The Leadership Studio

Learning together about public leadership
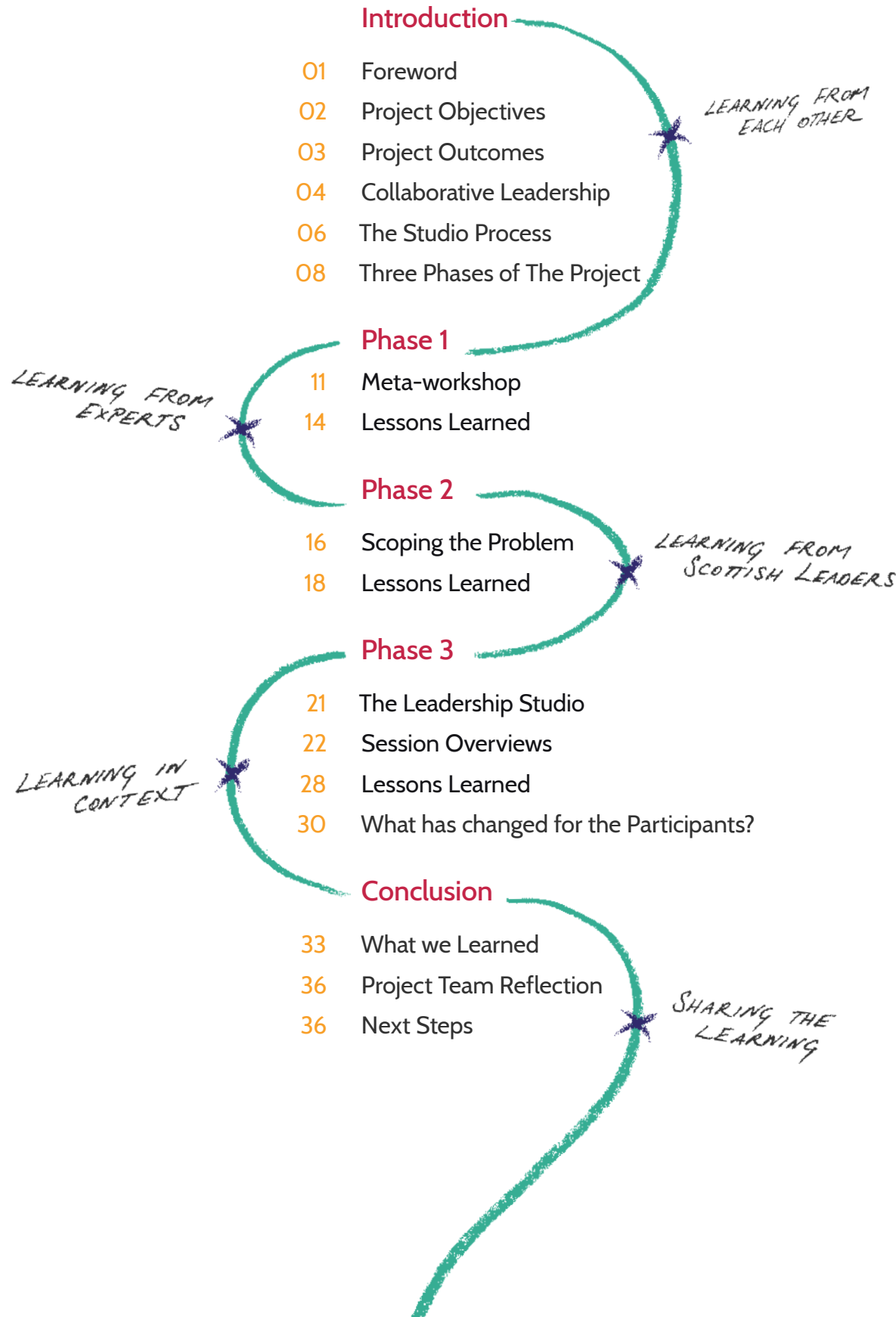
University of Strathclyde Glasgow

INNOVATION SCHOOL THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART

scottish universities insight institute
mobilising knowledge for a better Scotland

Foreword

It is one of the great truisms of our times that the world we live in is becoming ever more complex and contested. As obvious as this may seem, it nevertheless raises difficult questions about how best to negotiate a pathway into the future, how to sustainably manage increasingly stretched resources, and how to develop the qualities of leadership needed to bring about transformation in today's organisations. Nowhere are these questions more pressing than in the public sector, which is constantly confronted with 'wicked' problems that resist permanent resolution[1] such as the social consequences of poverty and homelessness, and health and social care systems that are no longer fit for purpose.

Over the past few years, a number of research and practice initiatives have begun to chip away at these questions. For instance, the Local Vision project[2], the Leadership Centre[3] and the King's Fund[4] have all explored aspects of systems leadership in the provision of health and social care services in England, while the Staff College[5] has taken a similar approach to public sector leadership for children's services. Following another thread, Needham & Mangan[6] have investigated the skills and attributes that will be needed in the future by public servants working in England. And in Scotland, the Ingage team in the Scottish Government has successfully developed the Pioneering Leadership Development Programme,[7] which offers intensive facilitation to support communities in accomplishing improved outcomes.

This report is the product of a collaborative research project involving the University of Strathclyde and the Glasgow School of Art. It sets out to extend these recent trends in public leadership research by introducing the idea of the Leadership Studio as a site for developing collaborative public leadership. The project specifically asks what types of intervention are more likely to be effective in developing readiness and capacity for collaborative leadership in the context of the wicked problems that characterise complex public issues.

The project was initially motivated by a call from Scotland's First Minister for more effective collaboration across public sector agencies. This imperative that has subsequently been taken up by the Scottish Leaders Forum[8].

Funding for this project was awarded by the Scottish Universities Insight Institute (SUII) as part of a broader themed inquiry into 'Learning from other places'[9]. Responding to this theme, the research design explicitly draws in expertise from diverse national and international locations. Using a studio pedagogy which emphasises the co-production of hands-on learning-by-making in real lived contexts, the project seeks to address the challenges of working productively across disciplinary and professional boundaries.

Introduction

Project Objectives

The project has comprised three phases of activity between March and October 2017 – a meta-workshop in March, a Scottish Leaders Forum scoping meeting in June, and a series of three studio sessions in September and October.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To learn from public practice in other jurisdictions that contrast with Scotland;

- To learn from the cross-fertilization of ideas in academic and practice domains;

- To learn from, and within, a team of Scottish public-sector leaders as their collaborative leadership develops in response to a complex challenge;

- To disseminate these learnings across Scotland and internationally through publications and follow-up events.

Project Outcomes

The purpose of this report is to present the integrated insights gained from the Leadership Studio. In brief, the project surfaced three interweaving dynamics that underpin the co-productive activities of collaborative leadership:

- Dialogue sits at the foundation of all socially engaged action. It is how we come to appreciate alternative perspectives on the world that then allow us to make different choices;

- Improvisation is how new meanings and new futures can be drawn out of dialogical processes. It is the creative dynamic that generates the emergent potentials of co-production;

- Daring recognises that doing things differently requires courage. To step into an uncertain future inevitably involves taking risks so collaborative leadership needs an enabling environment if it is to flourish.

What is Collaborative Leadership?

