



University of Limerick
Local Leadership Programme

Grappling with 'wicked problems'

Johnny Connolly, Seán Redmond and John Bamber

RESEARCH EVIDENCE INTO POLICY PROGRAMMES AND PRACTICE

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About the REPPP project

REPPP (Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice) is a research collaboration between the School of Law in the University of Limerick and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in Ireland. Its aim is to improve the evidence base in relation to youth crime and youth justice policy and practice. REPPP’s research activities are informed by, and in support of, the Irish Youth Justice Strategy.

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List of abbreviations

CYPSC	Children and Young People’s Services Committee
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
LLP	Local Leadership Programme
NEIC	North-east inner city
QCBI	Quality and Capacity Building Initiative
REPPP	Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice
SARA	Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment
UL	University of Limerick



Section 1: Introduction

The ‘wicked’ problems that face us today tend to be caused by such complex forces that their course cannot be changed by isolated interventions. They require multiple stakeholders working together, over many years, with a shared commitment to common results, so that the resources and authority necessary to bring about the needed changes can be mobilized and successfully applied (Schorr and Farrow, 2011, p. iii).

Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice (REPPP) at the University of Limerick is a research collaboration between the School of Law and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration aimed at improving the evidence base in relation to youth crime and youth justice reform in Ireland. REPPP’s research activities are informed by and support the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 (Department of Justice, 2021). The University of Limerick’s Local Leadership Programme (LLP) was developed by REPPP and piloted in Dublin’s north-east inner city (NEIC) in 2019.

The purpose of the programme is to provide participants with the space and possibly new tools to re-look at what may have been to date intractable problems in their community or their area of work and co-design better solutions. The programme offers places to professionals, usually preferencing frontline practitioners from the statutory, community and voluntary sectors with the demonstrable capacity to bring energy, critical thinking, imagination, leadership, and influence to addressing the problems they face. The problems may be ‘wicked’ by nature and not amenable to simple solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973). At local level, wicked problems include criminal activity, community safety issues, drug and substance misuse, poor educational achievement or impaired community efficacy and are often associated with modern ‘developed’ societies where existing policy and service infrastructures can be part of the problem.

These types of problems manifest themselves in the middle layer of routine governance, above the level of services to the individual and below the macro socio-economic, institutional level (Sparrow, 2008). While some of these fundamental ‘in your face’ problems are clearly observable, some are obscured, belying their potency. Other problems actively seek to subvert attempts to reduce their influence. All the problem types referred to negatively affect citizens’ quality of life. The LLP approaches such problems pragmatically, acknowledging how things are as a factual baseline. However, acknowledging is different from *accepting* the way things are, recognising that underlying structural factors such as poverty and inequality are at the root of many complex problems¹. What the LLP offers is the potential to collaboratively take on *big enough* problems of community relevance.

Wicked problems cannot be tackled by isolated and unsupported efforts. Instead, effective local service delivery requires dynamic, interactive and collaborative relationships on the ground. Moreover, beneficial outcomes for children, young people, families and communities depend on purposeful partnerships between policy makers, fund holders and those delivering services. A common commitment is needed to achieving aims and objectives that have been discussed among all interested stakeholders, including service users. The difficulty that state agencies and other bodies have in mobilising collectively around problems and making best use of resources can compound such issues and leave unhelpful legacies. Such problems can include the failure of statutory bodies to work together effectively or to govern national/local state decision-making and voluntary sector partnerships appropriately. In such cases, the promise of new or extra resources is unlikely to improve matters.

¹ The terms ‘complex’ and ‘wicked’ are used interchangeably in this report. They are discussed further in Section 3.



The LLP takes a common-sense but distinctively novel approach informed by the evidence about how to deal with wicked and complex problems. A central idea is that wicked problems cannot be addressed without reforming ways of thinking and practising and transforming systems. The transformation involves finding new ways of understanding complex problems and more effective ways of cooperating and collaborating up, down and horizontally across systems in addressing those problems. The fundamental claim here is that the patterns of thought and action required when people engage successfully with complex problems are distinctive; they are not 'business as usual'. The primary purpose of the LLP is therefore to increase participants' familiarity with practical tools for problem description, problem definition and the co-development and design of solutions.

Since the initial pilot programme in Dublin's NEIC, programmes have also been delivered in Limerick, Kerry, Galway, Cork, Dublin South Central, Wexford, north County Dublin and Longford. Participants in the programme have engaged with a range of complex place-based problems in both urban and rural settings throughout Ireland. These problems can be grouped under the following themes: Anti-social behaviour, crime and policing; Enhancing partnership working; Education reform, disadvantage and vulnerability; and Homelessness and aftercare; Minority rights (see Section 7). The programme has evolved iteratively over time, adapting to the specific contexts or issues presented. During the public health crisis brought about by the Covid 19 pandemic, one of the most complex societal challenges of recent times, the programme became an exclusively online engagement. The learning brought about by that experience has enabled the programme to adapt and develop further.

