

IGNITE

The leadership
programme for
local government
chief executives

collaborate
for social change



About

Ignite is a Solace leadership programme supported by the Local Government Association, which has been delivered in 2016/7 by Collaborate CIC in partnership with the RSA.

We are grateful to the LGA for their support, and to the Department for Communities and Local Government for ongoing endorsement and input into the programme. We are very grateful to a number of leaders from government, NHS, business and civil society who have contributed to the development of the programme, and to the local government chief executives who offered their expert input, support and participation on the programme. For more information and to register interest for the 2017/18 programme, please contact Trudy Birtwell from Solace at trudy.birtwell@solace.org.uk.

Deborah Cadman and Becky Shaw,
Solace Leadership Co-chairs

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Over the last year Solace – working in partnership with Collaborate, the RSA and supported by the Local Government Association – has co-designed and piloted a new kind of leadership programme for local authority chief executives.

In this short report we reflect on why we have done this, what we have learned, and what comes next. At the outset we were convinced that success in our roles as Chief Executives meant embracing the complexity around us, and using it as an opportunity to reflect, learn and drive improvement through collaboration. Now we are even more certain.

Deborah Cadman and Becky Shaw,
Solace Leadership Co-Chairs

A co-created process meant we have taken on a huge range of inputs – both from the group of chief executives who have taken part in elements of the programme, and from those outside of the sector whose views and challenge we have sought. Common to them all is this:

- 1. Transforming our places is personal and political** – this is ultimately about our collective ambition for people and place, and the ways in which we can organise for change in political and fast-changing environments. It requires us to keep working on the connection between purpose, intention and the values we hold as public servants. It means speaking truth to power, but also truth to ourselves.
- 2. System leadership is a requirement, but it needs to be real** – we are all working in a context in which the tensions between organisation, place, politics and people are more obvious than ever. As council chief executives we must ‘manage the whole’ – both gripping our organisations and influencing the system. Through the programme we have asked: do we have the right skills, relationships and space to work on them?
- 3. Accountability and improvement is all of our business** – the era of top-down judgement on our performance is all but over – replaced by a much more complex web of shared accountabilities and risks. This means doing more to understand ‘what good looks like’ from the perspectives of our members, peers, citizens and other stakeholders, and using this as a tool to drive self-reflection improvement and proactive relationship building with Whitehall and beyond.

The Ignite programme will be running a 2017/18 cohort beginning in September 2017, with support from the Local Government Association and backing from the Department of Communities and Local Government. Participants will spend time with peers and experience reflection and constructive challenge from senior figures in Whitehall, industry and across the public services in a range of environments, kicking off with a 24hr residential at Warwick University.

The programme offers a chance to reflect on the leadership challenges posed by running complex organisations and multiple services; in addressing wicked issues like health and social care integration, inclusive growth and children, families and social mobility; and the possibilities and challenges thrown up by new technology, social movements and political change. It offers a chance to build relationships with peers that can be a source of practical support and development for the future.

Why IGNITE? The New Climate for Local Government

The post-election climate for local government is uncertain. Brexit negotiations are in early stages. The mood music around austerity is changing. And a minority government will likely rule with a pared-back legislative agenda and a weakened central mandate. There will be no less pressure for local leaders to deliver, but we will need to be more proactive in doing so: asking for forgiveness rather than permission in areas such as growth and public service reform.

The ability to collaborate across sector, silo and departmental lines will be increasingly vital. In areas like health and social care – where whole system planning is being encouraged through STPs and new care models – there is a critical need to create relationships that can sustain a different way of working. This is the essence of system leadership. And as we struggle with the inevitable logjams around funding and market reorganisation, local government chief executives should ask ourselves: are we doing enough to model our positive vision for place based health?

Councils have a unique role in representing and connecting with place. We should be reflecting on whether we do enough to make this real. Recent tragic events in Manchester and London illustrate the need to re-build broken trust between communities and civic institutions, and create a culture of listening, learning and acting. This is leadership aligned strongly to purpose. None of it happens by accident, and we need to embody it.

The need for local places to drive new models of growth will persist. Government has made commitments around the relationship between industrial strategy and place. But none of this will mean much unless we can create narratives for change in our places that have a chance of sticking and generating economically and socially productive investment. Good chief executives are already going beyond the ‘art of the deal’ and working with political leadership to bring local partners together as part of collaborative growth and human capital strategies. At every level – district, county, unitary, metro – we have questions to ask and a role to play.

