

Collaborative System Leadership for Social Purpose

**A St George's House Consultation –
Wednesday 29th – Thursday, 30th March 2023**

REPORT





FOREWORD FROM THE ORGANISERS

St George's House brought together a deliberately diverse and imaginative group of people with leadership experience and insight. We convened for informed debate on the challenges of leading collaborative work for social purposes and on the opportunities for more efficient and effective collaboration.

Dame Mary Marsh chaired the discussion as a friend of the House and founder of Clore Social Leadership, from where the idea for the session emanated.

The discussion ranged broadly as well as deeply, drawing out the experience from participants sharing powerful testimony from deeply personal, lived experience and insights from:

- Leadership roles in small and large organisations;
- Global as well as local initiatives;
- The UK social sector (including voluntary, charity and social enterprise organisations) and statutory sector (including NHS and Local Authority organisations);
- Provision and funding roles.

A common purpose shone through and united the contributors and their day-to-day collaborations: a determination to contribute to the society in which we live, for the benefit of all.

The commitment to this common purpose is strong, sustained and needs to be. It is challenging work to overcome fragmentation of responsibilities, institutional self-interest and the challenges of leading through influence and persuasion. This probably explains why most of the exemplary case studies on collaborative leadership and effective joint working are place-based successes. Given the scale of change needed in the country, there is a real need for the gap to be filled in national and regional adoption and spread approaches. Why isn't there more funded capacity provided to support nationwide adoption and spread of practice worth spreading?

We have not documented here the various place-based case studies raised in discussion. Instead, this report highlights the common themes across the place-based examples raised. When discussing 'what's working' we explored how to act to deliver more, effective, faster collaboration. Unanimously, we agreed that respectful and trusting relationships between individuals is key to success. An outward mindset is useful, seeking 'win : win' ways forward that work for all and not just one's own organisation. We agreed that earning respect and building trust is time-intensive and that better work was required to engage more effectively across organisations working in the same field. Time is scarce and societal challenges are urgent.

Even like-minded individuals, with an outward and generous mindset, find it an effort to understand one another.

We spoke about the different constraints under which social sector and statutory sector institutions operate. We heard that these different constraints are common sources of frustration. In the experience of those present, these role constraints often affect postholders' relationships with counterparts. A strong feeling from those present was that a greater appreciation of these role constraints would improve personal relationships between stakeholders.



In addition, joint working with the public needs a stepchange. The effectiveness of engagement with the public in both the social sector and statutory sector was widely reported as inadequate. Respect and trust needs to be nurtured here too.

Language presents obstacles, with participants understanding the same words differently. There was a range of views regarding the notion of 'the system'. Some regarded it as failing in its intent to describe a context comprehensively, by neglecting some aspects of the context in which they worked and giving undue emphasis to other aspects. We deconstructed the different forms of 'collaboration', recognising that communicating and co-operating were looser forms of collaboration than pooling budgets and team members in tighter collaborations involving joint project work.

These challenges of language and of understanding organisational constraints are challenges of familiarity. More familiarity with each other's contexts, constraints and potential contributions will drive more effective collaborations.

Dame Mary Marsh, Gary McKeone, Guy Boersma



This report explores the key themes set out in the foreword in greater detail as discussed by participants. Notes of the discussion are recorded and, together, cover the key ingredients for effective collaboration for social change.

Participants are protected under the St George's House protocol where words and actions are not attributed to individuals.

1. A common purpose

A result of the consultation was to bring together a group of individuals from very diverse backgrounds who found common ground to improve collaboration across sectors. As the consultation concluded, participants focused on what might be a 'magnetic field' of interest that could bring together the participants at the consultation. This was inspired by a feeling of urgency to take action on this matter in an increasingly uncertain world. There was a sense of a crisis in the world caused by the disconnection of disadvantaged people from the state. One suggestion for a common interest that could draw the social and statutory sectors into co-ordinated working was improving the relationship and communication between professionals and those with lived experience. This is discussed in greater detail further in the report.

