

IGNITE

# SYSTEM LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

An Ignite essay collection



## ABOUT IGNITE

**IGNITE** is a **Solace** leadership programme supported by the Local Government Association, which has been delivered in 2016/2018 by Collaborate CIC. We are grateful to the LGA for their support, and to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government for ongoing endorsement and input into the programme. We are very grateful to a number of leaders from government, NHS, business and civil society who have contributed to the programme, and to the local government Chief Executives who offered their expert input, support and participation on the programme.

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## FOREWORD

Ignite: from a spark to a bonfire



Deborah Cadman OBE

When we became jointly responsible for **Solace's** work on leadership and development we agreed to focus on three areas: the importance of ambitious place-based leadership; the need to support all Chief Executives to engage actively in being the very best we can be; and amplifying the voice of lesser heard voices, especially women. As we pass on the **Solace** baton we were delighted to be asked for some introductory thoughts to this splendid collection of articles, and to reflect on what we have learnt.

Being involved with the Ignite programme has been a hugely rewarding and refreshing experience. We have met a whole range of new people from within local government and other sectors, learned loads, had our preconceptions challenged, and our minds changed. So much of all our jobs is focusing on problem-solving in the immediate, and anticipating and positioning for the future. It is a rare treat to be able to legitimately spend time thinking about **how**, as well as **what**, we do. We should all find time to do it more.

The three areas have proved to be very productive seams and intertwined more profoundly than we anticipated. As the context for the work moved from the peak of devolution to the uncertainties of Brexit and the next Budget, the themes strengthened. The need for strong voices championing our places, leading organisations, and drawing systems together in pursuit of the best collective interests of our current (and future) residents, communities and businesses has become even more important. Doing this well means listening to all voices, especially the quieter voices. Often, when heard, they hold the unlocking key.



Becky Shaw

While there was a lot of focus on supporting and attracting people to become Chief Executives, our intuition told us there was much less for people already in role beyond self-motivation. In particular, we were missing a safe and supportive space where serving Chief Executives could explore, learn, and be prodded to think really hard about how to do their jobs even better. We were delighted to be sponsored by LGA, MHCLG, **Solace** and all the Chief Executives and partners who were willing to give up their time to make Ignite the success it has so far been.

With three cohorts firmly established and two more cohorts being recruited, the Ignite programme has proved itself in practice as well as in principle. Each cohort has been gloriously different, reflecting the participants, their places, and the changing contexts. What has been striking is the speed at which our jobs are evolving. With this has come a hunger for collective time, with peers, to talk about the everyday challenges and to stretch ourselves with the new. Both are important and fundamentally interlinked: we need our credibility to underpin our legitimacy in new landscapes.

*“...The need for strong voices championing our places, leading organisations, and drawing systems together in pursuit of the best collective interests of our current (and future) residents, communities and businesses has never been more important...”*

New challenges increasingly include responding to social change (such as the rise of the far right and post-Brexit Britain), and global events and trends (such as climate change, mental health crisis, and movements of people). These challenges demand greater diversity in thought, service delivery and workforces, and learning from across the globe.

Add to this the toughness of budget management and it means the competence and judgement of Chief Executives are under scrutiny as never before.

As you will read in all that follows, Ignite has at its core enabled a stronger sense of collective mission. It has enabled people to say “I do not know but I want to”, or “does anyone know about...”, confident that in return they will receive a chorus of “so glad you said that, me neither, let’s work it out together”. We all need to build our tribes and make space for these conversations.

So far, Ignite has had four “significant adults” in its life who have nurtured, shaped and profoundly affected its nature. Dr Henry Kippin, Lord Victor Adebowale, Anna Randle and Trudy Birtwell, please take a bow and our thanks. Your contribution has been huge, and we know Ignite is safe in your hands.

Our final salute goes to the Chief Executives who have participated in Ignite so far, and to those who will follow on. The generosity of spirit, thoughtfulness, creativity, experience, hard work, willingness to share and, at times, downright cunning is astounding: they are awesome 21st century public servants to a man and a woman.

Let the Ignite spark become a bonfire!

# INTRODUCTION

Mark Lloyd, Local Government Association



Mark Lloyd

*“...Chief Executives need to be at the cutting edge of managing and implementing change within their own councils, pushing past traditional borders and boundaries and working collaboratively with others...”*

The public sector landscape and political environment in which local government operates continues to change rapidly, meaning good leadership has never been more important – or more challenging.

At the LGA, we know the huge importance of developing local government officers, managers and leaders as well as our support for politicians. This is reflected in our successful partnership with **Solace**, with whom we work to offer exclusive training for Chief Executives and senior managers across the sector.

Over the past year, the LGA has been proud to support three groups of Chief Executives through Ignite, a celebrated programme delivered by the LGA, **Solace** and Collaborate, which develops senior leaders in light of the changing context for local government. Co-created by Chief Executives and the wider sector, Ignite provides successful local government leaders the opportunity to nurture their talent and hone the skills to manage complex organisations in increasingly challenging times.

The essays in this collection show the difference the programme has made to the confidence, ambition and capabilities of already impressive local leaders. The challenges they face are as specific as the communities they serve, but the themes are often common. To be able to share the burden with others struggling against similar challenges has proved powerfully liberating. Local authority leaders are not alone. As these essays reveal, the Ignite programme shows what can happen when they come together.

Local government Chief Executives are demonstrating that soft skills like political saviness and emotional intelligence are crucial for leading change. We all know that demand for services continues to rise, while there is no end to austerity in sight. Our partnership with **Solace** and Collaborate to deliver the Ignite programme acknowledges the context of the challenge, with elements of the programme specifically tailored to some of the most complex issues. But it also provides a rare environment for Chief Executives to discuss and make progress against the issues facing local government, while nurturing the qualities required to thrive. Ignite includes topics that you might expect on a Chief Executive development programme, such as “leading change in our places”, or “the Chief Executive role in a changing environment”; but what makes it unique is the focus on cultivating empathy, confidence and resilience, as well as inspiring that in others. It is this approach which will help Chief Executives thrive in the face of increasing pressure.

We know that Chief Executives need to be at the cutting edge of managing and implementing change within their own councils, pushing past traditional borders and boundaries and working collaboratively with other local authorities – as well as with the plethora of other public and private organisations and partners delivering public services, all with their own agendas and priorities. Ignite creates an environment where leaders can grow and adapt, develop their personal leadership approach and learn from each other.

Like the wider LGA development offer, Ignite celebrates the importance of building relationships and support networks, and not just with fellow council Chief Executives. The combination of reflection time, Chief Executive roundtables, and discussions with politicians, means that Ignite offers our most senior local government managers the unique opportunity to develop their approach to managing within and across organisations, with the support and challenge of a network of peers.

It is programmes like Ignite that can help provide space, nurture ambition, and develop the relationships that will support Chief Executives through tough times and important changes.

Our organisations are changing at a bewildering pace and this can be very difficult for the people who work in them. It is critical to focus on keeping people engaged and celebrating their efforts, which is why our work with **Solace**, supporting rising stars and future leaders as well as current Chief Executives, is so important.

