LEADING CHANGE:

Why now is the time to invest in community leadership

About this report

The Community Leadership Academy asked Helen Goulden of the Young Foundation to explore the case for valuing and supporting community leadership, now and in the future.

This report summarises academic research and literature and real life examples to demonstrate how community leaders are already making change happen and what else might be needed to support them.

With thanks to Waqas Arshad, Ruth Ibegbuna and editor Isabel Young for helping to develop and inform the examples in this report.

About the Community Leadership Academy

Created by Local Trust in partnership with Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul, the Academy provides support for people making change happen in their communities and aims to help increase a wider understanding of community leadership.

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FOREWORD

The Big Local programme, set up by the National Lottery in 2010, is an extraordinary demonstration of what happens when trust is placed in people to improve things in their communities on their own terms. Nothing quite like it has existed before – a million pounds to be spent by people in 150 different neighbourhoods, volunteering their own time, over a period of 10 – 15 years.

Of course, the money is important, but it is the people who get involved, come together, build connections across their community, make decisions and get things done, who make the difference.

The work they do is rewarding and there are countless stories of amazing achievements and far-reaching impact. But we know from our research that, sometimes, it can be tough. The hours can be long and take a toll, and the mental burden can weigh heavily. Disagreements within groups can be difficult to navigate, negotiations can be hard work and there are setbacks as well as triumphs. And the people involved as partnership members, chairs, volunteers, often also have paid jobs, families and other caring responsibilities to think about alongside the roles they take up in their community.

This is not unique to Big Local. In neighbourhoods across the country, people are getting involved, meeting challenges and taking up responsibility in order to transform their neighbourhoods, whether it's setting up food banks in response to the pandemic, taking action on the climate emergency, or supporting young people to develop skills and find employment. Our society depends on people doing this kind of thing, and so it is clear the promise of levelling up, of a more balanced and locally-driven economy, depends on the effective participation of people in communities.

It's critical then that community leaders are recognised, celebrated and properly supported. At Local Trust we do this through the Community Leadership Academy, in partnership with Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul. The Community Leadership Academy offers one-to-one coaching and peer-learning sessions and is deliberately designed to be as generous and nourishing as similar programmes in government or the private sector. And when we talk about 'leaders' we don't mean leaders in the old-fashioned heroic sense, but leaders working together as a team to improve their communities: people creating change. As one participant puts it, "it isn't one person standing at the front, it's all of us together".

This report makes a strong case for the importance of this type of 'distributed leadership' within communities, a sense of collective agency and efficacy. As such, it is a valuable contribution to the essential conversation about the future of our communities and their role in society.

James Goodman
Director of partnerships and learning
Local Trust

INTRODUCTION

Many readers of this report will already believe in the power of communities to drive positive social change – that there is something beyond the state, beyond the market, beyond the family that provides meaning and momentum to act in the service of something bigger than our individual selves.

Since the surge of community action in response to the pandemic, we have seen that even more people feel they are part of a community. They feel more compelled to participate in local life, to support each other, to get involved. Much of the polling and survey data support this trend. And while the role of community during the pandemic has often been cast as remedial (going shopping, providing food, transport, care, homes, counselling, etc, at a time of crisis), we increasingly feel the regenerative power of community: that there is a source of power within communities which, if invested in and supported, can be a fundamental part of levelling up.

This is especially pressing given the government's current levelling up agenda. Recent research (ICS, 2020) shows that despite billions of investment to alleviate geographical inequalities over the past 15 years across different governments, between 2004 and 2019, there was 0 per cent average change in the relative economic deprivation of the most deprived local authority areas (Yang et al., 2021).

But from the tens of billions of investment in tackling these inequalities in the earliest decades of the 21st century, there is some evidence to suggest where communities are actively involved there is more success As a result, an economic as well as a social case seems to be emerging for supporting stronger communities. And yet the ability of a community to take control of a conversation with a local (or national) institutional powerholder to drive economic and social change requires community leadership.

Alongside this, there is clear evidence that community action improves our lives. We know that stronger communities have a significant positive impact on health compared to communities where there are poor social relationships (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). In the most deprived communities, almost half of people report a severe lack of support (Halpern, 2004), making those at greater risk less resilient to the health effects of social and economic disadvantage (Buck and Gregory, 2013). We also know that communities play a role in reducing crime through collective efficacy (the ability of members of a community to control the behaviour of individuals and groups in that community) (Levy et al., 2014).

We know that communities with strong social bonds fare better in the face of crisis and turbulence, boosting survival rates after a disaster, for example (Ye and Aldrich, 2019). And the survival rate of community-owned businesses during the pandemic is nothing short of extraordinary, with only 1 per cent ceasing trading during lockdown (CFE, 2020). Community action is also essential if we are to make a just and effective transition to a net zero economy, with studies showing that successful transition depends on many individual and household factors that require community-based action (UKRI, 2020).

This summary of the power of community is of course not exhaustive. But the larger message here is that communities – how people connect, gather and act in the places they live – is of material importance if we are to come anywhere close to finding a path through some of our most complex economic, social and environmental challenges.

The social and civic infrastructure that is readily acknowledged to be of prime importance for improving people's life chances, health and wellbeing (The British Academy, 2021) is not only about shared civic spaces like libraries, halls and parks, places and spaces to meet, critical though these places are. It's not only about the need for strong anchor institutions which provide services, jobs, cultural and creative activities. Our civic infrastructure includes us: our own human capacity to act together.

And yet the capacity and capability of communities to participate in decision-making, to take ownership of local assets and to organise on the issues that fundamentally affect their wellbeing cannot be assumed or taken for granted. Nor can it be assumed that all those who want to act have access to the skills, knowledge and support to do so. Nor can we assume that communities always act in benign ways, or in the best interests of all residents and neighbours. Communities can exclude as well as include. They can have long, deep historical fault lines which cleave open at times of stress and turbulence. The power dynamics that so dishearten us at a national level can be found in our neighbourhoods as well. Any one of us who has worked in a community setting will recognise that they are not conflict-free; they can be deeply divided by sometimes profound, sometimes petty differences and divisions.

This leads us to a recognition that there are particular kinds of leadership practice and behaviours that are more likely to enable functional and inclusive forms of community power and civic strength.

This report takes the view that community leadership is a critical part of the social and civic infrastructure needed to 'level up', and so is specific support for distributed, 'non-heroic' forms of leadership practice that will take us to a place of greater equity, prosperity and inclusion in the places we live.

Local Trust support for community leadership

In 2019 Local Trust invested in the design and development of a Community Leadership Academy, commissioning the Young Foundation, Northern Soul and Koreo to lead its creation. There were two drivers for setting up the initiative. First, to invest in and support established and emerging community leaders. To help these people achieve the change they want to see where they live, whilst simultaneously *developing a legacy of community action in their area, and connecting to a wider movement of community-led change across the country*.

Second, Big Local[1] volunteers had expressed a desire to develop their skills and confidence as leaders beyond the technical aspects of management. In response to these systemic and practical needs, the Community Leadership Academy was brought to life, offering a varied and sustained programme of support and leadership development to residents in Big Local areas and, increasingly, to community leaders outside the Big Local programme. Currently running until the end of 2022, the Community Leadership Academy has already supported over 120 individuals to explore and develop leadership in their communities.

1 Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10–15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY LEADER?

There are common stereotypes in much that is written about community leaders.

