COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

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Purpose: Findings from the formative evaluation of a national public library development initiative in England are discussed, with a focus on the practice and impact of collaborative leadership.

Design/methodology/approach: A Realistic Evaluation approach was used in the study, enabling a nuanced assessment of the initiative's *contexts, mechanisms and outcomes* in relation to its core objectives. These included testing innovative, partnership approaches to library service delivery, encouraging greater synergy between libraries and the arts and other public and commercial sectors. Evaluation findings are subsequently contextualised using a conceptual framework drawn from critical management studies on collaborative advantage.

Findings: Data show that the initiative was an effective catalyst for enhanced collaborative leadership in the public library sector, including the development of a cross-sector community of practice, with evidence of collective ownership and decision making. The relative collaborative advantages of the initiative are underpinned by evidence on the unique value of public library services to collaborating organisations and sectors.

Practical implications: Outcomes are of relevance to a range of public services and governing bodies with reference to shared strategic objectives with other sectors and services and collaborative leadership learning and practice.

Social implications: There are implications relating to the public value of library services and how this can potentially be enhanced via collaborative leadership approaches to service design and delivery. This is especially pertinent given current cross-government policy drivers towards integrated public services.

Originality/value: The research makes an original contribution to contemporary debates on cultural value in considering the cross-sector role and impact of collaborative leadership.

Contemporary cultural policy in the UK is dominated by the encouragement of enhanced collaborative working between cultural sectors and other public services, with the aim of integrating arts and culture more effectively in cross-government public policy agendas (DCMS, 2016). Recent evaluation research led by the author has considered the practice and impact of cross-sector collaborative leadership in the public library sector, using the national Libraries Development Initiative (LDI) in England as a contemporary case study. Drawing upon critical management theory, the following paper contextualises LDI evaluation outcomes using a conceptual framework of collaborative leadership, adapted from the work of Huxham (1993; 1996) and Huxham and Vangen (2005) on collaborative advantage. Key collaborative leadership qualities and practices include the effective identification and inclusion of relevant stakeholders; the collaborative pursuit of a shared goal; and equitable ownership, control and decision-making.

Arts Council England (ACE) acquired strategic responsibility for the development and support of libraries following the closure of the Museums Libraries and Archives council (MLA) in October 2011. The LDI programme was launched by ACE in February 2012 as a proactive initiative designed to encourage greater synergy between libraries and the arts, and to test innovative partnership approaches to library service delivery. The programme was structured using four key themes including new delivery models for arts and culture working together; coordinating partnerships to achieve national policy outcomes; books and reading; and commercial partnerships.

Thirteen individual, geographically dispersed projects (described in tables 1-4) were funded through the programme, under one of the four designated themes, within a total budget of £230,000. Each project had a dedicated Project Lead, who received on-going mentoring and support from a designated ACE Relationship Manager. Across the full programme, the LDI engaged 143 public library authorities, with the direct involvement of 668 library staff and 121 library volunteers, and a total of 217 non-library partners including arts, cultural and heritage organisations, commercial publishers, health, education and social services. The LDI was delivered between February 2012 and March 2013, with scheduled cross-programme workshops at ACE head offices in London enabling Project Leads and partners to network and share experiences throughout. The programme was evaluated on a formative basis from the beginning by a team of researchers led by the author at the Institute of Cultural Capital in Liverpool.

Each project evaluated its own learning outcomes within an overarching Realistic Evaluation framework and considered throughout the potential for sustained collaborative working with project partners, whilst simultaneously acknowledging and articulating the unique selling points (USPs) and 'value added' by the relevant public library service. The collaborative leadership challenge presented by the LDI in seeking to identify and promote the USP of public library services by working in partnership with different agencies, is of potential interest to a wider range of professional Library and Information Services (LIS), cultural organisations and other local government public services.

From an international perspective, the American Library Association's Center for the Future of Libraries has identified Collective Impact as a key trend for the profession, defined by Kania and Kramer (2011) as "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem". The paper is especially pertinent therefore for public sector services operating in reduced and subsequently competitive statutory environments, where collaboration is increasingly seen as being born of necessity rather than choice. In this context, the LDI evaluation provides a useful, contemporary empirical reference point for the study of professional boundary-spanning collaborative leadership in public sectors, with a particular focus on the value of strategic intermediation, agency and experimentation in collaborative learning.