## ESSAY 1

Chief Executive as curator: leading change in Redbridge



Andy Donald

*“Leadership now is about creating the spaces, the time, the support and the encouragement for the right people in the right organisations (including in the community) to find the right solutions. It is Chief Executive as curator.”*

Change is constant. At a global level, at city level and a local level, the world we live in feels like it is changing faster than at any point in my lifetime. Take my borough, Redbridge – historically a well-heeled eastern suburb of London. Ilford, the principal town, was once known as the capital of East London, its primary shopping and leisure destination. An aspirational place to live and work, with long streets of large Victorian properties, excellent schools and wonderful open spaces. The infrastructure is still there, but the dynamics of London have changed it beyond recognition over the last 20 years. The big businesses have long shut up shop and left, the town centre has failed to respond to the billions of pounds invested in Stratford, and as central London becomes increasingly gentrified, our communities are changing as people no longer able to afford to live in Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Newham are pushed further east.

We are the 4th fastest growing borough in the country, and now the 4th most ethnically diverse. Those desirable street properties are being converted into Houses of Multiple Occupation at an alarming rate. Our ageing populations are being joined by young cosmopolitan communities – some still attracted by the continually well performing schools and the open spaces, but many arriving because of the relatively low cost of property. With this change comes new challenges for those of us responsible for public services. My staff are now dealing on a daily basis with spiralling homelessness, overcrowding, gangs, prostitution, trafficking, county lines, rough sleeping, radicalisation and youth crime. Outer London is becoming the new Inner London.

It is not all gloom and doom, though: with change comes huge opportunity. For a borough which (shamefully) built little housing over the last 40 years, the arrival of the Elizabeth Line presents significant investment potential. Our newly adopted Local Plan sets out proposals for significant numbers of new homes around the four new stations. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to re-invent Ilford Town Centre as a destination relevant to local people. And those schools and open spaces remain fantastic.

For local public sector leaders there is one other common backdrop: funding. Outer London boroughs have traditionally been funded at significantly lower levels than inner London, yet now we face demand pressures like never before. Not just in respect of our ‘people services’ – housing, social care, children’s services – but also on our street services and public realm. Translating an agenda around civic pride to often transient communities is extremely challenging.

Being a Chief Executive of a local authority places you at the centre of trying to resolve these complexities. You very quickly realise that in a world (and a borough) that is changing so rapidly, the solutions that we have depended on for many years are in many cases completely inadequate or inappropriate. Why should we expect the regeneration solutions of the last 30 years to apply to a radically different growth agenda? They are fundamentally different things. Why should we expect our housing teams to be able to work the way they have always done and deliver the same results, when the main

cause of homelessness is now property market forces (resulting in landlord evictions), rather than domestic abuse and relationship breakdown? (And by the way, that domestic abuse hasn’t gone away – it is just hidden by the statistics). Why should we expect a children’s social care service almost overnight to be equipped to deal with the challenges of radicalisation or county lines?

It seems to me that fundamentally the role of the local authority Chief Executive is now about leading your organisation, and your partners, through this change, this ambiguity, this turmoil. It is very easy to get sucked into the day-to-day pressures and challenges (usually associated with how to save another £10m this year), rather than taking time to think through the implications of those decisions for the communities we work with – both now and in the future.

On paper this all sounds straightforward and logical. Unpacking the leadership role in practice is a whole different thing. I have always been clear that leadership (in any role) is a privilege. Now more than ever, it is very definitely not about being the source of all the solutions. On the contrary, it is about creating the spaces, the time, the support and the encouragement for the right people in the right organisations (including in the community) to find the right solutions. It is Chief Executive as curator.

The other truism about leadership is that it is personal. You have to find it yourself. No one can make you a good leader. And even if you are a good leader, with the ambiguity we all face in our roles, there is no guarantee that you will remain a good leader.

We all have a responsibility to challenge our own thinking and our own ways of working if we are to stay at the top of our game. We all have a responsibility to develop ourselves on an ongoing basis if we are to stay relevant.

This is where Ignite comes into play. For the last year I have been spending time with an inspiring group of colleagues, some of whom I knew before (or thought I knew!) and some of whom I'd never met. We're all at different stages of our Chief Executive 'lifetimes' – some are very experienced and others, like me, are still relative newbies. What Ignite has done is create a safe space where we can learn together – discuss ideas, reflect on different approaches, be introduced to leadership tools, contemplate perspectives and share anxieties and concerns. It's not really about learning from people who have done great things (although of course that's an important aspect, and we all share our successes), but more about collectively exploring things to which we don't know the answer. As a group, we openly encourage discussion around our vulnerabilities, and have consequently created a powerful and trusted support network. Being a local authority Chief Executive doesn't have to be a lonely role!

It has made a big difference. Back in East London I have the confidence to try new things. We have published 'One Brilliant Team – A Manual for A Changing Redbridge' – which focuses our conversations with staff around the way we might do things. It does not give the answers, but rather suggests a set of 'design principles' for how we might

become a Council that responds rapidly to changing external circumstances, a Council that organises itself around the needs and strengths of communities, a Council that promotes democracy and a borough that secures financial self-sufficiency.

Off the back of this we have re-invented our budget process, moving away from an expenditure paradigm towards an investment paradigm. We are pushing responsibility much further down the organisation – trying to move people away from the comfort of hierarchical management and giving them opportunities to find the right solutions themselves. We have promoted and encouraged multiple networks across the organisation to bring people together to problem solve and share ideas. And we have introduced our own leadership programme which reflects the One Brilliant Team approach. After all, it is not only Chief Executives that are being asked to play a different role, but all those around us too.

And so back to all that change. It is the Chief Executive's role to look over the horizon. To anticipate when we might need to do things differently again. All too often we assume that we have found the solutions to our challenges, and we rightly feel happy and proud to have done so – only for those challenges to have moved on again without us noticing. I call it 'planning for a brighter yesterday'. The solution is back to that Ignite network – I am confident my colleagues there will call me out as and when I fall into that trap...

After all, change is constant.



## ESSAY 2

Collaborative change: #teamBradford in action



Kersten England

*“Effective place leadership requires deep engagement ...it builds ambition and consensus about what will make for the common good. It convenes, brokers and facilitates relationships, identifies and pursues opportunities. And it harnesses the energies, talents and resources of all, with all the complexities, tensions and challenges this entails.”*

The economic crash of 2008 marked a watershed moment in British politics. It drove a wedge into the fissures of an already strained post-war consensus built on the virtues of social democracy, economic rights, the redistribution of wealth and the role of the welfare state. The new orthodoxy became deficit reduction, cutting public spending and living within our means. The principal focus of debate became how much and where to cut. The need to do so was undisputed among our mainstream politicians.

Austerity policies have, however, proved to be about far more than balancing the books. This has had significant implications for local authority leadership.

I remember the No. 10 policy advisor smiling politely as he listened to a northern city Chief Executive propose what she thought were innovative and effective ways for the local state to stimulate house building, with a diversity of supply creating mixed and sustainable communities. “How very Scandinavian”, he said in response. It was clear the conversation was going nowhere.

It brought home to me that dramatic shifts in the operating environment of local government after 2010 were driven not only by fiscal imperatives. They were also driven by a view that the state had become overgrown, thereby restricting the space for wealth creation, effective operation of markets and human agency. Notions of collective responsibility, progressive taxation and the state as a vehicle for good gave way to a much greater emphasis on the market, prosperity and individual responsibility.

There was a belief that places and people must stand on their own two feet and live within their means. Austerity would provide the programme through which the reach of the state, both national and local, would be rolled back and curtailed.