For example, they are lay people who represent and speak for their community. They are grassroots leaders, as opposed to formally appointed leaders of institutions or the socially and economically powerful. They can be leaders of communities of place, of interest or of solidarity. The legitimacy and value of their leadership is found in their community links rather than a formal appointment to a role. They tend to emerge organically, although they may then be formally appointed to a leadership role in response to specific opportunities or structures.

Possibly the most commonly held view about community leaders in our public consciousness is that they are a trusted voice of the community, whose most visible role is to liaise with the media and authorities to share the views of that particular community. For example, we often hear views of community leaders from different faiths on the news at the time of a traumatic event, injustice or act of discrimination. Local councillors or leaders within local organisations can sometimes be referred to (or refer to themselves) as community leaders. In this report, we are primarily concerned with those (many more) community leaders who often hold no legal power or institutional role, who are not paid and whose role transcends far beyond – and may often not even involve – broadcast communication to the public, politicians or authorities.

So, what is a community leader in the minds of people who are active in their communities? We asked participants of the Community Leadership Academy:

"IT'S ABOUT BEING ALONGSIDE PEOPLE. WHEN IT'S TIME TO MAKE A DECISION, DO IT TOGETHER... IT ISN'T ONE PERSON STANDING AT THE FRONT, IT'S ALL OF US TOGETHER, THAT'S THE THING FOR ME."

"IT'S NOT ABOUT, DOING IT FOR A WAGE, OR DOING IT FOR A THING. YOU'RE JUST MAKING SURE THAT IF SOMEONE'S GOT A PROBLEM YOU CAN HELP THEM."

"A COMMUNITY LEADER ENCOURAGES OTHERS TO DO THINGS EVEN WHEN THEY DON'T THINK THEY'RE CAPABLE OF DOING IT."

"COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP SHOWS PEOPLE GOOD WAYS OF LIVING AND WORKING TOGETHER. KINDNESS IS ABOUT CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE AND IS LOVE IN ACTION. IT MEANS BEING ABLE TO WORK THROUGH DIFFICULT THINGS IN A NON-JUDGMENTAL AND CARING WAY."

"IF I'M WORKING IN A GROUP, I'M WORKING AS A TEAM, SO IF IT WAS LIKE, RIGHT, THAT PERSON SEEMS TO BE DOWN. I WILL GO AND TRY TO TALK TO THEM, JUST HAVE A CHAT, SEE HOW THEY'RE DOING, SEE IF THEY NEED ANY HELP OR ANY ADVICE OR IF THEY NEED TO GO HOME FOR ANYTHING, JUST A – SO WE'RE ALL WORKING AS A TEAM."

"I COULDN'T CALL MYSELF A LEADER... I'M A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNITY DOING THEIR BIT BECAUSE I WANT IT TO BE BETTER AND WE WANT PEOPLE TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO GET INVOLVED."

These quotes from participants of the Community Leadership Academy highlight just how integral notions of togetherness, kindness and caring are to leadership undertaken in a community context. We are unlikely to find many leaders of organisations talking about leadership as being 'love in action'! And whereas it has taken a few generations of leadership practice in a professional context to fully realise the critical importance of making decisions together and providing a supporting, enabling environment for others, this is implicit and fundamental to community leaders. Unlike most organisational leaders, home life and working life operate in the same physical place. Care and love for the place they live and a desire for things to be better is the driving force.

The traits and characteristics of a community leader are entirely contingent on being able to build a collective, communitarian approach to creating change. Afforded no title, formal status or resources with which to command, efficacy and change is only achieved through listening, conversation, influence and collaboration. Legitimacy and ability to act are enabled only by and with others, managing conflict and building a path towards change. It is a dynamic state, forever held in balance, requiring extensive effort, patience and grit.

Academics, in uncharacteristically straightforward style, describe community leaders as people who want to "improve their community, have something to contribute and don't wait for others to get the job done" (Community Toolbox, 2018) and as "local residents stepping forward to solve community-level problems or promote action that advances the community's wellbeing" (Easterline, 2021).

As you will glimpse from the examples in this report, the impact created by community leaders, particularly those who consciously or intuitively enact a more distributed form of leadership practice, is extensive. What is also evident from the many observations and quotations from participants in programmes such as Local Trust's Community Leadership Academy is that individuals don't often self-identify as leaders. When researching community leadership programmes in other countries, from Kenya to Cardiff, participants often expressed surprise but were pleased to realise that someone else viewed them as a leader. In the UK, in particular, the label 'community leader' was uncomfortable for many who were clearly practising leadership in the places they lived.

We should be wary about attributing this discomfort to modesty or self-effacement. And we should be particularly careful using this language with emerging leaders who do not identify with the term 'leader', or do not understand what it entails and even feel excluded by it. The resistance to the label does not seem to be a rejection of the need for individuals to lead, but more a reflection on the power dynamics of traditional forms of leadership and connotations of hierarchy, which are discomforting to many. This is borne out strongly when talking to people about their motivations for getting involved in community action. These invariably emerge and grow from one seed alone: to improve the community they live in. There are also issues of confidence and self-belief driving an aversion to identifying as a leader. There is no doubt that feelings of 'imposter syndrome' are common, with community leaders feeling like they are not good enough, know enough, or have the necessary experience or skills to undertake in the work that they are already very clearly doing.

WHAT DO WE REALLY MEAN BY COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP?

"HALFWAY THROUGH THE BIG LOCAL PROGRAMME, IN ADDITION TO HEROIC LEADERS, WE ALSO NOTICED ANOTHER TYPE OF EMERGING LEADER WITH A VERY RICH SKILL SET, WITH SKILLS THAT ARE OFTEN UNDERVALUED. THEY TEND TO HAVE THE ABILITY TO LISTEN, TO CONVENE PEOPLE, TO COLLABORATE – AND SAW A REAL AND IMPORTANT GAP THERE TO DEVELOP COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL CHANGE."

Interim learning and evaluation report for the Community Leadership Academy by IVAR and Just Ideas, 2021

"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

The hero with a thousand faces,
Joseph Campbell

When Joseph Campbell wrote *The hero with a thousand faces*, he was drawing on his study of thousands of stories from across the world, from across many periods in history. He discusses the enduring myth of the hero: someone who has achieved something beyond the normal range of achievement or experience, who has encountered great difficulties, won great things and is able to bestow great things to their community on their return. The myth of the hero is so embedded in our psyche, so coupled now with our individualist culture, that the hero makes a regular appearance in all popular culture. Heroes are lauded and applauded everywhere we look, and so it is inevitable that this has shaped our understanding and embodiment of leadership practice.

The idea of what leadership means, what behaviours, traits and competencies make for effective leaders has changed dramatically over the past hundred years and is the subject of many books and a highly lucrative, if not always effective, industry (Gurdjian et al., 2014). And while theories of leadership have evolved well beyond the 'heroic leader', when most people are asked to imagine a leader they are, in general and unwittingly, locked into a stereotype that leaders are singular, heroic, visible, in front and at the top.

But this not what we find when working with community leaders. Communities are complex networks of (mostly) uncoerced forms of association. There are forms of

power flowing, but they are not bounded within hierarchy as in organisations or governments. The notion of a leader 'at the top' of a neighbourhood is not unheard of in some communities but, in general, community leadership is plural, demanding a different set of competencies which cannot lean into the structures of authority, status or leadership that exist in organisations to command legitimacy.

