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Exploring collective leadership and coproduction: an empirical study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores coproduction through a collective leadership lens. It draws from the public administration and leadership fields and a 2019 empirical study of public service collaboration in Scotland, UK. It is suggested that tensions generated by working within a New Public Management model combined with frustrations felt from current collaborative practice have motivated an exploration into alternative conceptions of leadership and different ways of working when collaborating. The findings reveal that collaboration can be strengthened through the application of four key processual and attitudinal modifications. This approach is described as working in an emergent and relational way while applying a systems and inquiry mind-set. It is the effect of the sum of these parts that boosts the intensity of collaborative work, offering a number of benefits, including an enriched and dynamic coproduction process embedded within its practice.

Keywords: Cross-Boundary Collaboration, Complexity, Emergent, Group Process, Inquiry, Relational, Systems, Wicked Issues

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this chapter is to explore the construct of collective leadership as a collaborative practice and to describe the connection between collective leadership and coproduction. It discusses research findings from a public service study (Docherty, 2019) alongside the existing literature and refers to contemporary theories and debates in order to position the work, establish links and build on what is already known. It begins from a research problem situated in and formed from key debates in the public administration and leadership literature, where linkages and interconnectedness are sought. They are 1) the move away from heroic concepts of leadership, 2) the complex and wicked problems that cannot be solved by single organizations or sectors, 3) the challenges of working in groups across organizational boundaries, and 4) how to build in knowledge inputs from the whole public service system, including citizens and communities.

This chapter promotes an approach where the reframing of leadership can offer a larger meaning, offering insights as to what practising leadership in a collective way means. Firstly, it proposes a collective leadership process model to clarify its main principles and secondly it presents an integrated framework for understanding how the collective leadership process can enable coproductive activities. Lastly, it illustrates how this practice is understood by those attempting to strengthen how they

collaborate with diverse stakeholders, across boundaries, and discusses the implications of such an approach.

BACKGROUND

Collaboration in public service delivery became more established in the 1990s, with coordinated service plans and pockets of citizen participative activity taking place in areas such as urban regeneration, care and health. In the UK, this was reinforced by the Labour Government's 'third way' agenda, where community planning and community engagement became components of many service plans and projects (Newman, 2001). During this period, the reform debates gained momentum and notions of New Public Governance (NPG) and Public Value Management (PVM) as post- New Public Management (NPM) paradigms took hold (O'Flynn, 2007; Osborne, 2010). The surfacing of alternatives to NPM recognized its incompatibility with horizontal informal structures and collaborative processes. They presented a shift from the traditional hierarchical arrangements to a recognition that cross-boundary efforts are important for supporting sustainable services, addressing complex problems and achieving public value for citizens and communities (Bingham et al., 2005; Stoker, 2006).

The mid 2000s in Scotland saw a shift towards greater collaboration and for services to be designed and built in partnership. This message was clearly reported in the *Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services* in Scotland – also known as the Christie Commission after its chair, Dr Campbell Christie CBE (2011). The Scottish Government (led by the Scottish National Party) embraced the Commission's recommendations and articulated the need for public service reform to harness the full range of skills and capacities of public services, citizens, third sector organizations and businesses. Moreover, where appropriate, greater responsibility and control were to be placed in the hands of citizens and communities (Loeffler et al., 2013).

The Christie Commission, supported by the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act in 2015, placed emphasis on the need for much greater collaboration across public services in order to achieve better societal outcomes. These developments foster a direction of travel where the basis of coproduction is held as part of the design and implementation process with citizens and communities, in collaboration with public service providers. Moreover, the development of the National Performance Framework (Scottish Government, 2011) highlights a rich array of crosscutting and interrelated themes that come together to express an aspirational vision for Scotland. This framework promotes an organizing structure which supports and enables collaboration through the adoption of broad strategic intentions (Mackie, 2018).

As a response to the combination of complexity of issues, political and financial uncertainty and the change agenda and ambition, working and leading together in order to achieve objectives across organizational, sectoral and even national boundaries have become routine. With this growing acknowledgement comes a requirement for those that work within a public context to work not only effectively within their own organizations, but also collectively throughout and across the wider system and their communities, in order to coordinate and integrate their actions (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007). In doing so, it is suggested that they will be better positioned to create effective solutions to complex problems (Currie & Lockett, 2011). Moreover, leadership becomes a collective organizational activity as opposed to an individual-level command and control phenomenon (Brookes & Grint, 2010).

The Study of Collaboration, Collective Leadership and Coproduction

There is limited empirical research within a public context that focuses on the relationship between cross-boundary collaboration, coproduction and collective leadership. This is in part due to a literature landscape riddled with challenges. There is no single definition of collaboration (Dickinson & Sullivan, 2014) or coproduction (Alford, 2009; Bourgon, 2009), and even less agreement on the meaning of collective leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2002; Sergi et al., 2012). Definitions of the three concepts are somewhat similar and overlap; for example Lai (2011, p.2) defines collaboration as the “mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve a problem together”, Cullen-Lester and Yammarino (2016, p.1) describe collective leadership as “collective behaviour resulting from a number of interdependent entities interacting with one another” and Bovaird (2007) describes coproduction as a socially constructed process where a wide range of stakeholders play an active role in shaping decisions and outcomes.

The conceptualization of coproduction as a collaborative process, where there is a focus on dynamic engagement, the development of long-term relationships and mutuality, is a common theme in the public administration literature. This interpretation focuses on value creation, better outcomes and resource sharing amongst multiple stakeholders, including citizens (Kekez et al., 2018; Sancino & Jacklin-Jarvis, 2016). Boyle and Harris (2009) support this view and consider coproduction in terms of delivering services together; they include professionals, citizens and communities in their assessment, and this is later described by Ryan (2012, p.316) as “full co-production”. Collective leadership is considered to encompass theories that conceptualize leadership as an emergent, relational and co-constructed process. The leader is redefined as a process, one that involves many persons collaborating together across the public service system, and it is at this collective level that leadership happens. Consequently leadership is not something that the leader, as one person, holds. Instead, “leadership is collective work” (Ospina & Foldy, 2015, p.4).

This chapter utilizes Ospina and Foldy’s (2015) description and builds on the theories of coproduction that draw from a collaborative and relational context. It explores the practice of collective leadership and illustrates how it can be used to intensify individual and group work within collaborative and coproductive settings. This is important, as there is a need to know more about how leadership, decision-making and resources can be shared across national and local spheres of government and with communities in order to understand

1. How multiple stakeholders (including citizens) work and lead together, in pursuit of complex shared outcomes; and
2. How the coproduction process is positioned in relation to a public service collaboration.

