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Systemic Approaches to Managing Across the Gap in the Public Sector: Results of an action research programme¹.

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Abstract

This paper tells the story and conclusions of a one year research project which took place over the calendar year of 2006. It was undertaken within a local government authority (LGA) in the UK. The specific research question to be answered was:

“Can the application of systems methods in the LGA aid Council staff in developing and enhancing their professional practice?”

A supplementary question arising was:

“Can such learning be of wider value to other sections of the public sector (for example in other regions of local government or the health sector)?”

In the process of the year 91 separate action research interactions took place. The research established that the LGA middle managers are often caught between two realities .. strategic initiatives and operational demands. In the gap between these two realities they experience change in many guises but most critically in terms of government directives, ICT initiatives and

¹ The Authority and those involved in the research have been made anonymous in this paper.

restructuring. Despite this complexity managers did not appear to always have adequate tools to deal with issues arising in their context.

To assist them a number of systemic and reflective project devices were applied and, emerging from the action learning process, a new, blended hybrid training programme to develop systemic reflective practitioners able to manage across the strategy / operations gap has been tested in 2007.

This programme shows signs of providing enhanced professional practice and, at the time of writing, is being further piloted with a view to establishing its wider applicability within the public sector.

Key words: Action Research, Systemic methods, Local Government

1. Background to ALC

The Action Learning Cycle or ALC story is a story of action research in practice.

This research arose from prior work in applying systemic practice in the public sector ... in this case in the health sector in the UK (Bell and Christina 2006).

In this, earlier paper, the value of equipping managers with capacities to manage systemically and reflectively in changing contexts was established as a practical and timely outcome. This observation is well supported elsewhere in the literature (see, for example: Leavy 1997; Cao, Clarke et al. 1999; Pitt 2001; Heracleous 2002; Anessi-Pessina and Cantu 2006; Burke and Church 2006). The overarching conclusion drawn from this basis is that systemic and reflective practice provides managers with additional capacity in dealing with change.

Following on from the outcomes of the health sector project one of the authors of the paper became a senior officer in the LGA Social Services Division and requested that a similar but more intense process be undertaken for the County Council. The basis for this request arose from a number of observations:

1. That NHS and Local Government appear to be under many similar pressures in terms of change agendas
2. Systemic tools appeared to provide officials with enhanced capacity to manage in the NHS context

3. Easy-to-learn, systemic but powerful methods appeared to have advantages over more compendious approaches to problem solving
4. An action research approach provides a learning organisation environment where new methods might be more sympathetically introduced and experienced.

The request for the research intervention arose from internal understanding of demand and supply. On the demand side, the observed complexities in Local Government appeared to be presenting a series of issues for managers and; on the supply side, the published experience of the NHS seemed to offer useful means to enhance management capacity.

On the face of it, the Local Authority context does not seem to be an obvious choice for follow-up research on capacity to deal with problems of change.

The Local Authority says of itself:

“The Vision for *the authority* is a long-term plan all about improving the economic, environmental and social well-being of the County over the next 20 years” (taken from an Authority document. Italics added)

And to this end the Authority has had some significant success. In 2001 UK Central Government announced its intention to carry out a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of all local authorities:

“In December 2002, all 150 county councils and single-tier authorities received their first assessment. *The authority*, along with only 21 other authorities, was classified as “Excellent” in the way that it serves local people. In December 2003, *the authority* was re-assessed along with other county councils and single-tier authorities as part of the annual ‘refresh’ of scores. Again it was classified as “Excellent”. In December 2004 *the authority* was classified as “Excellent” for a third year running” (taken from an Authority document. Italics added)

As a significant part of the drive of the LGA to continue to provide an excellent service to the people of the county the Authority has developed a strategy for staff which:

“will evolve and develop further in 2005/06. We will use the feedback from our staff survey outcomes to review its direction and content to ensure that recruitment, retention, development, motivation and release policies fit social, economic and demographic trends and meet the needs of our staff and the people of *the county*” (taken from an Authority document. Italics added)

A key driver for this research was to explore the interface between seeking for and achieving excellence and the abilities of the Authorities staff to meet this challenge. A justifiable assumption was that excellence was achieved by the developed/ developing and motivated staff of the Authority. With this in mind I was interested in assessing the potential value of systemic and reflective tools and techniques in the context of projects undertaken by the LGA managers.

2. The ALC Approach

As with the previous work undertaken by the researcher in the UK National Health Service and elsewhere (For example, see the use of AR in: Bell and Morse 2007; Bell and Morse 2007; Bell and Wood-Harper 2007), the approach for ALC was to be embedded in Action Research.

