Mobilizing Change in Public Services: Insights from a systems leadership development intervention

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Abstract

This paper explores the mobilization of systems change through analysis of a 'systems leadership' development intervention aimed to develop the capacity of cross-sector partnerships to tackle 'wicked' health and social care challenges. Particular attention is given to the role of independent 'enablers' in opening up 'adaptive spaces' where partners can navigate competing priorities and develop new ways of working. This paper contributes to existing literature by providing an overview of recent developments in the field of public leadership, applying these to the challenge of developing systems leadership capacity and considering implications for future research, development and practice.

Key words

Introduction

Over recent years the idea of whole system(s) change in the design and delivery of public services has fuelled a growing interest in leadership and influence across organizational boundaries. Emerging perspectives include 'collaborative' (Ansell and Gash, 2012), 'collective' (Contractor et al. 2012; Ospina 2017), 'complexity' (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017, 2018), 'distributed' (Gronn 2002; Spillane 2006), 'integrative' (Crosby and Bryson 2010), 'shared' (Pearce and Conger 2003) and now 'system(s)' (Ghate et al. 2013; Senge et al. 2015) leadership. Despite differences in the origins and uptake of these concepts they are united by a commitment to extending leadership theory and practice beyond the characteristics and behaviors of individual *leaders* to a contextually situated understanding of the collective and relational dynamics of *leadership* practice (Denis et al. 2012).

For a concept that has existed little more than a decade, system(s) leadership has made particularly impressive inroads into policy and practice and is now the preferred approach within health (Timmins 2015; Vize, 2017), education (Hopkins and Higham, 2007) and local government (Richardson et al. 2016) in the UK and elsewhere because of its focus on coordination, collaboration and change in complex multi-stakeholder environments. Despite the enthusiasm for such an approach, however, little consideration tends to be given to the tensions, paradoxes and dilemmas this poses for leaders and their organizations or how they can be addressed. This paper explores these issues through analysis of a 'systems leadership' development intervention that sought to develop the capacity of cross-sector partnerships to tackle 'wicked' health and social care challenges.

Whilst leadership development interventions typically focus on enhancing individual and/or organizational leadership capacity (Day 2000; Day et al. 2014) *Systems Leadership: Local Vision* took a place-based approach, seeking to embed the capacity for effective collaboration between partners by working together on a shared challenge with the support of a skilled system change facilitator (referred to as an 'enabler'). Through analysis of this initiative this paper provides an empirical account of how 'enablers' can help cross-sector partnerships navigate between competing priorities and perspectives by opening up 'adaptive spaces' (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017, 2018) where members can engage in processes of *conflicting*, *linking up* and *sponsoring* (ibid) that are key to mobilising systems change.

This paper contributes to the extant literature in three main ways. Firstly, it provides an overview of recent developments in the field of public leadership, drawing on insights from the fields of public administration and leadership studies. Secondly, it applies these concepts to the challenge of developing leadership capacity through evaluation of a place-based 'systems leadership' development intervention. Thirdly, it draws out implications for future research, development and practice in the area of systems leadership.

Background and literature review

Changing discourses of public leadership

Bryson et al. (2014) trace the evolution of public administration theory and practice through a number of phases, suggesting that New Public Management (NPM), with its emphasis on economic rationality and the 'market' that has underpinned policy and practice in the UK, US and other industrialized economies since the 1980s, is being replaced in complex, cross-boundary environments by an approach referred to as 'New

Public Service' (NPS) (Denhardt and Denhardt 2011). NPS recognizes the importance of "inclusive dialogue and deliberation" (Bryson et al. 2014, p. 447), including representatives from many sectors in the creation and maintenance of public value. This, Bryson and colleagues suggest, extends beyond traditional measures of *efficiency* and *effectiveness* to incorporate "the full range of democratic and constitutional values" (ibid, p. 446).

The evolving discourse of public administration mirrors developments in leadership theory and practice more generally, with a shift in focus from hierarchical towards networked and collective modes of engagement (Carter et al. 2015; Cullen-Lester & Yammarino 2016; Oc and Bashur 2013). In an extensive review of the literature Dinh et al. (2014, p. 37) note that whilst "leadership scholars have more often focused on the isolated effects of leaders or followers at one or another level of analysis and within short time intervals", over the past two decades there has been a rapid growth in leadership theory and research that recognises leadership as a "a complex phenomenon that operates across multiple levels of analysis […] involves multiple mediating and moderating factors […] and takes place over substantial periods of time" (ibid, p. 37). The literature, however, remains fragmented – with theory and research often neglected by those faced with the practical challenge of leading in complex and contested environments (Provan and Lemaire 2012).