Indeed, the 21st century competencies now wending their way into education and industry, such as creativity, collaborative problem-solving, adaptability and agility, could be found in community leaders in spades well before the 21st century arrived.

So, is there a strong theoretical underpinning for effective and impactful community leadership practice?

There is no shortage of theories of leadership in general contexts; but, despite the necessity of community as a central foundation of modern society (Putnam, 2000), there is remarkably less attention given to theories of leadership within communities (Lamm et al., 2017) and outside organisational or political settings. However, there are numerous theories of leadership which are relevant and useful in supporting community leadership development as a deliberate discipline and practice. Here we briefly explore the merits of three different theories, drawing on existing literature but also on our own lived experience of working with communities in different parts of the UK and Europe.

The first is the theory of **servant leadership**, which holds that the leader exists to serve others. A servant leader shares power, puts the needs of people first and helps them develop and perform as well as possible (Sendjaya et al., 2002). The central guiding question for a servant leader is: Do those served grow as people? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (Greenleaf, 2007). Servant leadership shows a particular way leaders can serve their communities and is strongly focused on people first, not mission first (Gandolfi, 2017).

The theory behind servant leadership is that the mission will be accomplished through helping followers achieve their maximum potential: it "directs its focus first on the ability of the individuals to succeed and second on the success of the mission" (Gandolfi, 2017). This theory of leadership speaks well to a community context, emphasising the critical importance of attending to the wellbeing and motivations of those volunteering effort, time, skills and emotions to support a community endeavour. The community leader will probably also be a volunteering member of the community, unable to draw on the personal resources and comforts afforded servant leaders in an organisation such as a CEO or equivalent. However, the importance servant leadership theory places on relational skills, being prepared to learn, exercising humility and activating the talents of others (Coetzer et al., 2017) resonates strongly in a community leadership setting.

Transformational leadership theory focuses on inspiring and encouraging people to change their behaviours and outlook, emphasising the importance of values, beliefs, aspirations and potential (Hollander, 1993). Transformational leaders provide inspirational motivation, encourage people to think for themselves and treat people as individuals (Bass and Avolio, 1993). They tend to exemplify moral standards and foster an ethical working environment with clear values, priorities and standards. The inspirational qualities of a transformational leader, underpinned by strong ethical values, have broad relevance for community leadership practice. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on shifting from an attitude of self-interest to an attitude of working for the common good and open communication (Bass and Riggio, 2006) is highly relevant to motivating inclusive, collective effort in a community.

There's no doubt though, in a crisis such as that experienced in the earliest days of lockdown, more traditional styles of leadership, where very clear objectives, tasks and goals are set in a direct manner,

are welcomed by community actors. One study of a community's leadership preferences found that people wanted their leaders to possess elements of both transformational and more transactional forms leadership in times of crisis. They wanted leaders who could inspire and communicate, but who could also set clear objectives and focus on what needed to be done (Boehm et al., 2010).

This brings us on to the third theory of leadership practice, which has informed the focus of the Community Leadership Academy: the theory of **distributed leadership**, where "the task of the leaders is to nurture and enable, not to command or control" (Onyx and Leonard, 2011).

The origin of distributed leadership theory has roots in the education system, where researchers have been interested in how leadership takes place in complex organisations like schools (Spillane et al., 2001). Now to be found in multiple sectors, industries and other complex environments, distributed leadership fully debunks any notion of the heroic leader and goes further, taking a more systemic approach to leadership as a shared effort by more than one person. It puts the concept of leadership centre stage rather than the individual leaders themselves.

Research into community leadership in South Africa outlines a model of distributed leadership in a community context. In this model, leadership is described as a process, not a person, and is a "collective relational phenomenon" (Kirk and Shutte, 2004). Each individual within the organisation is empowered through a role on which they lead, which they can fulfil with "purpose, confidence and authority".

Seeking to grow distributed leadership in organisations can require full-scale recalibration of power dynamics and structures. In communities, the focus on pluralistic engagement, enhanced dialogue across different groups and the development of shared meaning has strong applicability and resonance. Communities are complex and unpredictable networks of free association, meaning that community leaders are often already working in uncertain environments and are required to have a high tolerance for emergence and uncertainty (Lamm et al., 2017). A leadership development framework and practice to support and develop skills and competencies for distributing power and responsibilities (different from delegating) has been proven to be helpful in supporting the gritty, fluid reality of communities organising action on the things they care about.

This does not mean that communities are leaderless. There is still a role for a leader who is able to identify people's strengths as well as manage conflict and promote dialogue across diverse groups. Under this model, leadership as a skill remains important, but there is a shift in emphasis from telling to enabling and empowering. As with workplace trends towards self-management, the leader is not gone but they have very different responsibilities and require different skills.

The characteristics and competencies of distributed leadership

"DISTRIBUTED AND SHARED LEADERSHIP IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT, BUILD A TEAM AROUND YOU. HOW TO PLAN WITH A COMMUNITY MORE. WE AS GROUPS LIKE TO PLAN BUT I THINK THE COMMUNITY SHOULD AND WOULD LIKE TO BE MORE INVOLVED."

Community Leadership Academy participant

Distributed leadership is concerned with the practice of leadership, embodied across a team, group or organisation. In this context, leadership is not about the role and responsibilities of someone in authority; rather, leadership is shared across those who have relevant skills and expertise and can shift around according to context and circumstance. United by a common purpose or outcome, a community exercising distributed leadership will see many different people – whether out in front, out back, introverted or extroverted – influence and lead change in multiple different ways.

The conditions for effective distributed leadership require a shared desire to improve on what has gone before, a belief that experimenting and learning are fundamental to that improvement, that knowledge is shared freely and there is a collective view on a desirable outcome for a community. As such, the competencies of distributed leadership practice have three distinguishing features (Bennett et al 2003):

- leadership is the product of an interacting group or network of individuals, rather than the act of a single person
- the boundaries of leadership are opened up to those who would previously have been excluded from leadership activities
- a belief that expertise should be distributed across an organisation (or group) rather than concentrated in the hands of a few people.

These competencies are evident in residents in Big Local areas participating in the Community Leadership Academy:

"BEING IN A LEADERSHIP ROLE, YOU CAN LET GO OF SOME OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND TRUST OTHERS TO MANAGE THEM SUCCESSFULLY (IN A TEAM, VOLUNTEERS AND THE COMMUNITY). TAKE TIME TO ENABLE OTHERS TO TAKE ON RESPONSIBILITY."

Community Leadership Academy participant

"AND I JUST THINK, THIS COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP ACADEMY... WILL HELP ME PERSONALLY, YEAH, BUT THEN... I, IN TURN, WILL BE ABLE TO HELP ANOTHER PERSON, WHO THEN MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP SOMEBODY ELSE, AND FEEL LIKE A SNOWBALL EFFECT."

