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The strategic facilitation of change across UK public services: a critical reflection

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Title of the Context Statement: **The strategic facilitation of change across UK public services: a critical reflection**

A critical commentary and public works submitted to:

Middlesex University, London, in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of:

Doctor of Professional Studies by Public Works

Name: Kathryn Anne Perera

Student ID: M00839817

Month and Year: December 2023

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Kathryn Anne Perera, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and have been generated by me as my own original research.

I confirm that

- This work was done mainly or wholly while in candidature for the Doctorate in Professional Studies by Public Works with Middlesex University, London.

- Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this College or any other, it has been clearly stated.

- Whenever I have consulted the published works of others, they have been clearly attributed.

- Wherever I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work.

- I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

- Where the thesis is based on work done by myself or jointly with others, I have made clear what was done by others and what I contributed myself.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this document are mine and are not necessarily the views of my supervisory team, examiners or Middlesex University.

ABSTRACT

This Context Statement critically explores my public works in my various capacities as a community organiser, strategic facilitator, an educator and leadership development specialist, and as a Director in the English National Health Service (NHS). My intention has been to consider these public works in their wider context, to draw out implications that may inform learning across relevant fields of practice, and to gain a deeper understanding that will inform my future public works.

The completed public works that I explore are:

- My facilitation of two parliamentary roundtables on behalf of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness (2017-18).
- My design and delivery of the annual Jo Cox Memorial Lecture at the University of Cambridge (2018).
- My role in leading the co-design of the NHS Maternity Summit (2021).

In addition, I consider a current public work, the ongoing development of the Future Vision leadership programme, for which I have acted as one of the Lead Faculty since 2021.

Key insights from this Context Statement include:

- The role and value of transdisciplinary attitudes, skills, and practices in creating the conditions for systemic change.
- The importance of the relationship between small-scale actions and large-scale frameworks for change, and how this dynamic enhances our ability to lead change in complex systems.
- Why people, seeking to create the conditions in which intelligent, effective and sustainable change happens, need to better understand the interrelationship between 'inner skills' (relating to the world, and ourselves, in more nuanced ways) and 'outer skills' (how we lead change adaptively with others).

- Why imagination and experimentation are critical to generating breakthrough insights that actually change the thinking and behaviour of people leading change in public services.

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Thank you to the people who gave me the opportunities that led directly to these public works:

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GUIDANCE ON HOW TO READ THIS CONTEXT STATEMENT

A guiding theme of this Context Statement is "candles and spotlights" – a phrase that I pinched with pride from my first substantive conversation with my doctoral supervisor, Professor Brian Sutton.

In that conversation, Brian sought to explain the interaction of (i) auto-ethnographic research, (ii) wide and deep reading across academic disciplines, and (iii) critical reflection, that would be involved in producing this Context Statement. He invited me to imagine entering a dark space. He asked me to describe the quality of experience I might have in that space with only the light of a single large candle to guide me. I described a warm and generalised impression, one that might change as the light stretched into the depths of darkness beyond its reach. I imagined that, while I might gain some sense of the whole, I would be left wanting more. Without moving closer to any one part of the space, candlelight would not offer me the specifics of any part of the experience.

Brian next asked me to describe the quality of experience I might have in that space with a small and powerful spotlight to guide me. Here, by contrast, I described a clear and precise understanding of the portion of space being lit. Whatever was within that focus might be seen with forensic detail. Yet as I imagined this experience, I felt unsafe. Surely, I would know that the totality of the space was much larger than the portion of detail in my immediate line of sight. Beyond the specifics of my present view, there would be so much more than I could see at any one time. As we discussed these imaginings, Brian and I related the metaphors of candles and spotlights to the process on which I was about to embark. This opening conversation informed what followed. In this Context Statement, I give readers both 'candlelit' and 'spotlit' perspectives on how my personal experiences, my professional practice and the wider context have interacted across the arc of my career to date.

Chapter 1 draws on my auto-ethnographic research. The first part of the chapter offers a summary of relevant formative experiences that shaped my childhood and early

career. The second part of the chapter summarises the four public works considered later in this Context Statement.

Chapter 2 then outlines the main bodies of research which have shaped my overall approach to this Context Statement. While auto-ethnography and critical reflection underpin the Doctor of Professional Studies by Public Works, this chapter also outlines the fields of research which gave me four specific 'lenses' to apply to my public works: (i) transdisciplinarity; (ii) relational and embodied ways of knowing; (iii) constructivist-development approaches to change; and (iv) complexity-based approaches to change. The chapter not only describes the lenses and how they interrelate; it also offers a rationale for why I chose them and how, cumulatively, applying them to my public works has deepened my understanding of self, practice and context.

Chapters 3 to 5 describe my public works. Each of these chapters is structured into two parts:

The first part (**sub-Chapters 3.1, 4.1 and 5.1**) offers a short vignette of auto-ethnographic writing. In terms of subject-matter, the vignettes do not necessarily relate directly to the public work in question. Rather, their purpose is to describe a moment, or choice-point, within my auto-ethnographic research, which I consider important to the subsequent public work. Here, I am drawing on my experiences as a political activist and barrister during the early years of my career. A 'spotlight approach' would dictate that these experiences pre-date my public works and may not merit inclusion. By contrast, a 'candlelit approach' values them as building a richer perspective on my sense-making and behaviours during the subsequent public work. By intention, I do not make explicit references across each pair of linked sub-chapters. Rather, I would invite the reader to form an overall impression of how each pair of sub-chapters interrelate (the reasons for which I outline in Chapters 2 and 6).

The second part (**sub-Chapters 3.2, 4.2 and 5.2**) focuses on my specific public works. Here, I take a more structured approach to consider the interaction of self, practice and wider context that shaped the public work, from my perspective. This

allows me to suggest, within each sub-Chapter, particular implications for wider learning and practice arising from each public work.

Chapter 6 of this Context Statement offers closing reflections, in which I seek to bring together the main themes from across my public works, referencing back to the lenses that I have applied. I also offer a critical reflection on the process of creating this Context Statement, outlining how my work as a doctoral student has informed my thinking about future practice.

Readers will find a **Bibliography** and **Ethics Form** at the end of the Context Statement. I have also included **Appendices** for the Doctoral Examination Panel's consideration, containing additional materials that relate to each public work. Given the political context to my public works, there is a large amount of contextual material that could not be referenced within the required word-count but is available online and in public records. I have created a **Website List**, which includes links to a small selection of these materials. A copy of the Website List will be provided to the Doctoral Examination Panel.

Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION

My given name is Kathryn Anne White. I was born and grew up in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, where my mother was a youth worker and my father, a history teacher. Aylesbury is a market town, conservative by temperament and tradition.

My parents are both Irish and lifelong practising Roman Catholics. My early childhood centred around our Roman Catholic primary school, which was a short walk from our house and packed with children of Irish and Italian heritage. My other sphere of influence was the local Roman Catholic church where, from a young age, I served as a Reader (reading aloud passages from the Bible for the congregation during the Mass) and as an Altar Server (assisting the priest with the ceremony and rituals of the Mass). Each summer we 'returned' to N. Ireland, staying in my mother's childhood home in east Belfast. I remember those summers warmly. And while I was aware of people called 'Protestants' from conversations overheard during my time in Belfast, I do not recall consciously meeting a person who wasn't Roman Catholic until I was a teenager.

There was one exception.

This was my Great Aunt Pat McGonigal, who lived on Ulsterville Avenue in Belfast and who was the younger sister of my grandfather, Alexander. I remember Mum explaining to me that 'in those days' when Catholics and Protestants inter-married there were sensible solutions – the boys were raised in the father's religion and the girls were raised in the mother's religion. So it was that Aunty Pat was a Protestant who went to 'the other church' on Sundays. For my mother, who had left Belfast during 'The Troubles', this tale of pragmatic co-existence spoke to a near-forgotten past. Perhaps, when the story was recounted to me during the late 1980s, it also offered the promise of a different future.

From a young age, my two brothers and I were encouraged to express ourselves physically, creatively and analytically. As the children of two educators who continued to

work with young people, significant weight was placed on formal education and few opportunities were missed to weave learning into the pattern of our lives. Reading aloud in church became a 'rite of passage' for all three siblings, one which I believe cultivated skills that developed our shared ease with public speaking.

While my brothers excelled at sports of all kinds, I took every chance to shut myself away in my small bedroom to read, imagine and write. I remember the excitement of school plays, and writing my own stories to perform alone in my room. This same excitement led me to improvisation classes at the local arts centre in my teenage years, to 'A' Level Drama & Theatre Arts, to my performances at The Oxford Playhouse as an undergraduate student and, in my second year at university, to a full scholarship to the British American Drama Academy. This Context Statement is deeply informed by those foundational experiences of creativity, performance and embodied learning.

In 2000 I left Aylesbury to accept a place to study History at Balliol College, Oxford University. While the first two years of university were a social, cultural and artistic 'awakening' for me, it wasn't until the third and final year that I paid attention to my formal History studies. In doing so, I found a new arc of possibilities opening inside me – an awakening of my own intellectual potential. I discovered that the harder I worked and the more committed I was to creative academic enquiry, the richer and more fulfilling my experience.

Leaving university with a 'top' First class degree (a result that, I think, baffled most of my tutors who had suffered nearly three years of me handing-in mediocre essays that I had scribbled hastily during drama rehearsals the night before), I had no clear idea of what to do next. So, I travelled to Bangalore, India, and worked for 5 months in non-formal education centres. Bangalore then was a small but fast-growing city. Non-formal education centres, managed by various charities, pockmarked the poorest districts. They aimed to scoop up those children who were missing from formal schooling. Most of these children were, instead, found in precarious paid work across the city, including as rag-pickers in the local rubbish dumps. Their meagre incomes were relied upon by their families. Some non-formal education centres recruited trained teachers, but most made do without. None of the centres in which I worked had desks or chairs, paper, pens or

pencils. My delusions of 'teaching' did not long survive contact with reality, and, in classic 'Gap Year' tradition, I learned far more than anything I was able to 'teach' the children.

After five months, I ventured to Calcutta – a train journey of 1,100 miles which in those days took more than 50 hours. There, I volunteered for several weeks at the 'Kalighat Home for the Dying' founded by the Missionaries of Charity, before crossing the sub-continent back to Delhi and returning home.

These experiences were my first prolonged exposure to cultures and ways of being that were radically different from my own. I experienced a loosening of the formative ideas that I had held as 'truths' about the world. My memories of working in and travelling across India do not seem dream-like to me, but their impact shares a quality described in *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë, 1847):

> "I have dreamt in my life, dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas; they have gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the colour of my mind."

Before returning to the UK (and in the absence of a more compelling plan), I had applied to train as a barrister.

I felt myself called to practise Law for several reasons. Around the kitchen table at my grandmother's home in east Belfast, I had heard many stories of 'The Troubles' in N. Ireland and our family's work there as teachers, doctors and lawyers. It was the 1980s; violence and its threat were a present reality. I remember well the many great-aunts who visited our home – women who had lost husbands to wars or never married to pursue professions. According to our family lore, my grandmother, Nan McGonigal, graduated top in the whole of Ireland in her Law exams in the late 1920s yet worked as a Legal Secretary, raising four children alone as a young widow. I also spent time with my Aunty Moira, a talented bank clerk who, on becoming pregnant with her first child in the early 1970s, was legally dismissed and never went out to paid work again. While I may not have grasped the rank indignity of these experiences, even as a girl I understood the urgency with which women – *my* women – shared them with me.

Studying Law in London, and later practising as a barrister at 11KBW Chambers, led to more formative experiences in the liminal space between studentship and 'professional life'. Between 2004 and 2010 I trained with and then advocated alongside (and against) some of the most incisive lawyers in the UK. I litigated big cases on Equal Pay, sex and race discrimination, and the rights of children with special educational needs. Yet in much of this work I felt further from justice, not closer to it. There is a beginning to the story of each wrong. There is a point at which it can be *prevented*, not simply litigated. Tracing the thread back to its origin, finding the source, seemed to me the point of activism. I couldn't seem to keep hold of that thread as a lawyer.

In late 2009, I experienced a profound crisis of confidence and purpose, during which I reconsidered almost every aspect of my life. That autumn, I started to wind-down my practice as a barrister in London. I returned home to Aylesbury, where a small cadre of Labour Party activists had begun to organise for the General Election that was expected to be called in early 2010. I joined their number, becoming the Labour Party's Prospective Parliamentary Candidate (PPC) for the Aylesbury constituency.

By then, the Labour Party had enjoyed an unprecedented period of government, winning three consecutive General Elections for the first time in its history (1997; 2001; 2005). Much of its original reforming agenda had been enacted or had run its course. The Labour Party's leadership appeared deeply fatigued. Having become Prime Minister in June 2007, Gordon Brown's ambitions were overtaken by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, which re-framed the public's priorities just as a resurgent Conservative Party under David Cameron's leadership seemed (to some people) to offer a credible government-in-waiting.

Created as a single-member parliamentary constituency in 1885, Aylesbury has been held continuously by the Conservative Party since 1924. In this context, I had no illusions about winning the parliamentary seat. Rather, with a small and growing group of local activists, we set our ambition on building the foundations for Labour to win seats in the District Council elections that would follow in 2011. Together, we organised a strong, local campaign on limited resources. For the first time in years, I experienced the power of a small group of committed people working together to make change. We risked failure,

learned together, and committed to the pursuit of a shared goal. It transformed my sense of what was possible.

The General Election was called for May 2010. Some weeks beforehand, I was told that a newly formed 'far right' protest group, the self-styled English Defence League (EDL), planned to stage a march through Aylesbury on the Saturday before the General Election. The EDL arose out of various football hooligan firms operating in and around London, which had increasingly targeted mosques and Islamic community spaces following the 7 July 2005 London bombings.

In the weeks building up to the march, I spoke publicly against it and shared my views in local and national media, including writing a position piece in *The Guardian* (White, 2010). We were worried that hundreds of EDL supporters would show up in Aylesbury, using a protest in our town as a litmus test for larger rallies to follow in nearby towns such as Luton. On the day of the planned protest, I joined friends and community members taking a stand in solidarity outside Aylesbury Mosque. Yet in the event, the EDL failed to rally more than a few dozen disorganised supporters. They were significantly outnumbered by those standing together against their message, as well as by the local police presence. The protest passed without much incident and, later that week, the country went to the polls for the General Election.

Through that experience, I built new relationships both locally and within the wider Labour Movement. Jo Cox was among the fellow activists who contacted me to offer her support. Our paths had crossed briefly in the previous months, when I was elected to the National Committee of the Labour Women's Network (LWN), a small volunteer organisation that organised residential training for women seeking selection and then election to public office. From 2011 onwards, I became one of the LWN's core team of volunteers, while Jo Cox became the first ever elected Chair of the LWN. As fellow LWN National Committee members, Jo and I started to meet more regularly on weekends and evenings.

Over time, Jo became my dearly loved friend. We were both in a period of transition, considering whether to stand for 'winnable' parliamentary seats in the next General Election (2015). While Jo started to work with Sarah Brown on the global Maternal Mortality Campaign, I seized an opportunity to join the staff of a new political initiative created by David Miliband – Movement for Change.

Movement for Change was a not-for-profit social enterprise and 'five-year-long experiment' which sought to re-introduce the practice of Community Organising into grassroots campaigning across the UK Labour Movement. As the Head of Innovation (2011-12) and then as the Chief Executive (2012-16), I led a team of Community Organisers alongside hundreds of volunteers who built "relational power" (Ganz, 2010a) and won legislative change on national campaigns, including:

- ending the practice of legal loan sharking (extractive short-term, high-cost loans), with Stella Creasy MP.
- creating a network of community safe spaces for people experiencing domestic abuse, with Mike Kane MP.
- securing the 'Living Wage' (a wage rate enhanced above the National Minimum Wage based on living costs) for staff working at several university campuses, with two trade unions, USDAW and Unison.

Over the course of five years (2011-2016), Movement for Change organisers trained more than 3,000 people across the UK in Community Organising methodologies; delivered intensive, practice-based training to a further 400 emerging leaders in the Labour Movement, including allied Trade Unions; and developed more than 20 Community Organising projects; eight of which achieved their central campaign aims and a further three of which continue to exist as freestanding movements in their communities (**Appendix 1**).

My time leading Movement for Change was a steep learning curve. Our work explored the boundaries between 'representation' and 'activism', as we sought to build community campaigns around leaders *who brought direct experience of the issues at-hand* (rather than to 'engage' and 'advocate' on behalf of others). We challenged the limits of the

Labour Party's dominant political practice, which was based increasingly on segmentation of the electorate and centrally controlled messaging. And we sought to root our strategy around a conception of politics as a communitarian, reciprocal practice through which sharing responsibility, rather than 'delegating tasks' would encourage more diverse participation in public life.

The end of Movement for Change's five year 'seed' funding dovetailed with Jeremy Corbyn's election as Leader of the Labour Party, in September 2015. The Labour Party was then controlled by a faction that questioned Movement for Change's approach, while Corbyn and his allies were philosophically and pro-actively hostile to Movement for Change's purpose, founders and backers. In late 2015, the Board and I decided to pause Movement for Change's activities, and I accepted an invitation to become a US-UK Fulbright Commission Scholar at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, within the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. During my time in the United States, I sought to reflect on my experience of growing and leading Movement for Change. This resulted in a reflection paper, which I presented at the Ash Center's inter-disciplinary post-doctoral seminar group in early 2016 (**Appendix 2**).

This Context Statement describes and examines three past, and one current, 'public works' that followed these formative experiences.

First, I consider my role in facilitating a series of parliamentary roundtables on behalf of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness (2016-2018), a cross-party commission established following the assassination of Jo Cox MP to investigate ways to reduce loneliness in the UK. With the joint leadership of Seema Kennedy MP (Conservative) and Rachel Reeves MP (Labour), the Commission brought together 13 Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations to highlight the scale of loneliness throughout a person's lifecycle and across all areas of society. The Commission met and listened to people who had experienced loneliness, including older people, younger people, employers and their employees, children and new parents, people with disabilities, refugees and carers.

The Commission was then invited to make recommendations for action to the UK Prime Minister. The two parliamentary roundtables, which I designed and facilitated, led to the production of a short mission statement for the Commission titled 'A Call to Connect' (Hull, 2017; **Appendix 3**). From that, the Commission distilled three asks for the Prime Minister:

(i)   the development of a cross-Government strategy to combat loneliness.

(ii)   financial investment to support that strategy.

(iii)   the appointment of the world's first Minister for Loneliness to oversee the strategy's successful implementation.

At a specially convened event at No. 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister accepted all three recommendations.

This section of the Context Statement considers how I approached the task of convening the roundtables, and how I might approach it differently now. I reflect on the intersection of self, practice and context that informed how I approached the work, testing both the assumptions I may have held at the time and the assumptions that remained present for me as I developed this Context Statement.

My second public work is my preparation for and delivery of the annual Jo Cox Memorial Lecture (2018), at the joint invitation of Jo's family, the Department of Sociology and Murray Edwards College, Cambridge University. Here, I consider the perspectives that were missing and how my own thinking has changed in the intervening years. Finally, I reflect on my experience of delivering the lecture in its fuller context, including the embodied experience of delivery and the post-lecture discussion that Jo's sister, Kim Leadbeater (now MP), and I co-led on an impromptu basis. I explore how my presence made a difference and how these experiences have informed my professional practice going forward.

Third, I consider one aspect of my work as the Director of NHS Horizons, a specialist team within the National Health Service (NHS) which I joined in September 2016. I focus on my work to co-design the first national NHS Maternity Summit (May 2021). That specific work was commissioned to me by the NHS National Director of Intensive Support,

following publication of Donna Ockenden's interim review into maternity services at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust (Ockenden, 2020). I reflect on the Summit within that wider context, including my ongoing work to support the leadership development of people who use maternity services through training and coaching in the Public Narrative framework (Ganz, 2010a; Moniz et al, 2022). This section of my Context Statement examines sense-making, or "meaning making" (Drath and Palus, 1994), and uses ideas arising from constructivist-developmental theory to explore the dynamics at play for me as the facilitator, as well as between the various participants in the Summit (including me) (**Appendices 4 and 5**).

Finally, I consider a concurrent public work, my ongoing co-design and co-delivery of the Future Vision systemic leadership programme. Since May 2021, I have acted as a Lead Faculty member on Future Vision, taking an increasingly involved role in its design and delivery alongside two fellow practitioners, Professor Christopher Pietroni and Axelle Bagot (see **Appendix 6**).

In this section of my Context Statement, I explore our approach to helping people in positions of executive authority (including senior politicians, emergency services Chief Officers, health and care National Directors, and Chief Executives across the commercial, public and charitable sectors) to develop their capacity and capability to lead more effectively. This section of the Context Statement brings together the various strands outlined above and in the next chapter (Candles and spotlights: perspectives informing my Context Statement). I outline the 'edges' of my current thinking, so far as I can discern them, and how I believe my ideas may be changing as I bring the preparation of this Context Statement to a close.

At the end of this Context Statement, I offer closing reflections. These draw together some of the main themes of the Context Statement, while also reflecting on my experience of developing this Context Statement.

Chapter 2:

CANDLES AND SPOTLIGHTS
The perspectives informing this Context Statement

"Everywhere around us and within us we see pattern upon pattern, ever-deepening levels of complexity and variety

Why do we resist the vision or blind ourselves to the beauty or fail to embrace the learnings?"

Margaret Wheatley (1993)

In the Seventh Book of Plato's Republic (Plato, 375 BCE), the philosopher offers an allegory of a cave to describe the effect of education on human nature.

Plato ascribes the dialogue to his brother, Glaucon, and his mentor, Socrates. We learn of a community of people who have lived chained inside a cave their whole lives, facing onto a blank wall. We learn of shadows that pass across the wall, which the people take to be real. They give names to these shadows, while we, the readers, are given to know that these shadows are projected onto the wall by real objects near firelight which the people cannot see. In Plato's allegory, the shadows are a pseudo-truth, merely representative of reality, while the true form of objects may only be perceived through reason – theory, deductive logic, mathematics and the natural sciences. Through these higher levels of reasoning, Socrates is said to conclude, a prisoner may become a philosopher. She may become free.

Preparing this Context Statement over several years, the themes of 'light' and of 'seeing' have come to unify the whole. They bring together the major strands of theory that have informed my work and the overarching questions on which I have reflected as I have considered my public works:

- What is the role of context in informing our understanding of the world? How does the relationship between self, other and context shape that understanding?

- What do we mean by 'voice'? How do we 'give voice' to something or someone, whether through representation or otherwise? How is voice denied?

- How can I better understand myself, and myself in the world, through critical reflection on my experiences? What does it mean to 'see better' in and through the past, present and future?

Plato's allegory of the cave offers the hope that enlightenment will follow reason, perhaps first as a blurred outline seen by the light of a flame and, later, with more forensic precision. Yet how far is it possible 'to know', really, with reason alone? What if our ways of knowing include and extend far beyond reason, in Wheatley's "ever deepening levels of complexity and variety" (Wheatley, 1993, p.2)? What if the many ways of knowing require us to question not simply the shadows but also the apparent reality of the wall, the firelight and the cave?

This Context Statement takes an auto-ethnographic approach to considering my public works. I have sought to see the beauty (and the learnings) by observing myself and my wider context, considering the relationship between the two. Using Chang's definition of auto-ethnography, I have written about my individual experiences of life within the context of family, work, education and society, interpreting the apparent meanings of the experience (Chang, 2013, p.11). I have sought to move beyond a "mere narration of personal history" to engage with cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008, p.43).

In doing so, I remain conscious that auto-ethnography is a form of research variously described as "problematic" (Holt, 2003, p.18) and "unconventional" (Maréchal, 2010, p.124). The use of self as data source contravenes orthodoxies of mainstream academic research, where an 'objective' truth waits to be discovered (*per* Plato's description of the prisoner freed from the cave). As the concept of mainstream is relative, auto-ethnography might therefore be considered a marginal form of research. Yet as I have given myself permission to stray across conventional boundaries of subject-matter and academic discipline (an exploration described further below in relation to trans-disciplinarity), I have repeatedly found deep learning in taking a

reflexive approach to my public works, recognising (as Jan Fook proposed) that "all aspects of ourselves and our contexts influence the way we research (or create knowledge)" (Fook, 2015, p.443).