Before answering this question, there is a prior question that must first be addressed, namely 'what is leadership?' The working definition that we have adopted in this project is that leadership is a divergent and disruptive social process that improves existing situations by transforming them. It is the work of creating new and previously unimagined possibilities in the face of uncertainty about how to act. It is called out when there is no clear course of action going forward. Leadership actively constructs desired futures by stepping onto the road less travelled, as it is here that new vistas are to be found. We contrast this generative notion of leadership with the convergent dynamics of management, which are directed towards eliminating uncertainties and optimising best practice. The function of management is to draw the organisation towards an ever-more stabilised equilibrium state that admits orderly progress towards a more or less certain future. As such, leadership and management can be seen as opposing dynamics that serve very different purposes, but both are equally necessary for the continuity of organisations over time. Importantly, whilst it may be true that leadership resides in formal, hierarchical management roles, this is not always the case. The invitation for leadership development then, is to conceive leadership as a dynamic potential that is distributed widely and deeply, sitting in every seat and every position within an organisation.

Both the theory and practice of leadership and leadership development have traditionally focussed on the personal qualities and behaviours of individuals who occupy elite 'leader' roles. However, this individualistic approach is palpably inadequate in the context of the increasingly complex and ambiguous problems that confront our world[10]. Not only does it erect barriers to more inclusive forms of leadership that are capable of engaging all the intelligences in an organisation, but it also imposes impossible performance expectations on the incumbent individuals. More recently there has been a significant shift in the leadership literature towards plural, collective, shared and distributed models that explicitly recognise the multiplicity of actors engaged in leadership work[11]. These models range from the two-way interactions between leaders and followers[12], to more systemic approaches that emphasise working together to accomplish collective goals[13], and on to more broadly participative leadership that spans boundaries between people, functional areas of expertise, organisations, and cultures[14]. This systems view of leadership has its roots in complex adaptive systems theory[15], which focusses primarily on the questions of 'who', 'what' and 'why'. Answers to these questions combine to form a distinctive mind-set or way of thinking about leadership[16].

At the same time however, systems leadership neglects 'how' questions about the actions, performances and processes that constitute leadership through practice. It is these 'how' questions that are the focus of collaborative leadership, specifically how actions, rather than individuals or vision or values or situations, generate the creative dynamics of leadership. Stacey[17] recognised the absence of 'how' as a limitation of complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory, especially when it is applied to human agents, who do not merely adapt to their situations but also change them by asserting their own agency. Stacey proposed complex responsive processes (CRP) as an alternative way of accessing this type of engaged human action, an approach that Griffin[18] has taken up in relation to leadership. The emergence and fluidity of leadership implied by this CRP approach has also been developed by a number of writers who are committed to eliminating the artificial distinction between theory and practice[19]. They argue that theory will continue to appear remote and abstract to those engaged in leadership work until the practical dynamics of their day-to-day experience are illuminated and brought to life.

For researchers, this presents a challenge to develop new methods of inquiry that are better able to engage with dynamic constructs and the underlying movements in leadership practice.

As conceptions of leadership have changed, so necessarily have expectations of programmes for leadership development. It is still necessary to develop the personal skills and capabilities of individuals, but this provision for self-efficacy is no longer the exclusive preserve of those destined for formal 'leader' roles. Beyond this, collective and systems models of leadership also require the development of what we call a network sensibility, which recognises the multiplicity of actors who participate in leadership. Actors need to develop an awareness of the structural elements within the system and be able to recognise and classify differences in the ways other actors feel, perceive, think, relate, do and be[20]. Collaborative leadership goes another step beyond this awareness of the structural elements of the system, drawing attention to the generative, multidirectional and temporal interplay between these elements. This requires close attention to how different types of action contribute to the emergence of new leadership directions. Development in this sense is a process of entering into the flow of leadership and learning through direct practical engagement with living practice.

How does the studio process work?

In response to the requirement for direct practical engagement in developing collaborative leadership, this project has adopted a studio approach that is characterised by a pedagogy of learning-by-making. Studios are places of professional, research-based learning and teaching in the context of an immersive creative education. They are familiar as sites where artists and designers can collaborate to explore and better understand the contexts of their work, and where inspiring accidents and new connections may lead to novel insights and creative outputs. This type of approach has previously been used by the Glasgow School of Art to inform policymaking[21] but studios are less familiar as places for organisational development and business education.

"The central aspect that sets studio work apart from other educational practices in management … is the strong emphasis on participant-led inquiry through hands-on, creative engagement aimed at producing atypical results – imaginative problem reframing, innovative solutions, synthesis-oriented skill sets, integrative learning."[22]

Studio techniques involve activities such as visualising, modelling, prototyping and improvising that are used to make embodied, tangible artefacts and knowledge, co-produced by studio participants as they create something new together. Studios thus provide unparalleled opportunities for the co-production of collaborative leadership by engaging creative methods that make the abstract and intangible more widely accessible.

