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## "You can't Google everything": the voluntary sector and the leadership of communities of place

### Journal Item

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### **“You can’t Google everything” – Voluntary Sector and Leadership in the Eyes of Communities of Place**

Journal:	<i>Leadership</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Leadership and Place Special Issue
Keywords:	place leadership, voluntary sector, collective leadership, place, qualitative research
Abstract:	<p>This paper addresses an identified absence in the place leadership literature by exploring how voluntary sector actors contribute to the leadership of place. We attempt to untangle the complex relationship between leadership, place and the voluntary sector, exploring first how understandings of both leadership and place are strengthened by the significant recent advances in the collective and critical approaches to leadership studies. We argue that collective approaches are particularly well suited to interrogating place leadership, and the voluntary sector, both of which are inherently collective endeavours. Drawing on an empirical study of locally-rooted voluntary organisations in a district in the Midlands of England, we produce a thematic analysis which highlights three core themes of the voluntary sector contribution to collective place leadership: their ability to draw on and mobilise local knowledge, their positioning in a web of dense local relationships, and the notion that their intrinsic characteristics are a key source of their distinctiveness and value to the wider ‘system’ of place leadership. In drawing these empirical strands together we offer insight into the centrality of the voluntary sector in the constitution of place (a role that has long been undervalued). Further, our findings shed light on the complexity and multiplexity of leading in the collective, and particularly the extent to which the voluntary sector is constrained by wider structures and macro-dynamics.</p>

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## Introduction

Understanding of the role of actors in the voluntary sector in enacting and creating place leadership is underdeveloped in the literature ( ). Yet, the interactions between voluntary organisations, governmental and non-governmental organisations and communities provide a rich resource for exploring the fine-grained 'relational ground' that constitutes place (Collinge and Gibney, 2010: 388; ), and upon which the meaning-making processes of leadership are enacted. This is an important perspective which contributes to responding to the call to give greater attention to place in leadership studies (Sutherland et al. 2020). Furthermore, foregrounding the voluntary sector in our analyses ultimately provides a more complete picture of how collective leadership - which is also integral to an improved understanding of place leadership - has to include the voluntary sector as a significant actor.

This paper addresses this identified gap in the literature by exploring how voluntary sector actors contribute to place leadership, drawing particular attention to how resources of local knowledge and densely networked relationships are combined through the prism of their local rootedness and a commitment to place. In addition, the paper identifies how the distinctive contribution and attributes of the voluntary sector generate a source of legitimacy with local communities that in turn cements the role of voluntary sector actors in the collective leadership of place. In doing so, we uncover the social processes through which people influence and motivate one another, mutually constructing place and 'getting things done' (Sotarauta et al., 2017: 188). We also highlight these processes are shot through with tensions and contradictions, particularly those facing the voluntary sector actors who are committed to place leadership through their commitment to place.

We explore these themes through an in-depth case study of a district in the Midlands of England, UK. Specifically, the paper addresses two research questions:

RQ1 > How does the voluntary sector contribute to the constitution of *place*?

RQ2 > What role does the voluntary sector play in shaping (collective) place leadership?

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical background to the paper, making sense of the relationship between leadership, place and the voluntary sector. Next, we outline the method of the study, including the processes of data collection and analysis. The fourth section explores the findings of the empirical study. This is followed by a discussion and a brief conclusion.

## Theoretical backdrop: making sense of leadership, place and the voluntary sector

### *Leadership and Place through Collective and Critical Lenses*

Leadership and place are two widely defined and used terms, but there is still no widely accepted and refined definition of what *place leadership* is. Place leadership can thus be