While the focus of auto-ethnography "is on challenging researchers to embrace an approach to writing that favours emotional self-reflexivity as a rich data source" (Chang, 2013, pp.18-19), I have also been aware of its limitations. From an ethical perspective, for each chapter of the Context Statement I have had to consider how to describe both myself and the context in ways that have integrity while being authentic. In all cases, the context involved other people. This, then, was perhaps the first challenge of 'voice' that I faced while preparing the Context Statement: how to give voice authentically to my own perspectives while acknowledging, with integrity, the possible alternative perspectives at play in each given context.

In balancing this requirement across the Context Statement, I drew on the work of Patsy Rodenburg, a leading voice and drama coach. Rodenburg has written and taught widely on the concept of 'presence' – the "clear, whole and attentive energy" that underpins transformative performance (Rodenburg, 2008, p.xi). This echoes, from a different perspective, the description of 'attunement' by the psychiatrist Daniel Siegel, as "the process by which separate elements are brought into a resonating whole" (Siegel, 2007).

Rodenburg describes this 'attunement' or 'presence' as "Second Circle" energy, in contrast to a flat, inwardly focused energy (First Circle) and a forced, outward-moving, non-specific energy – "spraying your energy out to the world with an aerosol can" (Third Circle) (Rodenburg, 2008, p.17). In discerning, moment by moment, how to harness and focus energy to achieve a performance that enables both the performer and the audience to be fully present, Rodenburg invites performers to cultivate their ability to remain attentive; to seek balance; to harness and sustain second circle energy.

These ideas have inspired me to seek a balance, in this Context Statement, between asserting my own perspectives on my public works and being attentive to a bigger whole, including data that speaks to the possible perspectives of other people. In this way, I have sought to mitigate some of the 'problematic' aspects of auto-

ethnography, augmenting the rich data source of self-reflexivity with a wider appreciation of the alternative (and sometimes competing) ideas and perspectives that may have been at play. When analyses and interpretations have surfaced that appear definitive, I have tried to ask myself what other perspectives might be available to me.

As such, this Context Statement takes heed of Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner's proposition that auto-ethnographic research "is a socially conscious act", in which personal experience "must be considered in relation to an analysis of the wider cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). I have taken confidence from cross-disciplinary research which connects the practice of auto-ethnography with the practice of 'self-critical' reflection (see, for example, Mezirow, 1998), implicitly validating a process of research conducted by oneself on one's own material. I have also taken confidence from my study of the long-established and varied academic literature which centres on 'reflection' as a fundamental practice for uncovering (or creating) knowledge, from Dewey's emphasis on "assessing the grounds (justification) of one's belief" (Dewey, 1933, p.9) to Fook's proposition that rationally examining the assumptions by which we have been justifying our convictions may help us to become more intentional and effective practitioners (Fook, 2015, p.442).

Yet while Fook's research emphasises the importance of reflection in general, as "a way of approaching an understanding of one's life and actions", she also proposes that practitioners need to go beyond generalised reflection and cultivate a practice of critically reflecting on their own work. Fook identifies this 'reflective practice' as a more specific, perhaps more instrumental, means of improving practice by narrowing the gap between the espoused theory and the theory in use (Fook, 2015, p.441).

In doing so, Fook's work points to the importance of linking auto-ethnographic research with an understanding of reflection in general and with the specific practice of 'critical reflection' described in the work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (see, for example, Argyris and Schön, 1974). In describing my public works in this Context Statement, in particular my co-design and delivery of 'set-piece' events such as the roundtables for the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, I have reflected on the theories that were implicit in my practice – my actual behaviour and revealed preferences (the

'theories in use'). I have also considered these 'theories in use' in relation to how I explained my actions at the time, both to myself and to others (the 'espoused theories'). I have tried to make explicit the theories to which I 'gave allegiance' and which I communicated to others, even as my actions demonstrated that other theories were governing my actions (Argyris and Schön, 1974, pp.6-7).

Towards the end of preparing this Context Statement, I revisited the work of Argyris and Schön, seeing many connections that I had missed at first pass. Argyris and Schön's work proposes a theory of 'mental maps' that people develop internally, influencing how we plan, implement, review and understand our actions. They propose that people draw upon wide sources of information to create these mental maps. These then tend to inform people's actions, rather than the justification or rationale that people articulate consciously (Argyris and Schön, 1974).

My approach to drafting and then refining this Context Statement has been to read widely and, at times – from a methodologically orthodox perspective – seemingly at-random, following my preferences, emerging thought processes, emotional and embodied responses to the materials presented. Prior to any meta-analysis or refinement, I gave myself permission to research by association, paying as much attention to the synergies across different disciplines as to a depth of reading within any one category of literature or pre-defined body of research.

In summary, then, this Context Statement developed through an iterative process of auto-ethnography and critical reflection. These two approaches are its foundations. As my research and writing progressed, the interaction between these two foundations led me to try and seek a balance between attending to my own perspectives while considering possible alternative perspectives on my public works. These foundations also provoked the dilemma of how I could structure this Context Statement, so that it would offer a holistic impression of what I have learned (the candlelight) while focusing sufficiently on specific moments, or 'milestones', in my public life (the spotlight).

In grappling with that dilemma, initially I researched widely, roaming across so-called 'disciplines' while reading and experiencing materials (such as art, poetry, presentations, articles and books) that often defied categorisation on the basis of 'discipline'. I reflected synergistically on my learning, seeking to draw analogies between seemingly disparate ideas and fields of research. I both researched and wrote instinctively rather than within the parameters of a pre-framed disciplinary process.

In this way, I semi-consciously mirrored the process described by Donald Schön as 'reflective action', whereby through iteration a mental map develops of all the connections the brain makes with respect to a certain challenge. Logical thoughts, images, emotions and associative thoughts combine. Through these sources of information, we develop a 'map' of prior images, experiences and ideas:

> "When a practitioner makes sense of a situation he perceives to be unique, he sees it as something already present in his repertoire… [He sees] the unfamiliar, unique situation as both similar to and different from the familiar one, without at first being able to say similar or different with respect to what. The familiar situation functions as a precedent or metaphor." (Schön, 1983, p.138).

Once I had an overall impression of my 'mental map', I was able to experiment with how to structure this Context Statement, diving more deeply into the literature of various fields of research and reflecting on the insights offered through each particular 'lens'. Through that process, I developed this Context Statement using four 'lenses':

Transdisciplinarity

Relational and embodied ways of knowing

Constructivist-development approaches to change

Complexity-based approaches to change.

Seen discretely, these four lenses gave me specific bodies of research on which to draw, as I critically reflected upon and sought to describe the implications of my public works. Seen holistically, these lenses offered a rich synthesis of interrelated ideas and questions through which to consider my public works.

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In what follows, I describe the four lenses in turn. I offer a rationale for including the lens in this Context Statement and outline the key sources of research which I have considered when applying the lens to my public works. I then draw together overarching themes across all four lenses, signalling questions of 'meaning' and 'purpose' (or intentionality) which relate to my public works.

(i) <u>Transdisciplinarity</u>

Transdisciplinarity has been described as "elusive" and a concept "that continues to evolve" (Augsburg, 2014, p.234). Early attempts to define transdisciplinarity referenced the space of overarching frameworks that transcend disciplinary worldviews and boundaries (Miller, 1982, p.11). In more recent years, one strand of transdisciplinary research has developed the ideas of the physicist Basarab Nicolescu, who characterised transdisciplinarity as knowledge *in vivo* – that is, living or dynamic knowledge – and contrasted this with what he termed "disciplinary knowledge" or knowledge *in vitro* – that is, analytic or static knowledge within a constructed discipline, which operates through categorisation and exclusion (Nicolescu, 2008). Developing a schematic for knowledge *in vivo*, Nicolescu emphasised certain characteristics of transdisciplinarity, including:

- A focus on the relationship between the external world and the internal world (and 'relations between' more generally).
- Enquiry into multiple types of intelligence, beyond the analytical, harmonising between mind, feelings and body.
- An orientation towards astonishment, sharing and inclusion, in contrast to an orientation towards power, possession and exclusion.

Central to Nicolescu's conception of transdisciplinarity is the proposition that there are multiple levels of reality which, paradoxically, can be integrated without their apparent contradictions needing to be reconciled or resolved. Nicolescu developed this thesis through describing what he termed "the included middle" – a symbolic

representation of how different levels of reality may be harmonised without the need for disciplinary exclusion (Nicolescu, 2008). A central implication of this 'included middle logic', which has been developed by subsequent transdisciplinary researchers, is that there are different ways of knowing and there is no hierarchy between them (Dieleman, 2012; Augsburg, 2014).

This proposition is profound, challenging as it does the prevailing orthodoxies of scientific knowledge. In contrast to the paradigms that dominate my current and prior professional realms of law, healthcare and academia, transdisciplinarity asserts as a core principle that there are different levels of reality, with correspondingly different levels of perception. The imaginative world, with imaginative and creative knowing and perception, holds as much (or little) validity as the realm of scientific knowledge (Nicolescu, 2006; Nicolescu, 2008).

This insight shaped my overall approach to preparing this Context Statement. Researching transdisciplinarity helped me to see how my career has developed less through path dependency in a linear sense than through a process of reflective action. Having connected my impetus to study Law with legislative change, I moved from legal practice to testing the realities of representative democracy by joining a political campaigns team and standing for Parliament. My disquiet with the limitations of 'representing others' led me to explore what 'building power with others' could look like, through the practice of Community Organising. My frustrations with trying to influence change 'from the outside' was the basis of my transition into the NHS, aspiring to improve the health and care system from the inside out. Synthesising auto-ethnographic research and critical reflection with transdisciplinarity reveals pattern upon pattern, ever-deepening levels of complexity and variety (Wheatley, 1993).

As an adolescent, when I moved from one interest to the next in quick succession, my father would assert that I "couldn't stick" and "loved the chase more than the achievement". Perhaps without his intending so, I internalised these observations as a character flaw – a criticism that I lacked discipline and grit. Preparing this Context Statement has helped me to re-consider that internalised judgement. I have come to reflect, rather, on whether my apparent restlessness derives from a desire to

test acquired experience across different professional fields and, perhaps, beyond the idea of professional fields (noting that the very idea of different fields is, itself, socially constructed).

As such, the general principles of transdisciplinarity influenced my approach to this Context Statement, in the manner of enquiry advanced by Nicolescu. For clarity, I did not undertake the research in a way that others might label a 'transdisciplinary project', by bringing people from different disciplines together for joint problem-solving (Augsburg, 2014). Rather, I drew on Nicolescu's principles to layer varying insights from across the full terrain of my reading, listening, conversing and experiencing into the patterns of each chapter and across the whole. My guiding proposition was that many ways of knowing can contribute to a bigger whole, through which we may know the world in a more-than-disciplinary way. Nicolescu describes this as "that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all discipline" (Nicolescu, 2006).

Subsequent research developed Nicolescu's central proposition, advancing propositions for how 'transdisciplinary individuals' are, think and act. In this respect, I was particularly influenced by Alfonso Montuori, who proposed five dimensions that constitute the basis of transdisciplinarity, first among which is that transdisciplinarity is "inquiry-based rather than discipline-driven" (Montuori, 2012b). Allied to Nicolescu's call for categorical distinctions to be "collapsed" (Nicolescu, 2006), Montuori's research encouraged me to consider my public works in ways that reach beyond cognitive ways of knowing. There is the potential for emotional, creative and embodied ways of knowing to exist alongside, and even to augment, more orthodox forms of knowledge. Indeed, as Tanya Augsburg has outlined, enquiry into such forms of knowledge may be an aspect of the "fundamental characteristics critical for the cultivation of a transdisciplinary attitude and vision among individuals" (Augsburg, 2014). Augsburg's proposition for what is entailed in becoming and being a transdisciplinary individual unleashed me from a more narrow, analytical conception of my public works. I drew on Augsburg's inclusion of individual risk-taking, institutional transgressing and "a respect

for the role of creative inquiry, cultural diversity, and cultural relativism" as core to a transdisciplinary attitude.

This emphasis on non-cognitive ways of knowing is mirrored in Fook's broad conception of 'reflexivity' referenced above (Fook, 2015, p.443). Fook proposes multiple ways to create knowledge and to influence the type of knowledge we use. These include knowledge which is "embodied and social in nature… mediated by our physical and social lenses." Fook proposes that our physical states and our social positions "influence how we interpret and select information, and indeed how we are socially interpreted and interacted with" (Fook, 2015, p.443). This latter observation has particularly influenced my thinking, suggesting as it does that knowledge creation is a relational endeavour. By this, I mean that I perceive Fook to be suggesting that our understanding of the world is not simply internally generated; it is also mediated by our interactions with and interpretations of 'the other' (whether people or other sources of data, including nature) and how 'the other' interacts with and interprets us. In drafting and delivering the Jo Cox Memorial Lecture 2018, I was given free rein as to subject-matter and framing. Fook's work on embodied and social knowledge has helped me to consider how my design and delivery of the lecture were shaped by embodied and social knowledge, both my own and that of the audience.

Indeed, in all my public works, particularly those where I was presenting or performing at what I have termed a 'set piece' event, embodied knowledge played a significant role in shaping the assumptions, beliefs and values at play. In his research on "body sense" (that is, the awareness of our physical sensations), Alan Fogel invites us to rediscover the "lost art" of sensory intelligence (Fogel, 2009). Fogel proposes the term "subjective emotional present" to denote the ability of one part of the body to identify with another part of the body under the guise of one and the same whole, a process that Fogel refers to as "body schema" (Fogel, 2009, p.11). Recent research suggests that this does not simply involve tuning into the internal sensations of our own bodies (a capacity termed 'interoception'). Rather, subjective emotional presence may flow from the ways in which we use the world to think – the feelings and movements of our bodies, the physical spaces in which we exist and the other beings with which we

interact. As the writer Anna Murphy-Paul puts it, the gestures of the hand, the act of listening to someone tell a story, or the task of teaching someone else are all "extra neural inputs" that can change the way we think (Murphy-Paul, 2021, p.ix).

The concept of a subjective emotional present was especially useful when I reflected on moments during my public works which had required me to be attentive to other people's heightened emotions, including their experiences of trauma. When, for example, as Director of NHS Horizons I was commissioned to facilitate two virtual workshops with intensive-care nurses in London during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself working at the very edge of my abilities to facilitate learning in ways that were generative and appropriately boundaried rather than exploitative of the nurses' narrated experiences. In the very moment of facilitating the workshops, holding a space in which one nurse related the impact that a shortage of ventilators was having on critically ill patients under her care, it was our shared sensory knowledge – literally, the present energy that passed between me (as facilitator), the nurse (as storyteller or witness) and the workshop participants – that held us in a shared space of learning, jointly and implicitly consenting to jettison the planned agenda for the session.

This concept of 'embodied knowledge' has a long history in the area of trauma research (Rothschild, 2000; Totton, 2003) but seems relatively little known in other disciplines. The central proposition is that we exist through our embodied experience of the work, as well as through our ability to think. This embodied state is what Nick Totton refers to as our subjective "felt sense" (Totton, 2003). Totton's idea of a holistic felt sense and Fogel's concept of a body schema share synergies with the work of researchers in other fields who are striving to better describe the connections between parts and wholes. Much as Margaret Wheatley references "pattern upon pattern" (Wheatley, 1993), so the systems-thinker Nora Bateson describes how, in the natural world, processes of interaction and mutual learning take place in living entities at larger or smaller scales – a process that she envisions as "small arcs of larger circles" (Bateson, 2016).

(ii) Relational and embodied ways of knowing

Ideas of embodied knowledge, attention, and being present to what is emerging, are woven through this Context Statement. My interpretation of them in relation to my public works owes as much to my formative experiences of acting, improvisational theatre (see **Chapter 1**) and storytelling as to the varied research referenced above.

The renowned theatre director Peter Brook claimed that one "can take any empty space and call it a stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (Brook, 2008). Brook's observation echoes Fook's conception of knowledge as "embodied and social" (Fook, 2015, p.443). A person physically engages with an empty space (embodies it) and the act of being watched (the social) realises the dramatic potential of the moment. Extending Brook's metaphor of the empty space, I would propose that in drama the relationships *between things* are fundamental – they are what, in a literal sense, creates dramatic potential. The most radical and challenging domains of theatre seek to disrupt our current understanding of relationships, bringing forth the latent potential of 'the empty space' as a forum for participation and co-creation. In Augusto Boal's conception of 'The Theatre of the Oppressed', for instance, theatre is used as a political act of co-creation, with people who are not the professional 'actors' invited not just to participate but to represent their own subjective realities in the act of co-creating the theatrical experience (Boal, 1979). Preparing this Context Statement has enabled me to see the importance of my early exposure to improvisational theatre, acting and dramaturgy in my approach to my public works. This, in turn, has led me to feel more confident to explore the importance of storytelling, narrative and framing in my current professional practice.

In my concurrent public work, co-design and delivery of the Future Vision systems leadership programme, the themes of experimentation, imagination, emotions, framing and narrative are all explicitly 'live' in our shared creative process. The Future Vision programme has been developed and adapted over the past 12 years around the central premise that 'leadership' needs to be differentiated from 'authority' (Heifetz,

2004), mirroring a shift in leadership development theory and practice away from paradigms of 'command and control' (see, for example, Walton (1985)) and towards approaches that develop people's capacity to motivate others beyond "giving them orders" and "incentivizing them" with rewards or the fear of punishment (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

This shift has occurred in tandem with a growing awareness that the practice of leadership can be taught, learned and developed. Teaching leadership has evolved from 'leaders are born, not made' (so you mainly need to find them) to leadership 'development' (Snook, Nohria and Khurana, 2012). Further, a growing awareness that leadership is values-based, embodied and social (or relational) has led to a decline in 'teaching about leadership' and an emphasis on the praxis of 'teaching leadership': creating opportunities for systematic critical reflection on leadership practice itself (Ganz and Lin, 2012).

This, in turn, has opened space to explore the role of emotions, framing and narrative in the praxis of leadership development. The overall pedagogy of Future Vision emphasises the role of stories, or narrative (terms which I use here as synonyms), to foster connection between people at a deeper level than is enabled by the mere transmission of factual information. As Frank Fischer puts it, "narrative storytelling, unlike the giving of rational reasons, is designed not just to persuade people intellectually but emotionally as well" (Fischer, 2003).

My public works have been influenced profoundly by the work of Marshall Ganz, whose Public Narrative framework (Ganz, 2010a) supports the development of narrative as a leadership practice amongst those seeking to make change in public life. Ganz's work connects the concepts of values-based leadership and 'lived experience' (in the sense of 'the experience that I am living', rather than a static property):

> "When we tell our own story, we teach the values that our choices reveal, not as abstract principles, but as our lived experience. We reveal the kind of person we are to the extent that we let others identify with us." (Ganz, 2008).

Ganz describes the Public Narrative framework as "a skill to motivate others to join you in action" (Ganz, 2023). Its roots lie in the generations-old storytelling practices associated with the development of social movements, with Ganz drawing on his own personal and professional experiences in the civil rights and workers' rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Ganz, 2010b).

Ganz's exploration lies principally in the dynamic between values, emotion and the ability of people to create and sustain purposeful collective action. He proposes that narrative connects us with values through the emotion we feel as we experience a story. Drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2001), Ganz further proposes that since we make choices based on the values we experience via emotion, the "emotional content" of narrative has a unique capacity to motivate us to sustained and purposeful action in the world (Ganz, 2023). The Public Narrative framework, then, scaffolds three interconnected questions – what Ganz calls "the interdependence of self, other, and action" (Ganz, 2023):

What am I called to do?

What are others with whom I am in relationship called to do?

What action does the world in which we live demand of us now?

Ganz's insights about narrative are not in themselves unique. He specifically attributes the three questions to the teachings of Rabbi Hillel the Elder in the first century BCE. And much of Ganz's work on relational leadership develops the groundwork laid by Charles Taylor's insights on authenticity in relationships (Taylor, 1991, p.28). Meanwhile, multiple bodies of research propose that storytelling is a purposeful act. Yet Ganz's specific formulation has impacted significantly on all my public works because of his practice-based orientation, moving beyond description to create methods and tools that have enhanced my practice.

This Context Statement explores how, at critical moments in my public works, use of the Public Narrative framework and related teachings enabled outcomes that were contingent on influencing decision-makers to co-create new possibilities with people who were directly impacted by the issue at hand. In both my formative work at

Movement for Change, and during the public works described in this Context Statement, people in positions of formal authority were, in a sense, 'called to leadership' through another person's use of public narrative.

When I co-designed and led the facilitation of the NHS Maternity Summit in May 2021, we were not designing the interactions with the intention of making specific and direct asks of decision-makers. Rather, we were seeking to create the conditions in which a large group of senior health and care professionals could engage with the subject-matter, *and with each other*, beyond a rational exchange of reasoned arguments. Our use of the public narrative framework was designed to stimulate emotional engagement and to cultivate second circle energy throughout the day (Rodenburg, 2008). In this way, our ambition was to support participants to make new meaning and discover possibilities in their shared work to improve NHS maternity services. As such, we were employing the art of storytelling as a device to offer "internal logics" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p.20) that might help the participants to assemble their ideas and 'show up' at the Summit in a different mode. We hoped that the public narrative of a recent maternity services user, Mo Ade, shared near the outset in the plenary session, would provide a basis on which participants could tell, build and reinterpret, so as to better understand their shared goals and values (Fischer, 2003).

As Fischer proposes, narratives "create and shape social meaning by imposing a coherent interpretation on the whirl of events and actions around us" (Fischer, 2003, p.162). In preparing this Context Statement, I have considered the ideas of other researchers who use storytelling as one mode to better understand senior public sector leaders at the intersection of academia and practice. In the context of executive leadership in local government, Kevin Orr notes that "a multitude of stories and storytellers are at large at any one time" (Orr, 2014). The framing offered by a person sharing their public narrative is not received passively and uncritically. Rather, alternative frames, stories and interpretations vie for credibility, often based on contested experiences and competing values. Orr's work on "organizational ghosts" – how inheritances of the past haunt the relations and struggles of the present – is particularly relevant to my exploration of leading change in the NHS (Orr, 2014).

Here, my different 'lenses' inter-relate. While transdisciplinarity directly challenges the hegemony of the scientific world view as a form of knowledge, my understanding of the role of narrative in my public works has been shaped by Jerome Bruner's proposition that humans use two modes of thought to interpret and understand the world and our experiences: "paradigmatic" and "narrative" modes (Bruner, 1986). While the paradigmatic mode employs categorisation to "fulfil the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation" (Bruner, 1986, p.12), the narrative mode is concerned with the meaning that is ascribed to the world through stories. As Jonathan Adler proposes, both modes offer strengths to researchers for different purposes, with the narrative mode being particularly suited to organising "the complex and often ambiguous world of human intention and action into a meaningful structure" (Adler, 2008, p.423).

The simplicity of Bruner's construct of 'two modes' was a helpful guide, not least because so many of my professional contexts – most obviously, Law and healthcare – emphasise (or even, at times, fetishise) the paradigmatic at the expense of the narrative mode. In **Chapter 5**, I consider how these two modes can be integrated in practice.

(iii) <u>Constructivist-development approaches to change</u>

While Ganz's work develops the narrative mode of thought (within Bruner's conception), in preparing this Context Statement I have also explored fields of research which intersect across the narrative and the paradigmatic modes of thought.

As a US-UK Fulbright Commission Scholar (January to July 2016), I 'audited' (that is, attended without receiving formal academic credit) Robert Kegan's "Adult Development" course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (**Appendix 4**). Through this experience, I gained an overview of constructivist-developmental theories and practice. That learning has influenced my work in the NHS and it continues to influence my co-design and delivery of the Future Vision programme.

Developmental theorists maintain that the world does not exist in an objective state outside of us, with an absolute truth waiting to be discovered. Rather, their work proposes that reality is *constructed*, with each person an active participant in making and re-making meaning through her lived experience. Their work also focuses on *development*, proposing that a person's construction of reality and her relationship with it changes over time, with the potential to become more nuanced and multi-faceted (Kegan, 1994; Rooke and Torbet, 2005; Kegan and Lahey, 2009; Garvey-Berger, 2012).