Moreover, focusing on the “who, when, and what of coproduction” offers the potential for comparative capability through the description and analysis of coproduction processes and activities in context (Nabatchi et al., 2017, p.766).

Undertaking Coproduction

In recent decades, discussions around the idea of coproduction have increased (Brandsen & Helderma, 2012; Needham, 2008; Osborne et al., 2016; Pestoff, 2014). First introduced in the 1970s and early 1980s, this concept was used to define the practices that involve citizens in aspects of service design and delivery. This revival of interest has been in part prompted by financial pressures, where citizens and users can potentially become a public service resource (Boyle et al., 2006), and a growing acknowledgement that in order for public services to become more outcome focused, they must work with multiple stakeholders across the system, including citizens and communities (Bovaird et al., 2015).

Theories of coproduction propose that citizens and public services must work together to reach a shared outcome, and that leadership is an important aspect for success given the range of interests and motivational factors that influence initiatives (Bussu & Tullia Galanti, 2018; Schlappa & Imani, 2012, 2018). The complex and dynamic context of coproduction activities emphasize that public service policy, strategy, planning and implementation involve the contribution of many stakeholders. This presents an opportunity for citizens and communities to meaningfully contribute to systems change and

improved outcomes and to have a role in tackling social problems. This also implies enabling citizens to redefine problems and to bring their local knowledge and lived experience into the discussion (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012).

Writings on coproduction have increasingly emphasized the need for community interests to be more fully recognized in service and policy discussions. But a key challenge for public service professionals is how best to motivate communities to become involved in initiatives, and for the communities themselves to promote and stimulate coproduction activities (Vangen et al., 2017). This requires engagement to take place between professionals and citizens relating to the purpose and value of coproduction. In order to do so, different worldviews have to be taken into account and not merely the organizational policy and service positions (Van der Pennen & Van Bortel, 2016). Without this, coproduction will have limited significance, failing to capture the richness, substance and challenge that flow from purposeful and meaningful dialogue.

Leadership When Collaborating

Leadership and collaboration are both fundamental for public service operation, innovation and implementation. However, despite an ever-expanding literature on both concepts, understanding and knowledge about leadership in collaborative settings are muddled and fragmented. Attention is paid to entity-based debates where individual skills and competencies required by leaders who wish to lead collaborative groups exist, and while useful, they are limited in their scope (see Goldsmith and Eggers, 2005 for a more detailed discussion on this point). Moreover, and as discussed by Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012), what is found in theory and empirical research is weakened by the lack of distinction between terms and the often silent treatment given to philosophical underpinnings and perspectives. The shift in focus away from formal and traditional notions of leadership towards emphasizing the practice of leadership has been a focus for many scholars in recent decades, including Raelin (2016) and Senge (2006). Raelin and Senge both direct attention away from the individual or person as their roles and titles become less relevant, increasing emphasis on the need to build strong relationships and a focus on the outcome, which takes precedence.

Collective leadership is a dynamic process in which individuals from across a system form a collaboration, partnership or network and contribute skill, knowledge and meaning to a task (Dansereau & Yammarino, 1998; Day et al., 2004). These collaborative and collective practices require the input of a diverse range of individuals providing an energetic contribution of knowledge, where ideas and actions flow from multiple points of view and lived experience. This “co-construction of leadership” requires a form of organizing where roles and resources are negotiated, and attention is given to difference and worldviews (Raelin, 2017, p.61). Furthermore, there must be a focus on self-awareness, openness and appreciation of difference; this is discussed by Torbert and Taylor (2008), who maintain that consistent and constructive dialogic work is required to create the necessary climate for collective leadership to take place.

Scholars such as Cullen-Lester and Yammarino (2016) discuss collective leadership as being the result of a combination of processes and activities that are applied in order to make collaborative efforts more effective. Building up the capacity for this work is said to require the honing and adoption of a number of particular skills, including deep listening, inquiry, reflection and self-awareness (Gauthier, 2015; Sharp, 2018) as well as a shared acknowledgement that leadership is viewed as the property of the group and whole system (O'Connor & Quinn, 2004).

THE RESEARCH: RETHINKING COLLABORATION AS COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The purpose of the research presented in this chapter was to study the perceptions and experiences of participants who were exploring collective leadership as a way to address complex social and

organizational problems. The main objective was to discover the opinions, thoughts and feelings of participants in order to theorize about the practice of collective leadership by illuminating its component parts (Docherty, 2019). Furthermore, it sought to explore what it means to work in a collective leadership way when collaborating with others across the public service system.

At the time of the study the Scottish Government was funding and supporting a programme called Collective Leadership for Scotland (CLS). CLS is a collaborative network of public service professionals working together to address complex and systemic issues. This programme evolved from the Scottish Leaders Forum, and it focused on taking forward the recommendations set out in the Christie Commission report (2011), particularly those related to collaboration and participation. CLS is led by a small practice development team within the Scottish Government that is dedicated to supporting leadership and collaborative practice in relation to complex issues. Learning and development activities are designed and delivered to better equip public service professionals in their work; this includes facilitation support for teams in their places of work (as opposed to attending an external training and development course where attendees are removed from their day-to-day contexts). The emphasis of CLS is on learning and building capacity for leadership that focuses on the whole public service system, as well as giving attention to the behavioural, inquiring and relational aspects of working together (Collective Leadership, 2018, 2019).

This programme provided a suitable setting to explore collective leadership experiences, processes and practice with participants, in complex contexts. The research offered the opportunity to build on the work of CLS and to develop deeper understandings of collective leadership in order to inform both theory and practice. The learning drawn from the work of CLS, the study and the existing literature underpinned the development of a proposed framework (Figure 2), which draws attention to the processual properties of collective leadership. It is suggested that these properties may be utilized to promote a more intense form of collaboration and to enhance coproductive activities when addressing complex systemic issues.

Data Collection, Analysis and Interpretation

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data gathering method adopted for this research. This approach was selected to facilitate deeper understandings of participant experiences, while exploring their perceptions of collective leadership. Secondary data, including legislation, CLS publications, government and practitioner reports, along with empirical and conceptual scholarly literature, was used to supplement the interviews.