Project title	Objectives	Lead public library authority or organisation
QRacking the Code	To enhance the reading experience of existing and new library users, and to furthermore engage them in a wider, city-wide cultural offer through the use of smart phone technology and QR codes.	Bournemouth Libraries
Arts Alive in Libraries	To enhance the local arts and cultural offer in rural and remote settings using the public library network both as physical locations for new activities and as an active community participation and engagement platform in the planning and commissioning process.	Cambridgeshire County Council
Cinema in Libraries	To identify whether there were benefits to co-locating cinemas and libraries, and whether cinema could be a driver for increased engagement with reading and the library service.	Fresh Horizons, Huddersfield
Cultural Commissioning for Vulnerable Adults	To test the potential for library services to take on a role in brokering cultural commissioning for vulnerable adults.	Newcastle City Council

Table 1 – Description of 'New delivery models for arts and culture working together' LDI projects

Project title	Objectives	Lead public library authority or organisation
Artwork	To enhance an existing Job Club initiative via complementary arts workshops designed to build confidence, self-esteem and presentation skills.	Derby City Libraries
Shared Books on Prescription Scheme	To create a national scheme, endorsed by the Department of Health and quality assured through standardisation and engagement with health professions, available across all local authorities in England.	South Gloucestershire Council
Targeted Arts Interventions in Libraries	To test the value of structured, library-based artist-led activities in meeting the key social outcome requirements of commissioners, exploring throughout the unique contribution of libraries to participatory arts.	London Borough of Richmond upon Thames

Table 2 – Description of 'Co-ordinating partnerships to achieve national policy outcomes' LDI projects

Project title	Objectives	Lead public library authority or organisation
Young People and Libraries – Developing Volunteering Opportunities	To create and support a year-round national programme of volunteering opportunities for 11-19 year olds within the context of the Universal Reading Offer.	Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians
BookFest and Community Networks	To create an inclusive and innovative annual literary festival by piloting a co-production model with other cultural service providers that would help to develop a sustainable and resilient library service.	Portsmouth Library Service
Literature on your Doorstep	To build relationships between libraries, writers and publishers in the region, creating outcomes including continuing professional development for librarians, an enhanced offer to library service users, and promotional opportunities for writers and publishers.	Writing West Midlands

Table 3 – Description of 'Books and reading' LDI projects

Project title	Objectives	Lead public library authority or organisation
Feasibility study and pilot for a shared home delivery service	To enhance and expand the library home delivery service by the provision of a premium fee paying service, through a partnership between Camden, Islington and Hackney library services.	London Borough of Camden
Digital Skills Sharing	Building on the experience and skills of publishers already producing digital content and using social media to engage readers, the project sought to provide a mechanism through which these skills could be shared with libraries.	Publishers Association
Digital Vision (Library 21)	To test the feasibility of a digital platform through which publishers could share their digital assets with libraries (and potentially others in the arts and cultural sector).	The Reading Agency

Table 4 – Description of 'Commercial partnerships' LDI projects

Principles of collaborative leadership

In establishing a conceptual framework in which to consider the initiative's collaborative leadership qualities, the widely-cited work of Huxham (1993; 1996) and Huxham and Vangen (2005) on collaborative advantage provides a useful reference point. The working definition of collaborative advantage – used to inform this body of work – is as follows:

> "Collaborative advantage will be achieved when something unusually creative is produced – perhaps an objective is met – that no organization could have produced on its own and when each organization, through the collaboration, is able to achieve its own objectives better than it could alone. In some cases, it should also be possible to achieve some higher-level… objectives for society as a whole rather than just for the participating organizations." (Huxham 1993, pp. 603).