Our purpose in this project is to make visible the underpinning dynamics of practice that constitute collaborative leadership. To accomplish this, we have carefully orchestrated a series of studio activities intended to open up participants' experiences of leadership and to help them to concretise these as part of their own developmental processes. In addition to the ubiquitous use of Post-It notes to capture ideas and impressions on the fly, we also drew on a variety of different arts traditions to inform our design. We used visual and representational approaches to construct word maps and three-dimensional models, to record and feedback photographic images, to draw meaning out of personal artefacts, and generally to add colour, texture and symbolic richness to the studio work. We also employed theatre techniques to support role-playing and improvisational performance. And finally, we engaged musical traditions to make harmony together. These approaches combined to allow participants to generate localised concepts that were relevant to them in the here-and-now, but which also revealed underlying dynamics that ran throughout their studio collaborations.
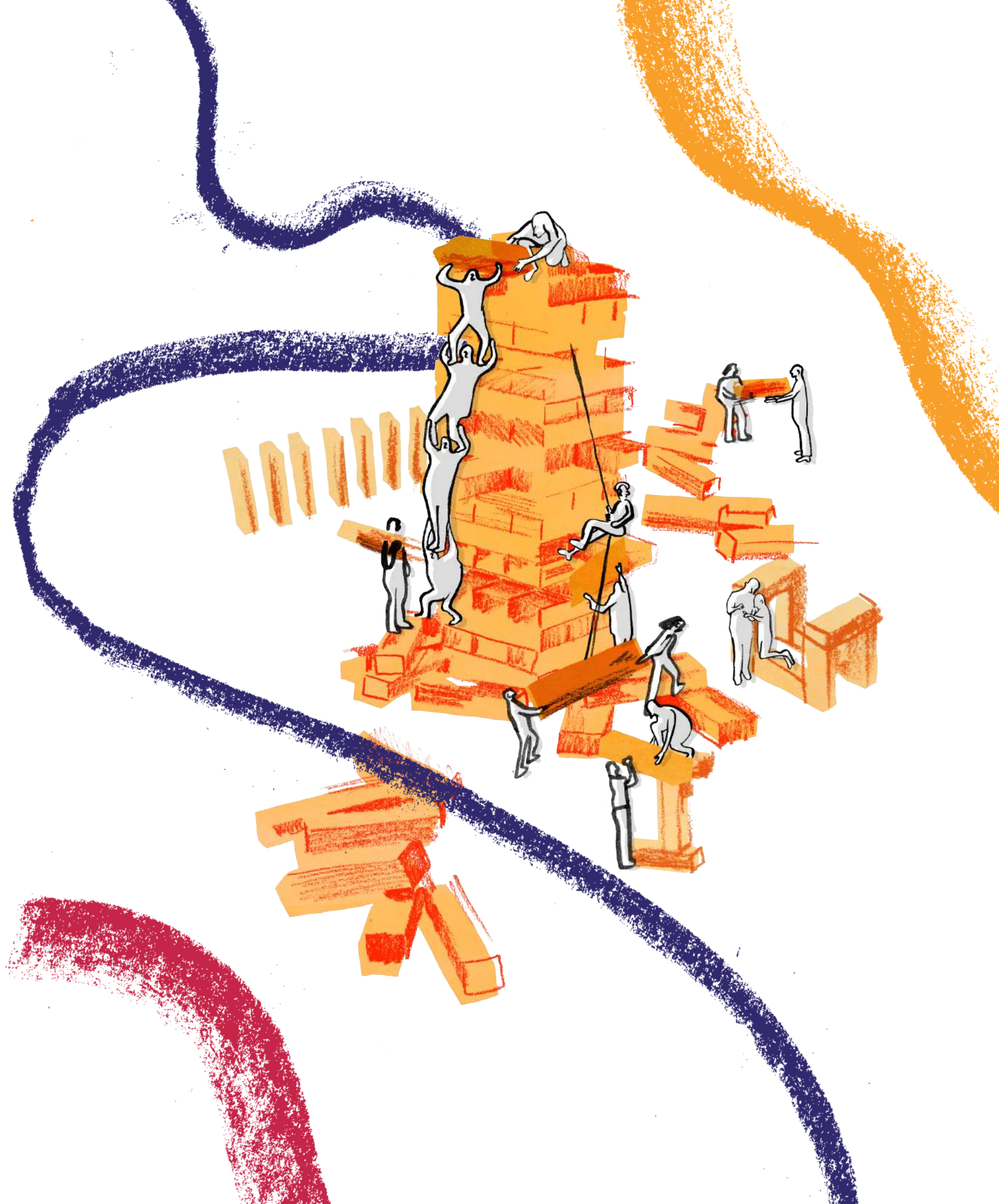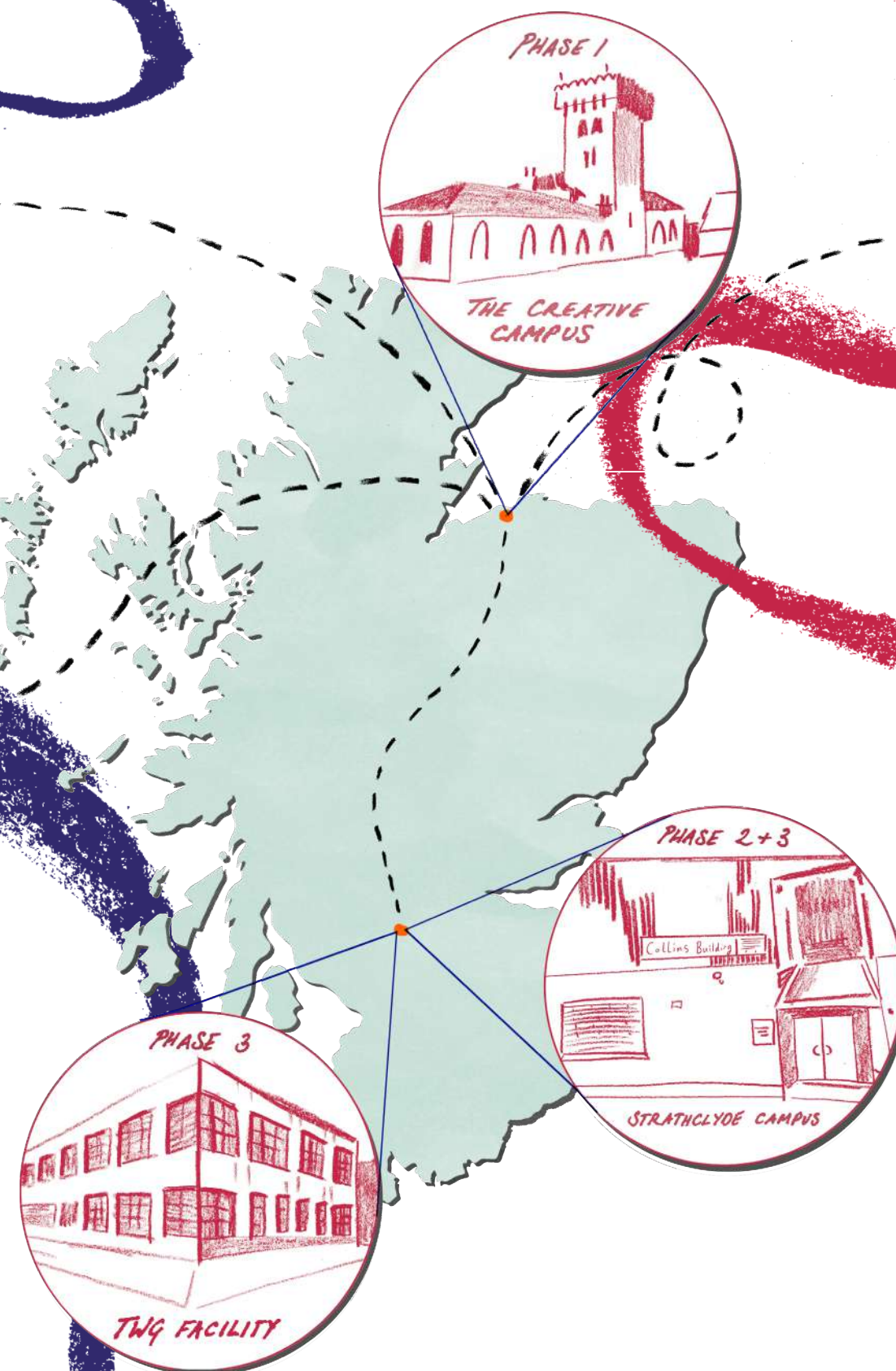
Three phases of project activity

This project has evolved improvisationally and iteratively over three distinct phases. The first phase was a meta-workshop designed to learn from experts, both academics and consultant practitioners, from other places including New York University, Victoria University of Wellington, Plymouth Graduate Management School, the New Zealand Leadership Development Centre, the King's Fund, the Improvement Service and Ingage. We convened for a two-day residential meeting at the Glasgow School of Art's creative campus in Forres, during which we were also joined for a few hours by senior local public-sector managers from Moray Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service and Scottish Natural Heritage.

The second phase was a three-hour scoping meeting held at the University of Strathclyde, which was designed to learn from members of the Scottish Leaders Forum. At this stage we were looking for a specific 'wicked' problem as a focus for the activities of the Leadership Studio. The meeting was convened around the topic 'Houses and homes' and was attended by delegates from Audit Scotland, Scottish Enterprise, NHS 24, North Ayrshire Council, Shelter Scotland, the Glasgow Centre for Population Health, and Positive Prisons.

