



Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times

Source Paper 2: The views of systems leaders

Resource

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Systems leaders

This paper is based on interviews with the following systems leaders: we are very grateful to them for their participation. The list below shows their roles at the time when we interviewed them:

Maggie Atkinson, The Children's Commissioner for England, Office of the Children's Commissioner

Gillian Beasley, Chief Executive, Peterborough City Council

Natasha Bishopp, Head of Family Recovery for the Tri-borough, Westminster City Council

Eleanor Brazil, Director of Children's Services, Stoke on Trent City Council

John Drew, Chief Executive, Youth Justice Board

Stuart Gallimore, Director of Children's Services, West Sussex County Council

John Goldup, Deputy Chief Inspector and National Director, Social Care, Ofsted

Janet Grauberg, UK Director of Strategy, Barnardo's

Kevin Hall, Assistant Director, Adults, Children and Education, City of York Council

Nikki Heffernan, Operations Manager, Adults, Children and Family Services, Kingston upon Hull City Council

Janette Karlins, Director of Children, Young People and Learning, Bracknell Forest Council

Robert McCulloch-Graham, Troubled Families Team, Department for Communities and Local Government

Deborah McKenzie, Programme Director, Leadership Development for Public Health and Social Care, Department of Health

Alison Murphy, Interim Division Director, Children and Families' Services, Waltham Forest Council

Jo Olsson, Director of People Services, Thurrock Council

Terry Parkin, Executive Director – Education and Care Services, London Borough of Bromley

Sarah Pickup, President of ADAS, Director of Health and Community Services, Hertfordshire County Council

Martin Reeves, Chief Executive, Coventry City Council

Nigel Richardson, Director of Children's Services, Leeds City Council

Eric Robinson, Deputy Chief Executive, Staffordshire County Council

Mark Rogers, Chief Executive, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

Eleanor Schooling, Corporate Director, Children's Services, Islington Council

Richard Selwyn, Head of Commissioning for Children and Families, Harrow Council

Debbie Sorkin, Acting Chief Executive, National Skills Academy for Social Care

Claire Tickell, Chief Executive, Action for Children

Irwin Turbitt, Senior Fellow, Warwick University

Peter Wanless, Chief Executive, Big Lottery Fund

Tessa Webb, Chief Executive, Hertfordshire Probation Trust

John Wilderspin, National Director for Health and Wellbeing Board Implementation, Department of Health

Executive summary

Introduction and methodology (Section 1)

This is one of a suite of papers from The Colebrooke Centre and Cass Business School's research on systems leadership, commissioned by the Virtual Staff College. It reports the views of 29 interviews with strategic leaders, operating in public service systems that include, or connect with, children's services. The objectives were to explore:

- what systems leadership is and why it is important
- what it involves in practice
- the enabling and inhibiting conditions
- how systems leadership links with improved outcomes
- and how capacity for systems leadership can be developed.

What is systems leadership and why is it important? (Section 2)

The study interviewees see systems leadership as fundamentally about organisations or people coming together to deliver common outcomes that can only be achieved by working across systems. It involves bringing together capacity across systems to achieve a shared vision, purpose or set of objectives, which are underpinned by common values and principles. Despite these shared values and principles, systems leadership often operates in areas that are conflictual and contested and where contradictions, ambiguities and tension need to be exposed, analysed and used creatively to move forward.

The need for systems leadership stems from the interdependency of individual organisations and parts of the system. No decisions are isolated in their consequences and systems leadership involves alignment of, and attention to, the spaces between systems. It requires people to see themselves as responsible for the whole system, not just for their part of it.

The key operating mode of systems leadership is influence. Authority is informal rather than formal, based on 'covenant' rather than contract, and relationships are fundamental to this. Relationships are brokered by reference to the opportunity for shared outcomes and involve honesty, trust, respect, transparency and credibility – but also understanding of each other's organisational contexts and pressures. They are the foundation for taking risks, managing ambiguity and uncertainty, disagreement, challenge and conflict – they are 'for something', not an end in themselves.

A fundamental part of the working model of systems leadership is the need at times to cede individual or organisational gains, in the interests of collective gains – to be 'magnanimous'. Individual or organisational power, influence, targets or resources may be foregone in the interests of increasing collective power and achievement, and this requires courage, risk-taking and a positive authorising environment.

Systems leadership is seen as emerging from the complexity of human systems, from 'wicked issues' that cannot be addressed in a scientific-rational way, and from a need to simplify complex systems around the perspective and needs of service users. Financial constraint contributes to the 'burning platform', where change is an absolute imperative and transformational thinking is required – no organisation can achieve its own goals, let alone collective goals, through its direct resources alone. Structural change is also a helpful context because it disturbs systems and creates the opportunity for radical change. But these conditions also put pressure on systems leadership, and the scope even for systems leadership to manage them successfully is finite.

Systems leadership is described largely in terms of 'place', or geographically bounded populations. The more manageable scale of local-level systems, the ability to focus on collective outcomes at the local level and the direct democratic accountability of local government, are all seen as conducive to the development and practice of systems leadership.

Systems leadership is not a panacea and not something to be objectified. It relies on having managed systems, and aspects of technical management skills are relevant. It has much in common with organisational leadership, but with more emphasis on informal bases of authority, collective aims, and adapting to complex contexts. It links strongly with both adaptive leadership¹ (many of the core concepts of adaptive leadership were used in the interviews) and with sector-led improvement (which for some interviewees was a central aspect of systems leadership). It also has much in common with collaboration and partnership, but with differences in emphasis, scale and purpose: leaders represent systems not organisations, they have goals which are genuinely joint not simply aligned, and withdrawing in the face of conflict or obstacles is not an option.

What is involved in systems leadership in practice? (Section 3)

A strong theme in the interviews is that systems leadership does not involve behaviours that are absolutely distinctive. Rather, it is the mind set, purpose and values that drive behaviours and give particular significance to them that are the distinctive features of systems leadership. Nevertheless, several ways of working were seen as especially aligned with and key to systems leadership. Systems leadership involves recognising and embracing uncertainty and complexity and making these conditions acceptable to others. Complexity can be simplified to some extent, by shaping systems around a single high level objective, such as improving outcomes for a particular population group. But complexity and ambiguity are inherent in systems, and systems leadership involves recognising and embracing these conditions and making them tolerable to others rather than over-simplifying. Systems leadership requires mutual understanding and active support: actively helping others to negotiate organisational and other pressures or barriers, seeing the world through another's eyes and using this knowledge strategically and tactically.

Hearing diverse voices is important, recognising that power lies not only in the obvious places and that creative challenge comes from people with different perspectives and skills. Because it is about aligning systems around service users, putting them at the centre through co-production and other approaches is important. Complex problems require non-obvious, non-linear solutions which, in turn, require risk taking, risk seeking, innovation and experimentation.

The hero leader model is replaced with a different type of charismatic leader, one who is values led, able to cede power and allow others to lead. Being able to step outside individual organisational identities and objectives is important. Systems leadership involves leadership that is distributed, both to other organisations and to other levels within the organisation. Staff are expected to use systems leadership approaches proactively in their own work, and this involves risk, a strong organisational vision, and approaches to performance management that provide incentive and reward.

Systems leadership requires hard intellectual graft: analytical skills, intellectual rigour, and the use of data and intelligence. It also requires people who are emotionally intelligent, are reflective and reflexive, flexible and adaptable, and resilient. Integrity and authenticity are important, but so too is a certain ruthlessness. Although systems leadership can accommodate different leadership styles, not all leaders understand it or are able to apply it. The scope for systems leadership is therefore influenced to some extent by the mind set and operating modes of other local leaders.

1 Heifetz R., Grashow A. and Linsky M (2009) The practice of adaptive leadership Boston: Harvard Business Press.

What are the enabling and inhibiting conditions for systems leadership? (Section 4)

Systems leadership is adaptive. It responds to, but is not hampered by, surrounding conditions. Systems leaders do not wait for the planets to fall into alignment: they lead through and compensate for conditions that might be less than ideal. However, the interviews identified enabling and inhibiting conditions at organisational, local political and national political levels.

Organisationally, a permissive environment for systems leaders is shaped by the quality and approach of the organisational leader; a culture that values learning, innovation and risk-taking; structures that allow integrated and joint working; approaches to staff selection and performance review that provide incentives and rewards to systems leaders, and a culture of being close to service users. An authorising environment from local politicians is an important enabler and local political leaders are themselves systems leaders, with influence and perspectives that are key.

Central government was generally seen as less directly relevant to local systems leadership. Its ability to create frameworks or incentives for systems leadership was valued and having a systems based policy construction of social problems was an important enabler. But, thereafter, the most important support government can provide is to leave space for local systems leadership. The vertical rather than horizontal integration of central government, and the flow of funding from central government to individual local organisations rather than to the place, were seen as a potential inhibitors. There was also some discussion of the need for a systems based approach to regulation and inspection, one that values risk and innovation and is less focused on compliance.

How does systems leadership link with improved outcomes? (Section 5)

Outcomes were absolutely embedded in the concept of systems leadership, but thoughts about how systems leadership actually improves outcomes were sometimes surprisingly undeveloped. The most clearly stated influence is that having a common purpose or set of goals will galvanise resources, break down organisational silos, and bring a focus and determination which will lead to more effective work. The potential of systems leadership also lies in reframing social problems in a creative and constructive way, ensuring engagement of the necessary stakeholders, more rational and effective service alignment and making better use of resources.

How can capacity for systems leadership be developed? (Section 6)

Because systems leadership lies to some degree in particular attributes, characteristics and personality types, there were seen to be limits to what can be trained. Furthermore, development which is based on competency and technical skills was not considered to be the way forward. Rather that the mind sets or ways of thinking that systems leadership involves can be nurtured. Experiential learning was seen as vital: opportunities to work in other parts of the systems (through secondments, shadowing, job swaps and so on), and to work with, and learn from, other systems leaders both through daily work and through mentoring, coaching and action learning sets. People talked about having developed personally through experimentation and reflection. Exposure to theory through reading and in formal learning settings, and opportunities to draw it into experiential learning, were important. Several respondents talked very positively about formal peer group development programmes, as long as it cuts across professional groups.