The value and use of Action Research (AR) as a means to understand complex contexts has a considerable track record. Lewin set out the original basis for AR (Lewin 1947). From this basis the approach has spread to all kinds of interesting domains of practice. For example, Bottrall provided guidance on the application of AR as one means to achieve transparency and inclusion in development practice (Bottrall 1982). Bottrall's early work has been extended and discussed in many potential fields – often related to information systems contexts and issues (Stowell, West et al. 1997; Baskerville and Wood-Harper 1998; Checkland and Holwell 1998; Lousberg and Soler 1998; Paton 2001). In attempt to make some sense of the growing field Baskerville and Wood-Harper have provided an overview of action research typographies (Baskerville and Wood-Harper 1998) and an overview of winning strategies in the approach (Baskerville and Wood-Harper 1996). More recently, the action research approach has been tied into issues of self-reflection, vulnerability and learning from outcomes by Bell (Bell 1998; Bell, Coleman et al. 2000). Also, AR has been argued to be a viable means to deal with conflicts and competing stakeholder requirements (Johnsen and Normann 2004) – this was assessed by the researcher as being a potentially

important power of the approaches in contexts where perspectives may be at variance.

Action Research has been argued to have the potential to bring out the understandings of those presenting different perspectives. Wadsworth, addressing the place of interpretivist approaches such as AR to problems solving argues:

“If conventional science wanted to give a group of people the power to determine 'truth' for and on behalf of others, the new science arose from a world of multiple and competing versions of truth and reality as a way of assisting people both to come to the truth of their own reality, and also to embrace that of others”.(Wadsworth 1998)

This notion of gaining a greater understanding of the value of others views: ‘starting from where the client is’ rather than from what the consultant might do if he or she were ‘in the client’s shoes’ (Bridger 2007 page 2.) is a key theme to the research described here.

The format of the AR came in five variations.

1. One to one conversations
2. One to many conversations
3. One to many facilitated open workshops
4. One to many facilitated SSM and/ or LFA workshops
5. (rarely, occasionally) one to one email conversations

In all cases the AR interventions were conducted with the researcher observing participant behaviour making relaxed use of the following table.

More will be said shortly about the exact values and uses of Being, Engaging, Contextualising and Managing (or BECM) in the methodology section which follows.

(Insert Table 1 here)

In discussion with the LGA Management the AR project .. now defined as ALC .. was refined in terms of its overall objectives. Central to them are those of:

- Improved competency in all aspects of project work
- Enhanced effectiveness of staff in both thinking and self-management skills
- Improved morale in key staff groups
- Sustained learning plans for key staff groups

In order to achieve these in turn, it was agreed that the researcher would work with the LGA in the role of an Action Researcher, facilitator and mentor within an Action Learning Cycle format and methodology. It was envisaged that the Researcher would seek to learn with and encourage systemic reflective practice in some key groups of the LGA's staff. The main elements of the ALC methodology to be applied in this case would be:

- Participatory reflecting on the current context of the LGA staff
- Participatory connecting with issues and opportunities
- Participatory modelling potential ways forward

- Collaborative action

(see: Bell 1999; Sankaran 2001; Bell and Morse 2003)

The project's specific objectives were to:

1. understand present practices in the domain of project working
2. introduce key systemic concepts within project scoping, planning, managing, monitoring and evaluation. .
3. develop capacity building for managing purposeful human activity.
4. encourage and enhance self-reflection and self-development in the process of working towards the Reflective Systems Practitioner as an operational model within the LGA staff.
5. develop appropriate stand-alone, 30 hour Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses, potentially (to be agreed) in the areas of:
 - Project Scoping with Soft Systems Methodology
 - Project Planning and managing with Logical Frameworks
 - Developing the Reflective Systems Practitioner or RSP.

The specific research question to be answered by this engagement was:

“Can the application of systems methods in the County Council aid Council staff in developing and enhancing their professional practice?”

A supplementary question arising was:

“Can such learning be of wider value to other sections of the public sector (for example in other regions of local government or the health sector)?”

3. The ALC methodology

Set within the broad AR mode of undertaking research, ALC was developed to operate on a number of levels. There were five separate but braided workstreams. These are shown in a learning helix in Figure 1. :

The ALC methodology was intended to provide considerable opportunity for employees of the authority to work with the researcher on a series of linked, sequential opportunities to reflect on their practice, investigate issues and opportunities, explore possible ways forward, take action and then, reflect again. This structure indicated that the learning helix would enable the LGA staff, should they be willing and able, to engage with the research process over a period and bring and review various issues and concerns in a learning process.

The researcher was to operate on the basis of invitation to engage across the authority. No specific group or individual in a specific section or division was to be picked out.

The LGA staff were made aware of the availability of the researcher in the general area of project development by word of mouth and could, if they so wished, invite him to join them in their work. Ninety one such invitations and engagements followed over the calendar year.

3.1 Research recording structures

For the run-time of the project all AR interventions were recorded in four structures.

Structure 1. This was used for gaining access to basic information at the time of each intervention. The purpose of the structure was to report basic WWW² data

Title of action research engagement: each intervention was given a unique title .. for example: 'Children's care study'.

Date:

Location:

Officer engaging service: The name of the LGA officer requesting the intervention was taken.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

Client group: This referred to the section of the LGA which the LGA officer was working in at the time of the engagement.

