



Leadership
for change

Stories from Leadership for Change



Leadership for Change; a single national programme for public service leaders, rooted in systems leadership

A report by Richard Vize for the
Leadership for Change Steering Group







You need to trust the process and the people. You need a psychological contract of what the expectations are on all sides; you've got to realise there are times you will be uncomfortable with what's going on, and you'll learn from this."

Leadership for Change participant

Introduction

The Staff College (formally known as the Virtual Staff College), the Leadership Centre, Public Health England, NHS Leadership Academy and the National Skills Academy for Social Care have established **Leadership for Change** as a single national programme bringing together leaders from children's services, adult social care, public health, the NHS and the third sector. The programme is built around the concept of systems leadership.

Systems leadership is a recognition that 21st century public service leaders need a more sophisticated approach than relying on authority, hierarchy and the resources of their own organisation. It involves sharing leadership with others – coming together on the basis of common values and ambitions to work towards shared solutions.

Systems leadership goes beyond organisational boundaries and extends to staff in all levels, professions and sectors. Crucially, systems leadership involves service users and carers in designing and delivering those services.

So far more than 200 leaders from more than 20 areas have participated in **Leadership for Change**. This short report reflects the experiences of those participants, revealing how the programme enabled them to think about themselves and their world differently and to find ways of working with others to tackle the complex, multifaceted problems that typify the modern public sector.

Leadership for Change is demanding. It requires a substantial commitment in time and emotional energy. There are occasions when you feel quite exposed, and many of your assumptions about yourself, the people around you and your abilities will be challenged. But it is also affirming, reassuring, empowering and liberating.



The Staff College defines system leadership as

the collaborative leadership of a network of people in different places and at different levels in the system creating a shared endeavour and cooperating to make a significant change.

Understanding systems leadership

Public services are no longer provided by simple organisations. In the face of rising demand, tightening funding and challenges ranging from the need to reduce dependency on the state to meeting expectations for digital services, redesigning the way services are delivered and managed requires new ways of thinking, working and leading.

By offering alternative approaches to leadership, the **Leadership for Change** programme aims to support those trying to manage in the complex and ambiguous world of public services. It is brought to life by participants working through their own challenges with their peers.

At the core of system leadership are six dimensions:



Personal values (ways of feeling)

Systems leadership is built around a shared set of values or a shared vision. This is the dimension of systems leadership that engages feelings and emotions; “what gets you up in the morning”. These will encompass a determination to achieve better outcomes for citizens and communities, as well as a wider belief in the value of co-operation and partnership. This is the shared vision that repeatedly brings people back to the table to continue with difficult work, overcoming competing goals and priorities, even when earlier attempts have failed.



Cognition and analysis (ways of thinking)

Ways of thinking – aspects of cognition, analysis and interpretation, and abilities in ‘sense-making’ and synthesis – allow systems leaders to embrace complexity and ambiguity, and to make them understandable and tolerable for others. It relies on considerable aptitude for précis and summary and skills in the construction and communication of clear narratives and explanations that can help make sense of complexity without oversimplifying, and that can ‘tune out’ background noise to focus on what information is most important.



Styles of participation (ways of relating)

Systems leaders connect with others in a participatory, collective way, seeking what can be achieved through relationships rather than individuals – the sum is greater than the parts. This requires empathy, not as an end in itself but in terms of understanding the other person’s perspective as a way to align goals and vision. Transparency, honesty and authenticity are key personal attributes.



Behaviours and actions (ways of doing)

Systems leaders encourage and enable others to make change. They build and maintain relationships on multiple fronts, and win trust by delivering on promises, giving mutual support, and sharing power and credit. This ties in with the construct of distributed leadership – the idea that leadership does not derive only from positional authority, but comes from aptitude and willingness to take responsibility at all levels of the system. Effective systems leaders creates the conditions in which distributed leadership thrives; they empower and support others to take a leadership role.



Observations and perceptions (ways of perceiving)

Experienced systems leaders describe a dimension to their work that is about particular ways of seeing, hearing or observing what is happening.