The interviews were exceptionally rich and reflective. Whilst for some of those we spoke to the concept of systems leadership was familiar, for others the interview was an opportunity to identify, 'name' and articulate ideas about something that had not yet, for them, been identified as a particular style of leadership.

1. Introduction and methodology

This is one of a suite of papers from The Colebrooke Centre and Cass Business School's research on systems leadership commissioned by the Virtual Staff College. It is intended to be read alongside other papers, particularly the [Synthesis Paper](#)². The project explores the meaning and practice of systems leadership and how it is emerging in both UK and international contexts. The programme of work also includes a review of the published national and international literature on systems leadership ([Source Paper 1: Literature review](#)³), and three case studies of leadership in specific UK-based multi-agency settings that have been characterised by whole systems working ([Source Paper 3: UK leadership scenarios](#)⁴). The project is further complemented by four small scale international studies seeking insight into systems leadership in other jurisdictions (Source Papers 4a-d).

This paper reports on a component of the project which involved in-depth interviews with strategic leaders operating in public service systems that include or connect with children's services. The objectives of the interviews were to explore the concepts and practice of systems leadership, addressing five key questions around which the paper is organised:

- **What is systems leadership and why is it important?** We draw out what emerged in the interviews as key constructs within systems leadership, highlight the environment to which it is a response, and discuss how it connects with other leadership concepts
- **What is involved in systems leadership in practice?** Here we look at the behaviours, skills and qualities that make up systems leadership in practice
- **What are the enabling and inhibiting conditions for systems leadership?** We describe the authorising environment for systems leadership particularly at organisational and political levels
- **How does systems leadership link with improved outcomes?** We highlight the range of ways in which systems leadership is considered to improve outcomes for service users
- **How can capacity for systems leadership be developed?** We draw on systems leaders own learning experiences and views about how capacity can be developed more generally.

The aim was to include leaders working at different levels and in different sectors and roles, within seven groups:

- Local authority Chief Executives
- Directors of children's and adult services (DCASs) – also known as 'twin hatters'
- Directors of children's services (DCSs) including those with both social care and education backgrounds
- Staff working in second and third tier posts (such as Assistant Director and Head of Service) in local authorities: within children's services, in central roles such as policy and commissioning and in strongly multi-agency areas of work such as the Troubled Families initiative
- Third sector leaders working in child and family services
- Leaders in other public sectors: covering health, adult social care, probation, youth justice, and police

2 Gbate, Lewis and Welbourn (2013) Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times. [Synthesis Paper](#)

3 Welbourn, Gbate and Lewis (2013) Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times. [Source Paper 1: Literature review](#)

4 Lewis, Welbourn and Gbate (2013) Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times. [Source Paper 3: UK leadership scenarios](#)

- Leaders in wider stakeholder organisations: central government, Ofsted, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS).

A sample profile was developed and potential participants were nominated by the Virtual Staff College, the Research Advisory Group, the Co-Production Group and the research team. The intention was to interview people who are viewed by their peers as systems leaders and who are likely to recognise the concept and to have particular insight to share. The study was not intended to map the diversity of understanding of systems leadership among public sector leaders more generally – its focus was specifically on people who had been identified as systems leaders.

Participant category	Sample
Local Authority Chief Executives	3
DCASs	3
DCSs	5
LA second/third tier leaders	5
Third sector leaders	3
Other public sector leaders	6
Stakeholders	4
Total	29

A total of 29 interviews were carried out between November 2012 and February 2013. Interviews were conducted face-to-face (with one telephone interview), digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, and generally lasted 60-90 minutes. They followed a topic guide which identified the key themes for coverage, but the order and actual questions were adapted flexibly to each interviewee. The key themes in the topic guide were:

- definitions and key concepts
- systems leadership in practice
- changing context of systems leadership
- permitting and inhibiting conditions
- distributed leadership
- linkages with outcomes
- developing capacity for systems leadership.

Analysis was undertaken using the ‘Framework’ method of thematic summary of qualitative data⁵. This involved drawing up a series of thematic charts and summarising data from each interview within relevant themes. Verbatim quotations from interviews are included in this paper in italicised paragraphs and individual phrases used in interviews are included in colour and italicised in the text.

5 Ritchie J, Spencer L, O’Connor W, Barnard M and Morrell G (forthcoming) ‘Analysis in practice’ in (eds) Ritchie J, Lewis J, McNaughton Nicolls C and Ormston R *Qualitative Research Practice: a guide for social science students and researchers* 2nd edition London: Sage

2. What is systems leadership and why is it important?

2.1 What is systems leadership?

For the people we interviewed, the fundamentals of systems leadership are organisations or people coming together to deliver common outcomes that can only be achieved by working across systems.

“For me when I’m thinking about systems leadership I’m thinking about bringing together institutional leaders and institutions and kind of small systems to achieve objectives that can only be achieved by systems coming together.” - DCAS

Systems leadership is fundamentally about **a shared objective or set of objectives or outcomes** which can only be achieved collectively. This is also described as ‘a compelling vision’, ‘a common purpose’, ‘a moral purpose’, ‘a moral imperative’ and ‘a shared narrative’ about objectives and intentions. This sense of the purpose of systems leadership is key to understanding the concept. It means that the focus is on ‘why’ in the sense of purpose, vision, values and principles, and on ‘what’ in the sense of intended results, rather than on ‘how’ in the sense of the detail of delivery. Vision and values remain constant and, as we discuss below, become the mechanism by which conflict and uncertainty are managed. The detail of delivery on the other hand is necessarily in flux and subject to renegotiation, and is delegated.

“Things have to be brokered, I think, in terms of a consensus about outcomes There will always be conversations about the means to the end. But it would be very hard to find anywhere in the country who said they don’t want children to be safe; they don’t want kids to be healthy; they don’t want kids to do well. So, I think the outcome, the condition of well-being, is easily brokered. The means to the end, then, may well be different [in different parts of the city and for different partners] and ultimately, different personalities who create different relationships, who have different conversations, which is key. [W]e’ve ended up, in my view, focusing too much on what we do and how we do it, as opposed to why we do it. If you can get back to the why, that helps you create the right what and how.” - DCS

Systems leadership is then about bringing together the capacity (money, people, talent, expertise, creativity) required across systems to achieve these outcomes. Systems leadership becomes relevant when the outcome can only be achieved through collective action, and the outcomes or visions described in the interviews were sometimes framed at a high and abstract level: ‘to make [x] the best city in the UK’; ‘to add years to life and life to years’, although systems leadership was also discussed with reference to more specific aims and objectives, such as reducing hospital admissions of older people arising from falls; reducing house burglaries or improving child protection. However they are framed, a collective ambition secures collective ‘buy-in’ and ensures the objective is jointly owned, and the sense of shared purpose was described as ‘neutralising’ organisational agendas. A guiding principle or set of values are seen as key to building a coalition, helping to overcome resistance, keeping everyone on course, and is used in managing conflict, risk and stress.

Interviewees talked about local systems leaders having a consistent narrative about these high level objectives and giving them relentless focus and repetition, so that the Chief Executives of all local agencies would describe the same central objective and priority. Occasionally this was described in terms that came close to the idea of a social movement, although this term was not used: in one case for example, systems leadership played out in a strong focus on the city with a brand and a Twitter hash tag used by all the partners.

The overarching goal then needs to be translated systematically through all the relevant organisations. For example, one DCS described a structure in which the goal to be the best city in the UK was translated in children's services into being the best city for children, a set of broad outcomes for children, and a set of more specific priorities on which all local teams are expected to focus.

Underneath this idea of high level collective ambitions, it was sometimes acknowledged that systems leadership nevertheless operates in areas that are conflictual and contested, and that this conflict needs to be exposed. Indeed one participant questioned whether it was ever possible to have uncontested shared value in the public sector and contrasted this with the private sector where the value proposition⁶, usually framed around financial outcomes, is clearer and uncontested. If the contradictions, ambiguities and tensions in the public value proposition have not been exposed and analysed, it becomes too easy to measure activity rather than outcomes and to value relationship for themselves rather than for what they achieve.

"And that purpose can only be achieved by bringing things together. And the system will be multi-agency and it will include diverse understandings of the nature of the problem and the nature of the solutions. So, it's kind of inherently conflictual or contested ... and for me it's about you don't know the answer at the start, but you've got a view about how you're going to think about it." - DCAS

The need for systems leadership stems in part from recognition of the interdependency and connectivity between individual organisations. The decisions made in one part of the system will affect other parts of the system, no decisions are isolated in their consequences and decisions need to be made at a systems level through collaboration.

"I see ... the systems leadership idea being ... either a chain of interconnected links or a set of Venn diagrams that overlap significantly. For me, systems leadership is about a palpable understanding that an action, a decision, a behaviour in one link of the chain, or one bit of the Venn diagram that overlaps, only makes sense when it's related to a number of other decisions that have been made, either at the same time, or in the same space. So ... no decision ... is isolated. It has intended and unintended consequences on the rest of the place or the rest of the system So, the systems thinking has to be what affects change, ultimately, for the outcome you're trying to do, by working in a much more collaborative, consensual way, rather than a whole series of actions which are individually led or organisation led, rather than across a wider place or a wider system." - LA Chief Executive

These inter-connections mean that outcomes can only be achieved by harnessing capacity, and aligning priorities and activities, across organisations. Systems leadership, therefore, means paying attention to inter-dependencies and to 'the spaces between systems'.

