

Public service leadership: insights from the research landscape

National Leadership Centre

- This collection of research articles - think-pieces - was commissioned by the National Leadership Centre and authored by leading academic researchers.
- The think-pieces focus on the NLC's initial areas of research interest, and highlight salient insights from a wide array of research evidence relating to leadership in the public sector
- The articles are grouped into four themes: systems leadership; the impact of leadership on outcomes; engaging and developing senior leaders; and effective public sector leadership. The collection begins with an historical perspective.

Background to the NLC

The National Leadership Centre (NLC) helps the country's most senior public service leaders (CEO-equivalent) develop the skills, knowledge and networks they need to address complex societal challenges and improve public services. We support the most senior leaders (Chief Executives and their equivalents) across the public service landscape through our flagship leadership development programme, and by convening a network of peers via online and in-person events.

Drawing from the Public Services Leadership Taskforce report,¹ the NLC's

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research mandate is to collate the best available evidence on public service leadership and its connection to outcomes including productivity. Our ambition is for insights from that research to inform iterations of our own programme and community-building, and, in collaboration with others supporting the development of a wider government learning ecosystem, to transform the way public services are led and delivered.

Academic engagement, Open Innovation

We began our research programme in summer 2019, initiating quantitative and qualitative research into the nature of public service leadership.

By engaging with advisers to the NLC and by informally exploring the research landscape, we scoped some initial areas of research interest grouped into four themes: **systems leadership; the impact of leadership on outcomes; engaging and developing senior leaders; and effective public sector leadership.**

We recognised that adding rigour to our research, and broadening our perspective, would mean tapping into the vast knowledge UK universities and other subject matter experts have in this arena. We also noted that the published and emergent literature contained many relevant insights, but also left many questions unanswered. To bring current knowledge together, and to better understand what the existing literature tells us about our four areas of interest, we sought to engage with leading

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researchers in leadership, management,
and public administration.

We partnered with Cabinet Office
colleagues in the Open Innovation Team to
convene four roundtable interactive
workshops, one on each of our four
themes. The reach and breadth of these
workshops is shown below.

We brought together



4

workshops

17

1000-word
thinkpieces



8

videos



64

academics and
other experts

30



universities, think tanks
and consultancies

Think-pieces

Alongside the workshops, we commissioned seventeen think-pieces to explore, challenge, and shape the future of our areas of research interest. The collection begins with an historical perspective from **Alix R. Green** at the University of Essex on **The politics of expertise and public sector leadership in post-war Britain**. It then features articles on:

1. Systems leadership

Professor Richard Bolden from the University of the West of England explores the **pitfalls and possibilities** of systems leadership.

Keith Grint, Professor Emeritus at Warwick University, discusses **clumsy solutions for wicked problems**.

Amy Stabler and Louise Kempton from the Newcastle University look at the potential of universities in **putting systems leadership in its place**.

Catherine Hobbs, Visiting Fellow at Northumbria University, and Professor **Professor Gerald Midgley**, University of Hull, consider **how systems thinking enhances systems leadership**.

2. Impact of leadership on outcomes

Anna Valero from the London School of Economics shares evidence around **management and productivity in the public sector**.

George Dibb from University College London explores **public sector leadership in the age of mission-oriented policy**.

Toby Lowe from Northumbria University asks, **as a public sector leader, how do you know if you are effective?**

Anna Topakas, University of Sheffield, discusses the importance of **leading to wellbeing**.

3. Engaging and developing senior leaders

Riikka Hofmann from the University of Cambridge writes about **overcoming barriers that stop new leaders from delivering change**

Professor Valerie Stead, Lancaster University, describes research around **leadership development and women's advancement into leadership roles**

Professor Helen Dickinson, from the University of New South Wales, Canberra, looks at evidence on **engaging and developing public sector leaders**

Professor Nelarine Cornelius, Queen Mary University of London, explores the concept of followership in her article, **Follow my leader?**

4. Effective public service leadership

Professor Jackie Ford of Durham University Business School examines **Relational leadership** in her think-piece on public sector leaders into the next decade

Professor Dennis Tourish, University of Sussex, looks at how research and practice is moving **beyond heroic leadership**

Professor Catherine Mangan, from the University of Birmingham, asks **How can senior public service leaders retain a focus on ethical leadership?**

Professor Jean Hartley from The Open University presents **Ten ideas for new research** on public service leadership.

Provocation, transformation

These articles are evidence-based provocations that will help the NLC iterate its leadership development programme and network activities, as well as its future research. They have already helped to refine our key areas of research interest for 2020/21. They are not presented as a systematic overview of research evidence, nor are they commentaries on policy. The articles do not reflect the opinion of the National Leadership Centre, the Open Innovation Team, or the authors' organisations. Our intention is for these provocations to drive transformational change in the way leaders collaborate, and influence how public services are led and delivered.

The think-piece articles in this collection were commissioned by the National Leadership Centre, in collaboration with the Open Innovation Team, a cross-government unit who work with academics and other experts to generate ideas and analysis for policy