Community Leadership Academy participant

Eight hallmarks of distributed leadership

Viewed in terms of the collective behaviour of many individuals, Dean Fink (2007) effectively assimilated different theorists' analyses of distributed leadership into eight key characteristics, or hallmarks:

Shared responsibility	Where leadership is viewed in terms of the collective behaviour of many individuals rather than a designated role
Shared power and authority	Whereas traditional notions of leadership focus on command and control, distributed leadership is more concerned with empowerment, participation and co-operation
Synergy	Under distributed leadership, decision-making is decentralised, with individuals engaging in collaborative activities and willingly sharing or overlapping roles with others whose skills and knowledge complement their own
Leadership capacity	Organisations with distributed leadership benefit from the collective knowledge and skills of their leadership participants, giving them greater leadership capacity than traditionally led organisations
Organisational learning	Where leadership and decision-making are distributed throughout an organisation, senior leaders have a responsibility to contribute to the quality of thinking throughout the organisation. How they work with their own teams serves as an example of how this can be replicated throughout the organisation
An equitable and ethical climate	Distributed leadership tends to involve a wider range of stakeholders in the decision-making process, thereby reducing the likelihood that ill-considered or unethical decisions are made
A democratic and investigative culture	As the cumulative result of shared responsibility, shared power and authority, and an ethical and organisational learning culture
Macro-community engagement	Many organisations that practise distributed leadership appreciate that part of their leadership capacity lies in their ability to understand and contribute to an increasingly complex internal and external environment, over which they can have little real leadership control

WHAT DOES DISTRIBUTED COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Now that we have examined some of the theories and concepts of community leadership – in particular, the value of thinking about distributed leadership across a whole team or group – what does look like in practice? Here we zoom in on two examples of community leaders who have enabled wider leadership in the communities in which they work.

CASE STUDY

Rekindle: Distributed leadership in action

Rekindle is a supplementary school for young people aged 13 to 16 in Manchester. Its aim is not to replace formal education or to teach the national curriculum, but to share life skills which will support young people – particularly young, working-class black people – to thrive in UK society. The school hopes to offer a space where young people can celebrate their culture and community, find wisdom in their elders, and feel safe enough to be their authentic selves. Founder Ruth Ibegbuna shares how Rekindle has been brought together by a collection of young people aged 17 to 25, many of whom share the same characteristics as the young people the school seeks to serve, and who have recently exited education themselves.

For Ruth, many traditional examples of youth leadership seem to involve young people being offered tokenistic boards to sit on and/or a refusal to support them into roles usually held by adults: "When I ran a children's charity, even wanting our board to all be made up of young people seemed too radical, and when I was a teacher, getting young people to lead on lessons was seen as a ridiculous idea." In contrast, Rekindle has tried to hand over a great deal of power. The board of trustees is entirely made up of young people, the majority of whom have been supported to develop their confidence, learn how systems work, and to think critically over the past few years. The chair is a young person, as are those overseeing the charity's finances and governance. Rekindle's safeguarding policy was written by a 17-year-old, for instance. Ruth describes how this approach was proactive and deliberate from the outset.

Any young person who joined Rekindle understood that there were a number of leadership profiles and were asked to step into one, such as leading on partnerships, networking or developing the curriculum. Before Rekindle, some of these young people had felt frustrated as young activists about what they'd been allowed to do; in comparison, Rekindle feels like a real opportunity to demonstrate their skills.

Rekindle is supported by three elders – two educators and one project manager – who have built trusted relationships with the young people over time. The young people can come to them for support and feedback, but the ideas, pushbacks and challenges have to come from the young people themselves. The elders limit their involvement to a supporting role. This type of distributive leadership is central to Rekindle's values and reflect Ruth's own experiences growing up in the area and as an educator:

"I'VE GOT A NIGERIAN SOCIAL WORKER FATHER WHO USED TO TALK ALL THE TIME ABOUT IT TAKING A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD AND I TRULY BELIEVE THAT. FOR US IN MANCHESTER, MOSS SIDE IS GOING TO BE THAT VILLAGE AND THE CHILDREN ARE GOING TO BE AT THE CENTRE AND THE ADULTS ARE GOING TO PLAY THEIR PART. AND THOSE ADULTS ON A PARTICULAR DAY MIGHT NOT BE THEIR MUM OR DAD, IT MIGHT BE SOMEONE IN OUR CENTRE, BUT THE CHILDREN ARE GOING TO LEAVE FEELING LOVED, NEEDS MET, FED, AND THAT LEARNING IS EXCITING."

Ruth Ibegbuna, Rekindle

This distributed leadership approach is not without its challenges – it can be chaotic and messy. But it is completely real. Rekindle has been a refreshing move away, not only from the mainstream education system but also from traditional power hierarchies:

"FOR ALL OF US, NOT HAVING A CEO, IT'S NOVEL AND SOMETIMES YOU FEEL THE YOUNG PEOPLE MISS OPEN GOALS AND SHORTCUTS, BUT I AM TRYING TO DISCIPLINE MYSELF AND THE OTHER ELDERS TO HOLD BACK WHEN MAYBE WE COULD GALLOP FASTER SOMETIMES. BUT HOW WOULD THAT BE DEVELOPMENTAL OR AUTHENTIC IN TERMS OF WHAT WE'RE TRYING TO ACHIEVE?"

Ruth Ibegbuna, Rekindle

Changing how leadership is understood is important for Rekindle, which is trying to show that different people – young people – have leadership abilities and, if given a bit of autonomy, can produce startling things that established leaders could learn from. Those involved feel dispirited by traditional leaders (including archetypal youth leaders, who are not typically working class, black or both) and leadership approaches and want to disrupt that:

"THESE ARE THE NOT THE YOUNG PEOPLE THAT YOU WOULD EXPECT TO BE LEADING THIS INITIATIVE. THEY HAVE THEIR STORIES, THEY HAVE THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCE, AND THEY ARE USING THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCE IN SUCH A POWERFUL, GROUNDED WAY AND REFUSING PITY, AND ABSOLUTELY JUST SAYING, 'I KNOW THIS STUFF, I'VE LIVED THIS STUFF, BELIEVE ME'.

Ruth Ibegbuna, Rekindle

Rekindle also challenges the type of leadership young people in mainstream education are exposed to, and what they are told they are capable of. Ruth reflects on how young people are traditionally taught about leadership models that feel completely unachievable to them. "They hear about Steve Jobs, Mandela, Malala, and other heroic leaders, but aren't sat in an assembly in Grimsby thinking as result, 'Right ok, off I go!'" Ruth argues that, instead, if people understood that, in the town next to theirs, there is a mother of six who is holding her estate together, maybe more people would feel that playing an active role in their community is something to be respected.

For community-led, and particularly youth-led, initiatives such as Rekindle, the leadership needed to hold something together that's ever-changing, complex and even upsetting at times is nuanced, almost vocational. Ruth suggests that because of that vocational nature, community leadership is not given respect. It is simply seen as 'some people put their heads up and take charge of these things'. And because these leaders are not respected or held up in society as having skills which more traditional leaders could only hope to have, they often don't see it in themselves. Yet schools, the education system and communities could learn so much if they trusted community leaders with lived experience, particularly young people.

The survival needed as a working-class young person with additional lived experience is remarkable, and it is initiatives such as Rekindle that are paving a new way for a new type of community leadership. This involves not having to wait for other people to give the green light but recognising a readiness to lead change in people around you, and not letting existing and out-dated structures get in the way.

CASE STUDY

Bradley Big Local, Pendle Food for All and Bradley Food 2 Go: Distributive leadership in action

In the lead up to the pandemic, the Bradley Big Local (BBL) partnership had been supporting a project run by local people aimed at addressing food poverty in the area. Their mission was to offer something with greater reach and less associated stigma than traditional food banks. Together they developed a food pantry, inviting local people to contribute £4 a week, which could then be used to purchase up to the equivalent of £20 worth of food. Named Pendle Food for All, the aim is to reach people from across the Bradley and Pendle district in Lancashire. Alongside this, they also set up a COVID-19 hot meals programme called Bradley Food 2 Go, which delivered over 80 meals every Friday to those who were isolating. No one was ever turned away. No questions asked.