"I imagine it like a series of planets. So you've got a planet that is social care, you've got a planet that's adult services, you've got a planet that's the NHS, you've got a planet that's local government, and they all sit in this big system So where those systems come together, where the interfaces are, where the spaces are between the systems, that's what I think we're trying to address with systems leadership. I think a lot of people consider systems leadership to be their bit [of the system], so anybody within the NHS would say the system is the NHS. And what we're trying to do is go beyond that." - Other public sector leader

"The job is different every day because you seek out where you make the next big difference, where you make the next big connection, where you stand. [Describes putting people in touch with each other] Really good system leaders do that all the time." - Stakeholder

6 Moore M (1995) *Recognising Public Value* Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press

“On a number of levels, so whether it’s just my own organisation or whether it’s these wider partnerships that we operate within, my job is to do the knitting, to make the connections or help the connections be made - it can be both. Both within the organisation and in its relationships with other partners.” - LA Chief Executive

This requires people fundamentally to see themselves as responsible for the whole system and not just for their part of it – and to put the interests of the whole above their own (see further below). It is seen as an intrinsic part of the approach to the role of the local authority Chief Executive or the DCS in particular. Having worked across disciplines and service areas is also an important enabler, and it was striking that many of the people we spoke to described very varied careers that had taken them across sectors (public, private, voluntary, academic) and across professional, service or business areas.

Leading through influence rather than formal power relationships: Working beyond organisational boundaries and formal roles means that the key operating mode of systems leadership is influence. Fundamental to this are relationships, because it is through relationships that influence operates. Influence is not unique to systems leadership, and the idea that leadership in any other context can be exercised through ‘command and control’ was generally refuted. However, it was seen as having particular emphasis in systems leadership. Authority is informal rather than formal, based on ‘covenant’ rather than on contractual or statutory relationships, and rooted in the commitment to the shared vision or objective and to the mutual and higher level gains that will accrue from working together.

“Actually, the sooner you realise that any notion of fixed form and shape, you know, that top down command and control, type thing, just doesn’t work -. So, if you take the traditional triangle of leadership, of the [leader] at the top ... what I’m talking about, really, is you flip, invert that triangle, and the leadership is at the bottom, to create the conditions that allow the right things to happen The right conditions for the police to have the right conversation with health to have the right conversation with social care to have the right conversation with families with children. So, it’s creating the conditions for a system to be effective.” - DCS

The emphasis on influence also brings an emphasis on understanding people in a systems context, understanding how real change happens, and using this understanding for change.

Relationships become key to creating networks and momentum that help to ‘sell’ the vision and to deliver it, and to negotiating complexity and uncertainty and managing risk. They are built to some extent on formal structures – the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board, the Health and Wellbeing Board, having the right people around the table at formal meetings – but informal ways of working were everywhere seen as extremely important. Meeting outside formal structures and large groups, working outside meetings, meeting without a specific task or agenda, informal and off the record conversations and picking up the phone to find a way through barriers or to avoid escalation of problems are all key.

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

But effective relationships that underpin systems leadership are not cosy and comfortable, and they are ‘for something’ rather than an end in themselves. Relationships allow disagreement,

challenge and conflict. They do not imply consensus, and they are used to hold each other to account and to have 'robust conversations'. There was widespread suspicion of networks where relationships are too comfortable, and a view that the most productive relationships are those that are difficult and that hold people in what some interviewees (using a term from adaptive leadership) called the 'zone of productive distress'⁷. Relationships also provide insight into how to increase the pressure, to push people further, to coerce and cajole – they are to some extent manipulative and 'Machiavellian', a means to an end.

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

"So constantly we make decisions about whether we prefer to make progress on our mission or we prefer to maintain and develop, preserve the relationships. So we're very loathe to damage the relationship in order to make progress But what the research shows [referring to a particular study] is that the partnerships that produced the most value, in other words produced the most reduction of crime and disorder, were the partnerships where the relationships were the most challenging. So they were not comfortable but they were challenging and productive." - Other public sector leader

"I don't particularly do a formal stakeholder map but I guess I hold it in my head or I'm figuring out, all right, who's here? Who's got the power? Who actually understands this? Who does it really matter to? I'll put my real effort into being their new best friend. I mean [exerting influence] in a way that isn't going to annoy them, isn't going to expose them but will get what we need to do, done." - LA second/third tier leader

Ceding power

A fundamental part of the working model of systems leadership is the need to prioritise the collective goal or outcome over organisational priorities, objectives or ambitions. All organisations ultimately gain because the collective goal is, in some way, beneficial to all – but it is a paradox of systems leadership that 'to gain you have to let go' and that this increases power overall.

"There's a brilliant [local authority] chief exec ... who talks about this so compellingly, and he says actually when you give away power you increase it manifold, but it's just not your power." - Other public sector leader

There needs to be a willingness to cede individual organisational or personal gains in the common interest. This 'magnanimity' manifests itself in different ways. It might be about giving up organisational targets because they undermine a wider collective ambition: for example in a systems-based attempt to tackle youth crime through early intervention, rather than a justice system approach, so that police service gave ground on crime clear-up rates to create space for preventative work by social care. It might be about transferring budget, letting go of funding or securing income for another organisation. It might be about yielding, influence or profile, or a decision about who leads an initiative or a component of it. Systems leaders are constantly renegotiating their own role and need to be prepared to follow and support as well as to lead. It also means seeing successes as collective rather than individual.

7 Heifetz R., Grashow A. and Linsky M (2009) The practice of adaptive leadership Boston: Harvard Business Press.

“When you look at yourself as a place systemically ... you’re not really bothered who does it, you’re bothered about it getting done and you’re bothered about it getting done in the right way. It’s then, if you think like that, far easier to have conversations about pooling budgets, far easier to talk about integration That’s a very different place then thinking about ‘Well, what outcomes do we want? How do we work across [the area] in order to achieve those outcomes? What’s the best delivery vehicle therefore?’ So, for example, I transferred £150 million and 1000 staff into a new healthcare trust because that’s the best place for that service.” - DCAS

“Being prepared to cede control, but also to give up on some of your priorities in order to gain in terms of bigger collective priorities, and I think that’s the hardest thing, so I’ve seen very successful leaders engage in system leadership and fail because their approach to it was they understood completely that by working together you could get bigger gains for your organisation, but they never quite understood that if you’re going to do that, you had to also be committed to it being for the benefit of the wider system. They could only see the benefits for them and their organisation.” - Other public sector leader

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

This was seen as a very challenging aspect of systems leadership, one that runs counter to instinct and to organisational cultures and reward systems and one that therefore requires courage, risk-taking and the right authorising environment. For the private and voluntary sector, the overlay of increasing competition for funding and for influence adds to the complexity.

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

2.2 Why is systems leadership important?

The importance of systems leadership rests in its perception as the best way of dealing with the **complexity** of human systems and of addressing the ‘wicked issues’ which cannot be addressed in a scientific-rational way through the application of knowledge and management competence. Indeed, complexity is seen as an ideal condition for systems leadership, because stable systems lack the incentive for change, risk-taking and innovation. Systems leadership is also a response to complexity in the sense of redesigning systems around service users and their needs and perspectives, creating simplicity in place of incoherence. It means tackling component parts together, rather than sequentially, recognising interdependencies.

"[The current level of flux is] a real opportunity, a huge opportunity. Because all the rules are changing, and the point at which the system becomes solid again, everything's baked in, and then you can't change it for another decade. So I think in particular this next twelve months while - it's a bit like tectonic plate, shifting across - while all that is happening people are ... open to doing things differently. You've got lots of new organisations who aren't particularly clear about how they're going to operate, so they don't have a fixed view. So for me this is a huge incredible opportunity." - Other public sector leader

A key task in systems leadership however is to make complexity and uncertainty acceptable to others, as we discuss below.

The **financial environment** is both an enabler and a hindrance to systems leadership. It presents a key driver for change and creates a 'burning platform' where action is an absolute imperative, and where systems leadership becomes non-optional. But it also disturbs the system and creates the space for transformational thinking. No agency can deliver on their objectives, let alone on the real wicked issues, with their own resources alone. Instead, they need to influence how others spend money, join spending to achieve more impact and avoid duplication. Agencies have become more transparent about resources and budgets, and austerity therefore creates traction for systems leadership. It creates space for creativity and invention, and it brings new players and new voices to the table.

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

"Because actually we can't deliver most of the big change programmes now without other people and their organisations because we've probably pushed as much as we can with our own resource and yet, the problems are still there." - LA second/third tier leader

But austerity also brings obvious challenges. It requires courage and resilience to respond through systems leadership, rather than to retrench and focus inwards. The scale of cuts is seen as raising the risk that systems are destroyed or overstretched. Restructuring, uncertainty and reduced staffing levels place very significant burdens on systems leaders and reduce their capacity for systems leadership. Financial constraint increases competition between voluntary sector and private sector organisations which can hinder systems leadership.

"[Talking about high level of local deprivation] We've got, you know, no employment available and we've just closed the pits, we're in the worst possible environment where your resilience is massively, massively stretched [A] bloated environment is not as conducive to system leadership as a more constricted environment where you're up against it. [But] there may be a point at which you're too far up against it and that's my worry, that it can actually be too tough. There's a great place in which it is really tough, you're really up against it, you've got to use all your creativity, you've got to use all your resource. And then that bloody straw breaks the camel's back. And we are towards that end of the equation System leadership can't do everything." - DCAS

The programme of austerity imposed on local authorities by central government also runs the risk of itself increasing the demand for services to a degree that even transformational systems leadership cannot manage. Changes to welfare benefits (those proposed and those already implemented) were seen as particularly challenging here, and there were real concerns that the scale of impact is not yet understood and will be devastating. It means there is less resource for learning, and particularly for some of the forms of learning that are relevant to systems leadership.

2.3 Systems leadership is largely place based

An important aspect of people's conception of systems leadership that emerged in the interviews is that it is primarily **place based and local**: its focus is on outcomes for populations within a bounded geographical entity – typically the city, county or other area of the local authority. Even people with national roles tended to discuss systems leadership in terms of relationships between place based organisations or described examples of systems leadership that were geographically boundaried. There was discussion of systems existing at the level of communities, schools clusters or the family, and a view that there may be systems leaders at these levels, but the discussion was generally about systems leadership in the context of geographical entities.

To some extent this is understandable, since it is the geographically boundaried population or place that defined the authority of most of the people we interviewed. But systems leadership at a national level was seen as too high a level of abstraction, too far removed from the living contexts of service users. High level collective ambitions were seen as much more tangible in the context of local change. The more manageable scale of local level systems leadership was felt to create space for a less technical approach, a focus on collective outcomes rather than individual systems and on where leadership should sit even if this challenged traditional organisational domains. The local level also created the potential for pooling or sharing resources and for integration.

