systemic action research.

## Key Learning

The learning here draws on a wide range of evidence from across CLfS programmes between August 2020–July 2022 that include short general introduction or taster sessions, Festivals, or series of events with a specific focus, specialist programmes aiming to deepen skills and facilitation practices, and place-based programmes, such as the Police and Local Government Pilots. Participants have been drawn from across National and Local Government, including the NHS and Health and Social Care Partnerships, Education and third sector agencies working in public services and communities, largely in Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

The unfolding impact of collective leadership is evident:

### Action Confidence

- People come away from CLfS programmes with 'action confidence', a change in relationship to taking action and a move away from feeling 'stuck'. This is tangible as changes in the ways people see and think about themselves and their role as a leader, changes in the way they interact with, perceive, pay attention to others and changes in action that they take as individuals and with others, towards that which is more inclusive and collaborative.

## Releasing collective resources

- A recurring theme is the importance of how participants orientate to others to make the most of the existing resource of collective knowledge and skills, rather than thinking that they must have all the answers or that it is their role to fix everything.
- There is a growing appreciation of the potential potency of collective power and ways to find simple steps that acknowledge complexity without being paralysed by it. These are essential first shifts in thinking and practice, as participants find different actions to take as individuals and with others.

## Creating impact together through action inquiry

- The potential for wider and deeper impact of these kinds of shifts in thinking and practice are most clearly seen in locality-based work, with extended opportunities to build communities of inquiry able to develop and implement their own solutions.
- The Police and Local Government Pilots, where participants have been part of on-going locality-based action inquiry groups, demonstrate that the further impact anticipated in the separate SIPR evaluation is already beginning to unfold.<sup>3</sup>
- There is also valuable national and international impact that can be achieved through developing learning networks to support those with an interest in taking their own understandings of collective leadership into the specific systems of which they are a part.

2 This report is a companion to our 2018 publication that articulates action inquiry as a model of 'practising change together', a form of self- and peer evaluative practice <https://workforcotland.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/collectiveleadershipreport1.pdf>

3 Docherty, K and Russell, B (2022) *Police Scotland and Local Government Collaborative Leadership Pilots Evaluation*, Research Report No 1, May <https://www.sipr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Police-Scotland-and-Local-Government-Collaborative-Leadership-Pilots-Evaluation-Docherty-and-Russell.pdf>

## Moving to implementation: the skills and practices that help

- The key skills and spreadable practices of action inquiry are the ‘how’ of collective leadership, crucial to shift the way that people work together to enact change. This is a ‘second-order practice shift’ that promotes deeper levels of reflection and exploration about the primary (first-order) issue or problem that is the shared focus, going deeper into how to do something differently, rather than necessarily doing something different.
- The practical value of reflective and relational practices and skills become plainer as people experience them for themselves and can be enriching, enabling the airing of different perspectives, checking the pace and direction, and helping to develop a more grounded and authentic trust.
- Some participants already have useful skills that have been dormant; the CLfS experience may remind people of what they already know and the chance to try something out in a relatively ‘safe space’ can make the practice of such skills outwith the group seem more possible.
- The CLfS provocative propositions can support conversations that explore understandings, negotiate compromises, and co-create a bespoke covenant of values, principles, and practices for collaboration. In this way groups can devise their own meaningful ways to evaluate their learning and establish their pathway to impact.

It is important to think about ways to help people really understand the work, what it asks of everyone involved and how that might need people at all levels to work differently.

## Implications for future prospects

In thinking of the future, it is worth noting:

- Continuing to offer a range of programmes is a way to recognise and meet different needs and possibilities.
- Locality or place-based work remains important as it is here that the practical implications of complexity and the unintended consequences of discrete interventions are evident and where the realities of relational and systemic leadership must be confronted. This approach also has the greatest potential to engage local people in communities and those who use public services in change efforts.
- Through such a range of offerings, the CLfS programmes can contribute to building a critical mass for system change and help to sustain the ambitions of the Christie Commission and the delivery of the National Outcomes for Scotland.

## Case Studies and Deeper Dives

This report offers a series of ‘inside-out’ perspectives and draws on the experiences of those that have been deeply engaged in the programmes as participants, facilitators and as a learning partner.

The report details four case studies in more detail. These are:

- **Police and Local Government Collaborative Leadership Programme:** we have worked with about 40 participants within three pilot sites, Aberdeenshire, West Dunbartonshire, and West Lothian.
- **Leadership Campfires Festival:** thirty-two separately hosted events held over two days across three time zones in September 2021, with many hosted by external partners.
- **Illuminating Leadership Festival:** forty-three events held over four days in early 2022, with an estimated reach of over 2,000 event participants, of which around 70% were based in Scotland.
- **Leadership and Facilitation Programme:** we have now completed seven online cohorts, with 83 participants, drawn from across public services.

Five deeper dives have also been conducted to provide a richer understanding of our impact. These span work undertaken in children’s services, health and social care, community planning, community development, community justice, public service reform, education, and rural social enterprise and amongst funders, users and practitioners of evaluation.

## Seeking systemic change

There is learning here about the enablers and barriers to systems change. For any systemic change to be enduring and effective, there needs to be exploration in the embedded cultural values and beliefs, whether formally expressed or otherwise, that continue to reproduce unwanted patterns in complex systems and that act as barriers to change. Change in habitual leadership practice is difficult and it is not straightforward to secure the transformational changes that are sought. The barriers include:

- People generally attended CLfS sessions, despite the extremely difficult circumstances they are working in. The participants talk about being overwhelmed, stretched, under a lot of pressure and time-poor, often overriding the immediate demands on their role, hoping that the programme can ultimately help them to make more of a difference. This brings anxiety for participants about what is expected of them and that their decision to use their time in this way will have been worthwhile.
- In these circumstances, collective leadership relies on the ability to build relationships quickly. The space and support to do such work is critical, yet it is hard to protect the time too often seen as a luxury within systems that favour immediate reactive responses to issues.
- Pervasive attitudes to active involvement in learning at all levels and positions, lack of time or interest in refreshing theoretical groundings, and a reluctance to talk openly with each other about group process.
- The commissioning, governance, and accountability arrangements commonly in place around public service leadership development initiatives can bring considerable additional difficulties and reporting requirements, particularly to the earliest stages of locality-based work.

- Prevailing tensions about evidence and approaches to evaluation can also act as barriers to change in complex systems, with little time dedicated to thinking about learning.

We note this context and that public services are held to account in ways that are arguably 'not going to go away'. This is the situation in which expectations and claims about impact must be tempered.

### **Action inquiry as a deliberate learning strategy**

A greater understanding of complexity demands that we shift our approach to the evaluation of relational and systemic practices, judged by the degree to which they offer help to determine 'wise actions' in real-life situations. Ultimately this work cannot be judged by the degree to which an individual or group was able to develop and implement a concrete action plan, deliver specific pre-defined outcomes, or tackle a 'wicked issue'. The changes at individual or locality level that we do see are perhaps more modest and look different to the ultimate desired outcomes.

This perspective doesn't negate legitimate interest in shifting outcomes 'at scale' or developing well-grounded understandings of 'what works' at a more strategic level. This is because change at population level can only be empirically measured over a longer timeframe. However, it does shift the immediate focus for current action to the local context, in the here and now; and it is perhaps only in hindsight that we will really understand 'what worked'.

---

**This shifts our search for evidence to immediate questions about what is helpful, to ask what (perhaps small) changes in thinking and practice might yet be significant in moving towards those outcomes?**

---

In the UK and internationally there is now wider recognition of the limitations of previous approaches to effect learning and change, and emerging integrative and adaptive approaches to learning and evaluation, across public service systems and philanthropic grant-making trusts. This finds an expression as a desire for more 'reflective spaces' in which to 'think about thinking' and have honest conversations about creating better forms of accountability. Another expression of this impulse is the creation of participatory learning frameworks that allow people to take ownership of their own learning.



## Collective sensemaking through stories

Different forms of narrative inquiry are indispensable to explore diverse ways of knowing and perspectives. We could do much more with our stories, creating safe spaces where people feel able to share their experience in a spirit of genuine curiosity and inquiry and be part of collective sensemaking. This is necessary to help all parties to become more aware of their own part in enabling or impeding change and creating space for change to happen.

All parties need to be confident that public money, other resources, and time are being used well, that any lessons potentially useful for practice are available in a timely way, and that the approach is sufficiently agile to respond to changing circumstances and emergent learning. The everyday, recurring inquiry 'How do we know we are doing good work?' foregrounds an ethic of learning as we practise change together and can help to create a different, internal, and shared genuine accountability.

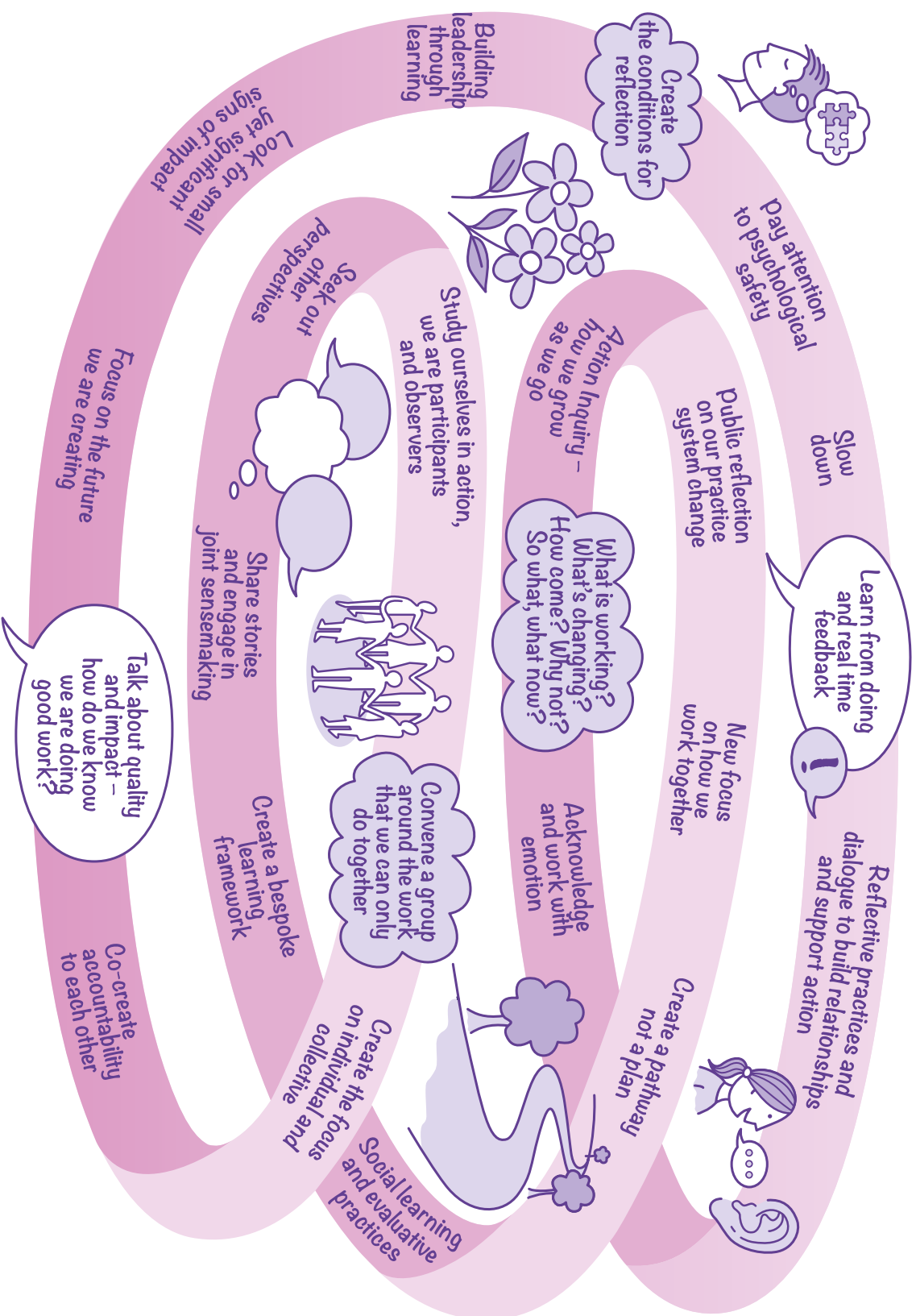
Our conclusion for now, is that more open and honest conversations about our mutual understandings and expectations of learning and change can help to build a different kind of accountability for learning and change. This demanding work relies on all parties, including those within Government, to commit to develop a new type of learning partnership, built on a different orientation to participation and practice as active involvement in personal, professional and leadership development.

Section 7 of the report outlines a set of quality criteria as routine inquiry questions that could be built into any approach to learning, including the engagement of the reader with this text. These are threaded throughout the document to prompt and engage the reader in their own reflexive inquiry.

We anticipate diverse policy and practice audiences for this report amongst all those that seek to implement new ways of working in public services and communities, including those facing the challenge of measuring impact in complexity. We suggest that all readers start with the Guide for Readers, which will help you find the best route through this report.



# THE PRACTICES OF ACTION INQUIRY



**This report is an invitation to the reader to step into a different, increasingly important systemic action research space that moves beyond many familiar ideas about leadership, collaboration, research, evaluation, and learning. It is a report about impact and about the underpinning thinking and expectations for impact that are often unexamined.**

We anticipate that readers will have different interests and varied levels of previous knowledge of the work of CLfS. Much of the content will be relevant to those with wider interests in leadership development and in the realities of collaboration, participation, and evaluation more broadly.

The Executive Summary provides an overview and may be sufficient for some readers.

In the main report there are six core sections (sections 2-7) that address different aspects of our learning, with some context setting (section 1) and conclusions (section 8).

Here we provide a short guide to help the reader consider what is of most relevance to their immediate and deeper interests. The integration of the ideas and evidence here is important, and we naturally hope that people will be drawn to read the whole report.

Much of the theoretical underpinning of this approach was explored in our 2018 publication “Collective Leadership: Where Nothing Is Clear, and Everything Keeps Changing” which is referenced at different points in the report. It is not essential to have read that report and some further theoretical references are threaded throughout here, as we have sought to balance theory and practice, and ensure that what emerges in people’s experience shines through.

## ORIENTATION AND FRAMING

### 1. Background and Introduction

A short piece that sets the policy context and the purpose of the report. It also explains our respective roles in CLfS and as insider and outsider action researchers, important for the reader to understand our perspectives and the nature of the report itself.

## THINKING ABOUT IMPACT

### 2. Learning 1: Practising Learning and Change Together

This section explores thinking about learning together in situations of complexity. An important orientation, particularly for readers unfamiliar with the 2018 report, it will develop understanding about the practice of action inquiry. It includes the first in a series of ‘inquiry prompts’ to encourage the reader to consider the implications for their own reflexive inquiry and a graphic of the five components of collective leadership.

### 3. Learning 2: Co-creating our Pathway to Impact

This section explores the creation of expectations about impact and the connection between the work of collective leadership and the high-level outcomes sought at national, local, and organisational or system levels. It introduces the idea of ‘action confidence’ or a change in relationship to taking action as an indicator of transformative change.

## GENERATING AND ANALYSING EVIDENCE ABOUT IMPACT

### 4. Learning 3: Embedding Learning through Collective Sensemaking

Here we discuss leadership practice and evaluation methodology, particularly the use of stories and the importance of collective sensemaking. This illuminates both the practices of CLfS programmes and the data sources, narrative and analytical approaches used to understand the evidence presented in this report, including information about the deeper dives.

## SHARING EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

### 5. Learning 4: Motivation, Participation, and Shaping Expectations of Impact

This section outlines who takes part in CLfS programmes and their interests and motivations. We also make a distinction between the reflective leadership practices arising in a learning network and a deeper relational leadership practice that can arise amongst a specific group, team, or community of inquiry. Expectations of impact are likely to be very different in each type of programme.

### 6. Learning 5: Our Impact and Learning from Case Studies

In this section we share conclusions about the impact of CLfS programmes, based on analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, with examples that bring the idea of action confidence to life. This includes four case studies based on the Police and Local Government Pilots, the Leadership Campfires Festival, the Illuminating Leadership Festival, and the Leadership and Facilitation Programme.

### 7. Learning 6: Deeper Insights About How to Create Impact

The five deeper dives are the source of rich learning and insights shared here. This highlights some of the opportunities and challenges of commissioning, convening and facilitation of collective leadership and the scope for deeper impact through building reflective and relational leadership practices. It considers important questions about quality in inquiry.

## SYNTHESIS AND CHALLENGE

### 8. Summary and conclusions

Finally, we draw this material together and reflect on impact that has been achieved, the real challenges for those seeking systemic change and the potential for the use of an action inquiry approach as a deliberate learning strategy. This will require new types of learning partnerships, built on a different orientation to leadership, participation, and evaluation.

## ABOUT US

The role of the first author of this report is that of learning partner to the CLfS practice team. The other authors are members of the CLfS delivery team with responsibility for oversight of the programmes and facilitation. The learning partner role has developed over a series of commissions related to the evolving collaborative and collective leadership work within the Scottish Government since 2014. Over time occasional involvement alongside the CLfS team, creates first-hand insight yet still partial knowledge of the context and evolution of the ambition, successes, and challenges of their work. Above all, we hope that our efforts to work with care to provide an honest and reflexive account of collective leadership, illuminate the work and engage the reader.

# 1. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

## Collective Leadership for Scotland

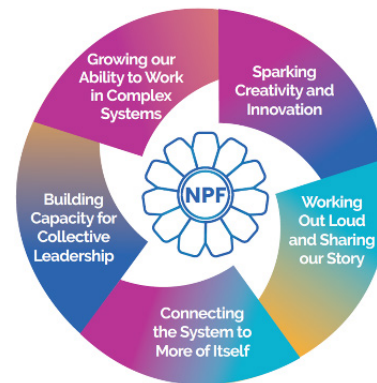
**The work of Collective Leadership for Scotland has its origins in the Christie Commission and the Scottish Leaders Forum (SLF), with widespread engagement with colleagues across sectors to identify the development that was required to best support the delivery of Christie.**

Our work has evolved over time but retains the core purpose of developing the skills and capacity for collaboration and Collective Leadership across our public services, with a recognition that the complex, societal issues that many of us are working on cannot be resolved by any organisation or individual working alone. They need a collective approach, and we work with groups of people to build the skills to help that to happen.