In practice, discourses of leadership and management are strongly influenced by contextual factors such as social attitudes, technological developments and the changing nature of work (Western 2013). Three key strands of the 'modernization' discourse, as identified in Pedersen and Hartley's (2008) analysis of UK and Danish public services, include: (1) an "emphasis on devolution of decision making from the central organs of the state to local organizations and local communities" (p. 329); (2) a

focus on "improving the quality of service delivery, performance, (self)-assessment and building of organizational and managerial capacity" (p. 330); and (3) greater emphasis on the 'choice' agenda "… by which is meant increasing the choice of service provider and service provision for individual users and citizens" (p. 330). Rather than giving greater clarity, legitimacy or authority to public service managers, however, Pedersen and Hartley suggest that these principles require them to "grapple with multiple and often competing expectations, demands, discourses and strategic dilemmas" (p. 333) that are hard, if not impossible, to resolve. In this context, "[l]eadership has become the watchword – even mantra – for public service managers who must continue to provide ever-improving high-quality and reliable services while also dismantling and reconfiguring these same services" (ibid, p. 333).

Wicked problems, complexity and public value

NPS and related concepts draw attention to the complex and contested nature of public leadership in which "local and national politicians are now just one set of actors among many in polycentric systems of governance" (Hartley 2011, p. 206), with whom they need to collaborate in order to "address the complex, or 'wicked' cross-cutting problems […] facing contemporary societies" (ibid, p. 206).

A move towards more fluid and networked forms of governance, that extend beyond organization and sector boundaries, highlights the limitations of traditional leadership theory in acknowledging the range of a people, processes and structures (what Huxham and Vangen, 2005 refer to as 'leadership media') that contribute towards public leadership. Whilst Moore (1995) placed the public manager at the centre of the 'strategic triangle', because of the key role they played in mobilising public value, legitimacy and support, and operational capacity, the situation is arguably far more complex in an NPS context. Bryson et al. (2017) suggest that the "new world…" is a

"… polycentric, multi-nodal, multi-sector, multi-level, multi-actor, multi-logic, multi-media, multi-practice place characterized by complexity, dynamism, uncertainty and ambiguity in which a wide range of actors are engaged in public value creation and do so in shifting configurations" (ibid, p. 641).

Bryson et al. (2017) highlight that in a shared power world a diverse range of actors, practices, arenas, challenges and functions contribute towards public value, noting its potential to be "hegemonic or contested" (p. 647). Given that what is/isn't valued is influenced by dynamics of culture, power and privilege it becomes necessary to consider public value as socially constructed and the process of mobilizing the strategic triangle as one of negotiating meaning and understanding across diverse stakeholders and agendas (Weick 2001; Pye 2005) rather than implementing common processes to deliver agreed outcomes.

Grint (2005, 2008) draws on Rittel and Webber's (1973) typology of 'tame' and 'wicked' problems to illustrate differences between leadership, management and command and their likely effectiveness in addressing particular challenges. A tame problem, he suggests, may be complicated but can be resolved through rational analysis and organized process – effectively calling for 'management'. A wicked problem on the other hand is complex and 'messy', with no obvious solution. Such a situation, Grint argues, calls for 'leadership' and involves mobilizing collective expertise to determine the nature of the problem and to gain agreement on a preferred course of action. Finally, a critical problem is defined as something that requires rapid, decisive action, where there is insufficient time to build consensus or apply process and tends to be associated with an autocratic/directive leadership approach.

Whilst Grint's framework bears similarities to other work on leadership in complex contexts (e.g. Comfort and Resodihardjo 2013; Snowden and Boone 2007; Uhl-Bien et

al. 2007) it highlights that problems are not readily identifiable as 'wicked', 'tame' or 'critical' in of themselves but are socially constructed as such through a process of collective sensemaking. This draws attention to the importance of 'framing' (Fairhurst and Sarr 1996) and 'adaptive work' (Heifetz and Laurie 1997; Heifetz et al. 2009) in building and maintaining commitment and momentum to tackle shared challenges and the inevitable tensions between differing accounts.