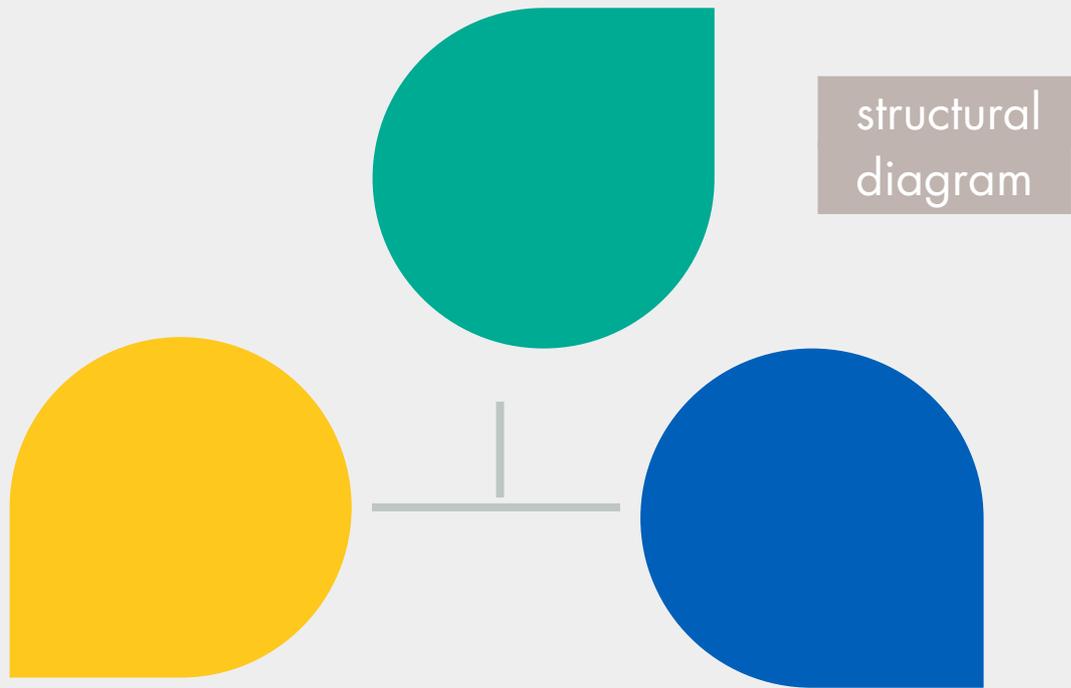
One way to think of this is the analogy of being on the balcony of the ballroom rather than the dance floor, where you can see the whole dance and the interactions between all the parties involved, not just the people immediately around you. A more detailed understanding of systems leadership takes this analogy a stage further by stressing that in complex, unstable, unpredictable systems it will never be possible to see the whole dance floor, even from the elevated vantage point of the balcony. Some parts will always remain out of view, either unseen or unknown. The ‘big picture’ will therefore contain an element of shadow and uncertainty that must be taken into account alongside what is in plain view during planning and decision-making.

The effective systems leader also sees many other things differently, such as their own role, the nature of risk and conflict and the nature of objectives and goals; fundamental to systems leadership is the idea that one’s own goals may often be secondary to, and even subsumed by, the wider goals of the collective.

Ways of hearing, and in particular the ability to seek out and listen attentively to ‘other voices’ is another key perceptual dimension of systems leadership. Systems leaders eagerly entertain alternative and diverse perspectives, and seek these out where they are not forthcoming. Systems leaders welcome challenge and contradiction, hearing these as part of the mix of information necessary to good decision-making rather than finding them threatening.

Personal qualities

There are a number of personal qualities attributed to effective systems leaders. Some are common to leaders in general, such as energy, drive, determination, bravery, resilience, confidence and the willingness to take risks. But systems leaders also demonstrate less common leadership attributes such as humility, magnanimity and patience.



The structure of the Leadership for Change programme

The **Leadership for Change** programme itself is made up of three, two day residential events, a series of complimentary Master Classes, a 360-degree survey examining the characteristics of systems leadership and access to a pool of highly experienced coaches.