In May and June 2019, the Collective Leadership for Scotland Strategy was developed, with colleagues and partners across public services, illustrating a clear context and purpose for our work, aligned with the National Outcomes for Scotland. This also enabled the work to build capacity for Collective Leadership to be fully embedded with the wider work of the team, with an integrated strategy to support the delivery of our National Outcomes.

This strategy focuses on:

- Building our Capacity for Collective Leadership
- Growing our Ability to Work in Complex Systems
- Sparking Creativity and Innovation
- Working out Loud and Sharing our Story
- Connecting the System to More of Itself



Our work is overseen by a Strategic Steering Group which includes partners from across key sectors and organisations in Scotland and enables ongoing monitoring and strategic alignment in our development offerings. Through our work with the Steering Group, we seek to directly model a collective approach to the initiation, development, and delivery of our work. The work itself is supported by facilitators drawn from public and voluntary services across Scotland, who are external to the location and situation of interest.

## Context and orientation

This report is an opportunity to talk about impact, how we think about it, what we've achieved and what gives us confidence in that knowledge. This is offered as an exploration and an invitation to engage with some significant ideas about impact that might challenge prevailing thinking about evaluation and evidence in public service systems that very often seek 'proof' that can be attributed to specific interventions.

The emergence of systems thinking, collaborative leadership and co-production has been accompanied by more complexity-informed and integrative approaches to evaluation, learning and change across public service systems and philanthropic grant-making trusts. Our own work and our participation in other networks across the UK and internationally signal a wider recognition of the limitations of previous approaches to effect change and emerging new approaches and practices, including evaluation practices. They point instead to the value of lived experience and the part we each play in change. In turn this means we must seek different theories and practical strategies that turn our attention to learning, so that we understand where and how we can have the greatest impact.

In these times where we have all been living through such depths of uncertainty and disruption, we have seen an even greater recognition of the need for collective leadership to support recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and to enable a more collective approach to be applied to the most complex societal issues we face. Between August 2020 and July 2022, we have:

- Hosted 33 general open workshops on Collective Leadership
- Developed a varied programme of specialist skills and practices to maintain connections, deepen and extend facilitation skills, including the delivery of an intensive Leadership and Facilitation programme to seven cohorts.

- Co-designed and produced four high-profile learning festivals with over 3,000 participants with many events hosted by external partners and high levels of participant engagement.
- Designed and delivered an intensive, place-based systems leadership offer to participants from three locality areas through the Police and Local Government Pilots.
- Taken up a System-Convening role for Place-Based Systems-Leadership, hosting events and creating opportunities for connections.

There is growing recognition of the foundational elements that Collective Leadership can offer to wider transformation and place-based systems leadership. It therefore feels timely to share an overview of our evidence of impact and to consider together how best we can offer direct support in these times.

The National Performance Framework and Christie Commission report continue to form the roots and direction of all our work. We continue to adjust and learn about how to offer our programmes and approaches to find ways that support people and give them confidence in how to proceed at a time of immense uncertainty and unprecedented stuckness.

**“Host leadership was a powerful reframe of how I can think about leadership. The challenge of genuinely empowering communities but hearing some amazing examples of it happening.”**

(Illuminating Leadership participant)

---

**“[This is] the bit that has been missing from all of the big change programmes I have been involved in.”**

Leadership and Facilitation Programme participant)

---

Our programmes continue to be entirely online in response to the pandemic. We have learned that working online brings benefits in terms of national, international, and organisational reach, the potential for greater inclusion, and the advantage of the chance to ‘connect the system to more of itself’, even within the same localities. In this way, we have grown our capabilities to work in complex systems and are conscious that it has been hugely important to be able to demonstrate just what it is possible to do on-line, to motivate others to adopt and adapt such approaches in their own settings. Despite these benefits, participants generally express a preference for face-to-face working and there continues to be uncertainty around when it will be appropriate to return to such interactions at any scale.

## Aims of the report

We acknowledge that there are different paradigms in use in public services, each that grapple with how to create appropriate forms of accountability whilst also seeking to support learning and change. This leaves us with four main aims for this report, to:

- Give an overview of our progress and impact, drawn from a review of the evidence from a range of Collective Leadership for Scotland (CLfS) programmes over the period from August 2020 to July 2022.
- Explore prevailing practices, shifts in thinking and remaining challenges, including learning about the challenges of convening, co-missioning, and action inquiry in a locality.
- Outline social learning, experiential, sensemaking and facilitation practices to strengthen the action inquiry approach as a deliberate learning strategy, building cultures that support new forms of collaborative inquiry and systemic action research.
- Set this evidence within a conceptual framing of a pathway to impact, built on the articulation of tangible shifts in thinking and practice as signs that new understandings are taking root in ways that will ultimately bear fruit.

## Balancing insider and outsider action research

Action inquiry develops the idea of evaluation as an embedded practice, undertaken by those active in the situation of interest, rather than residing in the traits, behaviours or assumed independence of an individual external to the situation. This acts as an encouragement for collective leadership participants and facilitators to become 'co-researchers', interested in studying themselves in action, aiming to both change something and create actionable knowledge along the way. This is closely akin to the idea of 'insider action research' in social settings and organisations, a strategy established amongst Organisational Development practitioners as an important way of understanding and changing organisations.<sup>4</sup> Extending these practices to the ambitions for system change, insider action research offers an ethical way to engage with complexity in social systems precisely because it is from the inside, rather than from the position of an external, detached observer.

Our approach is a hybrid approach to evaluative inquiry, straddling elements of 'insider' and 'outsider' action research, bringing both closeness and distance. The deeper consideration of impact here has relied upon social research-related support and guidance from the learning partner, in particular support to analyse existing data and design and facilitate opportunities for deeper reflection and sensemaking. Such processes have been a 'mini-inquiry' in themselves, testing out models of narrative inquiry, joint reflection and collective sensemaking applicable both to the practices of the CLfS facilitators and to the wider practices of collective leadership. Writing is also a form of collaborative reflective practice, and the account here reflects the sense that we have been able to make of the experience of collective leadership in the time we have had together.

Section 7 of the report outlines a set of quality criteria as routine inquiry questions that could be built into any approach to learning, including the engagement of the reader with this text. These are threaded throughout the document as 'inquiry prompts' to encourage the reader to consider the implications in their own reflexive inquiry.

4 Coghlan, D and Holian, R (2021) 'Insider Action Research as Leadership-As-Practice', *Organization Development Review*, Vol. 53 No. 5



# 2. LEARNING 1: PRACTISING LEARNING AND CHANGE TOGETHER

## Navigating new territories for evaluation through action inquiry

Our publication *Collective leadership: Where Nothing is Clear, and Everything Keeps Changing, New Territories for Evaluation* (2018) outlines the practice of 'action inquiry', an embedded evaluative learning practice that can help navigate complexity when enacting collective leadership.<sup>5</sup> An action inquiry approach can be characterised as a 'second-order practice shift' that promotes reflection about the primary (first-order) process of exploring the issue or problem that is the shared focus.<sup>6</sup>

Action inquiry develops a more complexity-sensitive and systemic evaluation practice, concerned with designing and enacting learning systems, in collaboration with those most involved in the 'situation of interest' with a view to those situations and the evaluation themselves being transformed through inquiry. As a form of public reflection on practice, this moves us beyond a primary concern with methods and ideas about robustness and reproducibility which are the 'antithesis to complexity sensitive evaluation'.<sup>7,8</sup> This is a timely, if not well overdue, shift for evaluators and evaluation practices that cannot meet the nature, urgency, and scale of the challenges.<sup>9</sup>

## Inquiry Prompts

- How is this work providing me/us with new insights into my/our own individual situation?
- How is this work helping me/us to better understand the position and perspectives of others?
- How is this work stimulating or identifying areas for change, for me/us?

## Practising change together

Action inquiry is a model of 'practising change together', a form of self- and peer evaluative practice, in situations where action must be collective and bespoke. Action inquiry treats learning as a verb; learning is emergent, a continuous process, not a phase or something transferred from elsewhere as 'what works'. It is a dialogical, iterative series of practices that create meaning and produce collective leadership amongst people as participants, whatever their formal position or seniority.

5 This earlier report outlines the theoretical underpinning of this approach and further reading. <https://workforcescotland.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/collectiveleadershipreport1.pdf>

6 Schmidt-Abbey, B., Reynolds, M. and Ison, R. (2020) 'Towards systemic evaluation in turbulent times – Second-order practice shift', *Evaluation*, Vol 26 (2) pp. 205-226

7 *ibid.*

8 This approach positions the evaluation practitioner differently. See section 1.

9 The title of the 14th European Evaluation Society's Biennial conference in Copenhagen in June 2022 suggested that evaluation finds itself at a watershed and called for 'actions and shifting paradigms in challenging times'.

A set of twenty-four working assumptions or 'provocative propositions' serve to summarise much of the thinking that underpins our action inquiry approach.<sup>10</sup> These are symbolic statements used to provoke or generate thinking and action, made in bold, positive terms to stretch, challenge, and encourage innovation. They can be characterised as future-forming and action focused, relational and appreciative, promoting collaborative inquiry and exploring participation, co-production, and knowledge co-creation.

Here we draw attention to a selection of those propositions that can help us to navigate this terrain and as an orientation to the subsequent discussion in this report about how we think about pathways to impact. These are used to illustrate some of the core working assumptions of our approach:<sup>11</sup>

- **Treat inquiry as a form of intervening, not a separate, detached process:** we adopt a reflective stance and endorse self and peer participant observation and self-evaluation to increase the probability of success of a programme. (1)
- **Be practical and pragmatic:** learning is available to us in the very work that we are involved in as we engage and improvise around uncertain and complex problems in our work environment or community. (2)
- **Adopt a future forming focus:** we believe that what we focus on becomes our reality – we get more of what we study. A focus on the shared desirable future is a better guiding star for evaluation and learning than a focus on what went right or wrong in the past, and why. (3)

- **Embrace complexity:** we don't rush to problem-solve but take time to understand problems and issues in our local system from multiple perspectives and create feedback loops to enable our real-time learning. (4)
- **Support experimental action:** we test out working assumptions and new ideas in practice and gather evidence of the impact. We seek to nudge or perturb the system and keep testing. We pay close attention to understanding the unintended consequences of actions within organisational systems. (6)

### Exploring our expectations and assumptions

Even this short selection above offers a significant challenge to established thinking and practice. High expectations of evidence-based or informed practice persist despite the greater recognition of complexity. Embedded assumptions about what we can claim for our intervening, what is valid evidence, what transfers and how we go to scale, can all be barriers to evaluation in complexity. The most recent HM Treasury Magenta Book supplementary guide on *Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation*, recognises this in the advice that: 'Stakeholders may have different views on complexity and appropriate evaluation strategies, so expectations and assumptions will need to be managed carefully.'<sup>12</sup>

These expectations and assumptions are rarely discussed and sit alongside ideas about systems thinking, knowledge co-production, the role of collective (rather than heroic) models of leadership, evaluative thinking, and action research, all of which recognise that change happens developmentally as people use their creativity and generate adaptive solutions that make sense locally.

<sup>10</sup> <https://collectiveleadershipscotland.com/provocative-propositions/>


<sup>11</sup> The numbers in brackets refer to the original numbering in the 2018 report.

<sup>12</sup> HM Treasury (2020) *Supplementary Guide: Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation*. p.26

Reflexive conversations where people think together about their thinking are rare, particularly outside conferences of specialist evaluators, and might seem a luxury amongst policy makers, strategic and operational managers and practitioners working directly with the public. Yet, there is certainly an appetite for change: the provocations have been used to navigate fruitful conversations to help individuals and groups explore their own explicit and tacit understandings of the thinking that underpins their ideas and practices about evidence, learning and change.<sup>13</sup> Our CLfS experience is that whilst the provocations often strike a resonant chord with people, it feels easier to have conversations of this type with comparative strangers, rather than within their own organisation or partnership. At the same time, in the spaces and places where such conversations have been possible, our experience is that they are valuable and important and play a part in acknowledging the shared dilemmas, challenges and possibilities.<sup>14</sup>

Our conclusion is that more open and honest conversations about our mutual understandings and expectations of learning and change can build mutual inquiry, a more relational way of working together and a different kind of accountability for learning.

Any invitation to take part in action inquiry is a call to recognise your own part in change, to become an active and engaged participant, with others, in an opportunity to build a culture of collaborative inquiry, in other words, to build leadership through learning.



**“We are talking less and less about leaders. Those who are working on an endeavor collectively are participants or collaborators whose mutual activities may or may not change a trajectory in the flow of practice...”<sup>15</sup>**

<sup>13</sup> Sharp, C (2022) 'Be a participant, not a spectator'. The Evaluator, Spring.

<sup>14</sup> We have explored some of these issues further in a dedicated deeper dive session as part of the research for this report. See section 7.

<sup>15</sup> Raelin, J. and Robinson, J. (2022) 'Update of leadership-as-practice "practice theory": Featuring Joe Raelin Interviewed by Jenny Robinson', *Leadership*, 2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–12

## Becoming active learners

Action and engagement become part of the process of co-production of knowledge and collective sense-making. This stance treats the participants in collective leadership as active and collaborative learners, both as observers and participants, who should expect to see change in themselves as well as in the wider systems of which they are a part, arising from their learning.

- **Be a participant, not a spectator:** we are 'active learners.' We anticipate that inquiry will lead to changes in ourselves and the wider system of which we are a part. (17)
- **Mobilise the competencies of all participants in inquiry and build skills and capacities in inquiry practices:** we can create new social capital and connection. We are always learning and seek to acknowledge and build on existing strengths, skills, and capacities. (18)
- **Seek multiple and diverse perspectives:** each of us is one expert amongst many. We are not looking for one truth, and we do not consider the belief in objectivity a sound basis for development and change. We work across boundaries and seek to learn from the complexity and richness of social behaviour. (20)

This introduction demonstrates that collective leadership makes new demands of evidence, beyond a focus on 'what works'. In elevating experiential and practical expressions of participatory knowledge as an aim of the work, it seeks a more integrative and adaptive approach. This generates and tests the choices that might inform 'wise actions' and explores the consequences of those actions in real-life situations to understand the difference that can be made.<sup>16</sup> The signs of changes being sought are more likely to be detected by sharing perspectives of those most closely involved, exploring their experience through various forms of narrative inquiry and collective meaning making, subjecting it to shared scrutiny and reappraisal. As a deliberate practice, action inquiry helps to:

- create on-going conversations about learning and change
- increase areas of choice, focus and awareness for individuals and a group as a whole
- make impact and scale a conscious choice for individuals and the group
- provide feedback and make visible the shifts in thinking and practice that show the dynamics and emergent signs of change arising from the collective leadership of the group.

<sup>16</sup> Raelin, J (2016) 'Imagine there are no leaders: Reframing leadership as collaborative agency', *Leadership*, Vol. 12(2) 131–158, Sage

## Seeking new horizons

Such integrative and adaptive approaches to learning and change are now much more visible across public service systems and philanthropic grant-making trusts. Our own work and our participation in other networks across the UK and internationally signal a wider recognition of the limitations of previous approaches to effect learning and change and emerging new approaches and practices.<sup>17</sup>

We find value in using the Three Horizons model as a scanning device to position this moment as one of transition and innovation, which may pave the way for the emergence of a radically different approach.<sup>18</sup> At this transition point, any effort to develop an action inquiry approach will encounter significant entrenched ideas about impact and evidence and the weight of prevailing performance measures and cultures. It may feel uncomfortable, messy, and uncertain and asks that we each notice and check our own ingrained habits and preferences. At the same time, our experience highlights that it has never been more necessary to change ways of working, and that this includes approaches to evaluation to develop an authentic accountability for learning and change.

- **Seek partnership in working relations:** we rarely work alone, even if we think we can. (24)
- **Talk about how to be comfortable with uncertainty, tentativeness and adopt humility in inquiry:** we recognise and work with the complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, paradox, tensions, and contradictions revealed by inquiry as offering vital opportunities to learn. We resist certainties, closure and finality through precise measurement or hasty judgement of the phenomena we observe. (15)

- **Take a relational perspective:** we work from a position of positive regard, intrinsic motivation and agency and assume that everybody has good reasons to behave the way they do, seen from their own perspective. We assume agency, not passivity – everyone is co-responsible, competent, and obligated members of the organisation or system. This shifts the focus from individuals to relationships and to our various and shared visions of a better future. (9)
- **Work with care:** we seek to promote relationships and avoid damaging them in the process of creating useful knowledge. (10)

This is challenging work that offers an opportunity to do justice to the complexity of the issues we face, without being paralysed by it. We see that it is possible to create opportunities to develop shared trust and learning through action inquiry, where insights are generated and discussed through continuing conversations about whether the time spent and the work itself is worthwhile and achieving the kind of results that are desired.

This underpinning expression of the need for systemic, cross-cutting, collaborative leadership is offered as a practical tool through the graphic presentation of the five components of collective leadership, shown in Figure 1.

<sup>17</sup> See for example (Paylor H. et al, 2022) *Preserve, Grow, Compost. Reflections on the process of creating Carnegie UK's new impact learning framework*, <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/preserve-grow-compost/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://collectiveleadershipscotland.com/week-1-2-three-horizons/>

Figure 1: The five components of Collective Leadership for Scotland



These elements all make significant contributions to creating the conditions for change and include:

- a set of practices that support exploratory reflection, both individual and inquiry with others
- developing understanding of complexity and the implications of this when working with systemic issues
- action inquiry - exploration of what taking an inquiring approach to practice and creating learning systems which support and make explicit the learning as we take action, which in turn informs our further action, reflection, and learning
- building relationships, relational and systemic practices that allow us to work more effectively together, support collective sensemaking and understanding from multiple angles and perspectives
- being comfortable with 'not knowing' and emergence, not starting with 'the' solution but with questions and the ability to experiment and learn as we move forward.

# 3. LEARNING 2: CO-CREATING OUR PATHWAY TO IMPACT

23

Scottish public services operate in a context where there is an emphasis on the achievement of National Outcomes. In this section we describe our thinking about the connection between the work of collective leadership and the high-level outcomes sought at national, local, organisational and system levels.

## Creating expectations about impact: a way of thinking about outcomes

Action inquiry continues to be a core methodology in our work as an individual and group practice that helps to make questions of impact and scale part of the conscious and shared inquiry. As an evaluative and social learning practice that runs throughout, it creates conversations about learning and change, expectations, and achievements, as well as highlighting the enablers and barriers to systemic change.