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3 understood as an unfolding and multi-disciplinary field of research and theoretical debate and as  
4 a conceptual lens which focuses on the mutual influences of place and leadership (e.g. Beer et  
5 al., 2019; Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Jackson and Parry, 2018). Depending on the primary  
6 academic disciplines involved ( ), which spans from regional and  
7 urban studies (e.g. Sotarauta et al., 2017) and politics and international relations (e.g. Acuto,  
8 2013) to public governance (e.g. Hambleton, 2019) and organisation and leadership studies  
9 (e.g. Jackson, 2019), there might be different combinations for describing the relationships that  
10 may occur between place and leadership.  
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14 From a leadership studies point of view, two lenses seem particularly suited for examining and  
15 understanding leadership and place: a collective and critical view of leadership (Gibney and  
16 Nicholds, 2016). As for the first element, Raagmaa and Keerberg (2017: 262) pointed out that  
17 'place-based leadership is inherently collective, choosing the ways in which leaders mobilize  
18 other actors and entire communities.' Moreover, it is also critical because it implies issues of  
19 power, which are inherent to the notion of place: according to Cresswell (2015) which draws on  
20 Agnew (1987), 'place at a basic level is space invested with meaning in the context of power'  
21 (Cresswell, 2015: 19). Place is indeed a key source of power for governing (intended both as  
22 governance and governmentality - Bevir, 2011) and can be leveraged by leadership as a site,  
23 object, means, and/or spatial imaginary (Jessop, 2016).  
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28 Coming to a more analytical definition of collective and critical, with collective leadership we  
29 refer to 'an emerging theoretical umbrella that captures diverse scholarship on the shared,  
30 distributed, pooled, and relational aspects of leadership, its emergence and relation to  
31 hierarchical leadership' (Ospina et al., 2020: 442). As Jackson, Nicoll and Roy have written  
32 (2018: 72), 'under the umbrella term of "collective leadership", many leadership scholars have  
33 rejected a leader-centred perspective and redefined leadership as a property of the collective,  
34 be it a group, an organisation or a social system'. In terms of critical leadership, we refer to a  
35 field of research which, originating from critical management studies (e.g. Adler et al., 2007),  
36 studies leadership as a relational, socially constructed and culturally specific phenomenon,  
37 sharing with collective leadership the assumption that leadership is much more than the result of  
38 a stable set of leadership attributes that inhere in 'the leaders' (e.g. Collinson, 2011; Grint,  
39 2005).  
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44 One fruitful point of connection between a collective and critical view of leadership has recently  
45 been established by Ospina et al. (2020: 443) by distinguishing between collective as a type or  
46 as a lens, and by considering the locus of leadership as either residing in the group or in  
47 systemic dynamics. Collective and critical lenses match when collective refers to a theoretical  
48 lens rather than to a reified type of leadership, and when leadership resides in systemic  
49 dynamics rather than in the group(s) (the locus of leadership). This means observing leadership  
50 dynamics in a way 'attentive to the conditioning effect of social, economic, cultural, and political  
51 structures - such as capitalism, patriarchy, or imperialism (Coule et al., 2020: 2) - as well as to  
52 'broader ideological and institutional conditions' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 373).  
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3 However, how does this work when adding place and the voluntary sector as focus of analysis  
4 to study leadership from critical and collective lenses?  
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### 7 ***Taking place and the voluntary sector seriously***

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9 We believe that taking seriously the aim of reinvigorating notions of place in leadership – which  
10 was identified as one of the key aims of this Special Issue - has huge implications, especially if  
11 using collective and critical lenses. In this regard, Sutherland et al. suggested a powerful insight:  
12 'Leaders must first be in place before acts of leadership can be delegated and enacted'  
13 (Sutherland et al., 2014: 763). Also, according to Grint, placing leadership is important as it  
14 'constitutes similar problems differently' (Grint, 2010: 365). Taken literally, this means place in  
15 some ways both precedes and explains leadership, being a 'container of leadership'. However,  
16 what is place? Place is "a meaningful site that combines location, locale, and sense of place"  
17 (Agnew, 1987) and a combination of "materiality, meaning and practice" (Cresswell, 2004)  
18 which provides a unique configuration of social relations and culture. Indeed as Massey  
19 reminded us each place is unique and reflects the 'accumulated history of a place, with that  
20 history itself conceptualised as the produce of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages both  
21 local and to the wider world' (1993, p.68). According to Collinge and Gibney (2010: 388), place  
22 is 'the relational ground upon which the interpreting 'activities' of leadership unfold at a variety of  
23 levels... and across a variety of boundaries.' Thus, place is a locus where spaces with  
24 opportunities and constraints (e.g. Hambleton, 2014) for leadership happen because of  
25 contingencies, economic and political context, culture, geographical spaces, and historical  
26 patterns. Also, the place of leadership is strongly connected to the purpose of leadership, as  
27 Jackson, Nicoll and Roy emphasised: 'Place foregrounds the context within which leadership is  
28 created. It asks where leadership is created, encompassing both its geographic and historic  
29 construction. Purpose focuses on the vital yet frequently unanswered question of why  
30 leadership is created. These two elements are often very closely interlinked.' (Jackson, Nicoll  
31 and Roy, 2018: 74)  
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38 The link between the constituting elements of the concept of place (e.g. context, culture, history,  
39 etc.) and purpose makes evident the need to adopt a critical lens for understanding leadership.  
40 In this respect, a focus on the voluntary sector - and especially on local (typically 'smaller') and  
41 thus rooted in a place - organisations (the specific empiric focus of this paper) can help to better  
42 understand how and why people come together because of place, what practices are socially  
43 constructed in places, and how these practices, in turn, contribute to the construction of place.  
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46 Arvidson et al. (2018) have previously argued for the importance of understanding the different  
47 ways in which voluntary organisations develop and act together in different localities within a  
48 nation-state, in their case Sweden. They suggest that 'local civil society regimes' – liberal,  
49 corporatist, and social democratic - develop in response to differences in local ideology and  
50 politics that in turn influence collaboration, cross-sector dialogue and funding regimes within a  
51 city. This paper highlights the significance of place in understanding voluntary sector  
52 development and activity. There is scant literature so far on leadership in and of the voluntary  
53 sector (e.g. Macmillan and McLaren, 2012; Terry et al., 2019). However, from our analysis and  
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3 knowledge of the topic, there are some important issues observable from a place perspective.  
4 First, the role of government (at any level) and governmentalities in manufacturing the voluntary  
5 sector (see Brandsen et al., 2018). As Lough (2020: 4) discusses 'due to its informal and  
6 voluntary nature, leadership in local places from voluntary sector and civil society is often  
7 hidden, difficult to study and overshadowed by formal governance structures' (Sotarauta, 2018).  
8 Second and related to the first point, looking at what voluntary organisations do in places can  
9 help to understand the impact of neoliberal systemic structures (Teasdale and Dey, 2019). For  
10 example, ██████████ (2020) discussed the prominence of the public services delivery role of  
11 the voluntary sector, which may disempower its collective political and advocacy potential (Della  
12 Porta, 2020; also ██████████). Third, in terms of practices of leadership, a voluntary  
13 sector and place focus has the potential to open up interesting insights. For example, Teasdale  
14 et al. (2019) have pointed out practices of deviance and ignorance might be necessary to be  
15 pursued by civil society leaders in interactions with government to achieve their social mission.  
16 Lough (2020) uses the term organic leadership pointing out that '[it] cannot be divorced from  
17 place because the relational capital required to make organic leadership work voluntarily is  
18 dependent on regular and repeat interactions of trust-based reciprocal exchanges between  
19 people'. The social technologies employed by voluntary sector organisations for leading are also  
20 often infused by post-capitalist and/or anti-capitalist practices (e.g. Zanoni, 2020), such as  
21 solidarity, gift and generosity.  
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27 So, to summarise, by looking through critical and collective lenses at leadership in place as  
28 enacted by the voluntary sector, what can we learn about leadership?  
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## 32 **Research Design and Method**