Type of action research engagement: There were a number of types .. but the main ones were: Workshops (usually either soft systems methodology for project scoping or Logical Framework Approach for project planning), one to one or one to many mentoring/ group facilitation, problem addressing conversations and more general training.

Number engaged:

Format: Again, this refers to the nature of the intervention .. a workshop type format or a less structured engagement.

² Who, What, Where?

Structure 2. This was intended to capture the reflections of the researcher, assessing the behaviours of the LGA managers against four characteristics of Being a Manager, Engaging with the work environment, Contextualising methods to problems, opportunities and issues and Managing within context. To aid with these reflections the researcher made use of a chart .. initially developed in the Open University for the assessment of the systemic qualities of third level students taking the course 'Managing Complexity: A systems approach' (Open University 2000). The researcher had worked as the Course Team Chair throughout the three year development process of the course and had been centrally involved in the development of the assessment matrix. An adapted version used in the LGA is shown in Table 2.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Rubrics for the interpretation of Table 2.

1st, 2nd and 3rd Order refer to what Argyris and Schon (Argyris and Schon 1974) described as single, double and triple loop learning. Moon's reworking of this (Moon 1999) as:

- 1st order = noticing,
- 2nd order = making sense and
- 3rd order = making meaning and working with meaning

Theory W, X, Y and Z had origin in McGregor's (McGregor 1960) theory X, Theory Y. Here:

- Theory W is tyranny and abuse,

- Theory X is an instrumental approach to research (do what I say),
- Theory Y is an invitation to participate and
- Theory Z is participant led research

The main purpose of the researchers use of the matrix was to detect the level of reflective practice being expressed by the LGA staff being worked with. The assessment of staff made by the researcher was based on noting evidence of the various behaviours. Each intervention was recorded on a table such as that shown below

(Insert Table 3 here)

It was expected that an overall picture would emerge, showing the tendency of the LGA staff and identifying if systemic and reflective practice was being experienced.

Structure 3. was only applied in a minority of cases as it was only applied in Interview contexts where the reactions of the LGA staff to their reflections on project work in the authority. As many of the interventions were highly ‘driven’ by the necessary agenda of the day (set by the LGA staff themselves) it was not possible to undertake this interview in the majority of cases.

The purpose of the reporting structure was to assess the level of complexity and sustainability experienced by the LGA staff in their project work.

The method applied was first developed in research work in the Mediterranean on sustainable development projects and is more fully

described elsewhere (Bell and Morse 2005; Bell and Morse 2007; Bell and Morse 2007).

Effectively the method involves gaining responses to twelve questions. The twelve questions are intended to investigate the four areas of purposeful human activity first set out by Kolb in his action learning cycle (Kolb 1984). The questions assume a continua in each case .. for example .. in reflecting on projects .. is the organisations tendency to be expansive or introspective? The questions are intended to pick up the flavour of the organisations experience through the eyes and feelings of the organisations employees. The format for the questions is shown in Table 4.

(Insert Table 4 here)

In each case the response of the interviewee was assessed on a continua from 1 .. which indicates a tendency to complex contexts which would be contenders for systemic approaches, to 10 .. which indicates a more controlled and restricted experience where more rigid approaches would be if not appropriate, then potentially useful.

An overall assessment from all those interviewed which indicated a tendency to 1 or to 10 would indicate a commensurate demand for either systemic or more limited approaches.

Structure 4 was purely applied as a means to review how the outcomes of each intervention complied with the five original Workstreams. The purpose of

this was to set out the how action research interventions conform to the Workstreams agreed for the ALC project

In this case, each intervention, when completed, was assessed in terms of its relevance/ relationship to the project Workstreams. In brief these were:

1. Intellectual framing of existing project/ self development approaches
2. Participant conceptual advice and feedback
3. Behavioural self-reflection
4. Engaging the Reflective Systems Practitioner
5. Preparation of dissemination material and papers in collaboration with the LGA members

Table 5 is the recording device applied.

(Insert Table 5 here)

3.2 The Spirit of ALC

These four devices were the recording means for the ALC approaches. There were themes and tones of the action research approach which corresponded to the spirit of Chambers work (Chambers 2002):

“Don’t

rush

lecture

criticise

interrupt

dominate

sabotage

take yourself too seriously”.

Chambers goes on to say:

“Do

Use own best judgement at all times

Introduce yourself, establish rapport

Respect, be nice to people

Ask them (refers to those who are generally seen as being more important asking those who are conventionally seen as less important)

... ‘what is your view?’, ‘how would you think of doing this?’, or ‘how did I behave?’

Facilitate

Empower and support, be confident that ‘they can do it’

Hand over the stick (has literal and metaphorical meanings. Literally, it means handing over a stick, baton, pointer, pen, chalk or other symbol of authority or means of expression. Metaphorically it means transferring authority or initiative).