### Inquiry Prompts

- How is this work stimulating or identifying areas for change, for me/us?
- How is this work facilitating, enabling, or empowering change, for me/us?

## Seeking transformational change

There is undoubtedly interest in how to make an impact through collective leadership of the nature and scale necessary to ultimately resolve the kind of problems referred to by the shorthand of 'wicked'. In several of our CLfS programmes, it is clearly motivating for some participants to have a chance to focus on the 'big issues' and indeed, there may be tacit or unexamined organisational expectations that such transformational change will be demonstrated.

**"It's brilliant that we are looking at the bigger issues that are affecting our area, rather than focusing on our service. It's so easy to get into churn mode, especially with Covid."**

(Police & LG Pilots participant)

Nevertheless, there is a distinction to be made between the outcomes that can be developed through engagement in collective leadership and the ultimate empirical measurement of change at scale.

## Creating different conditions for working together

The term 'wicked' itself may be a barrier, if used to judge the success or otherwise of the programme, which by this standard, will inevitably fall short. The quality of this work cannot be judged by the degree to which any individual or group was able to develop and implement a concrete action plan, deliver specific pre-defined outcomes or tackle 'wicked issues'. Such issues can't be delegated as a 'task', tackled 'head-on' or as direct deliverables of any programme. Instead, they require the creation of different conditions for working together, on-going mutual engagement and sensemaking, intended to produce changes at individual or locality level that are perhaps more modest and look different to the ultimate desired outcomes that will be measured over a longer timeframe at a population level.

## Talking about outcomes and our theories of change

The Outcomes Model in Figure 2 can help to translate the national ambitions for outcomes to the level of personal and group practice. It is a valuable tool for developing embedded action inquiry, that has been developed across a range of collaborative and collective leadership initiatives over several years.<sup>19</sup>

- **Explore theory:** we believe that theory helps us conceptualise our experience in ways that may be useful for ourselves and others; through inquiry, we can develop, and test out new theory based on our experience and communicate what we learn, in ways that make sense to us. Inquiry is an opportunity to test existing research and theory and to create new contributions to knowledge. (16)
- **Let the system own the outcomes:** our contributions to outcomes are likely to be at multiple levels, arising from our collaboration. It is probably unnecessary, undesirable, or impossible to seek to isolate our contributions from those of others. (21)
- **Value evidence of all kinds and seek to use it to create dialogue:** in particular, we value data generation and sense-making methods that create a dialogue and enable shared meaning making. We see data analysis as an ongoing process to help us understand what happens over time and use it to create further insights in ways that open up new possibilities for change. (23)

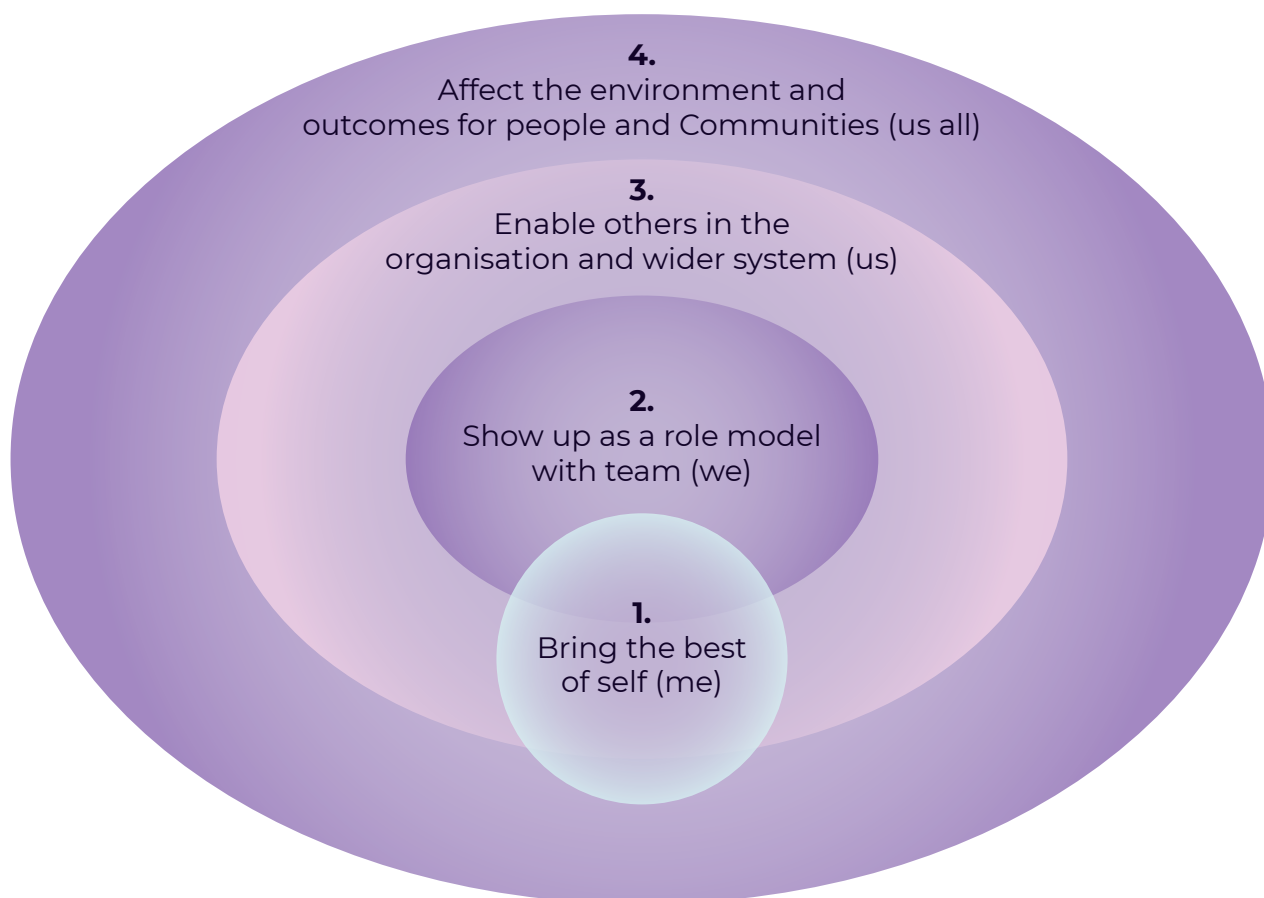
The Outcomes Model is a theory-based approach to outcome identification that builds on the idea of spheres of influence and is interested in the articulation of potential contribution towards outcomes, rather than direct measurement and attribution. The model is a visual device to enable conversations about different layers of outcomes, whether with individuals or groups, to help individuals and groups talk about their theories of change.

The model has four levels: these start with the closest and most immediate spheres of influence over which participants have most individual and collective influence or control (levels 1-2). Beyond that, the influence that participants have is more indirect and it is much more complex to attribute change directly to their actions (levels 3-4) and to gather empirical evidence of change.



<sup>19</sup> This was originally developed by a group of health and social care practitioners who were part of a 'Living Leadership' programme in 2014 which is explored here: <https://research-for-real.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/LL-Evaluation-Report-FINAL-Nov-2014.pdf>.





**Figure 2: The Outcomes Model**

It is worth noting that this framing provides a common, yet flexible approach capable of accommodating a range of collective leadership initiatives and helping to orientate a group to their first order goals; what they want and expect to achieve in the world, and where the evidence of change will become apparent. It offers facilitators and participants a structure for thinking about desired results, rather than specific pre-agreed outcomes, as an orientating device, rather than a measurement tool. For example:

- **Orientation to purpose:** at the earliest stages of convening, it can help to orientate a group to their collective purpose and support facilitators to challenge the participants about the difference they are really trying to make. Used in this way, it brings forward a conversation that might conventionally only be had much later or one confined

to non-participants when outcome evaluation is being considered.

- **The place of the individual in the wider system:** it can enable people to think about and articulate their own learning and positioning within the wider system of which they are a part and allows for variation in local or personal choices within a common framing.
- **Emerging results:** as the work progresses, the outcomes model helps groups talk about their emerging results, however modest they may seem, as a step towards a larger goal. Being able to articulate what is changing, generates more granular feedback which is tested by those most centrally involved and seen as necessary, though not sufficient, for wider system or population level change.

- **Motivation through feedback and dialogue:** generating real-time feedback provides confidence, motivation, and courage to continue. Being able to share stories and accounts of how things are changing helps to cultivate a more collective consciousness and stronger sense of 'self-authorisation' for the work in hand as participants understand the contribution that they are making.

Our pathway to impact is built on the articulation of tangible shifts in thinking and practice as signs that new understandings are taking root in ways that will ultimately bear fruit.

**A crucial sign of impact is the developing understanding amongst leaders that change inevitably includes themselves, not simply something that other people should do, or that is the responsibility of 'the system' or other more senior people.**

## Developing action confidence

The Scottish Government have supported the growth of Theory U and U Lab in Scotland.<sup>20</sup> Theory U is a structured approach to awareness-based action research, that offers an attitude towards inquiry that integrates new qualities of listening and conversing to explore and let go of past patterns and practices. The process redirects energies and attention to what can come into being by paying attention to the often neglected, invisible or unremarked aspects of a learning or change process and includes learning from experimental action (or prototyping in Theory U terms).

Based on the experience of U Lab, a change in relationship to taking action or 'action confidence' has been proposed as an indicator of transformative change.<sup>21</sup> With this in mind, impact is conceptualised as intrapersonal, relational, and systemic. Thus, the pathway to impact of collective leadership might be:

- changes in the ways people see and think about themselves and their role as a leader
- changes in the way they interact with, perceive, pay attention to others
- changes in action that they take as individuals and with others, towards that which is more inclusive and collaborative.

<sup>20</sup> See <https://ulabscot.com/> There were around 6000–8000 UK participants in ULab, between 2015 and 2018 of which many were from Scotland

<sup>21</sup> (2020) Pomeroy, E. and Oliver, K. 'Action Confidence as an Indicator of Transformative Change', *Journal of Transformative Education*, pp. 1-19, DOI: 10.1177/1541344620940815

We continue to explore how to operationalise this way of thinking about pathways to impact. Part of the role of the CLfS facilitators has been to make visible these shifts in thinking and practice that show the dynamics and emergent signs of change arising from the collective leadership of the group. As facilitators we observe that the way that the participants see themselves as they engage in collective leadership often changes. There can be a reappraisal of their own leadership, a kind of self-awareness that they are not being the kind of leader that they want to be. Some are also critical of the leadership that they, in turn, experience.

---

**“At best, these insights, that initially might feel quite oppressive, become articulated as a realisation that it is possible to be different, rather than simply to accept or replicate models of leadership from others. From initial caution and tentativeness, participants begin to see opportunities to explore, develop a willingness to take risks and be experimental.”**

(CLfS facilitators)

---

Ultimately, we expect this action inquiry approach to increase the probability of the success of the work and demonstrate impact to ourselves and to others in a meaningful way, that honours the ethos and integrity of the Collective Leadership work and generates evidence of change seen as resonant, trustworthy, and realistic by participants and other stakeholders.

We developed a tool to help people to notice and articulate such changes. The Impact Spotter in Figure 3 is derived from the routine notes made by facilitators, usually at check-in or check-out and was validated by the final event of the Police and Local Government Pilots in January 2022 and a further event held in June 2022 where participants talked directly about the changes in their own thinking and behaviours and how this in turn, generated new insights and possibilities for action.

The Impact Spotter serves both as a heuristic tool to assist people to notice changes, and as a further form of evidence of the kinds of changes achieved in the Police and Local Government Pilots.<sup>22</sup>

22 See case study A. Section 6.

Figure 3: Impact Spotter<sup>23</sup>

Created thinking time	Used pauses well	More conscious and active listening	Shared thoughts and feelings	Noticed and used body language well
Felt confident to say 'I don't know'	Suspended or halted my own agenda	Surprised myself	Facilitated a genuine discussion	
Changed my way of thinking about my role	Recognised a different approach was needed and tried it	Noticed and celebrated positive changes	Gave more considered responses	Compromises felt like a win-win
Took it much more slowly	Felt comfortable enough to let things emerge	Other people told me I was different	New skills or resources came to light	
Asked more open questions	Took deep breaths	Took a risk that paid off	Looked at an issue through a different lens	Offers of help were made
Noticed assumptions I'd been making	Felt true to my values	Could see my own part in creating or blocking change	Created a better understanding of each other	
Felt braver	Got people talking about their passion for the work	Gave others more space to contribute	Enabled others to come up with ideas I hadn't thought of	Decision-making was shared
Curbed my own eagerness to jump in or fix	Influenced others by being different	We brought out the best in each other	We each found small actions we could take	
Set aside the problem of the day	Deliberately sought out different perspectives	Found new allies	Saw beneficial impacts on team members	Teams brought back positive feedback

<sup>23</sup> This tool was inspired by The Well (Stoke Mandeville Hospital) licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> It is shared here subject to the same license.

# 4. LEARNING 3: EMBEDDING LEARNING THROUGH COLLECTIVE SENSEMAKING

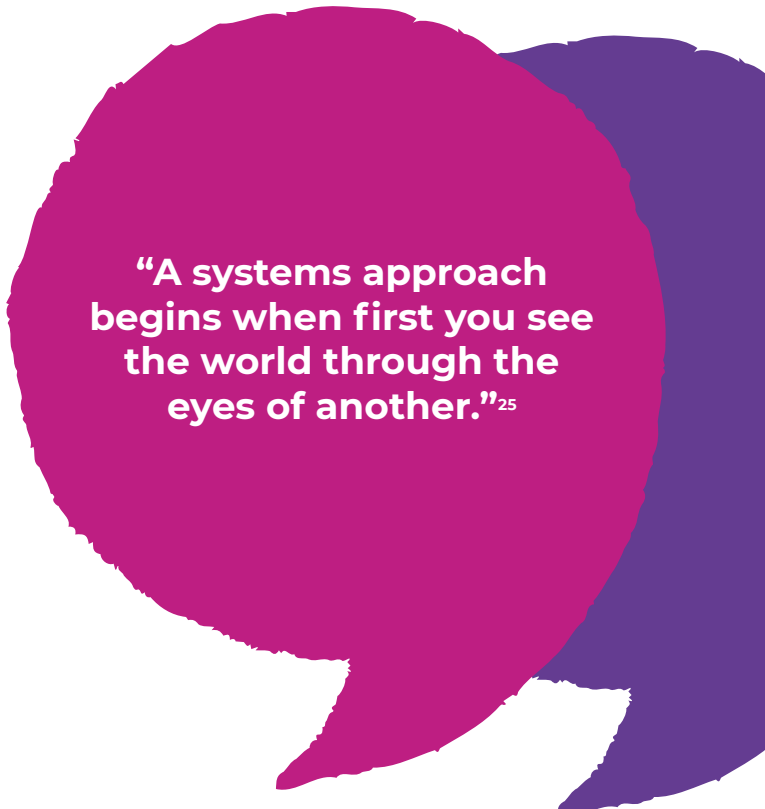
---

29

**This section discusses leadership practice and evaluation methodology, particularly the use of stories and the importance of collective sensemaking. This illuminates both the practices of CLfS programmes and the data sources, narrative and analytical approaches used to understand the evidence presented in this report, including the deeper dives.**

Sharing stories can be a powerful collective action inquiry practice to help people see 'old things in new ways', a source of experiential and mutual learning that generates the empathy, insight, and motivation necessary to propel action. It is our willingness to listen to others, to hear stories as active and sensitive listeners that further creates the space and receptive environment for our own stories to be heard.<sup>24</sup>

**What can we do with our stories?**



**“A systems approach begins when first you see the world through the eyes of another.”<sup>25</sup>**

Storytelling is a familiar part of everyday working and community life, although as stories are often told informally, too often they are dismissed as anecdotal, or simply lost. An important part of the work of collective leadership is to establish the conditions in which stories can be shared, with the intention of creating new appreciation of the perspectives at play, where the intention is to explore individual and mutual understandings, rather than to critique or dispute the veracity of the account.

- 24 See for example Dewar B, and Mackay R, (2010) 'Appreciating compassionate care in acute care setting caring for older people', *International Journal of Older People Nursing*, 5, 299-308; Dewar, B and Sharp, C (2013) 'Appreciative dialogue for co-facilitation in action research and practice development', *International Practice Development Journal* 3 (2) [7] <https://www.fons.org/library/journal/volume3-issue2/article7> and Mead, G (2014) *Telling the Story - The heart and soul of successful leadership*, Jossey Bass.
- 25 Churchman, C. W (1968) *The Systems Approach*. New York: Dell, p. 231 cited in Reynolds, M. and Holwell, S. (eds) (2010) *Systems Approaches to Managing Change: A Practical Guide*, Milton Keynes, The Open University in association with Springer-Verlag London Limited

**“As narrative is indispensable, we need to ask, ‘what can we do with our stories?’ When we share them, we can create a dialogue and a focus on what kind of future we want to create. In the way we approach our work together, whether it is research, leadership, practice development, or community development, we need to shift from investigations of deficits, to be future focused by creating a dialogue about contributions.”<sup>26</sup>**

### **Bringing Olympian perspectives down to earth**

Extending understanding of the use of narrative data or stories is part of the task of building cultures that support new forms of collaborative inquiry and systemic action research. Susan Weil has described stories as ‘more than merely a particular form of narrative’, but a ‘means of bringing Olympian and detached perspectives at the top into play with the more earthy and human elements and the emergence of shared purposes and values’.<sup>27</sup>

Working more intentionally with stories can be an *embedded learning strategy* and a way of bringing people together in reflection and action. As an element of action inquiry, stories are an integral part of a collaborative, human, inquiry-led way of thinking, a form of relational leadership. In collective leadership, sharing stories is part of how we enact our purpose, develop our leadership practice, and notice the difference we are making.

### **Collective sensemaking**

Being more deliberate about story-sharing is an act of individual agency and co-inquiry, a form of collective sensemaking and an exploration that can help to discern what is salient to the group. Importantly, it is a methodology or approach to collective knowledge generation, not simply a research method or technique.

26 Sharp, C. (2018) 'What can we do with our stories? Reflections from the Faroes', *Concept*, 9(2), p. 5. Available at: <http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/2813> (Accessed: 4 August 2022).

27 Weil, S (1994) 'Bringing about cultural change in colleges and universities: The power and potential of story'. In S. Weil (Ed.), *Introducing Change from the Top in Universities and Colleges: 10 Personal Accounts*. London: Kogan Page. pp. 149–167.