As discussed by Easterby-Smith et al., (2002), when carrying out interviews, the researcher is engaged in an active relationship with the participant. The role of the researcher is to achieve a balance between the focus of the study and allowing the participant to share and provide their insights and reflections. Gibson and Brown (2009) explain that adopting a semi-structured approach allows the researcher to follow the energy of the conversation structured around key topics and questions, although the question order can be flexible and querying may be different for each interview. In this case, an interview guide was prepared in advance and contained a number of set questions and specific areas to cover. The guide was used to organize the interview in a way that maintained relevance and consistency. Key topics included defining collective leadership, the practice of collective leadership, and the challenges and prospects of collective leadership. Participants were encouraged to share their beliefs, ideas and experiences around these topics and to provide examples and stories to encourage “authentic” and “rich” responses (Gabriel, 2000).

A “purposive” sampling strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) was considered to be the most effective method to recruit the participants. This approach is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). The majority of the participants were drawn from active cross-organizational groups who had already sought out the support of CLS in order to improve outcomes around specific themes, such as supporting children and vulnerable families and health and social care integration, or more

geographically focused areas where better local outcomes across a number of key concerns were important.

In practice this involved building and maintaining a close relationship with the CLS team in order to not only understand more about what they do but also make them aware of the research and to establish a degree of trust and credibility. Moreover, they were the “gatekeepers” in terms of participant access and were important to the realization of the study (Neuman, 2013). Based on CLS knowledge of the individuals and groups taking part in the programme they identified those who they believed to be familiar with the phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011) and who may be interested in participating, and willing to communicate experiences and opinions in an expressive and reflective way (Bernard, 2002). In order to trace additional participants, snowball sampling was used (Babbie, 1995), a method of expanding the sample by asking one participant to recommend others for interviewing.

The participants were from various local authorities, the NHS (National Health Service) and the Scottish Government, with roles such as director, manager, head teacher and psychologist. They were either working as part of a group linked to the CLS programme, facilitating a group involved in the CLS programme, or working to improve collaboration through the building of collective leadership. The common thread between all participants was an aspiration to improve collaborative practice, to learn and understand more about collective forms of leadership (including the facilitators themselves), and to better address complex and wicked problems (Heifetz & Linsky, 2014).

During March to August 2019, the author carried out twenty face-to-face interviews. The interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes and were digitally recorded. They were transcribed manually, and this data was thematically analysed by defining, categorizing, theorizing, exploring and mapping the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman & Burgess, 1994). The data analysis process is elaborated visually in Figure 1.

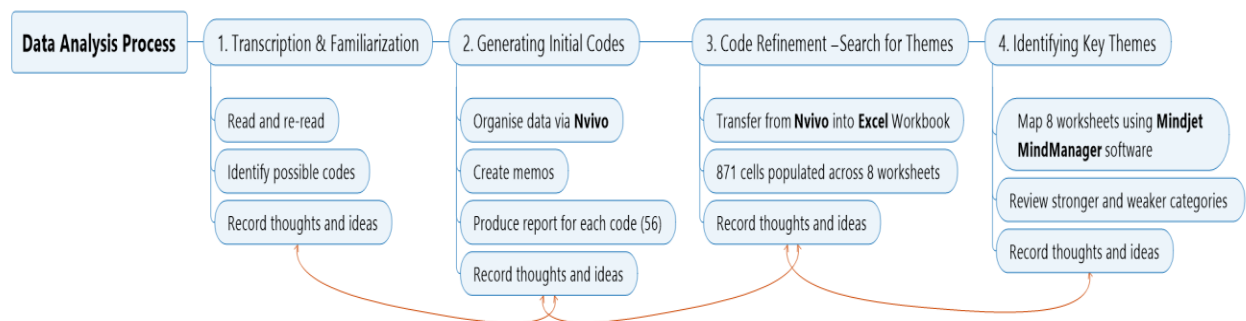


Figure 1. Data analysis overview – designed by the author to highlight the applied qualitative and thematic approach

Specifically, Figure 1 depicts how qualitative data analysis concerns the reduction of text into a systematic format that presents data in a clear and understandable way (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process for managing and analysing the data was based on a thematic framework analysis method of conceptualization, coding and categorizing, aided by the utilization of software programmes (Nvivo, Excel, MindManager). The aim was to develop an emerging set of constructs and themes that describe participants' understanding of collective leadership. During the process, as new ideas emerged and categories were shaped, the coded data was compared with the emergent themes to maintain consistency of ideas. As part of this process, earlier categories were built on, removed, revised or developed into more sophisticated and nuanced themes. Finally, coded themes were clustered to produce a smaller number of broad categories which, after further organization, were developed into three themes: 1) collaborating in a public context, 2) principles of collective leadership, and 3) from collaboration to collective leadership. This chapter draws from all of these themes.

Philosophical Approach

The research design was rooted in a social constructionist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology and phenomenological thinking (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Burrell & Morgan, 2017; Szanto & Moran, 2015; Van Manen, 2016). This approach brought concepts such as dialogue, creativity, co-creation and meaning making to the fore and aligns with the notion of transformative dialogue discussed by Gergen (2001), where moving towards mutuality is promoted by exploring differences between people. This approach allowed the opportunity to explore the richness of the participants' responses, formed from their experiences and perceptions of collaboration, coproduction and collective leadership. This became particularly important when trying to understand what it means to work and practise collective leadership by exploring its component parts. Gathering first-hand descriptions and accounts enabled a deeper level of investigation into the dynamics of this multifaceted approach; moreover, the contextual location and mode of delivery offered both theoretical and practice-focused insights.

THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this section is to discuss the empirical findings, together with existing literature. Firstly, the *collective leadership process* (Figure 2) is presented and discussed in terms of what it means to work in this way in practice. Secondly, the *understanding collective leadership and coproduction framework* (Figure 3) sets out more fully how this process is represented in a contextual situation. Finally, the discussion section explores collective leadership and coproduction in relation to the study as a whole and relevant literature.

Collective Leadership – the Process

The model (Figure 2) for understanding the collective leadership process is made up of insights drawn from the empirical data gathered in this research, and illuminates four distinct but interrelated principles, offering a simple visual of what the collective leadership process involves. The principles – *systems thinking*, *working emergently*, *relationality* and *inquiry* – each represent, in some form, a requirement to adjust current ways of thinking and working when operating in a collaborative context. They are therefore termed 'principles' in the model.

This model sets out principles for the activities required to successfully agitate traditional working practices, in order to support cross-boundary collaboration, improve joint working and the work experience in general, address complex issues and build better and stronger relationships. It is the effect of the sum of these parts that enables an increase in the intensity of collaborative work, and creates the conditions for a collective form of leadership to take place.