Local authorities, despite being the most efficient part of the public sector, have borne the brunt of austerity. They have grappled with Government funding cuts while simultaneously facing increasing demand and rising costs. In Bradford, where I am privileged to be Chief Executive, we have had to find over £262m in savings since 2011. We have got more to come, and the pressures on social care are unrelenting, yet we are operating with a low local tax base that is wholly insufficient to meet our high needs.

Government proposals to eliminate the Revenue Support Grant and to allow 100% local business rates retention were designed to incentivise support for local wealth creation, and in turn, increase the local tax take. But where you end up often depends on where you start from. It is an advantage if you already have a strong local tax base and a thriving, stable local economy. But for places with fragile or volatile economies this approach creates greater uncertainty around funding, greater risk to services and outcomes, and greater challenges for leadership.

But despite variations in local economies and tax base, the fundamental role of local government remains as it has been since its inception: to create the conditions for a place to prosper and to ensure the well-being of its people.

My local government career is rooted in northern England and in the cities and towns of the industrial revolution. These are places in which the actions of enlightened industrialists and social pioneers led to the creation of model villages for workers. They led to the provision of education, the first school baths and school dinner services, community parks, hospitals, sewers and sanitation. The legacy of the work of people such as Joseph Rowntree, Titus Salt and Margaret McMillan is all around us.

The goals, aspirations and values of our forebears persist in the DNA of our local governments. But as financial resources and direct delivery of services diminish, the nature of the leadership required is changing in its scope and complexity. Effective place leadership requires deep engagement, working with and alongside individuals, communities and businesses of the place. Effective place leadership builds ambition and consensus about what will make for the common good. It convenes, brokers and facilitates relationships, identifies and pursues opportunities. And it harnesses the energies, talents and resources of all, with all the complexities, tensions and challenges this entails.

I have been Chief Executive at Bradford since 2015. It is an amazing place that belies its popular image. It has the UK's youngest population, it is diverse and entrepreneurial with unique industrial and cultural heritage, world class landscapes, and the most productive city businesses in the North.

Globally connected, Bradford is built on the movements of people. Migrants from elsewhere in Britain came amid the industrial revolution to work in the mills and factories; German merchants helped to build a city of international importance; and the 20th century saw waves of migration from Europe, the sub-continent and the Caribbean. People from across the world have come here to work, raise their families, and make their mark, creating a unique fusion of proud Yorkshire heritage and international influences.

The hard graft, enterprise and resilience that characterises the migrant experience is hardwired into our communities, businesses and our Council workforce, four-fifths of whom call Bradford home. It manifests itself in no-nonsense attitudes, an ability to make a little go a long way and a bloody-minded determination to succeed whatever the odds.

But like most cities, we face significant challenges. Bradford is a big post-industrial urban area. It has high levels of deprivation and a low tax base with which to address them. It is diverse on every front. It is a very large city with significant towns and villages around, yet around two-thirds of the area is rural. It is home to some of the wealthiest and some of the poorest places in the country. Elderly people are growing in number, but we are the youngest place in the UK, with a quarter of the population under 16. One hundred and thirty languages are spoken, but our rural villages and small towns are overwhelmingly white of British heritage.

Bradford city itself is 50% white British and 50% Asian British and Asian. We are home to the largest population of Slovak Roma people outside London. Within these groupings there are communities that feel neglected, forgotten and discriminated against. There are children and women who are subject to intolerable abuse. There are people who harbour hatred and prejudice towards those that they see as not belonging or undeserving.

At the best of times the challenges are complex. There is huge heartache about the impact of decisions we have had to make to balance our budget, meet statutory responsibilities and retain investment in some universal services and services that underpin quality of life.

In these circumstances, the collective leadership objective of the Council, partners, businesses and communities is to unlock the full potential of our phenomenal asset base. Central to this approach is collaborative system leadership that cuts through complexity and removes unhelpful and limiting hierarchies, paternalism and deficit models. It dismantles boundaries that artificially divide. It demands the creation of a team spirit and mentality that transcends departmental, organisational and geographic borders. Only by using the totality of our resource can we secure and sustain better outcomes. So for me, anyone who wants to take the Bradford District forward is in **#teamBradford** - a team underpinned with respect, appreciation and support for all its members.

We have some great examples of **#teamBradford** collaboration:

- Our work on inclusive economic growth is about generating an economy that works for everyone: where residents have access to good jobs with decent employers and sustainable businesses, where the cost of living and doing business is minimised, and where there is support for people whose lives do not turn out how they had hoped. **Get Bradford Working**, our flagship employment and skills programme funded by a range of partners, has helped over 3,000 disadvantaged people into sustained work.
- The Council has set challenging targets on local and social value procurement, discounted business rates and aims to have 500 apprentices by 2020. Joint working between business and education is ensuring that 16-19-year olds have relevant vocational training and workplace experience. 5,000 of our 17,000 businesses are supporting schools through our Education Covenant. The Chamber of Commerce leads our Manufacturing Week, celebrating our strengths in advanced manufacturing and promoting careers in local industries.
- A new collaboration between the HE, FE sector, our acute and community health trusts, GPs, the Council and independent sector is developing routes into careers and progression pathways across the health and care economy.
- Strong, mature partnership working across health and care systems has been recognised by the Care Quality Commission and we are translating strategic goals into real difference on the ground. Our Joint Targeted Area Inspection of Domestic Abuse drew similar conclusions. The strong tradition of mutualism and reciprocity in our communities is being celebrated and promoted through a shared 'People Can' approach, supporting people to play their part in securing the outcomes they want for themselves, their families, and their communities.
- Collaboration on cohesion and integration is built on four shared objectives: securing equitable outcomes for all; creating high levels of civic participation and pride, building strong, trusting community relations; and combating all forms of prejudice and extremism. We initiated the national schools linking project that brings children from very different communities together. This has many committed community mediators. It also gave life to the inspirational Bradford Literature Festival, which breaks all records for the diversity and representativeness of both audience and author/performer.

In all these examples, there is huge emphasis on creating common cause and ambition, on each partner bringing what they can to invest (whether that is time, skills, expertise or money) and on leadership from many quarters. The Council can achieve little alone, but often it is council leadership that acts as the glue binding our collective efforts together.

Within the Council itself we are making decisive shifts to evidence-based investment for outcomes, and creation of space and support for innovation. We are shifting from 'benevolent paternalism' to working with and alongside communities. We are supporting talent to flourish, building confidence, celebrating success and assertively positioning the offer of 'Bradford' with our key audiences.

People have sometimes felt weary and under-confident, worn down by the attrition of austerity, nervous about being ambitious, with its risks of potential failure. There were times when Bradford didn't show up in regional and national arenas. Sometimes the challenges felt overwhelming and the odds stacked against us. Yet many employees and teams keep plugging away, finding innovative ways to deliver some incredible work.

Having worked across all of local government in Yorkshire and the Humber, both as a civil servant and within several local authorities, I know just how committed and capable the Bradford workforce is. So I have spent quite a lot of time holding the mirror up so that people can see themselves and their capabilities, to encourage and create opportunities for people to get their heads up, their chins stuck out, and to get out to 'bat for Bradford'.

I love Bradford. It is where I and my family have lived for some 27 years, and I am deeply indebted and committed to it. I have loads of energy, tenacity and optimism about what we want to achieve.