33 The research findings on which this paper is based originate from a larger qualitative study that  
34 sought to understand the value and contribution of small voluntary organisations in the UK by  
35 conducting area case study research in four localities in England and Wales (see Dayson et al.,  
36 2018). Here we discuss data gathered in just one of those localities because of the compelling  
37 and spontaneous discourses of interviewees that arose in relation to the ways in which the  
38 voluntary sector influences place leadership. The original study did not explicitly focus on nor  
39 ask directly about such a theme, and its presence in the data called for a further and deeper  
40 analysis on that direction, in line with the gap in the literature discussed in the previous section.  
41 Our focus of analysis is on a district in the British Midlands (from now on referred to as  
42 DISTRICT to guarantee anonymity), namely the second tier of local government sitting below  
43 that of a County Council. Very briefly, DISTRICT is a semi-rural locality that includes two small  
44 market towns and a number of smaller villages. It is characterised by its distance (physical and  
45 perceptual) from the county city and its identity as a former mining area. These characteristics in  
46 turn shape DISTRICT's social and economic identity.  
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51 The research was primarily qualitative and involved two stages: first, a 'mapping' of the  
52 ecosystem of voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations in each area; and  
53 second, organisation level research. We selected eight voluntary sector organisations (VSOs,  
54 VSO A to H) from within DISTRICT that reflected a range of organisational sizes, provided a  
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range of services associated with social welfare and disadvantage, and were located in different parts of the district. The selection reflected a pragmatic balance between convenience sampling (including the organisations' accessibility and willingness to take part in the research) and a sampling strategy aiming for representativeness of the diversity of voluntary sector activity in the area. Also, in order to triangulate the data, we involved in the study five key public sector organisations (PSOs, PSO 1-5) because of their important role with and influence on the local voluntary sector. In total, 36 semi-structured interviews were carried out with directors, staff, volunteers, trustee of the organisations, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Overview of case studies selected.

Organisations	Type	Brief description	N. of interviews
VSO A	Medium, £493k	Provides an emergency hostel, move on accommodation, and advice and support in one of the towns.	7
VSO B	Medium, £407k	A community resource agency offering help and support to individuals and organisations throughout DISTRICT, including older and socially isolated people	5 (with 4 participants – one interviewed twice)
VSO C	Small, £41k	Church-led organisation providing a range of community projects aimed at tackling deprivation and social isolation.	4
VSO D	Large, £158m	A large national charity that delivers a range of health and social care services to individuals, young people and families seeking to overcome issues such as substance misuse, homelessness, deprivation, offending and domestic abuse.	6



VSO E	Medium, £360k	Voluntary sector infrastructure organisation operating throughout DISTRICT. Offers support and advice to the local voluntary sector in addition to direct service delivery	4
VSO F	Small £58k	Church-led social enterprise providing a range of community projects aimed at tackling deprivation and social isolation.	1
VSO G	Medium £295k	Support for families affected by drug and alcohol misuse	1
VSO H	Small £30k	Food distribution	1
PSO 1	District council	//	2
PSO 2	PSO within the Justice sector	//	1
PSO 3	County Council	//	2 (with 3 participants)
PSO 4	Local health service	//	1
PSO 5		A hybrid organisation - Community Rehabilitation Trust, probation	1 (with 2 participants)

Interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed, and then analysed in NVivo by conducting a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). More specifically, the thematic analysis was based on an abductive reasoning (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), focused on semantic themes (rather than latent ones) and driven by the RQs, namely:

RQ1 > How does the voluntary sector contribute to the constitution of place?