Several such developmental theories propose that our understanding of a person's psychological development – one's ways of relating to the world and to oneself – can be structured around different 'stages' of meaning-making. Adult developmental practitioners, who seek to engender the development of greater capabilities and capacities for meaning-making within other people, often draw on the narrative mode as a means of diagnosing or hypothesising the 'stage' of inner complexity (meaning-making) that a person is using to make sense of the world and her relationship with it. For example, sentence completion activities may be used to access stories (the *content*) that then enable an interpretation to be made of the *structure* of a person's meaning-making. This interpretation may be categorised, leading to a diagnosis (or hypothesis) of the person's 'stage' of development (Kegan, 2016; Boston and Ellis, 2019).

Further, adult developmental practitioners engage with narrative as a key means to engender shifts in meaning-making that may support people to develop new capabilities and capacities. So, for example, Jennifer Garvey-Berger's practice-oriented work cautions against the "trap" of "simple stories" (Garvey-Berger, 2019a, p.21) and proposes a range of coaching-based activities that a person can undertake, whether alone or with structured support, to perceive other narratives that might open a wider set of options for how to relate to the world (Garvey-Berger, 2019a, pp.114-135). So, the field of constructivist-developmental research draws on the narrative mode in a range of ways.

At the same time, in a meta-ontological sense the very act of structuring a body of theories and related practices around proposed 'stages' of development anchors

constructivist-developmental research in Bruner's "paradigmatic mode". The stages provide categories, with each stage relating to the next through a constructed logic, the evidence for which may be observed and tested against the overall general proposition. More than this, notions of hierarchy are inextricable and inherent in any model which purports to describe the ways in which a person 'develops' through ordered steps of meaning-making. There is, then, a tension at the heart of constructivist-developmental theories and 'staged' approaches when considered alongside the central premise of, say, transdisciplinarity: different levels of reality, with correspondingly different levels of perception (Nicolescu, 2006).

What makes constructivist-developmental theories doubly intriguing is that this tension exists even as the 'higher' stages of development (variously referred to as ironist or "alchemical" (Rooke and Torbet, 2005) and "self-transforming" (Kegan, 1994)) paradoxically describe a form of meaning-making that transcends linear and orthodox ways of knowledge. Indeed, the fluidity of meaning-making that resides in these 'advanced stages' of development strongly echoes Nicolescu's focus on "that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all discipline" (Nicolescu, 2006). The alchemical and self-transforming 'stages' of meaning-making share much in common with Nora Bateson's description of how learning and knowledge-exchange in living things occurs across and between different scales, as "small arcs of larger circles" (Bateson, 2016).

While Bateson might recognise these limited synergies with her work, Bateson's overall critique of constructivist-developmental theories has strongly influenced how I have perceived those theories while writing this Context Statement. Bateson has cautioned against the misuse of constructivist-developmental theories to set arbitrary standards through which conformity is forced and has questioned why certain academics and practitioners find 'staged development' so appealing (Bateson and Conan Ryan, 2021; Bateson and Görtz, 2022).

Bateson proposes that a metric of linear development for a person's learning is dangerously entangled in eugenics, the emergence of industry in the nineteenth century, the need for efficiency and the propagation of a Western-constructed notion of

'normality'. Meanwhile the complexity researcher Dave Snowden invites us to shift away from the "rigid frames" of developmental models towards more fluid, contextualised ways of understanding human behaviours and values (Snowden, 2022).

In the process of reflecting on how constructivist-developmental research has informed my public works, I have settled on a somewhat pragmatic view. The transdisciplinary researcher, Tanya Augsburg, proposes that a central characteristic of the transdisciplinary individual is "a modest positionality" in which the imperfections of all forms of knowledge are recognised (Augsburg, 2014, p.241). While ways of categorising and describing experience may be inherently reductionist, they may also help to organise, test and advance our understanding. Assumptions and beliefs may be propagated by the application of a given model, even as that model prompts learning that seems at-odds with those same assumptions and beliefs.

I have weaved the ideas of constructivist-developmental research into this Context Statement when they have resonated with my overall learning. I have done so, in part, to acknowledge that my professional practice was enhanced by the work of Kegan and others long before I became familiar with other bodies of research referenced in this chapter. They form part of the context for what was happening in my practice at the time and, in that way, they provide a useful lens within this Context Statement.

As I reference constructivist-developmental research in the following chapters, I conceptualise the ideas less as 'stages' and more as 'spheres' of development. Garvey-Berger uses the metaphor of rings growing around a tree, year after year, to explain the 'nested' properties of the various stages of development (Garvey-Berger, 2019a). The practitioner Rob McNamara describes this nesting as follows: "One stage's subjectivity transcends the prior stages in a larger inclusive coordination that itself is a larger whole" (McNamara, 2016, p.5). In drafting this Context Statement, I have preferred to hold a visual metaphor in my mind's eye of the ancient Celtic Knot, an inter-connected whole that can be perceived in parts while holding its overall integrity:

In using the Celtic Knot to visualise 'spheres' of development, I take confidence from Donald Schön's observations on the potential of metaphor to generate new insights:

> "Through the discovery of new metaphors, new perceptions and explanations can be generated… the discovery of new and of generative metaphors is not an act of abstract conceptualization or visioning, but an act of being in contact with, reflecting on and above all experiencing the phenomena." (Schön, 1979, p.259).

Deepening the metaphor, the Celtic Knot may be said to confound our human tendencies towards 'development' and 'progress'. Donald Schön invites us to undertake critical reflection, in part so that we may close the gap between our espoused theories and our theories in use (Schön, 1979). Robert Kegan invites us to become more self-aware of the "mismatch" between the world's complexity and our own at this moment, in part so that we may bring the two into closer alignment (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). We accept these invitations knowing that, while the gaps may never close, learning awaits us in the endeavour.

(iv) Complexity-based approaches to change

In the Future Vision leadership programme, we scaffold the content around the dual concepts of 'leading from the inside-out' and 'leading from the outside-in'.

Inside-out leadership refers primarily to people's internal meaning-making capacities, encompassing the domains of constructivist development, narrative and critical self-reflection outlined above. In contrast, *outside-in leadership* orientates towards the 'complex environments' in which leadership happens when viewed through the lens of systems. The next part of this chapter describes some of the key themes and ideas that have informed my understanding of this aspect of my public works.

By the time I started work in the NHS in 2016, I had a growing sense that (regardless of professional sector or discipline) orthodox modes of practice – acquiring technical competence, accomplishing projects, gaining more specialist experience, completing trainings, becoming 'more qualified' – were wholly insufficient to the task of leading change in the way our world's challenges demanded. Studying with Robert Kegan had helped me to locate this dissonance within the boundary between the so-called 'Self-Authoring' and 'Self-Transforming' forms of mind (Kegan, 1982).

As people start to experience the possibilities of the Self-Transforming sphere of development, part of the shift that Kegan outlines is a re-orientation away from 'problem-solving' and towards 'problem-finding' (Kegan, 1982). A person making meaning from a Self-Authored form of mind might shape a strong sense of herself over time. Yet she is perhaps unable to experience how she is also being shaped by her context, both the vast networks of relationships in the immediacy of any given moment *and* the wider contextual factors that shape those relationships in turn. From a Self-Transforming form of mind, as McNamara puts it, a person "can experience the formation of selfhood arising out of a larger relatedness to the broader social, cultural, psychological and physiological contexts" (McNamara, 2016, p.8). A realisation arises, in other words, that 'the self' is profoundly influenced and potentially transformed by a larger relational immediacy.

From this space, one's understanding of the world becomes less about tackling complex problems so as to solve them – a myopic process likely to foreclose more creative responses – and more about a search for the deeper problems beneath the superficial one, rooted in broader, inter-related contexts. In my public works related to Jo Cox MP, for instance, the mainstreaming of far-right, nationalist language; the prevalence of misinformation; and the increase of abuse towards female politicians, all form part of the inter-related context to Jo's assassination. Yet so too do our cultural beliefs about 'otherness'; our constructs of knowledge and truth; and our deeply embedded misogyny. They all need to be recognised as part of the 'why' of what happened. This broader orientation invites us to move beyond simple answers towards experimentation and discovery, with the potential to realise a different order of creativity in how we relate to events. From this orientation, the people who are interwoven within the context – including oneself – are as amenable to influence and transformation as 'the problem' or 'the system' itself.

At a recent healthcare improvement conference, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's founder, Don Berwick, expressed his frustration with "incremental improvements of the *status quo*" and called on us to "cross the chasm" (Berwick, 2023). In doing so, Berwick referenced an aphorism most commonly attributed to former UK Prime Minister David Lloyd George*: You cannot cross a chasm in two steps. It takes one – a single leap*.

The origins of Berwick's call go a long way back. Reflecting on Berwick's keynote address, my NHS colleague Sasha Karakusevic relayed how, as a senior NHS manager, he first started to notice divergence in the leading indicators used to track progress in his local healthcare system in 2005. The approach to improvement used for more than two decades was showing signs of strain. Put simply, the future maths didn't add up and nobody was clear on what to do (Karakusevic, 2023). The geneses of present crises – climate breakdown, profound health inequalities, instabilities in global security – are all symptomatic of inter-related shifts over time. In this sense the healthcare system, a key attribute of a thriving society but far from the only one, is a small arc of the larger circle of profound change across systems. Yet if nobody is sure

what to do, what does 'a single leap' look like in practice? How can we discern which way to jump? And how do we build the collective muscles to leap and land on the other side?

With Sasha, Helen Bevan and others, from 2016 onwards I began to integrate disparate bodies of research into my practice as a strategic facilitator of change initiatives. Learning as we went, we tried to do more of what seemed effective and less of everything else. We focused on work that helped us to develop practices for facilitating transformative (rather than incremental) change.

An early discovery was the work of Bill Sharpe, whose "three horizons" model provides a basis for perceiving current problems with a view to developing "future consciousness" – a rich and multifaceted awareness of the future potential of the present (Sharpe, 2013). Within the three horizons model, the first horizon denotes the current state as generally perceived. In this state, effort is expended to maintain business as usual, often through acts of incremental adjustment (Sharpe, 2013). So, for example, while the health needs of our population have changed profoundly over the past two decades, the NHS' operating model has been altered but not re-imagined. Meanwhile, the third horizon denotes the "emerging future" – new patterns of possibility discerned through cycles of renewal, which speak to a fundamentally altered state (Sharpe, 2013). This third horizon is informed and partly shaped by innovative practice, which tests radical approaches to perceived problems so as to generate new thinking and practice. Over time, fault-lines in 'business as usual' prompt patterns of transition activities and innovations. These are Sharpe's 'second horizon'. Increasing numbers of people try things out in response to the ways in which the landscape is changing. These innovations have disparate impacts. Over time, they enable a new horizon to emerge as the long term successor to business as usual.

Sharpe's model holds many synergies with the insights of transdisciplinarity and reflective action outlined above. The three horizons model proposes no hierarchy for determining what types of innovation or practice are to be preferred. Rather, Sharpe's emphasis is on the need to test, reflect and learn (Sharpe, 2013). Knowledge is generated through experience, rather than a disembodied attempt to 'know our way'

into different possible futures. In this respect, the model chimes with Fook's conception of knowledge as embodied and social – a process rather than an artefact (Fook, 2015, p.443). Further, the iterative quality of Sharpe's second horizon resonates with Petranker's notion of living out a future consistent with your intention, with refinement as the context requires (Petranker, 2005, p.252).

Sharpe's insights also complement other models for exploring complex change. In 2018, I developed a formal partnership between our team, NHS Horizons, and the company Cognitive Edge, through which Dave Snowden continues to develop practice based on the Cynefin framework (Snowden and Boone, 2007). The framework acts as a decision-making and problem-solving tool, originally organised across five domains: Obvious, Complicated, Complex, Chaotic, and Disordered. I underwent Practitioner-level training in the framework and we funded NHS Horizons researchers to deploy the related 'Sensemaker' software in our commissioned work (Hunt, 2019). Alongside Ralph Stacey's model for delineating potential actions on the basis of the levels of certainty and agreement in a given context (Stacey, 2007), testing the principles of the Cynefin framework in practice helped to shape my NHS public works.

Growing more confident as practitioners of large-scale change, the NHS Horizons team augmented these models with other approaches to facilitating change. A blended approach started to emerge, which we used more consistently in our commissions. In terms of process, its bedrock was an 'accelerated design methodology' through which we would convene a small, diverse group of leaders to co-design bigger deliberative processes involving hundreds, if not thousands, of people. As a human-centred approach that stresses creativity and experimentation within a frame of 'learning through failure', design-thinking offered clear synergies both with the Sharpe / Snowden / Stacey sphere of research, and the practices of critical reflection and reflexivity outlined above.

Much more could be described about the full blend of theories, models and practices that we integrated across our numerous NHS commissions from 2016 onwards. For the purposes of this Context Statement, one further thread needs to be made explicit.

As set out above, theorists across numerous disciplines have explored the ways in which knowledge creation is a relational and contextual endeavour. As well as knowledge being 'embodied', this Context Statement also considers the proposition that knowledge may be created *outside* the body, or rather beyond a traditional conception of singularly embodied experience. As Anna Murphy Paul puts it in her study of 'the extended mind', human thought "is exquisitely sensitive to context, and one of the most powerful contexts of all is the presence of other people. As a consequence, when we think socially, we think differently – and often better – than when we think non-socially" (Murphy Paul, 2021, p.189).

Kegan's Self-Transforming form of mind points towards experience as transcending notions of 'self'. Similarly, Nicolescu orientates us to "that which is at once between… across… and beyond" (Nicolescu, 2006). In a related sense, the concept of the extended mind – or 'collective intelligence' – questions our default tendency to work our individual brains ever harder rather than seek opportunities to extend them, through working together with our environments and each other in different ways (Murphy Paul, 2021; Mulgan, 2022). The term 'collective intelligence' proposes that groups of people can work together to produce results that exceed their members' individual contributions" (Murphy Paul, 2021). This is the essence of the philosophy which underpins my most recent public works.

More than this, the research and practice on which this Context Statement rests would not have been possible without collective intelligence. In **Chapter 5**, I describe how Nancy Schön's sculptures impacted the research of her husband, Donald Schön (Schön, 2022). Within this, I see echoes of how Nora Bateson's discussions with her ecologist father, Gregory Bateson, are informing the next phase of systems-thinking research. Indeed, the existence of this Context Statement relies on such moments of collective intelligence, generated with Brian Sutton, Carolyn Wilkins, Christopher Pietroni, Helen Bevan, Sasha Karakusevic and others. I include this proposition not simply by way of recognition and thanks, but because the social, relational and collective construction of meaning that informs this Context Statement is a critical lens through which to read it.

Unifying the lenses: small arcs of a larger circle

If each of the four lenses is a small arc, then the larger circle connecting them in my public works is my search for meaning and purpose. In **Chapter 1**, I described some of my formative experiences, which led up to the public works on which I reflect in this Context Statement. I referred to a moment of "profound crisis of confidence and purpose, during which I reconsidered almost every aspect of my life". The final part of this chapter will pick up this thread and stitch it into the overall pattern.

In preparing this Context Statement, I have returned repeatedly to research and ideas which speak to questions of purpose and meaning. My exploration has ranged across formal academic research; experiences of art (such as performance, poetry, novels and the visual arts); structured and informal conversations; and simply sharing the experience I am living with other people. I have sought to accept Margaret Wheatley's entreaty to "look for new ways of seeing" in "many places", so as to see a bigger whole (Wheatley, 1993). In doing so, I have come to recognise how dynamic and porous the concept of 'purpose' can be, often acting as a chimera, both longed-for and illusory.

As I have read and experienced more, I have been drawn to Victor Frankl's proposition that the primary motive for living is to find meaning, rather than the goal of life being to attain happiness or comfort (Frankl, 2006). In 'The When of Knowing' Jack Petranker supplants the word 'purpose' with the term to "act from intention" (Petranker, 2005, p.252). Petranker's framing of intention as active implies our human agency to let go of commitments to past stories and even to "free ourselves from allegiance to a dream of what is possible" (Petranker, 2005, p.252). Intention can be enacted through many small choices. Petranker proposes that, by living a future consistent with our intention, "we can engender major transformations" (Petranker, 2005, p.252).

Whether training for the Bar and practising Law; or leaving that career without a formed plan and standing for Parliament; or running a political organisation (alongside giving birth to two children); or eschewing higher-status opportunities to lead change in the NHS, my public works rest on paths chosen and paths rejected. Preparing this Context Statement has given me the chance to consider these choices and their consequences more holistically, scaffolded by critical self-reflection. This, in turn, has shone a light on Wheatley's "ever-deepening levels of complexity and variety" (Wheatley, 1993). Living my own story forwards, through critical reflection I have found myself deeply engaged in reassessing my own purpose. I continue to wonder 'what more?' and 'what next?'.

The process has been deeply painful at times. It has revealed to me moments when I have felt dehumanised and, worse, moments when I may have dehumanised other people. As the philosopher Roberto Unger put it:

> "We must choose a path and reject other paths. This rejection, indispensable to our self-development, is also a mutilation. In choosing, as we must, we cast aside many aspects of our humanity. If, however, we cast them aside completely, we become less than fully human. We must continue somehow to feel the movements of the limbs we cut off." (Unger, 2012).

Continuing to feel, then, is central to acting from intention. Through the act of reflection, my past experiences are constructed anew. New circles of meaning and purpose become possible.

A final reflection.

In what follows, I am inviting you into "the empty space" (Brook, 2008), not as passive recipient but as actor. Engaging with this text, both as author and reader, presents a moment of possibility between us, beyond the construct of chronological time. There is a "hidden third", a space for experimentation and imagination which the casual observer might miss (Dieleman, 2012, p.51). Here is an invitation for you to

challenge your own perspectives as you read, contributing to and shaping the value of this Context Statement in the process.

In Plato's allegory of the cave, the free prisoner decides to return. The prisoner's eyes, now accustomed to the sunlight, are blind as he re-enters overwhelming darkness. He stumbles into the cave. The other prisoners, those who remained chained to the wall, infer that the man has been harmed by his journey in the outside world. They take heed of the warning. In Plato's telling, the philosopher Socrates concludes that, for their own self-protection, the prisoners may now gladly kill any person who tries to bring them out into the light.

CHAPTER 3(i):

ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE (vignette)
The small wooden stool

Dad holds the Missal at chest height and stands up straight before me. He raises his eyes, taking in his imaginary audience before allowing his line of sight to fall back to the open book. He projects his voice forward, slow, confident:

"The second reading comes from the First Epistle to the Thessalonians."

Dad passes the Missal down to me, smoothing the open page with his right palm so that I don't lose my place.

"Now you," he says.

The book is fat and wobbles, heavy in my hands. I grip it to try to keep the open page upright. I clear my throat and lift my chin.

"The second reading comes from the First Epistle to the They-a…"

"Not quite. *Thessalonians*."

"Thessay…"

"Nearly…"

"Thess… Thessalonians."

"That's it. Thessalonians. Good." He smiles encouragingly. "Again, from the top."

More certain now, I project my voice forward into the kitchen:

"The second reading comes from the First Epistle to the Thessalonians."

Deep breath. Pause. Read the sentence. Make sense of the words. Only then, look up to speak.

"We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers…"

We are in the kitchen of 'the old house" in our small market town on the edge of London, the house to which I returned from hospital when I was born, the house we moved out of when my younger brother was a few months old. I know this because I remember the coolness of the metal fridge door against which I'm leaning while I read aloud from the Missal, looking out at Dad and the congregation that we pretend is seated behind him.

That places this memory to when I was 6 years old.

Church (or rather, the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church", a description apparently applicable only to the Roman Catholic Church) acted as the moral compass of my childhood. It was the drumbeat to which the rhythm of our weeks marched, from Confessionals and school plays to the weekly Sunday Mass. It was the background of every interaction.

Aged 6, in our neat kitchen with its linoleum flooring and green Formica table, we are practising for the evening Mass, at which I will give the second reading in front of the 200-strong congregation. One of the other Readers (who, except for me and my older brother, Kevin, are all adults) will deliver the first reading. Then my turn, followed by the priest who will read that week's Gospel. Three passages from the Bible at each Mass, marking the transition to the priest's sermon and then the sacrament of the Eucharist.

I suppose, looking back, we must have been well-known in the Aylesbury Catholic community. The small children who read at Mass. I don't remember that particularly. I more just remember feeling part of something, feeling that I belonged. It was what we did.

Yet looking back, I see it as remarkable.

How we practised every Saturday until the reading was pitch-perfect. How Dad coached us not simply to read, but to understand what we were reading. And more, to realise that the way in which we read could help others to understand – the cadence, the pace and the pauses. *If you don't understand what you're saying, how can you expect others to?*

How the priest, Canon Frank Duane, came up with the idea of keeping a small wooden stool with a worn dark-green velvet cover under the church's lectern, so that Kevin and I could pull the stool out and stand on it before reaching up to adjust the microphone downwards.

How the congregation's warm smiles radiated up at me as I peeped round the sides of the lectern to make eye contact while speaking (*connect with each person, and with the people as a whole*). I remember simply assuming that this response was what always happened to a public speaker. It didn't occur to me that this was the generous encouragement of a community of friends, who seemed always surprised and delighted to have such a small child leading part of the weekly Mass.

When I was 12 years old, I transitioned from a small, community-minded and socially diverse Catholic primary school to a large, ultra-selective all-girls grammar school. Most of the children with whom I had been friends went to the "secondary modern" schools (which were carefully segregated from the grammars) or to the all-boys grammar school across the road (which shared no lessons or other activities with the girls' school). The transition was very difficult for me, and I struggled to feel a sense of belonging. In seven years at that school, I never quite settled. By my final year, I attended only to be present for the minimal classes that would permit me to sit my A-Level exams. From 14 years old onwards, I had no social life connected with the school. I mourned for what I had lost without really understanding what had happened.

When I was 14 years old, I decided to enter my school's Public Speaking Competition. The other speakers were all sixth formers, looming above me. By now, this wasn't

especially unusual, and I'd learned to treat differences in size, age and experience somewhat lightly. If one looked hard enough, there was always a church stool at-hand.

As the topic of my speech, I chose "Parents". How infuriating they could be. How they often said one thing and did another. How saintlike we were to put up with them and how we longed to reach the age when we could fly the nest. I didn't tell anyone else what I was drafting but worked on it every evening and practised in my mind how I would deliver it before the judges.

"Our next entry is Kathryn White, a Year 10 pupil…" These words prompted a low murmur from the assembled 300 sixth formers who, every year, comprised the audience for the competition. I stood and walked to the front. I don't recall being nervous, and I don't recall doing much more than glancing at my notes.

I do remember, though, stopping dead with surprise when I made my first joke and the room erupted in spontaneous laughter. This never happened in church. I was momentarily stunned. Recovering myself, I glanced around the room at the rows of smiling faces. Then back at my paper before continuing, to more laughter, with warm murmurs of recognition for my words and, at the end, strong applause. I sat back down and thought to myself, *well that was fun*.

When the judges came to give their verdict, I was commended for my use of humour, staying "just on the right side of the line between public speaking and drama" (a line I would tight-rope walk many times in the years ahead). That was enough for me. I was beaming and so pleased to have had the chance to take part.

So it was something of a shock when the Head Judge then announced: "And after careful consideration, we've decided to award the Public Speaking cup to… Kathryn White." I was so shocked that I physically lunged forward, burying my bright-scarlet face in my lap. In my tiny world this was a Big Deal, possibly the only time I had felt seen or rewarded in all my years at this school. People speak of the applause ringing in one's ears and that's precisely how it felt. If I close my eyes, I can hear it again and see myself standing in that hall, delighted and bewildered.

In class-time that afternoon, my form tutor announced the result with pride to our Year 10 class. Polite applause followed, and my tutor then announced that I would be delivering the winning speech to the Year 10 and 11 Assembly tomorrow morning. Even now, I remember my feeling of unease, though like much else in my life at this age, I couldn't quite describe why and decided to bury the feeling.

The next morning, I arrived early for Assembly. We were back in the same hall where I'd collected my prize to warm applause only the day before.

