

*“I used to think I had to fix it, but now I think ‘how am I going to bring in others?’ I have lots of great questions to bring the team on board. You can spend the time listening.”* (CLfS programme participant)

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

Collective Leadership for Scotland (CLfS) participants look for, and gain, fresh thinking, space and time for reflection, connection with others, a chance to think about how to tackle difficulties, and to test out what it takes to do, and continue to do, the work of collaborative public service.

The learning here comes from a wide range of evidence from across CLfS programmes between August 2020-July 2022. CLfS offers varied programmes, convened for different purposes and durations, and through these we have reached an estimated 4500 participants, including:<sup>1</sup>

- Thirty-three general open workshops on Collective Leadership and further programmes to support specialist skills and practices, including an intensive Leadership and Facilitation programme.
- Four high-profile learning festivals and an international colloquium with many events hosted by external partners.
- An intensive, place-based systems leadership offer through the Police and Local Government Pilots.

Participants come from across National and Local Government, including the NHS and Health and Social Care Partnerships, Education and third sector agencies working in public services and communities, largely in Scotland. The opportunities and challenges of true collaboration-in-practice, in the absence of blueprints, mean that it has never been more necessary to change ways of working and foreground integrative and adaptive approaches to learning and evaluation. Given this context we anticipate diverse and wide policy and practice audiences of those looking to implement new ways of working in public services and communities, beyond immediate interests in the CLfS programmes.

### Key Learning and Insights

This programme of work contributes to building a critical mass for system change, to help to sustain the ambitions of the Christie Commission and the delivery of the National Outcomes for Scotland.

Given the range of CLfS programmes, our expectations of impact are very different. Some ‘network’ programmes provide short, occasional, and unforeseen access to other people with similar interests and concerns, whilst others offer extended chances to develop a shared ‘community of inquiry’ around a task that can only be done together amongst a partnership group or team.

- A crucial sign of impact that is a consistent feature across all programmes is the developing understanding amongst leaders that change inevitably includes themselves, not simply something that other people should do, or that is the responsibility of ‘the system’ or other more senior people.
- Articulating a pathway to impact that starts with self and seeks tangible, small, yet significant shifts in thinking and practice, provides indications that new understandings are taking root in practice, in ways that will ultimately bear fruit. An important part of our learning about impact, what it is and how to achieve it, is that it is valuable and possible to encourage a dialogue about expectations and contributions as part of the ‘live work’.

From this starting point, an immediate and unfolding impact of collective leadership are both evident.

- People come away from CLfS programmes with ‘action confidence’, a change in relationship to taking action which enables people to acknowledge complexity without being paralysed by it. This becomes tangible as changes in the ways people see and think about themselves and their role as a leader, how

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<sup>1</sup> This is a mid-range estimate of attendance based on almost 7000 bookings.

they interact with, perceive, pay attention to others and changes in action that they take which are more inclusive and collaborative.

- These are essential first shifts in thinking and practice, as participants find different actions to take as individuals and with others, that enable the release of existing resources of collective knowledge and skills. There is a growing appreciation of the potential potency of collective power, where leaders need no longer have all the answers or see their role as being to fix everything.
- The potential for wider and deeper impact of these kinds of shifts are most clearly seen in locality-based work, where there are extended opportunities to build 'communities of inquiry' able to develop and implement their own solutions, as illustrated by the Police and Local Government Pilots.
- Valuable national and international impact can also be achieved through developing learning networks to support those with an interest in taking their own understandings of collective leadership into the specific systems of which they are a part.

There are valuable lessons about moving from ideas about leadership to implementation.

- The key skills and spreadable practices of action inquiry are the 'how' of collective leadership, crucial to shift the way that people work together to enact change. The practical value of reflective and relational practices and skills become plainer as people experience them for themselves and can be enriching, enabling the airing of different perspectives, checking the pace and direction, and helping to develop a more grounded and authentic trust.
- There is also learning about the social and experiential, sensemaking and facilitation practices that strengthen the action inquiry approach; different forms of narrative inquiry and collective sensemaking are indispensable to explore diverse ways of knowing and perspectives.
- Locality-based work is particularly important, as it is here that the practical realities of relational and systemic leadership must be confronted. Collective leadership relies on the ability to build relationships quickly and enable growing trust and shared purpose to create a group of allies galvanised around a common issue that they want to do something about. Working through the relational and power dynamics at play in the group process illuminates an important distinction between true collaboration, and 'partnership working' where it is far easier to only pay lip-service to the ideals.

## Seeking Systemic Change

This is the situation in which expectations and claims about impact must be tempered and there remains scope for deeper impact amongst organisations, communities, and wider systems.

- Across the board, change in habitual leadership practice is difficult and it is not straightforward to secure the transformational changes that are sought.
- The ability to establish relations with an appropriate grouping of people in a local site cannot be taken for granted. Progress must overcome the further challenges that arise from the governance and accountability arrangements in which organisations and partnerships operate, and the tensions and anxieties rooted in conflicting, unconscious, or unacknowledged expectations about the purpose and potential impact of the work.
- The barriers to systems change include conflicting priorities and difficulties in protecting the time, often seen as a luxury within systems that favour immediate reactive responses to issues. Further barriers include resistance to active involvement in learning at all levels and positions, lack of time or interest in refreshing theoretical groundings, and a reluctance to talk openly with each other about group process.

The vision for this work remains strong, whilst it is also evident that it is often complex, messy, unpredictable, and difficult to achieve change that can be empirically measured at scale. Given this, we conclude that more open and honest conversations about our mutual understandings and expectations of learning and change can help to build a different kind of accountability. This demanding work relies on all parties, including those within Government, to commit to develop a new type of learning partnership, built on a different orientation to participation and practice as active involvement in personal, professional and leadership development.

You can read the full impact report '[How do we know we are doing good work](#)' on our webpages [here](#).