Given the nature of this programme, places are offered to small teams from a range of professional disciplines who want to tackle a shared systems challenge. Typical participants include: directors of children's services, adult social services and public health; social care providers; leaders from NHS trusts and clinical commissioning groups; the chairs of local safeguarding children's boards; senior police officers and third sector leaders.

Successful applicants attend a pre-programme 24-hour residential event to learn about the leadership constructs of 'Wicked, Tame and Critical Issues' and 'Adaptive Leadership' with two experts in their field, Keith Grint and Irwin Turbitt. These are important underpinning ideas for the programme.

Grint describes how challenges can be divided into: critical problems – crises that need to be addressed by a commander with no time for discussion or dissent; tame problems which require simple management techniques to find a solution; and wicked problems.

Wicked problems often seem intractable and have no simple, right or wrong solutions. They cannot be solved in isolation by one hierarchy or organisation. They require concerted work across a system, and they need leadership not management.

Turbitt describes adaptive leadership as a practical framework which helps individuals and organisations adapt and thrive in challenging environments by taking on a process of change. It enables participants to separate the essential from the unimportant and challenge the status quo.

What participants said about Leadership for Change

Why we're here

Many of the participants were new to the concept of systems leadership. Typically there was one person in the local team who had already worked with the Staff College, formally known as the Virtual Staff College, and convinced other local leaders that systems leadership thinking would allow them to unlock solutions to the complex and difficult challenges they faced.

One person with systems leadership experience persuaded colleagues to join the programme because they:

“were about to embark on a major initiative around schools-led school improvement as part of a national drive, so Leadership for Change was relevant to an immediate and significant task that we couldn't do by ourselves.”

Others joined the programme because they could see that supposed ‘systems working’ in their own area was heading in the wrong direction – being focused on sorting out the problems of just one part of the system, such as an acute trust or struggling children's services department, with little regard for the values and needs of other players.

Some teams were there in the wake of repeated failures to make progress, and had come to understand that they needed a fresh perspective and way of working. As one person put it: “We had become historically stuck.”

One group had put a Better Care Fund plan together, complete with grand visions, but in practice there was little sign of joined up working: “Everyone involved in the bid had been supportive in a general way, but there hadn't been real buy-in or involvement across the patch, and no-one had said anything about, or thought about, ceding leadership or what wholly shared leadership looked like.”

This typifies the way in which people under pressure to deliver often come together under the guise of

a ‘partnership’, but in reality they are united only by the desire to get the best results for their own organisation. Recognising this, the Better Care Fund team joined **Leadership for Change** because they knew they needed to have difficult conversations so they could “get real” about how to make collaboration between health and local government a success. They saw the programme as a way to put systems leadership into place so that people could learn to think in new ways.

Different teams were at very different stages in developing a systems leadership approach – while some were trying to claw their way out of chaos, others were already well on the way to developing a coherent strategy, and saw systems leadership as the tool to make it happen; or as one person put it: “Oh God, we've got the plans and the money, now what about the people and the culture – how are we actually going to get this partnership to work?”

Superhuman effort is not the answer

Many public sector managers, faced with the irresistible pressures of less money, rising demand and growing expectations, respond with ever more superhuman efforts to launch yet more projects and initiatives aimed at joining up services, reducing demand, improving safety and so on. But the success never comes close to matching the effort. One participant described their working day in this environment as “feeling rubbish – random, chaotic and a struggle”.

The extraordinary pressures drive managers towards rushed or partial solutions which sap scarce time and resources but fail to resolve the problem – and often create new ones in the process. But leaders find it immensely difficult to stand back, look at the roots of problems rather than their symptoms, and collaborate with others to develop sustainable solutions.

Leadership for Change gives participants a safe space to think about why so many problems seem intractable, and to understand how shared values and goals, appreciating the perspectives of others and formulating a clear plan are the essential underpinnings for any change programme.

“No-one had thought about ceding leadership, or sharing leadership, and what this might mean. The programme helped surface these issues in a way that simply wouldn't have been possible or happened otherwise.”

Programme participant

Sharing leadership

One of the key skills in systems leadership is understanding how to share and cede influence and power.