And,

Be sensitive

Share

Watch, listen, learn

Embrace error – learn from mistakes

Relax

Unlearn, abandon preconceptions

Be self-aware and self-critical

Triangulate (means seek multiple perspectives to cross check, qualify and correct)

Seek optimal ignorance (means not finding out more than needs to be found out, or not measuring with more precision than is necessary).

Be honest

Improvise

Be optimally unprepared and flexible

Have fun, joke, enjoy

Innovate and invent – try new things, be bold, take risks.”

It should be noted that the BECM matrix used in this analysis was not intended to be judgemental in the sense of either lauding or demonising the LGA staff. The matrix was applied in the interventions as a short hand for noting the general awareness and behaviours of those engaged in each occasion. The Matrix was deliberately not intended to define the nature of any individual .. rather it was used as a reference for the describing the behaviours experienced by the researcher.

At the end of each quarter the various outcomes were assessed by three key methods:

- An assessment of the quantity of interventions which conformed to the five Workstreams
- An assessment of the quality of the reflective practitioner diary items. This was the researchers assessment of the level of RSP being shown by the LGA staff
- A triangulation self-assessment by the LGA staff of their project reflections. This was intended to provide the LGA staff with the ability to reflect on the levels of complexity and sustainability experienced in their projects.

4. Key findings

Dealing with the four reporting structures, the findings from the AR were as follows.

4.1 Engaging with the workstreams

Table 6 shows a self-assessment of the frequency with which each Workstream was engaged over the year.

(Insert Table 6 here)

The table indicates that the vast majority of interventions were relevant to the research objectives with less than a third of the interventions scoring with little or no relevance overall (across all of the five work streams). The majority of the Little or no relevance scores (over 50%) were attributed to work stream 5

which was recognised as being less relevant to the interventions concerning outreach and publication.

4.2 An assessment of the quality of the reflective practitioner

This relates to the researchers observations of the LGA staff behaviours evident within the various AR interventions. Overall responses to the interventions over the year (including all 7 interventions from the fourth quarter) are as shown in Table 7:

(Insert Table 7 here)

The emphasis for observed activity is in rows 3 and 4 ..over 76% of all observations are in this sector.. with a tendency to row 3, the description of which is:

“The person has systems qualities and can manage an enquiry but understanding of arguments and engaging are flawed and limited. Not wholly confident about being a SP (systemic practitioner)”.

It should be noted that this tendency is not presented to denigrate or criticise LGA behaviours .. rather it is an observation of the manner in which they appear to manage their being in context, the way in which they engage in their work, contextualise their experience and manage their interventions.

4.3 Triangulation of self-assessment by the LGA staff of their project experiences.

The interview necessary for this analysis only took place with 13 of the LGA staff over the year for the reasons already given in section 2. However, the findings are interesting. The overall findings are show in Table 8.

(Insert Table 8 here)

The implications of this tendency to 1 shown in Table 8 is discussed in the next section.

5. Discussion of outcomes and emergent issues

The two key findings .. relating to the reflective practitioner and the systemic nature of context are discussed separately. Finally, an emergent issue of empowerment is discussed.

5.1 A discussion of the quality of the reflective practitioner

This was an innovative aspect of the research, attempting to make use of the BECM criteria as a means to make sense of the direct action research observation of the researcher.

In this reflection I will focus on the results of the year as shown in Table 7.

Three Reflective Systems Practitioner (RSP) 'types' emerge from the interventions undertaken to-date. By far the greatest set of observations arise in the third band as 40% of all observations conform to the band three practitioner who is defined as:

“The person has systemic qualities and can manage an enquiry but understanding of arguments and engaging are flawed and limited. Not wholly confident about being a Systems Practitioner”.

Although over 16% of behaviours conformed to band 2:

“Solid grasp of systems ideas which can be applied over a wide range of contexts – without the innovative ability to reflect imaginatively as in the RSP.

Good straightforward and sensible approach. Potential as an action researcher but needs to develop reflective capability”

Nevertheless over 36% conformed to band 4.

“The person has adopted an instrumentalist approach to getting through. Has difficulty contextualising approaches to changing circumstances - low to poor ability to engage reflectively.”

The survey of direct observations shows no incidence of band 1 behaviour but although band 5 is thinly represented at almost 7% (consistent with the report for the third quarter), it does now also show one example of level 6

behaviours but none at level 7. For reference, band 5 is defined as follows:

“Some reference to systemic ideas but mainly an instrumentalist approach in the most limited and basic kind. No coherent logical thread going through presented work. Work full of bald and stereotypical ‘this is what you want to hear’ comments but not based on learning. Repeating known and preferred ideas without thought.”

The picture overall remains fairly healthy, with many of the LGA staff showing high order behaviour in terms of the BECM criteria – although this may hide impact. For example, it would be interesting to know if certain types of

behaviour have a disproportionate impact upon practice. For example does the 8% evidence of type 5 behaviour have a magnified impact on work practice? Triangulation in the next section may provide some clues. Although there is no direct evidence from these observations of band 1 Reflective Systems Practice this is hardly to be expected given the limited access to systems material which the LGA has had. On the other hand, the potential for LGA staff to become accomplished RSPs would appear to be evident. In the report following the second quarter certain means were indicated to achieve higher band behaviours. It was suggested that these might include:

- Access to systems material (specifically Logframe (LF) and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM)).
- Access to RSP Continuous Professional Development (CPD) material
- Opportunities to reflect in focus group forum on the outcomes of this research to date.