Some days this job feels great. I can see the progress we are making and the greater impact this whole system team approach is having. Persistence is critical, but leadership in a big, diverse, complex and frankly under-resourced District where there are no easy answers to some of our challenges can be tough. There are days I am not at my best and where frustration looms large. It is easy to become isolated and depleted, and not to make time to reflect and get support. So I jumped at the chance to take part in Ignite and spend time with fellow Chief Executives. It didn't disappoint.

Thanks to skilful facilitation in our group, we quickly established a high level of trust, rapport and connection with one another. Egos were parked at the door and people shared stories of hope and ambition, anxiety and difficulty and examples of extraordinary work and commitment. Even though we came from very different local authorities our points of connection were much greater than our differences, and the differences were fascinating.

Leadership is a difficult, complicated, and sometimes lonely business. Ignite gave me an immediate boost, new thoughts and perspectives and on-going access to a community of people I trust, whose expertise and wisdom I value, and whose mutual support is invaluable.



*"We are shifting from 'benevolent paternalism' to working with and alongside communities. We are supporting talent to flourish, building confidence, celebrating success and assertively positioning the offer of 'Bradford' with our key audiences."*

## ESSAY 3

Learning by doing: system leadership in Dudley



Sarah Norman

*“In the end, most of what we achieve is through relationships. It is about finding a shared endeavour and working hard together to make it happen. It is about being able to have difficult conversations when things get tough. It is about understanding what concerns others and finding a way to make things work for them as well as for you.”*

Being a Chief Executive in local government is both the best job I have ever had and also the most difficult.

It is the best job because every day brings something new and interesting to think about, because of the great people you work with inside and outside the organisation and because together you can have real impact on a place that you love. It is the most difficult job because there is no handbook or guide to tell you what to do. The stakes and pressures are very high, some of the challenges you are dealing with have proved impossible to solve for years, and achieving success relies on the actions of many others, both within and outside the organisation.

It is systems leadership at its best and worst.

Two big challenges for me since I started as Chief Executive in Dudley have been kick-starting regeneration and turning around a failing children’s service. Both are very important for politicians and the people of Dudley, both are deep-seated issues involving a host of partners.

Three-and-a-half years on we are not quite off the naughty step, but children’s services in Dudley have changed beyond all recognition from the failing service they were. Our relationship with partners is strong and challenging. Professional standards are high and we have received seven successful monitoring visits reporting on our progress, with a re-inspection promised in the autumn.

Meanwhile, a wide range of exciting regeneration projects are coming to fruition which will transform the physical nature and economy of the borough. These include a light rail innovation centre, a business and innovation

enterprise zone called DY5, and two university-level institutions in a borough that has previously had none. There is also the replacement of a derelict seven storey office building, Cavendish House. Today it stands empty, casting a shadow over Dudley. Soon it will be replaced with a new residential, leisure and retail development, served by a new Metro link to Birmingham and Wolverhampton.

West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has provided a forum for systems leadership on a bigger scale through our cutting-edge work on mental health. I have always thought of poor mental health as a classic example of whole-systems failure. Here in the West Midlands we estimate that mental illness costs the region £12.5 billion a year. This includes direct costs to the NHS, but also indirect costs from lost productivity, economic inactivity, the challenges for looked after children, and costs in the criminal justice system. And this is on top of the huge human costs for the individuals who are suffering and their families.

In response, the Mental Health Commission was established. The aim was simple: a whole system review to find a way to transform mental health provision into a system that invests in keeping people well.

The result has been system-wide commitments to a host of concrete actions in the Thrive West Midlands Action Plan. They include an £8.4m pilot to support people with health difficulties into work; a trial offering fiscal incentives to small businesses to invest in the wellbeing of their employees; a programme to train half a million West Midlanders in mental health literacy,

including mental health first aid; and some exciting initiatives in the criminal justice system to keep people out of prison and support them on their release.

So, what have I learnt from these challenges about systems leadership?

**You need to be brave.** Critical to the success of the Mental Health Commission was persuading Norman Lamb to chair it and Simon Stevens to back it. In both cases I had to make the elevator pitch. I could have easily chickened out. I am very glad that I didn’t.

**You need to be tenacious.** After initial promises, actually getting the money for the Thrive pilots has been frustratingly bureaucratic. Getting the Metro built will be just as challenging as securing the funding for it in the first place. On some days I feel as if I am having to move things forward by sheer force of will. There will be setbacks. Just do not give up.

**Find ways to produce something great out of very little.** None of us in local government have any money anymore. The total cost of the Mental Health Commission was £250,000, of which £100,000 came from NHS England. To succeed, it needed the enormous goodwill of people who gave their time to support its work. But the great benefit of this was that it secured the support of a host of champions who have been critical to the implementation of Thrive.

**Find great people who make things happen.** My biggest successes have come through the fabulous people who I have managed to persuade to work with me. Tony Oakman, now Chief Executive at Bolton Council,

was absolutely fundamental to driving forward our children's services improvement work. Alan Lunt, my Deputy here, has transformed Dudley's approach to regeneration and raised our game enormously. Persuading Chief Superintendent Sean Russell to take a secondment from West Midlands Police to be the implementation Director for the Thrive Action Plan may have seemed a strange move, but people who know Sean will know it was the best thing we have ever done.

**Tell stories to help people believe in change and it will help make it happen.**

There have been plans for a Metro to Dudley for more than two decades. Cavendish House has been standing empty over Dudley for nearly 25 years. People came to believe these things would never change. Telling a new story changes the narrative. Every time something happens towards the building of the Metro I tweet about it. Photos I take on my phone are published in the local paper. My WMCA colleagues laugh about the number of times I talk about the importance of the Metro to Dudley, but getting the funding became our Mayor Andy Street's top priority in our last devolution negotiations. And he succeeded. You have to build momentum to help move intractable issues forward.

**Really listen to and be guided by the people who experience our services.**

The use of a Citizen's Jury as part of the Mental Health Commission's work ensured it focused on issues that really matter. It also gave it weight that made its work more difficult to ignore. Making the voices of children and young people

central to Dudley's Children's Services improvement journey has been essential. That's what it is really all about, not just passing the Ofsted test.

**Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate.**

In the end, most of what we achieve is through relationships. It is about finding a shared endeavour and working hard together to make it happen. It is about being able to have difficult conversations when things get tough. It is about understanding what concerns others and finding a way to make things work for them as well as for you.

So how does Ignite fit into this? Ignite came along while I was in the midst of this system leadership journey. It gave me access to a network of other Chief Executives, who I would not have met otherwise, and they are grappling with similar challenges. We have had discussions about tactics and ways around obstacles. We have shared problems and good ideas.

This has not just been about support, although there has been a lot of that. It has also provided me with challenge. The bold and innovative ways in which my colleague Chief Executives have tackled some of their challenges has caused me to reflect on my own practice. In some cases, it has shaken me out of my own complacency and caused me to raise my game. I hope I have done the same for them. Being a Chief Executive can be a lonely job and sometimes things can get stuck. Working with others on Ignite has really helped me with my system leadership challenges, to find new ways forward.



## ESSAY 4

Meeting our challenges together: The Sutton Plan and integrated care



Niall Bolger

*“Leadership can happen everywhere, at every level in every organisation. It is about equipping colleagues with the knowledge and technology to solve problems, and creating the conditions for collaboration, cooperation and innovation. This means we can meet our biggest challenges together.”*

I have been a Chief Executive for nearly eight years, and the issue that has taken a large amount of my attention has been the almost constant change in health services locally and nationally. In this time, there have been three major reviews of the local health services in South West London, the Better Care Fund, the Improved Better Care Fund, the transfer of public health to local government, Vanguards (two – care homes and cancer), and the London Health and Care Devolution Agreement.