The third phase was a series of three four-hour studio sessions designed to learn from the collaborative leadership experience of Tomorrow's Women Glasgow (TWG), a Community Justice Centre for women who have been involved in offending behaviour. The 33 studio participants were drawn from the Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership and allied third sector organisations and included service users as well as service providers. The first two sessions were held in the SUII meeting space while the final one took place at the TWG facility.

PHASE 1

THE CREATIVE CAMPUS

PHASE 2 + 3

Collins Building

STRATHCLYDE CAMPUS

PHASE 3

TWG FACILITY

Meta Workshop

The original intention in gathering together this group of experts was to draw on the collective wisdom of all those present to design a series of three studio sessions for developing collaborative public leadership. In the event, this proved rather too ambitious a goal given the diversity of participants and the limited time available, even though we all shared a common interest in surfacing new thinking about the practice of leadership in the face of complex social challenges. Although the meta-workshop plan provided plenty of opportunity for sharing knowledge, it failed to develop an adequate platform to promote and support collaborative effort. One participant observed somewhat cynically "it seems that people are here to feed on existing knowledge rather than to make something new", and more generally frustrations were expressed about the direction and progress of our conversations. Nevertheless, the explorations that did take place very usefully informed subsequent developments in this project.

"WE BROUGHT TOGETHER AN ECLECTIC GROUP OF EXPERT ACADEMICS AND PRACTITIONERS TO TALK ABOUT WHAT COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP MEANS."

A series of presentations from local public sector senior managers explored the complexities that they encounter in their daily work, and the implications of these complexities for their leadership practice.

Workshop participants distilled three key themes that emerged from these presentations:
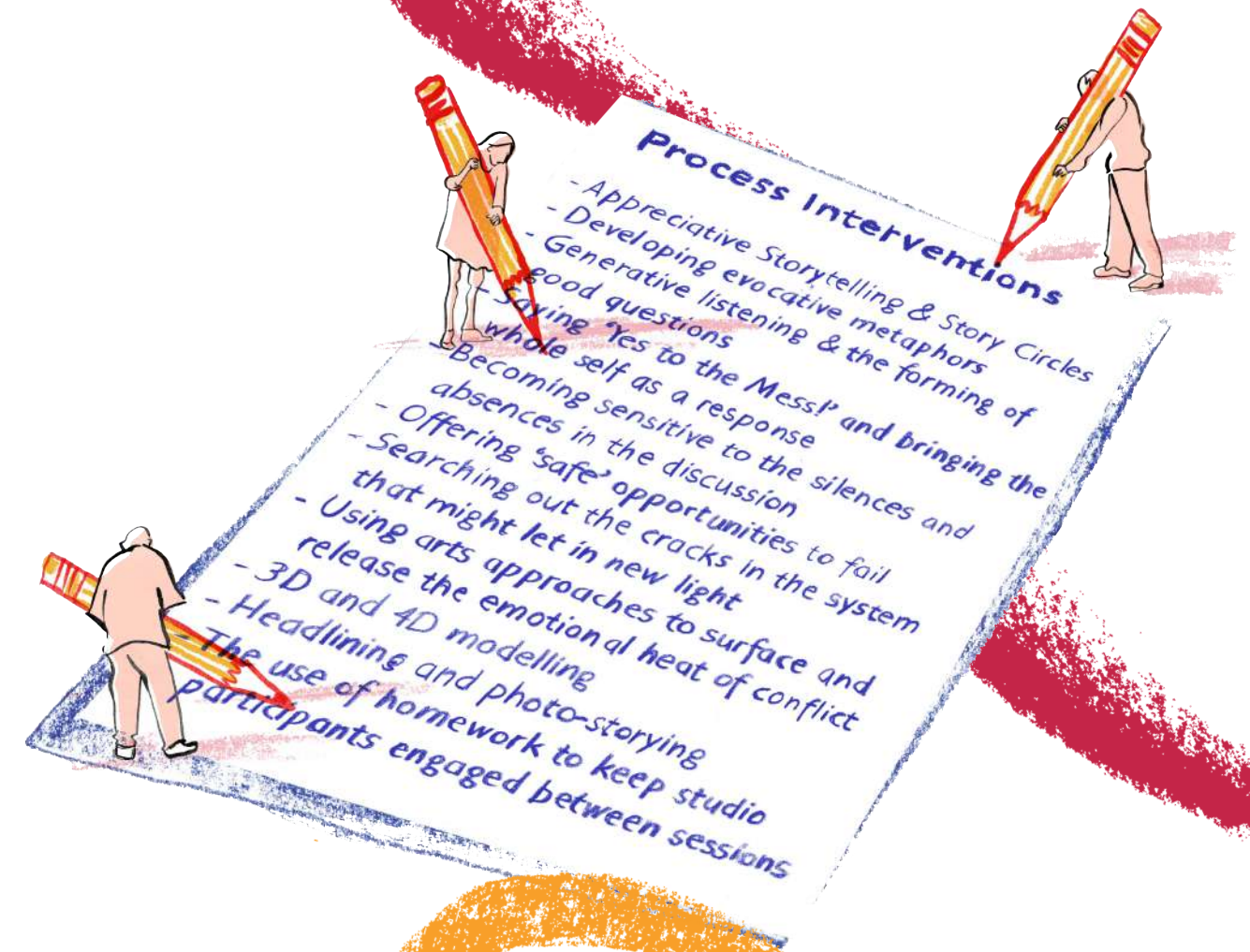
Leadership is a craft, not a skill

Skills are what we learn to avert the need to have to think out detailed responses in recurring situations, whereas craft is a process that embraces the imperfect and the unfinished in a search for new answers. Craft does not offer a quick fix; rather it engages with the aesthetic dimensions of human experience as it emerges in practice.

Pride is both a barrier and an enabler of leadership

Pride is a relational resource that influences self-efficacy in engaged social activity. On one hand it facilitates 'doing with' rather than 'doing to' others, but on the other hand it is the shadow of shame that justifies the cutting down of 'tall poppies'. As such, pride influences the formation and relinquishment of self-identity in the process of collaborative leadership.

Public leadership requires creative imagination

Conflict is inevitable in any collaborative community, but by deliberately engineering contested situations and creating a sense of urgency, conflict can become a constructive source of creative imagination rather than a cause of disintegration. It invites us to see ourselves differently and to find hidden treasures in every situation.

Process Interventions
- Appreciative Storytelling & Story Circles
- Developing evocative metaphors
- Generative listening & the forming of good questions
- Saying 'yes to the Mess!' and bringing the whole self as a response
- Becoming sensitive to the silences and absences in the discussion
- Offering 'safe' opportunities to foil
- Searching out the cracks in the system that might let in new light
- Using arts approaches to surface and release the emotional heat of conflict
- 3D and 4D modelling
- Headlining and photo-storying
- The use of homework to keep studio participants engaged between sessions

A LIST OF THE TYPES OF PROCESS INTERVENTIONS, DEVELOPED BY PARTICIPANTS, THAT MIGHT USEFULLY BE ENGAGED IN A STUDIO CONTEXT.