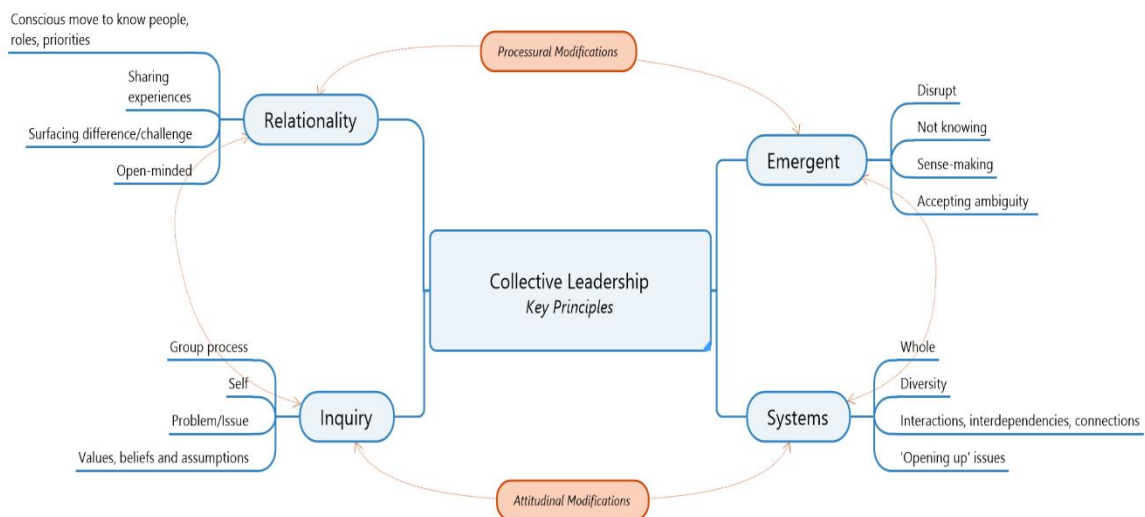


Figure 2: The collective leadership process – designed by the author based on the research findings and informed by the work of *Collective Leadership for Scotland*

The collective leadership principles set out in the model in Figure 2 suggest a course of action that, when applied, may promote effective collaboration when grappling with complex issues. Therefore it is prescriptive in its aim to strengthen collaborative processes within similar contexts. The principles are described in more detail below.

The Four Key Principles

Systems – Adopting a systems mind-set requires thought in relation to the contributions, processes and outputs from all relevant organizations across any given system, including citizens, all of which are considered to impact on an outcome. The idea of ‘opening up’ issues, in order to make sense of them and any potential root causes, inspires and alters the conversations that people choose to have. There is a focus on learning about public service systems in terms of how they connect and relate with each other. Paying attention to the interactions and interdependencies and enlisting diverse perspectives can establish connections and support a ‘whole system’ solution to problems (Chapman, 2004; Senge et al., 2015).

Emergent – Taking an emergent approach (as opposed to a planned style) consists of a continuous process of experimentation and adaptation, which may result in small to medium incremental adjustments, leading to transformational change. This style of working disrupts traditional patterns, with new ideas and opportunities thought to emerge out of the process. Collective thinking and sense making is encouraged as group members strive to maintain an openness to stay with whatever emerges (Burnes, 2004; Morley & Hosking, 2003).

Relationality – Taking a conscious step towards getting to know other people and their work, beyond the polite salutations, and privileging relational matters above or equal to a task, can adjust typical communication and behavioural patterns. Emphasis is given to the importance of bringing the whole person into the room, rather than representations of a role or an organization. It is through these exchanges that diverse viewpoints are more comfortably shared, as members relate together, shaping a new course of action (Fletcher, 2012; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2018).

Inquiry – Beginning an inquiry into the group process, the issue or problem, and any deeply held personal values, behaviours and beliefs, promotes a quest for fresh learning, the need to be open and curious, asking more questions and enabling different perspectives to be aired. It seeks to merge the subjective (what do I think) with the intersubjective (what do we think) and the objective data (what has been done already and what was the result), in order to enrich self-awareness and shape a different way of working (Gergen, 2009; Reason, 1994).

The four key principles support the agitation of traditional working practices in order to improve joint working and the work experience in general, address complex issues and bring in a diverse range of views, ideas and experiences from across the system, including users and citizens. All of the principles interrelate and the boundaries between them are blurred, but when applied together they reinforce each other, providing a distinctive approach to working. This model builds on recent scholarship on collective leadership by considering the practice of it from process and behavioural perspectives (Raelin, 2019; Sharp, 2020), and furthermore it is rooted in a particular context, one where cross-boundary collaboration and whole system engagement is a necessary and important part of public service work. Friedrich et al. (2009) state that this is critical, as the context within which collective leadership takes place can both advance and obstruct its capacity to emerge.

While Figure 2 provides a simple perspective of key collective leadership characteristics, it does not sufficiently encapsulate its processual and contextual aspects. The following sections will unpack the collective leadership approach in more detail by exploring its synergistic activities and coproductive effects, interpreted from the data and explored alongside the existing literature.

Collective Leadership and Coproduction

The research project was focused on the practice of collective leadership. The interview questions did not refer to coproduction, nor did the researcher explicitly raise it or name it; however, the data identified a set of activities involving coproduction with citizens and other stakeholders that took place as a result of their collective leadership practice.

What emerged as the study progressed was that participants were talking about the coproductive activities that took place, in part from adopting what was later termed *the systems mind-set* in the model into their collaborative work. An example is participant A, who said that when working to address a public service problem, “all of the stakeholders, people that work in the organizations that deliver services, citizens, the elected members, the board members, third sector...” were all part of the system, and “everybody’s got a contribution to make in figuring that [the problem] out.”

Descriptions were given of significant changes being made to processes as a direct result of engaging with and learning from citizens. In one particular account, the difficulty in accessing family support services was revealed through ‘inviting in’ and listening to user experiences. The current process was considered to be slow and burdensome and was illustrated by participant Q: “...this family said they had thirteen different interventions from different services and they still didn’t feel that the problems they were facing had been resolved.”

The approach taken to understanding more about this issue involved connecting with citizens through what is termed in the model *the inquiry approach*, which meant asking questions in order to understand more – and not jumping quickly to act or decide on a solution. This is further explained by the same participant: “They identified a couple of powerful questions that they then coalesced around what does it [support] mean for you. What’s it like for you in the situation you’re in?”

