

**Local Trust**  
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people



# Community Leadership Academy practice review

A practical reflection on the  
delivery of the Community  
Leadership Academy (2019-23)



# Local Trust

## About this practice review

This practice review was written by Koreo. It accompanies two other reports which have been published at the same time - Spheres of community influence: Understanding the long-term impact of the Community Leadership Academy and Living, Leading, Learning: A summary report from a series of community leadership roundtables.

This paper reflects on the last five years of design and delivery for the Community Leadership Academy (CLA). This includes an overview of the project and our approach to designing and delivering it, an outline of the programme journey, and an exploration of how it has played out in practice.

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Community Leadership Academy participants at a learning session in Manchester, September 2023  
(Photo: Local Trust/Tessa Harri Carroll Photography)



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# Introduction

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In this paper, we reflect on the last five years of design and delivery for the Community Leadership Academy (CLA).

Having spent the last five years working with community leaders from across the Big Local network, we are delighted to have the opportunity to reflect on the practice over that time, share the learning, and bring together the programme resources in such a way that they can be distributed around the sector.

We have always been motivated by the opportunity to build a wider community of practice around community leadership in the UK, and contribute to a broader discussion and narrative, rather than limit this to the CLA or Big Local context. Given the context of the Big Local programme ending in 2026, we are motivated for the practice around the CLA to be part of that story, and to recognise the part it has and could play in the broader landscape of community building and development.

Over the following pages you will find an overview of the project and our approach to designing and delivering it, an outline of the programme journey and how that has played out in practice. We then share some reflections from the project team on what we have learnt about what kind of space the CLA has been, the key learning shifts we have seen in this cohort of learners, and what we have learned about delivering coaching in this context. And finally, we share four tools we have found powerful in working with community leaders, before finishing with some reflections.

**Ned Younger at Koreo**

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# Programme overview

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## Project overview

**The Community Leadership Academy (CLA)** was launched in 2020 to provide support and skills development for the volunteers making Big Local happen. Created by Local Trust in partnership with Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul, the programme supports people effecting change in their communities, helping them to develop and share knowledge to benefit the whole community.

Since 2020, the programme has worked with over 150 community leaders from across Big Local and beyond, supporting them through a programme of leadership development and learning at a time of huge change and challenge. As the independent evaluation of the programme found in their review of the project, the CLA has made a difference not only to individuals, but also to Big Local partnerships and their wider communities.

As part of the project, Local Trust commissioned IVAR and Just Ideas to undertake an independent evaluation of the project. That evaluation was published in August 2023 in a report called Building Community Leadership, which is available on [the Local Trust website](#).

## The delivery partnership

**Local Trust** was established in 2012 to deliver Big Local, a unique programme that puts residents across the country in control of decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods.

**Koreo** is a learning consultancy working across the public and non-profit sectors in the UK society. We believe that a just and regenerative world is possible; that the talent to build it is everywhere; that the work of building it is for everyone; and that doing so will require a radical approach to learning.

**The Young Foundation** works to develop better connected and more sustainable communities across the UK. Bringing together their own – and other people’s – work, they are building a shared body of evidence, tools and insight about how communities are taking action on the issues that affect them.

**Northern Soul** is a social enterprise led by Ruth Ibegbuna, working to amplify and champion the people of the North. They nurture those who are passionate about social change, work in partnership with people from all over the UK and are fuelled by all sections of society working together to shift power and redress imbalances that have held back the North.

## Local Trust’s objectives

At the beginning of the programme, Local Trust set the following objectives:

1. To identify and support current and emerging leaders in Big Local to enhance the delivery of the programme in their areas.
2. To consider whether this support could be extended beyond Big Local communities in future.
3. To leave a legacy of more confident and better networked community leaders after Big Local has finished.
4. To further understanding and knowledge of community leadership and the application of distributed leadership in a real-world context. In particular, the ability to better define and communicate what community leadership is to a wider range of stakeholders and explore how it can be supported in future



## Programme prompts

Building on those objectives, as a delivery partnership we developed some question prompts to help us monitor our ability to understand, develop, and distribute community leadership capacity.