RQ2 > What role does the voluntary sector play in shaping (collective) place leadership?

## Findings

Three main and interconnected themes emerged from our thematic analysis. They are discussed here, under the headings: local knowledge, relationships, and distinctiveness.

### **Local Knowledge**

This is the first key theme emerged from the thematic analysis. From a voluntary sector perspective, place leadership is based on local knowledge, which could be defined as what and who you know about the place and its particularities, the needs and characteristics of local people at a fine-grained scale, and/or the knowledge of and links to particular communities of need (e.g. homeless, elderly). The centrality of the voluntary sector's local knowledge was strongly emphasised by participants who consider it as their 'unique selling point' and added value to local governance:

"Everything we do is about local knowledge and working with the clients on the ground. We know the local services (...) Outside services coming in don't have that so they can't help people in the same way because if you don't have that knowledge you don't know who to refer on to or signpost to. You can't Google everything."  
(VSO B).

"it's realising that the value again of local knowledge and local relationships, so commissioning on that perspective is a real threat and a challenge to the sector, that's where the value of small and local really does come through." (VSO E)

Local knowledge is, firstly, crucially deeply ingrained in the working practices and day-to-day activity of organisations. It gives them legitimacy in the eyes of communities of place and of need, and enables them to advocate on their behalf. As one interviewee from a PSO recognised:

I think life would get easier [without small VSOs], cos that voice, that street-level local understanding and advocacy for those people, that would go, so we'd end up with not a lot of noise, and we wouldn't really know what was going off and as nice as that would be, you'd kid yourself that everything's going smoothly, the reality is we'll be more disconnected from understanding the true needs. (...) I don't think there's much difference in terms of voluntary sector organisations' voice between DISTRICT or any of the other districts, I think it's about the same, it may be slightly stronger in places like DISTRICT purely cos they're the most deprived areas so there are more organisations there cos of that reason, there are more of them and they're more vocal cos they're passionate about vocal needs. But if they weren't there, we'd lose an important connection or connectivity with very low-level population need (PSO 3).

The concept of local knowledge is closely related, indeed intertwined with, the sense of being locally rooted and embedded in place and community. Many, if not most, local voluntary organisations emerge from a need within or affecting particular communities within their locality. The knowledge gained in their activities gives them further legitimacy with the wider community: the more knowledge they gain, the more they are embedded within that context, and the more knowledge they further gain, setting up a positive feedback loop:

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4 “We’re local people, we know our customers, we know the [DISTRICT] economy...  
5 being locally embedded... it’s not about whether you’re small or medium, it’s about  
6 how crucial you are locally built into an area” (VSO B).  
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9 A notable additional dimension is the extent to which key players within VSOs (staff, trustees  
10 and volunteers themselves) are long-term residents of the area:  
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13 “Yeah, I think I have benefited from really strong foundations and local knowledge...  
14 you feel embedded, I’m passionate about getting the services right for local people  
15 cos it impacts on all of us” (VSO E).  
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18 “Our uniqueness at VSO E is because we’re local and our local knowledge and  
19 experience is us whether that’s through mapping, personal experience, living in the  
20 area and understanding the [local] dynamics ” (VSO E).  
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22 This reflects a multi-faceted commitment to place, not just to direct ‘clients’ or service users, but  
23 a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to the wider set of actors in the place.  
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26 Other governance actors recognise that added value of VSOs, and contrast it with perceived  
27 shortcomings of public sector counterparts:  
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30 “They’re sat there in the local communities, people know them, they know what else  
31 is going on locally, so you might end up going to organisation X but they would know  
32 enough to say round the corner there is... so it’s that local knowledge.” (PSO 4)  
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35 “They bring a wealth of expertise, knowledge, understanding, they bring specific  
36 services to needs, cos they tend to be much closer to the service user than we are  
37 as an authority” (PSO 1).  
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39 Nevertheless, there was also recognition of contestation, reflected for instance in the  
40 acknowledgement that the large national charity providing services in the area could bring an  
41 added value as well: a wider knowledge of different local realities. In fact, while it doesn’t  
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44 “have that connection so closely with the local population as the smaller voluntary  
45 sector organisations”, it “turns out a national organisation delivers contracts in areas  
46 that are quite similar... and they have that expertise to translate over here” (PSO 3).  
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49 Thus, public sector stakeholders recognise that the local knowledge held by and actively  
50 translated by the VS represents a distinctive asset that enables influence within wider  
51 governance networks, offering them ‘a seat at the table’. Hence, we see reflected in the data the  
52 way local knowledge is deployed (consciously or not; altruistically or instrumentally) as an asset  
53 within the construction of place leadership:  
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3 “I think our unique selling point is our local knowledge base and networks and that is  
4 viewed very highly by our statutory partners particularly cos they now recognise that  
5 they need to understand that a bit more and they don't have to do it themselves cos  
6 it exists here.” (VSO E).  
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9 There is clearly variance in the degree to which respondents acknowledged whether this local  
10 knowledge was deployed in the construction of (collective) place leadership and interaction with  
11 other governance actors.  
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### 14 **Relationships**