1.2 Purpose and format of this report

The purpose of this report is to set out the key concepts and ideas that underpin the programme. The report is intended for a wide audience, including policy makers and professionals, frontline community activists and academics. Essentially, it is for interested actors from multiple perspectives who are encountering the wicked challenges of public governance in turbulent times.

Section 2 of the report outlines the background to the programme. Section 3 introduces two of the key concepts that underpin the LLP and its distinctive approach to problem analysis: wicked problems and complex harms. It also considers some other frameworks used to understand complexity. Section 4 examines what it means to take a problem-centred approach, creating democratic and deliberative spaces to facilitate engagement with complexity and the role of problem-solving processes and protocols. In Section 5, we consider what it means to be evidence-informed; the need for collective impact to bring about cross-sector coalitions; and evaluation. Section 6 describes the three key stages of the LLP process: problem definition, developing solutions and making proposals. In Section 7, we review the programmes that have taken place to date and the themes and problem areas that participants have focused on. Finally, in Section 8 we present some of the feedback received from former participants so as to reflect on the programme and consider potential future directions.

Section 2: A process of design

In this section, we trace the background to the LLP. In early 2000, there was a growing recognition in the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)² that many professionals work with deep-seated, enduring and intractable situations. This provided a platform for the development of new ways of understanding and engaging complex problems. At the same time, a deliberative design process, developed in response to the problem of children's involvement in criminal networks, would inform the shape of the LLP pilot programme in 2019.

2.1 Background to the programme

Better use of evidence to inform policy, programmes and practice

The LLP is an example of an increasing international focus on ensuring that policy brings about positive benefit for citizens. Examining the various logics and performance of government programmes offers a “strong foundation for transparency and accountability” (Gertler *et al.*, 2016, p. 4). The LLP was grounded in attempts to understand, explain and gauge performance and was informed by other training programmes developed at the time.³ Before the LLP, a training programme was designed to build capacity across the DCYA to manage programme funds more effectively and to include training in impact and process evaluation (Bamber and Redmond, 2016). It was clear from participant feedback from these training events that the core principles for measuring effectiveness had practical meaning and value. However, simple linear accounts of how *Intervention A* would impact *Outcome B* were clearly insufficient for comprehending the day-to-day realities of managing highly complex problems. It was also acknowledged that a collective approach to leadership was required to bring about change with a focus on practice, local reinvention and customisation. These developments set the context for the LLP.

The REPPP Greentown study

Two key developments relevant to the origins of the LLP — *problem framing* and the *deliberative design and testing of prototypes* in response — were tested as part of the REPPP Greentown study into the effects of criminal networks on children's offending behaviour (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016).

Problem framing

The first development was the ‘framing’ of a problem relating to children's involvement in criminal networks. National Garda Síochána⁴ Police Using Leading Systems Effectively (PULSE) data for law enforcement were analysed to identify locations in Ireland where the phenomenon of child involvement in organised criminal activity was likely to occur. One location, the real but anonymised community of Greentown, was selected for closer examination. Here, local crime data relating to children's involvement in drugs sales were presented as a network illustration to show offending relationships between co-detected individuals, including relationships between children and adults. The network was further examined using the testimony of sixteen front-line Garda members. Using the network illustration, each officer provided their own account of the size and shape of the network. This generated new scientific evidence “blending craft knowledge and experiential knowledge” of the type referred to by Boyle and Redmond (2024, p. 38) about how the network sustained itself and, importantly, identified potential areas of vulnerability. This diagnostic exercise is an example of what Head (2022, p. 9) refers to as framing “how an issue or problem is defined and presented to wider audiences, as part of the process of setting policy agendas and priorities”.

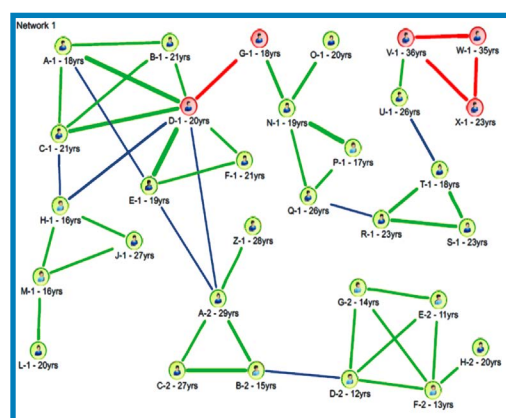


Figure 1 The Greentown criminal network

2 Re-structured as the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) by the coalition government in 2020.

3 For example ‘Leading Successful Programs: Using Evidence to Assess Effectiveness’ Harvard Kennedy School <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/educational-programs/executive-education/leading-successful-programs> (Accessed 20th March 2025).