Arguably, none of this has led to any fundamental change locally. Some of these initiatives have been abandoned, and a great deal of money has been spent defining and redefining the problem. To temper this cynical view, it is also arguable that this has been a necessary part of the journey to integration.

But there is a glimmer of hope. Over the last few years we have been working on The Sutton Plan. This is an approach to public service reform that aims to jointly engage all public service bodies and colleagues in the voluntary, community and private sector.

When we began this work, I feared we could be creating a whole edifice that stifles innovation and creativity and creates reform in our own image – whilst simultaneously saying the opposite. The reality could not have been more different.

We have worked with Collaborate CIC on co-producing our plan based on our shared principles of reform, and an evidence base that clarifies our challenges as a place (we worked with Metro Dynamics to build this using data from all partners). We have identified a shared vision and priorities for action, and we have spent the first year since publishing the Sutton Plan prototyping our approach through a range of projects. Some of the better community regeneration and LSP programmes I have been involved with have had those ingredients.

What is fundamentally different in this approach has been the explicit focus on leadership and collaboration. Crucially, we recognise that leadership can happen everywhere, at every level in every organisation. It is about equipping colleagues with the knowledge and technology to solve problems, and creating the conditions for collaboration, cooperation and innovation.

This means we can meet our biggest challenges together. The ageing and growing population makes the local health economy unsustainable in its present form, as providers and commissioners are being asked to do more with less. To ensure the Sutton health and care economy can effectively support the population in the future, partners need to work together to transform the way services are delivered. This means doing things differently – not just becoming more efficient.

The challenge is to build on existing good practice and enable teams to work across organisational boundaries to support people in a more holistic way.

Our approach has been to establish Sutton Health and Care (SHC), under the auspices of The Sutton Plan. This involves our Acute Trust, the CCG, the Mental Health Trust, the GP Federation and the Council working together to deliver seamless, integrated services. Over time Sutton Health and Care will deliver both preventative and reactive care in a single model.

The first phase of integration, which started in April 2018, has focused on our “reactive services”. Our aim has been to provide responsive integrated care at home wherever possible and to ensure that the necessary hospital care lasts no longer than clinically appropriate. The next phases will be our “proactive” and children’s community health services working together. The voluntary and community sector is fully involved in the system too. Our aim is to simplify access to integrated, multi-disciplinary care through a single point of communication and referral. The operating model has been designed with staff, service users and stakeholders to ensure it meets the needs of Sutton residents.

Residents will continue to be involved as implementation and mobilisation gets underway. Those accessing care will see teams working together to provide a personalised, joined-up response, using the same information, care records and processes.

This should mean people do not have to repeat themselves, and can be sure of receiving the right care, quickly, in the best setting. The day-to-day leadership and management of staff working in the alliance will be provided by an Integrated Management Team, with representation from each provider organisation.

Liberating colleagues to do what is right and what is good means there is definitely no room for command and control in this way of working. Knowing when to intervene and having the knowledge and sense of the organisation is crucial. But telling people what to do and how to do it does not work when trying to develop an ethos of collaboration and cooperation. I am definitely asking colleagues what they think far, far more than telling them what to do.

The reflection that colleagues need time to think and work differently, and be more appreciative of other experiences, has applied equally to my own personal development. I have participated in the Ignite programme over the last year. This programme aims to develop skills for collaborative leadership for Chief Executives in local authorities. It has been extraordinarily powerful. I have developed trusting, positive and supportive relationships with a range of

colleagues across the country who are grappling with issues of public service reform. The opportunity to work and learn with talented people in an open and supportive way has deepened my appreciation of how collaboration can make a real difference to people's lives - both citizens and colleagues working in public service.

Bringing this experience to our work in Sutton has definitely needed a more trusting, respectful, less judgemental approach to our partners' pressures and issues. This is not least because a version of New Public Management is very much alive and kicking (often hard) in the NHS. Creating the space for learning about each other's experiences and requirements has allowed us to move forward on health and social care reform more rapidly than we would have expected and been able to in the past.

Some of this has been mandated by others, but the approach and our aspiration for cooperation, collaboration, and liberating our colleagues to do good is ours. Ensuring the resilience of this approach is going to be the next building block, so that it is culturally embedded and transcends individuals. I think we are up for the task.



## ESSAY 5

Engaging with complexity: our positive ambition for Haringey



Zina Etheridge

*“System leadership requires collaboration, trust, a willingness to give up on organisational ways of doing things in order to bring others along, and the creation of different centres of organisational gravity. Achieving challenging outcomes within complex systems means behaving in different ways, and often means investing in leaders in other parts of the system.”*

It has become commonplace to hear people saying that the world around us in local government is changing at an unprecedented rate. I am not sure it is true that the world is changing faster than ever before. From ancient societies witnessing the Romans invading with new technology, new systems of governing and a new language, through the Industrial Revolution, the dismantling of the British Empire, and the huge societal impacts of the Second World War and post-war period, there have been great periods of substantial change before. And there will be again.

While the overall volume of change may not be unprecedented, it is absolutely true that the operating context in which we are working as leaders in public services is specific to now. We in local government are dealing with some of the most complex and challenging issues that people face: from serious youth violence, to supporting those furthest from the labour market into work; from keeping our most vulnerable children safe, to ensuring that everyone can have a good quality and affordable home.

We are doing this with ever reducing budgets, and in a political climate that is tending to drown out nuance and collaboration in favour of ideology. The focus is frequently on what is **not** wanted, rather than building consensus around what **is**. And that is before we start layering on some of the huge unknowns – such as what will Brexit mean for the economy, and for the health and social care workforce, to name but two.

These issues and more are part of the fabric of our roles. But for me, as for many other Chief Executives, the two aspects of the context I operate in that are most closely in front of me every day are, first, the financial challenges, and second, changes in politics.

The first is so obvious that I could leave it there, but the scale of the financial challenge is so substantial it is worth unpicking. Beyond the obvious impacts on the services we provide or commission from others, and the effects on our residents, it is starting to affect our fundamental stewardship of place. Those of us with struggling town centres, or run-down shopping malls or open spaces, or road networks in need of maintenance, are increasingly finding we do not have the resources to tackle these challenges in any meaningful way.

It has an impact too on our partnerships. Lack of money can be a real incentive to good partnership working, as everyone has to pull together to make the best use of reduced resources. But equally, it risks disrupting good relationships as the reality of budget reductions and the inevitable tightening up of access to services starts to feel like cost-shunting.

Finally, though austerity may encourage innovation and means we must plan our finances ever more carefully, it also means that finding time to think strategically is really hard. In previous years it felt like the budget cycle had a start and an end, with some time in the middle for thinking about some other things. Now it feels like we are in a continual loop: if we are not focusing on the next three-year financial strategy, we are focused on in-year savings.

This is all clearly good news for the value for money of what we do – it has probably never had so much attention. But it does also bring into sharp relief the tension between balancing the challenges in front of us today, and the need to plan for the changing shape of the future.