Participants felt that projects built through collaboration generally take time to set up but then have a higher likelihood to stand the test of time. One example given was the UK's welfare state. The 1945 post war Atlee government in the UK initiated large-scale social change. It was argued that this Labour government had the biggest impact of any twentieth century government in this country. It created the NHS and the build-up of a large amount of social housing. Yet, it was not in power for a very long time. The Conservative government, which followed, did not try to change direction but rather worked on bedding in the changes that had been initiated. It was noted that the success of large-scale social change projects like the NHS was due to the work of both the successor Conservative government as well as the Atlee government. These governments benefitted from and contributed to the post-war consensus on creating a better world after the Second World War. It was suggested that the increasing level of crisis we face now could be utilised to trigger this sort of collaboration and large-scale social change, for instance on addressing the inequalities highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Some participants suggested that during the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a rare moment where a lot more change became possible and organisations took more collaborative risks in pursuit of a shared, urgent goal. However, this environment was not felt to have been maintained as the crisis has reduced in severity. How can the spirit of collaboration born through a crisis that affects everyone be maintained?

2. Leadership

The consultation title pointed to the idea of system leadership. This was not a term that was universally embraced by participants, as discussed below, but it yielded some important insights. An initial provocation introduced the idea of living systems, made up of people and other living organisms. These are different from mechanical systems and must be treated differently as they are not fixed but are constantly changing.

System leadership was presented as being messy and the theme of it taking time recurred. It is naïve to believe one can organise this mess and make complex work simple. When leading, it may be tempting to use one single command strategy, especially when dealing with challenges.



However, working beyond organisation boundaries across a system involves multiple strategies and those leading must work at the interfaces between strategies, ensure they are fluid, and work well together. An important aspect of system leadership as opposed to organisation leadership is that it does not assume that the goal is to find one solution to a problem, after which the problem will disappear.

Leaders in systems are often faced with adversity and some people feel threatened by their work. System leadership is also full of uncertainty and as a leader, you may not be sure if you are actually doing good. It is hard to measure impact and even harder to attribute impact. It may be difficult even to know where you are as a leader in relation to the system in which you work and it is OK to acknowledge this. This is a relatively new field and more work needs to be done in the field of measuring impact.

Some qualities of system leadership were suggested:

Firstly, it was stressed that leadership is not all about people in a certain position or rank. People can lead from anywhere. Experience of difficulty was thought to be a strong credential for effective leadership, remembering that those who have experience of needing services from an organisation are often highly credible contributors who can provide excellent leadership. People with experience often also highlight the supporters and contributions that helped them get out of difficulty, which is a valued contribution to the challenge of attributing impact.

Secondly, remembering that everyone in the system comes with unique experience and will have a different view. It is essential to acknowledge different perspectives born out of different experience and to welcome all shades of thought. There will be opportunities to pattern these views and select which patterns will be used going forward.

Thirdly, each system looks different in different contexts. Standardised processes across different contexts can be limiting.

Finally, gauge the pace of the development of collaborative interest. Avoid the assumption that people need to shift their views to meet your pace. Meet people where they are and not where you want them to be.

There was some discussion on what leadership behaviours are beneficial, with participants indicating that the same leader and leadership style is not always the right fit at all stages of collaboration. Leaders need to be ready to step back when there is another leader alongside them who could add more and to adapt their style when remaining involved. Participants stressed that leadership development is not all about 'me'.

Some characteristics of effective leaders were suggested including:

- Having a strong moral compass;
- Having the ability to bring others with you;
- Being able to speak truth to power, whilst maintaining relationships;
- Seeing the power of bottom-up solutions;
- Empowering people;
- Experimenting with new approaches, learning from failures and successes;
- Having good evidence and noticing when there is success or less success;
- Being a catalyst of transformation;
- Not giving up;
- Being able to flip quickly from the detail to the whole picture;
- Being agile and responsive to changing contexts.