The result of this approach led to powerful, emotional stories being shared by vulnerable families, promoting empathy and awareness amongst members of the group, subsequently informing the actions and decisions taken regarding a new model of service provision for those families and others.

The following, more detailed account from participant J describes how a multi-partner collaborative group took a collective leadership approach to working with local school children and families, where citizens, as part of the system, were viewed as critical contributors. This particular account has been

selected as the example given includes all principles of the collective leadership process (see Figure 2), and illustrates how they interrelate and are utilized in practice.

Participant J (hereafter referred to as J) explained how the group agreed to focus on a recurring issue – *how best to provide support for families over the summer holiday period, when schools are closed*. In essence, it was made clear to the researcher that the summer break exacerbated family tensions and this culminated in police and other service interventions during and after this period. Shared concerns about this issue were said to be recognized by education, social work and other agency professionals:

There were common themes between education and social work around a problem that had been there for years, how to support families over the summer period. We knew it was tricky, no one knew the answer. A lot of resources had been thrown at it, it worries us all, we needed to collaborate outwith ourselves, asking families, asking children, coming up with ideas together about how to solve that problem. Children go off on holiday, they come back and they've had a really tricky time, we worried about it.

Figure 3 highlights the approach taken to tackle this issue as described by participant J during the interview, where an emergent, systems-focused, relational and inquiry path supported a move towards coproduction, which was interpreted as not solely about what they did, but how they did it. It was explained that an initial group came together, made up of practitioners from different organizations involved with or concerned about this issue. Together they accepted that many different change processes had been tried, different resources had been allocated, but nothing had worked. They acknowledged that they did not know what would make the difference to the families.

We've tried to change processes, we've tried procedures or we've blamed one department or another and actually it's not about any of that, it's about the fact that we actually just don't know what makes the difference.

J commented that the group recognized that taking a different approach to tackling the issue may offer a way forward, where other more traditional, collaborative approaches had not. They sought out facilitative support from within their local authority and the CLS team to help guide them.

J further explained that the group spent time exploring the assumptions and perceptions that existed around their own roles and responsibilities and those of others. This relational approach was interpreted by the researcher as seeking to privilege the processual aspects of group work above the task, with relational emphasis said to be particularly important in the early meetings of the group. They built on the knowledge and learning gained from each other, and stated that they then considered together some of the important questions that they wished to explore. J believed that adopting an emergent approach enabled the group to agree that they did not know how best to resolve the issue or have adequate answers to many of their questions. It was explained that the group elected to find out more from others in the system; crucially, this led them to involving many of the children and families affected by the issue. The time taken to get to this point was said to cause some frustration within the group; although described as only one or two meetings, working in this way was considered to be very different and challenging:

Some people were more frustrated than others about being stuck; it was a really interesting experience to be stuck with other people, professional people who should know the answer, and some of those people wanted the answer, a strategy, an action plan, right from the get go, don't leave us here all stuck and woolly. It was painful initially, really painful!

J indicated that opening up the conversation to the wider system changed the way the group had thought about providing this service. By working differently and identifying and sharing resources, it was said that they discovered that the families wanted to be supported but not separated from their children over the summer months, and that this collective understanding had a fundamental impact on the actions they took and the range of ideas and options they prepared. Crucially, the emergent nature of their approach enabled them to go back out to talk further, and to more families, as they built up their learning through inquiry and listening. J said that this work led to the eventual organization of a public vote to decide on the preferred way forward.

The families came up with innovative ideas. Food poverty was an issue, and they said a couple of meals a week would help. Parents were telling us that their social anxiety and mental health problems stopped them from using public transport, so things we'd never have thought of. We were then able to come up with suggestions and had a public vote about how to spend this money. They voted for the meals and the family trips. We needed to stop and not just think that we know the answers; we needed to go back and get a bit more. We learned a lot from that.

J explained that the result of the collaborative and coproductive work was described positively by teaching staff and that they noticed a tangible difference in their classrooms after the summer break. Furthermore, it was said that relief was felt by all the cross-agency staff involved who were pleased to find that post-summer police reports of problems fell dramatically. The success of the collective input continued to provide benefits as it was confirmed by J that financial support was secured for future years, and key resources were provided by parents and other community members, who took on the role of delivering this valued support service.