Attending the programme as a team triggered enlightening conversations, often among people who had worked together for years but who had never expressed their frustrations or concerns. One participant from a charity felt empowered to tackle head-on her frustration at the way the local NHS trust was, she felt, trying to dominate and control the programme they were all working on; it transpired that far from feeling in the driving seat, the NHS members of the team felt excluded from key decisions. That in turn led to a rebalancing of the relationship between the trust, the local authority and the charity.

One exercise which drew out these sorts of issues was 'power mapping'. It was always revealing for team members to see how others perceived the distribution of power. One group realised there was an inner and outer circle, which raised questions of how to bring people together and ensure that people in the outer circle felt a sense of ownership of the programme. Power mapping is a way of “revealing the system to itself”, and it rarely looks how anyone expected.

Change is hard

Many participants were relieved to find that the reason they were struggling to deliver change in their area was not because of some shortcoming on the part of themselves or their team, but simply because securing sustainable change in complex systems is tough. Some of this reassurance came from the formal sessions, but a lot of it was through meeting other committed, talented colleagues from other parts of the country facing just the same challenges.

Participants came away with a greater appreciation that turbulence and setbacks are part of the process; the issue is not to ensure that nothing ever goes wrong – because it will – but to ensure that the different players in the system respond to difficulties as systems leaders, not by blaming people from other organisations for what happened.

Among the many useful concepts introduced by the course was the metaphor of a 'boiling pot' – using difficult circumstances to generate honest conversations which allowed a breakthrough in both understanding and in team relationships. Rather than avoiding tough discussions, delegates appreciated that 'applying heat' could actually be a useful way of supporting change. But the technique requires some skill – in the wrong hands it could all just boil over.

Thinking differently

A public health manager, having initially found the programme quite tough, ended up by describing it as a revelation. Coming from a world dominated by data and rational arguments, he particularly appreciated ideas around values and telling stories. This enabled him to move from “what’s the epidemiology?” to focusing on what people could collaborate on that would make a difference to tackling a disease.

Another participant felt

“the programme as a whole acted as a reminder that you could be different, and human, and still be a leader, and that change can start anywhere – If you think it can be changed, do it”.

‘Lightbulb moments’ were common. For one group, it was the realisation that they spent so much time wrapped up in the governance of their partnership that they had failed to focus on what they really needed to do to generate collaborative leadership across their organisations.

Looking at an old issue in a new way

While many of the concepts explored through **Leadership for Change** are sophisticated, some are disarmingly simple. The notion of ‘reframing’ challenges and problems appealed to many. For example, one participant from the NHS changed her whole approach to preparing her team for Care Quality Commission inspections by reframing them as ‘quality and safety visits’. This has turned round the way staff perceive these inspections, and given them a far greater sense of ownership of the issues around quality and safety. One result was to go around the hospital looking at signage from the point of view of the patient; much of it has now been changed.

Returning to work, one participant made a determined effort to reframe her feelings about the local acute trust and stop seeing it as “the enemy”. Instead she mounted a determined charm offensive and now has good relations with senior managers there. When the trust was faced with a crisis these relationships and shared goals delivered better care for patients with dementia and mental illness.

Seeing the world through the eyes of others

One of the reasons traditional partnerships often fail is that the participants see them as a vehicle for achieving their own ends rather than as a means to develop a shared vision. Systems leadership requires leaders to build an understanding of what the world looks like from other people’s perspectives. The programme:

“provided the opportunity to really get under the skin of seeing the world from different people’s lenses.”

No more heroes

Effective leadership does not depend on big personalities or grand designs; on the contrary, modest changes can enable big steps forward. An important and welcome message for many participants was that systems leadership isn’t about “big heroic moments”, but about the seemingly small touch points between people and organisations. It emphasised the crucial importance of being a humane person with whom others could work.

Me and my place

“The great thing about Leadership for Change was that it combined getting improvements through leadership in a specific place with individual development for you as a leader in that place. So the programme got you thinking about yourself in your place. People had a chance to think about ‘what are my leadership behaviours as part of the system and partnership?’”