One of the first things that Pendle Food for All achieved was carefully co-ordinating with food banks in the area. This ensured they were open on different days and there were clear signposting links so people knew where they could access food throughout the week. With support from the Big Local partnership and its worker, Pendle Food for All developed a business plan and constituted themselves as a community interest company (CIC).

Waqas, the Bradley Big Local rep, explains: "For the partnership to succeed, it is vital that we act as silent partners, supporting our fellow local people to deliver an initiative which they have the skills, know-how and relationships to do." The partnership wants to overcome the traditional barriers which often prevent community projects from succeeding – demands for ongoing budget and spending reports, having to justify all decisions to funders, and feeling constrained to follow fixed plans even when things change. Instead, the partnership tries to offer support, autonomy and flexibility.

This proved vital when the pandemic hit. The food pantry's ambitions to gradually grow and offer additional services such as nutritional advice and training were put on hold. They had to rapidly shift to delivering food parcels across the area and respond to a sharp increase in need. Due to the time they had spent finessing processes and building connections in the area, they were able to manage this change effectively – offering people the option to safely pick up food parcels from the pantry, which were delivered to their car or left outside by a volunteer. Alternatively, through Bradley Food 2 Go, people could arrange to have warm meals delivered directly to their homes on a Friday. Now they are able to open their doors again, volunteers continue to support local people from across Bradley, asking them how they are doing and sharing information on support and initiatives such as council help towards energy bills.

The success of this project is predicated on strong local knowledge and relationships – both with the place and its people – helping it to mobilise and overcome challenges.

Pendle Food for All, Bradley Food 2 Go and their collaboration with Bradley Big Local showcase a distributed leadership approach. The project vision and delivery plan were designed and agreed by the group of people leading on the project, not just by one individual or organisation. Roles and responsibilities were discussed and agreed together. Those involved considered what one another's strengths were and, from there, each person was able to lead on a given aspect of the project. For instance, the Local Trust worker supports with funding bids and paperwork, the lead volunteer draws on the rapport she has built with local people over the years to deliver the project, and the partnership board helps with funds and business planning.

For Waqas, who is a member of the Bradley Big Local partnership board and a volunteer at Bradley Food 2 Go, trust and an open remit for action lie at the heart of what makes this collaboration a successful example of distributed leadership. As a formalised organisation, the BBL partnership is able to communicate that support is available if needed but, for the rest of the time, steps back and encourages local volunteers to run the projects that they are best placed to deliver. Waqas emphasises that this involves a willingness not to be at the forefront or in the limelight of the project, and a deep commitment to doing things together and being led by collective decision-making processes. For him, "Leadership isn't a single person, and that's the difference between leaders and leadership." Having participated in the Community Leadership Academy, he feels that "there are always going to be 'natural' leaders doing things in their communities, but what is needed is support for people – those potential campaigners – who would like to be involved but have perhaps benefited less from job opportunities or education, and so need that support and that push to get involved and volunteer". This push, he adds, needs to come from local authorities and those in positions of power, but is very much a mutual exchange. Waqas would like to see councillors learning from residents, and the wider public sector – including schools, the fire service, the CVS, the police, scouts and more – working together to offer people opportunities to lead in their communities beyond the age of 18, offering leadership opportunities beyond simply a certification or a route into local politics.

From Waqas' perspective as a community leader in Lancashire, projects like Pendle Food for All, Bradley Food 2 Go and Bradley Big Local recognise that community leaders come in all forms and that people like him are "happy to do what I do in the shadows, so long as I know it is benefiting local people". Waqas is "not afraid to try and fail, go away and evaluate, and come and build on what's been learnt". Where there is a sense of community and work to be done, there will be a diverse range of volunteers wanting to get involved in community-led initiatives. It is vital that support offered reflects the diversity of this leadership potential, and that barriers to getting things done are removed to enable local people to progress and effect change.

Both the Rekindle and the Pendle Food for All examples show many of the hallmarks of distributed leadership in action. Both initiatives support shared responsibility and decentralised decision-making, creating the space for others to step into roles that play to their strengths, experiences and passions. They are also creating a very deliberate space for people to try things for the first time. Things they might not initially feel capable of. This is not achieved through letting people fend for themselves in a 'sink or swim' style (although feeling slightly out of our depth is clearly a precondition for learning) but a kind of 'back-stage' support to be drawn on if needed, enabling new leadership capacity to emerge. Both case studies also demonstrate the need for leaders of all kinds to test, learn, adapt and move forward. This is 21st century leadership practice in action, requiring the humility to realise that the answers to challenging situations are not always easy or possible to discover without taking a leap into action. What is also evident is that there are routes to making decisions in highly complex settings that require neither a 'command and control' diktat nor absolute consensus from the whole community.

BUILDING THE CASE FOR 21ST CENTURY COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

> "LEADERSHIP ISN'T A SINGLE PERSON, AND THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP."
>
> Community Leadership Academy participant

This section sets out the value of community leadership and the broad case for greater and deeper investment in the growth and development of people in communities who can support meaningful, collective change on key local issues.

Leadership training in organisations is a £258 billion global industry, recognised as a critical development need for every industry ranging from manufacturing to healthcare. Leadership development is also valued in the not-for-profit and charitable sector, yet this sector is three times less likely to invest than private sector bodies (Ainsworth, 2016). Once in the realm of 'community', where activity is often the domain of small, informal neighbourhood groups or tiny charities, leadership development training is difficult to find – with a few notable exceptions from funders such as Local Trust, the National Lottery Community Fund in Northern Ireland, NEON and Lankelly Chase.

As with so many other non-organisational domains (informal care provision, unpaid domestic labour, to name but two), community leadership has historically suffered from little or no business case for its support, and therefore suffers from chronic underinvestment. Its value is measurable, but our measures and mindsets are not yet sufficient to fully recognise that value in ways that legitimise and unlock the investment and support that is so needed.

It is important to stress here that we are not proposing the professionalisation of community groups or the imposing of ill-fitting leadership development practices in a community setting. The reverse may be true: there are many community leadership practices and behaviours from which business and industry could learn much. It is about recognising that voluntary effort to effect positive change in the area where you live, where that effort

is inextricably linked to everyday life and wellbeing, is bold, difficult and challenging work that can only benefit from investment and support. That collective effort makes tangible and sizeable differences to the wellbeing of our communities, particularly those experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage and inequalities. If we buy into the case for a stronger civil society on our journey to recovery and renewal, we need more community leaders. Specifically, leaders who embody 21st century competencies that transcend and transform the idea of the sole heroic leader led by singular good intent into leaders who act as teams, distribute and grow power, agency and confidence in the communities in which they work.

What difference do community leaders make?

It is worth setting out ways in which community leaders effect positive change in the places we call home.

• Crisis response

Community responses to a significant and destabilising macro-event like COVID-19 are an essential form of civic repair (Macmillan, 2020). There are many and varied sources of evidence from across the globe showing that increased connectedness and social capital within a community is a key factor in helping people prepare for, and recover from, catastrophic events and emergencies (Aldrich, 2010).