15 The second key theme concerned the centrality of relationships in the voluntary sector, and into  
16 communities and the public (and sometimes private) sectors. A multiplicity of relationships  
17 exists among these actors and creates a complex environment characterised by both  
18 collaboration and competitiveness (especially over resources, including volunteers). Like ‘local  
19 knowledge’, relationships can be seen as an asset, and as crucial to the collective pursuit of the  
20 common good, for both the voluntary sector and for public sector stakeholders. Relationships  
21 also appear to be central to the identity and self-image of the voluntary sector itself: seen as  
22 essential to the achievement of organisations’ social mission, but also as an inherent part of the  
23 sector’s ‘way of being’. But relationships can also be seen as highly variable and dependent on  
24 context. On one hand, relationships even within a relatively bounded set of VSOs can be  
25 experienced in highly multivalent terms exhibiting differing degrees of consensualism/tension  
26 (for instance, outwardly extolling collaboration while acknowledging undertones of  
27 competitiveness); on the other hand, relationships with the public sector seemed to be marked  
28 by both mutual dependency and power imbalance. We briefly set out the types of relationship  
29 most emphasised by participants, acknowledging that there are more forms visible in the data:  
30 collaboration, commissioned-funded relationships (and competitiveness), and informal  
31 relationships.  
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38 Each of these different types of relationship sheds light on different aspects of  
39 collectivity/collective action, and thus both explain and influence the complexity of leading within  
40 the collective - and the difficulty of leading if you are not embedded in that relational complexity.  
41 Presumably, it is their co-existence and inter-relatedness that produces the complexity.  
42 Before discussing the three main types of relationships that emerged from the analysis, it is  
43 worth noting that terminology around relationships is ambiguous and can be conceptualised and  
44 perceived in a variety of ways. The three terms used here were not selected for their potential  
45 positive, negative or hidden connotations, but as they emerged from the analysis.  
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### 50 **Collaboration**

51 Collaboration is critical to the self-image of the sector, and seen as essential to achieving  
52 collective action and ‘doing the right thing’. But collaboration takes many forms, and constantly  
53 shades (as participants try to make sense of it) into relationships that may be more one-sided,  
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3 conflictual, or imbued with power imbalance, even potential exploitation. Thus typically seen in a  
4 positive light, it was exhorted as necessary despite (or because of) an inhospitable environment:  
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7 “As the climate has changed in the sector, the expectations are that you do work  
8 together and you're there for the service user and you no longer have the resources  
9 to work on your own, or try to be able to deal with it all on your own” (VSO D)  
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12 “Not one agency can solve the issues themselves and that actually we have to work  
13 together. So some of it is driven I think about cuts to services and they are more  
14 open to we've got to work together” (VSO I).  
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16 But collaboration also reflects a core value of civil society actors:  
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19 “You can't do it on your own and sometimes you're not the best people to do it... its  
20 come out of that core value of church with the knowledge that we can't do it on our  
21 own, some people do it better and we want to support other people” (VSO C).  
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24 There was also recognition of 'comparative advantage' as a motivation for collaboration (Billis  
25 and Glennerster, 1998):  
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28 “We work closely with a number of organisations; we have to do, because we  
29 haven't got the skills or expertise to support our service users in everything” (VSO  
30 A).  
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### 32 33 *Commissioned-funded relationships (and Competitiveness)*

34 Again, the webs of relationships that are based on the receipt of funding (usually referred to as  
35 commissioning, or award of grants), creates a particular and rather prevalent kind of relationship  
36 within and between sectors (see [REDACTED]). Primarily this is a vertical relationship with  
37 resources flowing from (local) public sector funders to VSOs, but not always: resource flows  
38 also create consequential horizontal relationships within the sector (closely tied to perceived  
39 competitive relationships). A key example is 'social prescribing' usually funded by the NHS  
40 (CCGs), enabling an umbrella organisation to distribute activities and hence funding to other  
41 VSOs, and hence “as well as the impact on a) the patient, b) other services it's also kind of  
42 supporting the voluntary sector as well” (VSO E). But viewed by other organisations, this central  
43 brokerage role is seen as introducing “an element of competitiveness that's starting to sneak  
44 through the door quite recently” as it means encroaching on the delivery of services that were  
45 previously seen as their territory: “there's only a certain pot of money out there that we're all  
46 fighting to get to” (both VSO B). Crucially, funding relationships are seen to carry tensions and  
47 burdens, particularly where they are felt to drive or exacerbate competitive relationships.  
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49 Supposedly 'technocratic' allocation methods like commissioning are in practice conflated with  
50 wider funding availability, marked most recently by austerity and contraction:  
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3 “With budget cuts certain bodies become somewhat precious. This is my client,  
4 nobody else is working with this client” (VSO F).  
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7 Even when funding is available, many organisations, justifiably or not, feel it is not a level  
8 playing field, reducing trust and the potential for cooperative relationships between VSOs,  
9 despite the growing recognition of the potential advantage of collaboration even for accessing  
10 funding:  
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13 “People do need to understand the benefits of collaboration and working together to  
14 get some of the bigger pots” (VSO E).  
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### 17 *Informal relationships*