“I think the permitting conditions is an articulation of the system [that comes back to] place. The place that we all care about is an overt articulation of what binds together all of those people, actors, organisations, influences in the system. That's the enabler I mean, we might have individual goals, drives, values, we might have organisational visions, objectives, inhibitors, restrictions ... but, actually, a system says, ultimately, what binds us all is the delivery of, in our case, prosperous, rich .. liveable, sustainable place I think that's what enables ... you within the system to say 'I'm prepared to let go; I'm prepared to make what appears to be a sub-optimal decision, because there's a greater thing here'. ... [A]nd that trumps everything else.” - LA Chief Executive

“I see myself as operating in a city that is trying to achieve a number of things and I'm part of an organisation that contributes to some of those things directly or indirectly. I see myself as part of a city first I think now [whereas previously] I saw myself as Chief Exec of an organisation I actually feel [now] that I'm part of a management team of a city, so I sit in a Board with other partners and we are responsible for the outcomes of a city and through that the council are handed specific things that they need to do to achieve that.” - LA Chief Executive

This discussion sometimes led to the conclusion that it leaves local authorities particularly well suited to systems leadership. In part this is because local authorities 'are all about place-shaping'; their remit is to bring together functions and to collaborate with other partners. But more important was the **direct democratic accountability** of local government to local communities, and this was generally seen – outside local government as well as within – as a very important driver of systems leadership. Although it was recognised that agencies such as police and health are open to challenge by, and are responsive to, their local populations, the dominance of national accountability, national frameworks and centrally set constraints on freedom was felt to create a very different paradigm, one in which the national system could easily remain the focus of attention and which is much less agile and responsive to the local population.

2.4 How systems leadership relates to other forms of leadership

The term systems leadership was familiar to, and already adopted by, some participants; it was new to others although the concepts, theory and practice it reflects were familiar and they often found it helpful to have a name placed on it. However, the term 'systems leadership' was not endorsed by everyone we interviewed. Some participants suggested alternative terms such as 'systems thinking across the whole system' cross-organisational collaboration', 'integrated services', 'collaborative leadership' or 'integrated partnership working'.

Although systems leadership was seen as meriting its own focus and involving some particular considerations, it was also important to participants that its distinctiveness and relevance should not be overstated, nor should it be seen as a panacea for ineffective services or financial constraint. It has clear interactions with management, leadership (organisational and other forms) and with partnership working, with many common behaviours although a distinctive purpose and emphasis.

Systems leadership is relatively easily distinguished from **management** (the direct control of resources; the application of knowledge and technical skills such as analysis and project planning). But management is seen as a necessary pre-condition of systems leadership. Systems leadership is 'management enabled leadership': the system needs to be managed and safe for systems leadership and experimentation to be possible. At times, for some participants, this had meant getting more involved in operational detail or putting off collaborative or systems-based working until an area of work has been secured.

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

Aspects of technical management are also relevant to systems leadership. In particular, people talked about the need to have a good grasp of detail, strong analytical skills, and enough knowledge to be able to assess where you need more input, whether something is proceeding as planned, when to challenge and ask questions and to have general credibility. Other technical management skills relevant to systems leadership are resource and project management skills, line management skills, and the ability also to manage upwards and within political contexts.

Systems leadership has much in common with **organisational leadership**, and many of the skills and behaviours were seen as common. However, because systems leadership draws on more informal and consensual bases of authority, it was seen to place more emphasis on compromise, negotiation and working through influence; on operating outside one's discipline or area of expertise; on working to mutual benefits and collective purpose; and on adapting to complex contexts. One participant concluded that all good systems leaders are good leaders, but that not all good leaders are good systems leaders.

There were also links with **adaptive leadership**⁸ and many of the core concepts of adaptive leadership emerged in the interviews: recognising that complex problems require more than technical solutions; moving between the high level overview of 'the balcony' and the operational level of 'the dance-floor'; living in disequilibrium, diagnosing, mobilising the system, using conflict creatively, staying connected to purpose, risk-taking and experimentation.

8 Heifetz R, Grashow A and Linsky M (2009) *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world* Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press

Systems leadership is also seen to relate to **sector-led improvement**. Some interviewees associated systems leadership very strongly with sector-led improvement in the schools context, seeing systems leadership as essentially being about devolving power to school leaders in order to lead the wider schools system. Three elements can be discerned, namely; setting objectives that are held and can only be met by schools collectively; giving schools freedom to work out how to meet those objectives; and using successful school leaders to spread success. For others, sector-led improvement was a type of systems leadership or an approach that might be employed in systems leadership. For example, the peer support and challenge initiative coordinated by the Children's Improvement Board⁹ was seen as a highly effective learning and improvement method which supported systems leadership.

Similarly, systems leadership has much in common with **partnership**, but there are differences in emphasis, scale and purpose. The key distinction made is that the relationships in systems leadership are voluntary, consensual, and based on achieving goals that go beyond individual organisational goals, and indeed may involve ceding organisational goals. Systems leadership operates with more emphasis on influence and informal power. Whereas in partnerships, leaders represent their organisation, in systems leadership they represent systems. Partnership is seen as involving organisational goals which are aligned, and systems leadership as involving goals which are genuinely joint. There is therefore a need for greater mutuality and support for each other and for magnanimity and ceding territory. Partnership is also seen as involving narrower intentions which are not systems based; project based work rather than whole systems change, and less enduring relationships. Systems leadership involves more conflict and less comfortable relationships: withdrawing when things get difficult and organisational goals are not being met is no longer an option.

"Well partnership implies you're all equal and you're all agreeing to do something Systems leadership would be, I guess, if I was the DCS, I'm here to deliver the best outcomes for children and I'm not just doing that for Children's Services, or even for the council. My job is to lead the system that delivers that for this borough It's not just saying my little bit of [the system] That's not what you are responsible for, you are responsible for the whole process and making sure the process is the best it can be." - LA second/third tier leader

"If I say I'm going to work in partnership with you, if I say I'm going to collaborate with you, I'm doing it on my terms. If I say I'm going to share leadership with you - which is what system leaders need to do: they need to share leadership - I'm doing it on our terms as we define them. That for me is the single biggest difference." - Other public sector leader

9 The Children's Improvement Board was a partnership between the LGA, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) focused on sector-led improvement. Funding from the Department for Education for CIB's work was withdrawn in April 2013.

3. What is involved in systems leadership in practice?

A strong theme in the interviews is that systems leadership does not involve behaviours that are absolutely distinctive. What is distinctive is the mind set, purpose and values that drive the behaviours, and that give particular significance, meaning and emphasis to particular behaviours. Nevertheless, there were ways of working that were seen as particularly aligned with and key to systems leadership.

Recognising and embracing uncertainty and complexity and making them acceptable to others

Uncertainty arises from the complexity of social problems, the interconnectedness of the system so that components cannot be addressed sequentially, the need to disrupt the system, and the lack of clarity in the pathways towards high level objectives. The scale of financial cuts and of transformation also creates uncertainty: staff are being asked to do something for which there is no blueprint or precedent. An important task in systems leadership is, therefore, that of sense-making; understanding and making sense of complexity for oneself, for partners and for staff. Having the confidence to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty is also important and interviewees talked about needing to provide some containment for others - particularly staff but also partners. Complexity, to some extent, needs to be simplified by reference to the high level objective and by translating this objective into more specific goals and activities. Complexity is inherent however and needs to be recognised, embraced and worked with, rather than removed by over-simplification. Complexity also means that it becomes more acceptable, indeed positively important, to admit that you do not know what the future will look like – but perhaps not to do this too often, or to recognise different tolerance levels to this.

“I would assert that my job is also to make ambiguity and uncertainty acceptable, that actually they just aren't simple, because if we are talking about systems thinking and if we're talking particularly about wicked issues, then I guess my job is to help an organisation cope with wicked issues through as much whole system thinking as it possibly can. Partly so that you do see all the facets of that wicked issue rather than just your bits of it.” - LA Chief Executive

“There is a point where it becomes so diffuse that you say ‘I'm not sure what's happening here’ so there is something about having sufficient discretion around your system [L]eading at the moment where we don't know what's round the corner. We used to just go and pull off a template, you know, what do I do in this situation? And you don't know now, and leadership for me actually is about how you provide certainty in very uncertain times, or you try to sound like you know what you are talking about, anyway! Or making people feel optimistic and believing.” - Third sector leader

Mutual understanding and active support

An important component of the relationships that are key to systems leadership is mutual understanding between leaders of each other's organisational contexts and pressures. Some participants called this 'empathy', although in fact the concept goes further and involves active work to help others negotiate or overcome organisational pressures or barriers, rather than just support and encouragement. It involves being able to see the world through someone else's eyes, understanding how their part of the system operates and how that impacts on the wider system or constrains their space for systems leadership. It involves using this knowledge to develop strategies for moving forward together towards the collective goal, supporting and encouraging each other, providing reinforcement, and compensating for each other.

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

This understanding is also key to tactical decisions, to knowing when and how to push and how to influence, and how to reconcile the needs of one organisation with how the system needs to change. It requires honesty and trust to be open about each other’s constraints and limitations and clear about what is the bottom line in a contested or negotiated situation.

Hearing diverse voices

Focusing on collective outcomes and working with influence means relationships beyond ‘the traditional players’. Power no longer rests only in the obvious places: it is more fragmented, and community groups and social enterprises have a new importance. Who the systems leaders are is changing and becoming harder to predict. It means that some of the key people with whom systems leaders need to work are on the periphery of traditional formal groupings. Understanding who holds power and influence means thinking about how change really happens. Curiosity is also seen as an important driver to working with different people.

People also talked about the importance of ensuring that you have diverse people around you or of bringing together people from different worlds – people whose mind-sets and approaches are different from each other’s or from yours, who will bring a different perspective or set of skills, who will challenge and ask difficult questions. This also means the systems leader has to be able to be alert to what is different in the discourse around them.