### Understanding

1. Does the CLA help develop a nuanced understanding of what leadership capacity is in Big Local areas?
2. Does the CLA help develop a nuanced understanding of what resources Big Local leaders need (individually and collectively) in order to confidently develop and deliver plans for their community?
3. Does the CLA help develop a nuanced understanding of how best to develop leadership capacity in Big Local areas?

### Developing

1. Do people have the (personal) resources necessary to confidently develop and deliver plans for their community?
2. Do people recognise themselves as playing a leadership role in their area/partnership?
3. Do people feel a commitment to developing their own leadership resources, and see why that would benefit their area/partnership?

### Distributing

1. Do people feel a commitment to build a legacy of community leadership in their area?
2. Does it build a belief that developing leadership in others is an effective way of creating change in their community?
3. Does it build an ability to find, engage and develop people who can play a (broadly defined) leadership role in their area?

4. Do people think of themselves as part of a regional/national network of community-led change?

## Original design principles

At the outset of the programme, we articulated the following principles to inform the design and delivery of the programme:

1. **Participant-led:** That the project would be led by the people taking part in both content and method.
2. That it would be **accessible** to the full range of people who joined it, regardless of their starting point.
3. That it would be **contextual** to real work, as opposed to theoretical.
4. That it would be **shareable** beyond the programme, with the idea that the learning could be distributed.
5. That it would be **built for sustainability** beyond Big Local areas.
6. And that it would be **complementary** to other Big Local activity, recognising this was part of a number of offers.

## Additions

In addition to the original principles above, following the first iteration of the project we agreed three new principles:

1. **Adaptability:** By which we recognised how much we'd been required to adapt to the changing context.
2. Working **in collaboration with the sector** by which we reaffirmed a commitment to doing this work openly and with the wider sector.
3. And finally, by creating intentional space for people to recognise **distance travelled** as a way of reinforcing learning.

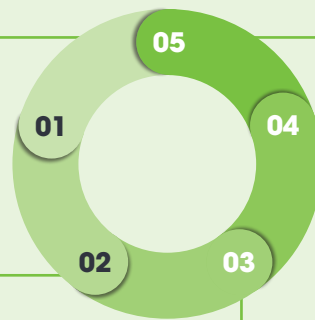
## Programme journey

### Onboarding and welcome

For each cohort on the programme we went through an application and nomination process, following by selection and then an onboarding call with a programme coach.

### Coaching

Each participant in the programme was matched with a coach for a series of confidential 1-2-1 sessions.



### Leading self

The first section of the programme looked at personal development, leadership styles, and the questions, challenges, or opportunities that were important to participants.

### Leading communities

And the final part of the programme focused on applying learning into the distribution of leadership across the community.

### Leading others

The second part of the programme helped people think about how they were leading in the context of their teams and partnerships.

### Leading Self

**Purpose & Objectives:** This section of the programme was intended to support people to build their self-awareness and reflective practice, to identify their own development areas, to invest in their own wellbeing and practice, to recognise different forms of leadership and leadership activity, and to connect with each other.

### Example Sessions:

Wellbeing & Resilience, You as a Leader (Including Imposter Syndrome), Leadership Styles & Models, An Inquiry Approach to Leadership, Personal Storytelling.

### Leading Others

**Purpose & Objectives:** This section of the programme was intended to support people to apply their learning about themselves into their partnership work, to recognise and work to improve group dynamics, and to be able to recognise and develop leadership capacity in others.

### Example Sessions:

Leading Effective Teams, Managing Conflict, Building Feedback Cultures, Developing Facilitation Skills, Exploring Power & Expertise in Leadership.

### Leading Communities

**Purpose & Objectives:** This section of the programme was intended to support people to build and distribute leadership capacity across their communities including with people and institutions outside of their projects and partnerships, as well as to connect their work to a wider story of community-led change.