Farazmand (2003) traces the evolution of complexity and systems thinking in public management through an analysis of chaos and transformation theories, highlighting the dialectical tensions within them that frequently go unnoticed. He argues:

> It is […] astonishing to observe how ignorant, or reluctant at best, the modern Western scientific community has been about the dialectical nature of chaos and transformation theories […] yet all the discoveries of this very community in both natural and social sciences have proven the fundamental law of the dialectical nature of change and continuity, of chaos and order, equilibrium and disequilibrium, linear and nonlinear processes of change, and stability and turbulence. (ibid, p. 347)

A dialectical approach is also evident in the work of Ralph Stacey and colleagues and their notion of 'complex responsive processes of relating' (CRPR). From this perspective, "the role of the leader *emerges*, and is continually iterated, in *social processes of recognition*" (Stacey 2010, p. 214, original emphasis) and the "practice of effective leadership is that of participating skilfully in interaction with others in reflective and imaginative ways, aware of the potentially destructive processes one may be caught up in" (ibid, p. 217). For Stacey, leaders can never step outside of the processes in which they are embedded and leadership unfolds through evolving patterns of conversation and interaction that cannot be detached from their context.

In a recent synthesis of the literature on leadership and organizational adaptability Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) highlight the importance of 'adaptive spaces' that enable integration and alignment between formal organizational structures and processes and emergent, entrepreneurial activity. From extensive empirical research they identify a series of principles and practices of 'enabling leadership' that facilitate processes of *conflicting*, *linking-up* and *sponsoring* in complex adaptive systems (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017, 2018).

The rise of systems leadership

In recent years the concept of 'system(s) leadership' has gained increasing popularity within health, local government, education and other areas of public service as an approach to leading and influencing across organizational and sector boundaries (Senge et al. 2015; Timmins 2015; Vize 2017). According to a review by Ghate et al. (2013) systems leadership has two key characteristics: (a) "it is a collective form of leadership…" concerned with "the concerted effort of many people working together at different places in the system and at different levels", and (b) it "crosses boundaries, both physical and virtual, existing simultaneously in multiple dimensions" (ibid, p. 6).

Whilst the notion of systems leadership builds on earlier conceptualisations of shared, distributed and collective leadership its development and application has been strongly influenced by policy and practice (Timmins 2015). Moving beyond a focus on leadership *within* organizations that still informs much theory and research in this field (see, for example, Bolden 2011; Holm and Fairhurst 2018; Sweeney et al. 2019) systems leadership shifts attention to leadership *beyond* organizational boundaries and *across* the wider network of groups, organizations, communities and stakeholders involved in creating and sustaining whole systems change.

As such, systems leadership has primarily been conceptualized and operationalized as a means for mobilizing large-scale transformation and change rather than as a means for enhancing organizational performance. The transformative potential of systems leadership in education, for example, is outlined as follows:

> System leadership arises when political leaders and school leaders openly debate and agree on the moral purpose of education, that is, the kind of people that education creates for what kind of society, and then work in partnership to agree and to implement both the means by which such purposes can be realized in practice and the criteria by which success in such an endeavour is to be judged. (Hargreaves 2007, cited in Hatcher 2008, p. 25)

Despite the rationale for a more systemic approach, however, this is not simply an ideological question but one born of pragmatic necessity. In the last decade, alongside the increased focus on whole systems working, people-centred design, and integration of public services, many countries have faced a significant decline in public funding, whilst demand for services continues to rise. The call for systems leadership, therefore, is set within a context of public scrutiny and austerity, which Hambleton (2017) describes as a "devolution deception". Despite the rhetoric of greater local involvement in decision-making, centralized control mechanisms and decreasing funding greatly limit the capacity of local leaders to deliver services, whilst at the same time shifting accountability and responsibility from the central state to local partners.

With this in mind, this paper explores the potential for 'systems leadership' to enhance our understanding of public leadership and the creation of public value. This is done through evaluation of a 'systems leadership' intervention that sought to develop the capacity of cross-sector partnerships in health and social care to address 'wicked' challenges. Whilst much existing work remains either focussed on the development of

individual leaders (e.g. Stuart and Wilcox 2017) or the characteristics of the wider network (e.g. Crosby and Bryson 2010) this paper explores the role of skilled facilitators ('enablers') as boundary spanners and catalysts (Morse 2010), who help mobilize systems change by opening up adaptive spaces (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017, 2018) where partners can work through areas of conflict, link-up approaches and activities and mobilize engagement with sponsors and key stakeholders. Such activities, it is suggested, are important in helping complex multi-stakeholder partnerships negotiate the 'strategic triangle' of authorization and legitimacy, capabilities and public value (Moore 1995; Bryson et al. 2017) and mobilise change.