The Year 10 and 11 students – my peers – scuffled into the room and slapped themselves down onto the rows of hard benches. It was November, the sky outside the small windows pallid and heavy. The heating hadn't quite kicked in and the faces looking out at me were a wall of grey.

My form tutor introduced me with the forced sing-song energy that teachers use when they have a long day ahead with adolescents. Then I stood to a half-hearted smatter of applause.

It's funny how the size of a space bears so little relation to its actual dimensions. I turn to face my audience. My handwritten notes, so pristine during the Competition, are now crumpled and tired. I silently wish that I'd thought to write them out again. My throat, inexplicably dry, tells my brain that it needs a moment before doing its work. I'm shaking (what *is* this?) and feel strangely small. My tutor, whose face offers the one encouraging smile looking up at me expectantly, seems to shrink to a distant corner of the room, while the girls in front of me merge together.

I clear my throat and begin. At the first joke, the one that yesterday garnered spontaneous laughter, I pause. *Nothing*. I look up, uncertain. Carla, ringleader of the Year 11 bullies, glares down at me, tight coils of red hair framing her face, lips pursed in disgust. The next line falters, the words all jumbled up in my brain, something not quite connecting from page to voice. Even the half-hearted smatter of applause to which I stood-up now feels kind.

It's funny how the size of a space bears so little relation to its actual dimensions. How a voice can wax and wane in the presence of others. How voice is not an absolute,

emanating from one person, but rather a dynamic existing in the relationship between living things. It's funny how silence can be voice; how, in that moment, Carla's voice and Carla's face and the faces of all her bullying "friends" and the wall of girls who sat bored or distracted or whatever in front of me, all had voice. I had the floor, but it didn't matter. I had the words, but they didn't want to hear, indeed resented being made to sit there. Weren't these the people who were meant to be proud of me? Weren't these supposed to be my Year, my 'congregation'? I limped to the end of my "prize winning speech" and sat back down.

One person's presence relates to the presence of another. One person's presence can be augmented, or diminished, by another. We hold a space together, and that space may blossom or wither depending on the quality of our attention. Being present; connecting with each person and the people as a whole. A spotlight on a particular moment, a particular truth, with candlelight behind it to illuminate the borders of the darkened room.

CHAPTER 3(ii):

ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE (public works)
The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission and Memorial Lecture

"All the lonely people, where do they all come from?

All the lonely people, where do they all belong?

I look at all the lonely people

I look at all the lonely people"

<div align="right">Paul McCartney (1966)</div>

When Jo Cox MP was murdered by a far-right extremist, I was in the final weeks of my Fulbright Scholarship at Harvard University. I had made the journey to Boston from London several months earlier, with my 2-year-old son under one arm and my 7-month-old daughter under the other. Life was full. While I followed Jo's progress as a new Member of Parliament, we didn't speak during those months. I simply assumed that, when I returned to the UK, Jo and I would continue our friendship where we left off. But there I was, an ocean away, receiving messages from friends that Jo had been attacked… shot and stabbed… that Jo was dead.

Jo's husband, Brendan Cox, issued an extraordinary statement on the day of her death. I returned to parts of his statement many times in preparing and delivering my public works:

"Jo believed in a better world and she fought for it every day of her life with an energy, and a zest for life, that would exhaust most people.

She would have wanted two things above all else to happen now, one that our precious children are bathed in love and two, that we all unite to fight against the

hatred that killed her. Hate doesn't have a creed, race or religion, it is poisonous."
(Cox, 2016).

In the days that followed Jo's murder, a tremendous outpouring of public grief mingled with pent-up, conflicting sentiments over the EU Referendum. Jo's family and closest friends set to work organising huge public events, centring-in on the core sentiment of Jo's maiden speech in Parliament, that we have "more in common" than that which divides us (Cox, 2015). The phrase became a rallying cry around which many of her friends and colleagues organised work to "fight against the hate that killed Jo". This included the 'Great Get Together' movement and the re-scoping of Jo's nascent parliamentary work to tackle loneliness into 'The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness'. The Commission was overseen jointly by two of Jo's friends, Rachel Reeves MP (Labour) and Seema Kennedy MP (Conservative). The Commission brought together 13 charitable organisations whose remits related directly to loneliness. Its final report was designed to set out the scale of the problem and to give practical examples as to how we could all make a difference in our communities.

By that time, I was back in the UK and working at NHS Horizons, a specialist improvement unit within NHS England. As part of that work, my colleague Helen Bevan invited me to co-present the NHS School for Change Agents, a 'massive open online course' (or 'MOOC') accessible for free by all NHS staff. Helen invited me to outline the methodology of the Public Narrative framework (Ganz, 2010a) with case studies, relevant to health and healthcare, that would inspire people to lead change in their own contexts. In a series of live sessions, I shared narratives from Jo Cox's life and used the coalescing of a movement around the 'Great Get Together' as an example of how to use the Public Narrative framework to lead change in public life.

The process of re-framing Jo's activism through the lens of health (combatting loneliness in our communities) and healthcare (loneliness as a public health emergency), then teaching it through the Public Narrative framework, is an example of Donald Schön's process of "reflective action" (Schön, 1983, p.138). In Helen's invitation to design Public Narrative content for the NHS School for Change Agents, I saw a

chance to integrate something already present in my repertoire from a fresh perspective. While coming to terms with Jo's death during the preceding months, I had been reflecting on her life, her activism and how these had been crafted into a movement for change by her family and close friends. Helen's invitation gave me the chance to test my ideas in public, wedding my previous experience of teaching Ganz's methodology with a content (Jo's life and activism) that felt very current.

Having received positive feedback from participants in the NHS School for Change Agents, my confidence grew. Up to that point, I had avoided contacting mutual friends and had not sought to involve myself in legacy work being organised in Jo's name. I felt shame at having been absent at the time of Jo's murder. I hadn't been involved in the 'formative rituals' of organising public events for collective grieving, nor in establishing the Jo Cox Foundation. From an adult developmental perspective, I found myself 'caught' by a simple story which misplaced cause-and-effect in a way that perpetuated my isolation from Jo and our mutual friends.

The developmental practitioner Jennifer Garvey-Berger describes "simple stories" as a major "trap" for leaders who are trying to work with complexity, both in their ways of knowing and in their response to the wider context:

> "This desire for beginnings and endings, for connecting cause and effect, doesn't just shape the way we draw boundaries and gather evidence and decide on guilt and innocence; it also shapes how we think about our actions in the future." (Garvey-Berger, 2019a, p.28).

I had been 'caught' by a simple story – that I had been absent when it mattered most, and I therefore did not 'deserve' to contribute to Jo's public legacy.

Re-shaping the story of Jo's life and activism, then using it to teach other potential activists through the NHS School for Change Agents, enabled me to untangle my sense-making. I started to feel confident enough to reconnect.

The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness

In early 2017, I contacted Kirsty McNeill, a mutual friend. Kirsty quickly connected me with members of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and the Chief Executive of the newly formed Jo Cox Foundation. From them, I learned that while the Commission was progressing steadily, there were difficulties with influencing the 13 charitable organisations to move beyond the descriptive elements of their Commission Report into pushing forward robust recommendations to the UK Government. I formed a strong impression that an overarching political narrative for the Commission's work would be needed, around which specific recommendations could be made to the UK Prime Minister.

In conversation with Iona Lawrence, inaugural Chief Executive of the Jo Cox Foundation, we agreed that I would design and convene two parliamentary roundtables to address these challenges. The roundtables were intended to bring together a range of different political and policy perspectives, beyond the contributions being made on behalf of the 13 charitable organisations. We hoped that this would create 'breakthrough thinking' that would enable the Commission to distil ambitious and achievable recommendations for the Prime Minister.

My appointment provoked some ruptures. Various charity leaders were invested in drafting the main Report and there was ongoing grumbling about who would 'hold the pen' for the final discussions with Government. I would characterise this now as a contestation around voice – a jostling for influence to decide who would get to sit at the table, what the terms of discussion would be and what perspectives might be heard or hidden. Here, I will focus on one element of this dynamic by way of reflecting on my own assumptions and beliefs about power, *per* Jan Fook's suggested frame for reflective practice (Fook, 2015).

In the first weeks of my involvement with the Commission, I had attended various meetings with representatives of the 13 charitable organisations, both to plan logistics and to work with politicians through public engagement events at the House of Commons. I had been struck by the total absence, within these events, of people offering direct lived experience of loneliness. While I wasn't naïve to a tendency within

the charitable sector to act 'on behalf of' others, the lack of any narrative within the Commission's day-to-day work on loneliness felt odd and limiting. The draft Report referenced various 'case studies', which described people's experiences of loneliness. But these were, in a literal sense, presented in boxes and divorced from the main structure of the draft Report. Meanwhile, the people who spoke at the meetings and events presented themselves, almost exclusively, as professionals working in "Engagement" roles.

This is not to deny that people in those roles may have had their own lived experience of loneliness. I am conscious, as I narrate my perspective here, of the need to acknowledge, with integrity, the possible alternative perspectives at play (Chang, 2008). Yet their own personal experiences remained latent in the content and delivery of all the events that I attended. People attended these events in a somewhat abstracted 'advisory' capacity.

As such, in planning the first roundtable, I decided to centre direct 'lived experience' of loneliness within the event. As a counterbalance, I also recognised that the roundtables would need contributions from leading policymakers. To this end, I invited Professor Nick Pearce, Director of the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Bath, to host the roundtables at IPR's Westminster venue and to help me ensure a balance of contributors from across the political spectrum.

At around that time I met a fellow mum in my local community, whom I will refer to in this Context Statement as "FM" (fellow mum). Walking home from our children's nursery one day, FM recounted how she had established an organisation offering training courses and other support about pregnancy, birth and beyond. FM described how she was motivated to start her organisation after feeling lonely, confused and ashamed during the pregnancies and births of her two children. After only two meetings, I invited FM to participate in the first roundtable. In subsequent conversations, we jointly shaped her experiences using the Public Narrative framework (Ganz, 2010a) into a 'testimony' with which to open the first roundtable.

What had I been assuming when I invited FM to contribute? Several things. I had assumed that the inclusion of testimony would, in and of itself, open space in the first

roundtable for 'grounded' discussions. By this, I think I had in mind discussions that referenced back to actual experiences of loneliness and that would root the final written output in narrative as well as formal analysis. In Bruner's conception, the narrative mode would be balanced alongside the paradigmatic (Bruner, 1986). I had assumed that FM would welcome the opportunity to participate in this way and that I would bring the experience and expertise needed to support her to do so bravely and safely.

I think I also assumed that, as a seemingly confident, articulate and educated woman who had built an organisation based on her personal experiences, FM would feel confident in this role. I had perhaps assumed that the physical space (a formal venue in Westminster) and the energetic space (a focused discussion with a high proportion of male politicians and policymakers) would be familiar to FM, or at least not so unfamiliar as to inhibit her ability to contribute.

The reality of that first roundtable was very different from what I had imagined. By my own design, we sat in a horseshoe around desks, with note-takers in the corners and me sitting in the centre of the horseshoe alongside Nick Pearce. I invited the contributors to introduce themselves sequentially. I then introduced FM and invited her to speak. To my surprise, FM gripped a piece of paper, which I then realised was a form of handwritten script. FM read aloud from it in a voice that brimmed with emotion. When she had finished, there was a brief pause and then another contributor raised his hand. I thanked FM and opened the discussion, starting with this contributor, whose point did not relate directly to what FM had said.

While facilitating the first roundtable, I failed to notice that FM had retreated into herself. When I think back now, I can recall how her posture rendered her physically smaller in the space. I had some notion that FM didn't speak during the discussion that followed, but I cannot recall that she seemed disengaged. I did note, however, that the energy in the room was flat. The discussion progressed, with one contribution after another. I had a sense that these contributions weren't building on each other – that the sum had not become greater than the parts. I had aspired to a conversation which would create "collective intelligence", in which we would think socially and therefore in

richer and more nuanced ways (Murphy Paul, 2021, p.189). Instead, one disparate point followed another. Only at the end, when I invited Nick Pearce to summarise what he had heard, did I feel confident that a coherent set of insights could be crafted from the various contributions.

Some weeks later, FM asked to meet me. During that conversation, she shared something of her own experience of the roundtable. It had been, she said, frightening. She had not felt that the stories she shared had been affirmed. From what she said, I perceived her to be telling me that she had not felt properly supported and she had not felt seen.

Reflecting critically on my role in that dynamic, I will draw on Argyris and Schön's conceptions of espoused theories and theories in use (Argyris and Schön, 1974, pp.6-7). The theory that I espoused at the time, both to myself and to others, was that the use of FM's Public Narrative would, in and of itself, create breakthrough thinking. I believed that I was attending to the conditions that would be needed to enable this to happen, by 'marrying' (as I saw it) a powerful use of testimony with a traditional policymaking context and setting. In reality, I now consider that I was working first and foremost from the perspective of the politicians and policymakers – the people who were already at the table. More, I designed the physical space and framed the language for the roundtable in ways that signalled an orthodox policymaking format. In other words, my theories in use signalled to the participants that they would be on familiar territory, invited to contribute through a rational, intellectual and 'evidence based' way of knowing.

Into that environment, I had invited FM's contribution without the scaffolding that might have enabled a safe and generative experience for her and others. I had not specifically framed her contribution in the pre-reading or in briefing calls, so contributors' own likely assumptions about the roundtable had not been challenged in advance. In a sense, I had made myself hostage to the very framing of a 'roundtable' with all its connotations of unembodied intellectual discussion. This is doubly intriguing given that, by this point in my career, I had years of experience in co-designing and facilitating

creative spaces that drew on wider conceptions of learning and knowledge. Why, then, did I allow my actual behaviour and revealed preferences to retreat to a narrower space on this occasion?

Perhaps my actions were governed by a desire to demonstrate that I was not a naïve political actor, but someone who understood the orthodoxies of the world we (the Commission) were seeking to influence. Perhaps, in a developmental sense, I was orienting primarily from a socialised form of mind, becoming embedded in the perspectives and perceived wisdom of Westminster policymaking (Kegan, 1994; Garvey-Berger, 2012, p.19). I certainly felt an internal tearing, as though parts of myself were pitted against each other in ways that I hadn't integrated or resolved.

My experience here resonates with Robert McNamara's description of the distinctions between 'socialised' and 'self-authoring' forms of mind. McNamara observes that to live from the self-authoring form of mind can be profoundly lonely – a "pronounced aloneness, often born from years of hard-earned self-sufficient autonomy" (McNamara, 2016, p.2). Where a person acting from a socialised form of mind may feel pressed on by others, autonomous individuals can feel untouchable, while perhaps also experiencing "a profound yearning for a new way to make intimate contact with others and perhaps everything in life" (McNamara, p.2). This observation resonates as I reflect on my internal tussle while preparing the first roundtable. I had a sense that I wanted to connect with people – and for them to connect with each other and with the experience – in ways that were generative and creative. I knew that a 'socialised' approach to the roundtable, in which we would 'fit in' with existing norms, wouldn't achieve this. Yet I feared exposing myself as 'other' – unmoored from the usual conventions of policymaking and deliberation – by trying something substantially novel.

My assumptions about FM, based on how she presented and spoke, and on what I knew of her background, were also important. I don't think I really considered FM as a whole person. I saw what I wanted to see: a confident, articulate white British woman whose educational background and class meant that she would meet the opportunity with ease. In the process, I flattened and inhibited the very energy that I had hoped to unleash. In my 'lens' chapter (Candles and Spotlights), I refer to this as a form

of dehumanisation. In doing so, I am attempting to meet Fook's invitation to deconstruct my thinking "in order to expose how we participate in constructing power" (Fook, 2015, p.445). This is humbling for me, bringing with it the realisation that I may have propagated a harm (FM feeling lonely, confused and ashamed, resonant with her experience of the births of her children) in the exact moment that I purported to want to lessen that harm.

What might I do differently now? It seems clear to me that my frames of reference were overly deferred to my perception of the existing paradigm about 'how to engage with' policymakers and politicians. Now, I would design the space in a radically different way, framing it as an 'experience' or 'event' rather than a 'roundtable' and using that new language to open new possibilities in format, content and physicality. I would, in other words, attend more to the social dimensions of the ways in which knowledge is used and interpreted, so as to better create the conditions in which "new shared understandings" might emerge (Fook, 2015, pp.445-446).

I would also design the roundtable more holistically. Rather than focusing on a standalone narrative from one contributor, I would devote more attention to preparing *all* contributors to engage with the event, the space and each other in unfamiliar ways. My reflection here notes how moments of 'collective intelligence' require cultivation and intentionality as to the set-up, framing and delivery of the work. This might take the form of in-person preparatory conversations with me; or connecting participants around creative prompt questions in advance of the session; or physically situating the event away from Westminster and configuring the space to enable embodied as well as intellectual work. As we experience the world through our embodied state (Totton, 2003), this shift might have enabled the participants to access a wider range of knowledge beyond their policy-making expertise.

Approaching the roundtable more holistically might also mean facilitating it so as to surface the lived experiences of *all* the contributors – not simply showcasing the standalone narrative of one person (in this case, FM). In this way, I might have better encouraged a context in which the participants' sense-making was more nuanced, aided

by the quality of attention and reflection that they were encouraged to bring to bear (Petranker, 2003, p.9).

Some of these changes occurred in the second roundtable, one month later. With an entirely fresh group of participants, we met in a community space near to Westminster but not 'in the heart' of that district of London. I made sure to speak with all contributors individually beforehand. I scheduled the event in the late morning and invited them to bring food that could be shared on the tables, lessening the sense of formality and activating a subliminal sense of shared experience (the social).

I also designed the flow of the event to be interactive and experiential. We moved around the room, using props, visual images and poetry. I worked hard to centre my own energy, actively listening so as to be more present to the possibilities that contributors offered. In this way, together we created a conversation through which one contribution built on the next towards a greater whole.

The only note-taker present at the second event was Andy Hull, whom I had asked to participate with everyone else while also capturing a few insights to shape a short 'mission statement' to share later with Rachel Reeves MP and Seema Kennedy MP. Andy had been a member of the Advisory Board when I was the CEO of Movement for Change. He had often acted as the 'soul' of the Board, bringing everyone else back to foundational questions of purpose and intent. I felt confident that Andy would understand the more creative framing that I was trying to offer for Rachel, Seema and the Commission.

This second event was, from my perspective, far more effective and impactful. From it, Andy was able to craft some clear messages, which both honoured Jo's original description of her independent Commission and provided a basis for making recommendations to Government. We described loneliness as "everybody's business", a problem that does not discriminate between young and old. We connected loneliness with "the feeling of being unloved" and framed it inclusively as a burden recognised across all cultures. We called for a "normalising" of everyday connections, setting out

policy recommendations that would require coordination across Government (Hull, 2017). Several of the roundtable contributors later informed me that they had spoken with colleagues in Whitehall and Westminster, influencing them to accept the Commission's three key asks:

- The development of a cross-Government strategy to combat loneliness.
- Financial investment to support that strategy.
- The appointment of the world's first Minister for Loneliness to oversee the strategy's successful implementation.

When, in January 2018, at a Downing Street reception the Prime Minister Theresa May MP welcomed the Commission's work and appointed Tracey Crouch MP as the first ministerial lead for loneliness, it was remarkable to hear some of the language of our work reflected in her speech.

Manny Perera and Kathryn Perera, on the beach in Hyannis Port, USA

16th June 2016

The Jo Cox Memorial Lecture, 2018

Four months after the Commission concluded, Iona Lawrence invited me to deliver the second annual Jo Cox Memorial Lecture at Murray Edwards College, Cambridge University. By that time, I was more settled into my work in the NHS and had resolved to concentrate my efforts there rather than re-involve myself in party politics. Yet I still felt there were strands that connected Jo's life as an activist, Labour politician and woman which had not been explored and on which I might have something useful to say.

In deciding on the topic for the Memorial Lecture, I may also have had in mind my experience of the roundtables and the need to reflect more deeply on using narrative effectively in practice. In preparing the roundtables, I had not reflected critically on my own narratives and my relationship with loneliness. Preparing the Memorial Lecture gave me that chance.

I thought back to my childhood experiences, the times when I had felt out of place and isolated, disengaging from school and trying to forge new friendships. I thought of the early months of motherhood, yes, but also the loneliness inherent in holding singular executive authority – as a Chief Executive, say, or a parliamentary candidate. This, in turn, connected me back to the potential loneliness of representative office and how I had witnessed the experience of female MPs transform for the worse over the past decade. I imagined the abuse for her deeply held beliefs that Jo faced in her final weeks, while out campaigning. I couldn't escape the reality that Jo, a slight and gentle woman, had been murdered by a man in a targeted street attack, within a context of rising threats of violence against female MPs.

As I read around these subjects, nobody seemed to be making the connections between loneliness, gender and the radically transformed pressures of elected office. My research uncovered stark data which demonstrated the barriers facing women in representative office, the impact of sexual objectification and how women's 'imposter syndrome' is reinforced as an individual (isolated *and isolating*) experience. Yet I could not find any work which crossed disciplinary boundaries and integrated analysis with more creative forms of knowing. That was my ambition for the Memorial Lecture.

I also paid attention to the likely audience. With Professor Sarah Franklin, the Memorial Lecture's host, we crafted a title and marketing materials designed to appeal to young female students interested in politics. Sarah invited a current student, Evie Aspinall (then President of the Cambridge University Students' Union) to introduce me. If there were things not being said about women, loneliness and public office, these were the people I wanted to invite to notice that with me. The way that we speak about experiences, what we choose to name, and what our language implies, all play their part in our attention, our 'noticing'. I wanted to craft a moment of collective noticing that knotted together connections I perceived across Jo Cox's life and work.

Finally, preparing the Memorial Lecture was my most structured opportunity to revisit experiences that I had shared with Jo. I wanted to see our relationship and shared work in a new light. This could be characterised as a 'developmental exploration'. If a person's construction of reality changes over time, with the potential to become more nuanced and multi-faceted (Kegan, 1994), the Memorial Lecture provided a public forum in which I could uncover nuance and new perspectives with others. In this respect, I found researching other women's creative non-fiction to be particularly useful. In *The Lonely City* (Laing, 2016), Olivia Laing blends research, biography and memoir in her exploration of loneliness among artists during the AIDS epidemic in New York City. Meanwhile, the writings of early Suffragettes enabled me to explore the connections across time between women's experiences of seeking representative office. In weaving these and other influences into a single lecture, I sub-consciously recognised that "all aspects of ourselves and our contexts influence the way we research (or create knowledge)" (Fook, 2015, p.443).

On an A1 piece of paper, I mapped the connections I could see between my different forms of data. In this way, I semi-consciously mirrored the process described by Schön as 'reflective action' (Schön, 1983, p.138). I could see what seemed familiar and different in each data point from my own experiences, without at first being able to articulate my perceptions. Instinctually, the visual map would throw up proximate lines of enquiry that informed my next stage of research. In this way, the first draft took shape.

With somewhat unorthodox content to offer, I knew that my form and style of delivery would be important. Drawing on my formative experience of public speaking, acting and vocal training, I sought to create the conditions for a clear, whole and attentive energy to emerge (or 'second circle' energy, *per* Rodenburg, 2008). I spent the whole day alone in Cambridge, arriving at the venue hours before the lecture to experience the physical space. In the hour before the lecture, I moved between greeting audience members and taking time in a small side-room to warm up my vocal cords, face and body through an established ritual of physical exercises.

Even though I had known that Jo's family supported the Memorial Lecture series, I was not told in advance that Jo's close family would attend. Jo's parents, Jean and Gordon Leadbeater, arrived with her sister, Kim Leadbeater. This threw me into momentary panic. I returned to the small side-room and feverishly re-read the script. What should I redact? I quickly realised that there was nothing to redact. Regardless of who was present, the lecture would be released into the public domain. What did I think I could say without Jo's family present that I wouldn't be prepared to say with them there?

Perhaps I was fearful to begin as planned, with a very personal vision of two realities:

"When I close my eyes and remember Jo, I remember a young woman whose eyes danced when she smiled, which was almost constantly. She's cradling Cuillin, her newborn son, in one arm as he feeds at her breast. Her other arm swoops through the air to make a point, as she chairs a meeting of senior politicians. She holds the meeting together, with grace and humour, as we rock gently back and forth on her houseboat.

