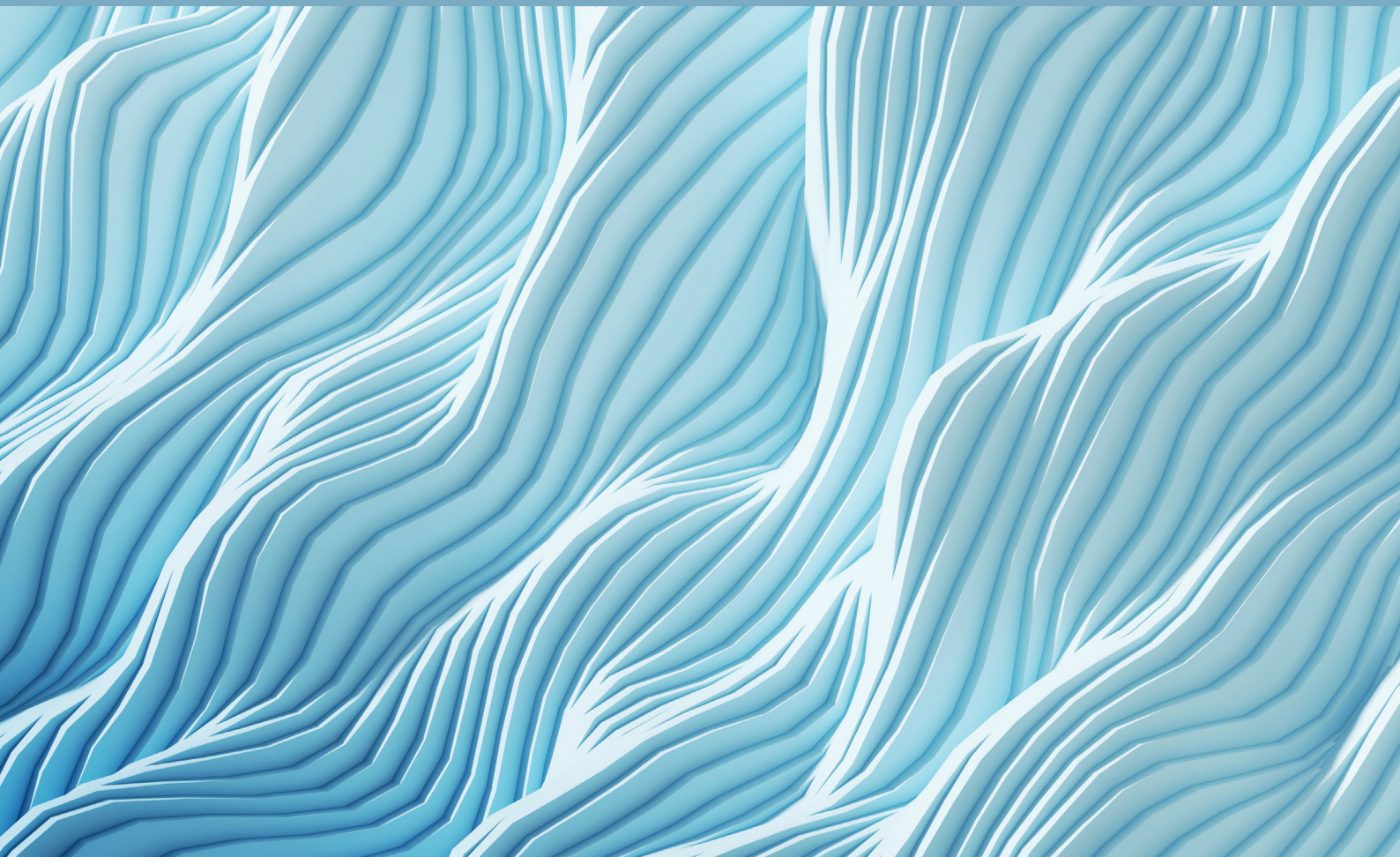




Glasgow Child Poverty Programme: Culture, Multi-Agency Working, Leadership and Learning Briefing