It is 'higher level' societal objectives that arguably call for a more heterogeneous collaborative approach, beyond the more conventional hegemonic leadership, partnership or co-operative forms (Finn 1996). In its broadest terms, the effective collaboration, and the one most likely to achieve the ultimate collaborative advantage, will have the following qualities or constituent parts: a shared mission, strategy and set of values; shared power, decision-making and resources; agreement on legitimacy of its mission, participants and collaboration itself; appropriate approximation and communication; and 'evocative' leadership that promotes good relationships, mutual awareness and trust (Huxham 1993, pp. 605). From this we can extract three key collaborative qualities and practices of relevance to ACE and its libraries strategy:

1 Knowing your collaborative community

The strategic and operational language of collaboration is littered with ambiguous terms of reference concerning those actively involved in its creation, management and delivery and those potentially affected by its outcomes, especially when speaking of 'stakeholders'. Finn (1996) defines the stakeholder as 'any person, organization, community or government that is affected or can affect the deliberations of and potential solution to the issue that requires the collaborative process' (pp. 156). Embracing and including those with a 'stake' in the collaborative issue therefore occupies those leading and managing collaborations on a continuing basis (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). The process and practice of stakeholder identification, consultation and inclusion was a priority for ACE in developing the LDI. As relatively new strategic custodians of an established professional sector, it was important to

adopt as diplomatic an approach as possible in both forming a leadership position for ACE and effectively integrating public libraries into the council's existing cultural portfolio.

2 The collaborative pursuit of a 'common goal'

A 'shared mission' provides the foundation for any effective collaboration – Peck and Dickinson (2008) note the 'crucial' role of leaders in shaping the meaning attached to collaborative ventures, which requires careful attention to 'their narrative and their audience' as much as to their own contribution and performance (pp. 71). This gains added resonance in public service settings, as Huxham (1993) observes that a shared 'meta-mission' is most likely to be achieved in public and voluntary sectors, where organisational objectives are shaped by a wider public interest remit. In a consideration of the transformational impacts of collaborative working in community or social settings, Himmelman (1996) notes the significant 'facilitative' powers of collaborative leadership, and the [frequently underestimated] role of arts, culture and celebration in enabling a holistic experience to occur. The concepts of 'local public life' and place-making become relevant therefore, requiring parallel practices of organisational, community and political leadership (Peck and Dickinson, 2008), each of critical concern to the aims and objectives of the LDI programme.

3 Distributed ownership, control and decision-making

Working to the assumption that collaborative advantage is not achieved by hegemonic leadership practices, the effective collaboration will adopt an equitable model of ownership, control and decision-making. In their 'spirit of collaboration' example, Huxham and Vangen (2005) describe a process of embracing the 'right' kind of members; empowering members to enable participation; involving and supporting all members; and mobilizing members to make things happen.

Contextual ideas and theories of cross-sector collaborative leadership are presented with the caveat that research is continually contested in this area, due to its limited scope, focus and consistency (Peck and Dickinson 2008). Looking to the wider management research field however, collaborative leadership as a strategic approach has received growing recognition as the most responsive mode to complex information-rich 21st century environments (Shriberg et al 1997; Archer and Cameron 2008), via its capacity to increase executive capability; bring together complementary styles, skills and values; facilitate shared and agreed collaborator objectives, equal and equitable productivity and efficiency; and enhance legitimacy and action

(Cropper 1996). Given the complexities involved, arguably to lead collaboratively, participating leaders must continuously and reflexively learn to collaborate. Collaborative inquiry in leadership *learning* is described as a process by which groups of people explore live organizational issues via a shared commitment to learning through individual or collective action, reflection and decision-making; participative and dialogic in character, collaborative inquiry is dependent upon increased levels of connectivity and empathy (Trinder, 2008).

The LDI programme therefore provides a unique context within which to explore the practice and leadership of collaboration, particularly within its remit of developing and sustaining library services within the broader contexts of arts and culture, public policy agendas and commercial opportunities on both local and national scales. The extent to which this was enabled and reinforced by the collaborative qualities and practices identified above is explored within greater detail throughout the paper, including their application at the macro level of ACE strategic intervention and initiation, and the micro level at which the individual projects funded under the initiative were led and delivered in local contexts.