**“Sense-making is about creating space for listening, reflection, and the exploration of meaning beyond the usual boundaries, allowing different framings, stories, and viewpoints to be shared and collectively explored. The purpose of sense-making is to develop a set of insights with explanatory possibilities rather than a body of knowledge or plan of action. It requires a leap of faith, coupled with an openness to all that can be seen, heard, felt, and intuited. It challenges the notion that one way of thinking can ever be enough to understand the complexities of the world and helps us to break out of narrow or simplistic framings.”<sup>28</sup>**

Story sharing and collective sensemaking helps us to know and explore what we, as participants in collective leadership think is important and how we conceptualise the substantive issues and the learning process, including how we are noticing difference or changes. This further selection of provocations develops aspects of the value of using stories in this way.

- **Promote generativity:** this helps people to listen with empathy and see old issues with new eyes. We recognise the part that emotion plays in creating cultures and seek to integrate acknowledgement of our feelings more explicitly into our work. (13)
- **Seek the stories behind every action:** as participants, we are observers of experience – our own and others – and recognise that we make interpretations of actions as they occur, rather than see ourselves as controllers of our environment. (7)
- **Promote appreciative dialogue:** we seek to understand what is working well and what is valued in the ‘here and now’ to support emergence and explore aspirations. This understanding is the foundation for the future and having fresh eyes and ears helps to check whether our existing practices support and motivate us in our vision to build a better future. We recognise that ‘improvement’ may not always be needed. (11)
- **Recognise that ‘words create worlds’:** we believe that the language we use creates our realities, so we seek to pay attention to how our language might position people and the inter-play between language, power and emotion. (12)
- **Focus on real-time learning through collaborative inquiry:** we reflect-in-action to discover more about our thinking and actions. This supports us to question our underlying assumptions and values to improve our immediate interactions and allows us to examine tacit or previously undiscussed assumptions and patterns of behaviour and reasoning. (14)

28 Lowe, T., Padmanabhan, C., McCart, D., McNeil, K, Brogan, A and Smith, M (2022) *Human Learning Systems: A practical guide for the curious*, CPI, HIS and IRISS, p.69

This approach enables us to build relational leadership as we:

- explore our values and what matters to each of us
- share our ways of thinking and acting
- talk about our achievements and valued practices
- are heard and able to hear others
- elicit other stories and unearth different perspectives
- can understand ourselves and others more deeply, beyond simply seeking information
- more fully explore perceptions, assumptions and projections and the power dynamics at play
- notice and share our own feelings and energies
- pay attention to how our language might position people and the inter-play between language, power, and emotion
- develop insight and empathy that can propel action
- bring humour and humanity to our exchanges
- notice difference or changes (however 'small') arising from our actions
- understand how we worked, as well as where we got to.

In the context of collective leadership, stories will be told at different times, with different intentions and prompts, partly to develop and propel the work forward; for example, something might be shared as a way of 'checking in' with the group, or might be sought more intentionally as an example of something that is changing or triggered by listening to another member of the group. At a practical level, stories are best told verbally and made sense of collectively in a naturalistic setting; in other words, amongst the participants involved in the work itself, preferably as close to the time of the sharing as possible, with a clear link through to implications or actions. As the work progresses the stories that people choose to share may change, and that in itself may signal important shifts in thinking and practice. Stories don't have to be sensational, entertaining, complete, positive, or negative in tone and content.



## Story guidance and reflections

The story guidance developed for the CLfS Colloquium on Collective Leadership and Leadership-As-Practice (Jan 2021) is relatively simple.

### Leadership in the moment: Story guidance

We would like people to prepare short 'micro' stories or accounts based on their direct experience of 'leadership in the moment' which we will share when we come together for the Colloquium. The following light touch guidance is offered to help frame these stories.

- Ideally, these should be written/told in the first person, based on something you have done or witnessed yourself, however small or fleeting an example it may be.
- Don't worry about creating a very polished story – keep it real.
- Tell us just enough to locate the story in time and space and get attention. We don't need a long back-story.
- Give us a flavour of who the main characters are without revealing their identity.
- Just give us the key moments – these need not be especially dramatic, but they should convey the nub of the talk or action.
- Tell us what was actually said, rather than telling us about what was said.
- Tell us how you, and others felt (if you know).
- Resist adding your own analysis or interpretative comments.
- If you write the story down it should take up no more than half a page of A4. Or take about three minutes to tell.

Despite this apparent simplicity, our experience suggests that professionals initially can feel uncomfortable talking about themselves and may find it difficult to give a simple descriptive account, being more familiar with offering interpretations or rationalisations.

We are aware that using the term 'stories' creates a risk that the rich, experiential, and multi-layered approach we are referring to may be too readily dismissed as not being 'truthful' or objective. In this respect we would note that we have not encountered responses which doubt the veracity of the accounts that we hear when collective leadership participants talk about their experience. Far from seeking agreement or consensus, story sharing is a relational practice rooted in the assumption that everybody has good reasons to behave the way they do seen from their own perspective. Hearing different stories enables sensemaking in which people can explore tacit knowing and entertain the idea that there will be multiple truths, other perspectives, and experiences worth hearing that can be affirming, challenging or a mixture. Stories will be told anyway in some form; here the invitation is to be more intentional and engage in collective sensemaking.

It is important to foster a curious and critical faculty about power. There are always questions about quality in inquiry, for example, about who is telling the stories or is absent, who is hearing, who undertakes the analysis or sensemaking of what is heard, when does this sensemaking take place in time and what is the relationship between story sharing, analysis, and action.

There are important considerations for group facilitation to ensure that the process of sharing and listening is developmental and safe. The ways in which the stories are worked with can help people see the point of doing so, can give explicit and implicit feedback to each other, and help to discern the difference being made. Creating a 'safe space' where this can happen is part of the task of collective leadership and it is something that builds over time as levels of trust, positive relationships and practices begin to be established.

## Deeper Dives: data sources and approach

The evaluative processes and skills of listening, reflecting and sensemaking need to be cultivated deliberately to blend more systemic and more systematic approaches into our practices.

As part of the commitment to their own reflexivity and to develop understanding of impact and how it is achieved, the CLfS facilitators and others who have been part of collective leadership programmes have explored their own learning from the experience of convening and facilitation of collective leadership. This has been done with the support of the first author, acting as a learning partner. The substantive learning is explored more fully following an explanation of the principles and methods used.

## Relational, appreciative, and collaborative methods for dialogue

There are potentially many kinds of individual and group methods to gather data and support making sense processes that have their roots in social research and evaluation methods, including participatory and systemic thinking tools. Most helpful are the creative, visual, and playful methods that

explore language and use stories to deepen inquiry, explore values, acknowledge, and express emotion and talk about 'tricky issues' or articulate those that are simply difficult to put into words. In using and adapting such methods, a good guideline is to focus on relational and appreciative approaches that work with people to create dialogue, rather than diagnostic methods that elicit information about a topic or other people. Such approaches are particularly indebted to several important influences highlighted in our earlier report and which have influenced the methods we have used in generating insight for this report.

- Both Yoland Wadsworth and Susan Weil are systemic thinkers who have done much to advance the understanding of the use of stories in evaluation and inquiry. Yoland Wadsworth has published very useful examples of how to build-in inquiry that address different contexts, design issues and ways to use narrative.<sup>29</sup> Wadsworth's approach is especially helpful in thinking about how to build everyday co-inquiry capabilities essential for collective leadership and how 'data' can be best generated and tested. She offers a cyclical framing of an iterative inquiry process by talking of 'inquiring full circle' through observation, reflection, planning and action.
- Both Yoland and Susan have made significant contributions to the development of methodologies of systemic action research and evaluation, for example, the work of Susan Weil and colleagues at SOLAR.<sup>30</sup> Building on Susan's earlier work with stories, the SOLAR approach was to experiment with diverse and creative forms of 'playing back' insights and disseminating outcomes in ways that opened-up new possibilities for change, as part of learning and feedback loops.

<sup>29</sup> Wadsworth, Y (2011) *Building in Research and Evaluation, Human Inquiry for Living Systems*, Allen and Unwin.

<sup>30</sup> SOLAR (Social and Organisational Learning as Action Research) was a research and development team specialising in systemic action research, originally established in 1996 by Susan Weil at University College Northampton and later at the University of the West of England. More details about the SOLAR approach are here Sharp, C and Balogh, R (2021) 'Becoming Participatory: some contributions to action research in the UK', in Burns, D., Howard, J. and Ospina, S. M. (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry* pp161-164

- The relational and appreciative inquiry work of Belinda Dewar and colleagues at the University of the West of Scotland as part of the My Home Life Scotland (MHL) leadership programme is also an important influence and valuable source of inquiry-led tools and resources. The MHL facilitator team developed a methodology initially known as Learning and Innovating from Everyday Excellence (LIFE). This is an appreciative approach that takes stories from everyday practice and uses a structured format of four sets of questions, similar to Wadsworth's four stage inquiry process, to help people talk collaboratively about ideals and practical ideas that can be taken forward.

It is also notable that others with interests in system change are also developing and deepening understanding of how to work with stories.<sup>31</sup>

Section 7 of this report draws on five separate deeper dives into the experience of different CLfS programmes, evaluation practices and challenges and associated support for facilitation as part of the commitment to on-going evaluation.

- In using qualitative data in our approach to embedded evaluation of collective leadership and specifically in undertaking the deeper dive analysis conducted for this report, we have adapted evaluative methods that support narrative inquiry and collaborative analysis, seeking to 'play back' and test emerging insights amongst those involved wherever possible. This approach significantly strengthens the credibility and trustworthiness of emerging learning, rather than relying on the interpretations of an external evaluation practitioner.
- The CLfS facilitators from several programmes have collated first person accounts/stories of their experience and engaged in an adapted LIFE story process<sup>32</sup> and a collective approach to the 'listening guide' to share perspectives and focus on their own practice as facilitators.<sup>33</sup>

31 Centre for Public Impact (2021) *Storytelling for Systems Change: Early insights from communities and storytellers*, [https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/insights/storytelling-for-systems-change-early-insights-from-communities-and-storytellers?mc\\_cid=4b6f3521e5&mc\\_eid=a0c6b6bb5d](https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/insights/storytelling-for-systems-change-early-insights-from-communities-and-storytellers?mc_cid=4b6f3521e5&mc_eid=a0c6b6bb5d), Human Learning Systems: A practical guide for the curious, (2022), Centre for Public Impact, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and Iriss

32 See for example (Roddy, E et al, 2021) 'Moving stories: exploring the LIFE session storytelling method as a way of enhancing innovative, generative outcomes in practice', *International Practice Development Journal*, Volume 11, Issue 1, Article 6, May <https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.111.006>

33 Andrea Doucet and Natasha S. Mauthner (2008) 'What can be known and how? Narrated subjects and the Listening Guide', *Qualitative Research* 2008; 8; 399, DOI: 10.1177/1468794106093636

- In-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews and other forms of narrative inquiry have also been used and have been analysed using a listening guide approach that draws out themes and layers through four lenses, including shifts in power relations and dominant narratives.
- Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants of the Creative Bravery organising group and analysed using the listening guide by the first author.<sup>34</sup>
- Two workshops using the provocations were held with invited participants with interests in impact and evaluation practices.
- Feedback about individual programmes from routine post-event evaluation questionnaires has provided quantitative and qualitative data, which is used in Sections 5 and 6.
- The report also draws on sources of secondary data: case studies, story gathering, and evaluation reports conducted by others. This includes the Police and Local Government Pilot evaluation and the InspiraAlba case studies; the latter were used in a collective sensemaking exercise, using a LIFE approach in two separate workshops.
- **Developing accountabilities for learning and quality in inquiry:** Two recent CLfS workshops on evaluation in June 2022 used the provocations threaded through this report to promote a dialogue amongst ten participants. Acknowledging all the pressures for certainty, precise measurement, and hasty judgements, these were unusual, thoughtful, and important conversations that we have drawn on here and which help to position some of the challenges articulated in a wider context.
- **The challenges of convening and commissioning in a locality:** the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) Leadership Programme worked with two trial sites in 2019-20. It was designed to create capability and capacity around collective leadership to ensure effective implementation of the GIRFEC approach. This worked in 'live local systems' with leaders at all levels across statutory and non-statutory partners concerned with improved service delivery and better outcomes for children, young people, carers, and their families. The facilitators reported to a national Steering Group and the work was authorised by a Chief Officer in each local authority. The programme worked largely with local lead officers from across the health and social care partnership, who had not necessarily been included in the initial scoping of the work.<sup>35</sup>
- **Learning about facilitation of action inquiry in a locality:** the facilitators of the Police and Local Government Pilots undertook a supported self-evaluation based on the collective analysis of stories from their work, with a focus on learning from the experience of convening and facilitation.<sup>36</sup> This is drawn on extensively throughout this report.

The deeper dives span work undertaken in children's services, health and social care, community planning, community development, community justice, public service reform, education, and rural social enterprise and amongst funders, users and practitioners of evaluation. The insights generated are used here to identify and elaborate on five important themes. These are:

34 These interviews were commenced by an in-house researcher.

35 This report draws on a group discussion held in September 2020 with five facilitators of the CLfS GIRFEC approach in Argyll and Bute and Fife. This focused on the generation, sharing and co-analysis of several first-person 'stories of practice' drawn from the two sites and the 'listening guide' approach.

36 This report draws on a two-stage process including first-person stories from the facilitators and an adapted LIFE approach.

- **Creating brave spaces - developing a group ethic through action:** Creative Bravery (CBF) was a week-long on-line festival held in September 2020, organised by a small group of people with interests in creativity and innovation in education and learning.<sup>37</sup> The early roots of the festival lie in the work of the CLfS team and their annual Firestarter Festival. The CBF Festival was convened as a response to the cancellation due to Covid-19 of the regular Festival of Education. It was essentially a series of events; some had a focused topic, whilst in others, participants were invited into an unstructured space, such as a campfire or café, simply to meet others, have conversations and make connections with people and ideas.<sup>38</sup>
- **Developing co-inquiry through story gathering and collective sensemaking:** InspirAlba is a charitable enterprise established in 2009 to provide business support services, learning and networking opportunities to rural social enterprises in Scotland.<sup>39</sup> In 2021, qualitative research was conducted by InspirAlba into Rural Collective Leadership written up as six case studies that explore collective leadership in practice.<sup>40</sup> CLfS offered support to co-host a sensemaking workshop, initially with staff and associates of the organisation and subsequently involving the people who featured in their case studies.<sup>41</sup>



37 [Homepage - Creative Bravery Festival](#)

38 This report draws on a series of six in-depth interviews conducted with the core 'organising group' and transcripts were analysed using a 'listening guide' approach.

39 <https://www.inspiralba.org.uk/>

40 <https://ruralsehub.net/collective-leadership-case-studies/>

41 This report draws on two workshops co-hosted with CLfS that engaged InspirAlba staff and those working in rural social enterprises in Scotland in the analysis of data. These workshops used an adapted LIFE method to elicit and explore insights and actions, and a real-time collaborative web platform in enable people to share comments and reflections.

# 5. LEARNING 4: MOTIVATION, PARTICIPATION, AND SHAPING EXPECTATIONS OF IMPACT

38

The focus on leadership development, rather than the development of leaders is an important distinction in the creation of expectations about what kind of impact might be possible through collective leadership programmes. This report is based on analysis of evidence from across all our programmes, including short general introduction or taster sessions, Festivals, or series of events with a specific focus, specialist programmes aimed to deepen skills and facilitation practices, and place-based programmes. The Annex lists the range of recent CLfS programmes, with a total of over 6,800 bookings.

## Motivations for engagement with Collective Leadership

The continuing scale of interest in this range of offerings and the involvement of a variety of public service organisations is notable. In general terms, people are looking for fresh thinking, space and time for reflection, connection with others, a chance to think about how to tackle difficulties, and to test out what it takes to do, and continue to do, the work of collaborative public service.

**“These sessions present the opportunity to link with others from different areas, sectors, and organisations. This gives a rich opportunity to share and learn. The sessions are well set up and facilitated and I am struck by and welcome the honesty and openness of participants – it’s not competitive.”**

(Facilitating and Hosting Conversations Online participant).

These motivations are deepened and brought into sharper focus by the pandemic, with an added interest in developing skills in online facilitation, finding space and time for reflection and vital refreshment and to make connection across the system.