“We all get stuck with the same mental models that reflect the past and not the current...”

Ignite Participant

In an era where accountability is more complex, many participants felt that we should judge our success by the extent to which the most marginalized people feel they have a stake in these changes. This in itself throws up important challenges. Do we know who they are? Do we have enough insight about their lives? Are we prepared to listen and re-design or re-commission our services in ways that give communities a chance to thrive? There is risk in innovating the way we work – but the risk of inertia is far greater, and the possibility of managed decline still real.

Participants on the 2016/17 programme debated the skills and attributes that chief executives need to really make a difference in this environment.

- **Thinking systemically and acting entrepreneurially** – asking: are we creating the underlying behaviours and culture to support systemic change? And can we act like public entrepreneurs that blur sectors and influence widely?
- **Building relationships that can hold the weight of change** – asking: have we built teams that are resilient and can adapt? How can we balance getting the basics right with a new level of ambition for our places?
- **Brokering narratives for place that can inspire** – asking: are we doing enough to build purpose-led organisations that understand their unique role? Is this aligned with a positive vision that is rooted in people and place, and what does this mean for our performance management techniques and the way we work at the political-managerial interface?
- **Managing fragmentation and working with the tensions** – asking: what does it mean for us as individuals to balance political, managerial, social and place issues? How do we understand our added value and work on our ability to manage the interdependencies?
- **Inviting evidence, challenge and the input of critical friends** – asking: how do the challenges we face feel from the perspective of others, and can we understand each others' definition of success? Can creating space for cross-sector dialogue make intractable issues seem possible to resolve?

"We need to invest effort in understanding what is going on in our institutions and strip it back - what are we in this for..."

NHS Chief Executive

The Ignite Programme

The 2016/17 Ignite programme tested a mix of methods and interventions, including:

- **1:1 interviews and reflection time**

Both as a means to design the programme, and as a way of reflecting on group sessions in more personal settings

- **24hr residential at Warwick University**

With sessions on the operating context, understanding each others roles challenges and emotions, and practical content on identified policy issues.

- **Small group Chatham House rules leadership roundtables**

Generating honest reflection from external experts, and giving small groups the chance to go deeper into issues and leadership implications.

- **Individual 'place' sessions with CX and politicians**

Giving people a chance to reflect 'in their places' – in one instance with a Leader, cabinet members and senior officers.

- **Interactive large-group session**

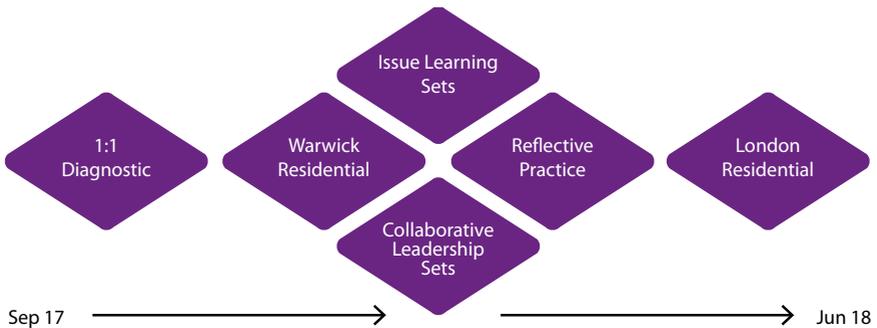
Which tested some emerging themes and generated feedback on the personal and organizational challenges facing CXs.

"(We need to be) courageous if we want something different. We need to be more than just thinkers and advocates; we need to be able to propose solutions..."

Ignite Participant

The 2017/18 programme will build on this to include exchanges (in partnership with DCLG, for example) and the opportunity for participants to co-design small group and reflective sessions around the leadership outcomes most pertinent to them.