Arts Council England, public libraries and the collaborative mission

From a strategic viewpoint the LDI sat within a longer-term, public policy-driven programme of ACE work within its emerging libraries and museums portfolio. The collaborative principles underpinning the LDI built upon successive ACE positioning papers on cross-sector strategy and practice. 'Libraries and the Arts: Pathways to Partnership' (Liddle, 2000) points to a 'new paradigm' for collaborative working between libraries and the arts prompted by local cultural strategies and 'best value' policies. LDI outcomes resonated strongly with recommendations made in this position paper concerning the strengthening of national and regional frameworks; development of partnerships with arts communities; and building on best practice, particularly where libraries' unique strengths in literary and reader development initiatives are concerned, and applying these successful models to other art forms. A review of research and literature on museums and libraries commissioned by ACE (Smithies, 2011) describes a number of gaps in the evidence base that are addressed in part by LDI and the work that it has initiated. This includes a scarcity of evidence on partnerships between libraries and creative practitioners, and the role and value of libraries more generally within the creative industries. The review also describes a need to consider more closely the role of partnership working in leadership and workforce development in the libraries sector – another key learning outcome identified by the LDI evaluation.

ACE subsequently published its strategic vision *Culture, Knowledge and Understanding: Great Museums and Libraries for Everyone* (ACE, 2011). The document describes five long-term goals that resonate with LDI aims and objectives, including excellence, sustainability, resilience, innovation and a commitment to a diverse and highly skilled workforce. Most significantly, the 'connecting' capacity of libraries is described as a 'big opportunity for libraries to lead the way in increasing engagement across the cultural sectors'. During the LDI period ACE undertook two complementary, library-specific research exercises, each designed to more pragmatically inform the future development of library services. Firstly, a review of community-led libraries (ACE, 2013) describes drivers behind enhanced community ownership of public libraries including expectations linked to the digital revolution; the added value of joined up services; financial challenges; and service delivery opportunities and expectations generated by the Localism Act 2011.

The second and most significant was the 'Envisioning the Library of the Future' project (ACE, 2014). This research followed a three-phase consultation process involving various stakeholders including relevant professional groups and the general public. 'Envisioning' corroborated many of the opinions of LDI stakeholders and concluded that libraries are trusted and highly valued public assets that face many challenges in continuing to legitimate their publicly-funded status. Recommendations reflected a strong collaborative trajectory and included more integration between libraries and other community assets and services; enabling communities and individuals to become more actively involved in the design and delivery of library services; new approaches to governing and managing libraries; and enabling libraries to be commissioned to deliver other public services.

Evaluating the LDI

As the commissioning body, ACE was interested in understanding how the LDI's core strategic objectives, including 'new delivery models for arts and culture working together', 'co-ordinating partnerships to achieve national policy outcomes', 'books and reading' and 'commercial partnerships' would be fulfilled by individual funded projects and by the programme as a cohesive whole. Other evaluation objectives included learning outcomes linked to the dynamics of collaborative working; relative innovation within and across the programme; and the extent to which the unique value of public libraries was sustained and promoted throughout, especially in what were essentially experimental collaborative professional contexts.

Given the strategic and operational complexity of the programme, a Realistic Evaluation approach was adopted. Pioneered by Pawson and Tilley (1997), Realistic Evaluation is driven by a desire for greater validity and utility of evaluation findings, via outcomes that are deeply rooted in the contexts and mechanisms of the programme under investigation. The approach encourages evaluators and programme stakeholders to consider the social and cultural conditions that are necessary for change mechanisms to operate most effectively, and how they are distributed within and between various programme contexts. The evaluation was designed therefore to capture the causal relationships that exist between the various contexts and mechanisms that formed part of the LDI programme, and the outcomes achieved by all participating projects. This enabled a thorough consideration of 'what worked and why', and the identification of learning outcomes of applied relevance to ACE in developing their strategic relationship with the libraries sector.

A flexible evaluation model was designed to capture the main objectives of the research process, including an overarching evaluation framework; tailored self-evaluation approaches for individual projects; culminating in a 'meta-evaluation' synthesising both of these key elements using Realistic Evaluation indicators (*contexts, mechanisms* and *outcomes*). A toolkit was designed to enable each Project Lead to develop their own specific data collection methods in collaboration with a dedicated member of the evaluation team. This facilitated a detailed, comparative analysis of the operational effectiveness of individual projects and relevant learning outcomes from the LDI process as a whole.

Regular cross-programme data collection exercises were undertaken throughout by the evaluation team in order to consider and profile more strategic learning outcomes. Research methods included a mid-point online stakeholder survey (Project Leads and ACE Relationship Managers) to capture developing ideas on the strategic value of the LDI programme; participatory observation of events run as part of individual projects; and facilitation of scheduled LDI workshops in collaboration with ACE. An Excel template was shared with Project Leads at the end of the programme to collect standardised quantitative data on headline outputs such as number of project partners, participating library services, public events and new library members.