**“I am not sure when we last had a moment of stillness....we have continued this collaborative leadership in unprecedented times and still managed to commit the time.”**

(Police & LG Pilots participant)

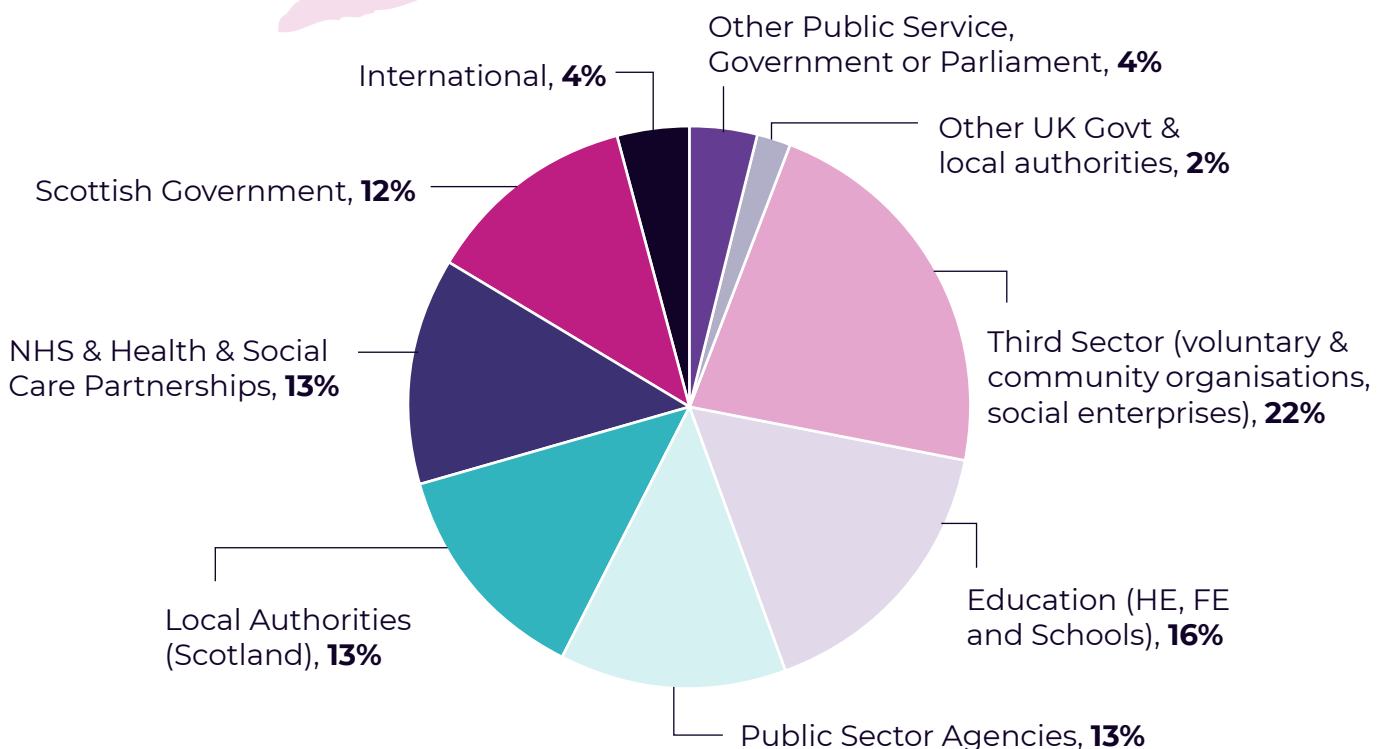
**“I was interested partly as a refresher and to keep up to date with any new ideas. It’s always great to listen to others and hear their experiences. Secondly, I needed a boost to remind me we each have the autonomy to make a difference.”**

(Collective Leadership Practice: Where to start participant)

**“I was inspired and relieved to see how many diverse organisations are interested in and beginning to acknowledge how essential collective approaches are if community initiatives are to remain effective, sustainable and truly inclusive.”**  
(Collective Leadership Workshop participant)

### Participation from across public services

Based on data on the employment sector of those booking our general and one-off programmes, Figure 4 shows a mix of bookings from across agencies working in public services, largely in Scotland.<sup>42</sup> This pattern reflects our experience of participation and allows people to meet others online from other sectors, without facilitators having to manage this process unduly.



**Figure 4: Bookings by sector**

<sup>42</sup> N=881 This is a sample of bookings taken from our general and one-off programmes where this information is available between August 2020 and March 2022.

## Enhancing opportunities for learning

### Developing reflective and relational practices

Different CLfS programmes are convened for different purposes, some for a very short period, whilst others offer extended chances to develop a shared programme of work where the emphasis is on continuous emergent change. The range of CLfS programmes illustrated in the Annex includes general programmes that serve to promote theoretical and practical understanding of the complexity of collaborative working and the principles for collective leadership through an interactive style of social and experiential learning. Other programmes build on these underpinnings to focus on the development of specialist skills and practices. In addition, there are Festivals that offer a mix of opportunities and experiences which may include both basic introductions and some skills development. Place-based programme such as the Police and Local Government Pilots offer very different and deeper opportunities for action, to develop the impact of learning in practice, as the opportunities to realise the development, transfer and sustainability of learning are very much wider. These offer a form of system convening, where part of the task of leadership is to assemble people together from across traditional boundaries and silos, bringing together different perspectives, practices, and institutions and to develop the learning capabilities and unrealised potential inherent amongst them.<sup>43</sup>

In developing a fuller understanding of such different forms of social and experiential learning, theories of reflective and relational knowledge which are the foundations of participatory practice are useful.<sup>44</sup>

- Reflective knowledge (or the power of confidence) helps people to understand what they themselves can do to help improve their situation. It is social, dialogical, and emancipatory by providing value standards and self-confidence to engage in change. Reflective knowledge 'upholds the dignity of human beings as free and autonomous agents who can act effectively and responsibly on their own behalf in the context of their interdependent relationships'.
- Relational knowledge (or the power of connection) helps people come to feel that they are not alone, but are part of a larger whole:

Building on these theories and emerging from our deeper exploration of impact, Figure 5 below explores the idea of developing communities of inquiry as distinct from learning networks. The former offers opportunities to build on the reflective leadership practices arising in a learning network to create a deeper relational leadership practice that emphasises the development and coordination of dialogical capabilities amongst a specific group or team.

<sup>43</sup> See <https://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/21-08-31-Systems-Convening-Full-PDF-version-corrected.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> Park, P., (2001) 'Knowledge and participatory research', in Reason, P and Bradbury, H (eds) *Handbook of Action Research*, Sage, p86



The opportunities to develop the practices of relational and collective leadership are quite different and expectations of impact are likely to be very different in each type of programme. Given such variety and in

thinking about how to consider a pathway to impact, we will explore whether it is helpful to make clearer distinctions between primarily 'network' focused programmes and 'community of inquiry' based programmes.

---

**“Relational knowledge comes from connecting and leads to further connecting. It is reciprocal, not only in that the parties involved know each other, but also in that it grows from interaction. Forms of interaction may include touching, as in shaking hands or hugging, telling stories or communicating through other means, sharing things and engaging in activities together... What makes conversation and other forms of interaction that lead to relational knowledge possible are respect, caring, sincerity, authenticity, and trust. The attitude most conducive to promoting these traits in conversation is that of listening.”<sup>45</sup>**

---

<sup>45</sup> Park, P. (2001) Ibid.

Figure 5: Building communities of inquiry for relational leadership practice<sup>46</sup>

Learning network approach (reflective leadership practice)	Community of inquiry (reflective and relational leadership practice)
Occasional and unforeseen access to other people with similar interests and concerns in other organisations and further afield, whether in formal positions of leadership or not	Intentional and continuing social contact with other stakeholders with similar purposes in local organisations and partnerships, whether in formal positions of leadership or not  Greater chance to develop common values, norms, language, and ways of working
Offers experience of and access to tools and techniques to promote reflection	Offers an ongoing live context to use tools and techniques to promote collective, multi-vocal dialogue
Focus on information sharing, chance to hear what others are thinking and doing at a point in time	Emphasis is on knowledge-in action/ knowledge generation, knowledge is actionable and operational  Opportunities for exchange and sharing are extended and ongoing
Individual reflection and focus on self, 1st person practices	Individual reflection, linked to others who are present in a dialogue – 1st, 2nd and potentially 3rd person practices
Action space: Types of tasks amongst those attending may be similar but are not joint tasks with others present, even though they may be shared as examples  Capacity to act: personal motivation, self-confidence and drive will influence next steps	Action space: Task is one that can only be done together  Opportunities to test out responses in action are available  Strong imperative for the issue to be resolved collectively  Motivation, confidence, and capacity to act influenced by group
Enduring focus of relationships is with those not present 'in the room'  Prevailing power dynamics may be referred to/talked about  Limited opportunities to surface inter-personal conflict and recognition of diverse interests	Focus of relationships is with those in the group/'in the room' and others not present  Power dynamics in the wider system play out in this space in real time  Greater space to surface and work with inter-personal conflict and recognition of diverse interests
Valuable for individual learning and motivation, access to new contacts  Can offer important motivation and energy to sustain participants	Valuable to create and test local customised responses to complex issues  Offers chance for deeper understanding and potential to create a culture of social learning
Diffuse impact – building a critical mass for system change	Focused impact on a common issue – more intensive system change at a local or thematic level

46 This table is an adaptation and extension of Table 5.1 in Sharp, C (2005) *The Improvement of Public Sector Delivery: Supporting Evidence Based Practice Through Action Research*, Scottish Executive <https://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20150220172407/http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2005/09/2890219/02201> Accessed 17/08/22

# 6. LEARNING 5: OUR IMPACT AND LEARNING FROM CASE STUDIES

43

## Inquiry prompts

What gives me/us confidence that positive change is happening?

- What has enabled that to happen?
- What would sustain and extend those changes?
- What is getting in the way of the changes we seek?

Overall, our programmes are an important source of connection and valued conversations for many working in public service and have provided a platform for people to share examples of changes in perspectives and practices.

**Feedback suggests that people come away from CLFS programmes with 'action confidence': a sense of how they want to proceed, fresh thinking and ideas for what they might do next, the courage and energy to try something different and lots of practical tools to help them to do so. Where there are extended opportunities to test out this learning in practice through action inquiry, there are important, early signs of changes in thinking and practice.**

These conclusions about impact are based on analysis of our sources of qualitative and quantitative data from across a range of programmes, followed by a selection of case studies as illustrations. The quotes used give voice to participants' perspectives on their learning and are selected as illustrations of the recurring themes within the data. This illustrates impact at different levels, including a) reactions to the programmes and learning about collective leadership; b) application of learning and new behaviours with others, based on learning and c) early changes arising from the further application of learning.

## Reactions and learning: changes in the ways people see and think about themselves and their role as a leader

Changes in thinking about what collective leadership means in practice are evident across our range of programmes.

An important part of the learning across all our programmes is that whatever the constraints and pressures, there are valuable, 'apparently small' things that can be done differently, sometimes described as instinctively 'the right thing to do'.<sup>47</sup> This offers people a simpler way to 'be' in the midst of complexity, relatable to their place in the world:

**“[I took away] a lot! ...the importance of pausing, reflecting, engaging, making time/space to do so. Trying not to jump straight to solutions or feel that I need to know the answer. The idea that complexity doesn't necessarily mean difficult or hard, and that something that is complex doesn't need to be (or can't be) broken down into simpler components. Some practical tools - mindfulness, journaling, questions to ask, to help put this into practice.”**

(Introduction to Collective Leadership participant)

The potential for wider and deeper impact of these kinds of shifts in thinking are most clearly seen in the Police and Local Government Pilots, where participants have been part of on-going action inquiry groups. These groups have offered protected time and space to think and engage differently, establishing relationships and networks in a psychologically safe environment and a chance to explore different professional and organisational cultures.

**“It's changing mindsets, moving away from traditional silo working. I'm thinking who else needs to be involved in this? I take a wider view of the issues now, more inclusive of the staff in general. You get some really good information coming back from the people at the coalface. They live it. I also know that not all the issues I'm presented with are my responsibility to solve. I'm trying to take a wee step back.”**

(Police & LG Pilots participant)

<sup>47</sup> See O'Donnell, J (2022 forthcoming) *The Art and Science of Systems Leadership through the lens of Systems Thinking*, Collective Leadership for Scotland

**Application and new behaviours: changes in the way they interact with, perceive, pay attention to others**

A recurring theme is the importance of how participants orientate to others to make the most of the existing resource of collective knowledge and skills available, rather than thinking that they must have all the answers or that it is their role to fix everything. We are fully aware that some of the dialogical, mindfulness and reflective practices that we offer to model the importance of wellbeing can be met with bemusement, scepticism, and fear. Nevertheless, invariably the value, importance and purpose become plainer as people experience it for themselves.

**“If you’d told me I’d be doing dialogue walks... well, let’s say I would have been sceptical! ... but I found them fascinating. It totally changes the dynamic compared to if I’d phoned you up to talk professionally. Real food for thought... it makes me wonder, our organisations talk about wellbeing, but how are we actively supporting our teams?”**

(Police & LG Pilots participant)

The key skills and practices of action inquiry are the ‘how’ of collective leadership, crucial to shift the way that people work together to enact change: these include reflective tools such as journaling, listening skills and the use of generative questions which are powerful, and key to progress by more skilful engagement of others.

**“I came away with lots of ideas and questions about how my organisation works and what we might be able to do better, and how we might support stakeholders and partners to be more open and curious and inquiring.”**

(Collective Leadership Workshop Online participant)

**“My learning is the art of asking questions, instead of being at a meeting where someone keeps talking and talking and you don’t get much from it. Questions help you get knowledge you weren’t aware of, to solutions that are created more collaboratively with others.”**

(Police & LG Pilots participant)

### **Further application and early changes: changes in action that they take as individuals and with others**

Such individual or collective actions can have major effects by shifting the focus of attention and intention, triggering different choices by making visible new options and potentially initiating a cascade of further changes and impacts in the wider system. These are essential first steps. In our model of outcomes, a new approach is a necessary beginning of a ripple of change, starting where people are and working through their spheres of influence.

The action inquiry groups in the Police and Local Government programme have been a space in which people can be supported by the facilitators and by the other group members to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting more fully, around a focused and shared issue.

- Part of the work of CLfS is to create new networks and relationships, to build community in, between and beyond the action inquiry groups.
- Within these locality-based groups, even where people did know each other beforehand, over time there is a new quality to their relating: greater depth, more openness and honesty which influences their confidence in taking action.
- Recognition of shared purpose brings people into a different relationship, where they see each other differently, as allies galvanised around a common issue that they want to do something about. There are offers of help and support made to each other.

- Rather than inhabiting a professional persona of certainty and detachment, growing trust enables participants to show more vulnerability that can sometimes open new understandings and possibilities.

The group experience is a microcosm of the wider system and demonstrates the ways in which some of the dominant narratives of leadership are asserted. In general terms, the experience of the action inquiry groups is of a developing understanding and desire to reimagine what leadership might be in a significant challenge to prevailing cultures of hierarchical leadership. There is learning about the enablers and barriers to systems change:

- People can articulate the essential 'stuckness' or limitations of established ways of working including those that rely on the formal exercise of authority over others.
- There is an urgency to the recognition that 'some of what we've been doing isn't right' where individual leadership development is simply unsuited to the prevailing challenges.
- There can be a sense of inevitability about the prevailing ways of working that can block change or make any effort to try something different too unsafe.



## Reflections and challenges

Over time and across the range of the CLfS programmes, there is a growing appreciation of the potential potency of collective power: collective leadership feels timely, even as it co-exists with still dominant ideas and structures that reinforce hierarchical models of leadership. This is the context in which expectations and claims about impact must be tempered.

Much of our learning reflects our own navigation of these tensions. Working differently does not feel easy, nor is it sufficient to secure the transformational changes that are sought. The space and support to do such work is critical, yet it is hard to protect the time too often seen as a luxury within systems that favour immediate reactive responses to issues, framed as deliverables, and are reluctant to pay attention to theory or actual leadership in practice.

A systemic perspective distinguishes between the changes in mindsets, thinking and practice that are keeping problems in place, and the visible, measurable changes or impact we are ultimately seeking at scale. Collective leadership is a dynamic model of the co-production of knowledge, that expands notions of participation to embrace all stakeholders. This 'extended model of participation' illustrates how questions of scale and sustainability are linked and assumes that people (communities and practitioners) have the capacity, intelligence, and experience to conduct their own analysis, lead and sustain their own change, and that it is such 'ownership' that enables processes to go to scale.<sup>48</sup>

We can no longer expect to rely on mandating or rolling-out successful interventions; the need to shift hearts and minds to fundamentally alter the conditions that continue to hold the problems in place, has been referred to as 'scaling deep' and is a necessary precursor to change at scale.<sup>49</sup>

Much of the change that is needed is often not noticed or is readily discounted, even if it might well signal important and necessary shifts in thinking and practice towards collective leadership in action.

**“The myriad of relational and conversational practices that take place on a daily basis are at the heart of learning and change; they create environments that are conducive or otherwise to engagement with a wide variety of knowledge and the testing and translation of that knowledge in action. This shift of gaze to the everyday, micro-level practices does not ignore the questions of how to achieve change at scale, indeed scale is achieved by nurturing such emergent processes.”<sup>50</sup>**

For any systemic change to be enduring and effective, there needs to be exploration of the embedded cultural values and beliefs, whether formally expressed or otherwise, that continue to reproduce unwanted patterns in complex systems and that act as barriers to change.

48 Sharp, C (2018) *Collective Leadership: Where Nothing is Clear and Everything Keeps Changing - Exploring new territories for evaluation*, Collective Leadership Scotland <http://tinyurl.com/y6vll2hp>

49 Riddell and Moore (2015) *Scaling Out, Scaling Up and Scaling Deep: Advancing Systemic Social Innovation and the Learning Processes to Support It*: October [https://mccconnellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ScalingOut\\_Nov27A\\_AV\\_BrandedBleed.pdf](https://mccconnellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ScalingOut_Nov27A_AV_BrandedBleed.pdf)

50 Burns, D quoted in Sharp, 2018

## Case studies

We are aware that interest and demand for our work to support the development of Collective Leadership can take many different forms and are pleased that we have been able to work with partners to offer a variety of meaningful, relational work online, which continues to experiment with different formats and means of engagement. Here we highlight four valuable examples.

### [A] Place-based collective leadership: the Police and Local Government Pilots

The Police and Local Government Collaborative Leadership Programme has worked within three pilot sites, Aberdeenshire, West Dunbartonshire, and West Lothian between March 2021-January 2022. This has been an online programme, with participants drawn from Police Scotland, local authorities and Health and Social Care Partnerships, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Third Sector Interfaces. This has been both an opportunity for learning in depth about the theories and practice of Collective Leadership, and a supported opportunity to deploy what has been learned in support of a real, complex work issue through developing communities of inquiry.

#### Motivations and context

Amongst the participants there is a strong sense of wanting change, of how much this work matters and a sense of responsibility to make a difference for the people and communities they are working in. Participants have managed their participation in the programme despite the extremely difficult circumstances they are working in, responding to crises and the immediate manifestations of enduring and

complex social issues that are the context in which they work. The participants talk about being overwhelmed, stretched, under a lot of pressure and time-poor.

#### Understanding impact

The evaluation conducted by Dr Kristy Docherty and Brigid Russell on behalf of the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR) between August 2021 and February 2022 concludes that the programme is 'a highly relevant and timely developmental approach which addresses practically the pace of change around, and the effectiveness of, cross-boundary collaborative work.'<sup>51</sup> They conclude that it inspires personal development and more effective local partnership and collaborative working, and outline an expectation that:

**"... the participants' learning, and the associated impact from participating in this programme, will continue to unfold over the coming months and years to come, with benefits evident both to individuals and the wider system."<sup>52</sup>**

51 Docherty, K and Russell, B (2022) *Police Scotland and Local Government Collaborative Leadership Pilots Evaluation, Research Report No 1*, May <https://www.sipr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Police-Scotland-and-Local-Government-Collaborative-Leadership-Pilots-Evaluation-Docherty-and-Russell.pdf>

52 Docherty and Russell (2022) Ibid.



They identify four key strands of learning:

- **Understanding the complexity of collaborative working** – participants broadened their theoretical understanding of collaboration, its relevance within a public service context, their appreciation of its practical, cultural, and relational challenges, and what it takes to work more effectively within collaborative structures and on cross-system issues.
- **Principles for collective leadership** – participants gained a greater appreciation of 'wicked issues', how to recognise them and to acknowledge their complexity. This learning was allied to the importance of collective leadership, a process and practice that can unlock and enable a collaborative cross-system approach to address the shared, intractable issues that continue to persist.
- **Building stronger relationships** – the programme provided a supported learning space within which participants could both understand the central importance of developing stronger connections and relationships across the system as well as put key relational skills into practice.
- **Promoting a collaborative culture** – a core strength of the programme is that it provides participants with a practical space in which to experience what effective collaboration actually feels like, and there was considerable evidence that this 'situated' understanding and learning was drawn on and applied beyond the programme within participants' own contexts.

