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CLEAR VISION: every facet of public service was represented at the conference

Making systems leadership work

Ewart Wooldrige, chief executive of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, and **Rob Worrall**, programme director at the National School of Government, look at a project to improve leadership of public services through greater collaboration

Public service leadership (PSL), a new collaboration between 11 public service leadership development academies, held its first ever conference late last year.

The conference, Collaborate to Innovate, brought together a wide range of senior leaders and frontline professionals representing almost every facet of our public services including central and local government, universities, further education and schools, the NHS, fire and rescue, the police and the Armed Forces.

Following a review by the Cabinet Office earlier in 2009, PSL has come together with a renewed intent to collaborate, driven by a clear vision to improve the effectiveness of collaborative leadership to tackle society's toughest issues.

We are focusing on developing those leadership skills needed to address the so-called "wicked issues" not in the gift of any one organisation or service. They are the challenges for which there is no one expert, or ready-made answer – or even agreement on the right set of questions.

Senior public service leaders need to go beyond just meeting their organisational or service-specific, output-based targets. They have to address whole systems, focusing on improving outcomes and increasing opportunities for the service users and communities they serve. This requires collaboration and forms of joint enterprise, partnerships and alliances, working across organisational and geographical boundaries, outside their direct span of control, with organisations which may have a very different perspective from their own.

The structures to make this happen are well established through local strategic partnerships, public service boards, task groups and initiatives such as Total Place. The real challenges are about

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the skills of leading collaboratively in an environment which is often complex, messy and frustrating, where valuable learning is more often a by-product of "doing".

The conference featured many scenarios and initiatives, including:

- Collaborating across Whitehall – lessons from cross-departmental PSAs
- Collaborating across a region – innovative working in the East of England
- Leading a county – the Worcestershire Total Place pilot
- Common purpose – leading beyond authority
- Leading cities – collaboration between university and civic leaders
- School leader succession planning
- Children's centre leaders – leading an integrated system
- Using peer support in partnership working.

The keynote speaker was Peter Housden, perma-

nent secretary of the Department for Communities and Local Government, who is heading the steering group responsible for implementing the leadership development review recommendations.

He told the conference: "Doing more with less is going to be everyday business. It is about using each other's strengths to sharpen what we offer and enable improved public service leadership."

The facilitator for the day was David Macleod, author of the influential Macleod Report on employee engagement.

PSL has already identified an outline framework for collaborative leadership, with core behaviour such as:

- Understanding and developing self
- Leading with political awareness
- Setting direction
- Building organisational and sectoral leadership capacity and capability
- Delivering intended results and outcomes
- Engaging people across boundaries and disciplines to support innovation for common purpose and community leadership.

PSL is now pulling together a powerful community of practice to develop and test out a potential cross-sector top leadership programme, new approaches to evaluation of collaborative outcomes, and new ways of learning from partnership working.

We really welcome leaders at all levels of public service to engage with this initiative. We are aiming to build a UK-wide community of practice that will provide a space to debate, test out and validate the practical approaches that deliver true systems leadership. If you are interested, contact us at: info@publicserviceleadership.org.uk.