### Example Sessions:

CLA Vision for Community Leadership, Distributing Leadership in Communities, Understanding & Involving Communities, Mobilisation,

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# Reflecting on the CLA programme

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## Design principles reflections

As a whole, the design principles outlined earlier in this report have served us well and have been consistent through the project until this point. Some specific reflections

- **Adaptability** was to some extent forced on us by the COVID-19 pandemic, and we have been continually balancing the relationship between in-person connection and virtual work.
- Being **participant-led**, in the group work and particularly in the coaching, has enabled us to work closely with people during a period of significant stress and change, and over what is a long programme experience.
- Equally, having something which is **contextual** as opposed to abstract has enabled us to continually prove the value of people prioritising the programme in busy lives, particularly when that time has been spent solving or exploring real, current problems they are experiencing in their work.

**Distance travelled** has been a powerful framing tool for learning since it was first articulated and has led to clearly recognisable trends in how people move through the programme, explored in some detail later in this practice review.

- It is fair to say that while the programme is repeatable, in the sense that the practice is developed, it is not easy to see how it would become **sustainable** in its current form without Local Trust's involvement (both as funder and provider of logistical support). Connected to that, while we have involved a range of external partners and supporters, the landscape of community leadership development remains atomised and competitive and we found connection to it challenging.

We have worked hard to create a programme that is **accessible** to everyone, but recognise this is an ongoing journey and we have had significant challenge and learning in this area as well as significant success.

## Programme journey

Although the model outlined has served us well throughout the programme to date, in the most recent iteration we have played around with the three 'leading' modules, and have started with 'leading communities'. We did this in response to participants finding it easier to do the personal reflection and development in the context of what they are trying to achieve in their communities. When we started with 'leading self', there was a risk that people found it uncomfortable, or even self-indulgent.



**Leading self:** Our experience of this section of the programme was that it was very unusual for the majority of the people participating in the programme to have much time for their own reflection and learning. As a result, for some people this space was a revelation and deeply welcome. For others it felt indulgent or hard to get hold of, and there was a desire to apply the content into practical actions quickly. However, combined with the coaching, it is fair to say that this section of the programme has grounded participants in reflective practice and allowed for the development of strong relationships with other participants.

**Leading others:** Our experience of this section of the programme was that despite the wide range of contexts participants were working in, the challenges they were facing in terms of team dynamics were consistent and comparable. Therefore, while we took a range of content and methods into the sessions, this has been the part of the programme where the most consistently valuable spaces were the ones where we gave them structures for sensemaking, peer conversation, and problem-solving. This was also the section of the programme where the strongest relationships were formed and where people drew on each other's experiences for inspiration and support.

**Leading communities:** Because of the range of other offers available to people involved in Big Local, this was the section of the programme that was hardest to pitch in a way that was complementary to other learning offers. Ultimately, having initially explored offering more practical training sessions around mobilising communities, we have framed this session around the opportunity to build leadership capacity in communities through action. In doing so, we have also seen the value of bringing this section to the beginning of the programme in order to make the rest of the content as contextual as possible, and framing the whole experience through the lens of community.

## Our reflections on delivering coaching through the CLA

Several sessions of 1-2-1 coaching was one of the most distinctive aspects of the CLA, as a methodology usually reserved for senior managers in organisations. As such, learning how to deliver coaching effectively in this context has been a valuable part of the CLA:

**A powerful tool:** Our experience over the last 3 years has confirmed a belief in the power of the attention, support and challenge provided by a coaching space, and has shown that it can provide significant value to people leading in communities. We saw people with very different starting points make the most of the opportunity, leaning into a different kind of developmental conversation and using it to focus on their own goals and growth. In doing that we saw participants make huge, rapid, tangible progress in terms of developing a reflective practice which could be applied into the work they were doing, and which made them more intentional and considered as leaders.

**High threshold to entry:** Having said that, preparing the ground for people to make the most of the space was an ongoing question for us, and we learnt a lot about introducing coaching to people who by and large didn't have any previous experience of it. Where that onboarding went well and people connected well with their coach we saw them quickly flourish into the space and make the most of it. Where it didn't, we saw people quickly drop off or de-prioritise coaching. As a result, over the course of the programme we increasingly understood how much energy needed to go into setting up the coaching relationship in particular.