Important elements of the success of the programme are identified as:

- The creation of a learning community, with practical opportunities for participants to learn from each other.
- Bridging theory with the realities of practice, received positively by participants, and providing a framework for collaboration in practice.
- The use of a relational lens in terms of programme design enables participants to develop effective collaborative relationships within the programme community, in the place-based action inquiry work, and within their respective organisational contexts.
- The place-based approach and potential of learning in live work, enabling participants to develop, transfer and sustain their learning in their own practice, where the opportunities for change will ultimately be realised.
- A consistent, supportive, and participatory facilitation approach that supports the learning of the individual participants and further develops the capacity within the system to work collaboratively.
- Co-ownership of approach, which provides valued opportunities to contribute actively to the construction of the programme, and to the shared learning.

The SIPR evaluation also raises issues for consideration and further discussion, some of which are a result of the structural and cultural tensions arising from the development of a collaborative and emergent programme within a system still subject to traditional governance structures, and with host organisations that are hierarchical in management and reporting terms. These tensions also bring challenges of legitimacy and nature of the space for learning, the need for wider representation from across public services, how collective learning is described and achieved, and issues of practical and programme design. The SIPR evaluation concluded that of all the skills required for effective collaboration, collective and immersive learning is the most valuable.

---

**“... the focus of leadership development becomes a collective one where participants learn together. This goes beyond the methods and content covered in ‘training’ courses and looks very different to traditional ‘leader development’ approaches. Collective learning grows most effectively through dialogue and interaction while locating the learning and development in live place-based work. This programme exemplifies the value and potential of ‘immersive learning’ and real participant engagement, where its impact is dynamic and ongoing.”<sup>53</sup>**

---

53 Docherty and Russell (2022) Ibid.

## Further insights about impact

In January 2022, the Police and Local Government Pilots participants shared what had stood out for them during the programme. The examples validated the evaluation report and illustrated changes in mental models of leadership, shifts in thinking about their own part in how

leadership is enacted given their role, and differences in preferred or default styles of engagement with others. Figure 6 shows some examples where perhaps small shifts in practice have been met by a different response from others, opening up new possibilities.

**Figure 6: Examples of the application of learning: new behaviours and impact for individuals and with others**

I used to....	But now I.....
think it was just us under pressure.	have an added appreciation for other departments.
think I had to fix it.	think 'how am I going to bring in others?' I have lots of great questions to bring the team on board. You can spend the time listening.
think that I have to make all the decisions.	know that I can rely on others around me.
be in 'churn mode' and focus solely on our service.	think it's brilliant that we are looking at the bigger issues that are affecting our area.
have few opportunities to come together.	find opportunities and strength from looking at things from another partners perspective .
find it a challenge to free up time amidst the chaos.	have discovered that what's important to me is also important to others.
have a focus on results.	think about how we have conversations, what questions we ask and how we conduct meetings.
struggle because there's no single thing our team can do to solve the issues we face.	help the team to understand that they aren't responsible to solve everything, only what is within their gift.
say 'here's what I think we need to do'.	allow conversations to go off-track, which might lead to a blind alley or to solutions that nobody has thought of yet.
jump from one thing to the next.	allow time for reflection.
find it hard to get the right people around the table.	persevere and help others to understand how it takes time.
find it hard to tolerate silence.	learned to take a deep breathe, step back a bit or sit on my hands!

In terms of our pathway to impact, it is possible to see the further impact anticipated by the SIPR evaluation already beginning to unfold: the impact on the participants emerges as they create a shared purpose, acknowledge to each other how they feel about their work, gain support from peers, and begin to create a collective and galvanising desire to do something about it.

Despite the acknowledged learning from the programme, it was challenging for the action inquiry groups to articulate a shared focus: some struggled to find the time to develop this as fully as they would have liked, others felt that they didn't have the mandate or could not prioritise the development of what they saw as a 'new work stream'. There was a sense of 'unfinished business' from a relatively short programme and important learning about how action inquiry groups are convened around an issue. This worked most successfully where there was 'buy-in' at executive level:

---

**“There is no denying the learning. But... there's an element of lottery in relation to who's in the group. The starting point does need to be a bit different. If we are expecting an agreed wicked issue to take forward, we need to consider the makeup of teams aligned with that wicked issue. It's about those that put us on these courses understanding the capacity we have to actually do it justice.”**

(Police & LG Pilots participant)

---

**“It was tortuous at times... it was 'I want answers, and I want them now'. I felt I need to come up with a grand plan that nobody has ever thought about before, whereas in fact, it was never going to work unless we mirror real life.”**

(Police & LG Pilots participant)

In valuing their own learning about the power and importance of working with colleagues in a locality, participants were interested to consider how they could sustain the momentum, stop prevailing practices that they felt were unhelpful and extend their learning into the wider organisations. There was interest in supporting senior leaders to 'see the power of the work', perhaps by being able to experience it for themselves. These issues of commissioning, convening and the challenges for facilitation to create wider systemic impact are developed further in Section 7.

## [B] Leadership Campfires Festival, September 2021

*"LISTENING TO DIFFERENT VOICES  
ALLOWS YOU TO HEAR VOICES  
DIFFERENTLY"*

Being online has enabled CLfS to reach into international networks and build valuable international collaborations as learning networks. The Leadership Campfires Festival (LCF) was co-hosted with Professor Joe Raelin following on from an International Colloquium on Collective Leadership and Leadership-as-Practice (LAP) held in January 2021. The LCF in September 2021 was a further opportunity to explore together what kind of leadership practices are most likely to serve us well in these times and learn more about Collective Leadership and Leadership-as-Practice, and where these fit together in our contemporary world.

This was a further iteration of a democratic, self-organising festival that members of the CLfS Team have initiated. From the Emporium of Dangerous Ideas, to the Fire Starter Festival and the Creative Bravery Festival, we have learned what it takes to create these open, convivial spaces; we have honed our craft in creating and hosting campfires that signals our intent to create a space for a different kind of conversation where differences can be aired, where questions are posed and mulled over, connections sparked, and ideas are free to emerge.

Thirty-two separately hosted events were held over two days across three time zones. Twenty of these events were hosted entirely by external partners, with a further three co-hosted with the CLfS team.

By creating inclusive spaces, with structure and openness to explore, participants experienced a richness and depth of experience that allowed them to reflect on their own leadership practice, both in content and form.

**"My key insight is to look for leading in the collective practices of the groupings. It's more than what they say to each other, it's what each then proceeds to DO, to practice in concert with the others, that creates the change. Don't just look for the leader, look for and support the leading."**

(Leadership Campfires Festival participant)

---

**“Keeping this approach nearly entirely conversational, overriding our customary ‘presentations’, is oddly groundbreaking and just right for inspiring new ways to foster leading.”**

(Leadership Campfires Festival participant)

**“I was reminded of the importance of not using young people or their stories to enable professionals to tick boxes. More adults need to let go of control, stop trying to empower young people and actually hear what they are asking for and support them to find ways and come up with ideas to effect change.”**

(Leadership Campfires Festival participant)

Whilst there are lessons, particularly around inclusivity online and working with a wide variety of hosts, we are confident that we did achieve something new and important at this time, by modelling the way collective leadership might be achieved.

**“...The benefits of being on-line are striking - this would simply not have happened otherwise. It was brilliant to be part of international conversations.”**

(Leadership Campfires Festival participant)

A commonly held assumption is that safety and trust are reduced or hard to accomplish online; our feedback suggests that with light structure, skill and care it is possible to achieve similar richness and depth.

## [C] Illuminating Leadership Festival, February, and March 2022

### "ALL OF US. INSPIRING EACH OTHER"

This festival was a series of 43 events held over four days, with an estimated reach of over 2,000 event participants, of which around 70% were based in Scotland.

Over half the events were entirely self-hosted by external partners, as well as a small number co-hosted by the Scottish Government and other key public service agencies. These included Public Health Scotland, Healthcare Improvement Scotland, the Scottish Social Services Council, Police Scotland, Education Scotland, Audit Scotland, the Local Government Improvement Service, local authorities and the third sector.

Some high-profile key speakers and launch contributors have been an important part of the appeal of the Festival. In feedback, Martin Kalungu-Banda, Paula Downey, Tadgh O'Sullivan, Cormac Russell, and Oliver Escobar were all mentioned as inspiring speakers. There have been valuable insights and personal conceptual and practical learning.

**"I'm already finding small ways to change the way I lead inspired by the Host Leadership session. Cormac Russell's session has really energised my thinking about what community relationships might look like and how to start from what's strong, not what's wrong. I'm going to be much more aware of looking for lived experience from that point of view not just problem-stories."**

(Illuminating Leadership Festival participant)

---

**“The spaciousness that arises from being present and comfortable with ‘not knowing’. More awareness of the silent and invisible voices in the face of complex and system problems and stretching ourselves more to bring inclusion to enrich our solutions.”**

(Illuminating Leadership Festival participant)

---

The connections and learning networks forged have been a chance to grow our national and international links, and to align Collective Leadership for Scotland with parallel developments in systems leadership and convening, public participation, community empowerment and wider public service reform.

**“What stood out was the potential for such rich connections between people across Scotland and beyond - it’s not about ‘experts’ but about all of us, inspiring each other.”**

(Illuminating Leadership Festival participant)



## [D] Leadership and Facilitation Programme

### “EXPLORING OURSELVES AND HOW WE BEST WORK TOGETHER”

We see the process of facilitation as an essential collective leadership practice and have designed a programme to bring experienced facilitators and leaders together to deepen their own leadership and facilitation practices. Formerly a residential programme, this programme is intended for those with some experience of working with complexity and who are open to reflecting on their own practice and willing to share their learning. Places are limited and participants complete an application process to be involved.

We have now completed seven online cohorts, with 83 participants, drawn from across public services.

**“This has had a much more powerful impact than say a conventional course because I think this course helps practitioners tap into what’s at the heart of their learning and growth needs.”**

(Leadership and Facilitation participant)

With some theoretical input, the focus is on cultivating greater insight in the use of self, creating the conditions for groups and teams to learn and take better action together. The focus is on developing curiosity as an ongoing part of reflective and relational leadership practice, with tools and techniques to support inquiry. The first-person inquiry questions framed by the May 2022 participants show the prevailing challenges and opportunities for relational leadership, and include:

*What can I do to safely bring my team to the edge (with me)?*

*What practice can I put in place that will enable me to take the time in any situation that will give me the capacity to be more present to the situation before me?*

*Who or what will support me to move forward?*

*How would being in a place of not knowing and embracing vulnerability feel for me?*

*How do I keep recharging the skills I already have, in support of the areas I want to develop?*

*How can I increase my capacity to speak up without blame, with humble observations and great questions?*

*How can I create the conditions in this space for openness and answers to emerge?*

*How will I change my approach to create better quality spaces for talking and listening?*

*How can I remain hopeful and curious when working with systems that do not recognise complexity or welcome curiosity?*

*How and where could I trust and ask for help more?*

*What else can I let go of? What am I afraid of? What is rekindling in me?*

*What assumptions might I be making as to the impact of what works for me as working for others?*

*How can I find out what I need to build confidence to ask people difficult questions, the nerve to hold space for the responses and the strength to share my own feelings?*

Whilst the outcomes are similar to our other programmes in terms of understandings of collective leadership, there is also a refreshed, deeper, and often affirming perspective on individual reflection and group facilitation practices, notably how the former supports the latter.

**“I found engaging in reflection on my own practice... to be both hard work and very helpful. I will be more aware of how I feel and the implications of this for how I facilitate a group after this course...and of what is happening in the room and what this might mean for how I proceed with the facilitation of the group I am with. I am feeling more confident and more humble at the same time and looking forward to working on my facilitation at the deeper levels we began exploring together on this course.”**

(Leadership and Facilitation participant)

**“The course had a huge impact on me. I found it emotive, eye opening and so informative, but informative in such a different way... it was not a content dump, but a true exploration into ourselves as professionals and how we work together for collective good. I found the course really expanded my understanding of myself and, in turn, how I move forward as a leader.”**

(Leadership and Facilitation participant)

---

**“I notice how much I focus on the what, when the gold probably lies in the how.... The presentation exercise really made me think. My focus was instantly taken by the ‘what’ – ‘let’s get this done’ and I wonder why I’ve never been prompted to observe, or perhaps more consciously engage with the process of ‘how’ we worked together?”**

(Leadership and Facilitation participant)

---

It has been important to be able to offer such a programme online, not least to show people what is possible given prevailing constraints.

To quote from feedback, we too were ‘delightfully surprised how well delivering it and participating in it online worked’. Yet, we are aware that this approach is not optimal, and there are lessons for online and face-to-face delivery that we can adopt. There have also been the wider benefits already noted in this report of online access and inclusion as well as a chance to consider more fully how different people learn, all of which will continue to be part of our own reflective practice.

**“In 2 years of online life it was the best-designed and most energising, generative and rewarding online course I’ve experienced. I loved the immersive intensity of it, the experiential learning, the responsibility it required of me for my own self-care and self-regulation. .... It raised my game enormously.”**

(Leadership and Facilitation participant)

# 7. LEARNING 6: DEEPER INSIGHTS ABOUT HOW TO CREATE IMPACT

60

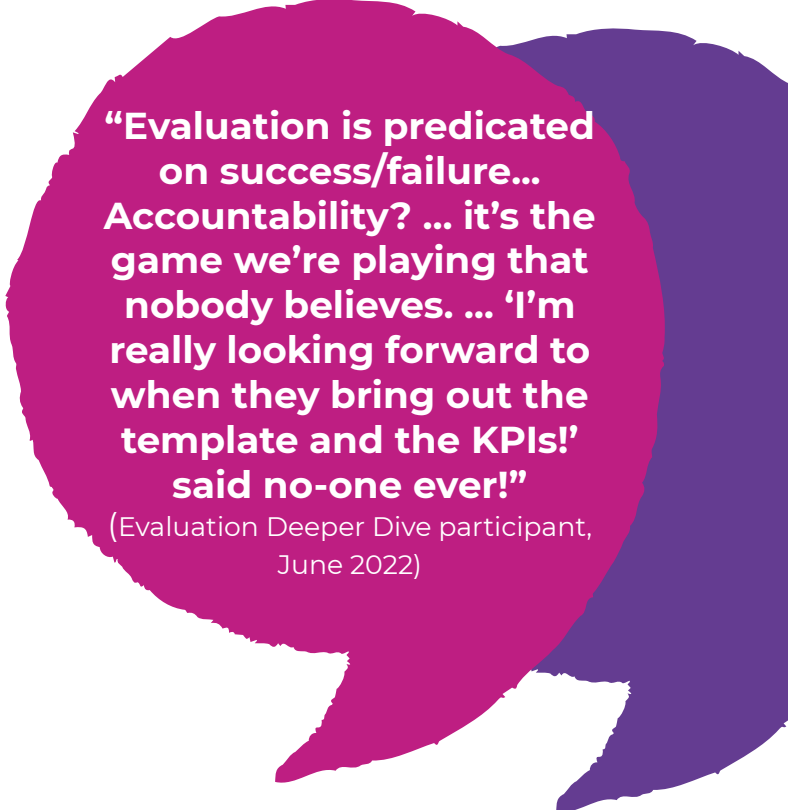
## Inquiry prompts

- How is our understanding and practice of collective leadership changing?
- What surprises me/us about the interactions, practices, and outcomes that I/we see?
- How are we listening to and valuing the voices of all the major interest groups in our work?

There is a need to demonstrate impact to ourselves and others in a meaningful way that honours the ethos and integrity of the collective leadership work, and generates evidence seen as trustworthy by all those with a stake in the work, whether participants, commissioners, or funders or those working or volunteering in a local setting. All parties need to be confident that public money, resources, and people's time are being used well, that any lessons potentially useful for practice are available in a timely way, and that the approach is sufficiently agile to respond to changing circumstances and emergent learning. There is value in more routine conversations about quality that also engage those with ultimate responsibility for accountabilities in discussions about evaluation design and meaningful evidence.

## How to develop genuine accountabilities for learning and action

Our evaluation deeper dive participants were all keen to find ways to support and influence system change, rather than provide 'project by project mitigation' and were thoughtful about how their roles might be contributing to achieving meaningful change.<sup>54</sup> There were frank exchanges around some of the prevailing tensions about evidence and evaluation that can act as barriers to change in complex systems.



**“Evaluation is predicated on success/failure... Accountability? ... it’s the game we’re playing that nobody believes. ... ‘I’m really looking forward to when they bring out the template and the KPIs!’ said no-one ever!”**

(Evaluation Deeper Dive participant, June 2022)

<sup>54</sup> This was undertaken through two workshops on evaluation in June 2022 using the provocations from the 2018 CLfS report to promote a dialogue amongst ten participants. See section 4.

**“So many people are motivated to find certainty – I’m interested in where people are at, and to shift them at the same time, whilst we are being held to account by ways that are not going to go away.”**

(Evaluation Deeper Dive participant, June 2022)

The discussions also explored the possibilities and challenges in seeking to build relational evaluative practice and cultures of collaborative inquiry that didn't see complexity and the desire for simplicity as being in tension; instead, simplicity (in the form of simple, individual steps) might be a response that could 'do justice to complexity without being paralysed by it'.

We conclude with some suggestions for an emergent and more public evaluative practice:

- Such unusual conversations can begin to create a different kind of internal accountability, that makes reflective, evaluative practice integral to the situation of interest, at the time, able to influence the flow and outcomes of the work.
- The provocations do not offer a blueprint, but can help to co-create an approach, as a practical tool to promote dialogue about the shared work in hand.