Let me say that again. When I recall the Member of Parliament for Batley and Spen, before her murder, I remember the River Thames, urgent politics, a beautiful baby, national leaders, decisions made, money raised, laughter and hope.

The images may seem deeply incongruous, yet they found coherence in Jo."

It seemed to me essential that I open the lecture with unvarnished truth, teaching the values that Jo's life revealed "not as abstract principles" but as very real experience (Ganz, 2023). I scaffolded the lecture using the Public Narrative framework, calling the audience to collective action. I was specific in the actions that I invited them to take. At some level, I was aware that I was being socially interpreted and interacted with (Fook, 2015, p.443) – that my background would inform people's perception of my legitimacy to articulate these ideas. I believe it is precisely because this was an excavation of my own experience, and my perception of Jo's experience, that the audience remained "alert, tuned in, curious" (Ospina and Dodge, 2005, p.143).

The most remarkable aspect of the experience followed the formal Memorial Lecture. The host opened the space for "Q and A". Most contributions came from young women in the audience. Further, as they contributed and I offered responses, I became confident to ask questions in return. As the women started to respond to me, we jointly created a discursive dynamic that involved many more people. After a while, Jo's sister Kim offered a long response to someone's contribution and the dynamic shifted again. This in no way mirrored the orthodox format for "Q and A", in which the lecturer holds forth as the nexus of all knowledge. Rather, we chose to create an alternative possibility in the moment.

What would I have done differently? On reflection, I wish that I had been bolder in delivery and integrated more poetry, even music, and brought the audience to a more embodied experience. I wish that, when Kim started to contribute during the "Q and A", I had thought to ask for an additional chair to be brought up onto the stage. I should have given Kim her place at the metaphorical table.

In his 'Letter to Young People', the philosopher Roberto Unger uses the metaphor of 'the body' to explore how we remain connected with past experiences, even as our choices lead us in new directions. Unger invites us "somehow to feel the movements of the limbs we cut off" (Unger, 2012). Meanwhile the academic Alan Fogel refers to the "subjective emotional present" through which one part of our body may identify with another part of our body as one and the same whole (Fogel, 2009, p.11).

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Extending their metaphors, I think that delivering the Memorial Lecture enabled me to 'lay to rest' residual feelings of guilt and disappointment that I felt in my relationship with Jo and my facilitation of the first roundtable. Afterwards, I would continue to feel the hurt of the experience that I had shared with FM, but as a generative learning that could inform my future practice. I was able, somehow, to feel its presence as part of a bigger whole.

CHAPTER 4(i):

FOLK WITH FAITH (vignette)
Her name was Marina

Her name was Marina, but we knew her as "M".

She appeared in our lives as a photocopy of a photo, glued clumsily to the front of each of the black ring-binders stacked neatly across the Tribunal Room's large oak table.

The photo shows a young girl with two neat plaits of dark brown hair and a carefully pressed white cotton school shirt, buttoned to her neck. She looks shy and awkward, yet she meets the camera's gaze. Everything about her appearance suggests that she is loved and cared for. Behind the lens of the camera, I imagine her mother, crouched low, offering a smile and quiet words of encouragement, coaxing her daughter to smile in return. I imagine that only Mum could have coaxed Marina to turn her face up and not look away.

Mum is in the Tribunal Room now. Every few minutes, her tired eyes dart across to the door through which the Tribunal Panel Members are expected to enter. One Tribunal Judge and two Educational Expert Members, holding the ring of power.

Mum fiddles with the small pearl buttons on the front of her blouse, repeatedly smoothing her neat black skirt. We wait together, sat on the same side of the long table. Our seating arrangement is a fiction; when proceedings begin, I will be "opposing counsel", representing the Local Authority whose decisions Mum seeks to overturn. Our business today is couched in the euphemisms of public sector legalese. We are here to "jointly assist" the Tribunal. Together, we will assess Marina's "special educational needs" and propose what is "in the best interests of the child". We will offer a "range of expert evidence" that "provides a rounded picture" of Marina, from which the Tribunal Judge and her fellow panel members will "determine the merits of M's case."

The language serves its purpose, anaesthetising years of parental anxiety, intrusive medical assessments and disappointed expectations that have eroded the relationship between Marina's Mum and the Local Authority. The bulging row of black files bears witness to these hopes, frustrations and missed opportunities.

I find my eyes returning to Marina's photo. I've read the contents of these files many times over, each document thumbed and marked for key points. Educational Psychology reports ("Ed-Psych"), speech and language therapy findings ("SALT"). These documents lay bare some of the most intimate details of Marina's personhood, yet that photo is the only personal thing in this room.

Today is zero sum.

If "Mum wins", the Tribunal will have validated her account of the severity and complexity of Marina's needs and the Local Authority will be legally compelled to meet the full costs of Marina's residential placement for the next nine years. A seven-figure cliff edge for a struggling public service.

If "Mum loses", then no residential provision will be made and Mum will be compelled to continue, as before, in sole charge of Marina as she attends the local community school, with Special Educational Needs support as determined by the Tribunal.

As Counsel for the Local Authority, I am there to ensure Mum loses.

Why do I remember Marina's case, out of dozens of Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal claims that I litigated?

Because, against the odds, "we" (the Local Authority) won. And, against even greater odds, Mum somehow found the resources and composure to appeal. At 26 years old, with just 18 months experience as a barrister, I found myself in the Royal Courts of Justice on the Strand, as sole counsel representing a Local Authority before a High Court Judge. On the opposing side (no doubt acting *pro bono*) sat one of the most formidable Queen's Counsels (QCs, as they then were) in the country.

I'm knotted with terror. Fear of… Being asked to step back from the bar (the literal bar at the front of the ancient court room, from which our profession derives its name) for some egregious error in protocol. Being professionally embarrassed by calling the judge "sir" (as I was used to in the Tribunals) rather than "My Lord" (as the High Court demands). Opening my mouth to speak and... nothing coming out.

I'm so terrified, in fact, that on the morning of the Appeal I kneel on the worn carpet of my basement room in chambers, clasp my hands together and silently pray to a God in whom I no longer believe.

"Lord. We don't talk much. But you know… If you are there, please just get me through this day."

I make the sign of the cross: *God be in my mind, my heart and at my side, left right*.

I stand, grab the wig and gown from the back of my door and stride out into the Temple with my head held high.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Nine hours later, I return to that same room. I hang the wig and gown carefully on the back of my door and kneel-down in the same spot. I'm exhausted as I bend forward, my forehead resting on the carpet. The day has gone smoothly. I have "held my own" and we (the Local Authority) have successfully defended our position. I have won my first High Court case.

The black telephone on my desk rings repeatedly – my solicitor; then the Local Authority officer… news has spread. Congratulations are shared. My fellow barristers – unfailingly well-meaning – organise impromptu celebratory drinks at a five-star hotel by Blackfriars Bridge. A particularly kind QC raises a glass as he beams at me proudly:

"You know," he says, with real feeling in his voice, "I think you're on course to be the next X." X is a childless, partnerless barrister famed across the London Bar for keeping a camper bed in her room in chambers ("it saves on the commute").

"Thank you," I reply, managing to summon a smile.

Already, my mind is elsewhere. Thinking of Mum. Thinking of M. M for Marina. I make my excuses and leave early, heading for the Embankment, hoping to clear my head. A fleeting moment of professional triumph for me. But what about you, Mum? What about Marina? What, after all, was it for? Years later, I wake in the night, fretting. Ghosts rising from my choices. Ghosts from a past life.

CHAPTER 4(ii):

FOLK WITH FAITH (public works)
Facilitating change in the English National Health Service

"The NHS will last as long as there's folk with faith left to fight for it."

Attributed to Nye Bevan MP, architect of the National Health Service (1948)

"The traditions of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living."

Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire (1852)

In his ethnographic studies of UK local councils and their executive leaders, the researcher Kevin Orr coined the term 'organisational ghosts' to explain "how inheritances of the past haunt the relations and struggles of the present" (Orr, 2014). In doing so, Orr echoed the philosopher Roberto Unger, whose work on how to re-energise and transform democracy laments the organisation of our institutions in "a form that inhibits the transformation of the structure, that makes change depend on crisis, and that perpetuates the rule of the dead over the living" (Unger, 2009; Unger, 2013).

As a Fulbright Scholar at Harvard University (2016), I audited Unger's class, 'Progressive Alternatives', a deep dive on critical theory and the relation of programmatic thought to future progressive politics. Unger entreated us to notice the ways in which our conceptions of what is possible are constrained by the form, and history, of our institutions. In doing so, Unger echoed a line of enquiry stretching back through philosophical debate, most famously explored by Karl Marx and reinterpreted by Jacques Derrida. Our agency, whether individual or collective, is a condition of inheritance (see, for example, Derrida, 1994, p.134). Returning to the UK, I started work in the National Health Service (NHS) with Unger's ideas humming in my mind.

I was drawn to work in the NHS by its foundational promise: a universal healthcare system, free at the point of use based on need, funded through general taxation. I became the Deputy Director – and later the Director – of NHS Horizons, an influential team leading the co-design and co-delivery of large-scale change initiatives, commissioned by senior executives from across the service. In taking up this role, I hoped to experience a 'bigger canvas' on which to test the thinking and practice that I had developed at Movement for Change and as a Fulbright Scholar. I was aware of the likely gap between the NHS's foundational promise and the current reality. Preparing for my new role, I read much of the current policy research sounding the alarm on the NHS's pressing challenges: the limited funding for capital investment; recurrent neglect of workforce planning; a mismatch between what the service was expected to achieve and its funding envelope; and a lack of consistent focus on *improving* as well as delivering services (see, for example, Imison, Castle-Clarke and Watson, 2016; Dunn, McKenna and Murray, 2016). At a basic level, I believe that I recognised how the NHS's foundational promise would both drive and constrain the possibilities for its transformation.

In my first few years working in the NHS, I also came to experience the weight of its institutional history (Unger's observation of 'the dead ruling the living'), and how past ideas, assumptions and beliefs continue to shape present possibilities for creating a sustainable service that can realise its foundational promise. The shadows of governmental interface (or political accountability, or party-political interference, depending on one's perspective); repeated institutional re-structuring; and long-gestated crises, continue to loom large (for one precis of these shadows, see Ham, 2023). The 'public work' on which this chapter will focus – my co-design of the NHS Maternity Summit (May 2021) – was shaped by the tensions and contradictions of this context.

In creating that public work, and in all prior commissions that I delivered within NHS Horizons, I was mentored by my colleagues Sasha Karakusevic and Helen Bevan.

Having diagnosed 'the system' as being "sicker than the patients" (Karakusevic, 2016), Sasha had left clinical practice to work as an NHS manager, with periods of structured learning in think-tanks and academic settings, developing his own ongoing

practice for testing, adapting, designing and delivering change initiatives. This combination of reflection *in action* and reflection *on action* (Schön, 1983) enabled Sasha to fuse his specialist healthcare knowledge with a considerable understanding of the underpinning theories and emerging practice to support large-scale system change.

Meanwhile, by the time we met, Helen had amassed more than three decades of experience in local government and the NHS. Helen's mindset, skills and preferences seemed oriented towards what Otto Scharmer terms "the emerging future" (Scharmer, 2007). Almost by default. Helen was primarily interested in how – to use a complexity term – the 'weak signals' that exist in the present may be amplified to generate possibilities for a different future. Integrating the three horizons concept (Sharpe, 2013) with other models for thinking about large-scale change, Helen focused NHS Horizons' work on supporting leaders in the health and care system to "make small-scale changes within a large-scale framework" (Bevan, 2023).

Sasha and Helen's mentoring was fundamental to how I approached the NHS Maternity Summit commission. From 2016 onwards, they guided my exploration across disciplines, introducing me to a wealth of research around complexity and systems-thinking. Looking back, I believe it was critical to have colleagues who were theoretically grounded and could anchor our evolving practice in a scaffolded web of inter-related theories, methods and practice.

Facilitated by this intensive mentoring and guidance, in the years building up to the NHS Maternity Summit (2016-2021), I worked across a considerable breadth of the health and care system's biggest challenges. This included large-scale change initiatives focused on pathway transformation, clinical decision support, records standardisation, continuous improvement and operational delivery. In most cases, my work involved complex challenges that span traditional organisational boundaries and require people to collaborate and lead in unfamiliar ways. I have done this through co-creating and growing professional networks (including the COVID-19 Large Scale Vaccination Centre's learning network and the national NHS Improvement Directors Network); leading the co-design and strategic facilitation of big 'set piece' deliberative events (in-person, virtual and hybrid); delivering training and talks; and publishing

insights on how we can think and act differently to inculcate shifts in the health and care system.

In this chapter, I focus on how I brought this cumulative learning into my approach to co-designing and leading the NHS Maternity Summit (2021).

Context to the NHS Maternity Summit

In 2019, NHS England (the national body which then 'hosted' the NHS Horizons team) appointed the first Chief Midwifery Office. This appointment signalled the urgent need for more pro-active leadership in responding to challenges across England's maternity services.

Whether reviewing devastating failures of care in Shrewsbury and Telford (Ockenden, 2020; Ockenden, 2022), East Kent (Kirkup, 2022) or Nottingham (ongoing), by early 2021 consistent themes were emerging. These included ineffective governance and risk management; a lack of individual staff competencies and multi-disciplinary working hampering good outcomes; and failures to engage appropriately with women using maternity services. In all cases, concerns were raised over many years about "leadership". Each report on maternity service failures has questioned whether, in specific contexts, the leadership environment enabled compassionate care and collaboration across professional boundaries.

Each report has also questioned whether NHS professionals and leaders truly listen and respond to the needs of women (and birthing people) and their families. When asked, women tend to articulate a consistent vision for their own birth experience: high-quality care for the woman and her baby, with care that is 'safe' not just medically but also psychologically, emotionally and experientially in ways that matter to the woman and baby (see, for example, Cumberlege, 2016). Much of the "espoused theory" (Argyris and Schön, 1974) of NHS maternity transformation work is oriented towards this vision. Yet ongoing gaps between intention, practice and outcomes signal the need for far-reaching change.

By 2019, I had started to lead commissions in maternity services improvement. First, I was invited to deliver in-person Public Narrative training for Heads of Midwifery across south-east England. This commission came from the Regional Chief Midwifery Officer, who saw potential for Public Narrative training to increase her team's confidence in leading contentious negotiations with NHS Finance Directors over the allocation of budgets to improve maternity services.

Following that work, I was commissioned to lead a bigger Public Narrative programme with 50 midwives across Kent and Medway, as well as to offer online coaching for women who had used maternity services and were now seeking to formally 'represent' the experiences of birthing people in NHS decision-making forums, as members of local Maternity Voice Partnerships (MVPs). This work, which pre-dates and informs my approach to the NHS Maternity Summit, became the focus of academic research to which I contributed (Aiello, Perera and Sordé Martí, 2022; Moniz, Karia, Khalid and Vindrola-Padros, 2023), and a formal evaluation (Moniz, Karia and Vindrola-Padros, 2022).

On reflection, I carved out opportunities to work on maternity services commissions in part due to my personal context. By 2019, I was the mother of two young children, but I had experienced four pregnancies (with two miscarriages). While my own experiences of maternity services were largely positive, I was working closely with two people whose babies had died, in circumstances where service failures were a contributing factor. I had some friends who had created large families, but more friends who were struggling to conceive. I also had Black friends who had shared with me their fears about the type of experience they could expect from a healthcare service with such disparate outcomes based on race. As a mother of mixed-heritage children, living in a diverse inner-London neighbourhood, I carried within me a host of broader, inter-related contexts that informed how I approached the NHS Maternity Summit – my social context influenced how I interpreted and selected information, and indeed is likely to have influenced how I was socially interpreted and interacted with (Fook, 2015, p.443).

The wider environmental context was also critical to how I approached this public work. By early 2021, I had spent nearly a year working with the most senior teams and

executives in the national and regional NHS responding to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. Amongst other experiences, I had facilitated the NHS London Region's "Gold Command" team, as they sought to prioritise resources for the pandemic response across the capital. I had also chaired virtual workshops with NHS clinical leaders, who joined these sessions from various intensive care units across London to share their direct experiences of the pandemic so as to inform the national team's allocation of scarce resources. In the fierce urgency of this unfolding global crisis, I was often working in what Donald Schön termed the "indeterminate zones" of practice (Schön, 1986). I shared moments with other senior leaders when the emotional space was heightened and we were *all* learning our way into a different way of being. I led the facilitation of high-stakes, highly contested events, where a mutual loosening of ego enabled a better quality of discussion. In the nomenclature of Ron Heifetz's work on adaptive leadership, we worked together effectively in the "zone of productive disequilibrium" (Heifetz, 2004), an optimal range of pressure within which we were able to be collaborative, creative and decisive. When I was commissioned to lead the co-design and facilitation of the NHS Maternity Summit, these experiences formed my immediate professional context.

Co-design of the NHS Maternity Summit

In December 2020, Donna Ockenden published an interim report, pursuant to her independent review of maternity services at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust (Ockenden, 2020). The report set out "urgent and essential actions", several of which applied to maternity services across England.

I was invited to meet with the NHS National Director for Intensive Support. She informed me that she intended to set a date for a national event, bringing together 100 or more of the most senior leaders and stakeholders from across the NHS and partner organisations, to discuss and enhance our current shared approach to improving maternity services – the first "NHS Maternity Summit" of its kind. The National Director invited me to lead the Summit's co-design and facilitation (Holden, 2021).

Once I had accepted this invitation, the National Director quickly connected me individually with 10 of the most senior national leaders working in maternity services transformation, explaining to them that she was convening the Summit (presenting this as a *fait accompli*) and asking them to work with me to shape its design. She also issued invitations to the Summit on behalf of the Chief Operating Officer of NHS England, Amanda Pritchard, to approximately 150 of the most senior leaders in the health service whose work intersected with the design, delivery and regulation of maternity services.

Responses varied. Some people pro-actively welcomed the idea and cleared space in their schedules to meet with me quickly on a one-to-one basis. Others were slower to engage with the co-design process. One key participant decided, early on, to send deputies instead of participating directly. From the outset, then, I was acutely conscious that the people who could 'make or break' the Summit would perceive the context in substantially different ways.

I was conscious that the NHS National Director for Intensive Support had convened the Summit somewhat unilaterally, constructing a 'now' moment for which the "immediate and essential actions" outlined in the interim Ockenden Review provided the urgent platform (Ockenden, 2020). Having worked repeatedly with the Public Narrative framework, I understood the importance of this constructed "story of now" (Ganz, 2010a). Absent the urgent moments that crystallise action and bring communities together, we may lack the impetus to move from "the world as it is" to "the world as it could be" (Ganz, 2023). Yet I remained nervous that insufficient groundwork had been laid to create investment in the proposition of the Summit – and in positioning my credibility to lead the process.

In the ever contested politics of organisational life, it was ambiguous as to whether a National Director with a brief to lead "Intensive Support" could claim a mandate to convene a Summit encompassing the entirety of maternity services transformation. The National Director's announcement of the Summit was thus a bold move. Ron Heifetz's distinction between authority and leadership is important here (Heifetz, 2004). The success of the Summit depended on a 'critical mass' of other NHS

Directors and senior leaders seizing the urgency of the moment to support the Summit, in circumstances where the mandate for convening it could have been contested. This was in part a question of authority – whether they would lend their positional authority to the process, giving it the required legitimacy and credibility. But it was mainly a question of leadership – whether they would accept responsibility for enabling the overall leadership community to address the 'urgent and essential actions' through an emergent, and therefore inherently uncertain, co-design process (using the conception of "leadership" offered by Ganz, 2010a).

Having conducted a rapid series of one-to-one discussions, I started to convene a small group of people who were recognised as decision-makers with both authority and credibility in national maternity services transformation. They included, for example, the clinical leads for various specialisms (for example, neonatology and obstetrics), senior midwives, and operational Directors with responsibility for the big national transformation programmes.

This small, sectorally diverse group of people met repeatedly in the weeks before the Summit, with me facilitating each meeting. Their explicit tasks were to guide and course-correct the emerging design for the Summit; to steer its framing and content; and to generate enthusiasm and investment from the much bigger leadership community who would participate in the Summit.

Over the course of several weeks, a rhythm emerged. In each co-design session, I steered a flow through which we:

- Reflected on what we'd done before and since our last meeting, building momentum and progress.
- Rooted our work back to the underpinning design methodology and theory of change. This included explicit reference to the potential for the Summit to create a small shift that in turn produces bigger changes in everything, referencing Donella Meadow's conception of "leverage points" for change (Meadows, 2008).
- Used most of the session for facilitated, collective sensemaking. This included one-to-one breakout conversations followed by collective feedback, framing an

expectation that everyone would contribute and deepening relationships across the group. In this way, I sought to mitigate the risk of what I term 'concealed contribution' – the rich potential learning that remains latent when a participant chooses not to share a perspective or insight.

- Raised the heat, particularly on topics which I sensed were contentious and needed to be given more space to breathe. This work expanded as the co-design process progressed and we 'looped back', with greater depth, on seemingly familiar topics.

- Held sufficient space towards the end of the session to express consensus – even if the consensus was to disagree on key points and return to them next time. In this way, we built a cadence of divergence and consensus across each session which informed the final design of the Summit.

- Elicited commitments to action and agreed next steps, before closing the meeting on time.

Reflecting back, I can see how my confidence to lead this process rested on my earlier learning from the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness Roundtables (**Chapter 3**), as well as my more recent experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. I had now integrated multiple loops of learning, testing and refining into my professional practice. With the co-design process, I sought to create a rhythm by which we would circle back on the same questions and challenges repeatedly, creating deeper insights across the whole co-design group which could then inform the whole (Bateson, 2016).

In other words, by the time I came to lead the co-design of the NHS Maternity Summit, I was aware that success or failure would be a distributed endeavour. One facilitator cannot hope to contain a synchronous space involving some 150 senior decision-makers' contested experiences and competing values. At the heart of my design choices, then, was a paradox of control and release: that only through ceding control, trusting in both the process and the co-design group, might I help to facilitate an effective outcome.

Throughout the co-design meetings, we negotiated the boundary of the Summit. This included what aspects of the various national programmes would be in-scope; which "immediate and essential actions" (Ockenden, 2020) we would discuss; and how we would frame the purpose, aims and priorities of the Summit. While I didn't have this language at the time, I believe that I was conscious that each member of the group would be constructing an internal representation or image of the "theory-in-use" across the whole (Argyris and Schön, 1978, p.16). Within that internalised process, the picture is always incomplete. Argyris and Schön propose that this leads each person to make ongoing attempts to "know" the organisation and to better understand one's own place within its context – a process of reflexive inquiry (Argyris and Schön, 1978).

I was also engaged in my own process of reflexive inquiry. The co-design participants worked closely together on a regular basis, whereas I was largely unknown to them before this commission. Recognising that this co-design process would represent a 'disruption' to their routine work (whether welcome or not), I consciously attended to the dynamics and energies present in the group – so far as I could perceive them – as well as the formalised communication in each meeting. To use a common heuristic intentionally, I wanted to 'get a sense of things'. This included a "felt sense" (Totton, 2003), in terms of my own bodily and emotional reactions to the dynamics at play within and between the group.

Progress on the co-design process was interspersed with reflective conversations between me, Sasha Karakusevic and Helen Bevan, both of whom acted as arms-length coaches for me. Through this process of shared reflection, I sought to better understand:

- What is the nature of this group of people? What contextual factors (including a history of working together) inform the dynamics, possibilities and current limitations?
- What could be an effective process of leadership for this group at this time? How might that process change as the relationship between (and relationships within) the group develops through our shared work?

- How can I, as a holder of authority derived from being commissioned to lead the co-design and facilitation, participate productively in this process of leadership?

I have adapted these questions from the work of Drath and Palus on meaning-making in communities of practice (Drath and Palus, 1994, p.2). In doing so, it is important to notice that I am providing more retrospective coherence on the process of sense-making than existed explicitly at the time. At the time, the process felt messier and far less coherent than this sequence of questions suggests. My intuition, or felt sense of things, was that the co-design group functions largely as disparate individuals who worked *alongside each other* but did not seem to share many aims and goals, beyond an abstract notion of 'improving maternity services'.