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Ingredients for success



Leadership

- ◆ Political leadership's focus on long-term change rather than quick fixes for child poverty
- ◆ Senior officer leadership's willingness to commit to change and embodying a different kind of leadership
- ◆ Some parts of the Scottish Government recognising the need for them to do things differently, and recognising their role as a partner, rather than solely a funder
- ◆ Leaders need time and space to step out of the "as is" system, and a high-risk appetite is essential

Culture and multi-agency working

- ◆ Strengthening understanding and building relationships across different organisational/ sectoral cultures, rather than a focus on collaborating around a specific service or intervention. Accepting this takes time and continuing to prioritise collaboration despite frustrations and challenges

Learning

- ◆ Learning cannot sit with a single person; it must be a shared responsibility
- ◆ Learning is not a thing ("What are we going to do with the learning?"). Learning is a process and deeply interwoven with practice change
- ◆ Using tools to embed learning into a team's way of working, e.g., strategic gateways, assessment and reflection tools, the Innovation and Learning Framework

Why is this piece of work important for tackling child poverty through public service reform?

- ◆ Reform work cannot be separated from culture. **People and relationships are at the heart of public service reform.**

- ◆ We need to interrogate assumptions around what public services should look like, what they are for, and what they can and cannot do. “That’s just the way we’ve always done it and that’s the only way it can be done”: this is where it is important to examine organisational/ sectoral culture and interrogate assumptions.
- ◆ Multi-agency programme structures complicate traditional models of leadership and collaboration. This different way of working can help create the conditions for systems change if done properly.

What has been the impact of this work so far?

Understanding
of the value of a
learning culture

Funding flexibility

Strengthened
relationships
between officials
and Elected
Members

Strengthened
relationships
between public
and third sector

Changing
understanding of
what leadership is

Relationships
between local
and national
government

- ◆ The “razor-sharp focus” on child poverty across the organisation has enabled Elected Members to make “**brave political decisions**” such as identifying and prioritising booster wards. This focus can help **strengthen relationships between officers and Elected Members**. Elected Members are now “talking about this way of working quite organically” and recognising that “quick wins” such as distributing grants are not always the most intelligent or sustainable option.
- ◆ The work of the Programme has “**changed the way we think about leadership in the Council particularly.**”
- ◆ There is widespread recognition across the team and leadership that **a learning culture is absolutely essential**. This shift is visible in new ways of working and in the use of collaborative, adaptive approaches. It is “early days,” but Glasgow emphasised that even a small cultural shift is “a big thing to change.”
- ◆ Working more closely with the Glasgow Health Determinants Research Collaboration, CELCIS and the Council’s Centre for Civic Innovation has been invaluable; having a **network of enabling ‘critical friends’** helps create space for clearer thinking and better pacing.

- ◆ With stronger collaboration and relationships, leadership's commitment to learning, and tools to support decision-making, **colleagues feel better equipped to make decisions, and feel more confident in taking the initiative and ownership of their role.**
- ◆ **At times, a much more “productive and two-way” relationship between local and national government.** “We’re walking in each other’s shoes much more than we used to”—this is a “step change”. However, work needs to be done to ensure that this is an embedded way of working.
- ◆ **Gaining flexibility around funding arrangements** through negotiations with the Scottish Government was a key milestone. This included the ability to carry forward funding and align different funding streams, such as the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and No One Left Behind, without being pressured into immediate spending. This flexibility enabled Glasgow to take a more innovative and responsive approach to delivery, and Glasgow highlighted that their relationship with the Scottish Government was key.

Key learning: Leadership



Local political leadership and senior leadership

- ◆ Pre-Covid, Glasgow’s political leadership recognised that challenges like child poverty require “generational approaches”, not quick fixes. Political leaders have welcomed robust data and evidence to support decision making and have welcomed reassurance that reform work is not about adding unsustainable resource or capacity. Instead, they have supported testing short-term, evidence-based changes that generate learning, inform policy and build a case for change.
- ◆ Senior leadership has been committed from the outset. Leaders were clear that past approaches had not worked and that a city-wide approach was required. One colleague recalled it feeling “raw and honest... we aren’t achieving anything if we keep going how we’re going and we’ll be here in another 30 years telling the same story”.
- ◆ Leaders have engaged meaningfully in discussions about funding, operationalisation and long-term collaboration—framing the Programme as reform work and embedding it in long-term plans and governance.