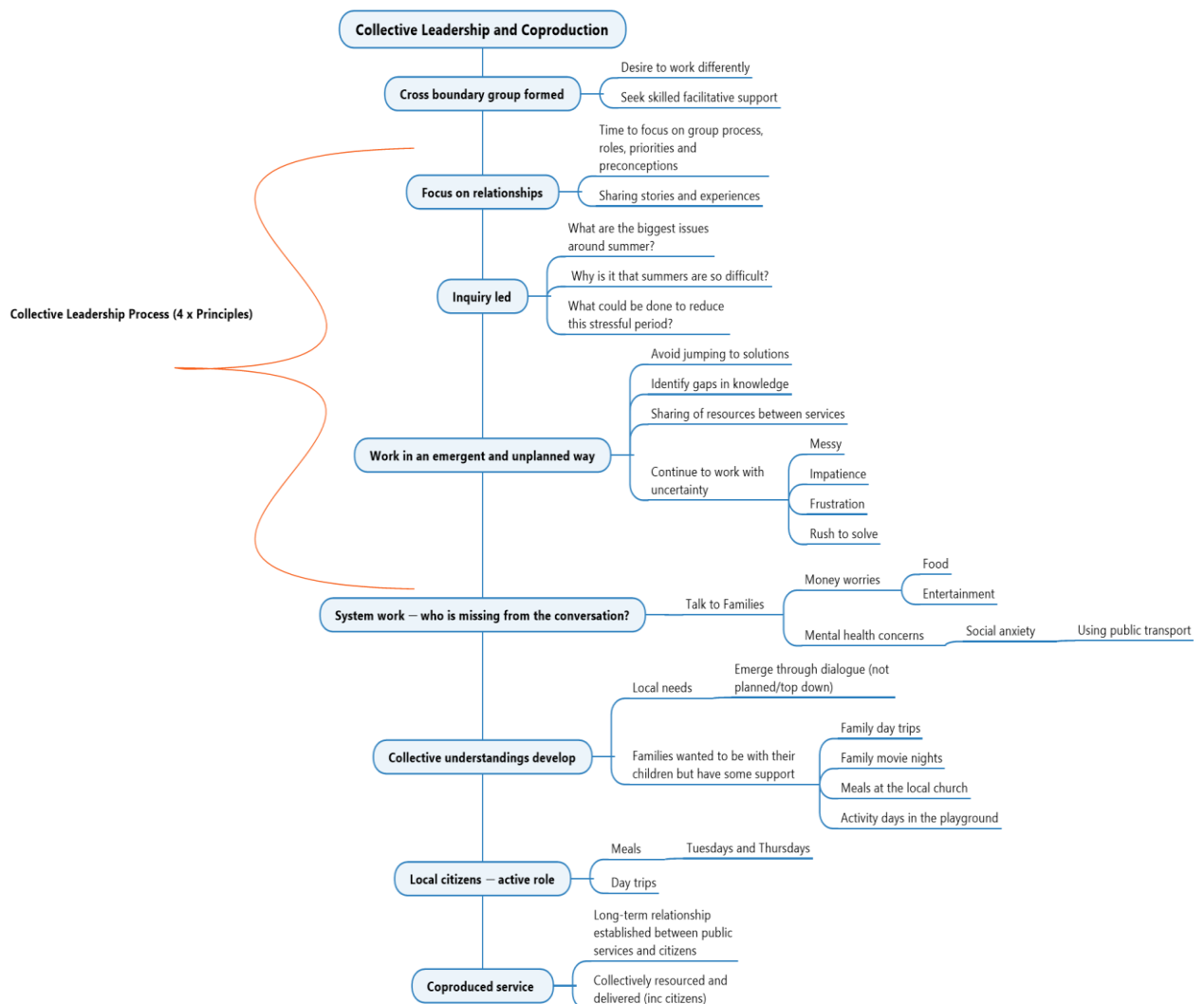


Figure 3. Understanding collective leadership and coproduction framework – designed by the author based on interviewee account [J]

DISCUSSION

This study involved asking participants about their experiences of collaborating differently by thinking about and practising a collective leadership approach. The focus on how multi-stakeholder groups work and lead together and where coproduction fits in relation to public service collaboration is explored further in this section. It draws from the entire data set, offering an interpretation of the underlying meaning, and describes new insights in light of what is already known.

Benefits of Collective Leadership-Led Coproduction

In this study, a collective leadership approach was found to foster the involvement of citizens, users, communities and other non-service providers in the design and production of public services, as well as those involved at the level of delivery. This is evidenced and supported through participant accounts, some of which have been included in this chapter, and highlights an important relationship between the need for a systems-focused approach when faced with complex issues and involving citizens and communities in addressing them. This version of coproduction (defined in Figure 3) is considered by the author to be a step beyond the consultation and participation exercises that take place around discrete projects or initiatives, and corresponds with the findings reported by Bianchi et al., (2017), who similarly acknowledge the importance of emergent working and learning when engaging in coproductive activities.

The emergent approach described by all study participants as a core component of adopting a collective leadership approach is built from a group admitting to not knowing the answer or what is best for a particular policy, service or issue. Thus they begin from a shared acknowledgement that the issue is complex and no one organization or individual has the solution. This was found to be a strength and an influencing factor when seeking to coproduce with others from across the system. The approach supports service delivery in a more active way, by presenting a position far removed from the traditional role of public services as creator and implementer of a service, and of citizens as simply beneficiaries. The focus on inquiry, and the desire to expand collective understandings of an issue, involves seeking out and speaking to all parts of the system. This is very different from engaging with citizens and communities on a predetermined proposal, mainly because of the emergent nature of the work and therefore the unknown outcome. These principles offer an authentic and meaningful form of coproduction, which may serve to adjust practitioner preconceptions regarding the worth of citizen contributions. In addition, there is also the promise of wider system participation from the less engaged, boosting the resource potential, diversity and capacity of the work.

Collective leadership is interpreted from the data as involving an element of personal reflection and self-work. Seeking to bring about change in this way, to coproduce outcomes with people, is explained as an approach where, rather than trying to avoid dissent or to cover it up, there is instead a necessity for different points of view to be expressed and heard. Learning to work with dissent, whether constructive or not, is important. This is described as hard to do in practice and practitioners may be relatively unequipped to do so. This finding raises questions around the capacity and skills required for collective leadership and invites a discussion on how these skills, when developed, may impact positively on coproduction efforts.

Furthermore, adopting a process that seeks to ‘invite in’ challenge and diverse voices from other sectors, organizations, teams and communities is a central component of a collective leadership approach. In doing so, there is the explicit intention to learn and listen, to work hard together and to understand different perceptions and realities. The data reveal that maintaining a focus on collectively leading is a valuable way to connect with people from across the public service system, and that the process (see Figures 2 and 3) inspires coproduction to take place.

Considerations and Conditions

This part of the chapter provides a broader perspective on collective leadership, drawn and interpreted from the data and supported by wider research. It focuses on why there is a desire to explore *how* groups

collaborate and what may inhibit or support aspects of this work. In the study, participants gave different explanations for their growing interest in collective leadership. The accounts offered a sense of the evolution and modernisation of public services, and the contradictions and tensions that can arise out of change and reform. In particular, four distinct but connected themes were interpreted from the data. All of these themes present challenges and prospects for actors involved in horizontal and collective processes within a public service context.

Frustrated Collaborations

The data highlight concerns with the organizational structures that influence working activities. Participants explained that the autonomous structures and silos that they operate within impede general cooperation and fluidity between organizations. Moreover, cultures clash and working preferences contrast, creating barriers for collaborative work and coproduction. This fragmentation is said to be divisive and can lead to a decrease in trust and disappointment from citizens, and can overly burden staff. The data show evidence of lengthy and over-complicated processes, difficulties in accessing information, and delays in responding to and providing the necessary support to those in need, all troubling for staff and citizens. This finding corresponds with the research of Pratt et al. (2018), who similarly state that institutional barriers and colliding systems impede collaborative progress.

The data imply that there has been a failure within NPM to consider the interconnected and interdependent nature of public services and, with that, an alienation of staff and citizens. This links with claims in the literature that aspects of NPM have undermined public service values through their dominant focus on competition and results (Hood, 1991). This is further recognized in the continuing debates around alternative paradigms to NPM, such as, NPG, PVM and new public leadership (Brookes, 2011). These alternative discussions are all intended to help understand government activity, and to explore what public service practitioners do. Interested scholars also seek to address the practical implications associated with the different conceptualizations and argue that a new paradigm will also present a series of challenges, including the development of additional skills, and added complexity for those operating within a public sphere (Morse, 2008).