I also perceived that they were interacting with *the assumption* of consensus between them. By this, I mean that they perhaps thought "we've had these conversations already" and there was nothing new to learn from and with each other. To my fresh ears, the views they expressed as to what mattered, and the consequent focus of their efforts in work, were markedly different. Yet I was unconvinced that they heard this same dissonance. This collective assumption of generalised consensus hampered our ability to use the creative potential of contestation and disagreement to deepen the Summit's design.

As the co-design process moved forward, recurrent dynamics emerged. One participant's default position was to impart information without referencing the contributions of others. From another participant, I developed a strong sense that s/he was simply going to 'wait the process out', arriving late to co-design meetings and contributing sparsely on topics which s/he might have led. A multitude of factors could explain why. Choosing just one, the genesis of the commission (instigated by a National Director whose remit might be perceived to sit outside maternity services leadership), indeed the very fact of the Summit's existence, might have been received, by some co-design group members, as an implied personal criticism.

Why did these perceived disruptions remain peripheral rather than decisive? In reflecting on this question, I have considered how the co-design participants may have perceived *me*, taking account of Jan Fook's proposition that both our physical states

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and our social positions "influence how we interpret and select information, *and indeed how we are socially interpreted and interacted with*" (Fook, 2015, p.443) [*my italics*]. I was significantly younger than all other members of the group. I professed no specialist expertise in maternity services. I was, by then, known by reputation as a credible facilitator. By this, I mean that I had cultivated a reputation as an intelligent, curious and humble facilitator – assertive when needed, yet capable of moving the shared process along without dominating the space.

Perhaps through serendipity, three of the most influential members of the co-design group decided from the outset to offer me active support, to assume my credibility and skill in the space and to demonstrate this through their choices within the group setting. This was critical. The scope and pace of what I was being asked to undertake could have been overwhelming. I was intensely aware that any mandate I might have would be influenced by my reputation and behaviour, but ultimately would be predicated on the choices of others.

In summary, then, I led the NHS Maternity Summit co-design process through a series of small conversations with a diverse group of leaders, first one-to-one and then through an intimate, sectorally diverse co-design group. We repeatedly circled back to co-create greater depth in our relationships and understanding, through which we refined the content and occasionally surfaced points of contestation. From these interactions, I shaped the Summit's final design. In this way, I was seeking to cultivate what Judy Olson and Gary Olson have termed "collaboration readiness" – the conditions that grow people's motivation to work together, that deepen trust between participants, that generate more aligned goals and that can enable a greater shared capacity to act (Olson and Olson, 2014, pp.43-47).

In our final co-design meeting, we distributed the most prominent roles in the Summit – both in terms of presenting, and in terms of breakout facilitation – across the co-design group's members. My ambition was that, if we co-led the Summit, building on the shared understanding we had created during the co-design process, then the results produced

would exceed each individual's contribution – a phenomenon described by Anna Murphy Paul as "collective intelligence" (Murphy Paul, 2021).

As a generalisation, healthcare practitioners tend to accept – or at least have some understanding – that the phenomenon of collective intelligence operates in heightened clinical environments. The apparently seamless coordination of diverse tasks during a complex surgical intervention, for example. The in-the-moment collective adaptation of the surgical team in response to what the surgeon finds as she commences surgery and assesses the health of the woman and/or baby. In a sense, we might describe these dynamic moments as 'trans-disciplinary' – the team, working as one organism through myriad interactions, works across the boundaries of specialism to move as one, beyond multi-disciplinary expertise, in a different flow (to paraphrase Nicolescu in relation to transdisciplinarity – Nicolescu, 2006, p.18).

Yet within the NHS, it is far more counter-cultural to situate this phenomenon in the realm of change initiatives. Instead, our dominant paradigm remains that change is there to be managed and transacted. We do not accept, generally, Robert Kegan's proposition (outlined in his descriptions of the properties of the so-called 'Self Transforming Mind') that humans have capacity not just to 'fix the problem' but to work dynamically and socially with others, allowing inherent contestation within processes of change to 'solve *us as people'* (see, for example, Kegan, 1994, p.319). The larger ability to work with and through uncertainty, that may be found in high-functioning surgical teams, does not readily translate to how those same people engage with complex challenges in NHS service delivery and improvement.

My ambition, then, to engender collective intelligence within the Summit, working with and through a group of very senior clinical and managerial leaders, set a high bar. As we entered the final days before the Summit, the pressure on me mounted. My days filled with one-to-one briefings with NHS Executives, who wanted to understand the Summit's purpose and aims in advance. Having finalised the agenda with the co-design group, I was pragmatic yet firm in my commitment to what the group had agreed.

Given the available word count, my facilitation of the NHS Maternity Summit itself is beyond the scope of this Context Statement. Yet consideration of the wider

implications of this public work requires me to describe the final design and how it was delivered. A final briefing document for the Summit is included as **Appendix 5**.

Having concluded the co-design process, our agenda anchored the Summit in three phases of plenary and small-group discussion:

- Scan. The first phase of the Summit created space to explore different options and to gather divergent insights. Echoing the etymology of the word 'scan' (*scandere* (Latin), 'to climb'), the opening discussions were a chance to view the broad terrain of maternity services and test different perspectives.
- Focus. As the word implies, this phase involved choice, and convergence on a few ideas which the participants considered more intentionally. In this phase, a handful of themes were explored in greater depth, with sessions jointly led by small-group facilitators and subject matter experts from the co-design group. This phase laid the groundwork for the final part of the Summit.
- Act. In this phase, participants migrated to the topics where they felt most intrinsic motivation to act, *and* where their own sphere of influence would enable them to make a meaningful contribution. (Taylor, 2017).

Within this, NHS England Executives and members of the co-design group set the context in-plenary through short presentations. In a bid to ensure that these presentations would match the tone and intent of the co-design process, in the week before the Summit I offered one-to-one coaching and/or personalised notes to plenary speakers who had not been involved directly in the co-design group:

- an NHS Trust CEO with lead national responsibility for maternity services.
- NHS England's Chief Operating Officer (and now CEO) Amanda Pritchard.
- Mo Ade, a local Maternity Voice Partnership Chair who opened the plenary of the Summit by sharing her Public Narrative.

For me, Mo's contribution was particularly important. In parallel to convening the co-design group, I had continued to coach a small group of MVP Chairs, following my earlier commissions to train Heads of Midwifery and maternity service users in the Public Narrative framework (Ganz, 2010a). In the final weeks before the Summit, I

judged that I had developed sufficient credibility with the co-design group to propose that we invite a service user 'representative' to open the Summit, alongside NHS England's Chief Operating Officer. The inclusion of Mo's testimony at the outset of the Summit, combined with the involvement of service user representatives across the whole (in sufficient numbers to involve a representative in every breakout discussion), was critical for grounding the Summit in the lived experiences of people using the services we were seeking to change.

In preparing this Context Statement, I have reflected on whether I could have pushed to include Mo, or other current users of maternity services, within the co-design group. Drawing on my experiences at Movement for Change; in the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness Roundtables; and my facilitation of Covid-19 workshops, this possibility was very present in my mind when I accepted the NHS Maternity Summit commission. Yet early conversations with co-design group members dissuaded me from pushing this suggestion forward. As a result, I decided to continue my Public Narrative work with MVP Chairs in-parallel to co-designing the Maternity Summit.

Critically examining this choice, I now consider that much more could have been done to involve, to co-produce and to challenge accepted norms through the co-design process. I assumed, for example, that the co-design group should be confined to maternity services professionals because 'resistance' to designing a more widely inclusive process might jeopardise consent for the very idea of the Summit. Yet I did not explicitly test this proposition with the co-design group. So, the possibility of including service user representation within the core group was never explored and/or contested between us.

At the time, I internalised this as the pragmatic choice. I was concerned not to push the boundaries of my credibility (and authority) to breaking point. In doing so, I may have missed an opportunity to test some big assumptions. These included my assumption that a person who uses maternity services, and who participates in that capacity, would be an unwelcome disruption for the co-design group. I see now that this was my own interpretation of the group dynamics, and that I assumed a particular mindset and positionality on the part of the clinicians and senior managers in the group.

I could have tested the boundary of co-design, and jointly assessed with them how we might expand it. Instead, while the insights of people using maternity services featured within the Summit, they were not fully included and involved.

Since the Summit, I have consciously deepened my work with people using services, including maternity services. With a small group of NHS Horizons colleagues, I 'recruited' and then coached numerous maternity service users in the Public Narrative framework, as a means of creating capacity for subsequent co-design work in maternity services. We have even developed co-design processes around these participants (as core rather than peripheral contributors), for example when developing NHS Learning Events with senior midwives in 2022 (see Moniz, Karia, Khalid and Vindrola-Padros, 2023). As a team, we are also becoming much more intentional about ensuring that people using services are integrated into existing programmes of work, appropriately remunerated for their time and explicitly recognised alongside professional contributors, with parity of esteem. As such, the Summit undoubtedly changed my practice and altered my ideas about how to approach co-design in complex, contested environments.

In preparing this Context Statement, I have also reflected critically on whether I maximised the available opportunities for the Summit to have its desired impact. Did I lay the foundations for participants to take their learning from the Summit and significantly change their daily work as a result?

In one critical respect, we collectively fell short. The urgency of the commission, the complexity of the politics and the wider context (a new wave of COVID-19; localised lockdowns; and the personal and professional impact of these changes) all played their part in leading us to focus too narrowly on the Summit as an event in and of itself. I did not, for example, think enough ahead of time about how the co-design group members would take the raw outputs from the Summit and use them productivity to reshape their existing work. Neither I, nor the National Director for Intensive Support, considered commissioning a team to collate and analyse the raw outputs from the Summit, which might have enabled ongoing co-production of actionable insights with the co-design

group. Without this component, we lacked the means to codify, and continue to build on, knowledge collectively generated during the Summit.

Instead, some weeks before the Summit I agreed with a member of the co-design group that we would work together to use the raw outputs (for example, completed templates from activities; the notes taken by breakout room facilitators; and the responses to in-session polls) to adapt the pre-existing aims and priorities of the national maternity transformation programme. In doing so, we substantially underestimated two factors. First, we did not appreciate the time, resource and range of expertise which this effort would require, if it were to be done in a robust and evidence-based way. Second, we were naïve as to the extent to which we would need to actively involve both the whole co-design group and their wider teams in co-producing these changes. I did not, in other words, extend the principles of co-design, social learning and collective intelligence from the preparation of the Summit into its follow-up and subsequent implementation.

One important implication here is the need to bring intentionality and organised resource to the ongoing work of change, avoiding the temptation to fixate on the delivery of 'set piece' events. Using Bill Sharpes' conception of the three horizons (Sharpe, 2013): bridging between business as usual (first horizon) and a substantially altered future reality (third horizon) requires more than simply articulating the adjacent possibilities for change that we can currently discern. Rather, Sharpes' conception of the second horizon requires us to identify the 'weak signals' for positive change in the current reality, and then to invest in the ongoing, concerted effort of engendering the shifts in thought, feeling and action that will amplify those weak signals into actual change.

Once we had completed the Summit as an event, we found ourselves constrained, in terms of resource and ongoing collective will, to carry forward the momentum into coherent reorganisation of the national programme's aims, priorities and approach. Those who may have participated in the Summit tepidly were free to retreat into business as usual. Those who sought to use the Summit as a 'leverage point' may have had some success within their own pre-existing sphere of influence.

They may also have leveraged new relationships across the Summit's network of participants to support their efforts. But we had not discernibly created a bigger sphere of collective influence for change.

My reflections on this public work were instrumental in leading me to start collaborating more intentionally with Research, Insights and Impact professionals. This included a collaboration with the Rapid Research Evaluation and Appraisal Lab (Moniz, Karia and Vindrola-Padros, 2022) and the Improvement Capability-Building and Delivery teams within NHS England. Having further developed my understanding of the potential to integrate Research, Insights and Impact capability into the NHS Horizons team, in 2023 we recruited new colleagues to form a dedicated Insights Team. Data-capture, thematic analysis and the distillation of rapid insights are now core aspects of our overall offer to partners and commissioners.

In summary, then, reflecting back on this public work I consider that I 'delivered the brief' competently for my commissioner, while not quite realising the opportunity of the Summit as a leverage point for change. Nora Bateson's term "small arcs of larger circles" (Bateson, 2016) refers not just to systemic change but also to the ability of individual actors to take small actions that prefigure bigger shifts. Echoing the same notion more instrumentally, Roberto Unger encourages a process of change by which "little things" are used "to break big things" (Unger, 2013). Both these ideas relate to Donella Meadows' theory of 'leverage points', which proposes that a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything (Meadows, 2008).

Within the co-design and delivery of the Summit, I worked hard to elevate the discussions to this scale of ambition – a small, but potentially significant, moment of collective leadership with the potential to reframe our overall approach to maternity services. In my approach to the work, I sought to live out a future consistent with this intention, as Jack Petranker's research on meaning, knowledge and purpose invites us to do (Petranker, 2005, p.252). For various reasons, some of which are outlined above, my efforts fell short.

Perhaps more fundamentally, my approach to and ambitions for the Summit were pulling against a dominant paradigm that weighs heavily on the mindsets, approaches and institutions I was aiming to alter. Within the upper echelons of NHS England's hierarchy, the predominant (though not exclusive) preoccupation is on 'managing today'. The moods of ministers guide much of the conversational framing and determine the types of 'solutions' that are brought to the table. Though they are rarely in the physical room, ministers and their teams haunt all executive discussions. In Peter Brook's sense of the dramatic potential, these were the "hidden audiences" (Brook, 2008) which impacted significantly on the choices made both before and during the Summit.

Meanwhile much of the thinking, and perhaps also individual actors' felt sense and energy (which, in turn, guide behaviours and action), is oriented towards analysis, description and explanation. As such, the dominant way of operating is squarely characteristic of Bruner's paradigmatic mode (Bruner, 1986). Co-productive, co-designed initiatives for change, which root themselves more firmly in the narrative mode (Bruner, 1986; Adler, 2008) and which seek to frame problems by engaging in reciprocal storytelling (Drath and Palus, 1994) are pulling against powerfully embedded cultures. As the systems-thinker Sophia Parker describes in her work on collective imagination:

> "If our leaders are so caught up in the work that they can't reflect, dream, and hope for a better world, then we're gambling our capacity to bring about the scale of change we need now." (Parker, 2021).

Efforts towards this collective imagining need to contend with the dominant and deeply ingrained frames, experiences and institutionalised incentives that may undermine their success. Even Robert Kegan's apparently simple proposition, that leadership capable of generating radical change requires problem *finding* rather than problem *solving* (Kegan, 1982), is deeply antithetical to the prevailing paradigmatic mode through which many health and care leaders define their professional purpose and aims.

In some ways, the NHS Maternity Summit is merely a snapshot of how we perpetuate the traditions of the past, their weight lying heavily on our collective ability to imagine

new possibilities and then live out a future consistent with our intention (Petranker, 2005, p.252).

Like any decades-old political and social project, the NHS is rife with organisational ghosts. And the essential quality of a ghost is its ability to return, time and again. In recent months, the sense of crisis in maternity services seems only to have grown. As I began to write this Context Statement, the former nurse Lucy Letby was standing trial for the alleged murder of 13 babies at the Countess of Cheshire NHS Hospital. Donna Ockenden's review has expanded into the largest maternity inquiry in the history of the NHS, with more than 1,800 cases of alleged failures being examined. And the latest Care Quality Commission (CQC) report on the state of care in England identifies maternity services among the service areas under most strain (Dixon-Woods, Barry, McGowan and Martin, 2023).

Last week, I was commissioned to lead a "Maternity Stocktake" on behalf of NHS England's National Maternity and Neonatal Board (scheduled for January 2024). Another small arc of a larger circle opens. Yet paradoxes remain. As overall public satisfaction with the NHS falls sharply, for the moment our collective 'faith' in the NHS remains high. In the most recent British Social Attitudes survey, the public continued to assert that we want a better health service, not a departure from the NHS model. An overwhelming majority continue to believe that the NHS "is crucial to British society and we must do everything to maintain it" (Health Foundation, 2022; Kings Fund, 2022).

But what if our iron-clad faith in the current model critically limits its chances of success? Perhaps what we need most is the space, and collective will, to re-imagine, to experiment, to voice what may seem unsayable about the options for a better future. Perhaps otherwise, inheritances of the past will continue to dictate our future possibilities, leaving us with the latent potential of what we have chosen to leave unsaid, uncontested and unexplored.

CHAPTER 5(i):

EVER DEEPENING LEVELS (vignette)
The spaces in between

In 2008 I defended my client, a large construction firm, in an Employment Tribunal on a new point of law. If I were to win on that new point of law, my opponent's case would be dismissed in totality. I worked hard on the written submissions and argued persuasively. I took great satisfaction in the fact that, despite my junior years, I might establish a precedent (however trivial) that would be reported in the professional press. Knowing this context, the Tribunal Judge gave both counsels' arguments his close attention. By a narrow margin, the Judge sided with me. He had taken some persuading because he knew that having decided thus, numerous other claims by more employees would also be dismissed automatically, precluding their cases from even being heard.

My solicitor was a hard-nosed commercial lawyer who guarded his time carefully. He had not accompanied me to the Tribunal hearing ("to keep the client's costs down"). Instead, he had delivered to me in chambers, bound in the customary pink ribbon, a clear and specific written brief. In that brief, he emphasised that if we won on this new point of law, I was "to pursue costs against the claimant as a deterrent to other employees". In other words, I was to ask the Judge to order that the (now unemployed) claimant should reimburse the construction company for the legal fees they had spent in going to the Tribunal to argue this new point of law.

This was patently ridiculous. Unlike in the Courts (where the loser routinely pays the winner's legal costs), the Tribunal can only order the losing party to pay the winner's costs if, in summary, they have behaved unreasonably. This means that only in rare cases will a Tribunal award costs for the employer and against the former employee. In our case, the point of law was tricky and technical; it was justifiable for it be tested before a Tribunal, rather than for the claimant to concede it without a hearing. Pursuing our costs was a pointless cause, but my instructions were clear. I did not want to risk

blotting my copybook with this powerful solicitor in my very moment of victory of his client's behalf. Many more lucrative cases would surely flow my way if I abided by his instructions.

We are in the Tribunal room. The Judge finishes stating his reasons as to why I have 'won' on the point of law. Having done so, he shuffles his papers into an agitated bundle and sighs deeply. The Judge has made it clear to me that he shares the claimant's frustration that her main claims will not even be heard by the Tribunal. The whole case had been stopped on a technicality. He leans over the bench and smiles apologetically at the claimant, then starts to lift himself out of his heavy leather chair to leave the room. I hurry to my feet.

"Sir, if I may?"

Suspended in mid-air, the Judge flicks his eyes up, looking at me quizzically.

"Yes, counsel?"

"Sir…" I clear my throat. "I'm instructed to make an application for costs."

At this, the Judge no longer hides his frustration. He stands to his full height and slaps his papers down on the desk. They scatter in untidy protest.

"Really, counsel? *Really*?"

I meet his gaze with a watery smile.

"Sir, those *are* my instructions."

The judge pauses, then eases down into his seat, eyeing me fiercely and snapping the lid off the end of his fountain pen. He gathers a fresh sheet of paper.

"Right," he snaps, pen poised. "Right then, counsel. Let's have your submissions."

A pause.

"No submissions, sir."

The Judge freezes. He frowns slightly, then tilts his head up to look at me. I hold his gaze. Slowly exhaling, the Judge sits back in his chair, watching me appraisingly.

"No submissions," he mouths, almost to himself. After a moment, he turns to the claimant's barrister and asks gently, "Counsel, may I have your submissions in reply, please?"

I wait impassively while my opposing counsel enumerates the many reasons why it would be preposterous for the Tribunal to award costs against the claimant in these circumstances. The Judge takes a careful note and, when the barrister stops speaking, he places his pen carefully on the desk.

"I deny the application for costs, for the very reasons set out on behalf of the claimant," he says.

He begins once again to gather his papers and each of us does likewise. We stand to attention for the Judge, who faces us in his turn and then moves towards the door. As he reaches out for the door handle, he stops abruptly and turns back. He addresses me directly.

"May I commend you, counsel, for the way in which you made that application."

I give a small nod in acknowledgement before the Judge turns back around and leaves the room. The 'little things' mattered. They were significant. The spaces in between. Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom (Frankl, 2006).

CHAPTER 5(ii):

EVER DEEPENING LEVELS (public works)
Co-designing and co-delivering Future Vision

"Everywhere around us and within us we see pattern upon pattern, ever-deepening levels of complexity and variety

Why do we resist the vision or blind ourselves to the beauty or fail to embrace the learnings?"

Margaret Wheatley (1993)

In this final chapter, I will explore a 'current' public work – one which developed while I researched and prepared this Context Statement, and which continues to evolve: the co-design and delivery of Future Vision.

Future Vision is a systemic leadership programme designed for the most senior executive leaders within organisations across the UK's public, private and non-profit sectors. Since Future Vision's inception in 2012, each year 25 people have been convened over the course of nine months for immersive, experiential learning opportunities that are intended to develop their understanding of complexity and to grow their capacity to lead effectively. Unusually, each Future Vision cohort brings together politicians alongside public service leaders and other senior executives. The programme blends whole-group activities with spaces for reflective practice, with both individual executive coaching and small-group peer coaching integrated into the programme.

One of three Lead Faculty members, I work with Professor Christopher Pietroni and Axelle Bagot to shape the programme. We lead the co-design and delivery of Future Vision, including sessions with guest contributors where appropriate. We also punctuate the Future Vision experience with "case in point" learning – a term coined by Ron Heifetz within his adaptive leadership framework to denote reflective activities, shaped by the cohort with expert facilitation, through which the group examines the

actions, behaviours and dynamics *within the group* as a way of learning about their respective system dynamics (Heifetz, 2004).

This chapter focuses on specific examples of my practice as a Faculty Lead, using these examples to reflect on my learning and its implications for other systems-oriented leadership development practitioners. In the final part of the chapter, I will consider the next curve of learning that may help us to evolve Future Vision into a more effective and impactful 'intervention', in service of the participants' learning.

Future Vision began in 2012 when Christopher Pietroni, a systems-thinker, facilitator and former local government executive, collaborated with a UK charity, the Leadership Centre, to offer a leadership development programme for executive leaders.

In terms of the field of leadership development, Future Vision was one of the earliest executive leadership programmes in the UK to assert that the foundational question is less "what to teach leaders" and more "how to help leaders to learn" (*per* Hackman and Wageman, 2007). In developing Future Vision collaboratively with the cohort during the first 24-hour residential of each programme, our starting point is to ask what interventions will be in service of the participants' learning at any given time. Our emphasis is on the praxis of leadership (rather than didactic teaching), orientating towards co-creating experiences which enable participants to explore new ideas through the arts, somatic work and simulation as well as through reading, workshopping and discussion. As Lead Faculty in the UK, Christopher and I both role-model and create opportunities for the participants to reflect critically on their own experience of leadership in applied work throughout the programme (an approach to leadership development outlined in, for example, Ganz and Lin, 2012). Each year, we then partner with the leadership development practitioner Axelle Bagot, to co-lead a week-long Study Visit to Boston, USA.

Future Vision has an overall orientation towards 'leadership from the outside-in' and 'leadership from the inside-out' (**Appendix 6**). More specifically than this general orientation, Future Vision's pedagogy is anchored in three approaches: adaptive

leadership; public narrative; and adult development. In leading the co-design and delivery of the programme, Christopher and I interweave these three approaches across the whole.

Our work on adaptive leadership is anchored in the approach of Ron Heifetz, in particular his distinction between 'authority' and 'leadership'. Heifetz describes 'authority' as the provision of direction, protection and order (see, for example, Heifetz, 2004). He contrasts this with 'leadership', which is framed as a praxis (something we do; not something we have) centred on enabling others to achieve shared purpose in conditions of uncertainty – a definition which derives from Marshall Ganz's Public Narrative framework (Ganz, 2010a). As such, the Public Narrative framework and its attendant skills are the second foundational component of the Future Vision programme. Many of the sessions and activities on the programme are designed to support participants in exploring values through narrative. At various stages, we work directly with the Public Narrative framework's three interconnected questions to help participants explore the connections between self, other and action (Ganz, 2023):

What am I called to do?