Lessons Learned

Quality is key to collaboration

Although we were disappointed at the time that this meta-workshop did not accomplish the target we had set for it, with the benefit of hindsight we now see that there was tremendous learning generated in this meeting. In our conversations we were able to dig into fine detail and discover the beauty that resides in the hidden recesses of leadership practice. These were unexpected finds that might have been missed in a headlong rush towards efficient goal attainment.

Collaboration takes time

In constructing the invitation list for this event we had focussed on attracting experts of the highest quality, who we believed could best inform our quest for different and new ideas about leadership development. However, we did not pay sufficient attention to the importance of building active connections between these experts, without which they had no platform to support collaborative effort. The work of building connections takes time, but time was a scarce resource in a two-day workshop.

Collaboration needs focus

We also came to understand that collaborative effort requires a clear, and compelling task that is relevant to all participants. Whilst we all shared a general interest in better public leadership, this concept proved to be too abstract to provide the necessary clarity of focus. As a result, conversations often headed out on tangents that ultimately distracted from our central purpose.

Scoping the Problem

There is no shortage of complex and 'wicked' problems to challenge Scotland's public sector. Our task in this meeting was to try to narrow our focus onto a leadership issue that could be clearly defined and delimited. In consultation with the Scottish Leaders Forum, we settled on 'Houses and Homes – New thinking for Scotland' as a starting point for our conversation. Those attending this meeting were all public service providers in Scotland, but each brought a unique perspective to the issues surrounding houses and homes. A lively discussion surfaced the complex connections with health, education, criminal justice and poverty along with the problems of empty homes, shortages of social housing, the increasingly multi-generational character of homes, deprivation postcodes, and the potential for regeneration through community action.

Eventually the conversation turned to the problems of leadership in this complex context. Understanding leadership as a craft as proposed in the meta-workshop, invites us to think about how relevant agencies work together to generate collaborative leadership. The meeting observed that often local authorities struggle to share information internally let alone across agency boundaries. The Scottish Fire & Rescue Service is a clear exception to this pattern though as illustrated by a chance discussion between a Fire Officer and a Police Officer about how to address the problems created

by a troublesome gang in Glasgow, which led to the emergence of a collaborative initiative. A multi-agency meeting with community planning partners including several areas within Glasgow City Council, a housing association and those with a remit for dealing with offending, criminal justice and employability met to discuss the gang, who were persistent reoffenders and well known to most of them. By targeting individuals to address their precise needs, while sharing information and resources with other agencies and consulting the young men themselves, the project improved the lives of both the individuals and their community.

"The initiative taken by the Fire & Rescue Service in Glasgow offers a potentially transferable model of collaborative leadership development."

This realisation led us to seek out communities of practice that adopt similar approaches to cross-agency collaboration. The discussion finally led us to Tomorrow's Women Glasgow[23], which sits under the umbrella of the Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership, bringing all the relevant services together under one roof to provide a comprehensive integrated service to its users. This was the insight, and the opportunity, that we carried forward into the final phase of this project.
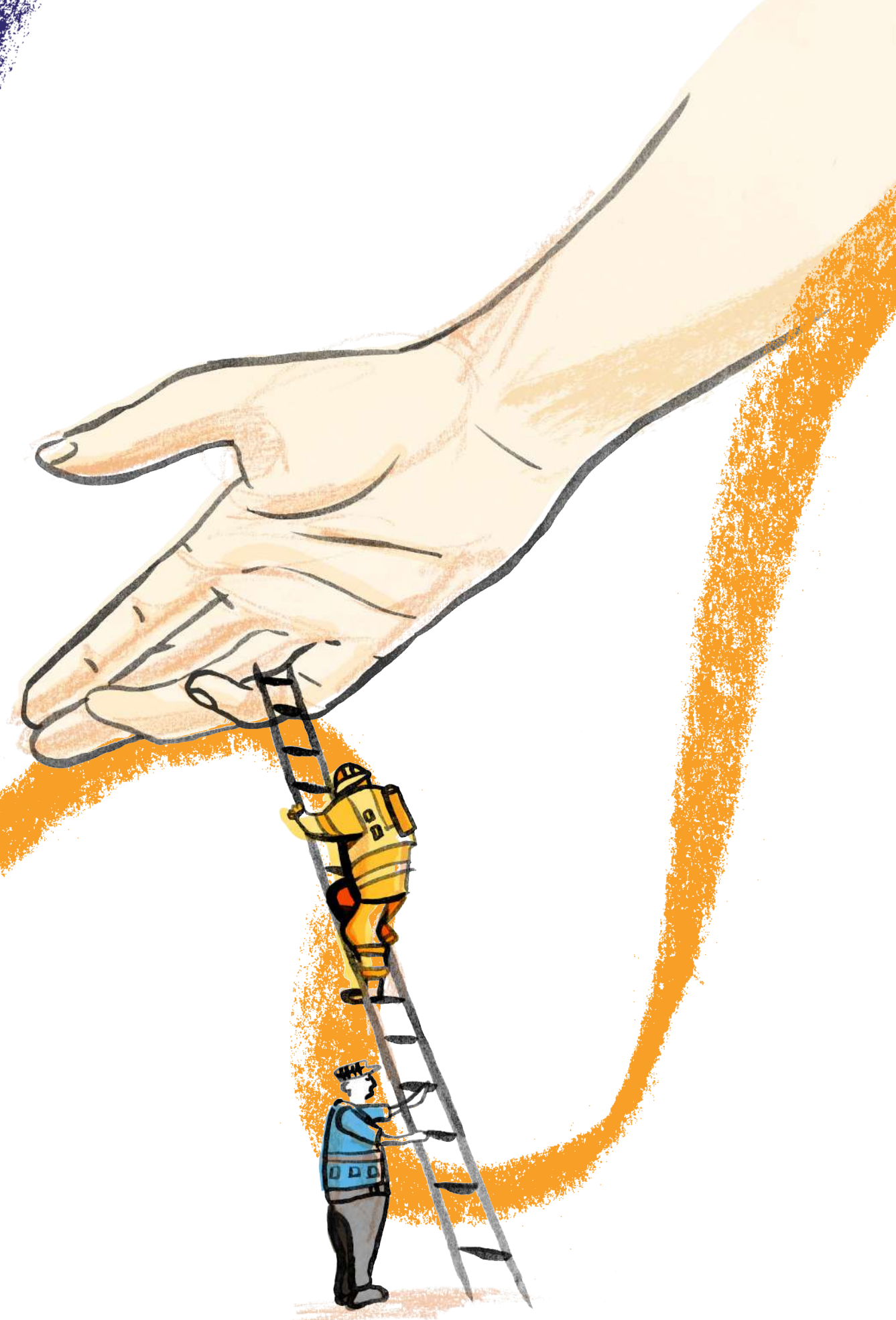
Lessons Learned

Collaborative leadership is hard to talk about

Strangely the practicing managers who participated in this meeting found it easier to talk about the intractable problems of housing and homes than about how to provide collaborative leadership in the face of such difficult problems. We surmise that this may be because questions of leadership can be personally confronting, so even senior managers may be reluctant to discuss these issues in front of a mixed audience where trust and safety have not yet been established.

Hierarchy and rules can constrain leadership

Although we know on an intellectual level that cross-agency collaborations are essential for tackling 'wicked' problems in the public sector, they are difficult to accomplish, so there are few working examples that offer exemplars for new ways of working together. The rules and structures conventionally found in organisations are a way of keeping us safe. In this context, collaborative leadership can be seen as a subversive activity that challenges these rules and structures.