In the earliest days of the pandemic, something remarkable happened across the UK. Well before the government put the country into lockdown, before any national volunteer response co-ordination was in place, thousands of communities had already self-organised, either as self-described mutual aid groups or simply as informal networks of neighbours and residents coming together to help each other and those most vulnerable in their communities. There are an estimated 4,300 mutual aid groups, accounting for almost three million volunteers (Power and Benton, 2021), which offered support to NHS and key workers, people who were homeless, those who were self-isolating, and families. This is a conservative number and does not include the uncountable number of WhatsApp and Facebook groups also dedicated to providing support to neighbours in need. Existing or new mutual-aid and peer-support groups require setting up, usually by just one or two people initially. Who set up those thousands of community groups? Who organised amid the chaos and uncertainty? Community leaders.

• Build trusted relationships

Recent work undertaken by the Young Foundation shows a stark contrast between people's perceptions of community leaders and local councillors. Overwhelmingly, regardless of geography, age, education or affluence, community and community activities are described in positive terms – belonging, connectedness, togetherness – alongside perceptions of local councillors, who are viewed far less positively: out of touch, biased, stuffy, unapproachable. Community leaders are critical to the creation of strong, functioning and trusting relationships between local government and community and neighbourhood groups. If we agree that tackling some of the very difficult, long-term complex social and environmental challenges we face cannot be achieved without engaging deeply with communities, then we need more community leaders, equipped with the competencies and skills to create equitable partnerships with local institutional powerholders and to drive community-led and community-involving change.

• Take ownership

Taking a local asset into community ownership or setting up a community business is no less challenging (indeed, it is arguably much harder) than setting up and sustaining any local business – and it requires community leadership. The estimated 6,325 assets in community ownership (Archer et al., 2019) in England generate £217 million worth of net additional gross value to the economy; £148 million per annum additional expenditure into local communities; 7,000 net additional full-time-equivalent jobs, providing £16 million in fiscal benefit savings per annum; and 151,000 net additional volunteer hours per week. While there has been a marked increase in community asset ownership over the last decade (Archer et al., 2019), these assets are not evenly distributed across England, with the highest numbers in less deprived rural local authorities. The most deprived 30 per cent of neighbourhoods have just 18 per cent of assets in community ownership. If we want to see a broader base of people take advantage of the benefits of increasing community-owned assets in their local area, we have a responsibility to offer access to the skills, expertise and leadership development that will increase the likelihood of that happening in places where it is most needed.

• Sustain community-led projects

Community leaders who can distribute ownership and responsibility for community projects are necessary for ensuring the sustainability of work that so clearly benefits communities and improves community wellbeing. Investment in the community leadership needed to support community-led projects is likely to make them more successful in the long term, arguably providing a better return on community-led project investment. These leaders build continuity, increasing the number of people involved and reducing the pressure on a small number of individuals. Good community leadership expressed well also tends to improve decision-making and quality of governance in community-led projects.

• Make local change social change

Power concedes nothing without a demand, as Frederick Douglass said in 1857 in his "West India Emancipation" speech. And community leaders are fundamental to channelling local community demand to have their voices heard on issues that affect their wellbeing. While the powerful effects of global movements such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion and #MeToo have reminded us of how the gathering of many voices can influence many powerholders towards a more just society, local communities and neighbourhoods hold power too. Examples of how an activated community has been able to safeguard the things they hold dear or successfully demanded things that are most needed are too many to recount, as a recent timeline of community development documented.[2] And there are as many, if not a far larger number of, examples where those campaigns have failed – the building torn down, the service closed, the playing field lost. Then there are the campaigns that have been driven by one faction of a community to the horror of another; where the tears, emotions and punches have rolled through each and every battle – whether won, lost or drawn. Local or global, on whichever side of the line we sit, the importance of a community expressing its needs and desires through peaceful protest and demonstration is at the core of a free society.

[2] https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/timeline/

The challenges community leaders face

Community leaders, whether they describe themselves as such or not, can face some considerable challenges: personal, communal and structural. It therefore becomes necessary not simply to make the case for why we need community leaders, but why actively supporting their development and wellbeing is so important.

Burnout

Community leaders are not paid; they take on responsibilities and the burden of expectations in an environment where they care deeply about their mission, which has a direct impact on their own lives, and the lives of people around them. Burnout – a shorthand for a kind of physical and emotional exhaustion which causes illness – is common and there are significant similarities between burnout and depression.

Community leaders have an acute understanding of the many different tasks and significant effort required to get a job done. Their intrinsic motivation to effect change means they will be as readily found printing, cleaning, mopping and stacking as they will be writing a bid for funding or trying to engage their local authority. Alongside a lack of volunteers – or lack of volunteer time – community leaders cannot always share the burden of work. Community leaders (as can be true of leaders of institutions) can also tend to normalise high volumes of work and activity, finding it difficult to say no, scooping up actions and responsibility too readily and deprioritising self-care.

One of the most enduring quotes from the Community Leadership Academy workshops has been the truth that "you can't drink from an empty cup". The high levels of adrenalin felt in community leaders at the earliest stages of the pandemic sustained high levels of activity in the first months, giving way to exhaustion and burnout over the following months – and over more than a year. There is no doubt that the provision of leadership development support through the Community Leadership Academy has offered a unique safe space for supporting self-care and wellbeing – and a confidential, cathartic space to talk through seemingly intractable challenges and frustrations.

While self-care is critical, it does not solely solve the problem of burnout. There are innumerable examples where older community leaders feel the burden of responsibility to continue to work in the service of the wider community, and are unable to identify people who would pick up the work should they stop doing it. Effecting a kind of leadership which creates space for others to lead and to distribute ownership is therefore a required critical characteristic of a community leader.

Imposter syndrome

Imposter syndrome can exacerbate or increase the likelihood of burnout, with leaders feeling they are not good enough to fulfil the roles they inhabit. Despite visible success, community leaders can often feel inadequate, be wracked by self-doubt, and feel that someone else would probably do a better job. As mentioned previously, this may be why the mantle of 'leader' sits so uncomfortably on their shoulders:

> "I NEED TO NOT TO LET THINGS GET TOO STRESSFUL AND SHARE PROBLEMS AND TASKS WITH MY TEAM. TRY NOT TO THINK I'M NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR MY ROLE."
>
> Community Leadership Academy participant

This is often felt most acutely in spaces and places which have traditionally excluded community members.

Exclusion

Community leaders can often feel excluded, particularly when seeking to engage with people in authority. This can be particularly true for under-represented groups in settings where the procedures, language and culture – or process – of an institution are unfamiliar or entirely inaccessible.

> "IT ALL STARTED WHEN I WENT TO A COUNCIL MEETING BECAUSE I HAD ISSUES I WANTED TO RAISE. WHEN I GOT THERE, I SAW THAT IT WAS MAINLY A LOT OF MEN. I SAID THE TIMING (8PM) ISN'T REALLY SUITABLE FOR MOTHERS BECAUSE IT'S QUITE LATE IN THE EVENING SO WE'RE EITHER TRYING TO GET KIDS TO BED OR FEED THEM. I POINTED OUT THAT THEY WERE NOT REALLY CATERING FOR EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY."
>
> Communities Driving Change[3] volunteer

In October 2020, the National Lottery Community Fund in Northern Ireland announced £500,000 of investment in the development and support of community leaders (NLCF, 2020). Research informing this initiative found that young people in particular were highly under-represented in the governance of community-based organisations, with the average age of committee members being 53. Nearly half of those had served for longer than six years, an indicator that there may not be a ready pipeline of people to take over in years to come.