Turning to the changes in politics and the nature of political debate, politics has been a huge part of the context I work in for a long time. And of course, it shifts and changes. I have worked with politicians and politics throughout my career, for administrations of different political backgrounds, in central and local government. But the context we are working in now does feel very different. There is an increasing tendency to replace civilised public debate with trading insults over social media, loud protests, heckling and physical interventions in our civic centres. This does not sit well with the often nuanced and complex debate we should be having about the choices and decisions we need to make.

Surely part of the conversation about Brexit should be about the factors that caused so much of the population to feel that they were not thriving economically or did not feel comfortable in the communities and places in which they were living, and so voted to leave the EU. Instead, the political debate we are currently in risks entrenching divisions in the country for decades to come. The rise of populism and extremism that are having global impacts risk sowing divisiveness amongst our communities closer to home. The rise in hate crime is already obvious.

If I had to characterise the context we are working in in one word it would be 'volatile'.

It is easy to paint a very negative picture of local government by focusing on these tough challenges. But there is little to be gained from wishing for a different world to the one we have. At the end of the day, our job is to be as successful as we can in the world we have, not in the one we wish it could be.

So, alongside the challenges we must acknowledge the positives – the clamour for the public to be better engaged in decision-making and more closely involved in service design is long overdue. While shrill criticism on Twitter might tempt us to close ourselves in and try to keep anything that can be used against us away from the light, this misses the opportunity that engaging the public and service users brings.

We must also acknowledge that this operating environment calls for different skills to those required in the past. Now a key part of the role of a local authority Chief Executive is not simply to run a great council, but to play a leading role in the wider system of which we are part, providing leadership for the place.

When we rebranded Haringey a few years ago, we were really clear that we wanted a brand for the place, not the Council. Authentic and edgy, ambitious and diverse, vibrant and buzzing with energy, from Muswell Hill to Tottenham, Haringey is an amazing place. The Council's job is to give voice to that ambition and ensure it can be realised through housing, infrastructure and transport connections, amazing schools

and places for the community to come together and ensuring those needing more support to achieve their goals get it. All whilst remembering that when we ask them, the thing residents want us to do more than anything else is to keep the place clean and deal with parking...

All of this means we must engage in complex problems, where multiple organisations have a role, with different funding and regulatory systems, different incentives and often different corporate cultures and languages. Delivering our vision for place means we must successfully navigate and lead in this complex landscape.

Leadership is a slippery context, often defined in terms of followership or hierarchy. But these sorts of definitions do not hold for system leadership. Here, achieving the outcomes we want to see requires collaboration, trust, a willingness to give up on organisational ways of doing things in order to bring others along, and the creation of different centres of organisational gravity. Achieving challenging outcomes within complex systems means behaving in different ways, and often means investing in leaders in other parts of the system.

One of the aspects of the Ignite programme that has been most helpful is starting to think through what behaviours exist in successful systems, how we can encourage them more, and discourage those that do not support success. A more difficult leadership question centres on where the power is vested in successful systems – difficult because sometimes the answer is not the local authority.



This raises all sorts of other issues throughout our organisations. These include how our decision making systems work (not notable for their flexibility); relationships with members; and how we can assure ourselves that outcomes are being delivered.

My senior team and I spent our last away morning working through some of these issues, which go to the heart of what our future operating model should be. Several hours in, our understanding of what we are trying to achieve was better, even if actual progress isn't measured in numbers of Post It notes!

Framing the conversation about system leadership and behaviours, though, gave us a new and valuable perspective.

Reflecting on all these issues together, it is easy to start feeling overwhelmed by the size of the challenge. There has been huge benefit from being able to step away from the day-to-day and share these challenges with a group of peers through the Ignite programme. Being able to discuss such issues with a group of incredibly talented individuals, with diverse experience from different parts of the county, has been a huge privilege.

## ESSAY 6

### Creating public value: leading reform in West Dunbartonshire



Joyce White OBE

*“The learning space Ignite has provided has afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my personal leadership style, relationships and ambition.”*

West Dunbartonshire is a truly wonderful place. It takes in ninety thousand people, from the shores of Loch Lomond to the Banks of the Clyde. It is a beautifully scenic area, running up the west coast of Scotland and wrapping round the north west of that great city, Glasgow. Our area’s rich maritime history and its relationship to the water play a key part in our identity. We are renowned for our shipbuilding heritage and constructed ships which were fit for a Queen: the Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Elizabeth 2 and Royal Yacht Britannia were all built in the shadow of the Titan Crane on the river at Clydebank.

Dumbarton Castle, which guards the point where the River Leven joins the River Clyde, also sits within our boundaries, its recorded history going back 1,500 years. As of May 2018 we can now boast of having our own Earl and Countess of Dumbarton, Harry and Meghan. We’re also proud to have Scotland’s first National Park on our doorstep. Loch Lomond, Britain’s largest inland stretch of water, has picturesque villages and mesmerising scenery. It is all overlooked by the majestic Munro that is Ben Lomond.

A decade ago I was given the opportunity and the privilege to lead West Dunbartonshire council. My previous life’s experience was in the private sector, focused on shareholder value, and there were definitely organisational and language differences in the public sector, as well as a change in purpose, focused on creating public value.

At times it felt as if I had entered a foreign land. Elected members and politics were also new to me, with any previous exposure minimal. Even with a strong financial background in the private sector and experience working in multi-nationals, I had to find a new way to converse and connect. I was pleased I had arrived in local government when the concept of ring-fenced funding had changed and there was a move much more to priority-based budgets and a focus on community planning partnerships.

The breadth of the responsibility of a local authority Chief Executive, with over 5,000 employees across thousands of individual services, was a particular challenge for me. Improving the lives of people in West Dunbartonshire, along with the Scotland-wide focus on getting it right for every child, were my top priorities. But also within my bailiwick were education, schools, care homes, roads, green space, environmental services, social work and many other functions including support services. These were far-reaching responsibilities in comparison to my leadership experience in manufacturing and service organisations.

When I joined, West Dunbartonshire Council was deemed to be ‘challenged’ in reports by the scrutiny bodies. So, we began the reform journey. “Let’s be the best in the west”, I said at interview.

Success is a journey, not a destination. New blood, different ways of working and reinforcing values were essential to effect the change agenda. I needed a wise group to support me and I

quickly got in the middle of **Solace** Scotland, a peer group who were hugely supportive. I listened to the office sages, and soon reaped the benefits of their insight. I also benefited from a mentor (arranged by Solace in Business) when I was appointed, a wise former Chief Executive who gave me great advice.

The reform journey has not always been smooth, but together we have made great progress. We have been encouraged by the recent Accounts Commission review of our Council. It recognised our strong performance and the significant progress we have made. This was important validation of our work: that we are making the difference our communities want and need. Published in June, the best value audit also highlighted the clear and steady improvement in service performance – particularly in our priority areas of housing and advancing educational attainment. I am never complacent, and we have further to go on our journey. We have firm plans to continue our development in future, but this independent review of our organisation has made every up and down, every success and bump on the road, feel worthwhile.

I firmly believe that to lead effectively we must continue to cultivate our own skills. I am passionate about my own personal development and am in the process of finalising an Institute of Leadership Management diploma in coaching level 7. Along with delivering freelance coaching, this provides me with a platform to engage with the various stakeholders I meet in my role.

In my personal life I actively volunteer with a range of organisations, including Girlguiding UK.