The Leadership Studio

In designing these three studio sessions we were attentive to the lessons already learned. Tomorrow's Women Glasgow (TWG) provided a very clear focal point for collaborative learning, allowing studio participants to experiment with insights that they themselves were able to extract from the TWG experience. The participant group remained very stable across all three sessions, with four representatives of TWG, a wide range of others at all levels from the Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership and related services, and service users. This combination of conditions promoted a sense of safety that supported participants in speaking up and trying out new and different ways of working together. The studio process facilitated this learning-by-making by introducing a series of process interventions inspired by design-led activities.

"WE CAN ALL LEARN ABOUT COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP FROM TOMORROWS WOMEN GLASGOW"

Session 1

The first session focused on allowing the diverse participants to get to know each other and to start conversations about collaborative leadership that would span the three sessions. The importance of dialogue in 'doing' leadership was the key focus for the design.

GROUPS REFLECTED ON "WHAT CONTRIBUTED TO EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE IN TWG"

OPENING DISCUSSION ABOUT WHAT COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP MEANS TO EACH PARTICIPANT

FISHBOWL WHERE MEMBERS OF TWG HAD A CONVERSATION ABOUT THEIR PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES OF COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP AND TALKED ABOUT A PERSONAL ARTEFACT THAT REFLECTED THEIR OWN INSIGHTS.

BRIEF PRESENTATION ABOUT DIALOGUE AS "STANDING IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES."

PAIRED CONVERSATION ABOUT HOW DIALOGUE MAKES LEADERSHIP - RECORDED VISUALLY ON SHOES.

GROUPS DISCUSSED A POSSIBLE SOLUTION TO NEWS HEADLINES ABOUT "HOW CAN WE SAVE THE WORLD" THEN REFLECTED ON THE DIALOGUE PROCESS USED IN THIS EXERCISE. KEY THEMES WERE CAPTURED ON POST-IT'S.

Session 2

There was a five-week break before the second session, so participants were invited to do some homework directed at making dialogues that are better, deeper and more creative. Feedback from this homework was integrated into the second session which aimed to deepen participants' understandings of their working contexts.

Phase 3

IN SMALL GROUPS, SHARED THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THEY PRACTICE LEADERSHIP AND IDENTIFIED THE CHALLENGES AND COMPLEXITIES FACED

PRESENTED SUMMARY OF IDEAS TO REST OF THE GROUP.

POTENTIAL DISASTER?

USING MATERIALS PROVIDED, GROUPS MADE AN ARTEFACT THAT DEPICTED ONE SPECIFIC CHALLENGE AND SUGGESTED STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THIS.

Phase 3

BRIEF PRESENTATION ABOUT IMPROVISATION AND KEY IDEAS SUCH AS "YES AND..."

YES AND...

PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED TO CHOOSE ANY SHOES, READ WHAT WAS WRITTEN ON IT THEN DISCUSS IN PAIRS THEIR EXPERIENCE OF DIALOGUE SINCE THE PREVIOUS SESSION. ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS WERE CAPTURED ON THE SHOES.
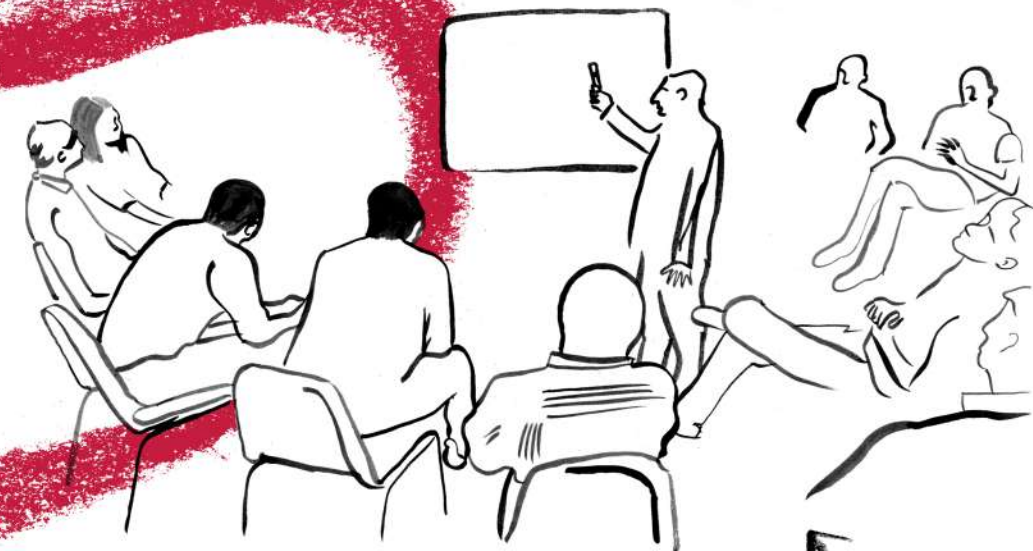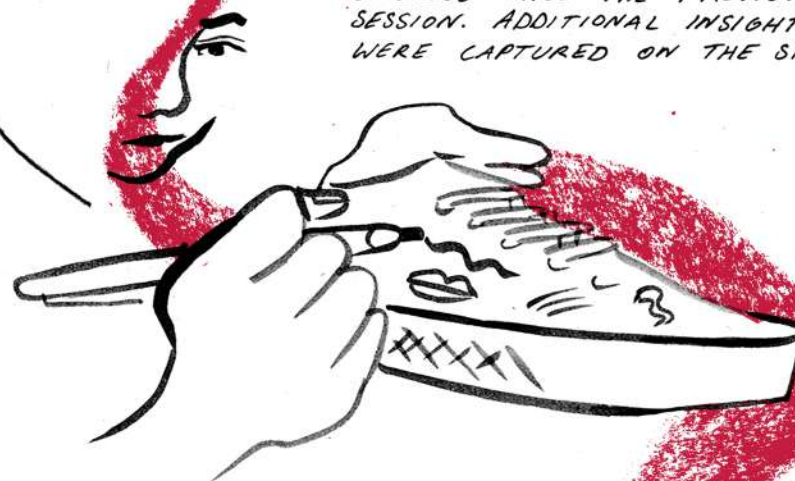
BACK IN A BIG CIRCLE, PARTICIPANTS SHARED THEIR REFLECTIONS OF THEIR LEARNING.
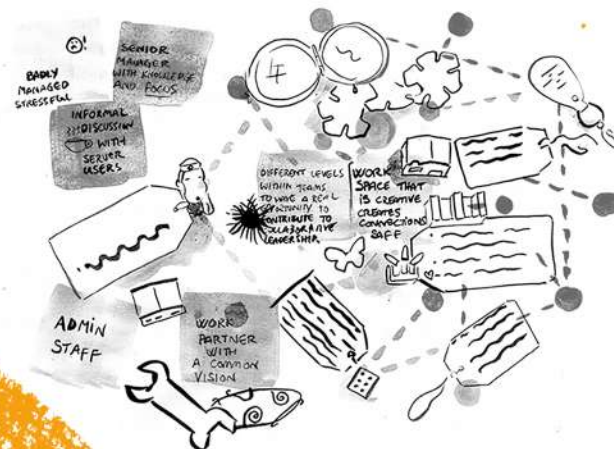
Session 3

In the week between the second and third sessions, participants were invited to identify a personal artefact that represents how their leadership practice has changed as a result of their studio activities, and to bring this to the final session. Improvisation was the key theme for this session.