The progress noted in the third quarterly report was:

- SSM and LF training is being rolled out in October/ November for some of the LGA staff
- A link between the Open University (OU) and the LGA for the production of SSM and LF as co-branded CPD material is being explored at the time of writing
- One event was run in April 2006 for the LGA staff to engage with the BECM matrix.

5.2 A discussion of the triangulation of self-assessment by the LGA staff of their project experiences.

The purpose of this exercise was to allow the LGA staff to reflect on the demands which projects make on them. Specific to this exercise was the exploration of their self-perception of the complexity and potentially systemic content of their project work. This aspect of the ALC exercise was expected to expand over the third and fourth quarters as trust and mutual understanding built up between the researcher and the LGA staff. Unfortunately, it did not prove possible to make significant additions to the analysis in the third or fourth quarters (only one fresh set of observations)

The following makes use of data derived from the year of the project. As at the time of writing thirteen interviews had taken place and the results are inconclusive but the responses indicate that on the whole the LGA projects tend to being inclusive and systemic in terms of the demands placed on the officers undertaking the work (i.e. tend to 1 rather than 10). This is so most specifically in the reflecting and modelling stages of the project cycle. It would appear that, when individuals are linking work to existing knowledge and as project work moves towards implementation the project format tends to a less inclusive and systemic format. This is consistent with findings from the first and second quarters and also those made using this method in Slovenia (Bell and Morse 2005; Bell and Morse 2005).

The main, overall observation that can be made at this point is that the projects which the LGA staff find themselves working with tend to be challenging, inclusive, systemic and sustainable. Overall they are characterised as having the following tendencies:

- Expansive in scope
- Divergent in accountability
- Sustainable in focus
- Open to stakeholders
- Self questioning
- Inclusive in partnership terms
- Experiential
- Inclusive in team terms
- With mixed forms of data
- Encouraging singular outcomes
- With controlled outcomes
- And with purpose set by stakeholders

Commensurate with this observation is the requirement for the LGA staff to be appropriately trained in the use of approaches, techniques and processes which provide facility to manage these kinds of complex activity. This issue is addressed more fully in section 6.

5.3 Discussion of the emergence of empowerment as an issue

A key issue insinuating itself with serpentine elegance throughout the research was that of empowerment .. the empowerment of individuals to be able to act and to react effectively to the complexities met on a daily basis in the work context. Empowerment is an issue which has been seen elsewhere to have ethical and strategic dimensions (Stainer and Stainer 2000).

The previous two sections provide evidence that on the one hand the LGA staff operate at a fairly high level (in terms of the qualities of a reflective practitioner). On the other hand I learned that they experience their project life as being complex. These managers would seem to be in need of systemic tools in order to operate effectively. To quote from my diary of September 2006:

“The diagram shows middle managers, represented here mid way on the continuum between strategy and operations – the decision making spindle. On this continuum the middle level manager is in the tricky position of having to translate strategy into operation and interpret the results of operations into the language of strategy. Meanwhile, these managers find themselves struggling among shifting sands of changes coming from mandatory government change, local restructuring and the on-rush of ICT. This diagram appears in the research now but it representative of many of the managers I have worked with over the past eight months.

This diagram encouraged me to specify the role of the manager in the LGA. It seems to me that the manager is expected to be as shown below in the middle column whereas what would seem to be more appropriate would be behaviours related to the model on the right.

BECM	The Hero manager³ signature (coincides with RSP level 7)	The RSP signature (coincides with RSP level 1)
Being	Telling	Interpreting
Engaging	Fixing	Sense making
Contextualising	Dividing and ruling	Constituency blending
Managing	Heavy-weight brokering	Viable and cooperative enquiry”

(Insert Figure 2 here)

This observation coalesced the discussion for me. The LGA provides its managers with contexts which require (if not demand) systemic skills similar to those of a level one Reflective Systems Practitioner. But .. paradoxically .. the skills assumed to be necessary to cope tend to be more those associated with the level seven tyrant!

The remaining task of the research was to seek to find means to empower LGA managers to enable them to meet the challenges of their work experience.

6. Managing Across the Gap - the value of a systemic, reflective approach

The ALC research programme in the Authority began with two questions:

Can the application of systems methods in the County Council aid Council

³ A rare breed .. but previously seen in the public sector. For example see Georgiades, N. J. and L. Phillimore (1980). The Myth of the Hero-Innovator and Alternative Strategies for Organisational Change, University of London.

staff in developing and enhancing their professional practice?

And:

Can such learning be of wider value to other sections of the public sector (for example in other regions of local government or the health sector)?