What are others with whom I am in relationship called to do?

What action does the world in which we live demand of us now?

These three questions are inherently self-regarding. They ask us to attend to our own meaning-making and ways of relating to the world as a core aspect of leading more effectively. As a complement to this invitation, the third consistent part of Future Vision's pedagogy is adult development. Our focus on constructivist-developmental approaches has increased markedly over the past two years, such that the programme now includes six one-hour developmental coaching sessions per participant and completion of an 'Action Logic' diagnostic at the outset of the programme.

In the programme's main sessions, this orientation is strengthened through participants' development of small, low-risk tests of change which they then enact in their real-world context. Heifetz refers to these small tests as "safe to fail experiments" (Heifetz, 2009); similarly, Kegan and Lahey's work focuses on crafting modest and

actionable steps through which people test their underlying assumptions about a given circumstance (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). Safe to fail experimentation encourages the Future Vision participants both to reflect *on* action during our residential sessions and to cultivate the practice of reflecting *in* action as they seek to apply the learning. Repeated use of these safe to fail experiments supports the participants to shift their habitual modes of meaning-making and behaviour over time. It provides a manageable 'jumping off' point through which insights generated during the Future Vision programme move from concept to practice.

Preparing this Context Statement has given me insight into how this 'safe to fail' approach is mirrored across a wide range of disciplines. The Cynefin framework, a decision-making tool developed by Dave Snowden and Mary Boone (Snowden and Boone, 2007), offers one example. Within the 'complex domain' of the Cynefin framework, where cause and effect can only be discerned in retrospect and universal protocols that can be simply applied are ineffectual, Snowden and Boone advocate leaders using multiple parallel 'safe to fail' experiments to probe, analyse and respond (in that order) within complex environments. Their research indicates that such experiments are best conducted by individuals or small groups, to enable quicker iterations, more immediate feedback and faster decision-making (ibid.).

In the context of Future Vision, such approaches run counter to the dominant paradigms that participants orientate towards prior to the programme's start. Participants are the most senior executive leaders in their given context. They tend to have sustained their careers by cultivating the habit of 'acting decisively' and projecting a mode of leadership that is rooted in authority – the provision of direction, protection and order (Heifetz, 2004). One might even characterise this as a sub-set of Bruner's paradigmatic mode of thought, through which people interpret and understand the world and their experiences through the logical characterisation of the world (Bruner, 1986). In the terms of the Cynefin framework, on joining Future Vision, many participants' default orientation tends towards analysis, categorisation and response. Their driving intent is to focus on solutions which will make the problem go away.

Safe to fail experimentation also echoes insights from the fields of ecology and anthropology. Nora Bateson's proposition that learning is contextual and mutual, existing in the interaction between a smaller entity within a bigger system, echoes Snowden and Boone's research but from a different disciplinary starting point (Bateson, 2016). One implication of Bateson's research is that changes made at a smaller scale also impact on the larger context within which the change takes place. This mirrors our hypothesis, in designing the Future Vision programme, that encouraging small-scale changes in thinking and behaviour, through low-risk experimentation, can cultivate the confidence and learning needed to enact bigger shifts.

Snowden, Boone and Bateson's insights resonate, in turn, with Bill Sharpe's "three horizons" model, which proposes that leaders need to become more self-aware of their present context (first horizon); to imagine radically different future possibilities (third horizon); and then to co-design specific tests of change, rooted in aspects of the present reality, that might provide a 'bridge' between the two (second horizon), as set out more fully in **Chapter 2** (Sharpe, 2013). By conceiving of different levels of possibility that exist simultaneously in our current reality, Sharpe's work complements transdisciplinary researcher Basarab Nicolescu's conception of "an included middle" – a logic which describes the dynamic connecting different levels of reality into one coherent whole (Nicolescu, 2010).

In all these examples, theorists and practitioners across disciplines work with the central insight that the seeds of future possibilities exist in our present realities. Those possibilities are not something to be 'managed'. Rather, they exist as a potential to be experienced and probed. Where appropriate, our role as leaders may be to amplify those possibilities over time by doing more of one thing and less of another. More than this, these cross-disciplinary examples all rely on experimentation and imagination as critical means to cultivate new possibilities. Bill Sharpes' three horizons model requires us to imagine a band, or breadth, of possible futures, some of which are more beneficial than others. In transdisciplinary terms, Nicolescu's 'included middle logic' requires a similar exercise of imagination. Predictive or forecast-based thinking, rooted in a mode of categorisation and exclusion (*per* Bruner's paradigmatic mode (Bruner, 1986) or

Nicolescu's *in vitro* knowledge (Nicolescu, 2008)) is insufficient. At the same time, purely narrative-based thinking, absent a creative space of imagination, also falls short. All these examples demand us bringing to bear multiple forms of knowledge, through a process of experimentation, to generate the foresight required to describe a range of possible futures.

In this regard, safe to fail experiments in Future Vision are intended not simply to disrupt individual, habituated patterns of behaviour. Rather, to some extent we are pinpointing the participants as potential 'leverage points' for wider change. By this, I mean that the participants might be thought of as entities in their wider systems, where a small shift in their meaning-making and consequent behaviours has the potential to engender much bigger changes across the whole (Meadows, 2008).

How Christopher, Axelle and I lead the co-design process for the programme also matters. We deliberately develop Future Vision not just from year to year, but during and in-between sessions within each year; we expressly integrate experimentation and reflective practice into our own work, testing new modes of delivery and co-coaching each other on these small tests of change.

While much of our teaching derives from the theories and propositions of others (as outlined above), as Faculty Leads we share an express ambition to create a language and syntax for our work that is meaningful in its own right. We repeatedly test how adaptive leadership, public narrative and adult development can be blended with other systems leadership approaches to enhanced effect. In one recent experiment, for example, Christopher and I re-shaped a one-day Public Narrative training to include an activity on system boundaries. In doing so, we invited the participants to notice how their current conceptions of the boundaries within their professional systems (the police and crime context of the county of Bedfordshire, say) can both limit and expand the options available to them as they exercise leadership in relationship with other people. The activity gave the participants space to relate the concepts of 'boundaries', 'relationships', 'perspective' and 'emergence' to the second strand of Ganz's Public Narrative framework (the 'Story of Us'). We then reflected together on our experience of

the activity, the insights from which helped Christopher and I to shape the next phase of the programme.

As such, reflection in general and the specific practice of critical reflection are core components of our approach to Future Vision. We recognise the proposition, usually attributed to the educationalist John Dewey, that assessing the grounds of one's own beliefs is a prerequisite to becoming more intentional and effective in leading change (Dewey, 1933, p.9). The underlying work in which Future Vision participants are engaged is to uncover and then narrow the gaps between the types of leadership that they seek to exercise (nuanced, compassionate, effective, timely) and the patterns of thinking and behaviour which limit their ability to do so. In this way, we draw on the insights of Argyris and Schön, that a key rationale for critical reflection is to better align the theories we espouse (how we explain our actions at the time, to ourselves and others) and our theories in use (our actual behaviour and revealed preferences) (Argyris and Schön, 1974, pp.6-7).

Each cohort of Future Vision meets in person seven times over the course of nine months. Sessions vary from single day experiences to five day residentials. In any given year, we may co-design and deliver some 25 different sessions as part of the Future Vision programme. The next part of this chapter goes deeper on two examples, offering reflections which draw on my learnings from earlier public works.

Example 1: The rhythm of check-ins

From the outset of each Future Vision programme, Christopher and I seek to establish a rhythm for the cohort which is, in most cases, experienced as deeply counter-cultural to participants' usual work environments. Central to this is the iterative practice of check-ins, whereby the whole cohort meets seated in a circle and follows the same structured rhythm:

- Welcome into the space and settling, facilitated by me and/or Christopher.

- A guided somatic activity, which calls us all to bring our attention into the shared space and to notice our energy at that present moment.

- An invitation for all members of the cohort to offer a reflection on a semi-structured theme. Sometimes, we pose a specific reflective question that relates to an earlier session or learning experience. Early in the programme, we simply invite participants to offer responses to: "Where do we find you?".

- We establish a norm whereby all participants are invited to speak once, self-regulating the order of their individual check-ins.

- At the end of the check-in, which usually lasts for one hour, we hold the physical space in a few moments of stillness before transitioning to our next activity together.

Upon meeting with the cohort for the first time, we facilitate a short initial check-in focused on people's names, professional roles and other descriptors that are more usually shared in orthodox professional environments. Only after then engaging in some introductory activities do we return for a second, deeper check-in which establishes the rhythm we intend to use for the remainder of the programme.

The check-in then frames the cadence and tone of each Future Vision residential or session. The point is that the habitual nature of the check-in creates a space for learning that, cumulatively, is more reflective, open and vulnerable. By this, I mean that the depth of reflection, quality of insight and collective ability to add to and enhance each other's learning all create "ever-deepening levels of complexity and variety", to use Margaret Wheatley's concept from complexity thinking (Wheatley, 1993). By the final sessions of the programme, the check-ins contain participants' shared moments of vulnerability in a way that is generative of learning, precisely because the structure enables any participant to add to, nuance or challenge the reflections offered by others. In recent years, through the check-in process participants have:

- Shared deeply held fears about their own professional competence.

- Described formative experiences that they now see as informing their current behaviours.

- Challenged each other robustly on issues, such as 'white privilege', perceived inaction on climate change and a perceived failure to exert leadership within the cohort. For most participants, such challenges are rarely expiated and given space in their regular working environments.

The check-in may seem a somewhat obvious example on which to focus for the purpose of this Context Statement. I have chosen it for several reasons. The Future Vision check-ins act as a powerful way of establishing norms which are central to the overall cadence and tone of the programme. As Patsy Rodenburg proposes in her conception of different "circles" of energy (Rodenburg, 2008), the type of energy existing between participants is a key determinant of the quality of discussion, and learning, that is then possible. When we self-regulate to protect ourselves (First Circle) or over-project to assert ourselves (Third Circle), we squander an opportunity to attune into the shared learning that may be available within a dynamic shared with other people.

In this way, Rodenburg's conception of attention or presence echoes not just the concept of "attunement" in psychiatry (Siegel, 2007) but also the insights into collective intelligence proposed by Anna Murphy Paul and others. Murphy Paul proposes several ways in which we may 'extend' our individual minds, the most fundamental of which is by creating spaces to share, reflect and learn with others (Murphy Paul, 2021, p.189).

While "thinking socially" can be a spontaneous behaviour within the course of interactions, my experiences at Movement for Change and in the NHS indicate that social thinking can also be crafted through structuring the physical, intellectual, emotional and social environment of a given experience. In the case of Future Vision, then, the check-ins are foundational to role modelling and then structuring opportunities for the participants to bring Second Circle energy to our shared work, in service of thinking differently (and often better) together.

In this context, the check-in can be a radically disruptive intervention. It can shift participants into habits of probing and sensing first, listening deeply for what emerges from the insights of others, and only then seeking to respond. In this way, check-ins have the potential to re-orientate participants from the linear causality of 'decisive action' described in the Complicated and Simple domains of the Cynefin framework, towards a

more complex interpretation of their context (Snowden and Boone, 2007). Drawing the link back to 'collective intelligence', the check-in challenges the participants' default tendency to work their individual brains ever harder rather than seek opportunities to 'extend' them by working with each other in different ways (Murphy Paul, 2021; Mulgan, 2022).

I want to add one further implication of preserving the check-in as a bedrock of the Future Vision programme. As outlined above, we have developed the practice of starting check-ins with a somatic activity, bringing the participants' attention to our individual and collective energy. Our increasing emphasis on somatic work as integral to the programme is perhaps its most counter-cultural element. By asserting the importance of embodied learning, through attention to breath and our felt sense, we are also challenging the prevailing orthodoxies of scientific knowledge with its preference for rational, analytical ways of knowing (working only 'from the neck up', so to speak). We are asserting that imaginative and creative knowing and perception hold equal validity and may provide a rich source of knowledge about ourselves and our contexts. In this way, our development of Future Vision echoes a foundational tenet of transdisciplinarity – that many ways of knowing can contribute to a bigger whole, through which we may know the world in a more-than-disciplinary way (Nicolescu, 2006, p.18).

Example 2: Interconnections that create a bigger whole

At the mid-way point of Future Vision each year, we lead a five day Study Visit with the cohort to Boston, United States. The Study Visit exposes participants to the work of academics from three of the city's universities – Harvard University; Suffolk University; and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

The sessions in Boston consolidate learning to date, using the 'outside inside and inside out' meta-framing summarised above. These include "case consultation" sessions using the adaptive leadership framework, during which participants present a real-life systemic leadership challenge around which others offer observations and coaching (Heifetz, 2004); and Immunity to Change work, which puts into practice one of

the key models from constructivist-developmental theory, guiding participants through a structured process by which they explore their apparent inability to change due to their deep-rooted assumptions and beliefs (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). We also work directly with Marshall Ganz, co-facilitating Public Narrative sessions to further develop participants' 'Stories of Self' (Ganz, 2010a). Interspersed with these Faculty sessions, we layer-in opportunities for arts-based learning that invite participants to think about their leadership in very different ways. Here, I will describe a recent example, as a means of drawing out insights for future practice.

In May 2022, on the first day of that year's Boston Site Visit, we arranged to meet the sculptor and artist Nancy Schön in central Boston. Having worked with Christopher Pietroni and the preceding Future Vision Faculty for several years, Schön was familiar with the programme. In discussing our ambitions for Schön's contribution, Christopher, Axelle and I agreed two aims.

First, we wanted Schön's session to ground the participants in the city of Boston itself, in an embodied sense. Immediately before Schön's session, we led the participants on a walk through Boston Public Garden. We then met Schön in front of her most famous public artwork – the sculpture in Boston Public Garden titled 'Make Way for Ducklings'. Here, we invited the participants to experience the sculpture with Schön's personal guidance.

Second, we sought to use Schön's input to connect the participants with deepening layers of experience, using the sculpture as a 'jumping off point' to explore connections between embodied experience, the artistic process and reflective practice. Specifically, we asked Schön to describe for participants the inter-connections between her work as a sculptor and her husband Donald Schön's concurrent work on critical reflection, reflexivity and reflective practice (Argyris and Schön, 1974).

Nancy Schön with Future Vision participants in Boston Public Gardens, May 2021

During the 90 minute session, Schön invited the participants to interact with *Make Way For Ducklings*, then to step back and observe the ways in which other passersby were experiencing the artwork. Schön then shared her perspective on the artwork's meaning, her artistic process and the wider context of her practice.

First, Schön referenced the cultural significance of the artwork. She described how the original children's book, on which *Make Way for Ducklings* is based, is beloved by generations of Bostonian children. Schön described her vision for an artwork that would be hard-wearing enough for people not simply to observe it, but to interact with it continuously in numerous ways. Schön shared photographs of the sculpture through the years, highlighting how people have periodically dressed the ducklings in seasonal or topical clothing. The artwork became, at various points, a symbol of the city and a relatively safe canvas on which people could express political ideas. At times, it became a coalescing point for protest as well as celebration. Schön recounted that, so potently did the sculpture come to symbolise the city of Boston, she declined all further commissions to make duckling sculptures in other American cities. Through her narration, Schön enabled the participants to experience the artwork at deeper levels of

complexity and variety. In the terms of Jerome Bruner's work, Schön ascribed richer, more compelling meaning to the artwork through stories (Bruner, 1986).

As co-convenors of the Study Visit, Christopher, Axelle and I were live to the other dimensions of the artwork that we wanted the participants to experience. With gentle probing, Schön next shared her own practice – the process of iteration, reflection, learning and improvement that she had used to produce the finished artwork. Schön recounted how she had sketched the artwork numerous times before settling on a final design, then testing its production in a range of materials. From this process of iteration, Schön settled on the use of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin which expands when heated (filling the nooks and crannies of a mould), then contracts as it cools (enabling safe removal from the mould without losing detail). Schön described how bronze would be hard-wearing but would also weather and change colour over time, in relationship with the elements (Schön, 2022).

Alongside inviting questions from participants, my role in the session was to draw out the analogies between Schön's narrative and the iterative, experimental approach to leadership which is core to Future Vision's systemic orientation. Christopher and I invited participants to notice how, through creative experimentation, Schön had brought her initial vision for the artwork and the finished products into closer alignment. This process mirrors closely Donald Schön's conception of the purpose of critical reflection, to bring our espoused theories (our articulation of the rationale for our actions at the time) and our theories in use (our actual behaviour and revealed preferences) into closer alignment (see, for example, Argyris and Schön, 1974, pp.6-7). With gentle prompting, Schön described how her husband Donald Schön had observed her testing different materials and configurations of the sculpture in her workshop, and how their discussions about the artistic process had informed his own understanding of the relationship between embodied learning, reflection and improvement (Schön, 2022).

What are the implications of this experience for the practice of leadership development?

First, that learning by analogy can be a powerful way for advancing one's own understanding of a specific context. In working with Nancy Schön, of course we did not

envisage that participants would choose to become artists. Nor were we expecting them to limit their learning to insights related directly to art. Rather, through the *specificity* of Schön's recounting of her artistic practice, we were able to derive *universal* principles which resonated with participants regardless of their own professional context. This paradox – of how the specific uncovers the universal – is a key implication of using art-based practices in service of learning about the practice of leadership.

The role of the facilitator is key here. In this case, Christopher, Axelle and I guided Schön's narration of her practice to ensure that the participants were able to draw the analogies that connected the session both to the overarching pedagogy of the programme and to their own professional experience. We explicitly bridged the learning, enabling Schön to make explicit aspects of her practice which she may only have understood tacitly. I would propose that this facilitative role mirrors the concept of "the included middle" described as core to the methodology of transdisciplinarity (Nicolescu, 2010), as well as the "second horizon" framing offered in the work of Bill Sharpe (Sharpe, 2013). A key role of facilitators is to reveal adjacent possibilities. By 'adjacent possibilities', I mean ways of understanding which are both proximate to and expansive of a participant's current understanding. In the case of Schön, we coached from her an experience that was at once unlike and yet somehow familiar to the participants' own work, which we then explicitly linked to the programme's pedagogy. Through this process, scaffolded learning becomes possible.

A second implication for the practice of leadership development is how readily arts-based experiences, when the learning from them is facilitated skilfully, can prise open the narrative mode and shift participants out of logico-scientific or "paradigmatic" modes of thought (Bruner, 1986). While the paradigmatic mode relies on the rigorous testing of hypotheses through observable evidence, the visceral experience of art can attune us to different levels of reality with a different quality of creative potential. Crafting spaces where people share artistic experience can act as a portal, ushering us through different states of being which call into question our prior assumptions about what leadership means.

A further implication of this example is that integrating arts-based practice into leadership development programmes is wholly congruent with an orientation towards systemic, complexity-based approaches to leadership. By experiencing an artwork with the artist (in this case, Nancy Schön), then inviting her to contextualise 'the thing itself', we were able to draw participants' attention away from the artwork as a freestanding object and towards *the connections between things*. The different levels of Schön's narrative prompted participants to attend to the relationship between the parts, rather than fixating on the outcome (the artwork) as a static property. In his metaphor of "the empty space", the theatre director Peter Brook proposes that a work of theatre is only engaged when a person walking across an empty space is observed by another person (Brook, 2008). It is the dynamic between – not the individual parts – which creates dramatic potential. This same idea recurs in the work of Anna Murphy Paul, Geoff Mulgan and other researchers who have described 'the extended mind' – the process of moving beyond individualised intelligence and extending into working with our environments and each other in different ways (Murphy Paul (2021); Mulgan, 2022). The very essence of collective intelligence depends on us attending to how seemingly discrete entities inter-relate.

For practitioners who are leading public services in complex environments, this insight is fundamental. If systems are driven by the quality of the interactions between the parts, and not solely the quality of the parts themselves, then simply working to improve discrete parts may do more harm than good. Just as a sculpture can be overworked if the artist fixates on one section to the detriment of the whole, "improving" one part of a complex system without systemic attunement may actively undermine the outcomes we seek.

Art-based practice provides a powerful means for leaders to experience these insights. Art is born out of the recurrent dynamic between order and chaos. It seeks order and form, not as a way of negating the chaotic but as a way of helping us to experience it more clearly. Order and chaos; structure and freedom – the tensions inherent within these dynamics are where creative potential resides. *The tyranny of the blank page* is a trope of creative writers precisely because the phrase recognises how

the constraints of structure and framing can, paradoxically, unleash creative expression. These same insights apply to the dynamics alive within complex systems. Systemic leadership development programmes need to invite participants to move from linear, reductionist modes of thinking to more reflexively interrogating their systems (and their own interactions within them) through the lens of boundaries, relationships, emergence and perspectives (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2018). Arts-based practice provides a proximate, relatable experience through which leaders can integrate these ideas into their own leadership practice.

Yet this is demanding work. Emotionally and psychologically as well as intellectually, it challenges dominant orthodoxies in which many people in senior positions of authority are inculcated and invested:

- that change can be managed
- that controlling my part of the system should be my overriding aim
- that anything which extends those boundaries and perspectives is 'nebulous' at best and irresponsible at worst.

The final insight I want to offer from the Nancy Schön example, then, relates to sequencing and pace. From the starting base of these prevailing orthodoxies, systemic leadership practice cannot be arrived at in a single leap. It is not simply a matter of 'filling the vessel' (the participant) with more of the same – *in*formation. Rather, we are seeking to change the very form of the container so that it becomes a larger vessel, with more capacity to deal with nuance, competing demands and uncertainty – *trans*formation (Petrie, 2014). Perhaps the paradox is that we cannot cross these chasms with a single leap, even though we might conceptualise our ambition at the scale of 'leaps' rather than 'steps'. So-called leaps of learning must, in practice, occur through many small steps, even while we simultaneously strive for a scale of change beyond incremental improvement.

Our session with Nancy Schön was simply one layer in a process facilitated over several months. In the weeks before the Boston Site Visit, Christopher and I led experiential sessions using the Public Narrative framework (Ganz, 2010a); Christopher coached some participants to then co-facilitate Public Narrative training sessions for

recent Local Government graduates; and we introduced drawing and sketching into Future Vision's main residential sessions. In addition, I led somatic breathing activities as part of our regular group check-ins, while integrating individual reflective walks in nature into the core programme. Steadily the participants' expectations of the types of experiences in which they would be invited to participate started to calibrate to a deeper quality of attention and presence.

We were, in other words, cumulatively integrating different ways of experiencing the programme's foundational concepts, at a rate that the participants could receive, reflect upon and then integrate. In our work together at NHS Horizons, my colleague Helen Bevan refers to this iteration as "small changes within a large-scale framework" (Bevan, 2023). Clarity of overall direction, on the part of the facilitators, is coupled with many small steps that enable participants to comprehend, then experience and then make sense of and potentially integrate what is being offered at deepening levels of nuance and complexity.

If this insight holds true, then it suggests that transformative learning may occur when we recognise the participants' experience as dynamic, and their sense-making as dependent on the quality of attention and reflection that they can bring to bear (Petranker, 2003, p.9). The processes we design for facilitating transformational learning need to acknowledge that we all carry within us our prior experiences, associations and perspectives. What Chris Agyris and Donald Schön call the 'mental maps' of our past images, experiences and ideas (Argyris and Schön,1974) need to be respected, not as something to challenge head-on but as the live resource with which facilitators can work to repeatedly introduce adjacent possibilities. In each session of a programme, facilitators of leadership development need to act with intention, listening deeply to how participants are making sense of what is being offered in ways which are congruent with the 'large-scale' purpose of the programme. As facilitators, then, we are *in* the work; we are an integrated part of the system.

What more can I do to test these implications through the Future Vision programme? Preparing this Context Statement has allowed me to reflect on the possibilities of

attention-based practices. I believe we have much more we could do to experiment with this aspect of leadership development. Over the past three years, Christopher, Axelle and I have grown in confidence to trust each other. Through our deepening relationships, we have moved beyond developing the pedagogy and structure of Future Vision to create a shared language and syntax for our work that is meaningful in its own right. The next curve of our learning may be a more holistic "attunement" – what the psychiatrist Daniel Siegel terms "the process by which separate elements are brought into a resonating whole" (Siegel, 2007, p.78). I would like this to involve more radical experimentation with integrating art-based experiences, kinaesthetic learning and somatic activities across the whole flow of the Future Vision programme.