Comprehensive research interviews were conducted at mid and endpoint phases with key stakeholders including individual Project Leads and relevant ACE Relationship Managers. Verbatim quotations from qualitative interview data are used as evidence throughout the paper

in order to substantiate research findings on the lived experience of collaborative working for LDI participants. Interviews were designed to prompt reflection and discussion on the opportunities and challenges created for collaborative leadership in public library service development, including:

- libraries' unique contribution to LDI collaborations;
- libraries' relationship with the arts and ACE;
- project sustainability and scalability;
- contribution of individual projects to LDI strategic objectives;
- opportunities and risks for ACE;
- cross-sector capture and dissemination of learning outcomes;
- key project successes, innovations and relevant mechanisms;
- partnership working, participation and engagement;
- the significance of LDI as a strategic intervention;
- perceptions of the relative return on investment;
- effectiveness of the structure and management of the LDI programme.

LDI collaborative leadership learning outcomes

The evaluation revealed a number of learning outcomes for ACE as it develops its strategic relationship with public library services, and for libraries on the frontline seeking to develop their collaborative cultural offer within the context of relevant local and national policy drivers.

Building a collaborative community of practice

The pertinent thematic design of the programme – with all applicants required to design and submit project proposals that responded to one or more of the four themes – created an effective starting point from which to build cross-sector project collaborations with mutually beneficial aims and objectives. The desirable 'common goal' in collaborative leadership was engendered therefore by ACE's germane initiation of the LDI and the way in which project teams aligned their own organisational ambitions to the requirements of the programme and those of project collaborators. There were several accomplished examples of commercial viability in projects with a digital focus and of social impact in relation to public policy agendas including unemployment and health and wellbeing. The thematic design therefore enabled the identification of responsive common goals across sectors and at both local and national scales.

"Another major partner has been the [trust], who are a charitable organisation who receive ESF funding to work on a one-to-one basis with jobseekers, so they're an integral part of our project… although we applied as a partnership with [arts organisation]… the [trust] has been an equal partner… they've been to all of the sessions… they've used this as an opportunity to learn different approaches to working with their clients… So it's been a seamless three-way partnership in that respect". [Project Lead]

"…the digital skills sharing project brings so much together in a way that hasn't been brought together [before] in a really useful way. It's very dynamic… It's like a community of practice that's being created… it's going to be a jewel… the bang for the buck with that is just fantastic… the whole Project Management approach is very entrepreneurial, it's very what can we do now, what more can we do?" [Relationship Manager]

The LDI programme incentivised and inspired new relationships to good effect, and helped to facilitate a greater understanding between sectors of their individual working practices, cultures and objectives, a key condition in any successful collaboration. This includes an enhanced appreciation of complementary skills sets between individual collaborators, organisations and sectors, and how these can be used more productively and proactively in the future.

"I think everyone's come out of it understanding each other much better, and has a bit more respect for how each other works and the challenges that each other faces." (Project Lead)

"I think it's helped us [to] understand the publishing community even better than we did before and the challenges that they're facing, but also what skills and resources that they actually do have that we can leverage into working with libraries in the future". [Project Lead]

Data collected throughout the evaluation showed a number of shared indicators of successful collaborative working across stakeholder groups, including greater understanding of the cross-sector demand for library services and programming; reduced duplication of effort within and across services; greater connections with service users; space to test the rationale behind and feasibility of collaborations; enhanced staff expertise; 'joined up' thinking and planning; and a domino effect in attracting and engaging new arts and cultural collaborators. Both Project

Leads and ACE Relationship Managers spoke of their own enhanced collaborative leadership skills as a direct result of the programme. This included leadership efficacy in making sure that projects were completed and delivered to the required shared standards, and in enabling and supporting collaborators and colleagues to directly learn and benefit from the experience. Partnerships with national agencies in particular were seen to be enhancing the sector's profile, particularly within public policy agendas, enabling pervasive levels of access, engagement and advocacy that would be difficult for any stand-alone library service to accomplish.