18 A third type of relationships relates to a broad range of more informal and intangible  
19 relationships widely seen as crucial to ‘getting things done’:  
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22 “There’s a kind of very informal agreement to do it, is actually probably going to stop  
23 people from dying of the cold this winter.” (VSO B).  
24  
25

26 These relationships appear to be based on friendships and longstanding alliances, forming  
27 strong trust-based networks:  
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29  
30 “It’s those connections that at local level don’t need any funding, just happen cos  
31 we’re putting interested parties together.” (VSO E).  
32

33 These informal relationships sit in the background, often sustaining more concrete and tangible  
34 collaborations, though they require personal commitment and sustainment:  
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36

37 “You’ve got to maintain and keep in touch. Staff change. Your name doesn’t get  
38 passed on... I’ve got time restraints like everyone else but you do have to keep it up  
39 and keep going back.” (VSO B).  
40  
41

42 Nevertheless, it is notable that such relationships can blend into, or help broker, more  
43 instrumental and transactional relationships, and respondents were far from blind to the  
44 instrumental utility of such networks: for instance, in bringing together partnerships to bid for  
45 resources or deliver services, and ‘gluing together’ relationships into the public sector and to  
46 communities. Here, personal relationships are seen as key to underpin stable and lower conflict  
47 relationships between organisations and across sectors. Also unsurprisingly, they exhibit similar  
48 degrees of inclusion/exclusion, though many respondents were reticent to discuss this, unless  
49 framed as ‘competition’ (above). Finally, informal relationships (and knowledge) also underpin  
50 and facilitate more substantive, functional networks for meeting community need, seen as  
51 efficient, cooperative and appropriate - usually referred to as referrals or signposting:  
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3 “If there’s a problem we’ll try and help with it or signpost on to somebody that can  
4 help if it’s not something we do. You can’t do everything yourself so we signpost”  
5 (VSO B)  
6  
7

### 8 ***Value / Distinctiveness***

9 If local knowledge and relationships are the elements that enable the voluntary sector to  
10 mobilise and influence and/or being influenced by other local governance actors (and hence  
11 play together a collective place leadership role), this final theme reflects the intrinsic  
12 characteristics of the activities, organisations and behaviours within the voluntary sector, and  
13 thus a form of legitimacy within their communities. The characteristics that make VSOs  
14 distinctive, vis-à-vis other types of organisation, are thus intimately bound up legitimacy with  
15 their constituent community (which can include service users, members, beneficiaries and wider  
16 communities) (see also Dayson et al., 2018). Ultimately therefore, voluntary sector  
17 distinctiveness contributes, alongside the more instrumental ‘assets’ of knowledge and  
18 relationships/networks, a moral legitimacy that cements their role in the collective endeavour of  
19 place leadership. The first visible element (or sub-theme) in the data was a sense of profound  
20 duty and rootedness in the community, which explains the willingness to go ‘above and beyond’  
21 in pursuance of their stated formal mission:  
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25  
26 “The bottom line has always been that we’re here to serve the community and work  
27 for all the people we can here” (VSO C)  
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29  
30 “This isn’t about your jobs, it’s about the people in DISTRICT that need this help,  
31 that’s why we’re here.” (VSO B)  
32

33  
34 “You still feel like it’s your duty” (VSO A).  
35

36 What is particularly notable in each of these instances is the explicit or implicit appeal to the  
37 importance of place - their core stakeholders are located in DISTRICT, and this reinforces their  
38 legitimacy and moral urgency of their activity, even if they may have other stakeholders outside  
39 the area (e.g. funders). In terms of their distinctive contribution to the community (and more  
40 broadly to the place), the key sub-themes we identify are: empowerment (of individuals and  
41 collectivities), help & support, prevention/early intervention (e.g. reducing social isolation) and  
42 their ability to recognise and meet community needs. Although potentially a diffuse concept, the  
43 idea of empowerment is widely invoked by voluntary sector respondents:  
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45

46  
47 “We’re constantly trying to empower service users to lead themselves and for  
48 workers to have initiative and to kind of create something that’s totally in touch with  
49 the local community” (VSO D).  
50

51 This is very akin to the related concept of recovery, or moving on:  
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53