Systemic devices originally applied in the UK NHS and described in a previous article (Bell and Christina 2006) were subsequently used in the LGA contexts in order to provide managers with reflective /systemic capacity (as described in sections 4.2 and 5.1) to meet the complexities of their work lives (as described in sections 4.3 and 5.2). This nature of this complexity is described in section 5.3.

Soft Systems Methodology, Logical Framework Approach and Reflective Practitioner were used in a large number of ALC interactions and were seen to provide the LGA officers with lasting tools which were fit for purpose.

At the time of writing, five months following the conclusion of the research programme, there appears to be no reduction in demand for these tools and methods.

So the answer to the first question would seem to be a resounding 'Yes'.

Systemic tools do seem to aid the LGA staff in developing their professional practice. The answer to the second question is still related to work in progress.

In addressing the first question, and in developing a portfolio of training materials to meet the LGA demand, it became clear that a more sustainable approach to filling the 'gap' in existing training provision would be valuable.

LGA managers needed systemic and reflective means to address complex issues. One-off training events provided some much needed resources but, in conversation with these managers, it emerged that a more durable and lasting learning event would be appropriate.

In April 2007 a selection of the LGA staff, along with professionals from another local authority and a representative from the private sector participated in a four day, Reflective Systemic Practitioner training event designed specifically to meet the needs identified in the ALC process.

The hub of the four day event involves participants working in learning groups of approximately eight individuals. The learning group is tasked to identify an issue of general interest to the group, to explore it by means of SSM but in a double task mode. Double tasking is a psycho-dynamic methodology which involves the learning group is periodically suspending its work on task 1 (in this case using SSM to work on an issue of general concern to the group) to review its business and reflect on its processes. The model was originally developed by Harold Bridger of the Tavistock Institute and is more recently used by the Bayswater Institute (Klein 2001; Gold and Klein 2004). The SSM/DT model is in its infancy but early reflections of those who attended the course appear to confirm that the model has great potential in terms of developing Reflective Practitioners and aiding to bridge the 'gap' which individual managers experience between their existing skill set and the demands of their work life.

Finally, no durable reflection can be made here regarding the sustainability of the outcomes observed from this research project. It would be of great value if

those involved in the action research could be contacted in a subsequent research exercise to assess:

- The continuance or non-continuance of systemic approaches
- The progress or non-progress made towards reflective practice, and
- The overall capacity of officers to manage in a situation of change and complexity.

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Table 1. AR ALC Observational Table

In seeking to understand action and looking for future changes I seek to know:

	Being	Engaging	Contextualising	Managing
What is the current situation as you find it in your?				
What is the expected situation as you wish it in terms of your?				
How will you achieve what you seek in terms of your?				