**Slow starts** As a result of that high threshold to entry, it's fair to say that it was often a slow start and took multiple sessions for people to get into the swing of things. Sometimes that was because of a lack of clarity about how to use the sessions, but often it was because the space was so unusual for them (and possibly overdue) that it took a couple of sessions to get past the 'download' stage and be in a position to articulate the goals they wanted to work towards. That download stage included the need to process significant amounts of stress and trauma, particularly in the context of public health and economic crisis, and that impacted the nature and intensity of initial sessions for both participant and coach.

**Adjustments** It's also worth noting that many of the coaches we worked with took some time to find their feet. Recognising that many of the coaches we worked with had applied coaching mostly into organisational settings, we reckoned with the challenges of offering coaching in a non-professional space with fewer of the accountability mechanisms that coaches were used to being able to rely on.

**Coaching and mentoring:** All sides found some rub at the boundaries of coaching as a practice, which mostly presented as people wanting direction from their coaches. We ultimately decided that coaching's starting point — that people had the best answers to their own questions, and by extension its centering of the participant's learning journey, meant that it was the right approach even if it meant a slower or more winding road.

**Virtual default:** In a world that had made virtual the default, there was surprise from participants in particular that they could experience coaching powerfully at a distance through Zoom or over the phone, something that also enabled us to match coaches with participants on the basis of something more nuanced than geography. At the same time, we consistently found the power of coaching sessions which took

the form of a 'walk and talk' through a community so that the participant could tell the story of their work more physically, and facilitated a face to face meeting through which the relationship could deepen.

**Peer approaches** Finally, while coaching was a key method and worked well, we also saw the power of peer-based approaches which built on the space provided by coaching, complementing the 1-2-1 space with group work. In particular we deployed a lot of group coaching approaches through the programme and saw people embrace different ways of supporting each other and addressing issues.

## The kind of space we created through the CLA

Looking at the CLA as a whole over its first three years, it has become clear the space we have been creating with people has had a consistent, distinctive flavour:

These were **peer learning spaces**, through which people were able to learn in a space that valued the various forms of knowledge and wisdom people brought. That often meant introducing conversational structures (action learning, peer coaching, conversation cafe, our colleague Isabel's witnessing circles) that gave people an equalising space to reflect, listen, collaborate and contribute.

Because of that emphasis on peer learning, these were **relational spaces** where the quality of the relationship between people was a priority and enabled everything that followed, where time was taken to invest in how people connected and related to each other as opposed to seeing that as a by-product of the experience. This started in the first session, where people were asked to introduce themselves through an object that represented their community, and continued to the final celebration event.

As a result, they were also **baggy spaces**, with a loose approach which adjusted to the needs of the group in terms of timing, content and activity, as opposed to sticking to a rigid idea of what the space was for. We were as happy finishing early as we were extending the session if we needed to, as well as taking detours if we needed to or creating additional space to cover particular topics that emerged from conversations. We saw spin-off conversations as an indicator of success.

At the same time, it was a **boundaried space**. The most obvious of those boundaries was that the CLA was a time-limited experience, and encouraged a sense of progression and achievement which people could look back on to see what they'd done. And although the programme was a long one, it made it easier for people to commit knowing that their involvement was time-bound, something that stood in stark contrast to many of their experiences through their community work.

They were **reflective spaces**, through which significant space was given for people to make sense of their experience and what they wanted to do with the reflections, hypotheses and conclusions they drew from them. By centring this activity through coaching and sessions, the content from the programme was also contextualised around the tangible challenges and opportunities people were experiencing in their work and activism. The value of this reflection and the reflective muscle that was built over the course of the programme was clear from the session-to-session work with people, and what we heard about how their practice had progressed, as well as through the formal evaluation.

And finally, they were **spaces that enabled agency**. As well as starting with a belief that people were full of talent and ambition, this was a learning space and experience which sought to give people as much agency as possible in how they learnt, how they contributed, and ultimately what they took from the programme. People were invited to engage with the programme in the way that made sense to them, choosing from 'optional' and 'compulsory' sessions, working with their coach to decide the focus and rhythm of those sessions, and ultimately taking what they wanted to apply into their work.