> "In terms of other sectors, I think that the books on prescription project is a good example because the national leadership on that has allowed all kinds of access to different areas… the partner organisation is so well clued up… talking to all different Government departments… that's been quite an eye-opener. I know a lot of individual library services struggle to get that high-level access and advocacy." [Relationship Manager]

Collective ownership and decision-making

The way in which the LDI was structured and managed created an equitable platform from which to build a genuinely collaborative cross-sector community of practice. There was a strong emphasis throughout on learning through experimentation. As such, conventional hierarchies between the 'commissioner' or funding body (ACE) and 'supplier' (Project Leads) were flattened by the lack of expectation to fulfil specific contracted outcomes or requirements, avoiding any risk of relative failure to deliver. Any changes and unanticipated developments in individual projects were collectively negotiated and agreed upon, creating shared opportunities to critically reflect upon the learning experience. Project Leads were especially appreciative of the operational structure of the programme in facilitating a learning process, including guidance and support from Relationship Managers.

Thinking of the LDI network as a community of practice (CoP) in this context is useful, as CoPs are recognised as vehicles for organisational learning and forms of collaborative inquiry described by Trinder (2008), via the construction of learning as a process of participation; an emphasis on learning via practice-led opportunities; the engagement of communities in the design of their practice as a place of learning; and the provision of resources needed to negotiate connections with other practices within the organisation (Wenger, 1998).

Collective ownership and decision-making were effectively evidenced through individual LDI projects. The Arts Alive project in Cambridgeshire for example aimed to enhance the local arts and cultural offer in rural and remote settings, using the public library network both as physical locations for new activities and as an active community participation and engagement platform in the planning and commissioning process. The project team included CS3, an established arts consortium representing Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, who effectively engaged existing library friends groups and local social media sites to create a community-based commissioning model. This enabled the effective place-based democratisation of arts programming via the public library network, ensuring that commissioned events and activities met local needs and were more likely to engage new, intergenerational library users and arts audiences. Commissioned activities included live poetry, community TV, comedy clubs, theatre performances and manga drawing workshops. Arts Alive acted as a catalyst for sustained collaborative working in the region through mutually beneficial management of the project - commissioned arts organisations for example were required to formally join the CS3 consortium, helping to build strategic networks and support regional capacity building.

USP and collaborative added value

The unique value of libraries in the context of new collaborative working was actively considered throughout, with defining qualities such as access, reach and trust being regularly cited, but in a non-sentimental capacity due to the clear impact these qualities have in reinforcing collaborative relationships and engaging a breadth of stakeholders and service users. The 'connecting' quality of libraries therefore, both within communities and as central links between different professional sectors emerged as a key asset, including their traditional information and reader service roles, and the specialist knowledge and expertise of library staff. Such core values have been collectively enhanced by LDI in the shape of improved commercial awareness and versatility; evidence of staff skills development including project management and renewed job satisfaction; and significant new and improved partnerships at local and national levels, each enabling real leadership and advocacy potential for the sector.

> "I don't think you would have got that level of [trust and] engagement if the Artwork project was held in a Jobcentre or even in the community centre… and with Books on Prescription, that's something to do with the power of numbers in the library network… if library services can come together, [they] have a unique reach as well as the work that they're doing in the way that very few organisations could. Even if the

NHS ran Books on Prescription themselves, it wouldn't get the kind of reach and penetration that the library service can get". [Relationship Manager]

The LDI furthermore facilitated an enhanced recognition and appreciation of the complementary offers and professional practices between arts and library sectors, leading to the genuine creation of new, sustainable collaborative relationships and products. In this context, LDI funding worked in a leverage capacity to secure match funding, additional resources, and 'scaling-up' of some projects for future funding applications. There was considerable evidence of community co-production in several projects, and of low-cost sustainable methods including effective use of social media and adaptable, transferable training materials. Such adaptation and re-contextualisation of library services pointed to several examples of *relative innovation* for the sector, including new activities in libraries, community commissioning models, and different ways of presenting traditional reader development and information service roles via digital interventions. The pilot, experimental nature of LDI facilitated *positive* risk taking in this context, allowing a certain amount of creative freedom not often experienced by public libraries as statutory local authority services.