Being in close contact with staff also becomes more important. This involves being approachable and creating a climate in which people will come to you with a constructive worry or challenge, an admission, a solution or idea, or holding regular networking meetings with middle-managers, rather than relying on flows of information through line management. It also means closer contact with service users and responsive and fast feedback loops so that the effects of change can be gauged and strategies adjusted.

Co-production with service users

For some participants, a core aspect of systems leadership is co-production with service users. Systems are being aligned to place service users and outcomes at the centre, rather than being shaped by service and organisational structures. Some interviewees talked about the importance of involving service users in systems redesign and, more generally, there was a recurrent view that systems leadership recognises how change actually happens and the importance of ‘doing with, not to’ as part of this. Local authorities are striving to build new relationships with communities which make better use of community and individual assets and resources. This also means getting close to the community and finding out what is important to them.

“I think there is an emerging kind of civic leadership style, and some of it comes from the radical right, but interestingly some of it is now coming more from the radical left, which is about changing the relationship between the individual and the state, so that relationship has been quite a dependent one. [Responding to demographic and financial pressures] will drive collaboration So things like personal budgets or supporting people with a mental health condition to work, supporting children with complex needs to grow up and be able to work, and things like that, I think that requires ... collaboration between authorities and it requires a collaboration with the community or people with the voluntary sector, with businesses so actually the system then gets bigger.” - Other public sector leader

Risk-taking and risk-seeking; innovation and experimentation

Much of systems leadership is seen as inherently risky – dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, leading when the overall aim is clear, but not the pathways or even the direction, ceding control to others, working beyond your professional discipline or job description, being a leader among leaders. One participant talked about the importance of actively seeking out risk and opportunities to disrupt the status quo. There is also a strong sense of personal and reputational risk – being the leader of a high profile but uncertain endeavour, being personally associated with a vision for a different way of working, creating challenge and disruption before the way forward has been secured or proven.

“Being the person at the front of the charge, or being the person in the middle of a big ring of other people, both of which images work for systems leadership, is a scary, scary place to be.” - Stakeholder

It also involves innovation and experimentation, because non-linear, non-obvious, creative solutions are required in complex conditions and to address wicked issues. Systems leadership suits people who are entrepreneurial, imaginative and creative, who understand the complexity of problems and are solution-focused, and who respond well to being given space and freedom to think.

“Being open minded and looking for unusual solutions. So, entrepreneurial thinking, [being a] change agent.” - LA second/third tier leader

An important point here was the importance of getting close to service users and the frontline because innovation is more likely to come from these places than from those in strategic leadership roles.

Organisational cultures that support risk-taking and innovation are therefore important. Participants talked about the importance of an organisational culture that permits experimentation and innovation and thus, by definition, can tolerate, learn from and, indeed, welcome failure and mistakes as well as successes. They recognised the need to give support and encouragement to individual staff to work in this way, to build their confidence.

The timescales involved in systems leadership and whole systems change are also relevant here. Participants talked about the scale of change requiring a timeframe of several years, with the possibility of little tangible or measurable progress for some time and the need for people and organisations to ‘hold your nerve’ to stay the course.

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

“You need to recognise that it might not be in your lifetime or your tenure.” - Third sector leader

Underlying this was a sense of the confidence of individuals, groups, organisations and communities growing through the experience of successful systems leadership and of the importance of personal displays of commitment and confidence to support this. Successful systems leadership breeds confidence and an appetite for more – but it requires courage on the part of those taking the first steps in systems change.

Beyond the hero leader

Systems leadership was seen to call for a different model of leadership from the individual hero leader; individual and organisational egos need to be controlled. There was a rejection of the idea of the 'hero leader' or 'charismatic leader', or a redefinition of the behaviours in which charisma lies. This relates to the importance of being values-led, ceding power, allowing and making space for others to lead, giving up individual gains in the interests of collective gain, and recognising the value of the expertise of others. Celebrating success as collective rather than individual was also seen as important. The terms 'humble' and 'humility' were used in some interviews, and people also talked about the value of being 'an introvert' in systems leadership, but it is clear that systems leadership also calls for a strong sense of self, confidence, self-belief and a driving ambition.

"When I was looking at my current job ... a very senior person said to me, 'Well, of course, one of the attractions about doing this job is that you're probably going to be the system leader' and I didn't say anything but I thought, 'If you think that there is one system leader you haven't got this'. I mean that is the biggest cultural inhibitor in the health service is that we are still very much based on this kind of charismatic leadership, hero leadership stuff. [T]o be fair that's really hard because actually I've never met a good leader who wasn't charismatic because you don't have followers unless you have some degree of charisma [but] ... I've seen very quiet, humble charisma." - Other public sector leader

"If you come in thinking you're an expert you will fail [T]he word 'humble' is much misused but for me some of the most successful systems leaders are quite humble people. They're coming in because they've got a thirst for learning themselves. They're not coming in as the expert." - DCAS

Leadership at all levels

There was a strong emphasis on the importance of leadership at all levels, creating the space for others to excel through autonomy. It emerges within systems leadership in a number of ways. In relationships with other organisations, it links with the ceding of power and, also, with dealing with uncertainty because objectives are agreed at a high level, and because yours may not be the lead organisation; it involves allowing others to lead and to work out the detailed pathways.

It is particularly talked about in relationship to distributed leadership within a leader's own organisation. Power and influence are delegated but, more fundamentally than this, there is an expectation that staff at all levels are systems leaders, displaying at least some of the same behaviours and the same mind set as senior systems leaders and using systems leadership approaches and thinking proactively in their own work.

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

"That is why I think it's so important to try and create an understanding that everybody can make a difference and should make a difference, has a responsibility to, and then give them the tools to do that, because 450 people [the number of staff who are line managers], or at least a good percentage of them, kind of cascading what seven people [the senior management team] are driving - it's going to have much more effect than seven of us trying to do it by force." - LA Chief Executive

Leadership at all levels means letting go of the detail, yielding control and authority, and giving permission for others to exercise judgement and develop something in their own way. The motivation is not that a systems leader cannot do everything and that delegating creates the time required for a leader to retain a strategic vision. It is a fundamental belief that someone else will do the job better and that systems leadership needs to be part of the operating style of all. In particular it recognises that people who are closer to the operational level will have insight, understanding and relationships that bring real added value and that are key to innovation. It also involves recognising that staff who are line managers are themselves influencers, and need to be encouraged and permitted to exercise that influence.

Although essential, creating a culture of leadership at all levels was seen as challenging and high risk. Not everyone rises to the challenge offered to them: distributing leadership sometimes meets with reluctance or resistance and staff need to be nurtured, encouraged and supported. It is a learning process for staff too, and they inevitably meet challenges and do not always get things right. Distributed leadership therefore involves holding one's nerve and managing the instinct to step in and re-take control, particularly if things are not going well. Fundamentally, though, it requires good people.

"It took time [for me] to let go and to have confidence in people I said this earlier and it's really key: I can only do this if I've got really good people, and they are exceptionally good." - LA second/third tier leader

Being clear about the vision, and the principles behind it, is important to allow staff to predict the response of their leaders so that staff can act without recourse to instruction or to referring decisions upwards. It also requires a supportive organisational culture and context and developing this might mean giving people the permission to work in a new way. It needs a culture that allows experimentation, that tolerates and learns from mistakes and failures, a reflective and learning culture rather than a culture of blame.

Part of the challenge here also lies in judging the scope for leadership by others. Interviewees described being very active and present in some areas of work and much more distributive in others. One DCAS described the three spheres in which she operates in ascending order of the scope for distributed working: national and local political relationships; partnerships and the outside world; and the internal world of her local authority – but alongside this was the view that distributive leadership involves asking others to operate in all three areas.

It needs good formal and informal systems for accountability, communication and data, and it needs the systems leader to be present, providing challenge, asking questions and maintaining a formal and informal dialogue. Supporting distributed leadership means constantly reflecting on how your colleague is responding, adjusting your own behaviour, gauging how much support and how much constraint to provide, assessing when to influence and when it is necessary to get actively involved. Some participants saw it as having been aided by taking out tiers of management which previously suppressed direct communication and talent. The behaviours involved in leadership at all levels, in distributing leadership and responding to it, need to be supported in reward and review systems. For example, in one organisation, managers are now asked to provide examples of good decisions made by their staff where previously the focus would have been on their own decisions and judgement.

Several participants talked about this as a very challenging area of work, and they also described the situation of ineffective cross-partnership work where a colleague in another agency had not been given clearly delegated authority and a mandate to act so that their participation, and collective progress, was severely hampered.

“Creating an environment in which staff, through the system, see themselves as leading the change on behalf of the people that they’re seeking to help rather than administering the rules that have been set down by their boss, that’s another really big challenge and I suppose, again, an illustration of a system that’s really motoring, where the people closest to the action or context, if you like, feel they can take decisions to help move people along rather than refer them up for a ruling.” - Third sector leader

Analytical skills and intellectual rigour

The intellectual rigour involved in systems leadership came across strongly in the interviews. It involves high-level analytical and diagnostic skills, the ability to analyse a situation, to understand the underlying determinants, drivers and blockers of change, the systems involved and their intersections and interdependencies, where power lies and its nature, who the key actors are and how their objectives and constraints can be aligned or utilised for systems change. It calls for strong tactical as well as strategic knowledge. Systems leadership involves a culture of professional judgement, rather than a reliance on procedures.

As well as a grasp of detail and technical knowledge it involves people who can see the big picture and who are good at horizon-scanning. There were several references to ‘being on the balcony’, the concept from adaptive leadership of gaining a distanced perspective that allows you to see what is really happening on ‘the dance floor’ and how to influence it. People who take to systems leadership are cerebral, thrive in making sense of uncertainty, like ‘the fog’ and do not need instant gratification or rapid reward.

The use of data and intelligence

Seeking out and using formal research evidence, local data, soft intelligence and the user voice, also came across strongly and was linked by some to the idea of systems being self-regulating and adaptive. Data is used by systems leaders to challenge and disturb, to force change, to challenge one’s own prejudices and preferences. It is an important part of what helps to make distributed leadership secure, requiring a flow of meaningful information and data, a culture of trust with others to share and interpret information. It also involves skills in the subtle ‘hearing’ or reading of data to see the ‘delicacy’ within it. And it involves knowing what to respond to and what to ‘tune out’.