## The common learning shifts we saw for participants

Building on the 'Distance Travelled' design principle, as we went through the programme we paid increasing attention to the learning shifts we saw happen for participants. We share them as indications of what was important about the programme:

**"I'm not alone in this work"**. One of the most profound and consistent shifts has been someone's realisation that they are not alone in the complex, messy work of community-led change. The Community Academy has been a collective experience. And the connections that people made are, as with many leadership programmes, one of the most important things about it. The connection spaces and the relationships that are created or deepened through them are a powerful moment of recognising that the however isolated you might feel in a particular project or in a particular organisation, you are not alone, and that there can exist the support structure which helps you to reflect on what you're doing, discover other perspectives and find the support you need.

**"I can call this leadership"**. The second shift was towards people understanding themselves as playing a leadership role, or at least towards a realisation that what they were doing could be understood as leadership. That shift was liberating as much as it was bolstering, giving a different lens on what people were doing and implicitly asked people to step into the responsibility and potential of the role. There are valuable conversations to be had about whether 'community leadership' is a helpful frame, but in this project and with this group of people it enabled people to realise that they were more expert than they thought, that they have expertise and experience to share beyond their specific context, and that they could add value for other people navigating similar things.

**"There's a name for that, it's a thing"**. Thirdly, and one that looked different to different people according to their starting position and experience, was when the content shared through the programme gave a name and legitimacy to something they recognised and had personal experience of. Examples of that included Ruth's early exploration of imposter syndrome in community leadership. This space led to powerful reflections on what people had achieved through their work already, the skill and resilience they'd demonstrated in doing it, and a developed confidence in talking about it. That value in 'naming' extended to metaphors that came into the programme through models, for example the balcony and the dancefloor metaphor from adaptive leadership that people found powerful as a way of reflecting on their work.

**"This isn't fixed"**. In a similar vein, we have consistently seen a shift through which people recognised the licence they have to approach something differently, and in doing so reflected on how limiting some assumptions have been in terms of making change. This happened at different times for different people, some through the reflective muscle built in the coaching space, some through particular tool like the iceberg model, and some through the combination. But what was common was an increased ability to take a breath when faced with a situation and to question their own assumptions and approach, a loosening of the constraints around what was possible. And also an understanding that many of the limits were self-imposed rather than externally set. So there was an increasing confidence in taking a more experimental or learning-centred approach to their work, for example in running meetings differently or approaching conflict with more curiosity than fear.