The characteristics of heroic leaders who take all the responsibility and decisions upon themselves were discussed as being generally undesirable. Yet, some participants suggested that there are times when it is necessary for a leader to heroically and fearlessly stand personally in the firing line for an individual they are supporting or for a change that needs to be made. This confrontational leadership can even be important for redistributing power in a system. However, other participants questioned whether it has to be this way since this means that there is competition for resources based on who has the best advocate.

Some participants felt that system leadership was close to synonymous with generous leadership and was all about sharing power and making ideas a shared resource. At the same time, participants observed that generous leadership is not generally supported in current systems and a leadership revolution is needed to encourage generous leadership.

3. Open mindset

Stereotypical views exist and hinder collaboration. It is not right or fair on individuals to attribute a difference in values and commitment to 'doing good' based on which organisation a collaborating colleague works for currently.

Building trust between sectors and sector staff takes time. Better communication between the social and statutory sectors will help build trust and collaborations for social purpose.

Greater understanding of each other's structures, governance and financial freedoms and constraints will also benefit effective joint working.

Social sector challenges with the statutory sector

It was said that social sector partners often see colleagues in the statutory sector as being extremely risk averse, whilst seeing the social sector as more agile and often the first responders in crises. They see themselves as risk takers and innovators, especially the smaller organisations. They also see statutory partners as risk redistributors, too often avoiding financial risk for their organisation by passing it elsewhere, rather than working to mitigate the risk.

The initiative of link workers for social prescribing placed in GP surgeries was discussed, with participants noting that the investment in link workers had not been matched with an investment in the social sector to meet the extra demand generated by effective link workers. Consequently, many link workers have found it challenging to refer effectively to social sector partners because of their limited affordable capacity. To be a more effective initiative, more investment is needed to build capacity of local social sector partners to ensure the link workers have something to link people to.

Statutory sector challenges with the social sector

It was said that statutory sector partners often see colleagues in the social sector as having unrealistic expectations of the ability of the public purse to finance their work.



Statutory sector leaders also experience challenge from the campaigning work of social sector organisations and leaders. A 'David vs. Goliath' mentality undermines the productive partnership for common purpose sought. It was stressed that staff in statutory organisations also join and stay in post to deliver social benefit and this is not the sole preserve of staff working in the social sector.

4. Public involvement

Communication with service users and people with lived experience was highlighted as an area where both sectors want and need to improve. Experience was shared, indicating that collaborative practice starting from action often works better than preparatory work on shared values. In addition, working on communicating with those with lived experience can inspire employees to achieve more since they better understand the people they are working for and with.

Participants stressed the importance of co-design with people with lived experience and those being served. In collaborations, partners should work out how shared discretionary resources could be used differently in relation to user input. Currently a lot of services are delivered that users do not actually want. Finite resources can be used more effectively if they come out of discussion with service users.

It is difficult, as a service user, to break in to a system and be heard. It is important to find someone who can help them navigate the system. A strong advocate was suggested as an important contribution too. This enabler helps service users to have their cases heard.

There was a reminder that meaningful engagement must enable action aimed at supporting people to improve their lives. Just giving people a voice can increase frustration if what they say does not lead to action making any difference. Other participants added that some vulnerable people just do not want to talk. Levels of trust and confidence are sometimes insufficient for collaborative joint working. Some social sector organisations choose to 'go it alone' and lead the way.

Other participants stressed the importance of both the majority and the marginalised. They suggested going beyond just speaking about disadvantage and look instead at how to create a social movement for radical social changes, such as inverting the UK taxation system which currently takes a higher proportion of household income from the lowest-income households than it takes from the highest-income households.

Participants raised the question of what the public want from state funded and charitably and independently funded services. Do they want the same thing? Ideas of what is best vary between people. Statutory professionals have the challenge of meeting the needs of those who have rejected the services on offer and appreciated by other members of the public. There are also issues where the public expect more from the statutory sector than it can provide. In relation to the NHS, it was suggested that society needs to consider what it really wants the NHS to achieve. Should the NHS be responsible for primary prevention of disease as well as treating illness? Or with prison services, will we fund services to rehabilitate offenders as well as protect the public in the period of incarceration?