FRIENDSHIP "KNOWING EACH OTHER, SUPPORTING EACH OTHER"

BEGAN WITH A FUN, HARMONISING (HUMMING) EXERCISE TO BUILD TRUST BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS.

RETURNING TO THE SAME GROUPS AS IN SESSION TWO, EACH PARTICIPANT SHARED AND EXPLAINED THE RELEVANCE OF THEIR ARTEFACT. THESE WERE THEN TAGGED WITH THE KEY INSIGHTS.

THE ARTEFACTS ALONGSIDE PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE OUTCOMES OF SESSION TWO WERE USED TO GUIDE EACH GROUP TO BUILD A SCENARIO OF A PREFERRED BETTER FUTURE IN WHICH COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP WAS EFFECTIVE.

THESE SCENARIOS WERE THE BASIS FOR DESIGNING AND PERFORMING A ROLE PLAY TO THE LARGER GROUP.

THE WHOLE GROUP CAME TOGETHER IN A CIRCLE FOR A FINAL DISCUSSION ABOUT KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE ROLE-PLAYS.
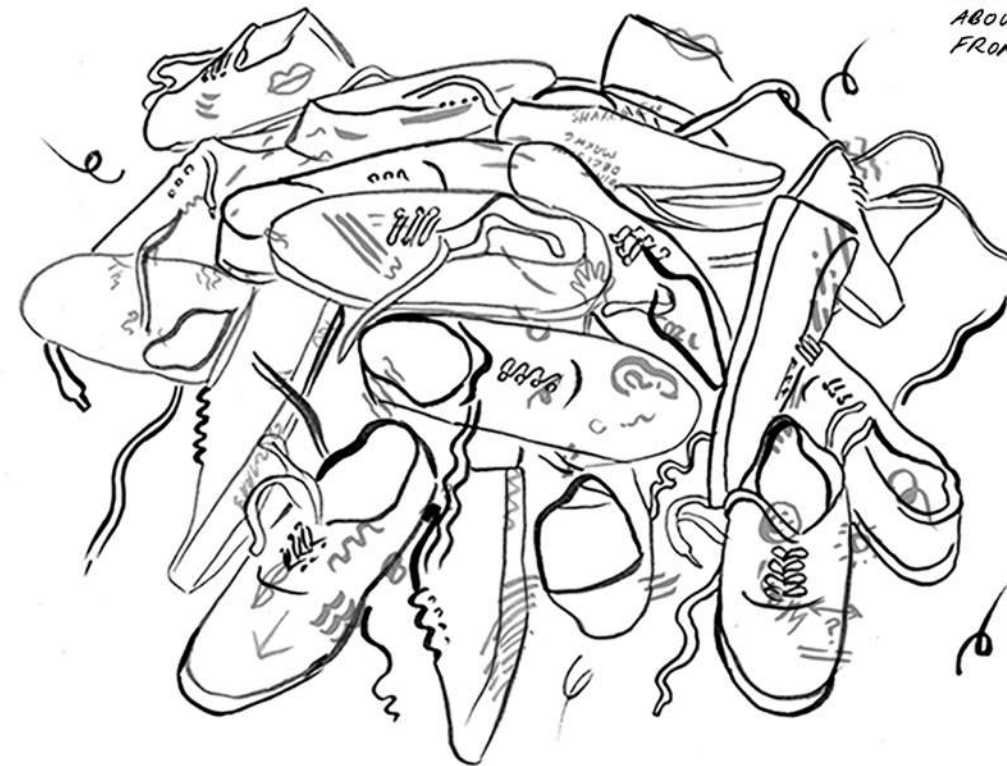
PARTICIPANTS WERE OFFERED THE OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE A PLIMSOLL AS A RECORD OF THEIR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN THE LEADERSHIP STUDIO.

Lessons Learned

## Co-production flourishes when people from different levels and functions collaborate

Many of the participants commented that the studio sessions had brought them into contact with others who they would not normally meet, or even dream of meeting, in the course of their normal work. By deliberately mixing people up together and identifying them by first names only (and no job titles), conversations took place on a more level playing field where different voices could be more fully appreciated, which in turn helped participants in their efforts to 'stand in the shoes of others'.

'Safe Spaces' accelerate collaboration

Participants expressed genuine amazement about the speed with which safety had been created in the group, allowing everyone to feel appreciated while at the same time appreciating the contributions of others. This then encouraged all participants to be more personally confessional than they might otherwise have been. They were also more willing to take the risks that necessarily precede transformational change while at the same time strengthening their collective capacity for organisational renewal.

Collaboration makes the unknown less daunting

Fear of what lies in the future obstructs many organisations in their efforts to transform, even though they know they need to. Especially in the third session, participants were confronted with their own fears as they were asked to perform a role-play in front of an audience of peers. However, this task was made much more approachable for participants by laying down some shared foundations and then planning the performance together. The performances were all entertaining and fun, emerging as a capstone that reflected the entirety of the studio process.