Reassuringly, LDI participants were keen to reinforce libraries' unique *professional* value as knowledge and information services throughout the programme. In the case of LDI projects with a strong digital component for example, and those contributing to information-dependent public policy agendas, the programme has helped to substantiate this traditional role and USP in collaborative contexts:

"…we have been approached by other partners, like Jobcentre Plus, to help them with their digital training as well. So, although the council has got some exciting IT development that's going to be coming up, I think we are doing a lot more than probably other departments… for actually passing those skills to the public, and that's always been a role with the library service." [Project Lead]

"…the partnership with IAPT [Improving Access to Psychological Therapy programme]… is going to be particularly productive… IAPT are talking about using our core reading list… they're also talking about what other health information resources they could channel through libraries… … and also a sort of joint referral system." [Project Lead]

Summary and emerging discussion points

For a relatively modest investment, the LDI fulfilled its objectives in encouraging public libraries to extend their collaborative reach, engaging in a breadth of cross-sector projects of local, regional and national significance. Use of a Realistic Evaluation framework enabled the consistent causal mapping of relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes within and across funded projects. Where situated contexts included cuts to or gaps in existing public service provision (for example Newcastle City Council's 'Cultural Commissioning for Vulnerable Adults' project), there is a discernible relationship between collaborative mechanisms (including for example converged library and community spaces, delivery partnerships with local arts organisations and cross-agency joint commissioning) and positive social outcomes including active participation of isolated community members; entry to employment for participating jobseekers; and the training and development of young library volunteers.

The evaluation team noted in its final report to ACE (Wilson et al, 2014) that the LDI presented a positive foundation on which to build a future libraries strategy defined by the sector's unique cultural value, but that it would be naïve to overlook the stark operational challenges facing public libraries alongside all local authority services in England. A number of key political and economic conditions were consistently referred to by LDI participants as part of the evaluation process, which in turn invariably affected the way in which participants interpreted and shared their own particular LDI experiences. Local authority budget cuts continue to have a profound impact in terms of branch closures and service reductions – a national survey conducted by CIPFA (2012) showed a reduction of more than 200 library service points in the UK during 2011-12, with 2015 figures reporting a continual decline, with spending on library services across England, Scotland and Wales cut by £50m in 2014/15, leading to closure of more than 100 libraries (Johnstone, 2015).

The reality of the sector's economic situation, and the anxieties caused by this, should be carefully acknowledged. Interestingly this has added another collaborative leadership dimension since completion of the LDI via responses to public library closures from campaign groups, media and prominent public advocates (Wilson, 2016a). The Speak up for Libraries campaign group has actively lobbied MPs to protect the service from further damaging cuts. Campaigners appealed to politicians to back an early day motion reinforcing the principles of the Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1964, asserting that local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. The sector's

professional membership body, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, is also currently campaigning for adherence to legal responsibilities regarding the provision of quality library services. Again this is garnering significant public support via petitioning of the Secretary of State and via social media, using #MyLibraryByRight for campaign promotion and updates.

It was important to reiterate via the LDI evaluation that ACE is not working in isolation as the development body and leading advocate for the sector, as many of the LDI projects reflected and represented the healthy collaborative infrastructure that underpins and supports public libraries on a national basis. This included the active involvement of professional bodies and associations including the Society of Chief Librarians, Association of Senior Children's and Education Libraries and The Reading Agency. More can arguably be done to reassert the sector's collaborative cross-sector value in light of current policy agendas concerning integrated health and social care, and relevant shifts in cultural commissioning by statutory health and social services (Wilson, 2016b).

The LDI illustrated that the sector has the necessary networks, assets and capacity to respond to dominant public policy narratives of integrated resilience, as public libraries continue to face a true test of their collaborative leadership in increasingly risk-averse local authority environments. With regards to the theoretical study of boundary-spanning public sector leadership, and reflecting back on the three identified principles of collaborative leadership (knowing your collaborative community; the collaborative pursuit of a common goal; and distributed ownership, control and decision making), strategic intermediation is shown to be a valuable catalyst for experimentation in collaborative learning. This in turn can create a greater sense of agency and mutually beneficial ownership in cross-sector communities of practice. These are significant learning outcomes for public sector organisations seeking to make a collective impact in the 'meta mission' of public service.

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