- Whilst the focus of the conversation might still be on the first-order questions of what the group wants to explore about the world, they encourage some second-order reflection about how any group might want to work together and so offer a way into developing more accountable, integrated, and actionable evaluative practice.
- In this way, they can help groups to explore their own explicit and tacit understandings and negotiate compromises to co-create a bespoke covenant of values, principles, and practices of both how they wish to work together and develop their own ways to judge the impact and learning from their work together.

### Quality in inquiry

Such conversations invariably confront basic questions about the philosophy of science and what can be known. Rather than seeking infallible truths or replicability, the exploration of the value and impact of our collective leadership requires a way of thinking about rigour or quality in inquiry that goes beyond conventional positivist social science notions of objectivity and generalisability.

Drawing on a range of action research approaches, our 2018 paper proposed that quality has multiple dimensions or 'choice points' to guide collaborative actions, that must include concerns for the quality of relationships amongst the primary stakeholders and the extent to which all stakeholders or interest groups are included. Action inquiry arguably raises the standard of evidence expected as it subjects insights and ideas considered worthwhile to trial in 'the hard test of complex, "live" practice', in a form of naturalistic experimentation and review.<sup>55</sup> This brings forth a further quality concern for actionability.

55 This point is attributed to Yoland Wadsworth, 2011 p.67.

---

**A key point of quality is that choices should be made transparent and prospective actions tested out, rather than simply framed as recommendations.**

---

Quality arises where emerging learning is subject to shared scrutiny in relation to the original purposes and any subsequent changes that have evolved throughout the course of the action inquiry. In this way, questions about the quality and impact of collective leadership are an integral, iterative part of action inquiry. Judgements about quality cannot be effectively outsourced to others assumed to be knowledgeable yet dispassionate.

Outcomes remain important, yet given the prevailing funding and commissioning climate, it is unusual for a group to be able to develop their own set of bespoke outcomes and to track their own progress, their shifting thinking and ultimately impact and learning. The evaluation deeper dive identified emerging promising collaborative evaluative practices from outwith Government:

**“We have created a learning framework that allows people to take ownership of their own learning. It’s a way to change the narrative about who they are and what they can do. And it helps me to consider ‘what questions am I asking people?...to explore ‘What are we imagining that we can control?’”**

(Evaluation Deeper Dive participant, June 2022)

Any approach to developing a bespoke learning framework will bring new dimensions to the work of group facilitation that might previously have been seen as the domain of the specialist evaluator, but is part of any approach to make impact and sustainability a more conscious choice.

Figure 7 below outlines a set of quality criteria as routine inquiry questions that could be built into any approach to learning, including the engagement of the reader with this text.

**Figure 7: How do we know we are doing good work?** <sup>56</sup>

- a. How is this work providing me/us with new insights into my/our own individual situation?
- b. How is this work helping me/us to better understand the position and perspectives of others?
- c. How is this work stimulating or identifying areas for change, for me/us?
- d. How is this work facilitating, enabling, or empowering change, for me/us?
- e. What gives me/us confidence that positive change is happening?
  - What has enabled that to happen?
  - What would sustain and extend those changes?
  - What is getting in the way of the changes we seek?
- f. How is our understanding and practice of collective leadership changing?
- g. What surprises me/us about the interactions, practices and outcomes that I/we see?
- h. How are we listening to and valuing the voices of all the major interest groups in our work?

These questions build on the educative and empowerment impacts and go further in anticipating the encouragement and enabling of action, including exploration of the enablers, barriers, and sustainment of change, before looping back into reflection about changes in understandings and practices and questions of fairness and inclusion

that might expose limitations or further needs for inquiry. Used in this way, they build a process of knowledge co-production that is engaged and aware of the context, open, attentive, careful, honest, and reflexive.

<sup>56</sup> These are adapted from the original proposed authenticity criteria for constructivist research. Guba, E.G., Lincoln, Y.S. (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Newbury Park: Sage, pp245-250, and influenced by Nolan, M.R., Hanson, E., Magnusson, L., Andersson, B. (2003) 'Gauging quality in constructivist research: the ÄldreVäst Sjuhärad model revisited.' *Quality in Ageing — Policy, Practice and Research* 4:2, 22-27.

## The challenges of convening, commissioning, and action inquiry in a locality

Putting collective leadership into practice is skilful, facilitative work, with decisions taken in the moment, informed by each person's understanding of the theories, models and practices of collective leadership. In their work CLfS facilitators hold a tension between a stance that asserts positively that 'there's always something that can be done', and an empathetic stance, that acknowledges the context and how difficult it can be to make change, but that perhaps seemingly modest, individual changes are a necessary first step to making wider and enduring changes.

**“Organisations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organisational learning but without it no organisational learning occurs”<sup>57</sup>**

In thinking about the wider opportunities for impact, locality-based work is important.

- It is within localities that the practical implications of complexity and the unintended consequences of discrete interventions are evident and where the realities of relational and systemic leadership must be confronted.
- A local focus also offers important opportunities to build communities of inquiry able to develop and implement their own solutions and has the greatest potential to engage people in communities and who use public services in change efforts.
- A more diffuse, yet valuable impact can also be achieved by using learning networks to spread the ideas and practices of collective leadership, drawing in and supporting those with an interest in taking their own understandings of collective leadership into the specific systems of which they are a part.

The locality model on which the GIRFEC and the Police and Local Government Pilots work were both based is a short to medium term facilitated intervention to support a group process, with facilitators being invited into a 'site' to meet with each group.<sup>58</sup> Such collaborative cross-system work is 'necessarily messy, emergent, and comes with multiple 'owners' and stakeholders.'<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Senge, P (1990) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, p139

<sup>58</sup> The facilitators work in pairs in a locality where they do not have other connections. The GIRFEC programme was face to face and P&LG Pilots was online.

<sup>59</sup> This point is made by Docherty and Russell (2022) op cit. p.50



**“The very way in which the live collaborative work undertaken by each action inquiry group is selected and positioned is a huge part of the learning. In this sense, it can feel a real stretch for participants, as well as other stakeholders, because it challenges the prevailing way in which ‘project’ work is organised, i.e. with one clear ‘sponsor’ and formal lines of accountability.”<sup>60</sup>**

This section draws on insights from deeper dives into locality-based programmes and offers valuable learning about some of the contextual and relational complexities of facilitating collective leadership development.

### **The first steps are fateful**

In both the GIRFEC and the Police and Local Government Pilots, there is a strong sense of wanting change amongst the participants, of how much this work matters and a sense of responsibility to make a difference for the people and communities they are working in.

The action inquiry process begins from the very earliest contact, the ‘first steps are fateful’: the way access is established, and on how participants are engaged early on,

how they understand the purpose of the work, their expectations about what will be asked of them and all the other day to day pressures and issues that they are grappling with, all come into play in some shape or form.

The public service governance and accountability arrangements bring considerable additional difficulties to the convening and contracting stages of this kind of work. This, in turn, influences the scope to build a genuinely shared ‘co-mission’, at the local level, rooted in the practice realities of each site.<sup>61</sup> Such complexities can play out in such ways as tensions within the group process, for example:

- Uncertainty about what the ‘offer’ of external facilitation is for, including a perception of the offer as being about ‘troubleshooting’ or as a training course.
- A desire by the facilitators to enable local stakeholders to engage fully, avoid superficial responses and be honest about the realities they face, in a situation where trust and safety cannot be taken for granted and there are anxieties about being judged by powerful external national players.
- Immediate, ‘more pressing’ and familiar priorities (such as meeting operational or regulatory needs) taking precedence, or becoming the ‘de facto’ purpose, whatever else may have been formally agreed previously as a focus for the work.
- Preconceptions amongst stakeholders about what is appropriate in relation to roles and hierarchical position in particular contexts, that may override the autonomy and professional judgement of facilitators.

<sup>60</sup> Docherty and Russell (2022) Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> A co-mission is a collective agenda and purpose that people can orient around and that also helps them to define their relational accountabilities with each other. Barge, J. K. 2015. ‘Consulting as Collaborative Co-inquiry.’ In *Dialogic Organization Development*, edited by G. Bushe and R. Marshak. Berrett-Koehler, p179

There will always be a need for what might be difficult conversations; different interpretations about what such an intervention is and how it works or preferences for more familiar 'taught' models of learning need to be surfaced and explored. Whilst such challenges are not necessarily unusual where work is complex and involves multiple stakeholders, it does signal a lack of real shared understanding and clarity and creates additional work and potential delay in making progress within the facilitated space. Personnel changes and the absence of an embedded habitual use of the collective leadership practices mean that it is very often necessary to 'keep starting from the beginning' or recontract with new staff.

A feature of such work that relies on the ability to build relationships quickly, is that even over a short period of time, people constantly move jobs or must respond to other more pressing demands, so that continuity of attendance is unrealistic whether face to face or online. Important contextual factors of the locality-based work are:

- People generally attended sessions, despite the extremely difficult circumstances they are working in.
- The participants talk about being overwhelmed, stretched, under a lot of pressure and time-poor, often overriding the immediate demands on their role, in the hope that the programme can ultimately help them to make more of a difference.
- This brings anxiety amongst participants both about what is expected of them and that their decision to use their time in this way will have been worthwhile.

In such conditions, the facilitators express a strong commitment to the approach and of support for each other. The work feels exciting, risky, and challenging. They are often courageous and willing to try something new with a group, even at the earliest stages of their work. They are tenacious and committed to seeing an impact of the work, even if they expect that to be relatively modest in the short time that they have and the wider systemic pressures that people are working under.

The action inquiry groups become a space for reflection and action in which people can be supported by the facilitators and by the other group members to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting. The space and support to do such work is critical, yet it is hard to protect the time too often seen as a luxury within systems that favour immediate reactive responses to issues.

In this kind of work there are not always 'local allies' or sponsors who are 'in the room', who understand the purpose and approach and with whom they might be able to 're-contract' as the work unfolds. This may reflect the lack of active participation in the group process of those who have authorised the work locally who are operating at different levels within the local system. Whatever the reason, any absence of allies able to sponsor the continuing work significantly weakens the scope and sustainability of the work.

## Working with anxiety across systems

As they entered into this work, the facilitators encountered a 'surprising level of anxiety' and variation in the degree to which different stakeholders and interests were able to be comfortable, when they felt uncertain about whether their particular desired outcomes would be achieved. In these circumstances, the facilitators hold a lot of anxiety and tension that they experience across the system. Some of the tensions experienced arise from conflicting, unconscious, or unacknowledged expectations about the purpose and potential impact of the work. The work itself can act as an outlet for anxiety, and a chance to redirect and reenergise people towards action that they can take.

There is very often a lack of shared understanding of the collective leadership approach, how such an intervention may challenge or run counter to prevailing assumptions about both leadership and public management practices, and what the potential benefits for individual participants might be.

Such expectations, tensions and challenges were not always overtly stated or surfaced and might be expressed through the direct or indirect influence of both formal and informal power dynamics, where 'people can be influential without being in the room.' At times when participants have been galvanised into action, perhaps being willing to try something different, they can encounter a block or barrier from within the group.

---

**The use of language to express cynicism or doubt can be a powerful dampener on the willingness to take risks. A simple word might tap into the real desire for change yet be met with a rejoinder that plays into deep fears and anxieties, changing the tone, unearthing deep unease about damage to credibility and career prospects.**

**Any optimism about risk taking and the possibility of change is vulnerable to such expressions of cynicism as dominant narratives assert themselves through such interplay. Yet to hear a different, perhaps 'radical' voice is a different experience and influences how the participants seek to work with their teams.**

---

## Building relationships and opening up conversations

Despite these complexities and challenges, conversations have been opened up and the facilitators feel that 'it is remarkable what we did do in the short time that we had' with action inquiry groups. Modelling reflexivity, the facilitators see themselves as both observers and participants in the system, observing their own experience as well as the group experience and how participants speak and act. They accept that they are part of the work, not detached 'objective' or independent observers. They seek to work with care, being thoughtful about what they say and how they intervene, including any sharing of their own response to what they hear. And they model being 'active inquirers', at times taking what feels like a risk, picking up on something that people have said, and at times pushing back or noticing that a particular dynamic is at play.

This is a rich group process in which there is a lot happening, not all of which is directly observable, nor is it unique to the locality-based work. The facilitators have been able to encourage enhanced listening, greater honesty, and the ability to express more diverse perspectives. They talk about themselves as 'holding a lot' and having to make moment to moment judgements. Energy levels fluctuate and facilitators must exercise their discretion about when and how to intervene as the work unfolds. There are always competing possibilities, and whatever their judgement, the exercise of choices amongst facilitators, for example, whether to sit with the silence, ambiguity or discomfort or offer reassurance, is not always made explicitly, or intentionally brought to the awareness of the group. Over time, it is also noticeable that the participants pick up the facilitation baton and take more of a lead role.

Whilst there is a desire within the group to work differently and to 'be better', this sits in tension with anxieties and vulnerabilities amongst practitioners who fear an implied judgement of past practice, as 'they put their armour on – expecting judgements'. Being able to acknowledge and contain anxiety causes a lot of additional work, where the premium is on the assumed primary task and the pace. The facilitators face the challenge of how to acknowledge good work and still move things on to make them better.

## Facilitating communities of inquiry

Balancing diagnosis and dialogue in systemic facilitation is important to how the purpose of inquiry is understood and how the power and emotional dynamics that are at play in the wider system can be worked with 'in the room'. As facilitators, owning and sharing our own observations to the group can be offered in quite different ways that are significant to how the task of facilitation in system change is viewed. The example below is a familiar part of group dynamics, albeit made even more difficult by being online.



---

**An apparent drop in energy amongst a group might be sign of demotivation, tiredness or an indicator of people wanting time to reflect. An observation may be offered by a facilitator to highlight a pattern or previous experience, perhaps as reassurance.**

**Or observations might simply be noticed, treated as an inquiry by checking out with others, and used to propel dialogue and further inquiry about the implications for action.**

---

Part of the work of Collective Leadership is to create new networks and relationships, to build community in, between and beyond the action inquiry groups. Within action inquiry groups:

- Over time there is a new quality to relationships, greater depth, more openness, and honesty which influences confidence and practical support, even where people did know each other beforehand.
- Growing trust enables participants to show more vulnerability that can sometimes create new understandings and possibilities, rather than inhabiting a professional persona of certainty and detachment.

- Recognition of shared purpose might bring people into a different relationship, where they see each other differently, as allies galvanised around a common issue that they want to do something about.

These dynamics illuminate an important distinction between such true collaboration, and 'partnership working' where it is far easier to only pay lip-service to the ideals. In thinking about the wider connections and spaces outwith the action inquiry group:

- There is an awareness that the relationships that exist beyond the group cannot be discounted or harmed in thinking about how to take actions forward. Participants might use the space to rehearse what a different relationship might be or how it might come about.
- Participants are aware of 'not wanting to stand on people's toes', and that other work that is aligned in some way is already happening and needs to be considered.
- Such existing and sometimes complicated connections can be both a barrier to working differently and an opportunity to encourage wider attempts to do something in a different way. In this way, there can be a discernible 'ripple effect' to wider networks as group members consciously choose to share new practices, using their experience of collective leadership to enhance existing relationships and networks.

There are also new relationships and connections that arise through expanding 'communities of collective leadership practice'; for example, there are new connections across the different localities involved in the Police and Local Government Pilots work at a national level and some have participated in wider international networks, for example, through the Global Campfires.

## Creating brave spaces: developing a group ethic through action

Whilst not conceived as an explicit action inquiry group as in the locality-based work, the Creative Bravery Festival (CBF) organising group operated in similar ways. The participants were all drawn to be part of something different that seemed to meet their interests in creativity and innovation in education. Several have many years of experience of the education sector, including schools, FE and HE and valued being part of a different group of people, whom they informally understood to share interests in change and different models of leadership. Whilst many aspects of the CBF are probably untypical of much of conventional or even collective leadership practice, the group dynamics at play offer an intriguing insight into both what is possible, and the enduring challenges present in any collective leadership practice.

### Making it happen

There is great admiration and respect expressed for the others involved, and a sense of pride and awe that they managed to organise a successful festival, in a pandemic, that reached a global audience. This was well beyond their expectations of what they could achieve. The role of the initial CLfS convenor is acknowledged as essential in creating the enabling conditions, and yet there is no sense of a single leader.

The group experience was widely characterised as a 'safe' or 'brave space', where, for the most part, they felt able to say what they thought and could 'let their guard down'. This was frequently referred to as quite distinct and a welcome change from other education-focused experiences.

There was a strong focus on action, on making something exciting and worthwhile happen: it was important to have a laugh and enjoy the work, and to make sure that something valuable and important came out of those efforts.

The group members clearly flourished in this environment, largely enjoying the openness, uncertainty, and lack of formal hierarchy. The success of the festival played an important part in maintaining the wellbeing of some of the members in a very difficult period.

### There was no stopping us!

There was a strong group ethic expressed by the participants; several people referred to the idea of a 'tribe'. It is notable that this expression refers to a group of people most of whom have only ever met online and there was some trepidation that the group dynamic might be different if they were to meet face to face.

All group members were interested in learning and contributing in some way. Descriptions of the work suggest an energy and quick, at times rushed, pace. There was a focus on action, forged through a strong sense of trust in the convenor and the process, and an ability to live with the uncertainty about ultimate outcomes.

Most of the group members talk of being drawn to the group, and of being there 'as themselves' rather than as a representative or being there because of their position or formal role. Most were attracted by and comfortable with this informal style, but it raised questions for others experiencing this as a lack of clarity as to 'who's in this team and why?' For one, the decision to leave the group was based on a clarifying insight about where they best felt energised; this was seen as a positive decision that left the others in place as the 'right team'.

It is evident that there were shared characteristics and preferred working styles within the group, perhaps to the degree that it was difficult to offer a different perspective. This could be perceived as slowing things down or perhaps, awkwardly 'missing the point'. On reflection, there is acknowledgement that strong conviction about the direction of travel combined with a sense that 'there was no stopping us' has both a positive and shadow side; in practice, it might be difficult to stop or challenge the direction of travel.

The members acknowledged the difficulties and confusion that there was at times, but trust, shared ambitions and humour seems to have brought perspective and an ability to move on, rather than dwell on difficulties. In so far that there was collective agreement about purpose and roles, it seems to have been largely forged in action, rather than through explicit discussion. Chances to speak more openly and explicitly about group process, and ensuring it was always transparent might have been enriching.