Research context and method

The empirical evidence for this paper comes from an independent evaluation of a systems leadership development initiative conducted by the authors. The initiative, *Systems Leadership: Local Vision* (LV), was designed and delivered by the Leadership Centre (www.leadershipcentre.org.uk) on behalf of the Systems Leadership Steering Group (SLSG) (a cross-sector network of senior public sector leaders) in order to enhance systems leadership capacity in health and social care.

The aims of LV, as outlined on the programme website (http://leadershipforchange.org.uk/systems-leadership-local-vision/), were to:

1. Assist in the development of local solutions to a local 'wicked'/intractable issue through leadership development;
2. Ensure that the leadership learning is left in place to allow it to be used for other issues;
3. Draw together lessons and learning about leadership behaviours and development that will help resolve future wicked issues.

The intervention was applied and problem-focussed, creating the opportunity to develop by working collaboratively with partners from a range of sectors. Rather than taking the form of a programme for individual learners LV allocated an experienced systems leadership facilitator (referred to as an 'enabler') to work with people in localities to make progress towards addressing a shared challenge.

The first cohort of LV provided support to 25 place-based projects selected (out of 40 applications) against the criteria outlined in Table 1. Successful places were awarded funding for an 'enabler' to support the project, as well as involvement in a facilitated learning network and some tailored consultancy support. Subsequent cohorts brought the number of LV and associated place-based projects to around 50 across England, making it a significant nationwide initiative.

 [Table 1 About Here]

The evaluation of LV took a mixed-methods approach, conducted in two phases over a one-year period. Phase 1 involved preliminary scoping and analysis, including: review of academic and practitioner literature; in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (n=14); online survey of project leads (11 responses); review of prior survey responses (n=38); review of previous interviews (n=11); review of project documentation; local area data profiles (n=25). Phase 2 involved the development of a number of case studies of LV cohort 1 and 2 projects, including 4 full case studies, 3 mid-level and 5 mini-cases. Cases were chosen to cover a range of places, projects and enablers. In each case a range of sources were used, including interviews, survey data, memorandum of understanding (MOU) and project reports. See Table 2 for a summary of case studies and supporting evidence.

[Table 2 About Here]

In total 62 interviews, 49 online survey responses, 4 site visits, 25 local area data profiles, and numerous project reports, documentation and minutes were collated and analyzed. As a systems-based evaluation attempts were made to take the wider context into account, along with a thematic approach to the analysis, exploring a range of factors shaping outcomes at national as well as local level.

Narrative cases were constructed from available evidence to give a sense of how projects developed and evolved, including start up conditions, organizational and political context, key partners and stakeholders, the role played by LV enablers, project outcomes and experiences, data and metrics. Cross-checking of findings and interpretations across members of the research team enabled verification of case study evidence and the identification of higher–level themes.

Findings

This section summarizes insights from the evaluation, with particular emphasis on the role of 'enablers' in creating and sustaining 'adaptive spaces' (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017, 2018) in which partners could work through tensions and challenges and build alignment and commitment. Findings are structured according to Crosby and Bryson's (2010) integrative leadership framework, which identifies five key dimensions that underpin leadership in cross-sector partnerships: (1) initial conditions, (2) processes and practices, (3) structure and governance, (4) contingencies and constraints, and (5) outcomes and accountabilities. Within each area consideration is given to the ways in which LV supported the development of the leadership capacity of individuals, groups, organizations and the wider system, in order to address common challenges.

1. Initial conditions

Whilst a number of common criteria were used to select LV sites there was significant variation in terms of project focus and the local context (see Table 2), which impacted on how projects were conceived and developed.

The LV selection process, overseen by staff at the Leadership Centre, involved local partners committing to address a shared 'wicked' problem, of relevance and benefit to several stakeholders as well as the local community. Enablers used the initial engagement process to build a shared sense of commitment towards, and ownership of, the selected challenge, building on previous work and, in many cases, their own prior experience of working in the place.