So, it was with great interest that I signed up to the Ignite development programme for Chief Executives. This programme, self-designed by the group of Chief Executives, has provided another safe space to develop my skills to deliver in my role, which can often feel isolating. By being involved, I have gained new contacts, networks, access to different thinking, and a place to consider shared practice. I have widened my thinking and developed ideas to take back to my own local authority, and the wider Glasgow region. While updating my long-term financial plan, I have also considered the thinking around community empowerment, digitalisation and new models of public services. In addition, the learning space provided by Ignite has afforded me me the opportunity to reflect on my personal leadership style, relationships and ambition.

Local authorities play a unique role in our communities, with the opportunity to improve the lives of the people we serve. We do this by listening to, and engaging with, our citizens to understand their needs, and by ensuring we invest in the necessary infrastructure to enable excellent service delivery. While we all face many challenges in delivering services in 2018 and beyond, I believe that it is an exciting time to work in local government, and a privilege to be in a position to serve the residents of West Dunbartonshire.



## ESSAY 7

### Changing places: reshaping Ealing



Paul Najsarek

*“We need to shift the boundaries of what we see as our core business, what we think we can influence and control, and where we put our effort. We are increasingly about trying to shape our context, not coping with its impact. This means the boundaries of our organisations are not as fixed or important as they were, and the service lens is not exclusively the way to view problems.”*

When their operating environment is particularly demanding, there is always a risk that organisations look inward. Local government’s reason for being is place. This is our great strength, but it can also reinforce a parochialism that reduces openness to learning.

I was delighted when I learned that **Solace** was partnering with Collaborate to create a personal development offer for Chief Executives. It was also great to be able to contribute to the shape of the programme with the rest of my cohort on the programme, in the spirit of co-production. The programme itself offered a handful of get-togethers with peers and experts to explore important areas of change for local authorities. It was also free to participate, with only a commitment to learning and sharing expected.

For me this was a great opportunity to use this learning space to reflect with others on the work we are doing locally in Ealing, on our **Future Ealing** transformation programme. We are resolutely committed to focusing on the deep impact we can make on outcomes. We understand that we can’t do this without an active citizenry and without harnessing digital technology. The Ignite programme was a great chance to understand how others were grappling with similar issues and to hear from people who were leaders in innovation outside local government.

Although it is possible to overstate the novelty of our current operating environment, there are some trends which are more acute than in earlier parts of my career.

The way I sum this up is that local government now must influence and shape its operating environment rather than merely respond to it. When austerity means government investment reduces, we need new sources of income. Where local economies do not work for people, we are expected to intervene. When demand grows, we need to consider how we prevent problems rather than just responding to need when it arises.

In short, this means we need to shift the boundaries of what we see as our core business, what we think we can influence and control, and where we put our effort. We are increasingly about trying to shape our context, not coping with its impact.

This means the boundaries of our organisations are not as fixed or important as they were, and the service lens is not exclusively the way to view problems. Increasingly the local authority role is to consider what the priorities are for action in our places and consider what resources are available across public, private and third sectors, as well as local community assets which can be channelled into improvement.

We have also needed a change in how we judge success. The traditional view of how many things you do, or how quickly and how satisfied your customers are, is no longer enough. We increasingly judge ourselves by more profound outcomes of preventing homelessness or entry to the care system, nudging residents to contribute to the place and enhance their wellbeing or interact with the

local community to help correct broken markets. Local authorities are not the only, or even the main actor, in many of these systems.

All of this means a rebalancing of the leadership role towards:

- Establishing credibility and influence with partners
- Connecting to the environment and spotting places to act
- A higher tolerance for ambiguity in dealing with problems that are often not well understood or defined
- More openness to managed innovation to solve problems not confronted previously
- Harnessing the power of community and social movements rather than seeing the organisation as always in decision-making and provider roles
- Building a culture of collaboration within and outside the organisation. No service or individual owns the outcome
- Focus on purpose not organisational models. Old models of outsourcing or structural change are not the primary way of addressing today’s priorities

Ignite has helped me keep enriching our approach to Future Ealing by:

- Offering reinforcement that its core insights are right
- Reminding me that different people see the same challenges in different ways and have different motivators
- Helping me understand some of the potential of digital and social activism from practitioners working at the leading edge of these worlds
- Feeling the energy and strength of a group of committed people working on similar problems

All of this has meant that, in Ealing, I am better able to sustain a continued commitment to engaging my colleagues in the Council on the purpose and direction of the organisation.

I have been better placed to support the digital strategy to help it to do things genuinely differently, rather than simply automate poor processes.

We have also continued to build our engagement with our community, to catalyse social action and build understanding of the future of the Borough.

I came into the programme feeling like the nature of the task we are facing in local government requires us to engage our public service values more than ever before. I now know this to be true.



## AFTERWORD

Keeping it personal: the future of Ignite



Anna Randle

*“Leaders of public services today face a daunting but exciting task: the reinventing and repurposing of a 20th Century state for 21st Century challenges. This requires new thinking, new behaviours, new relationships, and a fresh mindset about the role of public services and the organisations that deliver them.”*

In this collection of essays, Ignite participants have set out compelling portraits of the challenges they face in their localities, in a context of perpetual and rapid change. They reveal how important Ignite has been in supporting their progress, raising their ambition, and reflecting on their work. Local authority Chief Executives were missing critical support and important challenge. These essays show how, through Ignite, they found it in each other.

The starting point for Ignite discussions has been the context of austerity, rising demand, increasing complexity, and ongoing political uncertainty. These extraordinary factors have certainly formed a now familiar background to our discussions. However, as the essays here attest, our real focus has been on what it means to embrace this complexity: to develop the personal resilience to work effectively within it and to find ways to bring colleagues, partners and communities along on the journey too.

Leaders of public services today face a daunting but exciting task: the reinventing and repurposing of a 20th Century state for 21st Century challenges. This requires new thinking, new behaviours, new relationships, and a fresh mindset about the role of public services and the organisations that deliver them. We are at a point of transition: we know the old models are no longer fit for purpose, yet we still operate largely within them as we nurture the green shoots of the future.

Perhaps this is why it feels to me that so much of Ignite, and the essays in this collection, have ultimately come back to the question of purpose. The purpose of local authorities and public services. Finding shared purpose with politicians, partners and community activists. The ways that that social media and new forms of engagement can alter purpose. How digital can enable purpose to be realised. And, for the Chief Executives in the room, reconnecting with personal motivation and purpose to improve the lives of people in the communities they serve.

The Ignite programme themes have been guided by the framework overleaf, which was co-designed with the pioneering first Ignite cohort of Chief Executives to help understand major strategic issues Chief Executives face in their uniquely wide-ranging roles.<sup>1</sup>

These issues have also rung true for the subsequent groups of Chief Executives. But while the framework has been a sound starting point, it cannot do justice to the richness of the discussions that have taken place, characterised by openness and a very personal perspective. From these discussions and the essays in this collection, below are some reflections on the themes that have emerged within the core components of the Ignite framework.

### 1. Mandate, confidence and capabilities

This is arguably the most relevant theme of Ignite discussions so far. As you have seen reflected through the essays in this collection, participants have approached macro issues, such as the changing nature of political engagement and public debate, very much from a personal point of view: what does this mean for me in my role?