All participants discussed their deep dissatisfaction with the way public service organizations respond to the more difficult challenges facing them. In the study there was an acceptance from participants that many of the complex societal problems that they hope to address are not easily solved. Yet they are committed to understanding more about them, and to taking a new course of action in responding to them. This work requires the building of capacity in order to intensify cross-boundary collaboration across the public service system and, with that, reach the promise of improved outcomes. Yet an active NPM style of leadership continues to prevail within public organizations. This model is recognized and discussed in the research because of its tendency to favour and adopt rational and technical responses to problem solving, believed to be unsuitable for treating intractable and systemic issues (Clarke & Stewart, 2003). These tensions were said to cause a number of difficulties for participants as they attempted to circumvent an established and deep-rooted culture within their collaborative work.

Wicked Issues

Critics of rational and technical approaches to problem solving have argued for some decades that wicked issues cannot be addressed and understood in isolation (Ackoff, 1974; Alford & Head, 2017). Furthermore, this complexity is exacerbated because of the structures and processes that bind public services, inhibiting attempts at productive and effective responses. Correspondingly, participants within the study commented on being inducted into a public service model full of structure and boundaries, where a hierarchical, siloed culture sits side by side with command and control and heroic forms of leadership. This rigid way of organizing and leading public services is described as forming a demarcation between service provision and what is actually required in local communities, where the entrenched characteristics are unable to fully embrace the need for a more collaborative relationship between citizens and government. Furthermore, this inflexibility limits opportunities to think creatively about difficult policy and service issues across departments, professions and organizations.

The data show that alternative ways of functioning, producing, operating and leading are required to address the inherent weaknesses witnessed in day-to-day practice, where the promotion of self-interest, without regard for the wider system or desired outcomes, is keenly felt. Moreover, when working with others is mandatory, participants voiced their concerns about the constant pressure to deliver, implement and report back on collaborative work tasked with producing effective and efficient results. This is felt as a weight, which runs counter to a basic need to spend time thinking about how best to work together. Linking with this study, research by Goss and Tarplett (2010) discusses many of the problems facing collaborative groups, and they comment that there are difficulties related to evidencing successful progress and performance, arguing that this may be the result of single organizations failing to recognize the need for a more sophisticated and adaptive approach when it comes to measuring success in respect of multi-stakeholder groups.

Shifting Perspectives of Leadership

The data show that motivations for alternative conceptions of leadership and different ways of working when collaborating appear to be drawn from the combined strain of working within an NPM model and the frustrations felt with current collaborative practice. Moreover, when there are complex issues to attend to, these pressure points and obstructions become ever more problematic.

The findings in the data point to a desire to deepen collaborative intensity through the application of the collective leadership process; this necessitates a rethink about notions of leadership dependent on heroic and individual interpretations (Drath et al., 2008). Furthermore, working and leading collectively in complex environments requires a focus on the social interactions that take place between members of a collaborative group and the leadership practices that occur and unfold through the development of those relationships (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016; Youngs, 2017). The data challenge traditional notions of leadership by turning attention towards the processes that produce leadership in collaborative settings.

Leadership and how it is understood are reflected in the data as a move away from heroic concepts towards leadership as a practice, process and outcome (Carroll et al., 2008). While traditional conceptions and constructions of leaders and leadership are not discounted within this research, participants have evidenced a move to embrace a collective leadership style and to operationalise it.

These shifting perspectives of leadership are revealed in the data in terms of exposing a relationship between a changing public service system and how work is organized, and linking this with a society where expectations are high and scrutiny is all pervasive. Similar dynamics are found in the work of Pollitt et al., (2016), who comment on the intensity of public and media interest and concern in respect of public services. The majority of participants have been working in a public sphere for much of their careers (decades in most cases). The roles they occupy range from organizational or leadership development to professional roles working directly with vulnerable families, children or patients. Many have experienced a combination of service and policy roles and some are regarded as formal leaders responsible for departmental and organizational sustainability. What unites them all are their public service credentials and a common view that a more relational and collective form of leadership is now required to respond to complex issues, to best facilitate the active participation of citizens in the policy and service process, to improve the life of communities and to sustain public services going forward. They question hierarchy and formal power structures in relation to this work and propose that there is a need for public service practitioners to acknowledge that notions of leadership are not solely concerned with leader-centric conceptions that focus on the individual. Furthermore, participants wish to promote and defend a reconstruction of leadership, one that is taking place in their work and through their daily interactions. This finding is consistent with and builds on the research of Crevani et al., (2010), who in their work promote an analytical focus on the practice of leadership rather than on individual leaders; furthermore they suggest that the exchanges that take place between people are important and are worth exploring from a relational leadership lens.

The study findings propose that a collective leadership approach is beneficial for cross-boundary collaborative work and the enablement of coproduction, particularly when dealing with complex and wicked issues. This approach involves adopting a process where all members of a group come together

to meaningfully address shared concerns, to attend to and overcome the challenges associated with collaborating *and then* take the action formed out of this work. There is an understanding among participants of the contradictions and paradoxes this will bring to the mixed arrangements coexisting in and across public services, relating to the competing doctrines, governance and conceptions of leadership associated with each. This is a concern to them, but there is also a strong feeling of agitation, directed towards a growing and pressing need to build capacity for more effective collaborative work.

Building Capacity for Collaborative and Coproductive Practice

In the study, participants describe the frustration experienced with the typical collaborative efforts they had been involved in prior to the collective leadership work. They rarely realized positive results, explaining how they often made some progress only to see the work unravel because of confusion or a lack of commitment or buy-in. Furthermore, they described them as ‘talking shops’, where individuals held tightly to their organizational mandates, having a detrimental impact on the quality of dialogue, contribution of ideas, actions taken and outcomes reached, not quite arriving at the potential envisioned and set out by Christie (2011). Individuals and organizations were said to lose motivation because of misunderstandings around the nature of the problems being tackled, combined with the polite conversations that tended to dodge the critical and meaningful.

The research findings hold some similarities to the work of Crosby et al., (2017), who address the significant collaborative challenges relating to historical and embedded organizational cultures and structures through an exploration of the viability of a collective approach. Their application of a case study approach to a Minneapolis homelessness crisis examines some of the key debates around collective leadership, coproduction and the creation of public value. They found difficulties in transforming public managers with deeply ingrained working practices, commenting that these individuals continue to remain acutely sensitive to political demands and short-term policy priorities and are weighed down by media scrutiny, making it very hard for them to change behaviours and attempt a more collective way of working, even if desired. They argue that taking time to invest in staff development, with the aim of supporting them through a shift in working practices, may help to support collective leadership, where the aim is to solve complex problems in society, involve users and citizens in policy and service design, and achieve public value.