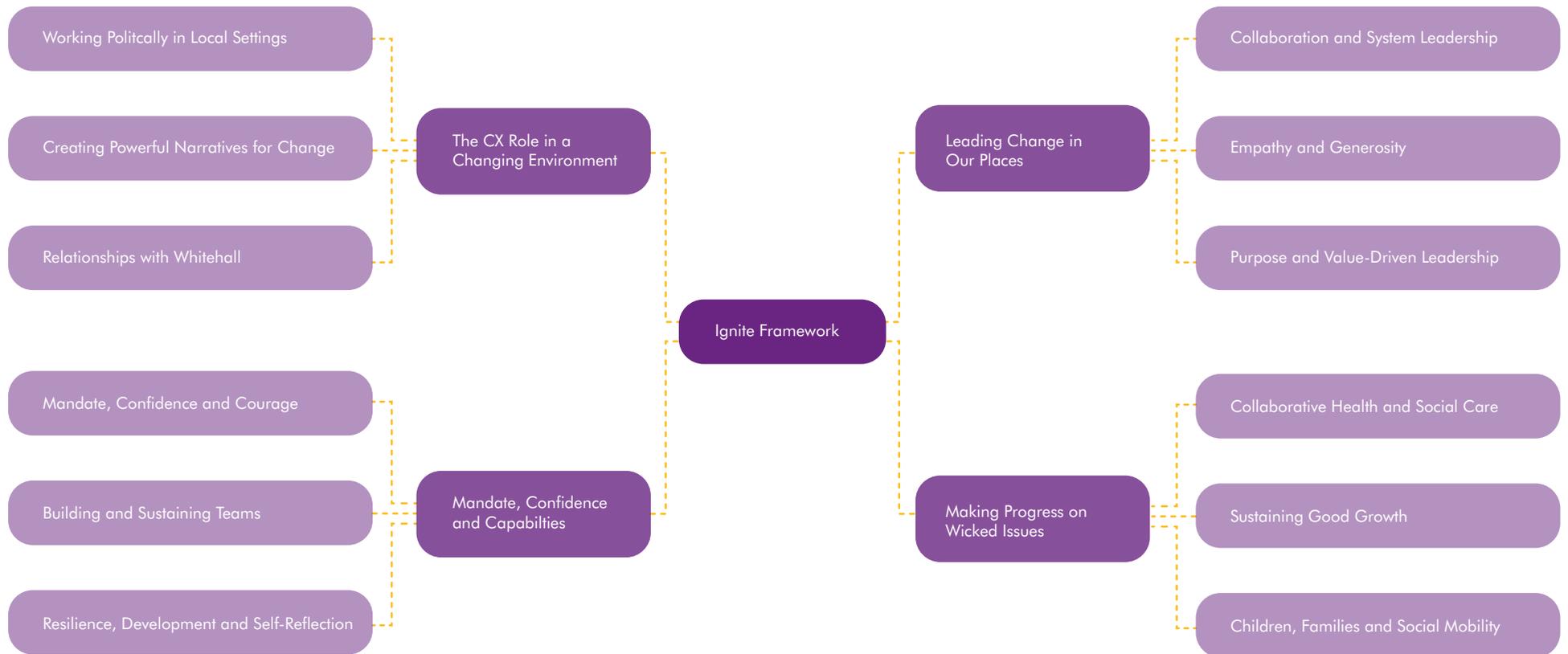
The timeline will be as follows:



This is a subsidised programme – part of a joint commitment from the LGA, Solace and DCLG to offer more support to serving chief executives at a time where demands on our time are greater than ever. But it does not work without commitment – so participants will need to sign up for the programme with a commitment to what will be approximately 5-7 days of their time through a nine month period.

The Ignite Framework

The following pages outline the framework for Ignite which we have co-designed with CXs and partners. It gives a sense of the issues that participants have brought to the group, and the ways in which will structure leadership support for the 2017/18 cohort. To discuss in more depth, contact Henry on henry@collaborateCIC.com



Leading Change in our Places

	EXAMPLES OF ISSUES/TENSIONS?	EXAMPLES OF LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS ADDRESSED WITHIN IGNITE
LEADING ACROSS SECTORS AND SYSTEMS	An increasing need to build influence, delivery capacity across systems – but still second order for many CXs, and gaps around the necessary skillset for system/place leadership. Leading in a system and system leadership are 2 different things!	What is the skillset (and mindset) needed for to understand organisational and system culture? Is our leadership as CXs enabling or undermining transformation? Can we do this stuff whilst also doing the basics...or are the 'basics' changing?
EMPATHY AND GENEROSITY	Need for relationships with teams, partners and stakeholders to be stronger or adaptive. Need for reconnection with public as basis for mandate. Need for holistic view and offer for citizens/communities	Do we do enough as CXs to put ourselves in others' shoes? Do we understand enough about the incentives and pressures on those around us? Are we listening properly and with intention?
PURPOSE AND VALUE DRIVEN LEADERSHIP	Sometimes we lack of clear account of why we are transforming, esp as the policy context changes. This is the purpose question! Can be lack of a positive vision for what great place leadership could deliver beyond austerity tramlines.	How do we create space to work on purpose, values and vision? Are we doing enough with peers to help each other craft and sustain this? Do sector bodies value and celebrate this enough?