[3] www.youngfoundation.org/projects/communities-driving-change/

If we know that involvement in community leadership development is highly effective in increasing social action in people who have historically not been active, the recruitment of new blood into leadership programmes becomes as important as supporting existing leaders. The Community Leadership Academy has sought to diversify participants through soliciting nominations as well as direct applications. The Aspen Young Leaders Fellowship programme specifically seeks to disrupt dominant leader applications through community stakeholders, rather than staff, driving recruitment and selection. These stakeholders work with community partners to nominate and encourage applicants from those least likely to apply. This includes targeting disability organisations, unions and arts-based charities, and hiring community stakeholders and leaders, not just professionals.

Conflict

Communities are where the most damaging and difficult conflict happens, where the impact of any conflict is most keenly felt and can endure for many years. Varying degrees of conflict are experienced by many community leaders in every community setting, and it surfaces through the Community Leadership Academy too. When talking about managing conflict one participant said:

> "I REALLY VALUED THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE WITH OTHERS ON THE SAME JOURNEY – IT'S A SHAME SO MANY OF US ARE HAVING TO DEAL WITH THIS PROBLEM."

Managing conflict and disagreement is a key part of a community leader's role: being able to bridge across factions within a community. Leaders of communities of place in particular must be able to stretch and gain trust across different groups (Skinner, 2020). Conflict management requires the courage to discuss difficult issues clearly and proactively, and to avoid minimising the problem being discussed (FTI Consulting, 2017). Conflict resolution can be intuited and learned 'on the job' but the need for support and investment for community leaders to expand their repertoire of skills, tactics and approaches to managing conflict should not be in question at this time. The Communities Driving Change programme works across different neighbourhoods in Tower Hamlets. Here, conflict resolution, as much as mobilising for social action, is a core feature of everyday work, as it will be in many other communities across the country.

While there is good evidence for a new energy and forms of community organising during the pandemic, other evidence seems to indicate that COVID-19 has caused an erosion of trust. Research undertaken in 2020 shows a substantial drop in trust over the past eight years, with the percentage of people reporting positive feelings about their community lowest during the pandemic period (ISER, 2020). Divisions between young and old, leavers and remainers, rich and poor, and across different parts of the UK have begun to resurface. However, places that have invested in building trust and cohesion in their communities have remained more cohesive during this time (Abrams, et al., 2021).

Investment in supporting and developing the strength of community leaders to bridge divides and build understanding through listening and deliberation is essential if we are to navigate and emerge from a period of crisis into a period of recovery and renewal.

Loss of funding

One of the biggest challenges facing the voluntary sector and community groups is the predicted loss of £6.4 billion in fundraising and other income for the UK's 170,000 charities during the period until December 2020 (Pro Bono Economics, 2020). Not only has this placed pressure on very small charities with limited or no reserves in the short term but threatens the sustainability of even larger organisations in the longer term. Where donations were shown to increase, it was for the NHS charities (Neighbourly, 2020).

Big problems, little people

Community leaders are often trying to counter the systemic impacts and effects of injustice, inequality poverty and poor service provision in their communities. Even when a community is engaged in regenerative activities (re-opening communal buildings and civic spaces or creating events and festivals which bring different groups together) rather than remedial activities (such as distributing food, essentials, etc) there are very real and well-evidenced structural and systemic challenges which inhibit making high-impact, sustained change, particularly in deprived areas of the country. This is noticed and often understood, and drives feelings of disempowerment and distrust in authorities, governments and others. Communities can often perceive the root causes and systemic flaws in the wider structures surrounding the places they live and are well able to articulate not only problems but also potential solutions (Bulutoglu and Whyte, 2021). But finding the levers and resources to shift those systems often feels an impossible task.

What do we know about the impact of interventions to support community leadership?

The case has been made in this report, and more fulsomely in other literature, that stronger communities improve our lives in very real and measurable ways. We demonstrate that a key characteristic of a strong and powerful community is one where a larger number of people have the confidence and capabilities to take action on the issues they care about. From this larger group there emerges a smaller one, which takes on a another role expressed in many ways. Members of this group are skillful in convening, collaborating and leading change that their communities care about – they are community leaders. So now we must ask how can we best support and grow community leadership to help these leaders be effective in their mission.

A review of the literature signals that community leadership development programmes provide participants with personal growth and efficacy, community commitment, a shared future and purpose, community knowledge and enhanced civic engagement. Participants on such programmes have an improved understanding of their local community and the networking in place to work with other leaders in their communities (Cleveland and Cleveland, 2018) . Bono, Shen, and Snyder (2010) conducted a longitudinal field study which suggested that individuals who have participated in a formal community leadership programme tend to become more involved in their communities, with the most impact seen in those who were not previously engaged in any community activity. This highlights the impact case for bringing potential and emerging community leaders into leadership programmes, rather than simply focusing efforts on existing leaders.

Most community leadership development programmes provide for both emerging and current leaders (Goodman et al., 2018) and emphasise the need to empower citizens to contribute their input and opinions, while negating the traditional top-down, problem-solving approach (Lamm et al., 2017; Goodman, L et al., 2018; Wituk et al., 2005). In this way, citizens contribute to the solutions in their communities while learning the leadership competencies necessary for sustainable progress they might not otherwise encounter.

Participants in community leadership programmes build relationships with other participants and affiliated professionals, enabling them to participate in networks beyond their family and friends. Thus, the empowerment of community residents contributes to community success. (Lamm et al., 2017; Goodman, L et al., 2018; Pigg, 2002).

Leaders benefit from participating in programmes that educate beyond the individual skills of a leader, focusing on experiences that provide a more comprehensive understanding of citizenship and create a culture for civic engagement. Community leadership programmes tend to improve participants' knowledge of community issues and connect them with other like-minded community leaders. Beyond community engagement, there are also positive benefits for economic development and local businesses (Galloway, 1997; Lamm et al., 2017; Goodman et al., 2018).

Through continuing education, leaders can enhance their leadership abilities, share perspectives on relevant issues, and work toward solutions in the public interest. Exposing leaders and emerging leaders to a diversity of viewpoints and value systems through an action learning approach is one key component of building leadership capacity (Cleveland, 2020).

HOW CAN WE BEST SUPPORT COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP?

In recognition of the need to support community leaders, particularly in neighbourhoods experiencing extreme forms of disadvantage and inequality, Local Trust took on an innovative and progressive role in setting up the Community Leadership Academy. The initiative seeks to identify and support established and emerging leaders in Big Local areas to leave a legacy of more confident and better networked community leaders, and to develop our collective understanding of community leadership, its importance in thriving communities and how it can be better supported in future.

The Community Leadership Academy is only in its second year of full delivery and data evidencing its positive impact at a systemic level is, as we might expect, limited. However, there is good evidence that the initiative is improving confidence and self-awareness in participants. Participants feel both supported and empowered through the programme; delivery of Big Local is enhanced in the areas they come from, and it is evident that the values of shared (or distributed) leadership built into the work of the Community Leadership Academy is being adopted by some. Participants feel more confident, more able to advocate for change in their areas.