Some participants wondered whether there is agreement of what good looks like in working with people with lived experience, especially in collaborative work across sectors. Even if there is, is there agreement between the social and statutory sectors on this? Participants felt that current practice was unsophisticated and in need of maturing.

Some felt that the conversation about improving engagement with lived experience has been had too many times over the years with little change. There has also been no consistency of improvement, with effort fluctuating as the financial situation has changed. Others argued that it remains extremely important nevertheless, since when a question becomes seen as too difficult to solve nothing can ever change. Some participants were convinced that cross-sector leadership was exactly the vehicle to improve this, especially through system leadership.

Some participants stressed the importance of connecting with groups that already do this well, such as faith groups, Alcoholics Anonymous and others. This linked to the importance of supporting areas where the social sector is least healthy with suggestions of pilot schemes in these areas to gauge the presence of the social sector and interest and commitment of local authorities.

5. Language Barriers

As the consultation drew on it became increasingly clear that participants did not agree on a definition of the terms suggested in the title of the consultation, neither the phrase 'collaborative system leadership' nor its constituent concepts.

A number of participants expressed that they were more interested in collaborative leadership than system leadership. Collaborative leadership was defined by some as distributed leadership. Many participants found the concept of system leadership confusing. Some felt that the word system implied a fixed situation, and others that it discouraged using professional intuition due to having to follow processes. Others saw it as being closely tied to the statutory sector and alienating for those who were in the social sector since online definitions of system leadership centre around state-funded public services.

The distinction between systems and institutions was an important point. Participants found it useful to acknowledge the distinction between individual institutions and the system and systems in which they operate. They also acknowledged that systems themselves can get stuck or institutionalised.

Other uses of language in collaboration were also questioned, from a basic level of which pronouns were most effective for overcoming conflict and resistance, to specialised terms such as 'lived experience' and 'empowerment'.

'Lived Experience' was problematic for some as it was seen as a term that creates an 'us and them' mindset, with a power dynamic that may be under examined. For many 'lived experience' is actually lived trauma.

'Empowerment' was another problematic term as some felt it was a top-down word implying giving power out to those who do not already have it. Some participants suggested that rather than building agency and ownership in service users, the question should be how to build the context in which these emerge. For this, it is important for a leader to have the ability to sense context and how far they can push.



6. Implementing collaboration

a) Collaboration partners

Some organisations were felt to be good at particular kinds of working with others, but bad at other types. Some are set up to collaborate and others are not. Some participants suggested that the social sector is more responsive and agile, being less constrained by the role requirements ascribed to organisations in the statutory sector. Being clear about the different types of contribution made by social sector organisations was discussed and many participants valued reference to the categories below:

- Complementary role:
 - o Working in partnership;
 - o For example, commissioned work.
- Supplementary role:
 - o Voluntary agencies working independently of statutory;
 - o Often in preventative roles which reduce demand on public services;
 - o This situation has increased since austerity.
- Campaigning role:
 - o Holding statutory providers to account;
 - o Some individuals in statutory roles may seek to block this. For example, MPs who say that charities in receipt of public money should not campaign;
 - o Some charities, which are closely involved with government, have sacrificed their campaigning role in favour of heavy emphasis on bid making to secure government contracts. This raised the question of how charities can balance policy work with paying salaries;
 - o However, this adversarial role can open doors to collaboration. For example, by using the media to shame local authorities, which triggers them to talk to external agencies.

Potential partners are often frustrated early on in collaborations because of the difficulties in finding a way in to the right team to engage within a partner organisation. External players can be passed around from one department or organisation to another, blocking collaboration at a very early stage.

b) Types of collaboration

Being clear about the type of collaboration sought is helpful and this framework for distinguishing the purpose (i.e. the 'what') of collaboration was recommended:

- Vital collaboration:
 - o Without this the system would not work.
- Functional collaboration:
 - o For better system functioning.
- Aspirational collaboration:
 - o About shifting horizons.



