



## Briefing Paper 2: Understanding the leadership development terrain for the UK voluntary sector

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## About the CVSL Briefing Papers

This briefing paper is the second in a series of **three** short papers exploring the topic of leadership in the UK voluntary sector produced by the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership (CVSL). Our aim in preparing these papers has been to set the context for understanding recent debates around leadership in the voluntary sector in order to identify where further research and discussion is needed, and to understand what leadership development resources have been developed within and for the voluntary sector. We also hope to frame and shape future debates on leadership, and to point to new research agendas.

Consequently, **Paper 1** concentrates on reviewing literature that is best characterised as broadly concerning the debate about leadership within the UK voluntary sector, but it goes on to open this up wherever possible to explore the broader influence of debates on leadership which have influenced thinking about leadership in the sector. For instance these tend to be more critical perspectives that challenge ‘person-centred’ or heroic leader models. **Paper 2** describes the recent leadership development ‘terrain’ that has developed for the UK voluntary sector. Finally, **Paper 3** details a (non-exhaustive) group of approaches and theories in the wider leadership literature which are particularly pertinent to understanding, researching and communicating about leadership in the voluntary sector. Each paper is based on a semi-systematic review of the available academic and ‘policy based’ literature.

The underlying questions addressed in **Paper 2** are:

- What does the leadership development terrain look like for the voluntary sector?
- What are the current constraints facing the development of leadership skills in the voluntary sector?

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## 1. Introduction

In contrast to the underdeveloped and ‘embryonic’ (Macmillan and McLaren, 2012) nature of the UK academic voluntary sector leadership literature, there has been a much stronger sense of importance and urgency in policy and practice debates about the issue of leadership within the sector. The paper briefly outlines the issues raised by these debates before offering a (non-comprehensive) overview of the leadership development ‘terrain’ for the UK voluntary sector. Finally we consider the constraints to enhancing leadership development in the sector.

Over the years there have been calls from within the sector to pay heed to a supposed leadership deficit (Kirchner, 2006), due to limited investment in the development of leaders and managers within the sector, or emphasis on recruitment and retention of managers. A number of empirical studies have at various times spurred concern with a ‘lack of leadership’ across the sector. One such study, a ‘State of the Sector Panel’, was a longitudinal survey conducted by the Home Office on approximately 3,600 voluntary sector organisations in England. The intention of the study was to assess whether there was an increase in voluntary and community sector activity by 5% between 2003 and 2006 during the Labour administration. Surveys were conducted annually over the four years to gather information about the scale of activities delivered, funding arrangements, and relationships within and across sectors (Green 2009a, b, c). Some key findings from the survey showed:

- In 2002-03, around three quarters of respondents (74%) expected their activities to increase over the next three years, but this falls to between 50% and 60% in subsequent years (cited in Macmillan, 2011: 7).
- Although the survey found the primary constraint on activities was funding (Green 2009b: 10), it was shown that funding from public sources increased over time (Green 2009b: 15).

- Lack of leadership skills was also found to be one of the top five constraints facing the voluntary sector (Green, 2009a).

Green’s findings refer to the lack of individual leaders to play out these roles in the sector, whereas evidence provided by the UK Workforce Hub found this was more to do with gaps in leadership and strategy skills in the sector’s workforce (Clark, 2007). The latter study aimed to investigate the skills and workforce development of voluntary sector employees in 2007, by conducting a large scale survey of 1,922 English voluntary sector organisations using computer aided telephone interviewing (CATI) (Clark, 2007). Clark claims the ‘survey results have been weighted to ensure that they are representative of voluntary sector organisations with two or more paid employees for each nation’ (p.3). Key findings were: recruitment problems across the sector; skills shortage; and skills gaps identified by around three in ten employers. Specific to leadership issues it found ‘a lack of leadership skills in applicants was highlighted by more than one in eight employers (13%)...more needs to be done to rectify this and encourage individuals at all levels of their career to increase these skills’ (Clark, 2007: 6).