Figure 1.
The ALC
Process/
Methodology

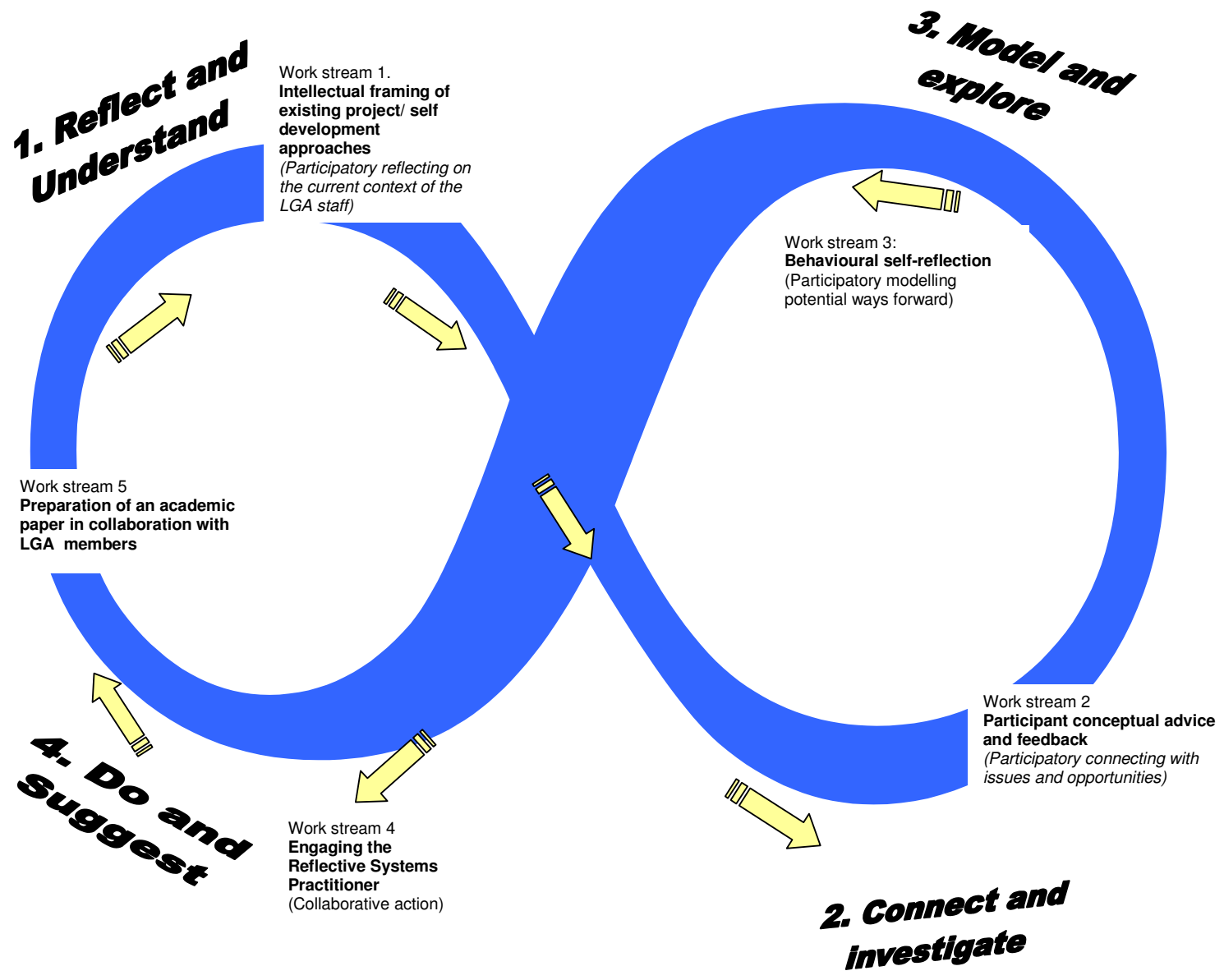


Table 2. The RSP Matrix Broad guidelines	Being a RSP - respecting perspectives	Engaging with complex situations	Contextualising a systems approach	Managing systems practice
1. RSP. The person has internalised the concepts/ skills associated with effective systems practice - can use and apply ideas in a logical way - varying approach in reflection with context. Can adapt and change the systems approach in creative ways. Learning is bi-directional. Evidence of realistic, astute, practical judgement and perception as an action researcher	Self-aware, aware of others and ethically focused. Written material uses 2nd and 3rd order language ('I' and 'We').	Complexity seen as being within the nature of relationships not 'in the world'. Same with 'system', etc. Emergence understood.	Able to adapt systems concepts, approach and methodology to context with ease, responsibility and creativity.	Inviting and welcoming others to join in and share enquiry (3rd Order, Theory Z)Continually aware of interpersonal viability of enquiry. Appreciate needs for evaluating own managing. Responsive to opportunities and 'environmental' problems
2. Solid grasp of systems ideas which can be applied over a wide range of contexts – without the innovative ability to reflect imaginatively as in the RSP. Good straightforward and sensible approach. Potential as an action researcher but needs to develop reflective capability	Aware and sometimes self-aware. Evidence of considering ethical issues. Frequent use of 2nd and 3rd order language	Complexity usually seen as being in the relationship and not in the world	Good at adapting approach to context. Good grasp of approach and systemic methodology	- providing the where-with-all for viable enquiry (2nd order, Theory Y). Demonstrates awareness of modes of managing (for, with, or enabling others to). Acknowledges need to be responsive to environment
3. The person has systems qualities and can manage an enquiry but understanding of arguments and engaging are flawed and limited. Not wholly confident about being a SP.	Aware but not really self-aware. Some use of Ethical approaches. Written material uses mainly 1st order language (it)	Complexity sometimes seen as being in the relationship and not in the world	Generally good at adapting approach to context. Better than adequate grasp of approach and develops own methodology systemically	Sometimes providing viable enquiry (1st to 2nd order, Theory X and Y) and some awareness of different modes of managing. Some, though inconsistent acknowledgement of, and responsiveness to, the environment
4. The person has adopted an instrumentalist approach to getting through. Has difficulty contextualising approaches to changing circumstances - low to poor ability to engage reflectively.	Very limited awareness. Very limited thought about the ethics of an intervention as demonstrated by use of 1st order language ('it').	Complexity usually in the world - sometimes abstracted to relationships	Sometimes good at adapting approach to context. Adequate grasp of approach - applies methods and sometime methodologies mainly in a systematic manner	Little but occasional thought of viability in enquiry - fairly instrumentalist (Usually 1st order and theory X). Little acknowledgement of environment outside immediate managerial concerns
5. Some reference to systemic ideas but mainly an instrumentalist approach in the most limited and basic kind. No coherent logical thread going through presented work. Work full of bald and stereotypical 'this is what you want to hear' comments but not based on learning. Repeating known and preferred ideas without thought.	Not aware of how the self is or relates to others as demonstrated by limited use of 1st order language ('it') in reporting on systems practice	Complexity is always in the world – always divorced completely from different perceptions including that of the observer/ systems practitioner	Hardly able to adapt approach to context. Very limited grasp of approach -applies methods in a simple, though not incomplete systematic, unreflective manner	Highly instrumentalist. Little awareness of different modes of managing. Narrow and sketchy focus on elements bound within a 'system'. Always 1st order and Theory X - occasional evidence of W
6. Little of reflection on behaviour. A few isolated points. Grossly flawed understanding and representation of points. Incoherent.	Domination and self-assertion. Possible signs of egoistic attitude permeating reports, accompanied with dogmatic assertions	Complexity is someone else's fault	Unable to adapt approach to context. Muddy view of any approach - square peg in round hole	No awareness of different modes of managing. Non-responsive to values, beliefs and circumstances outside the practitioners own sphere. Theory W
7. No understanding of systems ideas.	Tyranny. Frequent use of dogmatic assertions and no evidence at all of being self-critical	Complexity is not understandable and emergence is not understood	No grasp of systems concepts or approach at all	Flagrant abuse of others values, beliefs and circumstances. No idea of what 'managing' involves