This mix of the personal and place is one of the key ingredients of the programme. By the end of it, participants have a greater appreciation of themselves, their perspectives and the role they do and could fulfil in the local community.

It also helps people identify local actors who they believe either see the need for change already or could be convinced of the case, what one participant called:

“identifying those on the dance floor with whom I can work and who will be responsive to the need for the change”.

Opening my eyes to Wilful Blindness

One of the most popular parts of the programme has been the masterclasses from a range of expert speakers. Margaret Heffernan developed the concept of 'wilful blindness'. She argues that the biggest dangers we face are the ones we don't see, not because they are invisible but because we are wilfully blind.

She discussed the concept in the context of governments and organisations and posed questions such as: what makes us prefer ignorance? What are we so afraid of? Why do some people see more than others? Heffernan outlined mechanisms, structures and strategies that institutions and individuals can use to combat wilful blindness. Feedback was unanimously positive, such as:

"Absolutely first class. Margaret Heffernan was superb. Lots of reflection for me and huge recognition of behaviours within my organisation."

"Superb. So stimulating. I learnt so much."

"Margaret is inspirational. I will be applying some of the thinking in my practice."

"What I will take away is a refreshed view and attitude and renewed fortitude to persevere."

"This has been a fantastic day, both for personal learning and reflection but also as an opportunity to make connections with other leaders with similar frustrations and ambitions. I leave today's session feeling inspired and invigorated."

Finding my voice through Public Narrative

A successful training programme provides participants with tools to use under the daily pressures back at work. One of these is 'public narrative', which is a way of leaders articulating a connection between their own experiences and values and the goal they are pursuing, thereby creating a sense of shared values and purpose with the audience, and inspiring action.

An obvious application is a manager making a connection with their staff, explaining how their differing roles are united by shared values, underlining their personal commitment to the work and describing a shared goal. One participant who

found the technique invaluable used it shortly after the course in addressing 100 clinical nurse specialists. She was able to communicate that she knew what it was like to be in their shoes, and use that as a way to get them to think about changing the systems in which they were working.

Public narrative is not just useful on a soapbox; it is a powerful way to explore shared values and goals in a conversation.

Public narrative reflects one of the core roles of a leader – to "join dots and tell stories". Reflecting on the programme one participant said "I've never used a tool so much", feeling it had helped her to harness emotions and communicate key issues. Some of her colleagues are now starting to use public narrative with their own teams.

Another participant described public narrative as "a life changer". It gave her a chance to reflect on what mattered to her, and provided a reason to bring herself into the story and explain her motivations, as well as offering a structure for managing a message and for engaging with other people.

Back at work

There are numerous other ways in which participants have used the techniques and insights of **Leadership for Change**.

One group now has the confidence to have more open, unstructured conversations. One member noted how the reframing and public narrative sessions had helped create more of a shared language across the NHS and local government in their area. More dramatically, a group of NHS staff said they "only averted disaster in services because of the relationships that had been strengthened by Leadership for Change".

Many participants made small but crucial changes in their behaviour. One person who had previously been quite forceful in the way he made his 'asks' of other people adopted the approach of "this is my understanding, what is yours?". This gave him a far better perspective on the values, pressures and goals of those working around him.

In a similar vein another participant, using a concept from Irwin Turbitt, described their determination to understand those around them, saying: "I will spend more time on the balcony, especially at meetings, and actively listen."

There was a realisation that systems leadership meant spreading their understanding and approach among their teams – taking care to include all levels of their organisation. One group described this as "getting more people to own different bits of the programme – and trying to grow leaders at all levels, lower down the organisation than we'd previously considered".

Lasting impressions

“A life changing programme for me; a personal journey of connecting more powerfully to my values and purpose. Thank you.”

“This is one of the best leadership courses I have done. A great mix of the latest thinking and real life, taught in a way that sticks. The cross-agency element is really powerful and [delivers] benefits far wider than the course content. I would definitely recommend it.”