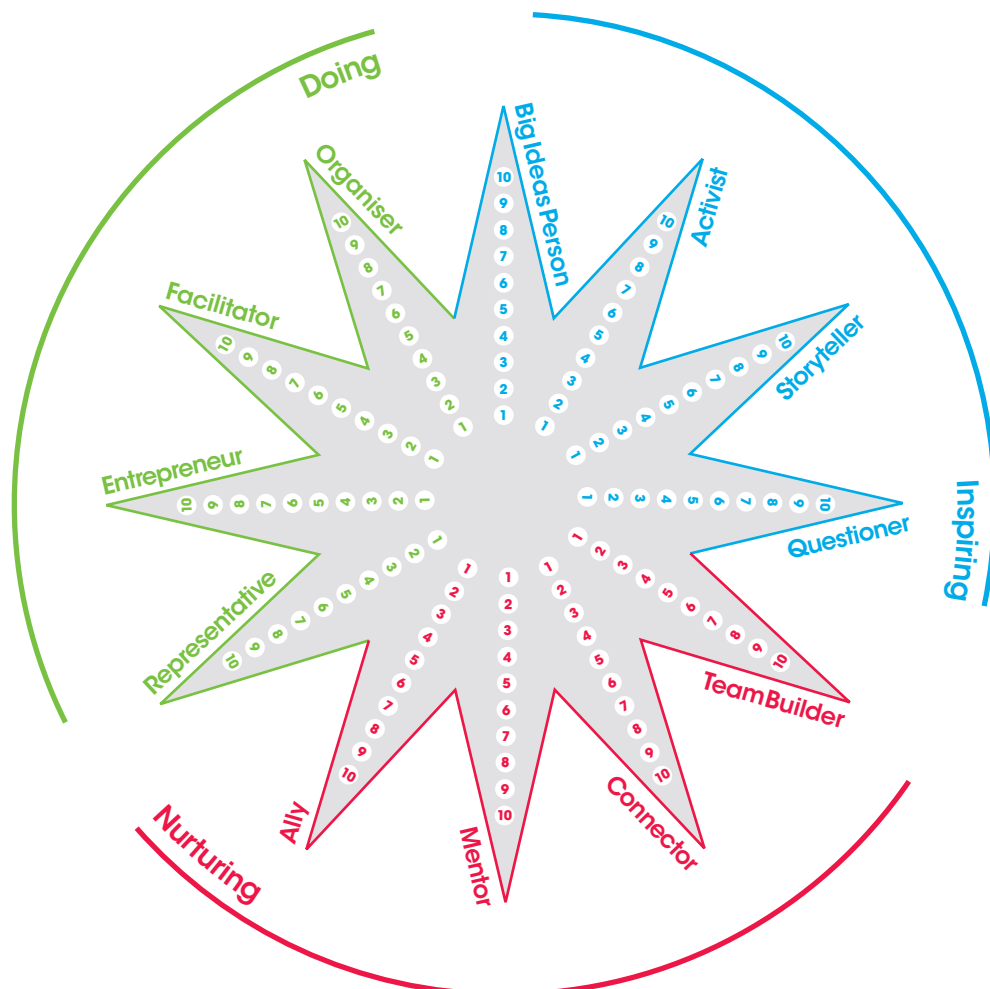
**"I did it"**. Probably the most obvious of the shifts, but no less important for that, was the sense of achievement of having done something which for many was a significant step outside what was usual or comfortable. So whether that sense of achievement was understood in terms of the relationships created or deepened, the learning that had been supported, or simply by reflecting on the programme had played out alongside or against the backdrop of events, it was a consistent source of pride and confirmation.

# Useful learning tools

## Four useful learning tools

We found that talking about the roles of community leadership as opposed to behaviours of community leadership made the concept feel more tangible and accessible for CLA participants. Building on Deepa Iyer's Social Change Ecosystem Map and incorporating learning and language from Big Local with the support of community development expert Steve Skinner, we developed a wheel of community leadership roles, which we have taken into each CLA group we have worked with.

We used the wheel as a self-assessment tool, as well as a prompt for reflection and discussion. We found it particularly useful to show people the multiple roles they were playing, as well as to highlight how they might be different in different contexts, or experienced in a range of ways by different people.