Clore Social Leadership Programme (Hopkins, 2010) identifies other studies providing support for these conclusions in the UK, including:

- ‘The 2003 ACEVO report Leadership, Leadership found that the sector faced significant problems in attracting and retaining staff with leadership potential and its 2006/07 survey of CEOs found that only 19 per cent were ‘home-grown’ and 74 per cent do not have a succession plan.
- An Institute for Public Policy Research (2009) paper found that the ‘voluntary sector needs to improve its skills in key leadership competencies such as strategic thinking, influencing and negotiating and communication and interpersonal skills.’ (cited in *ibid*: 26)

However, in apparent contradiction to these claims a recent study using the small charity index investigated the potential skills gaps in small organisations, and found little concern for the ‘lack of leadership’ across the sector. Instead, concern was concentrated on trustees, as ‘leadership was selected as the area where small charities felt the greatest need for upskilling amongst trustees, with 23% selecting either significant or some upskilling required’ (FSI, 2017: 17). This study is not representative of the sector, but does indicate towards potential differences in leadership across varying sized organisations e.g. trustees in small charities often take on some management responsibilities, as well as, governance, compared to larger voluntary sector organisations. This supports the notion for further research on leadership within small and medium-sized organisations and to not view leadership as homogenous across the sector.

Even though this survey has a much smaller sample size, initially distributed to the FSI’s member database of over 5,000 small charities but only received a total response rate of 326, these findings point out a number of potential arguments. These are not necessarily deduced from the findings, but useful in thinking about the situation from a different perspective. Firstly, these current findings may indicate that this ‘lack of leadership’ has been addressed in recent times. Secondly, it raises debate whether the notion of a ‘leadership deficit’ is, if it ever was, still relevant in the current UK voluntary sector context. Thirdly, the narrative at that time could reflect the contextual environment it was situated within, with the government favouring investment in such leadership development, and in turn the sector bodies overemphasised these concerns due to self-interest in becoming involved in such developments. Nonetheless, it would be beneficial to identify whether there are particular parts of the sector (such as, size, policy field, or group), that are more at risk of a lack of leadership, and ultimately, resources should be targeted and invested towards these challenging areas.

In the current climate there continue to be echoes of these concerns with a ‘leadership deficit’ in the voluntary sector. In 2010, the Leadership 20:20

commission was set up by NCVO as a means to address such concerns, with the commission president Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson DBE stating at the launch event, ‘it has never been more important to challenge civil society organisations, as well as Government and Business, to do more to engage and inspire future civil society leaders’. Subsequently, the commission released a review that identified a number of issues, gaps and challenges within voluntary sector leadership, stating:

‘It is felt that our sector’s leaders do not broadly represent the constituents our sector supports, and there is a lack of women, black and ethnic minority, and disabled leaders.

17. There is a lack of recognised pathways into our sector and its leadership.
18. Personal and professional development in our sector is patchy, and emerging leaders face a number of barriers to their development; financial, cultural and the availability of opportunities.
19. A lack of focus on management and leadership development is placing sustainability in our sector under threat.
20. There are few opportunities for emerging leaders in our sector to network and share with one another.
21. Emerging leaders more broadly do not have a place in scoping or contributing to our sector’s response to the challenges we will face.
22. The possibility of cross-sector collaboration to address the challenges our society faces is being hindered by a lack of mobility of leaders across sectors.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson DBE (2013)  
*Leadership 20:20 cabinet review submission*.  
London: Cabinet Office.

As listed in the box, a number of useful recommendations emerged from the review, such as, focusing on issues of inequality; establishing a robust network for emerging leaders; supporting more staff and volunteer development; promoting more awareness of leadership among funders; and encouraging mobility across sectors. However, there are still questions as to why this review was undertaken, who was it aimed for and meant to benefit, with the theme that voluntary sector leadership is 'broken' and needs 'fixing' echoing in the background. As previously referred to, Macmillan (2017) addresses an important argument on whether there is a current leadership problem, or if this normative narrative by the government on leadership is a politicised agenda to shift the focus away from the government onto the voluntary sector. Or has this been a genuine effort by the government to address a real, and possibly detrimental, issue within the sector? With these continuous calls and publicised recommendations the paper will turn to how these issues have been addressed and influenced leadership development.

## 2. Recent initiatives in voluntary sector leadership development

Previously, when these calls were made, government – and to an extent the voluntary sector itself – often reacted in some form. Certainly, under New Labour one response was a wave of research and leadership initiatives as part of its 'mainstreaming' and partnership initiatives. The underlying assumption was that the sector should be brought more actively into the delivery of public services (Mullins and Rees, 2016). To encourage a more even playing field, and enhance the role of the voluntary sector as a public service provider, Labour invested a substantial amount of funds in capacity building in the sector, through two key programmes known as 'Futurebuilders' and 'ChangeUp' (the latter being the most relevant for this paper).

'ChangeUp was a more diffuse and general £230m programme helping 'frontline' voluntary and community organisations to reach their potential (in delivering services or in other roles) by significantly improving the local, regional and national infrastructure available to them' (Macmillan, 2016: 112).