> LV gave [our collaborative project] a bit more energy. It was a combination of the value of process and incentive that helped. We've been doing this for two years now and there is still much to be done… (LV Project Partner, BDP)

Before engagement there was a careful matching process to ensure that enablers would have sufficient credibility and support in order to operate effectively in the LV site. In several cases existing relationships and/or knowledge of places were used as a means for accelerating the development of open and trusting relationships. Enablers were recruited for their expertise in leadership development and mobilizing systems change, with a focus on building and embedding collective systems leadership capacity (see Atkinson et al. 2015 for further details).

LV encouraged partners in an area to work together on a shared priority that would have beneficial health and wellbeing outcomes for service users. The enabler played an important part in helping to articulate and build commitment across a diverse range of stakeholders that supported coalition building and the mobilization of energy to address a chosen wicked problem.

We have a strong history of partnership working […] as demonstrated through our involvement in the whole place community budget programme. I believe that this programme has extended these principles by allowing us to work with important third sector providers, such as Age UK, to address these issues in partnership with important providers. (LV Project Partner, West Cheshire)

2. Processes and practices

As an independent facilitator, specifically invited to work with partners, the LV enabler had a unique opportunity to explore issues that were difficult for those within the system to raise themselves, and to hold partners to account for their role in addressing them. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreed by partners at the outset was seen as a key part of articulating the nature of the challenge and building joint commitment to action, acting as a 'boundary object' (Morse 2010) that united them around a shared purpose. In practice, the degree to which the MOU stood as a live, robust document varied, reflecting inevitable variations across locations in the degree to which it was taken seriously and/or seen as a precursor to the 'real' work of systems leadership.

I think one of the biggest impacts [the enablers] had was in a couple of workshops they ran with the operational managers and team leaders in making them understand that they had to change and why they had to change... [One enabler] in particular was challenging people when they were saying "well this is what we do anyway" and that approach was actually being challenged, and people started to get what it was we were trying to do. I think it might not have happened without them… (LV Project Partner, Solihull)

Enablers drew on a wide range of expertise in order to mobilize collective capacity and systems change in localities. The focus was on experiential learning and problem-based

development in order to highlight the limitations of current ways of working and help stakeholders identify and embrace more inclusive approaches.

> The enabler was able to point out the behaviors we were demonstrating and the language we were using which was really helpful, for example saying 'what I am observing at this point is this'. (LV Project Partner, Dudley)

There were variations between how enablers worked in different areas although a common feature was being flexible and responsive to local needs. Enablers took a non-hierarchical and inclusive approach to building systems leadership capacity. In several projects they created opportunities for participants to engage directly with community partners, which served as a trigger for learning and reflection. In several cases people working in sites commented on how their engagement with LV had reconnected them with a genuine sense of responsibility and purpose. This improved understanding, awareness and commitment led to tangible benefits and increased capacity to work collaboratively on other issues beyond the LV project.

> [The enabler] helped us understand the system better and therefore begin to appreciate why it wasn't as we wanted. This insight allowed us to make suggestions/ recommendations to the safeguarding board. (LV Project Partner, Hackney)

3. Structure and governance

The LV selection process required senior-level support, as well as a financial contribution from the local Health and Wellbeing Board. Projects frequently ran alongside other place-based service integration initiatives, as well as joint funding sources such as the Better Care Fund, which provided a platform for further systems-based working. The link between local and national priorities, as well as current and future funding sources proved important in maintaining focus and momentum, although

on occasion LV processes and outcomes were disrupted by related initiatives that were not based on a systems approach.

> Elected members have been very important in this. If they do not think that this is the way to go, it can't happen. The work of the Health and Well Being Board showed that the elected members did buy in to this new way of looking at things, and this has permeated throughout the City. The political leadership is absolutely critical. (LV Project Partner, Plymouth)

LV offered a mechanism for people who do not always work together to collaborate on shared projects. This gave opportunities for junior staff to be empowered to take action, as well as increasing community voice. The primary focus was on building capacity for networked governance and collaboration – achieved as much through a change in perspective as skills development. LV enablers played an important leadership role in bridging and connecting stakeholders and facilitating difficult conversations.

> What has been achieved is a commitment to conversation in an open environment, sharing views, developing trust, and deepening relationships. Many of the participants had worked with each other for years, but there was a perception that these conversations were something new, that people were really getting to know each other and that people were beginning to form more effective working relationships. (LV Enabler)

As a consequence of developing a more systemic view of leadership, partners in a number of areas commented on how this had empowered people to take greater responsibility for their contribution and enhanced ownership and buy-in from others who play a key role in supporting and sustaining action. Such an approach opened up space for new leaders to emerge, working in non-hierarchical ways to build links and span organizational agendas.