Programme leadership

- ◆ Deliberately practising collaborative leadership across public and third sectors within a complex change programme is difficult. “It has been collectively difficult... to adapt to a different way of doing leadership and stick to it... We keep talking about collaborative leadership and we demonstrate that behaviour really well for a while, and then we all slip back into the less good practices because that’s where our comfort zone is”. We are now on our “third iteration of some sort of governance leadership structure” to enable more collective leadership, as previous attempts “started, stopped... this isn’t quite working. Sometimes you get so comfortable that it is working that you stop putting in the effort that is required to make it work”.
- ◆ There are ongoing tensions between collaborative decision making and clear direction, between maintaining focus and competing demands, and in “striking a balance between staying the course and remaining open to new opportunities”.
- ◆ Governance, accountability and leadership are challenging in a multi-agency change programme. “Is there collective governance or not?” What do accountability and power dynamics look like when one organisation holds the budget and funds other partners? And “what is the governance process for the progression of ideas across all partners within the team?”

The programme has evolved a “golden thread” of communication and decision-making from the ground level up to strategic leadership. The structure includes:

- Core Coordination Group: Comprising workstream leads and multidisciplinary team members, meeting fortnightly to discuss progress and ideas.
- Leadership Team: Receives updates from the coordination group and decides what to escalate.
- Children’s Services Executive Group: A joint public and third sector forum for agreeing on proposals in principle.
- Public Service Reform Taskforce: A higher-level body considering broader strategic reform



Relationships between local and national government

- ◆ There has been emerging understanding from the Scottish Government about the need for them to do things differently. “There was a session that brought together senior leaders from the council and the Scottish Government that was honest and realistic about challenges” and the collective recognition that we “need to do something differently. [It] felt like a turning point. An absolutely fantastic session. A really, really honest session...amazing because for the first time, government acknowledge[ed] they might be part of the problem... Everybody was sort of understanding they were part of the part of the problem and part of the solution. So that was really key”.
- ◆ Early pathfinders such as Glasgow and Dundee were intensive learning processes that also developing a different kind of partnership between national and local government, allowing partners to explore what this means in practice. This meant moving away from funding a pilot service or intervention for its scalability, but rather a focus on “working differently, not doing more”. “For Scottish Government, I think there was a focus on how do we take what we’ve learnt from Glasgow, not about the impact but about the process and the relationship and the engagement and turn that into something that we could scale”. This positive change in relationship must be structurally embedded going forward, rather than relying on individuals or specific policy context.
- ◆ There was a recognition from the beginning that Scottish Government needed to be a partner, not just a funder. This work required a different approach to the national-local dynamic. This meant coming to meetings even when there was not a clear purpose for Scottish Government or specific ask. The messaging had to be focused on the purpose being collaboration. The Scottish Government needed to be comfortable with not having a policy position, and both national and local government valuing the relationship and process of collaboration even if there was not a tangible outcome in the short term.
- ◆ The need for leaders across Glasgow’s Programme and the Scottish Government to be disrupters in their host organisations. The relationship could not be about conveying messages between organisations, but rather focusing on how to challenge the “as is” system. This can’t be “an engagement where [one organisation] asks 100 questions and gets answers to everything...this is a discussion about how we work together”. This involves direct relationships and direct conversations, allowing for more scope for negotiations and the Scottish Government being able to act as a broker to bring in other key policy areas or partners.

Key learning: Culture, multi-agency collaboration and learning



Reimagining council and third sector relationships

A core aim of the Programme has been finding better ways of working between the council family, as well as third and voluntary sector partners. Previously, engagement focused on representation, which had “historical connotations about being adversarial and about arguing for resource for the [third] sector.” The newer approach focuses on collaboration and recognising that “we’re not two sectors in competition with each other, we’re actually a Civic Society... that can do lots of good for the citizens in the city.”