54 “Every individual that comes in we want to get them to move on, to get them to  
55 move on through our services and we’ll do that how best we can.” (VSO A)  
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4 This approach is opposite to creating dependency, but interestingly it is rarely politicised.  
5 Similarly, the essential content of much work in the welfare/social needs part of the voluntary  
6 sector is providing (relatively) time unrestricted and relational social support:  
7

8  
9 “What we won’t do is veer from that mission because I think everybody within that  
10 service knows that if we don’t fight tooth and nail for those families nobody else will  
11 and if we’re not there those families haven’t got anything else.” (VSO G).  
12

13  
14 Interestingly, commitment to people, and people rooted in place is very clear. Adopting a  
15 preventive approach to welfare provision (as opposed to responsive/dependent) across a wide  
16 range of domains also seems to be characteristic, or particularly valued within the voluntary  
17 sector. Yet it is difficult to measure, hence is very often framed in the negative:  
18

19  
20 “DISTRICT generally has got so used to VSO A being here... you just expect it to be  
21 there and expect it to carry on and I don't think people would realise the impact until  
22 you're not there. I think it would be horrendous.” (VSO A)  
23

24  
25 “And the knock-on effect, in terms of someone in debt and getting stressed or  
26 mental health problems as a result, the impact on their family, it would be a massive,  
27 massive impact, a massive loss to community, to society, economically as well, I  
28 think it would be devastating” (PSO 3).  
29

30  
31 Finally, and just as reflective of the underlying motivation and an ethos is the commitment to  
32 meet new needs, this VSO:  
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34  
35 “Bridges the gap where statutory services are being cut or redesigned. Whether  
36 that’s health, local authority, we plug the gaps sometimes. Not we as in VSO E, but  
37 us as a sector.” (VSO E).  
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## 41 Discussion

42 In returning to our research questions and the aims of this Special Issue, we suggest that our  
43 findings offer some interesting insights from at least three points of view. First, voluntary sector  
44 actors play a key role in constituting what a place is, exercising a leadership role in being the  
45 network and the glue of a place. As one place leader argued:  
46

47  
48 “When I talk about us being the network and the glue, there’s a patchwork  
49 throughout DISTRICT of people who are doing things, the sports clubs, the  
50 uniformed organisations, the book clubs etc so the awareness of them has  
51 enriched the picture, enriched the offer.” (VSO E)  
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54 The locale of a place, i.e. the settings in which social relations are constituted (Agnew, 1987), is  
55 thus constituted by the key actions of voluntary organisations which fill the gap left by the  
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3 increasing fragmentation and individualisation of communities (e.g. Bauman, 2013). It is indeed  
4 interesting to note that it is through voluntary sector action that place is experienced and  
5 constituted in all its three components of location, locale and sense of place (Agnew, 1987).  
6 Some neighbourhoods?? or communities of people are off-limits for both traditional public and  
7 business actors. A voluntary sector perspective seems therefore indispensable to make a full  
8 experience and account of what a place is. Put simply, they are undoubtedly a key set of  
9 collective actors in a place, and constituent of place leadership, even if their role isn't 'high  
10 profile', widely accepted as (traditional) leadership, nor even, as always visible to the public and  
11 citizens. One respondent described this as having "a seat at the table", while another stressed  
12 that the sector's contribution to place leadership was through:  
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16 "forcing others to actually stop and look I think at what's gone on I think they're also  
17 informing policy and strategic decisions... I think they're also a test bed for service  
18 provision and very creative in developing stuff and they're probably the *social*  
19 *conscience of the statutory organisations*" (VSO B, emphasis added).  
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22 As the title of our paper tries to communicate, local knowledge cannot be understood through  
23 traditional channels ("you can't google everything"). At the same time, the place could be a  
24 jumble of different communities within a geographical and/or cultural community (location), with  
25 sometimes cooperative and sometimes conflicting attitudes; with communities that can open up  
26 the place through external connections and contribute a to build a "common community", but  
27 with communities that can sometimes too close the place up being identitarian and divisive.  
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31 Second, in terms of investigating structure, power and politics as 'existing social relationships,  
32 roles and responsibilities, hierarchical assumptions and reporting relationships' (Sutherland et  
33 al., 2020), our findings shed light on the complexity and multiplexity of leading in the collective  
34 and on the importance of informal structures of collective leadership co-existing with formal  
35 traditional structures. Two quotes highlight neatly these elements:  
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38 "We have a DISTRICT public third sector partnership of which the CCG is a member  
39 and I'm on that, that's a body that brings together locally the district council,  
40 ourselves, voluntary sector, the college, police, fire, DWP, it's not a forum to discuss  
41 everything that all of us are doing, it was specifically to hone in on the things we  
42 could better do together" (PSO 4).  
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45 "All the ministries in [DISTRICT's town] meet with the MP and the councillors every  
46 2 months so that gives information of what the generic need is in the area" (VSO C).  
47  
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49 The role of informal leadership as a governance asset (e.g. Ayres, 2019) seems therefore an  
50 interesting issue to explore, with a decentred approach (e.g. Bevir, 2013) as a particularly  
51 appropriate perspective for this endeavour. Moreover, if we want to truly understand place  
52 leadership, a focus on "actually existing" local governmental practice is paramount (e.g. Barnett  
53 et al., 2020). As Sotarauta illustrates, since 'governance structures both constrain and enable  
54 leadership processes, place leadership cannot be examined as a separate entity' (Sotarauta,  
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3 2016: 47). In that respect, while we acknowledge that place governmental practices can be  
4 enacted by different sectoral actors, we believe that the role of public authority and thus of  
5 public institutions is of fundamental importance for understanding place leadership. We argue –  
6 and in someways we hope – for a more explicit integration between scholars on leadership and  
7 organisation studies and scholars on public governance (including public administration and  
8 third sector).  
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11 Third, from our findings, it emerges consistently a tension between structural macro-dynamics  
12 (e.g. austerity, capitalism, economies of scale, digitalisation) and voluntary sector action at a  
13 micro-level. Here a focus on voluntary sector highlights the structures of domination by the neo-  
14 liberal order, even if it also shows the possibility of micro-emancipation through logics of  
15 informal and hidden and/or alternative leadership. This was plain to see in the way VSOs  
16 repeatedly highlighted how they struggled against, resisted, but ultimately felt impelled to work  
17 within the grain of structures imposed from above, particularly the competitive allocation of  
18 funding under the policy of commissioning (██████████). Nevertheless, a more nuanced and  
19 situated reading also suggests that competitive-collaborative dynamics might always exist in  
20 *tension* within the sector, for instance in the way organisations criticise public sector funding  
21 allocation (whether austerity-inspired retrenchment or competitive allocation) while alluding to  
22 micro-struggles over status, enduring hierarchical leadership, local spatial ‘turfs’, and the right to  
23 continued existence. On a more positive note, these tensions seem to be subsumed within a  
24 broader collective commitment to place:  
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30 “For us the bottom line has always been that we’re here to serve the community and  
31 work for all the people we can here. 10 years on that has never altered” (VSO C).  
32