A part of this 'ChangeUp' programme (2004-2011), focused on developing voluntary sector leadership through establishing several initiatives, such as, the 'Governance' and 'Workforce' National Hubs of Expertise with the former focused on improving the quality of governance within the sector. This was later developed into the 'Governance and Leadership' National Support Service and Skills initiative. Alongside this, a number of national voluntary sector umbrella bodies – NAVCA, ACEVO and NCVO - also sought to address voluntary sector leadership development, arguing there had previously been a lack of spending on developing the sector or attention to leadership development. In response to the changing environment NCVO and ACEVO undertook a joint partnership to develop a new leadership initiative - known as the Voluntary Sector Leadership Centre – with the intention of raising the leadership profile and development across the voluntary sector (Bolton and Abdy, 2003). Although some leadership work was done by this centre it was relatively short lived due to a break down in the partnership between the two national bodies (Plummer, 2009). This created a gap in the leadership field for other TSOs to grow and develop their leadership programmes, such as, The Kings Fund, Clore Social Leadership Programme and the Foundation for Social Improvement, each tending to focus on leadership within different field e.g. health and care, arts and culture, small charities etc. These will be explained in more detail further on.

**Table 1 Recent leadership development initiatives**

Still in existence:	
NAVCA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide peer support and coaching services</li> </ul>
ACEVO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emerging Leaders Programme</li> <li>- Leadership learning (one day courses)</li> <li>- Coaching, mentoring and resources</li> </ul>
Common Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Runs leadership development courses which mix people from the private, public and not-for-profit sectors.</li> </ul>
Clore Social Leadership Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Delivery a range of courses</li> <li>- Run fellowships for emerging leaders from a range of demographics, young people, BME, female disability etc.</li> </ul>
NCVO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leadership 20: 20 commission, this has led to 'Charity leadership in the 2020s' fee based programme for aspiring leaders.</li> <li>- Step on board programme</li> </ul>
ACOSVO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focused in Scottish voluntary sector organisations</li> <li>- The Leadership Exchange Programme is a free initiative that pairs leaders from across sectors to improve leadership capacity between peers</li> <li>- Also provide mentoring and a leader support service</li> </ul>
Uprising leadership programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offer a range of leadership and employability programmes for 16-25 year olds.</li> </ul>
Foundation for Social Improvement – FSI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Free, or limited fee, training courses cover a wide range of subjects from event planning to</li> </ul>

<b>leadership, which are targeted at small sized charities.</b>
School for Social Entrepreneurs- SSE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Run a number of fee-based courses, such as, developing sustainable leaders, voluntary sector digital leaders.</li> <li>- Run a free social entrepreneur programme.</li> </ul>
The King's Fund
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Portfolio of leadership programmes that cover different leadership styles, issues and groups. Many are run over a series of sessions, but have a substantial fee. The Cascading Leadership programme provides a free programme but spaces are limited to 20 leaders, individuals will be partnered with a consultant to provide support and advice.</li> </ul>
Voluntary Organisations Network North East
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes We Can leadership and management programme for social change. 8 day training course, for those who are not accredited to develop their skills, with an attached fee.</li> </ul>

During the New Labour administration more emphasis was given to a top-down approach by: the government funding infrastructure organisations – NCVO, ACEVO and NAVCA – to deliver capacity building programmes; and develop national hubs, such as ChangeUp, that had earmarked allocated resources for leadership development. Part of the government's agenda to build the sector's capacity, was delivering a stream specifically focused on developing the skills, capacity and networks of leaders; however, these hubs closed once the funding ran out in 2008. Following this a series of events took place that created the 'unsettlement' of this field and exacerbated conditions to create an emerging market.

These factors included the construction of the Conservative-led Coalition (2010-2015) that was fairly critical of the dependent relationship built

between the voluntary sector and state, which they claimed had developed under the previous administration. There was also increasing uncertainty over how effective the capacity building programmes were that were being delivered (Macmillan, 2016), which was accentuated by the financial crisis and negotiations on how to play out austerity measures. In particular, the Coalition government's first Comprehensive Spending Review in 2010 outlined major deficit reduction strategies to drastically reduce government spending, with the intention of tackling these issues in one administration. The withdrawal of funding sources to the sector and significant changes to funding arrangements, both contributed to the ChangeUp programmes being closed.