4. Contingencies and constraints

The most widely cited barrier to LV projects was insufficient political and organizational support. Enablers observed that whilst junior staff were often quick to understand systems leadership and enthusiastic to get involved, without positional authority they struggled to implement change. Tensions also arose between organizational and political leaders, with competing values and agendas that contradicted a 'whole system' approach. Enablers had an important role to play in mediating competing perspectives and engaging key stakeholders. This was often done behind the scenes and could be challenging to achieve in the time allocated.

> There was an intellectual acceptance of the need for systems thinking and action, but limited understanding about what this really meant in day-to-day leadership behaviour. They note that new systems leadership behaviours may have emerged through the project, but it needed constant attention and facilitation to embed. (LV Enabler)

LV was based on the premise of building local capacity to work in collaboration to address wicked problems. The ability of the enabler to facilitate and embed a systems leadership approach, however, was dependent on tapping into existing capability and capacity in places. Initial conditions, as described earlier, were an important factor, influencing not only the speed at which new approaches could be developed but the capacity of the system to respond. Likewise, the enabler needed to begin planning for their exit very early on in order to reduce the reliance of local partners on their continued involvement. The ability to put in place a transition strategy, however, was challenging in a context of restructuring and change where there was no guarantee of continuity of staff over time.

> The culture of the Local Authority was one of successful project management – being very clear about aims and objectives, governance, delegation and reporting back to a

board. The kind of messy and complex work involved in system leadership was counter-cultural to them. (LV Enabler)

Whilst LV projects were focused on tackling problems that would bring benefits to the health and wellbeing of people in local areas, this needed to be achieved in a context of budget cuts and rigorous external monitoring and accountability. Tensions between notions of efficiency, effectiveness and democratic/social value often emerged and placed pressure on the ability of LV projects to deliver broader public/social value. Enablers played an important role in surfacing and negotiating between competing value logics and supporting sites in identifying additional funding opportunities to develop, embed and maintain projects.

5. Outcomes and accountabilities

The principle outcome of LV in many places was facilitating a shift in mindset towards a more systemic and collaborative approach to leadership. Where there was senior level support for a systems leadership approach this gave permission for actors from across the system to take up a leadership role, supporting the development of more a more inclusive and collective culture of leadership.

> The energy in the city at the moment is good. I have this real sense of opportunity that things can be delivered out of silos, we can break down organizational boundaries, we can look at what the people who use our services actually need, to be able to deliver collaboratively. (LV Project Partner, Plymouth)

The project initiation and MOU process, national level championing by the SLSG and alignment with government policy gave legitimacy and credibility to a systems leadership approach that increased the likelihood of local partners to engage. One of the significant impacts of a more inclusive approach, as advocated through LV, was a willingness of staff at all levels to step-forward and take a more proactive role in

tackling challenges. A key part of the enabler role was building the capacity of local projects to document and disseminate the learning and impact from their work in order to build a case for future investment. The Leadership Centre also played an important role in sharing learning from across projects and building connections between people in different locations.

The evaluation suggested that LV projects produced positive outcomes that extended beyond purely functional concerns. For most localities LV was one of a number of inter-related initiatives linked to strategic development and transformation, although the role of the enabler was distinctive and often an important catalyst for change. There was evidence from around half of the case studies of LV being used to leverage additional funding and development opportunities. There was also evidence of a commitment to working with a broader range of partners and to taking joint responsibility for achieving improved outcomes for the community.

> The main difference will be that we are starting to listen and learn what the community wants from us, and that we are able to deliver a more bespoke service which meets the needs of the population. (LV Project Participant, Gloucestershire)

Discussion

The case study outlined above illustrates a number of ways in which 'enablers' can facilitate the emergence of 'adaptive spaces' (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017, 2018) in which partners in multi-stakeholder initiatives can develop their capacity to lead and collaborate across boundaries. Use of Crosby and Bryson's (2010) integrative leadership framework has shown how initial conditions, processes and practices, structures and governance, contingencies and constraints, and outcomes and accountabilities have an important bearing on how projects develop, including their likelihood of success. Whilst Crosby and Bryson's work, however, is based on analysis

of established partnerships through its application to a developmental situation, where partnerships are still being formed, it has been possible to illustrate the potential for independent 'enablers' to help catalyze systems change through 'enabling leadership' (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017, 2018).