33 Place, and the feelings of attachment people have to their place, are an important resource for  
34 those seeking to strengthen the co-production and co-creation of new solutions to public policy  
35 challenges (Hambleton, 2019: 276). However, it seems more necessary rediscovering the  
36 political and collective advocacy rather than just public services delivery, through being  
37 “interested in revealing the things that people actually do to influence other people in these very  
38 particular types of settings both formally and informally – openly as well opaquely – and how  
39 they go about doing what they do. It is also about revealing the types of social processes  
40 involved in ‘making things happen’ and in ‘getting things done’ (or not getting things done)  
41 (Sotarauta et al., 2017: 188).  
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## 45 **Conclusion**

46 Adopting a voluntary sector perspective on place leadership has enabled us to identify how  
47 relational and local knowledge resources contribute to the social processes through which  
48 people influence one another to constitute place and get things done. In addition, our research  
49 highlights how the distinctiveness of VSOs is the source of their legitimacy as actors in the  
50 collective leadership endeavour. It suggests that voluntary sector organisations (or actors) are  
51 not simply disempowered followers in a system dominated by public agencies but rather active  
52 agents in the constitution of collective place leadership.  
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3 In terms of our theoretical contribution, we suggest this centres on the understanding of place  
4 leadership as including a multiplexity of actors within, broadly, the 'civil society' space. Our data  
5 focuses more on the relatively formalised voluntary sector, with important insights from the  
6 public agencies that inter-relate with them in complex ways to create a dispersed and highly  
7 collective place leadership. Nevertheless, it is clear that not only do VSOs and related civil  
8 society actors draw on the 'assets' of knowledge and relationships in order to have legitimacy in  
9 the collective construction of place leadership, it is clear that they also act as 'conduits' - in  
10 limited, contingent and sometimes unequal ways - for community and citizen actors to play a  
11 part in place leadership, as proposed by [REDACTED].  
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15 In this respect, we argue that place and purpose? should not just be added to the Grint  
16 framework as stated by Jackson, Nicoll and Roy (2018). Rather, they should be considered as  
17 supra-ordinated elements for observing, understanding and assessing leadership as a situated  
18 and context-dependent practice. In other words, we argue that it is by putting place and purpose  
19 first that leadership can be fully understood and the power of place for leadership fully realised  
20 (Jackson, 2019).  
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24 A limitation of our study is that we have only in part addressed how the micro social processes  
25 identified here influence and are influenced by the macro structures of the political and  
26 economic context. A focus on the voluntary sector shows the possibility of micro-emancipation  
27 through logics of informal and hidden leadership but also highlights the structures of domination  
28 by the neo-liberal order. This needs further research to explore the boundaries of what can be  
29 achieved through without more overt challenge to the system through the voluntary sector's role  
30 as advocate and disrupter. In this respect, longitudinal studies might be particularly important to  
31 map out the evolving relationships amongst multiple sectoral actors involved in the collective  
32 enactment of place leadership.  
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