However, this does not mean that all leadership development has ceased within the sector. In fact, this provision has evolved in its scope and the nature of delivery. Macmillan (2016) provides a useful explanation of this changing landscape, specifically focusing on the capacity building field and the role of infrastructure organisations, which can be extended to understand the changes in the leadership development domain. Macmillan (2016) describes that under the previous administration the capacity building provision was to 'work with and fund the supply-side of mainly the voluntary sector infrastructure organisations' (p.113). Following this the combination of overlapping and complex exogenous pressures, subsequently, shifted the focus from a supply-side to delivering 'demand-led capacity building'. This was fuelled by concerns about potential bias in how funds were previously distributed, and the rationale that channelling funds to frontline services and community organisations would not only be more effective, but also bring their interests and voice to the foreground and promote a more demand-led approach. Alongside this, was the introduction of market-based mechanisms to operate in this new environment, including, fee-based services (due to a shift from grants to contractual arrangements), voucher schemes, and as Macmillan defines, a trip advisor style device for consumers to leave feedback and comments (ibid). Such arrangements have created

conditions for a competitive operating environment, with organisations other than the infrastructure agencies entering the market and trying to find a space to negotiate from.

The term 'leadership' has become an all-encompassing buzzword in the current environment, and proposed as fundamental to the survival of voluntary sector organisations. There have been a number of organisations that have evolved and become established within the field as key service providers, which entails delivering leadership training, support through mentoring and coaching, and a range of leader fellowship programmes. Whilst the list in Table 1 is not exhaustive it does illustrate a wave of emerging leadership development initiatives that tend to be small in scale, delivered as a one or two day training courses for a select few. The focus continues to be on the emerging and aspiring leader, or the traditional individualistic perspective, which raises questions about the types of provision and the accessibility for some groups.

That being said there are some organisations that have developed a portfolio of leadership programmes for the voluntary sector, that directly address some of the recommendations raised by the Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson DBE, albeit typically focused on a certain domain of the sector.

**Example 1:** The Kings Fund takes a broader approach to leadership development by opening programmes to a range of stakeholders within the health and social care sector, such as, NHS providers, local authorities, public sector as well as third sector organisations. There is a portfolio of programmes addressing specific styles, issues or groups, from becoming more self-aware, and emerging leaders to women only programmes. These programmes tend to be delivered over a series of sessions, and although many are focused on the individual leader, they offer one of the few courses to develop collaborative leadership. There are substantial fees attached to the programmes. The Cascading programme is a free course funded by Comic Relief and the Big Lottery for leaders

specifically from voluntary sector organisations, of any size, that focus on health and wellbeing.

**Example 2:** Clore Social Leadership Programme has successfully secured a number of charitable trust grants to develop various initiatives to support aspiring leaders focused on the cultural sector. Programmes directly address issues of gender equality within voluntary sector leadership, youth and migrant fellowship, although the focus still remains solely on the individual.

**Example 3:** Foundations for Social Improvement provide training on a wide range of issues targeted at small charities, such as, building corporate relationships, fundraising skills, and although the training is not solely dedicated to leadership development there are some clear overlaps in building leadership skills. They deliver the training across the UK at a very minimal fee.

**Example 4:** Another method of leadership development is channelled through university provision aimed specifically at the sector, such as, at Birkbeck University of London and at The Open University. The Open University has recently launched free online courses for small and medium sized voluntary sector organisation designed to provide an opportunity for people who work within voluntary organisations to develop energetic, practical and thoughtful leadership practice. These courses move away from thinking purely about the individual leader to focusing on collaborative leadership and uses an approach of blended learning.

It is also worth acknowledging that Table 1 probably only represents a segment of leadership development programmes that currently exists, as additional opportunities can often be disguised under different terms, such as, 'capacity building' or 'skills development', that undoubtedly overlap and contribute to the leadership of an organisation or across sectors. For example, the Local Sustainability Fund provided by the Office for Civil Society provides resources to organisations of a certain size to give the organisation the opportunity to think strategically about its 'business' model and overall

direction, and to build the organisation's capacity. This arguably could also be viewed as enabling leadership within organisations that would not normally have the capacity to do so.

### 3 What are the constraints facing leadership development?

Although addressing a wider issue on governance, it is salient to note the 'Taken on Trust' (2017) report by the Charity Commission that illustrates research into awareness and the effectiveness of charity trustees in England and Wales. Although not directly about leadership the report raises some comparable findings on skills deficits within the sector but within a board context, by demonstrating:

'Only 40% of all trustees report that their board contains sufficient governance skills to effectively meet the needs of their organisation. Whilst this rises to 75% when those reporting mainly sufficient skills are added, this nonetheless indicates that a quarter of all trustees reporting feel that the board's competence in this important respect is lacking.' (2017, p.44)

This report echoes further similarities by distinguishing differences by the size of organisations, more specifically, reporting organisations from the largest two income bands to have the most sufficient governance skills whilst demonstrating a considerable decline in smaller organisations.