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) identify five *principles* of enabling leadership (apply complexity thinking, enable adaptive space, leverage network structures, engage complexity dynamics, play in the pressures) and six *practices* of enabling leadership (brokerage, leveraging adaptive tension, linking up, tags and attractors, simple rules, network closure), each of which is illustrated to some degree within the case study evidence. Whilst LV 'enablers' are clearly not the only people to enact these principles and practices (indeed a fundamental part of their role is to develop and embed these capabilities across the wider system) it provides a useful terminology for articulating what they do.

The place-based approach of *Systems Leadership: Local Vision* offers an alternative to program-based interventions that are generally focused on 'leader' rather than 'leadership' development (Day 2000). Through the appointment of skilled and credible 'enablers' to work alongside local partners LV not only offered a means for developing individual and collective leadership *capacity*, but also providing *authorization and legitimacy* to projects and negotiating understandings of *public value* (Moore 2005; Bryson et al. 2017). The enabler has an important role to play as catalyst and boundary spanner through their expertise in facilitating the coming together of partners to address a shared challenge (Morse 2010). Such work often falters in the absence of impartial facilitation and the ability of enablers to hold partners to account and work through conflict, where necessary, is a significant leadership intervention in itself. Systems leadership, like other collective/shared forms of leadership, is fundamentally relational,

requiring trust, honesty and commitment to a shared purpose (Ghate et al. 2013; Vize 2017) although the inter-organizational, multi-stakeholder context in which this occurs poses particular challenges.

The tensions and contradictions that emerge within complex networks make it necessary for leaders to learn how to navigate competing agendas and value logics (Farazmand 2003; Hartley 2011; Petersen and Hartley 2008). The LV projects, and the enablers recruited to support them, assist in this process through facilitating the articulation of a shared narrative to underpin adaptive work (Heifetz and Laurie 1997). The enabler is, in effect, an intermediary, invited into places for a finite period of time to help progress collaboration and partnership-working in relation to a shared challenge.

There remain, of course, many significant constraints and barriers that enablers may struggle to address, although they do have a role to play in supporting local partners to identify solutions. Budget cuts (both actual and anticipated), for example, were a significant challenge in many sites, yet with the impetus created through LV many were able to secure additional funding linked to service integration. The emergent and opportunistic nature of this work may be characteristic of a systems leadership approach, with the need to quickly adapt and respond to changing contexts. Whilst it may be difficult to determine exactly when an LV project starts and ends, the ability of the enabler to prepare for their departure is a key aspect of building local capacity and avoiding dependency.

Scalability remains another significant challenge given the time it takes to establish relationships and to enable genuine dialogue. Enablers seem to have a particularly important role during project initiation and/or when progress slows due to intergroup conflict and/or competing agendas. The LV evaluation suggests that this is a relatively economical way of catalyzing systems change but is dependent on the availability of

experienced enablers, whose skillsets can be hard to assess or develop (Atkinson et al. 2015). The ability of enablers to embed systems leadership capacity in places is also dependent on senior level engagement and local expertise and capacity, including a commitment to working in a collaborative and inclusive manner and providing the time, resource and recognition required for this complex and difficult work.

The potential for systems leadership to deliver the transformation sought in health, social care and other public services, however, is far from certain. Indeed, reflecting on insights from the education sector, Hatcher (2008, p. 28) claims that "[t]he dominant discourse of system leadership represents a technocratic managerial solution based on a claimed expertise in the management and leadership of change". Far from promoting greater inclusion and democratic representation, he suggests that: "… system leadership can best be understood as a reconfiguring of state power, attempting to create new vehicles for the implementation of policy under the control of a reliable new technocratic management cadre" (ibid, p. 30).

The co-option of conceptual frameworks for political purposes is not new. Indeed, Hatcher (2005) and Gosling et al. (2009) make similar observations in relation to how the concept of 'distributed leadership' has been adopted in schools and universities respectively to promote active engagement in leadership of the institution with little attempt to address underlying hierarchy and power differentials. Such analyses call for a more critical engagement with both the theory and practice of concepts such as 'systems leadership' and the need to expose underlying assumptions to critical scrutiny.