Emotional intelligence and being reflective and reflexive

The ability to stand back, to listen and observe, to reflect, to review where a system is in the cycle of change and to be alert constantly to responding or adapting your own behaviour was emphasised. Also important here is being reflexive and self-aware, understanding yourself, your preferences and prejudices, how you are reacting to other people’s behaviour and they to yours, and ‘knowing yourself’. These issues are important parts of systems leadership involving compensating mechanisms. It involves being aware of your own working styles, your default operating mode, how to employ your own or other’s styles in different situations, when to act and when to hold back or influence. Systems leadership calls for high levels of emotional intelligence – the ability to read a person or situation, to employ different strategies and tones, to listen and to communicate exceptionally well.

Flexibility and adaptability

Flexibility was described as ‘the hallmark of a good leader’. Systems leadership involves going beyond your job description and encouraging and allowing others to do the same. It means adapting to working with, and in, different parts of the system beyond one’s technical expertise or discipline. It involves flexing around other people’s agendas, between non-aligned organisational

objectives, between local and national priorities. It involves moving between the balcony and the dance floor.

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

“When I’m doing it at my best, I know that I’m weaving a story between ... all of those drivers, national, local, individual, that lets people come out and create something that’s useful and achievable.” - LA second/third tier leader

Resilience

The need to be resilient came across strongly; to accept knock-backs, to be determined, to ‘hold your nerve’ or ‘play the long game’, to keep going in the face of entrenched positions or barriers. Systems leadership involves holding disparate groups together through conflict, encouraging and supporting people when their commitment falters or their courage fails. It involves being able to de-personalise conflict and challenge, and being able to accept criticism and challenge. As we noted earlier, it involves long time scales which call for courage and steadfastness. Systems leadership also involves being able to take a pragmatic approach – recognising which battles can be lost in the interests of winning the war, knowing when the conditions are not right for change or for a systems approach, judging when to stop pressing for something, accepting that individuals or organisations will sometimes be unable or unwilling to engage with systems leadership.

“It means if not being comfortable [then] finding ways to manage the absence of those straight lines and to be able to live with uncertainty, live with the hope of what you’re trying to achieve. Not losing confidence in your colleagues or in yourself when things don’t go the way you’d hoped or thought, or people have not delivered in the way that they did. Rather than going back in to the bunker and saying ‘I’ve tried that and I’m not doing that again’, going back around the loop again in terms of saying ‘that hasn’t worked, why hasn’t it worked, what could we do differently?’.” - DCS

Integrity, credibility and authenticity

Systems leadership was seen as calling for a high level of honesty – keeping your promises, being open about limitations and constraints, ‘putting your cards on the table’, being clear about the bottom line in negotiations. These are key to building the trust on which effective relationships are built. Focusing on, and remaining authentic to, the shared values, objective and moral purpose was seen as important – modelling the qualities and behaviours in your own actions in relation to your staff and your partners, being transparent and earning credibility.

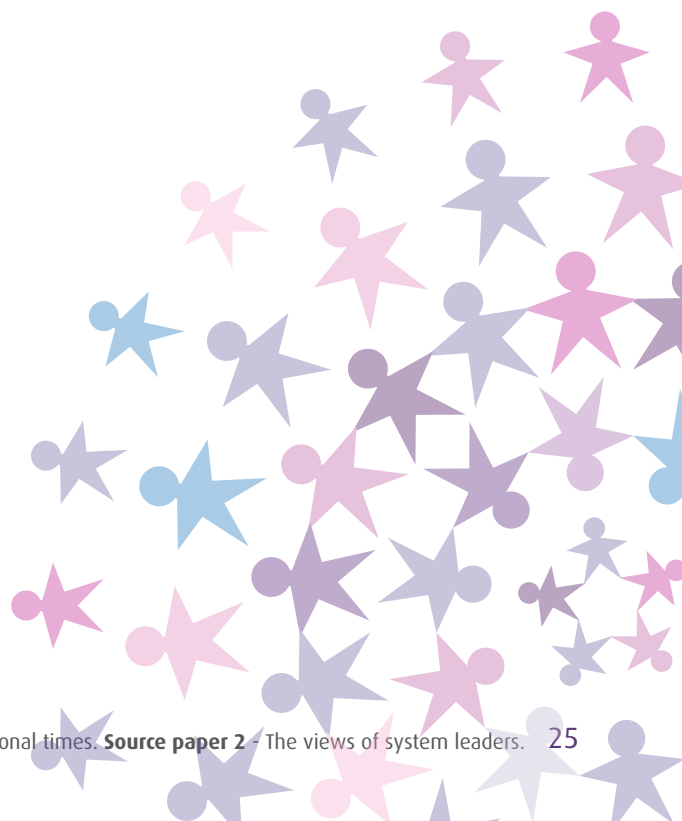
Ruthlessness and relentlessness

Also, interviewees talked about being ‘relentless’ in the pursuit of shared objectives and about the need to be ruthless.

“You’re only here to work for children. You’re not here to work for [the staff] There also needs in our best systems leaders an absolute ruthlessness because it is such a truism but children who come through the system, they only come through it once It’s being absolutely driven, absolutely driven by the outcomes we want for children.” - DCAS

Space for different leadership styles

Although there was much consistency in the views expressed about the qualities and skills involved in systems leadership, there is clearly also space for different styles – and indeed differences in the personal working styles of participants came across strongly in the interviews. People described diversity in the working styles of other systems leaders around them, and the importance of using different styles for different situations or looking for compensating mechanisms or ways of working. But it was also clear that not everyone understands systems leadership or is able to use it and create the conditions that support it. People talked about having flourished as a systems leader after a change of organisational or line manager, or seeing a sudden acceleration in local systems leadership or in its progress and achievements following a change of leadership in a partner organisation.



4. What are the enabling and inhibiting conditions for systems leadership?

An important feature of systems leadership is that it is adaptive. It recognises and responds to, but is not hampered by, the surrounding conditions. Systems leadership was not seen as involving waiting for the perfect conditions for leadership practice, for the planets to fall into alignment: rather, systems leaders use the attitudes and approaches of systems leadership to lead through conditions that may be less than ideal. There seemed to be more emphasis on compensating for, rather than, on influencing the surrounding conditions.

“Money has a massive influence. National politics has a big influence and local politics has a big influence. But, that’s what you’re trying to navigate your way through, really.” - DCS

“You might not like what’s happened [in a policy area]. That’s highly irrelevant to a leader.” - LA Chief Executive

However, enabling and inhibiting conditions were described at the level of organisations, local politics, national government and other aspects of context.

4.1 The organisational conditions for systems leadership

At the level of the **organisation**, a permissive environment for systems leaders is shaped by:

- the quality of and approach to **organisational leadership**: particularly the style of the chief executive and whether they ‘get’ systems leadership. If not, systems leadership is likely to be found in pockets or to operate somewhat more cautiously and ‘under the radar’, seeking profile and formal approval only once some ground has been secured and there is evidence that the systems leadership approach has gained traction
- an organisational culture that values learning, takes risks, embraces innovation, allows people to take ownership and to widen their vision beyond their specified remit, and is not process-driven. An over-reliance on bureaucracy, targets and monitoring curtails the space for radical thinking

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

- **organisational structures** which allow **integration and joint work** within the organisation, wide portfolios and a structure that discourages siloed working, with fewer tiers of management leading to better connectivity between leadership levels and not fragmented leadership

“Our new structure ... forces some of those behaviours and some of those drivers [The Chief Executive] has lined it up in a way that forces conversation, and no one is going to – even if you thought it was a good idea - is going to survive sitting in their silo. [He] talks about no straight lines and that it’s deliberate there aren’t any straight lines, it’s deliberate that there are lots of broken ones, because that’s the behaviours he’s wanting to drive in terms of that system leadership” - LA second/third tier leader

- 'hardwiring' the skills, qualities and behaviours of systems leadership into **staff selection and performance review frameworks**. Several participating organisations had begun to recruit with much more focus on the values and skills consistent with systems leadership and had built the behaviours and characteristics of systems leadership, and collaborative working more generally, into performance review frameworks. They found this was changing which staff were now viewed as performing well, with the shortcomings of people who were strong on delivery and following procedures now exposed and people who challenge processes and take risks now viewed more positively. Being ruthless about moving on staff who did not have the qualities needed was also seen as important

"One of my big shocks when I moved into the public sector is that appraisals are based purely on delivering a task. In the private sector, all through my career ... my appraisal was 50 per cent about my behaviours and 50 per cent about my delivery of task. And I just think we have to shift to that, because otherwise why would people change?" - Other public sector leader

"... you have to help people acquire a different set of behaviours to those that previously have made a manager very, very successful [When a service introduced a new service model focusing on outcomes rather than processes] the thing that most surprised them was ... what they've seen is a complete turnaround of their high performers ... and their low performers rising to the top Those people who have been on [their] radar as the highest performers were those people who could just engage with and deliver to a process. You've got this bunch of people who've been given a framework and they just did it, and they could just roll and boom, boom, boom. Take the framework away from them and they've found that there's some real skills deficits ... in terms of that ability to ... move outside of the box, and to just be able to be more reliant on their professional judgement Conversely, some of those people that managers used to see as a real pain in the arse - really constantly challenging the process because they couldn't see that the process added any value, and it got in the way, it stopped them having the appropriate relationships with their service users - actually are now rising to the fore because what they've always been good at, but the system didn't encourage it, is their ability to engage with and generate those appropriate relationships, know when to push and when to step back, when to give a bit of license and when not to, those sorts of things." - DCS

- a culture of being **close to service users**: the replacement of Primary Care Trusts with Clinical Commissioning Groups and the greater autonomy of schools was seen as valuable here. More generally, organisations that work in a paradigm that recognises the complexity of human systems and social problems were seen to create more space for systems leadership. Having a rounded, holistic understanding of social worlds and understanding people within systems is an incentive for collaboration and to systems leadership, compared with a narrow or deficit-based view of people
- finally, the move to a **commissioning model** in local authorities was viewed as supportive of systems leadership because of its focus on outcomes.