Another framework, for distinguishing the depth (i.e. the 'how') of collaboration, was recommended:

- Communicate:
 - o Share information on the shared social purpose.
- Co-ordinate and co-operate:
 - o Make separate contributions on the shared social purpose.
- Collaborate:
 - o Share resources and do joint work on the shared social purpose.

c) Obstacles to efficient and effective collaboration

Within all these forms of collaboration there are significant obstacles which arise from the contrasting goals and ways of thinking and working between sectors.

c(i) Contrasting styles of working

Councils and other statutory organisations generally have a more top-down structure than charities and other social sector organisations. Commissioning practice can seem very impersonal. Quality often feels under-appreciated, with statutory commissioners often felt to be prioritising price over quality and value.

Statutory decision makers generally focus on populations, while social sector partners are often focused on elements of the population, groups connected by a shared challenge or interest. It can be difficult for a statutory partner to take on a collaboration focused on a particular group, even if the innovation will have an extremely significant positive impact on that group.

c(ii) Approaches to risk

It was stressed that if change is to happen it is necessary to take risks. It is important to consider what space different organisations have to manage risks. In collaborative situations, organisations need to have clear and honest conversations about risk and how they manage it in their way of working. Often these conversations take place behind closed doors and are not minuted. Transparency is risky. However, partners need to trust each other enough to share the whole story, to sustain relationships and so that both have enough information to make an informed decision. A joint approach to risk management is required for effective joint working.

Risk management is culturally defined. Risk can be closely associated with class bias, racism and other unequal treatment. Service users, who are often excluded, can understand particular risks particularly well. There needs to be more diversity in management of organisations and more user involvement in informing decisions. Outward accountability to local people needs to be strengthened.

It was said that stereotyping is a natural human behaviour when faced with complexity. It is necessary to simplify the situation and it is related to similarity-seeking which is the first step towards trust. Strong leadership is needed to take people beyond their comfort zones and encourage them to interact with people who do not have any obvious similarities.



There may need to be a movement from existent accountability models to new ones. The way you deal with persistent risk in large organisations is to escalate. This can mean risk management depersonalises. Organisations need to think about how to get conversations about risk out of the high-level closed rooms of management which are more likely to produce a depersonalised solution.

Some participants criticised a tendency in collaborations to build workarounds rather than changing the system to allow more risk taking. Staff on the frontline (from the social and statutory sectors) can feel that they and their organisations are trying to get away with things, rather than feeling supported in how they manage risk because the structure of the organisation and management blocks engagement with essential collaborators, including service users, who may be perceived as 'risky'. It was emphasised that small charities are often large risk takers and need to be supported as such.

Institutions can reinforce risk aversion. The statutory sector was characterised as risk averse and this risk aversion can be pushed down the supply chain in collaborations. The statutory sector needs to trust commissioned organisations both to manage money and non-financial risks, according to many of the social sector participants.

The social sector needs to understand the level and breadth of risks managed by the statutory sector. Their upwards accountability to Whitehall is hard to overstate, according to many of the statutory sector participants.

The public can be unforgiving and this drives risk aversion in the statutory sector. When accidents happen, people look for someone to blame and there *is* risk around this, especially for statutory sector staff, for instance in child protection services. More engagement with the public could help with this.

c(iii) Impact Measurement

There is a responsibility and pressure on social and statutory organisations to measure impact. This is often hard to satisfy and especially hard to attribute impact to particular interventions and contributions from partners

The demand for impact measurement in statutory commissioning can make it seem impersonal, as the contracts require counting social value in a very narrow way, such as number of apprenticeships offered. These measurements often favour larger social sector organisations with more measurement and reporting capacity and capability.