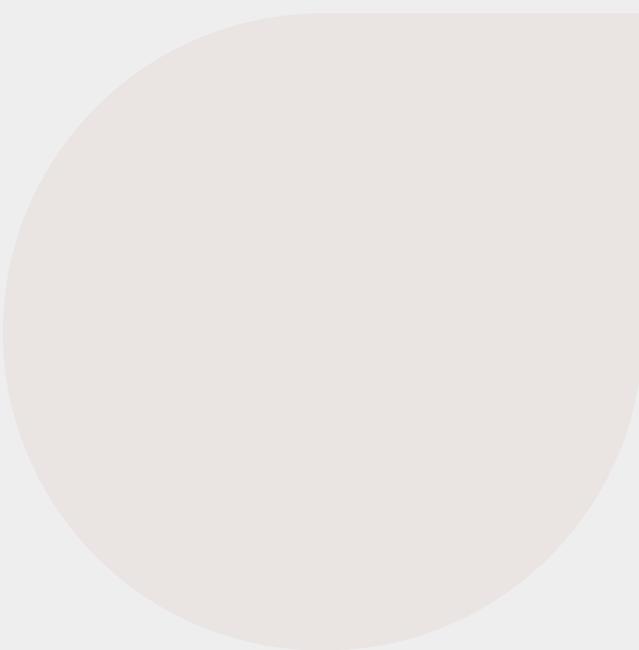
“A well-constructed, well- paced programme. It has supported me to develop some sustainable changes to my practice that are demonstrably making a difference. Thank you for the thought and effort you have put into this.”

“My expectations were exceeded. The calibre of other attendees, the honesty and the sharing has been brilliant.”

“It has been incredibly useful – space to think, learn and test.”

“Thank you for the valuable learning experience.”

“The experience has been an amazing opportunity. I feel privileged to be among the cohort and I have learnt huge amounts. I have been on a personal journey which will help me immensely over the next 12 months and for the rest of my career.”



Key messages

It takes courage

Every group which has participated in **Leadership for Change** has had the courage to challenge accepted ways of working and relating – such as always putting their own organisation first. When organisations and their leaders are being judged on a narrow range of short term measurements such as a target, a budget or an inspection, lifting their eyes to see a bigger prize for service users and partner organisations is a big step.

Dig the foundations before putting up the walls

Invest time and energy in building firm foundations – trust, empathy, shared values and vision, clear goals – are essential to ultimate success. It is those ways of relating and understanding which see the team through the inevitable tough times when confronting wicked issues.

There is more than one truth

Seeing the world through the eyes of others is revelatory. It is not a question of who is right, it is about understanding the perceptions, motivations and challenges of each partner and how it influences the way they relate to you and others.

Tough discussions are (usually) a good sign

Systems leadership is not about consensus and deal-making, it is about having the relationships and skills to argue through the toughest problems and arrive at the best solution for the service user. Tough discussions are not only essential in their own right; when handled well they can also play an important role in helping the participants develop trust and understanding.