For most participants, there was a recognition that their organisation (and others around them) have some distance to travel before they could be said to be environments that really support systems leadership, despite progress being made.

4.2 The local political conditions for systems leadership

An authorising environment from local politicians was a powerful enabler of systems leadership for interviewees in local authorities, and local politicians are themselves systems leaders. Having political support and knowing that leaders would stand by the strategy in the face of controversy and challenge was key to taking risks. It was also vital to know and be able to demonstrate to partners that you have the political support required to deliver on your promises. The political leadership needs to be willing to cede territory to other partners, to rise above the local political identity and 'ego' of the local authority. Political leaders need to be adept at knowing when they need to intervene or challenge at an operational level and when to allow space and autonomy to officials. Negotiating this balance in changing circumstances was seen as a required skill for political leaders and for the DCS and other senior officials.

Supportive local politicians also know where their own influence lies and how to use it. They have strong relationships which can be used powerfully to 'unblock' or to build consensus within the political body and more widely. They understand social problems and social change in systems terms, and they work well across policy areas and organisations.

"It's all too easy for officers or civil servants to say, 'Everything would be fine if we didn't have those pesky politicians' I fundamentally disagree with that because I think what you lose is the ability to galvanise different resources in favour of a cause when you lose the political angle That might be their relationship with the leader, the local strategic partnership or whatever it is, or it might be political resources outside, or it might be just their own passion and their ability to communicate with the media or other groups or on the national stage Those political connections that actually, when harnessed in the right way can be extremely powerful in raising an issue, getting something unblocked, raising an issue with profile." - Third sector leader

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



4.3 The national government conditions for systems leadership

Central government was often seen as less relevant to local systems leadership, because systems leadership is seen as being about local relationships rather than relationships with central government. The requirement of central government was seen largely to lie in **creating frameworks or incentives for systems leadership**. For example the statutory requirement to cooperate in children's safeguarding or the requirement for children's partnerships were seen as useful ways of creating a supportive platform for systems leadership – with the task for the locality being to make the most of it. Indeed, there were times when participants said they would welcome a stronger push or legislative force from central government in order to incentivise or remove blockages to systems leadership, such as around information sharing. But it was the brokering of relationships and goals within the locality which was seen as the essence of systems leadership.

As well as creating this framework for collaboration, people saw government as having a role in challenging and holding local organisations to account. But, thereafter, the key role for central government is seen as **leaving space for local systems leadership** – to focus on strategy not operational issues, not to over-legislate, to define outcomes not behaviours. The political rhetoric of localism was seen as apt here, although the general view was that it is not the reality of central government's relationship with local government which is actually much more of a centralising agenda.

For central government to have **a systems-based construction of social problems** and of policies was also seen as an important condition for systems leadership. For example the schools academy policy was seen by some as unhelpful, because it demotes the role of schools as part of systems. By contrast the Troubled Families policy was seen as being systems-based, providing a strong incentive for collaboration and systems leadership. The Munro Review agenda for transforming social work with its emphasis on professional judgement, shared responsibility and the child's journey rather than compliance, prescription, process and bureaucracy was seen as creating space for systems leadership. Similarly sector-led improvement rather than improvement through compliance and targets was seen as part of an enabling environment.

A constraining influence was the increasing **fragmentation** of strategic decision-making and operational delivery seen in the new roles of schools, Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and the private sector (although these changes were welcomed in other ways as we have noted). The multiple smaller organisations that result from fragmentation are focused on a narrow part of the system, harder to influence and concerned with their own processes and identities.

The **scale of structural change** created by new policy agendas was seen as both an opportunity for and a threat to systems leadership. On the one hand it disturbs the system and is an unparalleled opportunity to broker new relationships and ambitions. On the other it can overload systems leaders, creates an inward focus, and makes it harder to build and sustain relationships.

The **vertical rather than horizontal integration** of central government was seen as inhibiting the degree to which central government operates through systems leadership. Government departments and the roles of their leaders were seen as 'hard structures' lacking the fluidity of local government and hard for leaders to step beyond, for all that individual ministers were seen as having transformed the landscape through powerful systems-based approaches. This was seen as leading to a preference for neat solutions which do not engage sufficiently with the complexity of human systems and which create incentives for siloed working rather than for systems leadership.

“At a local level it’s much more fluid all of the time, whereas at a national level because of the way government departments are ... institutions in themselves, the relationships are much more clearly defined Whether there’s something about the fact that [at a local level] the institutions are smaller or the units are smaller, or ... that individuals have more of a role than institutions Maybe that’s what it is. That actually individuals make more of a difference in a local system [and relationships are more important] That’s the thing. It’s ‘the Home Secretary’ and ‘the Secretary of State for Education’ and it’s structured to de-personalise, to de-individualise and de-relationshipise and that what’s makes it feel different, sort of harder and less flexible and less malleable.” - Third sector leader

There was also some discussion of the need for a systems-based approach to **regulation and inspection**. The concept of, and early work towards, multi-agency inspection had been welcomed and seen as an appropriate direction for inspection. Generally there was a view that inspection and regulatory bodies (the discussion focused on Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission) need to be more embracing of risk and innovation and to develop a paradigm which is less focused on compliance.

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

“[One of the blocks to systems leadership] is regulators. I think Ofsted are particularly poor in being very traditional and reinforcing the old ...insular ways. The current assessment of our safeguarding ... was of local authority safeguarding. Now everyone’s spent the last five years making theirs a partnership arrangement. So is Ofsted reinforcing that? And because they’re making pretty much everyone ‘inadequate’, then actually it’s causing retrenchment and people obviously become more insular and less about the system, more about what [the local authority] do and more obsessed in terms of the old way. So that’s really, really unhelpful the way the regulatory frame works and I think a very poor example by Ofsted.” - DCAS

Traditional **financial structures** were seen as potential inhibitors of systems leadership. The fact that almost all local funding is organisationally based, with resources flowing to organisations rather than to place, meant that the task of building an infrastructure for pooled budgets or joint resources was considerable. The reduced use of financial ring fencing was welcomed, although what remained was felt to constrain the space for creative use of resources in systems leadership. There was also concern about funding structures which conflict directly with collective intentions, such as the perverse incentives for hospitals to retain patients at a time when the local emphasis was on preventing admissions.

4.4 The local place conditions for systems leadership

Finally, some particular aspects of **place** were seen as supportive conditions for systems leadership: the quality of existing relationships and history of partnership working; the extent to which the local community is receptive to or pressing for change; the co-terminosity of organisations’ geographic boundaries, and size. Smaller and co-terminous local areas meant that leaders could focus on relationships and networks rather than on structure, and are not constrained by the need for consistency with other geographical areas where the conditions and pressures may be quite different.

5. How does systems leadership link with improved outcomes?

Many interviewees talked about outcomes throughout the interview – outcomes were absolutely embedded in their concept of systems leadership; thoughts about how systems leadership might actually contribute to better outcomes for all local people or for particular population groups were sometimes surprisingly undeveloped. Indeed the question seemed initially almost illogical to some interviewees. They saw the focus on outcomes as being the enabler of systems leadership: to be asked how systems leadership enables outcomes seemed puzzling. This perhaps suggests that the distinction between outcomes as intended and outcomes as achieved was not always clear. Or it may be that the value of focusing endeavour and resources on a shared set of outcomes is so obvious that it is almost not necessary to ask for an underlying logic. It also suggests that the underlying theory of change by which systems leadership might contribute to improved outcomes is a complex one.

Researcher: *“What’s thelogic model by which improved systems leadership helps to create better outcomes for ... the beneficiary group one has in mind?”*

Participant: *“See I would do it the other way round, I think you need to know what are the outcomes that you want to achieve for children or adults, or whoever, and then you need to organise your leadership and your interventions around that. So there’s no point in leading systems for their own sake, or joining things up because joining up is inevitably better, it may not be.”* - Third sector leader

Researcher: *“What is the ... underlying logic by which systems leadership drives outcomes?”*

Participant: *“This comes back to one of my fundamental questions for you and your work and that is, what’s the point of the system? Systems don’t exist for no purpose, so the only point of having a system coming together is ... to improve outcomes for the product as opposed to the process So I would say the fundamental question is what’s the point of a system? I would say the fundamental point of a system is to improve the outcomes for those with whom that system works.”* - DCAS

The most clearly stated way in which systems leadership can contribute to improved outcomes is through its common purpose and a shared set of goals, or an ambition for improved outcomes that drives change. This sharpens the focus and the use of resources by each organisation, cuts through silos and elevates these goals above individual organisational goals or parts of the system.

“If you start with a consensus of what it is we’re trying to do, then those conversations become a lot healthier. So you might still fall out about particular things but it’s the means to the ends, rather than the ends themselves.” - Other public sector leader

“The language of outcomes gives you permission to work in a particular way It’s who’s best placed to do what? If that’s the outcome we want, who is best place to do that? How would we do that? What would it look like if we did do that? So, it’s changing the nature of those conversations that has the biggest influence.” - DCS

Systems leadership is also seen as contributing to outcomes by:

- reframing social problems as being multi-dimensional and changing the nature of the discourse through requiring integrated approaches based around an understanding of service users' experiences, needs and perspectives

"Working out, what's the right question? What's the strategic question we're trying to answer? Then the next thing is how do we use customer insight? So actually you've then got this kind of insight that then gives you food for thought in terms of these are the themes that are emerging. And if that insight's sophisticated enough in the way it's presented, the way it's analysed, when the issues emerge you find that actually there are some really big themes ... that touch people round the table." - DCAS

- bringing people to the table; ensuring that all the players engage with systems leadership
- achieving a more coherent alignment of services around the service user, a fundamental change

"... [S]ystems leadership is predicated on the idea that we use the skills and the abilities and talents of other people ... and that all parts are relevant and part of the whole, and that the process is secondary to what it is we're trying to achieve. I think in terms of outcomes, unless we move to a stage where we absorb that, as part of the organisation, we will be stuck with an old-fashioned done to type model of organisational service delivery that actually doesn't meet anybody's needs properly [W]e're coming at it from a starting point of ... if you come through the door if you're a service user, what does this feel like? And actually all the other stuff is peripheral It involves a completely different way of thinking about the services that we produce and the outcomes we're trying to achieve." - LA second/third tier leader

- making better use of finite or dwindling resources in the sense of both people and money, reducing duplication and gaps but more profoundly increasing the impact of resources – so that capacity increases even though resources diminish

"I think the most important resource we have in the social care system is individuals [rather than money] So what systems thinking does is brings into the arena a much wider range of expertise that you couldn't otherwise call on. So for me, in particularly the context of children's services, it's about giving me access to the widest possible range of resources to improve outcomes. There is no other reason for the system to come together." - DCAS

'We've lost a huge amount of resource but by creating the common language and the common endeavour, our capacity is actually increasing because of the influence across different networks Our best guess is [there are] 180,000 children and young people in [the city], there's probably, on any one day, around 75,000 professionals who, day in day out, touch the lives of those 180,000 You mobilise that group, that's a hell of a capacity So whilst the resource has shrunk, the capacity has actually increased.' - DCS

- opening up a range of routes by which an outcome can be achieved rather than a single pathway or a 'one size fits all approach'
- by bringing more expertise to bear on the problem and generating innovative, creative and unexpected solutions and empowering new people to find solutions.