'By contrast, only 64% of trustees reporting in the smallest band of charities (less than £10k income) identify sufficient or mainly sufficient governance skills present at the board.' (ibid)

The report goes on to highlight the importance of charities accessing advice and support to address these skill deficits, in particular by smaller organisations. However, the report identifies smaller organisations are also less likely to access available support due to lack of awareness of such services or the services not being applicable to this size organisations. This reflects a similar situation for leadership development in small charities being a dual pronged attack, and the importance of understanding and tackling the barriers and constraints that may prevent, particularly smaller, organisations from accessing support.

Other than lack of awareness the literature often mentions constraints that might prevent leaders from attending development initiatives and training, particularly around lack of time and resources. Small organisations that face an increase in demand and fewer resources, with senior staff often playing out several roles within an organisation, this could act as a barrier to accessing training and investing in leadership development. Leadership initiatives are also argued to have a London bias (Macmillan and Buckingham, 2013), and operate as a fee-based service, which could further prevent an equal playing field for organisations accessing leadership development, adversely impacting on smaller organisations. Furthermore, there is a tradition in the sector for short one day or half-day courses, which arguably do not provide an appropriate amount of time or scope to inform comprehensive leadership development.

A wider constraint is the negative attitudes and connotations attached to leadership development. These are based on assumptions that limited resources should not fund staff training development but should fundamentally support the delivery of frontline services. For example, this was brought to attention by the national infrastructure agency AVECO by arguing professionalism should no longer be viewed as a 'guilty secret' (Kirchner, 2006). Nevertheless, such efforts have not eliminated these attitudes, as Dame Mary Marsh (2013) the founding Director of Clore Social Leadership argues 'we [within the social sector] too often give the impression that it is wrong and selfish to focus on personal leadership development' (2013: 9). At a time when economic downturn and austerity measures have become the norm, parts of the sector have faced a decline in public trust and increasing scrutiny by the media due to cases of mismanagement of funds and poor governance e.g. supposedly demonstrated in the case of Kids Company. These exogenous pressures may have accentuated these 'guilty' feelings within the sector making organisations increasingly wary to invest funds on training or 'personal' leadership development, even though the long-term outcome would potentially build the organisations'

sustainability. These feelings may be heightened by the challenges of measuring the success of leadership development, often having less tangible outcomes, or a limited direct impact on the social purpose of the organisation. This illustrates how alongside developing and targeting leadership development within and across the sector, it is just as important to promote the relevance of such investment, particularly for organisations with less capacity, and to address wider negative attitudes towards leadership initiatives. Doing this will also tackle the misconception that leadership development is only for the elite few in positions of power across the sector.

Nevertheless, whether there is a leadership deficit or not, leadership and leadership development continues to be promoted as a key answer to the challenges of the current environment. For example, the Lords Inquiry (2017) championed these thoughts throughout, but there was an acknowledgement of the failings of the leadership training and development market:

‘Charities recognise that training and development for leaders and staff is important, however there are still significant shortcomings in terms of available training and levels of take-up. We therefore recommend that infrastructure bodies in the sector take the lead on working with government, academics and research institutions, and with the business community, to identify further opportunities to support and fund leadership programmes.’ (p.32)

One explanation for this is due to the sector spending considerably less on leadership development than the other sectors (Hudson, 2011); it is argued that if the sector were to invest more in this area it would result in greater effectiveness. In conjunction with this is the increasing exogenous pressures that have created considerable strain and tension on organisations accessing leadership development. Whilst organisations have seen a significant rise in demand on services coupled with a squeeze on resources, organisations have faced a decline in the amount of resources and time they have to dedicate to attending such leadership

development and initiatives. Furthermore, some organisations have raised concern that current leadership development is not good value for money, particularly during a time of financial uncertainty, even to the extent it has been described ‘the market for leadership development is broken’ (Harris, 2016). In response to squeezed resources there are a few examples of free leadership programmes, mainly by the Foundation for Social Improvement (FSI) that deliver various types of training to small charities, and the recently launched e-learning courses on leadership development by The Open University. Whilst these are obviously helpful for certain groups to access leadership development and build organisations’ capacity, which otherwise would not have the resources to do so, it also raises the question as to whether this potentially contributes to disrupting the market by making it increasingly competitive. Although this paper has directly drawn attention to the growing market of leadership development it is, however, still a relatively small level of provision which is monopolised by a few key players. Due to the low level of provision, issues around marketing and organisations not being aware of the services (Charity Commission, 2017), and the constraints mentioned previously, there is still some way for the leadership development arena to be inclusive and appropriate for all organisations within the sector.

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