Table 3. BECM Reflections:

RSP	Being	Engaging	Contextualising	Managing
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				

Table 4. Reflecting on Context questionnaire

Name of interviewee _____ Position _____ Date: _____

	More inclusive					More exclusive				
Reflection - Being										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Scope/ horizon. In your projects, you are encouraged to provide stakeholders with the opportunity to consider wide ranging issues	Yes (expansive)					No (introspective)				
Accountability. The projects you work with are interested in monitoring changes which arise from existing data and new sources of data	Yes (divergent)					No (convergent)				
Sustainability. The idea of sustainability pervades the projects which you work with	Yes (sustainable focus)					No (short-term focus)				
Connecting - Engaging										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Centring. The focus for the projects you are involved with are determined by the needs of the wider community first and a narrow group of clients second.	Yes (more open to stakeholders)					No (more closed to stakeholders)				
Questioning. The project approach you have applied so far is interested in questioning the project meaning and understanding the context rather than simply 'doing' the project	Yes (Self questioning)					No (Not self-questioning)				
Inclusion. The project process you make use of includes the need to bring people together	Yes (partnership)					No (ownership)				
Modelling - Contextualising										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Experiential. The information that comes from your projects usually arises from people's experiences rather than data and controlled observations	Yes (implicit)					No (explicit)				
Team. The projects you work with have a wide and diverse team for all aspects of project work	Yes (inclusive)					No (exclusive)				
Data. The data you use is mixed rather than being purely quantifiable	Yes (mixed)					No (quantitative)				
Doing - Managing										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Outcome. Projects are at their best when they focus on wide ranging and varied outcomes	Yes (diverse)					No (single)				
Ownership. The project is best if handed over on early to stakeholders from the project team	Yes (autonomy)					No (control)				
Purpose. The project works best when its goals are set by the stakeholders rather than a small group of decision makers	Yes (purposeful)					No (purposive)				

Table 5. Workstreams

Workstreams	Little or no relevance	Some relevance	Relevant	Very relevant
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				

Table 6. Frequency with which the five Workstreams were addressed in the course of interventions⁴.

Workstreams	Little or no relevance	Some relevance	Relevant	Very relevant
1	5	2	10	56
2	5	7	17	45
3	14	23	16	20
4	26	28	12	6
5	54	2	9	7
Total	104	62	64	134

⁴ An intervention is an active engagement of the researcher with the LGA staff and their colleagues working on the LGA related projects.

Table 7 BECM reflections on the responses of those engaged over 2006

RSP	Being	Engaging	Contextualising	Managing	Total	%
1					0	0
2	19	11	11	4	45	16.2
3	23	27	30	32	112	40.4
4	24	27	23	26	100	36.1
5	3	4	5	7	19	6.8
6				1	1	0.4
7					0	0
Total					277	100

Table 8. Responses to the questions

	Questions	Extremes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
R	Scope / Horizon	Expansive or introspective	5		4	2		1	1				3.17
R	Accountability	Divergent or convergent	5	4	1	2						1	2.83
R	Sustainability	Sustainable or short term	8	1		2	1		1	1		1	4.00
C	Centring	Open or closed to stakeholders	2			1	4		1	3		2	6.42
C	Questioning	Self questioning or not	3	1	1	2	2	1	2			1	4.67
C	Inclusion	Partnership or ownership	6	4	3				2				3.08
M	Experiential	Implicit or explicit	1		1	1	9	1					4.92
M	Team	Inclusive or exclusive	3		3	1	1	2	1	1	1		4.75
M	Data	Mixed or quantitative	4	1	5	2	1						2.83
D	Outcome	Diverse or single	2	1	1		3		2	1		3	6.17
D	Ownership	Autonomy or control	2	2	2	2	1	2				2	4.75
D	Purpose	Purposeful or purposive	6	2	1	1	1	1	1				2.92

(13 responses)

All four domains show a slight tendency towards 1. Averaging the three results the outcome is as follows:

Reflecting	3.3
Connecting	4.7
Modelling	4.1
Doing	4.6

The tendency is towards the complex and systemic context.

Figure 2 The Decision Making Spindle – the gap between strategy and operation