Progress Against Wicked Issues

	EXAMPLES OF ISSUES/TENSIONS?	EXAMPLES OF LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS ADDRESSED WITHIN IGNITE
COLLABORATIVE HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	Difficult relationships with NHS colleagues. Difficulty in producing cogent plans that challenge NHS/clinical hegemony. Creating credible models of local change. Lack of our own models for what good place based health would look like?	Do we need more insight around health issues, or understanding and empathy with NHS colleagues? Some STPs are creating heightened process but not opportunity – how do we create the ‘insulation’ to do radical things locally? And have we shown what good looks like from our perspective?
INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & GROWTH	Disconnection between economic and social functionality. Need for a clearer account of social infrastructure for growth. Silo problem within councils and across local economies. Some lack of understanding of how the investment community thinks and works.	Do we lead our councils as effective anchor institutions in place, or understand what this would require? Do we have the right understanding of how inclusive growth can be made real? Can we build robust enough teams and a strong local narrative to drive IG across sectors?
CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND SOCIAL MOBILITY	Rise in demand with complex root causes and presentation. In some cases a lack of multi-sector response or fragmented relationships between agencies. Some lack a strong narrative on family support and the meaning of social mobility in our places – beyond responding to service demand.	How do we create strong and rapid feedback loops – both within our councils and around families? Are we seeing the whole family and doing enough to change the way public services respond and support? Do we have a silo problem that we perpetuate as CXs?

Confidence and Capabilities

	EXAMPLES OF ISSUES/TENSIONS?	EXAMPLES OF LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS ADDRESSED WITHIN IGNITE
MANDATE, CONFIDENCE AND COURAGE	Increasing fragility of the job. Consequences of speaking truth to power. Difficulty CXs find in asking the right questions, and getting honest feedback from teams and peers. Lack of collective peer support – is local government still too much of a zero sum game?	How do we help each other build confidence in our skills and our roles? Where do we get constructively challenged and get comparative input, and should this happen more outside of the service/local govt lens? If the job is increasingly short tenure then are we being bold enough in our impact?
BUILDING AND SUSTAINING TEAMS	This is a core and enduring skill – but increasingly critical. Need for increasingly outward facing – teams that build relationships; act like entrepreneurs and often across sectors. Not enough regular orientation? Feedback loops need to be more honest and stronger	How do we help teams to give honest feedback so we can learn together? How do we as CXs cascade this through our organisations? What methods can we use, and do we need more ‘critical friend’ support/views? How can we share power and risk?
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT, RESILIENCE AND SELF-REFLECTION	We never have enough time for this stuff....but all recognize it is critical and needs to be invested in and valued. Personal resilience is taken for granted (by CXs and by others) and long-term risk of this is burnout and poor productivity.	This is the whole point of Ignite! Do we reflect enough on our own personal journeys, and ask (and share) how the work affects us personally? What would encourage us to do this, and create a safe space for ongoing mutual support?

Leading in a Changing Political Environment

	EXAMPLES OF ISSUES/TENSIONS?	EXAMPLES OF LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS ADDRESSED WITHIN IGNITE
WORKING POLITICALLY IN LOCAL SETTINGS	An enduring tension around leadership of (and responsibility/accountability for) organisation, place, politics, citizens. CXs feeling this tension more than ever – but increasing pressure to manage it effectively. Some getting sacked for taking risks and innovating. Need to develop a ‘code’ for leading with integrity that is fit for purpose.	How do we navigate these tensions and get the right kind of support to understand them? What is the ongoing support mechanism that Solace/LGA/CLG could provide? What should our new operating or ethical principles be as CXs?
CREATING SHARED NARRATIVES FOR CHANGE	Creating a robust narrative for change #1 task in many places – goes beyond management – but not enough CXs have the resources and teams around them. Political & stakeholder influencing needs to be stronger in some cases. Weak centre means this is increasingly critical locally – both at local and devo/city regional level.	What support do CXs need to create and sustain high level transformation narratives? Are we hiring and promoting people without this skillset? How can we as CXs learn from others more effectively and share our stories?
LOCAL-WHITEHALL RELATIONSHIPS	The relationship to feel more enabling. Opportunities from weak legislative agenda but a need for stronger collective local voice on some issues. Need to understand alignment with civil service/Whitehall approach to leadership. Credibility & strength of both is key & interdependent!	How can we improve the interface with Whitehall for us as leaders? Do we get enough support and/or push from central gov? Are we clear about what is expected of us and who judges? Can we test this through Ignite cohorts?

