

A photograph of three people in a meeting. A woman with long brown hair, wearing a blue top and a lanyard, is looking towards a man on the left who is gesturing with his hand. A man with glasses and a grey sweater is visible on the right, also wearing a lanyard. The background is a plain wall.

Developing excellence in systems leadership

Contents

- 01 Introduction
- 02 What is systems leadership?
- 03 What is systems leadership development,
and who is it for?
- 04 Our systems leadership offer
- 05 Outcomes and impact
- 10 Leading for Systems Change
- 11 National programmes
- 12 Find out more

Introduction

Systems leadership is essential if integrated care and population health are to be prioritised in line with the NHS long term plan.

Leaders in health and care are beginning to work across organisational and service boundaries in new ways in order to deliver the requirements of Integrated Care Systems, as well as working much more closely with leaders in local government and the third sector. This eBook describes how the NHS Leadership Academy can support leaders, wherever they are in their local system, to develop the skills, confidence and know-how to lead in systems more effectively.

We highlight examples of successful programmes and interventions from across England, and describe the process we use to work with you in your networks and systems to help you decide on the most appropriate support to achieve your ambitions: for leaders, for their systems and for the people they serve.

“Since attending, I have been much better at listening to my colleagues and bringing them into decisions - this supportive approach has been really successful and added a lot of value”

What is systems leadership?

In health and social care we define systems leadership as:

Collaborative leadership across boundaries at every leadership level to achieve collective ambitions no single organisation can deliver.

Systems leadership involves working with people across health and social care who have a shared interest in improving health and wellbeing. This might include the voluntary sector, public health, social care, emergency services, housing, education, employers and local citizens, as well as healthcare leaders in all settings. Systems leadership has the greatest potential to bring about transformation when it:

- Incorporates many diverse perspectives
- Makes people the priority
- Challenges ‘the way we do things round here’

“I use the learning I gained as a reference point and can apply the learning and new ways of thinking in my current role”

Systems leadership is not an end in itself: it’s the means to delivering the goals of better health and wellbeing for people in their communities, teams and places.

Traditional leadership approaches won’t deliver whole-system change. Systems leadership goes beyond partnering or cooperation, requiring more of leaders than simply retaining individual power and authority while working with others. As leaders, we can’t respond effectively to system-level challenges unless we have the:

- Courage to be uncertain and unclear
- Confidence in ourselves to influence without control and share power
- Clarity of shared purpose to ‘take people with us’

But building these skills and capabilities takes time and focused, expert support and development.

What is systems leadership development, and who is it for?

Systems leadership development uses the principles of systems thinking to enable leaders to tackle some of the most complex challenges in 21st century health and care.

Development interventions are designed to support leaders – individually, collectively and at every level in the system - to practice and embody the following behaviours:

- Focusing on processes as well as outcomes and impacts
- Basing the work on strong, trusting and honest relationships
- Leading confidently in uncertain, ambiguous and volatile contexts
- Maximising the potential of difference and diversity
- Allowing for experimentation and risk
- Being able to adapt to, listen to and see others' perspectives
- Connecting, networking and building communities of learning and practice
- Collaboratively designing a vision, purpose and strategy
- Influencing, collaborating and building partnerships
- Mediating existing power relations and hierarchy
- Fostering ethical and sustainable change across the system

Systems leadership development is aimed at any leader or group of leaders in the health and care system with a desire to improve the way they collaborate across organisational, professional and hierarchical boundaries to design and deliver better outcomes for people. It aims to broaden the perspective of the wider system, explore how systems and the people working in them behave and understand the implications for leading change. Those accessing leadership development might be working with local integration plans, have specific collaborative ambitions to pursue or want more generally to understand and develop the skills, behaviours and confidence to lead in a complex system. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance and effectiveness of systems thinking in order to improve services and population health. In addition to this, the focus on building relationships across systems is more crucial than ever as we move towards digital and virtual working.

Our systems leadership offer

Here's why the NHS Leadership Academy is uniquely placed to support your systems leadership development:

- **It's based on building strong relationships:** We have long-standing connections with leaders and organisations in the regions, deep knowledge of the context they're leading in, and we're already trusted facilitators in this area
- **It needs space and time to develop:** In programmes and bespoke interventions, we create the physical and thinking space in which leaders can come together to do this work
- **It needs experience and skilled know-how:** With national reach and local knowledge, we can bring together a wide range of tried and tested products and services to meet the complex and changing needs of leaders in health and social care systems
- **It's collaborative:** Our history of working in partnership to design, deliver and evaluate leadership development means that we can support leaders to transform the challenges of working with multiple different perspectives, goals and approaches into shared purpose and ambition for their populations

"...it was a good programme; there were lots of different people from different backgrounds and areas, and it was great to see how involved we actually all are in trying to achieve the same goals."