The statutory sector also recognises impact measurement as both hard and necessary. Statutory partners need to account for taxpayers' money, just as charities need to account for donated money. Both statutory and social sector participants were keen to evolve current impact measurement into more meaningful effort.



c(iv) The costs of collaboration

The cost, financial or otherwise, of collaboration can be very high and this can cause organisations to decide it is easier to work on their own. The cost of collaboration needs to be factored in when agreeing to collaborate and there need to be stock taking moments within a collaborative venture. Sometimes collaborative partners will have to realise that the collaboration is too difficult and accept the consequences of ending a collaboration. However, an effort should be made to keep the door open. A temporary pause can be very good for collaboration, as in other relationships.

Financial cost is a particularly big barrier. Although statutory decision makers may manage a large budget, only a small proportion of that budget may be available as discretionary spend.

Since austerity, there has been less money available for contracts between statutory and social sector partners. Many social sector organisations are run on a shoestring budget where they cannot see where the next paycheque for their staff and service provision is coming from. This creates great stress for social sector leaders. Money in collaborations creates a power dynamic, which can be challenging especially when it is used to discourage the social sector from criticising their statutory partners.

Charities often subsidise the funding they get through contracts with their own charitable funds and not all charities can do this. In addition, smaller charities are often outbid by larger charities, even though the smaller charities may be doing better, bespoke work.

Statutory decision makers encourage larger social sector partners to work with smaller partner organisations on bids to share funding. Sometimes larger organisations are commissioned with a condition themselves to commission smaller organisations for some of the work. Statutory partners often consider that large organisations within the social sector are better placed to commission smaller partners; however, this may not be correct. The social sector is complex, diverse, hard to generalise and complex to work with. There is tension between national and local charities and large and small charities. Charities do not necessarily communicate well among themselves, and participants questioned whether they should be grouped together as a sector at all, as this masks the difference between large and small organisations.

However, other participants pointed out that all sectors have a similar problem. It may be better to focus on collaborations between institutions and organisations rather than sectors.

Above all, for collaboration involving funding to work, partners need to find the sweet spot of something the statutory sector partner needs and the social sector partner wants to provide.



CONCLUSION

The consultation ended leaving the organisers inspired to see leaders committed to improving services so that they serve the public better and help everyone flourish. A range of values were highlighted as essential to collaborative leadership and shared by many in the room, including co-production, generous collaboration, fairness, impact-driven, social benefit, loving-kindness.

However, there was a strong sense of the challenges and risk involved in working better together. Improving high-volume services is not easy and many organisations struggle to deliver their social mission in full. The conversation showed that there is an opportunity to create a meaningful outcome. By working together, we can share experience more and apply lessons from 'collaborative leadership for social purpose'.

A range of offers were made specific to this outcome:

- Convening and steering further work stimulated by the St George's House Consultation;
- Consortium building, consortium development and coaching;
- Accompaniment, mentoring and coaching to social purpose organisations and their staff;
- Networking and resource gathering including:
 - o insights from recent system and organisation redesigns;
 - o personal experiences of good practice and working coalitions;
 - o case studies and surveys seeking good practice;
 - o personal experience working with diversity;
 - o offers to build connections with people with lived experience;
 - o offers of safe spaces to discuss the difficulties of collaborative leadership.

With hard work, generosity, a willingness to look beyond the borders of each individual organisation and to challenge our own and others' mindsets, we can create an environment we would all want to live and work in where everyone is flourishing, supported by effective services.

Next steps: the re-convening and steering work is underway. Readers keen to learn more should contact Gary McKeone at St George's House gary.mckeone@stgeorghouse.org and Guy Boersma at g.boersma@surrey.ac.uk.



Participants

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Ms Jo Broadwood	Chief Executive Officer Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network
Mr Cliff Bush, OBE	Director Surrey Coalition of Disabled People
Mrs Mary Ann Clements	Co-Chief Executive and Transformation Officer, ADD International Founding Director, Healing Solidarity
Mr Josh Ettinger	Doctoral Candidate University of Oxford / Cumberland Lodge Fellow
Ms Esther Foreman	Chief Executive Officer The Social Change Agency
Mr David Harries	Volunteer working in prisons with those who have problems with alcohol and drugs
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