**"I would have loved a conversation like this one that we're having now - how do we make this more routine?"**

(CBF participant)

## **Building authentic trust**

There are some useful insights of potential value for the wider practices of collective leadership in public services. An important challenge for collective leadership is the willingness to more deliberately and consistently surface the hidden aspects of group dynamics to work effectively with the dimensions of power and emotions, helping people notice their own group process and maintain conversations about how they want to be together.

Open and routine reflection within any group, about the group experience and process is an uncommon experience but holds out the prospect of creating (and constantly recreating) a mature, 'authentic trust', that recognises the possibility of altered perspectives about your own part in any group endeavour, including a change of heart or disappointment.

**"It's worth taking the time at the start to get clarity on the purpose and contributions, all of our reasons for being there. And to check in, in a few weeks, that you feel this is [still] the place for you."**

(CBF participant)

Being listened to and confidence that you have been heard are key to sharing power and creating genuine collaborative relationships that enable different and honest communication.

Conversations to create a 'group covenant' might be a useful way to align the individual group members to a shared purpose and enable declaration of needs, different perspectives, or preferred styles of working. For example, asking (after Margaret Wheatley):<sup>62</sup>

- What's the work for me to do here?
- Where can I contribute my best self?
- What do I need from the group?

This is offered as an interpretative reflection on the experience that they have shared, at least worthy of wider consideration. The CBF organising group members are very reflective and thoughtful about their experience in the deeper dive interviews. They acknowledge the demands of the work and the risks that they may make assumptions about other preferences and styles of working. Safety is important but what creates safety is different for different people. It is always an important aspect of group dynamics, perhaps especially amongst a vibrant and energised group of creative, brave, and committed people.

## Developing co-inquiry through story gathering and collective sensemaking

InspirAlba were interested to develop their understanding of how a collective leadership approach can flourish 'where resources are scarce, but community is strong', and what learning can be harnessed for wider benefit. Working collaboratively in a deeper dive to explore their case studies deepened and shared understandings of collective leadership and the benefits and pitfalls for rural social enterprise. Using structured reflection was a useful exercise in a context where a focus on action is particularly highly valued. There was a sense that this was a 'different space', in which people were able to be honest and talk about the realities of the work, what they understood about it and how it might be distinct from other approaches. Themes of purpose, voice, pace, self-care, and value of noticing and celebrating small wins all emerged. In terms of a sensemaking process, it showed the value of creating:

**"... genuinely reflective and inquiry spaces which support learning in action and where people can 'tell it like it is'."**

(InspirAlba Workshop participant, July 2021)

62 Collaborative Work with Margaret Wheatley – Collective Leadership for Scotland ([collectiveleadershipscotland.com](http://collectiveleadershipscotland.com))



This process was a practical example of the value of social and peer learning through collective reflection. Reflection was seen as something that is important to do for yourself, if you are asking others to do it, despite the acknowledged difficulties of prioritising it. Reflection both 'before' and 'after' action was identified as valuable, as well as reflecting on what has gone well, and difficulties. The sensemaking process was experienced as a 'spreadable practice', a way of using the case studies as learning materials to prompt curiosity and a conversation that was motivational and able to enrich understanding of the theory and practice of collective leadership. The second workshop offered similar insights, whilst the value was less about organisational learning and more on the value for the participants of seeing the similarities between different case studies for social enterprises across Scotland. Again, it was acknowledged that reflection is often not prioritised, but that there is scope to do more online 'get togethers' in which there is some structure or framing of reflection and peer learning.



# 8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS 74

---


## Overview of impact

**Collective leadership feels timely and important in an uncertain, fast changing, and challenging world. This report comes at this heightened moment with potential and appetite for renewal, transition and innovation in public services and communities. The opportunities and challenges of true collaboration-in-practice, in the absence of blueprints, mean that it has never been more necessary to change ways of working and foreground learning.**

The conclusions here are likely to have wider resonance beyond interests in the CLfS programmes. As outcomes remain important, and time and resources are scarcer than ever, the approach of collective leadership makes impact a shared, conscious, and actionable choice, where expectations and contributions are co-created through dialogue and by design, not assuming it will happen because we have good intentions.

The continuing scale of interest in the CLfS range of offerings and the involvement of people from a variety of public service and voluntary sector organisations is notable, particularly given that most participants are working within organisational and cultural operational and reporting environments that continue to reinforce hierarchical models of leadership. Their motivations for taking part are deepened and brought into sharper focus by the pandemic, with an added interest in developing skills in online facilitation.

People come away from CLfS programmes with 'action confidence': a sense of how they want to proceed, fresh thinking and ideas for what they might do next, the courage and energy to try something different and lots of practical tools to help them to do so.



**Whatever the constraints and pressures, there are valuable, 'apparently small' things that can be done differently.**

Where there are extended opportunities to test out this learning in practice through action inquiry, there are important signs of changes in thinking and practice. There is a growing appreciation of the potential potency of collective power and ways to find simple steps that acknowledge complexity without being paralysed by it.

The unfolding impact of collective leadership is evident as:

### Action confidence

- Changes in the ways people see and think about themselves and their role as a leader, changes in the way they interact with, perceive, pay attention to others and changes in action that they take as individuals and with others, towards that which is more inclusive and collaborative.

## Releasing collective resources

- A recurring theme is the importance of how participants orientate to others to make the most of the existing resource of collective knowledge and skills, rather than thinking that they must have all the answers or that it is their role to fix everything. There are changes in action that participants take as individuals and with others. These are essential shifts in thinking and practice.
- Seemingly simple or modest individual or collective actions can change the focus of attention and intention, triggering different choices by making visible new options and potentially initiating a cascade of further changes and impacts in the wider system.

## Moving to implementation: the skills and practices that help

- The key skills and spreadable practices of action inquiry are the 'how' of collective leadership, crucial to shift the way that people work together to enact change. This is a 'second-order practice shift' that promotes deeper levels of reflection and exploration about the primary (first-order) issue or problem that is the shared focus, going deeper into how to do something differently, rather than necessarily doing something different.
- Programme participants and facilitators have rich experience of how to create open and convivial spaces for learning, including the use of reflective tools such as journaling, listening skills, the use of generative questions, story gathering and collective sensemaking.
- The value, importance and purpose of such practices become plainer as people experience them for themselves and can be enriching, enabling the airing of different perspectives, checking the pace and direction, and helping to develop a more grounded and authentic trust.
- Some participants already have useful skills that have been dormant; the CLfS experience may remind people of what they already know and the chance to try something out in a relatively 'safe space' can make the practice of such skills outwith the group seem more possible.
- The CLfS provocative propositions can support conversations that explore understandings, negotiate compromises, and co-create a bespoke covenant of values, principles, and practices for collaboration. In this way groups can devise their own meaningful ways to evaluate their learning and establish their pathway to impact.

## Creating impact together through action inquiry

- The Police and Local Government Pilots, where participants have been part of on-going locality-based action inquiry groups, demonstrate that the further impact anticipated in the separate SIPR evaluation is already beginning to unfold.
- The potential for wider and deeper impact of these kinds of shifts in thinking and practice are most clearly seen in locality-based work, with extended opportunities to build communities of inquiry able to develop and implement their own solutions.
- It is in such locality or place-based work that the practical implications of complexity and the unintended consequences of discrete interventions are evident and where the realities of relational and systemic leadership must be confronted. This approach also has the greatest potential to engage local people in communities and those who use public services in change efforts.

- There is also valuable national and international impact that can be achieved through developing learning networks to support those with an interest in taking their own understandings of collective leadership into the specific systems of which they are a part.
- Thinking about the future, continuing to offer a range of programmes is important to recognise and meet different needs and possibilities. Through such a range of offerings, the CLfS programmes can contribute to building a critical mass for system change and help to sustain the ambitions of the Christie Commission and the delivery of the National Outcomes for Scotland.
- People generally attended sessions, despite the extremely difficult circumstances they are working in. The participants talk about being overwhelmed, stretched, under a lot of pressure and time-poor, often overriding the immediate demands on their role, hoping that the programme can ultimately help them to make more of a difference. This brings anxiety for participants about what is expected of them and that their decision to use their time in this way will have been worthwhile.
- In these circumstances, collective leadership relies on the ability to build relationships quickly. The space and support to do such work is critical, yet it is hard to protect the time too often seen as a luxury within systems that favour immediate reactive responses to issues.

## Seeking systemic change

Participants in the learning network programmes are often mostly seeking connection and time for reflection and refreshment. Participants in locality-based collective leadership programmes have the expectation that the programme will ultimately help them to make more of a difference. For most, participation is invariably despite the extremely difficult circumstances people are working in, responding to crises and the immediate manifestations of enduring and complex social issues that are the context in which they work.

This is the situation in which expectations and claims about impact must be tempered. For any systemic change to be enduring and effective, there needs to be exploration of the embedded cultural values and beliefs, whether formally expressed or otherwise, that continue to reproduce unwanted patterns in complex systems and that act as barriers to change. Change in leadership practice is not straightforward and there is learning here about the enablers and barriers to systems change. The barriers include:

- Working differently is not easy, nor is it sufficient to secure the transformational changes that are sought. The space and support to do such work is critical, yet it is hard to protect the time too often seen as a luxury within systems that favour immediate reactive responses to issues.
- Barriers to systemic change include attitudes to active involvement in learning at all levels and positions, lack of time or interest in refreshing theoretical groundings and a reluctance to talk openly about group process.
- The commissioning, governance, and accountability arrangements commonly in place around public service leadership development initiatives can bring considerable additional difficulties and reporting requirements to the earliest stages of locality-based work.
- Prevailing tensions about evidence and approaches to evaluation can also act as barriers to change in complex systems.

Whilst these challenges are not necessarily unusual where work is complex and involves multiple stakeholders, the need to develop clarity and a real shared understanding can add to the difficulties of building a genuinely shared 'co-mission' rooted in the practice realities of each site. It is important to surface and explore whatever assumptions might be being made within the group; for example, the idea that the external facilitation offer is about audit or troubleshooting and preferences for more familiar didactic forms of learning.

### **Action inquiry as a deliberate learning strategy**

A greater understanding of complexity demands that we shift our approach to the evaluation of relational and systemic practices, judged by the degree to which they offer help to determine 'wise actions' in real-life situations. The changes at individual or locality level that we might see are perhaps more modest and look different to the ultimate desired outcomes.

This perspective doesn't negate legitimate interest in shifting outcomes at scale or developing well-grounded understandings of 'what works' at a more strategic level. This is because change at population level can only be empirically measured over a longer timeframe. However, it does shift the immediate focus for current action to the local context, in the here and now; and it is perhaps only in hindsight that we will really understand 'what worked'. Far from shying away from attempts to create and demonstrate change, this approach seeks to make impact a shared, conscious, and actionable choice.

### **This shifts our search for evidence to immediate questions about what is helpful, to ask what (perhaps small) changes in thinking and practice might yet be significant in moving towards those outcomes?**

The evaluative processes and skills of inquiry, including working with data of all kinds, story sharing, listening, reflecting and collective sensemaking need to be cultivated deliberately to blend more systemic and more systematic approaches into leadership practices as a deliberate, embedded learning strategy. Extending understanding of the use of narrative data or stories and collective sensemaking is part of the task of building cultures that support new forms of collaborative inquiry and systemic action research.

Such spreadable approaches to shared analysis can create a genuine, shared, internal accountability so that reflective, evaluative practice is integral to the situation of interest, at the time, able to influence the flow and outcomes of the work. Building inquiry into living systems in this way significantly strengthens the credibility, trustworthiness, and sustainability of emerging learning.

- Our own work and our participation in other networks across the UK and internationally signal a wider recognition of the limitations of previous approaches to effect learning and change and emerging new approaches and practices, including evaluative practices.
- More integrative and adaptive approaches to learning and change are now much more visible across public service systems and philanthropic grant-making trusts.

We see this moment as one of transition and innovation, which may pave the way for the emergence of a radically different approach, perhaps where rigour will be thought of as arising from many ways of knowing and the absence of certainty or ‘over confidence’ in knowing.<sup>63</sup>

For now, our conclusion is that more open and honest conversations about our mutual understandings and expectations of learning and change are the route to collaborative inquiry, to build a more relational way of working together and a different kind of accountability for learning and change, as a form of leadership development.

The vision for this work remains strong amongst the programme participants, CLfS facilitators and those that have taken part in the deeper dives. There is recognition of the need for more ‘reflective spaces’ in which to ‘think about thinking’ where there is no formal ‘agenda’ and where this time is seen as valuable and productive. This is necessary at individual, local and national levels to help all parties to become more aware of their own part in enabling or impeding change and create space for change to happen. There is confidence that it is individual modest steps, taken together with others, that will ultimately shift a system.

## Implications for convening and facilitation

This report deepens understanding of some of the challenges of convening legitimacy, the variable scope for deeper impact through building reflective and relational leadership practices, particularly through the development and coordination of collective, social learning capabilities amongst a specific work group or team. It also outlines practices that might strengthen the action inquiry approach as a deliberate learning strategy, to support collective sensemaking and increase the probability of the success and sustainability of their work.

The evaluative processes and skills of listening, reflecting and sensemaking need to be cultivated deliberately to blend more systemic and more systematic approaches into our practices. In part this demands a shift of emphasis from the ‘role’ of facilitators to the co-created ‘process’ of facilitation, through practices that encourage the group to pay more attention to group process and how it is created.

**“For us, in facilitating, we are not looking for recognition of a job well done, but in not highlighting what it is we do, we pave the way for it not being done well.”**

(CLfS facilitators)

<sup>63</sup> This is an important issue and there are some useful references in the 2018 report. The CLfS Illuminating Leadership Festival in March 2022 held a session dedicated to “Not Knowing” to provide a space for questioning, reflecting, bringing in different perspectives, noticing and seeing what emerges. This podcast was shared in advance of that event and provides an accessible way into aspects of these debates. <https://www.rte.ie/radio/lyricfm/culture-file-weekly/programmes/2022/0115/1273918-culture-file-weekly-saturday-15-january-2022/>

This comparative lack of attention limits opportunities for others to fully understand how progress was made and can be sustained. To take it forward, there is a sense that it is important to think about ways to help people at all levels really understand the work, what it asks of everyone involved and how that might need people to work differently.

To ensure the collective leadership offer is convened as an opportunity for system change, co-missioning and facilitation practices need to give equal weight to content and process, to be more explicit about ways of working so that they continue once the facilitators are no longer present, perhaps deploying local sponsors as co-facilitators and ensuring strategic sponsorship is in place. Arguably, the real 'contract' will always need to be made with the people 'in the room' and re-contracted as the work proceeds. This might be presented as a more robust and assertive desire to create a bespoke covenant amongst the group as to, firstly, what they want to work on (first order), which may contrast with what the commissioning partners have envisaged, and secondly, how they want to work together (second order) to ensure time is well used on everyone's part.

Such subtle but important shifts in facilitation practice may help to surface the 'hidden aspects of facilitation' more consistently, enabling deeper work with the dimensions of power and emotions, helping people notice their own group process and continue to have conversations about how they want to be together. The CLfS paired facilitation model could offer opportunities for each facilitator to take on a slightly different role in the group. Valuable strategies include:

- Deepening the attention to language, how our use of language might position people and the inter-play between language, power, and emotion.

- Adopting a more intentional co-facilitation strategy where the explicit purpose is to build facilitation skills and capabilities amongst local participants, likely to remain in the setting for a longer time.
- Developing stronger local 'sponsorship' or ownership that would enable continuing and emergent change, taking any learning about enablers and blockers to relevant partners, what might be termed 'connecting the system to more of itself'.
- There might also be a sponsor role at a national level, through the Steering Group working as a sponsor for the learning that emerges, rather than a client expecting deliverables.

It is already well known that this work is often complex, messy, unpredictable, and difficult to achieve and that the ability to establish relations with an appropriate grouping of people in a local site cannot be taken for granted. In this context, CLfS has articulated action inquiry as a model of 'practising change together' which relies on co-creation at every stage. This must be built on solid internal and external contracting and work to create open dialogue about issues of power. This demanding work relies on all parties, including those within Government, to commit to develop a new type of learning partnership, built on a different orientation to participation as active involvement in personal, professional and leadership development.

# ANNEX: DETAILS OF PROGRAMMES

80

Name of Session or Development Offer*	Dates	Number of sessions	Bookings**
<b>General programmes/introductions</b>			
Collective Leadership Workshop - Online	From June 2020	6	128
Introduction to Collective Leadership (New outline)	From January 2021	14	402
Facilitating & Hosting Conversations Online	From April 2021	4	126
Collective Leadership Practice: Where to Start	From July 2021	7	165
Place-Based Systems Leadership Workshop - Deepening our Connections	January 2022	1	14
Place-Based Systems Leadership - Workshop	February 2022	1	61
<b>Development of specialist skills and practices</b>			
Mindfulness for Renewal	Sept-Nov 2020	7	41
Hosted Guided Journaling Sessions	Sept 2020-March 2021	23	291
CLfS Community Event	October 2020	1	46
Dialogue Walk	October 2020	1	13
CL for Renewal Base Camp Group	Oct-Nov 2020	3	16
Leadership Now and for the Generations ahead	Oct-Nov 2020	3	119
Creative & Experimental Workshops	Oct and Dec 2020	2	38
Leadership & Facilitation Programme	From Nov 2020	7	83
Images for Renewal	Nov 2020	1	3
Inner Work for Creative Bravery	Nov 2020-April 2021	6	164
Life-Affirming Leadership: Developing the Skills of Insight and Compassion	October 2021	1	53
The Open Space for Breaking the Mould with Young People	December 2021	1	50



<b>Festivals</b>			
Sparkfest 2020	October 2020 (2 days)	6 events	108
Fire Starter Festival 2021	February 2021 (5 days)	68 events	1661
Leadership Campfires Festival 2021	September 2021 (2 days)	32 events	1072
Illuminating Leadership Festival 2022	Feb/March 2022 (4 days)	43 events	Over 2,000
<b>Place-based collective leadership</b>			
Police and Local Government Pilots (3 areas)	March 2021-January 2022	various	40
<b>Other</b>			
How can we raise each other up? (International colloquium)	Jan 2021 (2 days)	2	158

\*Some of these programmes are intended to be small to enable focused group discussion and reflection. Others lend themselves to a mix of larger sessions and small group discussions in break out rooms.

\*\*Note these are bookings which demonstrate interest. All programmes are online, and although this is variable, perhaps about 30-40% of those booked do not attend on the day, particularly in the larger events and programmes.