There is clear evidence that the Community Leadership Academy is supporting community leaders with strategies to avoid potential burnout:

"I THINK MORE ABOUT HOW I NAVIGATE MY OWN WELLBEING WHILST LEARNING HOW TO LEAD EFFECTIVELY."

The Community Leadership Academy is building self-awareness in ways that are shifting team/partnership dynamics:

"I UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT MYSELF AS A COMMUNITY LEADER, MY WAY OF BEING, WHO I AM AND WHY I AM THAT WAY. A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHY I NATURALLY TEND TO BE THE WAY I AM."

And beginning to effect change in distributing leadership across teams:

> "HOW BEING IN A LEADERSHIP ROLE YOU CAN LET GO OF SOME OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND TRUST OTHERS TO MANAGE THEM SUCCESSFULLY (IN A TEAM, VOLUNTEERS AND THE COMMUNITY). TAKE TIME TO ENABLE OTHERS TO TAKE ON RESPONSIBILITY."

If we accept the logic that strong, empowered communities are critical to our long-term recovery and renewal in a post-lockdown, post-Brexit United Kingdom, and that the presence of good, strong community leadership is a key foundation for a strong community, it follows that investment in our community leaders is both legitimate and necessary.

With this in mind, we could conceptualise a coherent agenda for supporting community leaders to incorporate up to six core features:

1. An expanded, annually rolling National Community Leadership Programme, providing intensive, structured support for building distributed leadership teams in communities across the UK

Building on the success and learnings of the Community Leadership Academy, a national intervention would be accessible online alongside local face-to-face delivery, comprising peer coaching, taught content, masterclasses, and possibly even light-touch accreditation.

2. An open, sharing network dedicated to all alumni of the Community Leadership Academy and any affiliate members

The network could have a dedicated focus for the sharing and learning of community leaders across the country. A large component would be self-organising, with semi-structured support for creating small leadership learning networks for leaders in different communities experiencing similar challenges or with similar aspirations, and to share learning, tips, pain and innovations.

3. Free, open access to regularly updated resources, tools, techniques, and approaches to building community leadership capacity

Leadership development is an ongoing practice for the best leaders. And, as previously discussed, there are few relevant, context-specific resources for community actors to build their leadership skills compared to formalised sectors of our economy and society. Open access to high-quality, useful resources and tools available in a 'self-service' environment is a low-cost approach to building the confidence and capacity of community leaders – both novice and experienced.

4. Support for community leaders to conceive, design (and possibly bid for resources) to test new ideas that are made possible through (or build substantively on) community leadership capacity

It is inevitable that enhanced, shared leadership practice in communities will prompt new ideas and thinking about how the community organises and acts. This new thinking may represent a radical leap from existing practice (LaLoux, 2014) and, like all new ideas, may benefit from support and encouragement to experiment. A structured, supported offer would be necessary.

Community leadership teams could be encouraged to innovate, not just for their own communities but on behalf of the whole community leadership community, who might help validate and select ideas felt most relevant to the broader movement for development community leadership practice. These could include things like:

- a new model of community partnership with local authorities that 'spins in' community leaders to work on specific projects and portfolios of work, taking inspiration from Public Practice,[4] where built environment professionals undertake placement work in local authorities
- a new 'shadowing' model for building trust, understanding and stronger relationships between community leaders and local councillors
- the trialling of new models that have been successful in other countries, such as the Buffalo Equity Roundtable, bringing more international learning into the sharing network
- new methods and approaches for using distributive leadership practice to build a more diverse (in all its forms) movement of community leaders
- partnership structures and patterns of organising which transcend traditional hierarchical approaches to governance and accountability.

5. Recognition of the skills required

The exercise of distributed leadership in a community is a valuable skill. It demonstrates competencies we need in many other facets of our working lives, whatever the sector. While we should be very wary of the 'professionalisation' of community leaders or somehow stratifying different leaders, there may be scope to introduce a form of qualification or accreditation for those wishing to (or feeling the need to) legitimise the skills they learn and therefore be more valued by institutions they would like to work with or in.

6. Build the next generation of community leaders

There is also a strong rationale for directing interventions specifically towards younger people. Pre-lockdown data (NCVO, 2020) show that the group most likely to volunteer in their local community on a regular basis are those aged between 64 and 75. People aged between 24 and 35 are least likely to volunteer. The demographics of the Big Local programme broadly mirror that trend, with over 69 per cent of partnership members over the age of 45. Since the start of the pandemic, the UK has seen a large increase in unemployment among young people aged 16–24 (Powell, Francis-Devine, and Clark, 2021). But today's Generation Z have no shortage of major issues that they feel passionate about. A Deloitte survey into the attitudes of 27,000 younger people in 2020 (Deloitte, 2020) underscored what we see in the young people who surround us every day. They are no less motivated by health, equity and climate change than they were before the pandemic. Coronavirus has only increased their sympathies for others, with around 75 per cent saying they are planning to take action in their communities once the pandemic abates. That's an astounding percentage. It's also an astonishing amount of pent-up desire for social change.

[4] www.publicpractice.org.uk

There is a growing number of opportunities for supporting young people to volunteer, innovate in their communities and participate in social action, not least new projects announced by the National Citizen Service CIC (Weakley, 2021). But these often lack a focus on the explicit development of leadership skills. It is clear from the evidence that individuals who have participated in formal community leadership programmes tend to become more involved in their communities as a result, with the biggest impact occurring among recruited participants who have previously been less or not at all engaged (Bono et al., 2010).

Community leadership programmes can therefore become a route to building the confidence and capacity of those who are not already civically active. There is scope to consider a separate ambitious national community leadership programme for young people under the age of 30, targeted specifically in areas of high levels of economic inequality, to complement the work of the Community Leadership Academy. The programme would work specifically in place on issues of direct concern to the next generation of community leaders.

This is an area of exploration which may benefit from more focused attention by funders and policymakers alike. Issues include ensuring that interventions to support community leadership are effective in addressing the 'cliff edge' challenge of older leaders retiring from their roles and encouraging and supporting the young people to become engaged in social action, of which there is typically already much appetite to do so.

A FINAL WORD...

"I'M WORRIED WHEN WE GET OUT OF LOCKDOWN, HOW WE WILL BE? OTHER DECISION-MAKERS AREN'T INTERESTED IN GETTING TOGETHER TO LOOK BEYOND LOCKDOWN. WE NEED TO BE IN ADVANCE OF THIS. WE NEED HELP LEADING AND THINKING BEYOND LOCKDOWN."

Community Leadership Academy participant

This short report sets out the broad case for investing in community leaders across the UK. It advocates supporting distributive leadership capacity-building and highlights numerous national initiatives that might support this, all of which could work at a local level too.

To fully cement the case for support, it is worth reflecting on the current context, as we emerge, slowly, out of the pandemic and into a period of recovery and renewal. When we talk about recovery at a human rather than a system level, it usually means having time to recover, a period of being able, and an expectation that you will, do less. But that time – and that care – is in short supply for community leaders. They've finished one marathon, only to find themselves at the start of another. And the route is much more complicated, of indeterminate length and they're tired before it starts.

If we are in agreement that there are multiple ways in which communities and their leadership can help navigate complex social, health, economic and environmental challenges, and that to enable this we need strong communities capable of responding to further challenges yet to come, then investment now in human capital and community leadership, as much as investment in bricks and mortar, must be a prerequisite for any right-thinking powerholder.

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About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities to make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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