Building greater collaborative capacity is a key driver of the collective leadership process, where better equipping the collaborators to handle complex, shared work is said to be essential to enable effective coproduction and to help sustain public services going forward. Yet the data highlight a gap between what is espoused in the modernisation reports *and* the capacity of people to work in the ways envisaged (see Christie, 2011; Housden, 2014). This gap is attributed to

- 1: The lack of investment in exploring how best to achieve quality collaboration;
- 2: Limited organizational concern or motivation to openly and widely acknowledge how hard it is to partner and collaborate well; and
- 3: An inability or reluctance to address the underlying tensions that exist within collaborative groups from the outset.

Therefore, at the core of the research is an identified need to support the practice of collaboration, based on the difficulties associated with obtaining successful results related specifically to the task, as well as an acknowledgement of the social complexity of collaborating across the public service system while doing the work.

This understanding, linked to the relational aspects of collaboration, is important. These formations bring together different structures and cultures, which are represented through the group members (made up of public service professionals in this study) and further extended by citizen and community involvement. The tensions within collaborative practice are specifically identified as members holding very different views, long-standing assumptions of responsibilities, services and roles and rushing to address the task, which reduces the quality of listening, and how best to build relationships and trust.

Instances of unsurfaced power imbalances were said to be common within groups, tempering the effectiveness of the work. Moreover, potential innovation is stifled by the avoidance of conflict and uncomfortable conversations, an approach said to be tolerated for the sake of harmony and habit.

Concerns about the limited range of contributions influencing service and policy decisions are expressed by participants in terms of the need to bring in diverse people, voices and experiences from across the public service system, and to be more inclusive. Making connections, understanding others and their way of thinking, looking for patterns and filling in the knowledge gaps are all considered important in this dynamic work. This implies involving colleagues, communities, citizens, the third sector and the private sector in the activities of system representation and change initiatives. This diversity offers alternative views and insights, as priorities, aspirations and experiences differ, providing the necessary challenge required to stimulate current thinking and planning towards new ideas, innovation and transformation. This is similar to Raelin's (2003, p.49) characterization of a systems-level approach, where "webs of partnerships" become an operational reality, changing the form of leadership towards collective, collaborative and coproductive practices.

The account of coproduction included in this chapter (Figure 3) shows that by extending the conversation out to the wider system and utilizing the resource, knowledge and experiences of others, the way a service is thought about can be critically altered. Furthermore, and drawing on the full study data, a focus on what is deemed 'local' and of value to participants was found to influence the direction of the conversations within groups, building them up from a place of individual concerns and experience rather than from a pre-prepared agenda. This connects with debates in the wider literature relating to stakeholder participation, public engagement and democracy, where scholars like Raelin (2017, p.64) present the phenomenon of collective leadership as an alternative viewpoint because of its "spirit of connectedness". The study findings also correspond with Weick's research (2000), who explores some of the benefits of emergent and systems-focused change, suggesting that a collective leadership approach can offer an increased sensitivity to local possibilities, generated from the sharing of lived experience and knowledge, transferred between people and across boundaries.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter explores an intense form of collaboration established from a centrist public service model inadequately prepared for complex issues and cross-boundary collaboration. Changing perceptions and increased awareness about leading and leadership within this context, combined with the need for a systems perspective and increased diversity, have added traction and emphasis towards coproduction processes and outcomes. All of these themes present rich research opportunities.

More specifically the study described in this chapter is based on a bounded view of collective leadership, one drawn from those working within or on behalf of public service organizations. The process model (Figure 2) and understanding collective leadership and coproduction (Figure 3) could be utilized to study collective leadership and coproduction from other perspectives, such as the third sector, the private sector, citizens or other non-service delivery providers. This would help to offer insights on the shifting roles that take place as a result of this work, and the extent of the change. Equally, it would be useful to explore forms of collective leadership in other countries in relation to public service collaboration, reform and change.

CONCLUSION

Collective leadership is described as an approach where citizens, communities and other non-service delivery stakeholders are included as part of the whole public service system. Moreover, given the financial pressures, expectations and external scrutiny that weigh heavily on public services, consideration of how coproduction can be carried out, and for what purpose, is helpful. With untapped potential in all of our communities, there is a real need to bring to the surface the tensions, opportunities and processual aspects of coproduction. This means understanding more about the people who deliver

services, hearing from the people who use the services and illuminating the steps taken to do the work. Collective leadership shows promise as a way to mobilise a relational approach, to stimulate a more effective conversation around the challenges of delivering public services and to engage with what is valued at a local level.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Collective Leadership: Collective leadership is the result of building collaborative capacity through intense individual and group work. Relationships are privileged and complex problems faced, in the pursuit of learning and discovering what can be achieved together.

Collective Leadership for Scotland: A practice development team within the Scottish Government that works with partners from across the public services. The team has developed leadership practice around complex issues, recognizing the critical importance of working collectively in pursuit of complex outcomes. The emphasis is on learning and building capacity for leadership that appreciates and engages with the whole system.

Cross-Boundary Collaboration: Is the term used to describe groups, networks or partnerships made up of individuals from the contexts of government, business, third sector, communities and citizens, and where individuals work together, beyond their own departments or organizations, in order to tackle social problems and other complex challenges.

Leadership as Practice: Engages with the experiential, relational, interactive and situated aspects of work and explores connections with self, others and the wider system, often when complex problems arise and rational approaches are considered less reliable and attractive. It is a perspective where leadership becomes the level of analysis and where the empirical focus seeks to explore the leadership interactions, practices and processes.

Local Government (Scotland): Is organized through thirty-two unitary ‘local authorities’, with elected councillors in each area. Local authorities operate independently of central government and are accountable to their electorates for the services they provide, which include education, social care and environmental and planning services. They receive the majority of their funding from the Scottish Government.

Phenomenology: Is a type of qualitative research that focuses on the study of lived experience, with the general aim to understand and describe a particular phenomenon. Phenomenologists assume that knowledge and understanding are developed through the interaction of the researcher and participant, rendering them subjective, inductive and dynamic.

Scottish Government: Is the devolved government for Scotland and has a range of responsibilities that include the economy, education, health, justice, rural affairs, housing, environment, equal opportunities, consumer advocacy and advice, transport and taxation. The civil service helps the government of the day develop and implement its policies as well as deliver public services. Civil servants are accountable to ministers, who in turn are accountable to Parliament.

Social Constructionism: A belief that there is no universal truth but a reality that we all contribute to making.