Hambleton's (2014) work on 'inclusive city leadership' identifies that place-based governance is framed by a range of socio-cultural, governmental and economic factors, and contained within environmental limits. These are significant aspects of context that impact not only on the development and operationalization of systems leadership but

also the readiness and capacity of people, organizations and places to collaborate in addressing shared challenges. Whilst, for example, there are strong calls for a systems leadership approach in health and social care across the UK continuing expectations to demonstrate effectiveness and efficiency, as defined within an NPM approach to public services (Bryson et al. 2014), may mitigate against genuine collaboration. Indeed, literature on systems leadership highlights the paradoxical nature of such work and the need for leaders, managers and organizations to juggle contradictory expectations and demands (Ghate et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2016). Whilst such issues are now commonly recognized in theory and research there is still a long way to go before they are fully acknowledged in practice, with the continuing tendency for much of this work to focus on the development of 'system leaders' rather than 'systems leadership', likely to accentuate the problem.

Conclusion

In recent years systems leadership has increasingly been proposed as means for mobilizing large-scale, transformative change. Systems leadership initiatives, such as the one discussed in this paper, have the potential to generate public value in cross-sector partnerships yet their capacity to do so requires careful consideration of the political context in which they are situated and the broader agendas behind them. It is hard not to appreciate the ideological argument for more inclusive, systems leadership, nor the pragmatic value of collaborating across boundaries to address 'wicked' challenges. The promise of systems leadership, however, risks becoming empty rhetoric if it does not look beyond the neoliberal drive for a market-based approach, which construes public services in functional rather than relational terms (Connell et al. 2009). Instead, a focus on "the full range of democratic and constitutional values" (Bryson et al. 2014, p. 446) implied in more recent conceptions of public value must be

maintained, along with open and honest dialogue that engenders a genuine sense of trust and relationship.

Analysis of the case study in this paper highlights the potential role of independent system change 'enablers' in mobilizing place-based systems leadership through opening up 'adaptive spaces' where partners can work through conflict and foster new ways of working. It is likely, however, that for initiatives such as this to be successful they must be complemented by a range of other interventions that support individuals, groups, organizations, partnerships and communities to develop the resilience necessary to continue creating public value in a complex, ambiguous and contested world, and to push back against unrealistic expectations and demands as and when required.

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- The extent to which the project related to a 'breakthrough' issue across a locality that involved a range of sectors and stakeholders.

- Ability to demonstrate new ways of working in support of delivering integrated services.

- Evidence of seeking to achieve measurable achievements in health, care and wellbeing.

- Commitment to applying what they learned about Systems Leadership to other issues, and to sharing their learning so that other areas could benefit,

- Senior-level political support and a funding commitment of £10,000 from their local Health and Wellbeing Board.

Table 1 – Selection criteria for LV projects

Place	Project focus	LV cohort, type of case study	Data sources
Birmingham	Supporting older people stay well at home	Cohort 1, mini-case study	1 interview, project documentation & website
Blackpool	Transforming outcomes for 0-3s and their parents over the next 10 years	Cohort 2, mini-case study	1 interview, MOU, project documentation
Bournemouth, Dorset & Poole (BDP)	Developing a coherent local system to deliver integrated health and social care	Cohort 1, full case study	5 interviews, site visit, minutes of meetings, MOU
Dudley	Reducing hospital admissions and improving life experience for frail elderly through closer collaboration between health, social care and the voluntary and community sector	Cohort 1, mid-level case study	4 interviews, MOU, project reports
Gloucestershire	Reducing intergenerational obesity	Cohort 1, mid-level case study	4 interviews, project report, MOU
Hackney	Eliminating the risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) faced by girls and young women growing up in Hackney	Cohort 1, mid-level case study	4 interviews, project reports and minutes, MOU, enabler reports, press coverage, website
Kent	Further developing an approach to integrated commissioning	Cohort 1, mini-case study	1 interview, MOU, project reports and minutes
Plymouth	Tackling alcohol abuse and drinking culture in Plymouth	Cohort 1, full case study	9 interviews, site visit, MOU, project reports
Solihull	Supporting the development and implementation of integrated care	Cohort 2, full case study	5 interviews, site visit, MOU, survey responses
West Cheshire	Developing a multi-agency response to social isolation	Cohort 1, mini-case study	1 interview, MOU, website
Wiltshire	Creating a multi-agency 24/7 response for those with urgent care needs, supporting implementation of Better Care Fund	Cohort 1, full case study	8 interviews, site visit, MOU, project reports
Wirral	Improving access to affordable, healthy food and encouraging positive local attitudes towards food	Cohort 1, mini-case study	Project documentation, website, MOU, survey responses

Table 2 – Summary of case study sites and supporting evidence