Building a sense of place

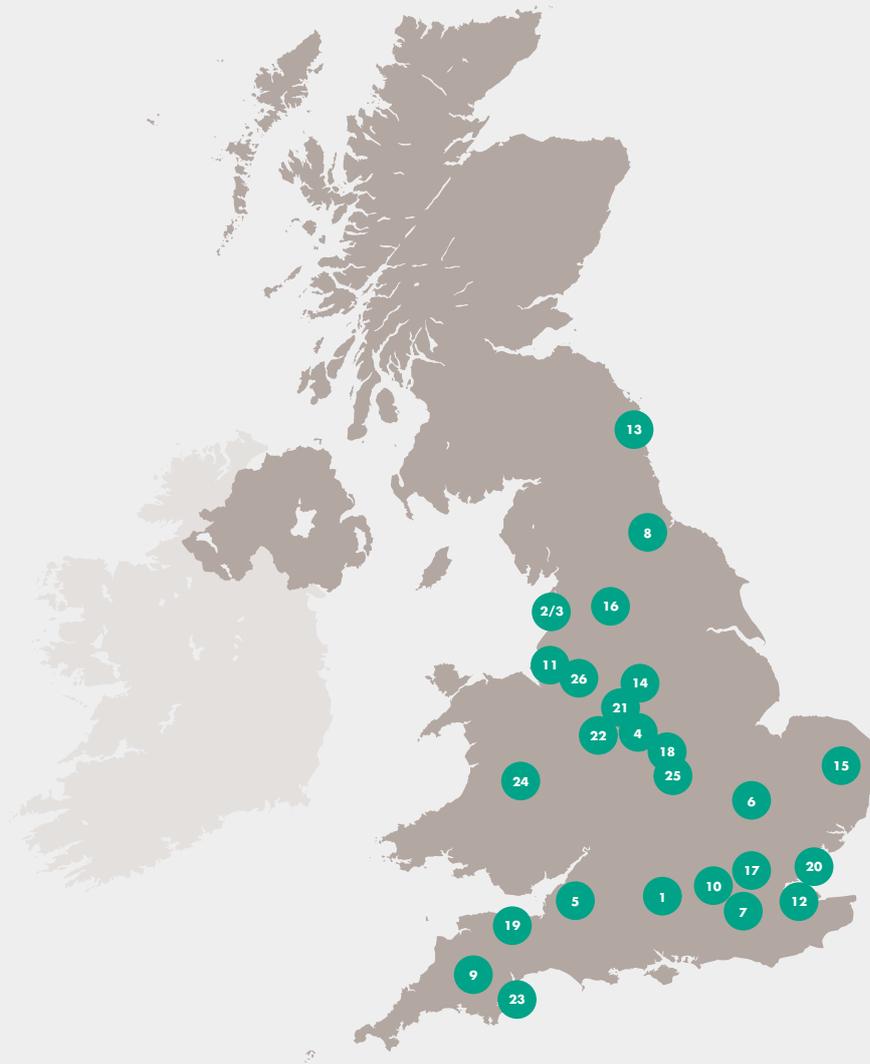
Systems leaders see their role in the context of their place and community – a far more compelling and uplifting notion than position in a hierarchy.

Small moments can make a big difference

Building success is not all about big milestones and grand gestures; small touchpoints between people can transform relationships. Every interaction matters.

Appendix A

These are the Leadership for Change place teams. Each one represents both a policy or service challenge and a complex System Leadership challenge.



1. Berkshire	10. Ealing	19. Somerset
2. Better Start Blackpool	11. Liverpool	20. Southend
3. Blackpool	12. Medway	21. Staffordshire
4. Birmingham	13. NHS England	22. Telford and Wrekin
5. Bristol	14. North Staffordshire	23. Torbay
6. Cambridgeshire	15. Norwich	24. Wales
7. Croydon	16. Pennine Lancashire Health	25. Warwickshire
8. Darlington	17. Public Health England	26. Warrington
9. Devon (x2)	18. Solihull	

Appendix B

Leadership for Change Steering Group members

The Leadership for Change programme is the result of a collaboration between stakeholders with a shared vision of transforming public services through leadership development and new ways of working.

Leadership for Change Steering Group members include:

Leadership Centre
Local Government Association
NHS Leadership Academy
Public Health England
The Staff College
The National Skills Academy for Social Care

...and is chaired by:

Anton Florek, Chief Executive, The Staff College, and
Joe Simpson, Director, Leadership Centre and Principal Strategic Adviser, Local Government Association.

Appendix C

Acknowledgements

We would like to give our thanks to the Leadership for Change Facilitators and Coaches who have been, and continue to be, at the heart of the Leadership for Change Programme.

John Atkinson	Liz Goold	Diane Neale
Jill Barrow	Sue Goss	Joyce Redfearn
David Bolger	Matt Gott	Myron Rodgers
Bernie Brooks	Keith Grint	Phil Swann
Lesley Campbell	Ruth Kennedy	Paul Tarplett
Jo Cleary	Chris Lawrence-Pietroni	Alison Trimble
Mari Davis	David Love	Irwin Turbitt
John Deffenbaugh	Alix Morgan	Holly Wheeler
Robin Douglas	Julia Morrison	David White



Leadership for change



For more information about the Leadership
for Change programme please visit:

www.leadershipforchange.org.uk