I would also like us to push the boundaries of what we mean by "attunement" in this context. My research into constructivist-developmental theory and adult development has given me new perspectives on what Siegel's "resonating whole" might involve. In his work on the so-called "Self-Transforming Mind", Rob McNamara outlines how we commonly think of attuning with another person (or system) as creating a larger coherence or resonance between one or more people. It is, in this conception, an exchange of views and ideas that might lead the people involved to feel that they have a shared understanding (McNamara, 2016, p.10). Yet McNamara proposes that attunement can also function on a different level. McNamara refers to this different level as "relational flux", through which the people involved are intentionally attuned to "what is happening within the experiential field that is co-creating" them (McNamara, 2016). Explaining his idea, McNamara refers to the immediacy of our everyday experience. While functioning in our lives, billions of data points are perpetually flowing through our nervous systems. Attunement here is less a matter of focusing on one part of that experience than of calibrating towards the whole without impeding the overall flow. This requires that we relax and release – that we "surrender to the immediacy that is already doing, working, informing and shaping you" (McNamara, 2016).

What might it be like to attune to the experience of co-creating and co-delivering Future Vision in the way that McNamara describes?

In my earliest public works – such as at Movement for Change and during the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission – I described crafting experiences for participants that were designed to enable them to represent their own perspectives with confidence and conviction. I conceived of myself somewhat as 'outside' that experience. In my later public works – such as the NHS Maternity Summit – I started to explore this more as a dynamic between me, the participants and our wider environmental context. I was becoming more aware of my integration within the context, alongside other people, and how different methods and approaches for facilitating change might enable different outcomes, depending on how we attended to the connections existing within the overall dynamic.

Perhaps now, the work resides in holding lightly the apparent 'building blocks' of the Future Vision programme – its pedagogy, programme structure and individual sessions – to allow for emergence. New learning may emerge, for example, if we further blur the distinctions between our respective roles: faculty; facilitators; contributors; and participants. Perhaps we need to imagine more radical ways for us all to experience how the context within which we exist is co-creating us – and being co-created by us in turn. In this way, we might make a small contribution towards improving human perception of, and attention towards, the complexity we live within, to improve our interaction with the world.

CHAPTER 6:

What might this mean for leadership practice in public services?

"Reading your [draft Context Statement] has helped me to recognise the internal disquiet I feel in myself. This idea of 'not fitting a particular mould' and a worry I have that I don't neatly sit within any one profession anymore. Instead, you have helped me to see this as a cause for celebration and a source of value both for the wider team and the people we work alongside; looking back, I can now see how I have drawn upon my own transdisciplinary experience and used it as a strength to create Rapid Insight."

Laura Yearsley, Associate Director of Rapid Insight, NHS Horizons (2024)

This chapter aims to distil emerging thinking that I have developed while preparing this Context Statement. It is aimed at senior public sector leaders in the UK (that is, Future Vision's target cohort), who may be working towards exercising leadership in more systemic, complex and nuanced ways. As this summary is written for practice-based engagement, I have not included direct referencing. Instead, I have written fluidly and drawn on the range of sources set out in Chapter 2.

Most people who hold positions of authority within public services, and many people who seek to practise leadership in that context, live in a world of 'solutions'.

Whether in Law, Government, Healthcare or many other sectors that dominate the development and provision of public services, we imbibe an orientation to critical thinking, analysis and problem-solving from the earliest stages of our formal (and wider social) education. We are rewarded for our ability to acquire and exercise technical competence; for projecting 'what we know' on a given subject; and for pursuing the tantalising finality of a problem fixed.

This educational inculcation is symptomatic of the great myth of new management approaches to public services: that outcomes are delivered by organisations, programmes and pathways. They are not. The most pressing challenges our world faces – local, national and international – are systemic, multi-faceted and inter-dependent. Frequently, they are characterised by difference, disruption and conflict. This complexity is how outcomes are created. If we want to achieve breakthrough change in public services (and more widely), we must debunk the credo of management, delivery and results, with its attendant leadership practices of command+control, linearity and an obsessive focus on 'solving' the inherently irresolvable. Instead, we need to pivot:

- from solution seeking, towards problem seeking.
- from asserting answers, towards asking better questions.
- from paradigmatic ways of being and thinking, towards approaches that harness the potential of multiple, potentially complementary and inter-connected levels of conscious being, thinking and action.

What does this look like in practice? Based on the learning I have sought to describe in this Context Statement, here are three suggestions for public sector leaders who want to engender such a change:

1. Shift positions.
2. Explore *and* exploit.
3. Live the reality you want to create.

1) Shift positions

It is seductive to imagine that we can intervene, from a position of formal authority within our organisation and/or across organisational boundaries, and confidently predict the consequences of our intervention. Seductive, yet wrongheaded. If we are intervening to influence across multiple relationships, networks and formal structures, by definition we cannot foresee and predict the total impact.

This being so, we need to develop habits that loosen our attachment to pursuing fixed or specific 'deliverables' to achieve a defined outcome. Instead, we need to develop practices that focus on how we influence *towards more of one thing and less of another*:

Case study example: Territorial police force capacity (UK)
Source: Adapted from a scenario presented by the Chief Constable of a territorial Police Force in England during the Future Vision Programme (2023)
Leadership challenge: Large amounts of Police Officer time is being expended on manually redacting sensitive information from interview records, to comply with governance and regulatory requirements.
Desired outcome: Make the redaction process less onerous on Police Officers, creating more capacity for them to focus on other aspects of the service's mission (i.e. making communities safer; preventing crime and antisocial behaviour; keeping the peace; protecting and reassuring communities; investigating crime and bringing offenders to justice).
A possible approach
Frame a positional shift ('*from x, towards y*' and '*more of a, less of b*'): e.g. "I'm interested in generating more capacity for our Police Officers to deliver frontline services. That includes less Police Officer time being spent on completing tasks that can be done by other means."
Pose generative questions: e.g. Reduce reliance on statements such as: "How will you (hierarchical subordinate / team / manager) address the need to reduce the compliance burden on my Officers, so that they can get out on the frontline?" Ask more questions such as: "___How might we___ *create* a better ___balance between___ our compliance duties and directing more Police Officer capacity towards visible frontline delivery, ___so that together we can___ achieve our service's core mission more effectively___?___"
Actively invite diverse perspectives: e.g. Create different spaces (1:1s, meetings, 'town hall' events, surveys) framed around the shared enquiry, actively inviting people from across different roles and lived experience to contribute ideas, examples and data. Thinking longer-term, use your positional authority to sponsor the creation of multiple networks across the service, through which different communities of interest can shape opinions, encourage diverse thinking and influence for change.

Work out loud as you reflect: e.g. Articulate a process by which you will openly listen to (and be seen to listen to) the ideas, examples and data generated. Openly demonstrate how the ideas, examples and data have informed your thinking and approach.
Test small arcs of the bigger change: Co-design experiments (or small tests of change; or small arcs of the bigger strategic / mission-oriented circle) that will now be further developed and trialled.

As this example shows, shifting positions has several elements. First, it involves creating spaces in which to practise opposable thinking – the ability to work productively with conflicting or polarised ideas and to handle dilemmas. As such, it invites us to exercise leadership in ways that demonstrate how we are valuing people (and perspectives) whose experiences and views are markedly different from our own. This, in turn, may encourage a wider culture across our organisations and systems, orientated towards inclusive learning.

Second, it invites us as leaders to hold a light positionality – to wear our own professional and other sectoral identities more loosely. Professional and sectoral identities exist for many good reasons, yet when the issues we seek to address are cross-sectoral, those identities may get in our way. We need to consistently strengthen our ability to stand in different shoes. As leaders, we need to cultivate that ability in other people using the power (ability to act) conferred by our formal authority. This is difficult, ongoing work akin to building physical muscles through repetitive exercise. For most of us, our past professional achievements (and the attendant narratives, and accolades, we have accrued) are somewhat 'fused' with who we think we are. Loosening that relationship is hard work, but it is crucial for our future development as *more systemic* leaders.

Third, shifting positions means recognising that boundaries are porous; many so-called truths are contingent; and all models for visualising 'the world as it is' are only approximations of reality. At best, models and frameworks are lies that reveal a truth. Too often, in organisations and systems, we mistake the model (the organogram, the change management process, the pathway descriptor) for an objective truth, then become frustrated when our interventions don't survive contact with reality. Instead, we need to recognise simultaneously the value of useful models and frameworks, while

being adept at responding to what emerges from the interventions that we (and others) make.

2) Explore *and* exploit

Holding a light positionality goes together with embracing 'not knowing' as a leadership practice. We can do this more easily when we are aware of the dynamic between *exploitation* and *exploration*.

In the exploit mode, leaders focus on how to get the next thing done, how to complete the agenda, how to accomplish the task. In more evolutionary terms, we foster exploitative (or executive) capabilities within children so that they can do things *on* the world – not simply to explore within it, but to channel that exploration in service of effecting a specific change. In a normatively neutral sense, this is our ability *to exploit*. When a child starts to manipulate a spoon towards her own mouth for the first time, all the motor skills, perceptual awareness and coordination she has explored for months in a generalised sense are brought to bear in executing that essential task. This incredible human capacity, to exploit our wider environment in service of our goals, is critical to our survival.

In leadership terms, too, the exploit mode matters. We will always be better at achieving a particular goal if we optimise for its fulfilment. We will always do better when taught to the test… so long as the test itself is predictable.

The explore mode is concerned with generalised learning, through which we widen our understanding of ourselves, *and ourselves in relation to the world*. This is the essence of play – interacting with the world on the terms that we find, so as to increase understanding. The exploit mode and the explore mode pursue two different developmental and evolutionary agendas. The ways we experience the world – our consciousness – are going to be different depending on whether our dominant orientation is towards exploitation (i.e. execute, deliver) or towards exploration. If exploitation and exploration represent two poles of a polarity, then striking some form of

productive balance between them is important. There are choices to make *within* the polarity, not choices *between* the poles:
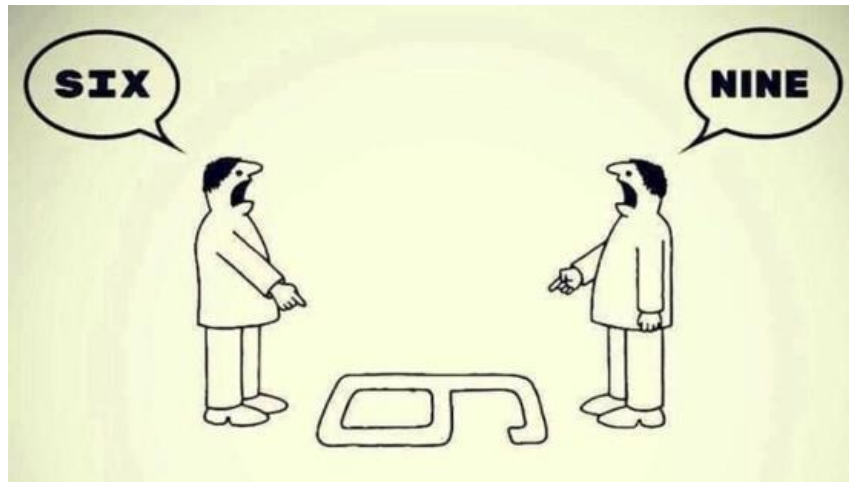
Source: attributed to The Education Tree, via [Pinterest](#)

As leaders, our over-reliance on the exploit mode may cause unintentional harm. It is of little to no use when *we don't know how to achieve the goal*. At best, it risks trapping us in simple but wrong approaches.

Exploration builds resilience. It may remind us that 'spotlight consciousness' (which enables the forensic completion of specific tasks, and which orientates towards analysis and delivery) is only one form of consciousness. There are many ways of being sentient that are not like a spotlight at all. When the test is unpredictable, by definition the task cannot be executed successfully by spotlight. We need the ability to look around, to see more widely, more flexibly. Exploration, then, enables a vital form of resilience – the ability to apply learning by analogy from generalised circumstances and the wider context to a range of specific tasks. It is critical to how leaders make meaningful progress on complex challenges:

Example: Activating 'the explore mode' as a senior positional leader

Steps to take with your team, or your constituency / community of interest
Acknowledge openly that you don't know.
Invite your team 'up onto the balcony' to look with you at the challenge in-hand. Before we can 'deliver' specific work to address a challenge (exploit mode), we need to better understand its nature. From up here, what do we each see 'down on the dancefloor'? What could we test as a small change? If we make a change or test something new, how will we assess whether that change is an improvement or not?
Pose exploratory questions, such as: **What else do we need to consider? (the 'else' is crucial, as it implies there is more)** **Whose perspectives do we also need? (the 'also' acknowledges that no gathering of people is whole and complete)** What have we not yet noticed? ('yet' because the question invites a new and deeper layer of contribution)
Agree a handful of small experiments that are low stakes to the overall mission (i.e. 'safe to fail'). Make sure that these experiments are 'ABC' – **A**ctionable (they require us to do something); **B**ridging (they involve people who hold different perspectives) and **C**onnected (they require us to do something together, across organisational / sectoral boundaries).
As our experiments start to generate data and insights, re-group to discuss the learning as a team. Get back 'on the balcony', to co-produce the next loop of testing and learning.

One way to cultivate the explore mode is to prioritise play. As leaders, we need to take play seriously, as a route to learning. Play enhances our ability to read context; to make more flexible and discerning judgements; and to respond in versatile ways to new information.

The invitation, then, is to practise anew our childhood (not childish) ability to take the world on its own terms and try to construct how it works.[1] In adulthood, this means prioritising experiences that seem to take our consciousness 'out of the self'. Play with others includes synchronously experiencing and/or creating dance or music; and taking part in team sports. Solo play includes tactile experiences that use our brain differently;

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[1] The invitation is to invest more time as adults thinking in child-like ways. This requires humility to find the wisdom in childlike states. I would suggest that, as human beings, we are not moving through some linear path from primitive understanding towards attaining our perfection. Children are not defective adults.

perhaps crafting or woodwork, perhaps simply completing a puzzle. What matters is the intention we bring to our reflection on the learning that play offers.

This critical reflection is the bridge that enables us to bring the sights generated by exploration to bear on a specific challenge. As such, exploration and exploitation need not be a trade-off. By being more intentional about which mode we are in, and for what purposes, we can reap the benefits of both.

3) Live the reality you want to create

Many participants describe the Future Vision programme as 'respite' and 'a break from reality'. They reference the space for reflection, the quality of conversation with others and the integration of creativity alongside analysis.

From one perspective, this is welcome. Yet if such experiences simply remain a respite or haven, we will have squandered the opportunities they offer. Public sector leaders who want to do the hard work of challenging orthodoxy need to find ways to integrate reflection, trusting conversations and creatively more intentionally into the everyday:

Example: Three practices towards living the reality you want to create in the everyday
Source: Derived from my observations of practices that Future Vision participants (and whole cohorts) have chosen to embed after the formal close of the programme (2021-2024)
1. It's more powerful to move toward what you desire rather than move away from a problem. What do you want to embody for your future? What aspects of this are shared by your community (whether your Future Vision cohort, or otherwise)?
2. Trust is paradoxical: we don't have it until we give it. Seek out and contribute to communities where you feel able to give / build trust in service of deeper, mutual learning.
3. Experience widely across the arts, sport, humanities, sciences and beyond. In a literal sense, allow your consciousness to 'cross disciplines' habitually, in the everyday. Build in activities that encourage this leadership practice in your colleagues and teams.

As leaders, we deserve more than to remember experiences like Future Vision as a past 'respite'. Rather, living the reality that we want to create means we may remember those experiences as catalysts that led to tangible, sustained change.

Together, these three suggestions provide starting points for orienting towards more systemic and holistic forms of conscious being, thinking and action in the everyday.

We could add many more, including suggestions that touch more directly on the multiple forms of consciousness we may experience in being human. For example, many cultures encompass notions of 'luminous consciousness' – our sense of impermanence and feelings of insignificance in the face of transcendence.

The Theravadin Anguttara Nikaya Atthakatha commentary identifies the luminous mind as the bhavanga, the 'ground of becoming', a fundamental building block for other forms of consciousness. In our Judeo-Christian traditions, we more readily describe this form of consciousness as a 'state of awe'. Its essential quality is the felt sense that I am unique and special within a wider university that is unique and special. I am both an essential part and subsumed within that wider whole. Setting down our spotlights in favour of lanterns, or candles, enables us to take in the overall impression of that which surrounds us. Attuning in this way to anything beautiful – visual art, poetry, natural landscapes – cultivates a sensitivity that spreads to our experience in general.

As leaders, we must attune to beauty as a means to access additional consciousness and knowledge. Find things that are beautiful; expose ourselves to them at length; give them preferential attention.

Are we courageous enough to explore these realms of consciousness with our communities, teams, colleagues… within ourselves? Are we willing to try small tests in a new direction with our teams, recognising that none of us is as smart as all of us?

Are we ready to move beyond a world of 'solutions'?

CHAPTER 7:

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

"You are out walking in the hills. The ground rises to the tops and falls to the valley floors along which run fast-flowing streams. Here and there are farms and homesteads, marked on your map as places with names. At this moment you are following a track from one such place, Ayrton, to another, Beesdale. With each step, vistas change as ground once occluded looms into view while that already traversed disappears from sight. Already, the view is very different from what it was in the place from where you set out. And on arrival at your destination, it is different again…

…Yet on the way from one place to the other, you have crossed no boundary, no point at which you could say we are no longer in Ayrton but in Beesdale. The landscape, in your experience, is continuous. This does not mean, however, that it is all the same. On the contrary, what it reveals to you, as you make your way along its paths and tracks, is a continuum of difference."

Tim Ingold (2010)

This Context Statement has sought to engage with several questions that inform how I interpret and understand the world and my experience, offering implications from my public works for future practice. I have sought to consider how the relationship between the self, other and context shape our understandings of the world – and even how these three categorisations (self, other, context) are themselves constructs with porous boundaries.

Each of my four lenses offers opportunities to consider the concepts of power, voice, representation and identity. By choice, I have not overtly interrogated the many different and contested definitions of these terms in this Context Statement. Rather, I have chosen to explore them obliquely, through connecting auto-ethnographic research with critical reflection and through engagement with a synthesis of various bodies of research. I have sought to leave space for the reader to engage with the work using a more 'transdisciplinary attitude' than an orthodox disciplinary, definitional approach might have allowed.

After all, this Context Statement describes a version of a story. It is not *the* story. It is not *my* story, not in its entirety. We all contain multitudes. And it is perhaps the

'permission' to explore those multitudes in ways that are simultaneously creative, analytical, analogous, risky and transgressive that has been the biggest gift of this doctoral programme. The doctoral process has given me a scaffolding from which to imagine, experience and describe that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all discipline (Nicolescu, 2008). As such, it has both validated and enabled my articulation of knowledge that, previously, I could only intuit: that human beings exist and experience and 'know' in many ways; that disciplinary knowledge can be powerful and simultaneously insufficient; and that there is far more to discover in the spaces between our current perception and positionality than we tend to acknowledge.

I am excited that researchers and practitioners are now asking questions that signal a 'next curve' of transdisciplinary learning. Questions such as:

- How does one identify, train and practise with a 'transdisciplinary attitude'?
- How do we sustain enquiry and cultivate knowledge between, and across, and beyond, constructed boundaries?
- How do we attune to knowledge in an expansive sense, to better align the world's complexity and our own at any given moment?

I believe that I may have a contribution to make, as we collectively pursue these enquiries.

At times, researching and preparing this Context Statement has been painful. I had a choice of 'public works' and I tried to choose bravely. I chose not to explore those campaigns, initiatives or events which, while arguably significant from certain perspectives, carried little emotional resonance for me. I was and am personally invested in each of my public works. Yet I have also self-negotiated the boundaries of that investment. Where there are scars, I have tried to explore these without rupture. Where there are wounds, I have left them alone to heal. While the practices of both auto-ethnography and critical reflection may share aspects of therapeutic practice, they

are distinct and pursue different aims. In this self-negotiation, I have tried to probe, not pry, untangling with care the personal from the private.

As I have probed, certain 'uncomfortable questions' recurred. Perhaps these are the smaller arcs of a larger circle through which I am trying to integrate self, practice and context:

- To what extent are my experiences, and the resulting public works, opportunistic? To what extent have I sought them and shaped them?
- When and how have I been invited into spaces and contexts by reason of special rights and advantages, relative to other people?
- How do I both recognise and own that privilege, without denying the fulness of my humanity, including my pain, my suffering and my joy?

As I have drafted this Context Statement, returning to these questions has helped me to curb any tendencies towards 'victimhood'. Yes, being a boundary-spanner can be lonely. Disciplinary practice may provide ready-made community, or at least a bounded 'tribe' or route to attachment. While intersectionality in the arts is culturally accepted in our society – one art-form often deriving its frame, narratives and modes of expression from others – I have built my career in sectors where the prevailing currency is a more rigid and exclusionary conception of 'expertise'.

Yet when I really interrogate my own thinking and practice, it would be a nonsense to claim victimhood. Rather, a pattern emerges of me repeatedly constructing professional and public spaces from which I can manoeuvre between different levels, professions and sectors. My liminal positionality is a choice, albeit one that requires energy, wide alliances and concerted effort to maintain. Perhaps this is simply what is required if we seek to experience and 'know' the world in more subtle and complex ways.

In the first months of preparing this Context Statement, I embraced Donald Schön's invitation to explore metaphors as a means of generating fresh insights (Schön, 1983, p.138). Reaching the end of this doctoral programme, new rings of understanding continue to grow. Yet now I perceive the tree as *a process*, not a *product*. I turn my mind

to the next deliberative event, the next campaign, the next lecture, and these public works are all present within me. They will re-emerge in small and big ways through my future practice. Much as in classical music, a fugue layers one voice on another, first in imitation and then, almost imperceptibly, as a complementary sound and cadence. Within a single harmony, we may find a continuum of difference.

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ETHICS FORM

Doctor of Professional Studies by Public Works (Transdisciplinary)

1. You are critiquing your own works
2. You are drawing on expanded literature
3. Some of your works may have been co-authored/co created and/or involved a number of contributors/ participants
4. You are likely to name people, collaborators etc
5. You are likely to have copyright and ownership considerations
6. You are not doing primary research unless you have been invited to do a concurrent public work. If that is the case you need to go through the MORE process (University Research Ethics Protocols) for that primary piece of research

	Questions required to be completed	YES	NO	NOT YET	N/A
1	Do you have written agreement to use co-authored/co-created/collaborative works for the purposes of a doctorate. Provide evidence	X			
	Comment: This applies to my current public work, Future Vision. Written consent has been received via email from Professor Christopher Pietroni and Axelle Bagot, Future Vision's Lead Faculty. Both individuals have been offered the opportunity to read this Context Statement.				
2	Do you have testimony as to your role in those works. Provide evidence				X
3.	Do you have written permission to use personal data that may identify a person you are including in your research. Provide evidence.	X			
	Comment: Limited personal data is referenced. People are wholly anonymised where this is appropriate (e.g. "FM" in Chapter 3 and "M" in Chapter 4). Written consent has been received via email from individuals named and referenced to confirm that they are aware of the Context Statement and the specific references. A copy of the Context				

#					
	Statement has been offered and provided when requested.				
4.	Do you have permission to use images to illustrate your work or images of contributors, participants in your works. Provide evidence.	X			
	Comment: Author's own images. Written consent for use of the photograph has been requested from the only identifiable person other than the author and her son, namely Nancy Schön.				
5.	Will your critique disclose information that was confidential at the time the works were created (such as privileged access, professional /personal/relationship)		X		
6.	Have you named anyone in a way that will be a danger to them or their organisations or their reputation		X		
7.	Have you named any organisation in a way that will bring their reputation into disrepute		X		
8.	To your knowledge have any of your works resulted in harm for individuals or organisations		X		
9.	Will your critique have the possibility of bringing harm to you due to changing geopolitical and social contexts		X		
10.	Are there patents/publications pending related to your existing works		X		
11.	Has your work been through Turnitin	X			

Your Name	Your signature	Date
Kathryn Perera	*[signature]*	15th December 2023
Name of DoS	Brian Sutton	15th December 2023