## The role of metaphor

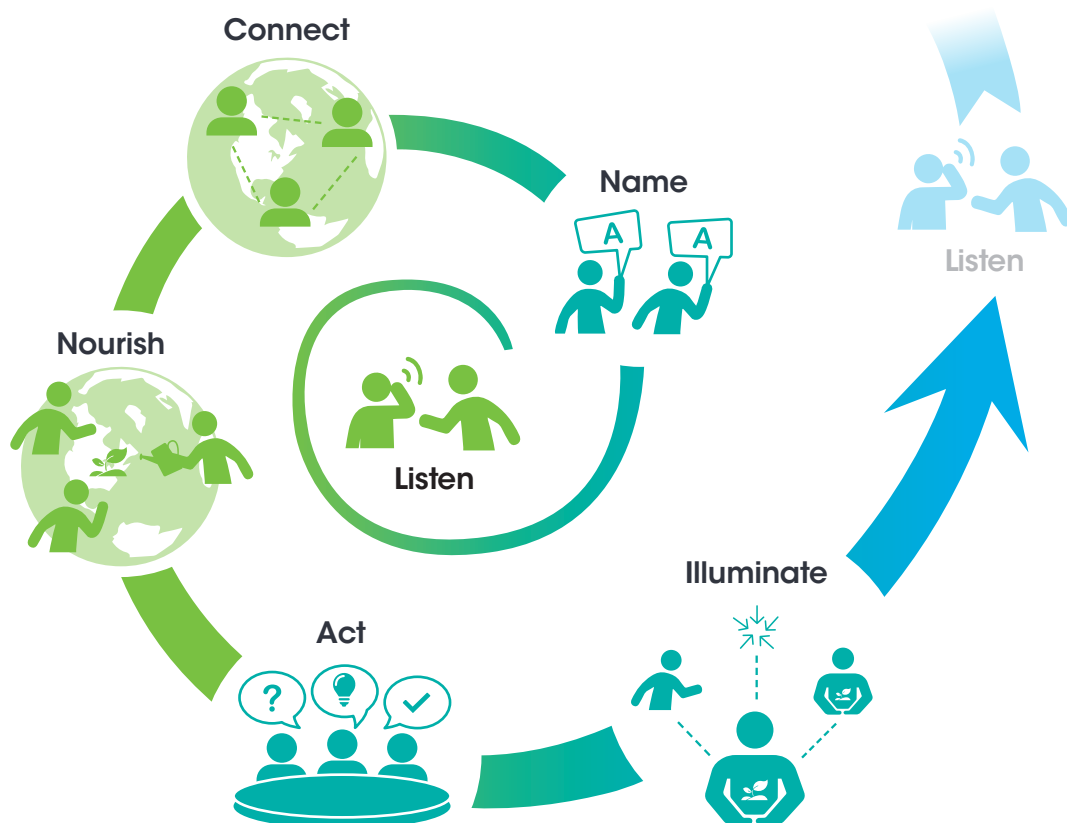
Throughout the CLA we've found working with metaphor to be a consistently helpful way of unlocking insight with and for the people taking part in the programme.

An example which found particular resonance with the groups was the idea of the balcony and the dancefloor (taken from Adaptive Leadership Heifetz and Linsky, 2009), whereby leaders reflected on balancing the time they spent in the cut and thrust of the action and the time they spent observing the patterns and trends of the work.

When we first introduced this image and metaphor we heard a lot that people weren't spending any time 'on the balcony', and one of the key learnings of the programme has certainly been how to support people to build the capacity to take a step back for reflection and analysis.

## Spiral for regenerating communities

As we have explored how best to ground this work in the messy reality of community work, we have played around with different approaches to building out from personal approaches to leadership to more distributed approaches to leading in communities. In the most recent iteration of the programme we have organised the beginning of the programme around AfterNow's Spiral, using it as a framing device for the activity of building collective capacity for changing. As both a process and loose framework for conversation, we have found it an accessible and generative way of thinking about leadership in communities, and has enabled participants with a wide range of objectives and activity to connect on the principles that underpin their work.



## Coaching and the GROW model

Coaching is a form of one-to-one support and has been at the heart of the CLA experience from the beginning of the programme. In a series of confidential conversations between the participant and a leadership coach, participants defined personal goals and agreed steps to achieve them – all at their own pace.

The important thing about coaching, and the reason we made it so central to the CLA, is that it is directed by the participant, meaning they choose what to focus on, and the coach works with you to think it

through in their own way. Participants have used the coaching to help them think through particular situations as they arose, or used multiple sessions to think about something bigger, like building confidence or dealing with a specific project.

Although our coaches drew on a range of methods and frameworks, when talking about coaching and encouraging coaching relationships with between participants, we used Sir John Whitmore's GROW model as a clear, intuitive way of thinking about a coaching conversation.





## About Local Trust

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

[localtrust.org.uk](http://localtrust.org.uk)

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## About Koreo

**Koreo is a learning consultancy dedicated to imagining and building a better world.** We believe that a just and regenerative world is possible; that the talent to build it is everywhere; that the work of building it is for everyone; and that doing so will require a radical approach to learning. Since 2004 we have combined those beliefs to become one of the UK's leading learning and development partners for organisations with a social purpose. During that time we have worked alongside leaders in communities, supported national institutions to shift culture towards learning and transformation, and convened collaborative networks across organisational, sectoral and geographic boundaries.

## Local Trust

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