- ◆ This shift is still challenging and there will “always be tension”, but colleagues note a “much more thoughtful and... more nurturing relationship.” One early challenge was “who’s round the table,” with an awareness that “the more people you have round the table, the slower you move.” Some perceive multi-agency work as just “spending all their time in a room,” without seeing the “sense making” and creation of “clarity of consensus... understanding... vision.”
- ◆ Collaboration must be realistic. Local authorities should assess readiness, as premature collaboration can be counterproductive. Investing time, capacity and resource is essential, even without a service-delivery outcome. As one colleague put it: “We’ve learned... by bringing everyone together... nothing would have changed” otherwise.
- ◆ Cultural tensions persist across sectors, including differences in language, governance and pace. Glasgow has built “a space where two sectors... with very different cultures have started to understand... the strengths and challenges of the other.” These conversations reveal biases and ensure services reflect diverse needs, which “we wouldn’t have understood without actually having those conversations.”
- ◆ Some tensions can be reduced through informal contact, development days and facilitated discussions. Others must be managed. Highly motivated third sector staff sometimes feel spaces “don’t feel as collaborative as they should” when decisions are pulled back into council processes. Early enthusiasm—“desperate to talk and engage... about this big, ambitious plan”—later met frustration when the sector asked, “what’s happening with that?” while the Council focused on tackling “structural things that were stopping us doing things.” These “two things can [both] be true... it’s difficult to move things.”

- ◆ Progress moves at different speeds. Much of the team is “still very much dominated by Council staff”, who may feel this impacts on the potential pace of their work. Non-council partners may be able to “move faster”: “Having someone who’s not in the Council with a mandate of ‘go and explore this’... whereas... [in the Council] we’re always looking at their management chain... because that’s how we work”.



Accountability and governance

Decision making, accountability and governance still often ultimately lie with the Council, which creates challenges for multi-agency partnership working and power dynamics.

- ◆ While collaboration is prioritised, decisions often get “pulled because councillors make a decision or because this governance structure requires [something],” which undermines equal partnership. “Nobody ever designed local authorities to be collaboratively accountable,” and this becomes clear in the Programme’s work. While personal collaboration works well, “strategic accountability gets dragged away,” creating tension. The reality is that “every penny the [Programme] spends goes back to a Council committee, not a partnership space.” This “creates a power dynamic that we have to be conscious of.”
- ◆ The agenda for the work can often still feel “very Council dominated” but this also reflects a process where, if control or power is going to be ceded, “some people have to step up and take it”. Some of the more recent work around strategy and innovation have been “much more co-designed...but it’s still co-designed with the pen held by the Council”.



Ways of working

- ◆ When working within a systems change environment; there’s an ever-present temptation to take on additional work that is recognisably important but not inherently necessary to public service reform. Layering on more work can make it impossible for teams to sustain a commitment to change and innovation, where the “small things” like workload management aren’t adopted.
- ◆ There is a significant risk that “old ways of working” seep back into spaces that are designed to change culture. Culture is powerful, and it is natural to revert to default.

- ◆ There's a tension between pace and reflection, where it can feel easy to be swept along by a fast-moving, emerging change culture. At times, there would have been benefit to a further slowing down in order to better balance pace with reflection.
- ◆ Culture can feel "nebulous", which is why linking culture to practice change is helpful. This involves mapping the cultural norms shaping behaviour and mapping the specific practices within services that reinforce those norms.



Language, definitions and conceptual clarity

From the start, it has been extremely difficult to define Glasgow's work "because I think we were trying to say something we didn't quite understand". The phrase "whole system change" was used often, but its meaning was ambiguous. This led to Glasgow's work being framed quite narrowly in terms of tangible services like Glasgow Helps, partly because "describing systems change was complex, so it became very long and Glasgow Helps was tangible". This leads to the question: "do you have to have the tangible thing that you can touch and feel and describe alongside the systems change work?".

- ◆ Differences in definitions create challenges. Terms like prevention, early intervention, systems change, culture and tackling/eradicating child poverty all mean different things to different people and organisational cultures. "It requires ongoing facilitation... it can sometimes feel tedious or tiring... yet you can also see how that can inadvertently present certain challenges... when people haven't taken the time to make sure everyone's on the same page."
- ◆ There is also the challenge of misconceptions. The concept of reform can sound abstract, but fundamentally, it's about people: how people work together, and how people deliver services for other people.
- ◆ Communication can often be de-prioritised in favour of tangible delivery or strategic wins. There is a need to prioritise internal and external communications to support coherence, identity and vision.

◆ Notes

1. All quotes are from Glasgow Programme and Scottish Government colleagues.
2. This document is part of a wider briefing pack.

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