Phase 3
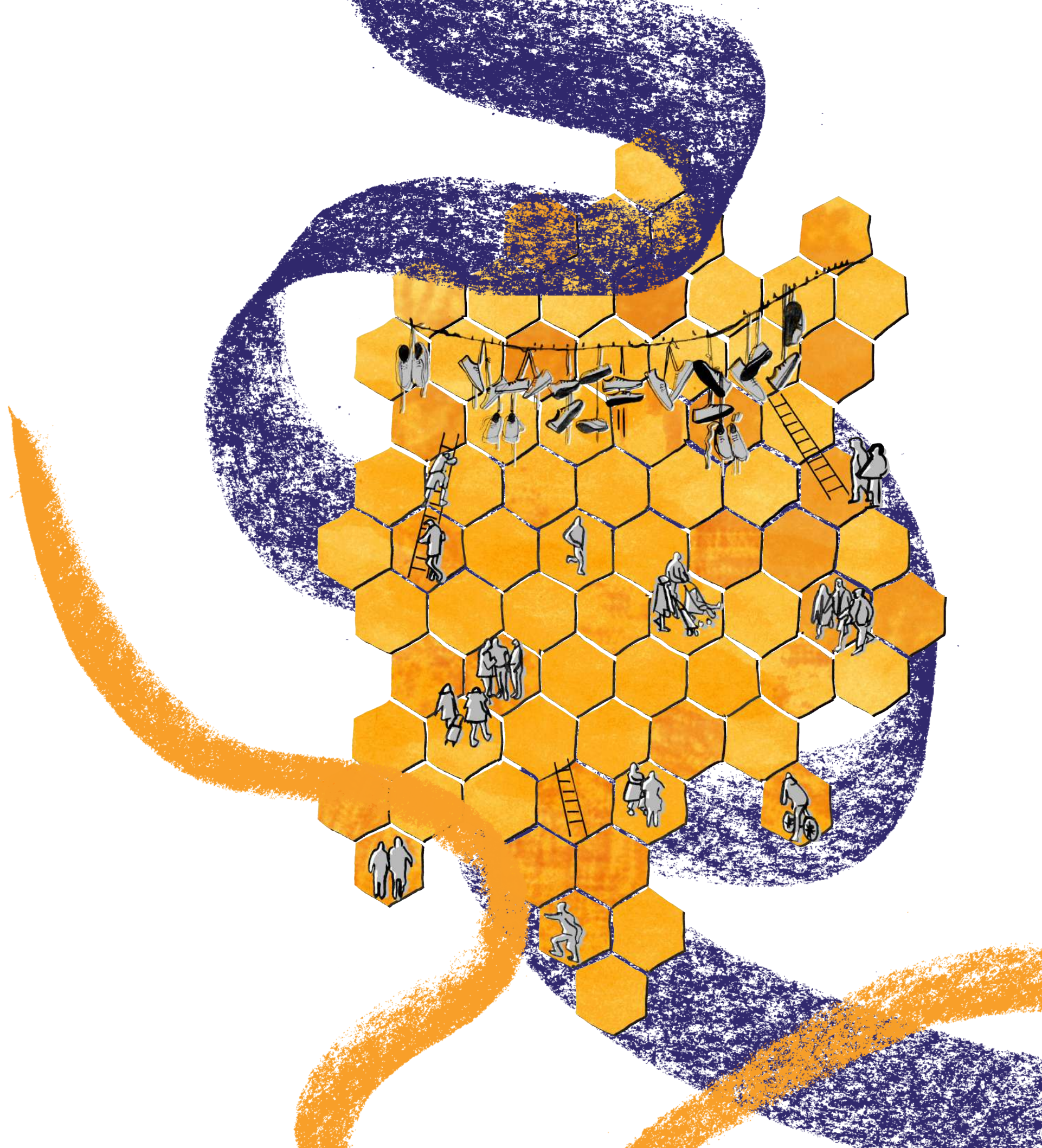
What has changed for the Participants?

Although it is still early days, participants are already reporting benefits of taking part in the studio sessions in shaping their practice of collaborative leadership.

" THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IS THE BASIS OF GOOD COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP "

" THIS EXPERIENCE SHOULD BE MANDATORY FOR MANAGERS IN SERVICES TO HELP THEM DEVELOP TO BE ENABLERS. "

" THERE IS STILL A LOT OF PASSION, COMMITMENT AND EXPERIENCE IN FRONT-LINE STAFF THAT IS TAPPED INTO DIFFERENT LEVELS IN DIFFERENT SERVICES AND THE REASONS FOR VARIATION NEEDS FURTHER EXPLORATION. "

" THE ABSOLUTE VALUE OF CO-PRODUCTION. NOT ONLY FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE BUT ALSO FROM FRONT LINE STAFF AND FRONT LINE MANAGERS. "

" MULTI-DISCIPLINARY WORKING IS MORE EFFECTIVE AND RESOURCEFUL "

" THE OPENNESS OF THESE SESSIONS IS IN MARKED CONTRAST TO DAY-TO-DAY CULTURE "

" THE ABILITY TO EMBED TRUST INTO THE ORGANISATION WHERE STAFF RECOGNISE THAT RISKS ARE WELL INTENDED MISTAKES MAY OCCUR AND BE UNDERSTOOD. "

" COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP IS MORE FULFILLING FOR STAFF "

" QUALITY DIALOGUE TAKES TIME AND EFFORT TO DEVELOP AND PROMOTE "

" IT'S OK TO BE UNSURE OF WHAT TO DO NEXT IN LEADERSHIP "

" PERSPECTIVE TAKING IS AN EFFECTIVE SKILL WHEN WORKING WITH STAFF OR SERVICE USERS "

" THE VALUE IN TAKING CALCULATED RISKS AND ALLOWING SENIOR MANAGERS TO SHARE THIS WITH STAFF AND FRONT-LINE MANAGERS "

What have we learned about collaborative leadership?

To the extent that collaborative leadership is understood as a craft, it will be best developed in situ through the active processes of experimentation and learning-by-making. The Leadership Studio project has demonstrated that these processes will be most effective if they involve full participation across all levels of organisation, they are focussed on a specific task, and there is sufficient time and commitment to build relationships based on trust.

Collaborative leadership goes beyond a network sensibility that attends to the structural elements and rules of engagement characterising many models of collective leadership, to consider 'how' leadership emerges through socially engaged work and 'how' it generates transformational change. Of course, the specifics of 'how' will be unique to each leadership situation, but what we have sought to do is identify underlying dynamics that can be scaled up beyond a single case.

Our inquiry has surfaced three such dynamics – dialogue, improvisation, and daring – that flow together, interweaving in the co-productive processes of collaborative leadership.

"MAYBE IT'S TIME TO START SHARING MORE GOOD EXAMPLES AND GOOD PRACTICES SO WE CAN CHIP AWAY AT THE BARRIERS BIT BY BIT."

Dialogue

Dialogue is a conversational process, but it is much more than conventional conversation or discussion, which often takes the form of a ping-pong game where each player defends their own position while seeking to gain advantage over their opponent. Rather, dialogue transcends these defensive positions in order to see the situation from alternative perspectives. It is the possibility of reflexive insight afforded by attempting to 'stand in the other's shoes' that initiates the generative process of collaborative leadership.

Improvisation

Improvisation is familiar in performance contexts such as theatre, music, dance, and sport, but equally it is pervasive in all day-to-day human activities involved in getting on with living together. It is a creative process, which makes something new out of what already exists by seeing previously unanticipated connections that invite new ways of acting in the present situation. Improvisation is a social accomplishment that arises within dialogue when appreciative language is used to 'yes ... and' others' contributions to progressively build something new.

Daring

Daring is what it takes to risk doing something different. It takes courage to step off the parapet and trust that you will fly. Organisations, with their standardised procedures, siloed operations and implicit expectations, are reinforced by learned skills and habits of action that avoid uncertainty and risk. Collaborative leadership offers a challenge to all of these uncertainty-reduction mechanisms, calling instead for a more enabling environment that learns from risk-taking and celebrates mistakes rather than punishing the perpetrators.

Conclusion

Project Team Reflections

The research team itself learned a great deal about collaborative leadership through working together across our various disciplinary and experiential backgrounds. This project has been greatly enriched by these differences, but it would be simplistic to suggest that the process has been easy. Ultimately though, as we prepare this report together, there is strong evidence that we have learned how better to collaborate for mutual benefit. It is entirely appropriate that the team has gained just as much as the other participants because we are every bit as involved in the process as they have been.

Next Steps

The Leadership Studio is but a drop in the ocean of collaborative public leadership, but even the smallest drop generates ripples. Our aspiration as a project team is to continue to energise the rippling out of collaborative leadership development through dialogue, improvisation and daring, encouraging others to pick up the mantle and facilitate collaborative flourishing.

As a starting point, we want to disseminate this report across Scotland and internationally. We encourage readers to assist in this rippling out by engaging in co-productive dialogues in their own workplaces, and by sharing this work with others who might be interested. In addition, we are always willing to dialogue with anyone who is working with collaborative leadership.

Notes

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