"There is this constant need for different bits of the system to feed off other bits of the system and inter-relate, and in doing that what the different bits of the system do are unexpected things that lead to unexpected consequences that were probably better than you thought of in the first place." - Stakeholder

6. How can capacity for systems leadership be developed?

The development of capacity for systems leadership was mostly discussed in the interviews in terms of how the capacity of individuals can be developed and how those interviewed felt their own capacity had been developed. It was more difficult to identify how capacity in organisations and systems themselves can be developed.

Because successful systems leadership was seen to lie to some degree in particular attributes, characteristics and personality types, there were seen to be **limits to what can be trained or learnt**. Development based around competency and technical skills was not seen as the way forward, and it was felt that there was not much scope for developing people who fundamentally fail to grasp systems leadership and for whom it is a way of working that runs entirely counter to basic preferences, styles, values and characteristics. However, it was widely felt that the mind-set or ways or thinking of systems leadership can be nurtured and developed.

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

Experiential learning was seen as a vital aspect of capacity development. Secondments, shadowing, job swaps and other opportunities to work in different parts of the system were seen as valuable. Opportunities to work with and learn from people struggling with the same sorts of issues, and people who had successfully provided systems leadership, were valued as well as their formalising in mentoring, coaching and action learning sets.

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

Opportunities for **personal development through experimentation and for reflection** were seen as very important and taking a very reflective approach to one’s own experiences. People talked about learning from making themselves reflect on situations where there had not been the expected breakthrough or transformational change, where the group had failed to show collective courage or magnanimity. They also noted the importance of knowing and reflecting on your own style, deliberately working to develop skills in areas that are not a natural strength or to compensate for default behaviours.

The importance of developing **confidence**, particularly to work with uncertainty, was also noted – people talked about beginning to see a virtuous circle where successful systems leadership builds confidence in the approach which and a willingness to take risks and cede ground based on confidence in the potential benefits.

Theory was also, to varying degrees, seen as important – with opportunities to interpret and apply it in your own setting and through interaction with others. People had valued their exposure to strong theoretical thinkers and international experts in formal learning setting and in their own academic learning or reading, or had sought out experts in different areas to develop their own thinking and practice. Part of the value of exposure to theory was that it enabled one to reframe, reflect on and better understand what had been learnt experientially.

Several interviewees talked very positively about **formal peer group development programmes** provided for example by the Virtual Staff College, the National College for Teaching and Leadership, the Cabinet Office and the ‘Leaders for London’ programme, although this style of learning did not suit everyone. The value of training with peers from a wide range of professional groups, rather than reinforcing professional identity and silos, was emphasised. Formal learning also creates a cohort of people across organisations who had a common language in systems leadership. It was felt to help with the ‘naming’ of systems leadership, making it very explicit as a style of working. The importance of this given the emergence of new groups of local leaders – such as General Practitioners (GPs) and CCGs – was emphasised.

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



7. Concluding comments

The interviews with systems leaders in child and family services and wider public sector roles highlight some clear and consistent themes about the nature and the practice of systems leadership. It starts with a high level objective or ambition which, because it is rooted in the inter-dependencies inherent in systems, can only be addressed through a systems-based approach. Leadership means responsibility for more than just your part of the system – it means responsibility for the whole system, and for the interfaces between systems. So it is about stepping outside individual organisational identities and objectives, placing a collective priority above organisational priorities, ceding power or territory, and a more ‘magnanimous’ approach to others. This is seen as one of its greatest challenges, and is perhaps an area where systems leadership comes most abruptly up against intra-organisational systems and cultures. Place-based accountability rather than national accountability is seen as a real enabler to the mind set involved.

Systems leadership is seen as emerging from but also a necessary response to complexity and financial constraint. It is seen as the only way of managing these conditions. It is also enabled by structural change because it disturbs the system and creates the opportunity for radical change. However, these conditions put pressure on systems leadership, and it would be wrong to see systems leadership as having infinite capacity to manage them. Systems leadership is not a silver bullet and not something to be elevated above other forms of leadership – it links with, builds on and must be supported by other leadership approaches, by partnership, and by technical management and operational capacity.

Systems leadership requires the right authorising environment to flourish. At an organisational level this means systems leadership at the highest level, a culture that values learning and risk taking, organisational structures that allow integration, and building systems leadership into staff selection and performance review. At a local political level it means commitment to collective ambition, acceptance of risk, and space for systems leaders to operate. At a national political level it means a systems-based construction of policy challenges, frameworks or incentives for systems leadership, and freeing local leaders from prescription; it would be supported by more horizontal integration of government and more flexibility in financial flow structures.

The interviews were exceptionally rich and reflective. There was a strong sense, in some, of participants’ conceptualisation of systems leadership taking shape through the interview: the interview provided an opportunity to identify, ‘name’ and articulate ideas that had not always been brought together or identified as a particular form of leadership.

Appendix: Research methods

We used qualitative interviewing methods because we needed to understand each participant’s own construction of systems leadership – whether they recognised the term, how they define it, what they see it as involving – rather than structuring data collection around our own framing of it. We did include a broad definition in our approach letter to participants in order to orient them to the study objectives, referring to systems leadership as ‘leading across organisational and geopolitical boundaries, beyond individual professional disciplines, within a range of organisational and stakeholder cultures, often without direct managerial control’. Using open-ended and responsive questioning allowed us to surface participants’ perspectives and framing of the topic and to clarify and explore in depth.

We wanted to interview people who were likely to recognise the concept of systems leadership as part of their own behaviours and mind set, whatever term they used for it, and to be among the more advanced in their understanding and use of it. This meant creating a sample frame of people who were viewed - by the Virtual Staff College, the Research Advisory Group, our Co-Production Group or by the research team – as systems leaders. We created a short specification and invited suggestions from these groups.

A selection was then made to ensure we had good coverage across the seven sample groups, and individuals were approached by joint letter from the Virtual Staff College and the research team. Fifteen of those approached declined to participate, cancelled and were not able to reschedule an arranged interview, or passed the invitation on to a colleague (which we did not pursue because our selection had been of specific individuals, see table below). They usually cited work pressures as the reason although there was sometimes an indication that they did not feel able to discuss systems leadership in detail.

LA Chief Executives	0
DCASS	4
DCSs	1
Second/third tier LA	1
Third sector leaders	3
Other sectors	5
Stakeholders	1

A total of 29 interviews were carried out, by two members of the research team, between November 2012 and February 2013. Interviews were conducted face-to-face (with one telephone interview), digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, and generally lasted 60-90 minutes. They followed a topic guide which identified the key themes for coverage, but the order and actual questions were adapted flexibly to each interviewee. The key themes in the topic guide were:

- definitions and key concepts
- systems leadership in practice
- changing context of systems leadership
- permitting and inhibiting conditions
- distributed leadership
- linkages with outcomes

Data from verbatim transcripts were analysed using Framework, which is a thematic analysis approach in which data are summarised in a series of thematic matrices or tables¹⁰. This study had five thematic matrices (see below). In each, columns represented sub-topics and rows represented individual interviews, ordered by sample group. The method facilitates both within-case analysis (exploring the linkages with an individual interview) and within-theme analysis (looking across the sample, or sample groups, at the range of views expressed).

Analysis began about mid-way through fieldwork. The framework reflected the objectives of the study, the issues addressed in the interviews so far and the research team’s developing conceptualisation of systems leadership. The five themes (each covered by one matrix) and the sub-topics (each represented by a column on the matrix) were:

<p>Background</p> <p>Participant background</p> <p>Local and organisational context</p> <p>Systems mentioned in interview</p>	<p>Defining systems leadership</p> <p>Familiarity and self-identification</p> <p>Meaning: key concepts</p> <p>Behaviours of systems leadership</p> <p>Characteristics, attributes, personalities, attitudes</p> <p>Other comments</p>
<p>Other aspects of systems leadership</p> <p>Distributed leadership</p> <p>Relations to other leadership; management; partnership</p> <p>Links with improved outcomes</p> <p>Examples of successful systems leadership</p> <p>Absence / poor systems leadership</p> <p>Other comments</p>	<p>Conditions for systems leadership</p> <p>Enabling conditions</p> <p>Constraining conditions</p> <p>Political, social, economic change</p> <p>Systems leadership in different systems</p> <p>Wider stakeholders</p> <p>Other comments</p>
<p>Developing systems leadership</p> <p>Developing capacity</p> <p>Their own learning</p> <p>Other comments</p>	

The matrices were reviewed in detail to develop the analysis in this paper, returning to the transcripts for more detailed review and to extract verbatim quotations.

10 Ritchie J, Spencer L, O’Connor W, Barnard M and Morrell G (forthcoming, 2013) ‘Analysis in practice’ in (eds) Ritchie J, Lewis J, McNaughton Nicolls C and Ormston R *Qualitative Research Practice: a guide for social science students and researchers* 2nd edition London: Sage;

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