Outcomes and impact

The benefits of systems leadership development work include:

- Better understanding of systems, systems thinking and leadership in the context of the whole system
- Measurably and sustainably improved collaborative working, at all levels - individual, team, organisational, neighbourhood and place - with more open, honest dialogue and better understanding of other viewpoints
- Future-focused leaders who are confident in adopting the behaviours that support successful collaboration in complex systems
- Progress towards an agreed vision and collective plan for each system, based on a shared understanding of place, need and ambition
- Wider impacts, including benefits for patients and citizens such as improved population health outcomes, stronger engagement and more integrated processes

“[It helped me] develop a wider perspective on my context.”



Local support

We offer bespoke consultancy and a wide range of locally co-created development interventions and programmes, all aimed at helping leaders in systems work more confidently and collectively to deliver shared goals.

Through our tailored offers, we work with teams in organisations, communities and place-based systems to deliver whole-system transformational change. We can also work with you and the Primary Care and System Transformation team to identify the most relevant support available.

All systems are different, but experience tells us that there are common challenges and development needs, giving us valuable insight on the skills and behaviours necessary for leaders to work collaboratively and more effectively in new models of service delivery.

Our in-depth knowledge of local systems means our development offers meet the real needs of leaders - wherever their starting point and whatever their ambition - and can be implemented sustainably.

We use a variety of methods, from larger-scale, longer-term programmatic interventions to webinars, experiential workshops and masterclasses, creating facilitated spaces for leaders to come together as a system and explore the challenges of systems leadership.

There's no one-size-fits-all package; through co-production and co-design, we consider the many factors that will help us to decide on the appropriate level and type of support, including:

- Aims and ambition for the work
- Readiness of the system and of individual leaders for change
- Characteristics of the place leaders are working in
- Commitment of local leaders and sponsors
- History of system and leader development

What might systems leadership development include?



Depending on the ambition and the starting point, systems leadership interventions might include any of the above as well as opportunities to shadow and learn from others, support to develop networks, coaching, mentoring and action learning. Whilst we offer system leadership support at all levels, we also have significant experience and understanding of the unique challenges that senior system leaders face.

Our process: co-design and partnership

Our process is one of working in partnership to:

- Determine the right intervention
- Identify the ambition and the measures of success
- Talk through the possibilities
- Implement and deliver
- Evaluate against the objectives set at the outset

This work isn't formulaic. It can take a degree of experimentation to find the intervention that works best, but the Academy will work with you throughout the process, and beyond that, for as long as our support is needed. We'll help you to identify future needs and support you as your systems leadership work evolves and progresses.

Our process

Discovery

- We explore with clients the challenge and the ambition in the system and set objectives
- We may carry out diagnostic work to understand the current position and talk to key people, to find out what has already been implemented
- We share ideas and examples to help identify the most appropriate intervention, given what we know of the context



Design and delivery

- We work with world-leading delivery partners with strong track records of success
- We develop collaborations to ensure the design is right
- We ensure the planned intervention is managed effectively, maintaining contact throughout



Further development

- We follow up to check the interventions - be they programmes, workshops, facilitated sessions, or OD consultancy - have been delivered successfully
- We assess impact: through the LeADER framework for example
- We identify future development and support needs, and the most appropriate approaches

Leading for System Change

The Leading for System Change development offer is a set of flexible components, tailored to the needs of a particular system and delivered within that locality, that aims to develop and extend the capacity for system-wide thinking and action within a system, helping to encourage new ways of working and – ultimately – to enable better outcomes for people using health and care services.

The offer fuses theory with practical application. It brings together system leadership knowledge and principles with their practical application to enable a group of up to 40 participants from an ICS to work together in small teams on deep-seated, complex issues that form part of the ICS' priorities.

The offer has been designed as a means of accelerating change, increasing impact and building collaborative energy to address real system issues.

For more information, please visit www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk or contact your local leadership and lifelong learning team.

National programmes

The NHS Leadership Academy provides world-class development for leaders in health and care, wherever they are in the system.

Our range of award-winning leadership programmes are available for leaders at all levels. Systems leadership principles run throughout our national programmes so that leaders understand their role and potential in a whole-system context. For more information please visit www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk



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