Trying to thrive while having to cope

As our Ignite conversations underlined, a recurrent problem for all leaders is how to keep the show on the road while creating the space for change; how to manage in the current flawed system while trying to reform that system. The terrible tragedy of Grenfell Tower and the chaos and disruption still playing out reminds us that getting the basics right, for example making sure regulations are understood and enforced can be a matter of life and death.

In the face of tight budgets, complex needs and multiple risks, avoiding failure, let alone disaster, is itself a huge responsibility. Yet for few leaders, and certainly not for those participating in the Ignite process, is avoiding failure a sufficient motivation. Instead, ambitious leaders see managing the present and changing the future as links in a chain of improvement. Coping today is the 'floor target', reforming for tomorrow is the 'stretch target'.

One way we thought about this used the framework for policy success developed recently by the Centre for Public Impact (CPI), which was based on hundreds of case studies from around the world. Conforming the ideas of public value theory, the CPI research suggests the likelihood of intended impact is maximised by balancing three components; legitimacy, policy design and action. At one of the Ignite workshops, listening to the council

and health leaders discuss the challenges of service reconfiguration and integration, we sensed a way a connecting the idea of 'trying to thrive while having to cope' to the CPI framework.

For 'legitimacy', by which is meant stakeholder and public buy-in to the goals and methods of change, the floor target is clarity and engagement. Employees, service users and citizens need to understand what leaders are trying to do, recognise it is necessary and have some faith that it is deliverable. This requires genuine engagement, not just formal processes but long term relationships in which people across a place feel they can speak and be heard. Given the impact of austerity, the vagaries of national regulation and the scale of public cynicism that's a challenging baseline in itself. The stretch target is harder still. As we describe above, it involves the development and articulation of a mobilising mission for a service or a place; an ambitious account – both visionary and practical - of what is possible; a mission that not only excites people but motivates them to be part of change.

For 'policy' the floor target is an unerring focus on outcomes and people. This might sound obvious but, as many of the leaders in our discussion said, too often it appears that the aim of policy is more about organisational self-preservation

than meeting public needs or aspirations. As one leader put it “what drives too many organisations, particularly in the NHS, is the question ‘what can I be sacked for and how can I avoid it’”. We also heard of policy, both national and local, unveiled without even a coherent account of the problem it is seeking to solve. If clarity of outcome is the necessity, the stretch target for policy development is innovation and agility; creating the confidence to try things out and the culture and systems which mean failure can be tolerated and learnt from quickly. This is part of what we mean by ‘acting like an entrepreneur’; not easy to do locally; almost impossible centrally.

Finally, for what the CPI call ‘action’ - what is often referred to as implementation - the floor target is an understanding and appreciation of the incentives of each actor in a system. If change involves asking people to do something which they don’t think is in their interests, success is highly unlikely. This is why so often in discussions about local collaboration Ignite participants emphasised the importance of understanding and empathy between partners for the constraints and goals of their peers. Too often leaders are incurious or simply wrong about motivations in our own organisation let alone others. The stretch target for action is a deeper level collaboration, the time when it is relevant to use the clichéd word ‘synergy’.

It’s when actors in a system move from a zero-sum to a positive-sum game and from that point start to embed expectations of trust and generosity.

Delving deeply into case studies and comparative data suggests that success isn’t just about having greater legitimacy, better policy, more powerful action; these things need to go together and in balance. A successful outcome is more likely when all three components are good than if two are excellent and one poor. This is as true of the stretch targets as of the floor. Leaders can and should start from wherever the opportunity to unlock change lies, but ultimately vision, innovation and generosity need to go together.

In the face of the pressures on local government the idea that leaders can aspire to do more than cope may seem unrealistic. But unless they are motivated by mission and possibility as well as necessity they are doomed to eternal crisis management. And when things go right there is a feedback loop. Those occasional moments when it all comes to together, when we are reminded of the ambition that first moved us to public service, are also a vital source of energy when coping is the least and the most we can do.

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