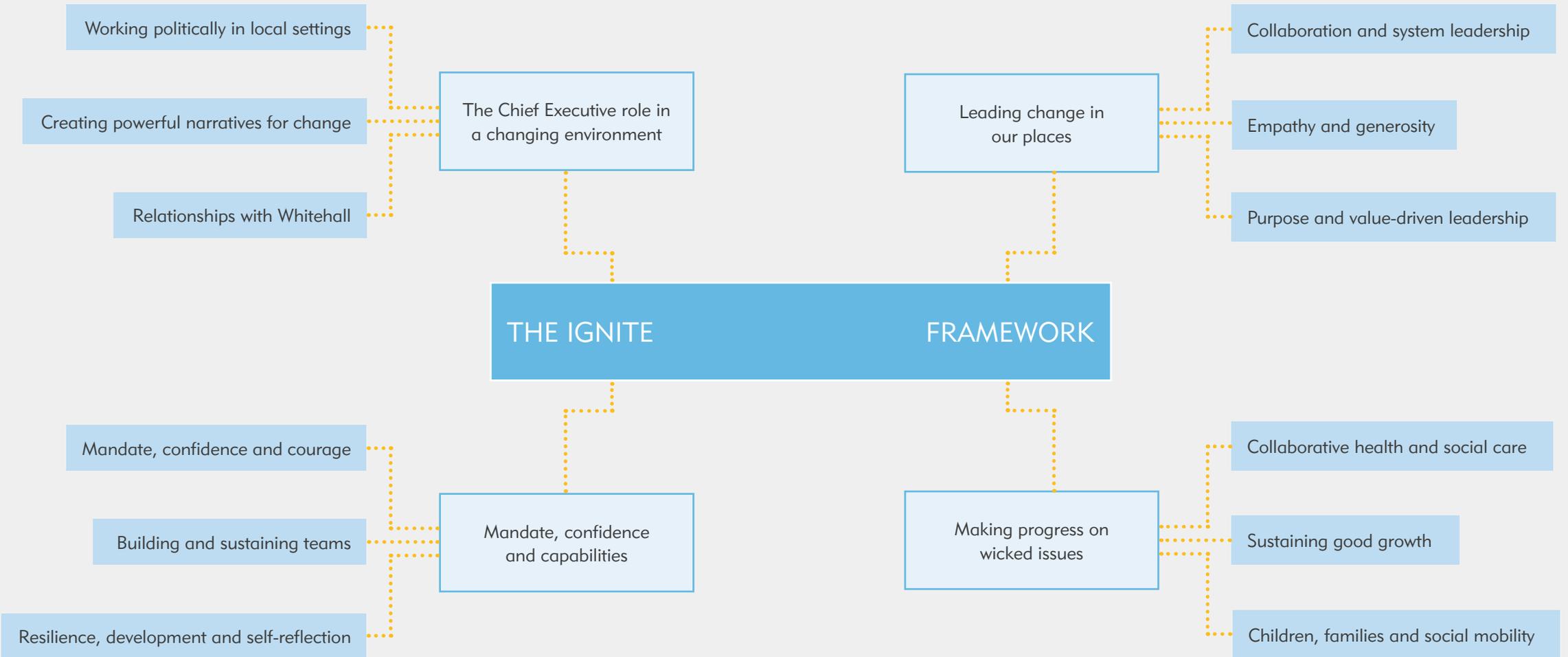
Confidence and courage are critical leadership qualities in the face of complexity and uncertainty, but there has also been exploration of more distributed leadership models, and the role of leaders in building and sustaining teams that can also operate in today's environment.

Many participants have returned to their organisations to have new and different conversations with colleagues that draw on Ignite both in approach and content. They have also explored how to build organisations of the future: harnessing the power of digital, readying the workforce for change, creating new culture and behaviours throughout organisations, and developing distributed models of leadership.

1. Ignite – The Leadership Programme for Local Government Chief Executives (2017) available at [http://www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports\\_guides/Ignite-Report\\_Jul-2017.pdf](http://www.solace.org.uk/knowledge/reports_guides/Ignite-Report_Jul-2017.pdf)

**IGNITE** Strategic Framework

*Leading change in our places underpins all Ignite discussions: the importance of developing shared purpose and values across different sectors, the behaviours and empathy required to build trust with local stakeholders, and the increasing relevance of other sectors to the role of a local authority Chief Executive.*



## 2. The Chief Executive role in a changing environment

A common theme has been the tensions inherent in leadership that operates simultaneously in multiple spheres: organisations, place, politics, and citizens. Groups have explored working effectively with elected members, reflecting on role boundaries and the importance of personal relationships. They have also discussed the changing nature of political debate and engagement today, from the impact of social media, to single issue campaigns and social activism, and how to work with the grain of social movements, looking beyond the service lens for ways to create social value and real impact. Interestingly, relationships with Whitehall have not emerged as a major theme in Ignite discussions so far. It seems the complexity of local relationships within Chief Executives' own organisations and with other parts of the public sector and the community are more to the front of mind.

## 3. Leading change in our places

This theme underpins all Ignite discussions: the importance of developing shared purpose and values across different sectors, the behaviours and empathy required to build trust with local stakeholders, and the increasing relevance of other sectors to the role of a local authority Chief Executive. Groups have reflected on the potential power of similar system leadership development across multiple sectors – a natural next step for Ignite which we are now exploring.

## 4. Making progress against wicked issues

Interestingly, specific challenges in local government such as collaborative health and social care, inclusive growth and improving outcomes for children and families have become less overt themes of Ignite as it has developed. This may be because the themes outlined above are critical foundations or enablers for making progress against these complex, interconnected issues at a local level, and therefore take precedence.

## Moving forward: the next phase of Ignite

Personal development and taking the time to reflect, away from the day-to-day, matters. Participants have observed how difficult it is to find the time, and these essays show that Ignite has created a new and valued space to do so. Doing this together with trusted peers, who are facing the same challenges in their own local context, is hugely valued by the participants. The relationships that have been built will live beyond the final Ignite sessions to provide an ongoing source of support to those who have participated in the programme.

In our first report about Ignite, authors Dr Henry Kippin and Matthew Taylor wrote that *"unless (leaders) are motivated by mission and possibility as well as necessity they are doomed to eternal crisis management... Those occasional moments when it all comes together, when we are reminded of the ambition that first moved us to public service, are a vital source of energy when coping is the least and the most we can do"*. Just over a year on, this feels absolutely right.

As the essays in this collection attest, leadership itself is personal, and many of the stories reflected are of people finding the inner resources to meet the needs of local people in challenging times. Personal purpose is what provides the resilience and energy to lead organisations within complex systems. It is the bedrock on which everything else in the role of a Chief Executive rests. Extending our thinking about leadership beyond organisations into systems requires us to start with our own capacity, appetite, and commitment for the challenge.

The programme has helped participants to recall why they went into public service in the first place, to consider the degree to which their current roles enable them to fulfil that original purpose, and to reconnect with it, to approach their work today in that original spirit.

That is why **Solace** and Collaborate, with support from the LGA, are continuing to develop Ignite with new cohorts of Chief Executives in 2018-19. It is why we will continue to share the learning and insights from the programme to others.

By reconnecting with personal motivation and purpose, combined with the support of sympathetic peers, leadership of local government today seems a place where Chief Executives cannot just cope, but thrive.

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*By reconnecting  
with personal  
motivation and  
purpose, combined  
with the support of  
sympathetic peers,  
leadership of local  
government today is  
a place where Chief  
Executives cannot  
just cope, but thrive.*





**collaborate**  
for social change