Deliberative design

The second development involved using the Greentown framing exercise to guide a subsequent deliberative design process. The objective was to develop a new intervention able to deal with the complex problems presented by the Greentown network. The design process involved thirty international experts in the fields of organised crime, law enforcement and child welfare. The expert group, informed by the literature on how to engage with wicked problems (see Section 3) was asked to carry out a critical examination of the problem framed by the initial study and to provide fresh, wider perspectives. The problem frame was adjusted to take account of the new perspectives. It was then 'flipped' to clarify the challenges that a new intervention would need to address successfully to reduce network influence on children in communities like Greentown.

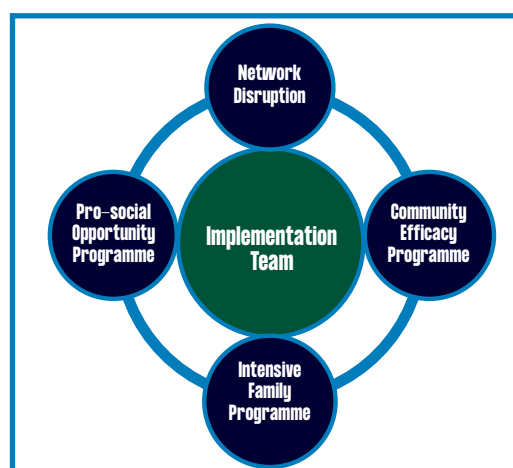


Figure 2
Greentown model responding to criminal networks

This process produced four inter-connected network intervention domains: family, community, pro-social alternatives and network disruption (Figure 2). It was felt that a combination of these domains was necessary to successfully engage the multiple and multi-dimensional adversities facing children in close proximity to crime network activity. The proposal that emerged was then used to develop a provisional prototype that was subjected to further feasibility testing by sixty front-line workers based in Ireland from policing, child protection, probation services, youth justice services and community development disciplines. The Greentown prototype design is currently being tested in the field and, informed by on-the-ground experience of delivery, is subject to continual review and adaptation.⁵ The process of exhaustively and comprehensively examining a problem from multiple perspectives, deliberative design, feasibility testing and the development of prototypes were to become core features of the LLP programme.

The Local Leadership Programme

The LLP was created as the Executive Leadership Programme in 2019 for the What Works Initiative launched by the DCYA. What Works is a prevention and early intervention initiative established and led by the DCYA and funded through the Dormant Accounts Fund.⁶ The strategy acknowledged that a collective approach to leadership was required to bring about change and that the focus should be on practice, local reinvention and customisation. The strategy also recognised that many professionals work in challenging environments and grapple with deep-seated, enduring and intractable problems. Solutions are evasive and positive outcomes are difficult to achieve. In tandem with What Works, the DCYA also established the Quality and Capacity Building Initiative (QCBI)⁷. This recognised the potential of specific interest groups to bring people together to receive training, share lessons and best practices, evaluate performance and work individually and collaboratively to implement practice changes over time. What Works and the QCBI came together through an innovative partnership between the School of Law at the University of Limerick and the DCYA. Led by REPPP, this partnership established the Executive Leadership Programme (which became the LLP) to enable professionals to identify these kinds of real and practical problems and develop collective solutions. The pilot programme in Dublin's north-east inner city in 2019 brought together professionals from the statutory sector and from the community and voluntary sector to develop their understanding of the latest research about how to improve social programmes, drawing on the problem-solving, planning and implementation expertise and practice wisdom of participants.⁸ Since 2022, the LLP has been funded by the Department of Justice and is part of a suite of services which forms REPPP.⁹ Most LLPs are commissioned through the Department of Justice by a specific agency such as a Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC).

4 The Irish national police service.

5 For a fuller description of the design and development of the Greentown programme and related studies, see <https://www.ul.ie/artsoc/ccjvs/research/youth-justice/the-greentown-study-2016-2022>.

6 Learning Strategy - What Works

7 <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f69233-new-funding-available-to-networks-working-to-improve-outcomes-for-ch/>

8 Waldo Klein and Martin Bloom (1995, p. 799) define practice wisdom as a "personal and value-driven system of knowledge that emerges out of the transaction between the phenomenological experience of the client situation and the use of scientific information. The result of this transaction is tentative and often unarticulated knowledge that forms the basis for on-the-spot practice hypotheses that enable progress to be made on a case in the absence of fully tested methods".

9 <https://www.ul.ie/artsoc/ccjvs/research/youth-justice/REPPP>



Section 3: Understanding *wicked* problems and complex harms

In this section, we present two of the key concepts that underpin the LLP and its distinctive approach to problem analysis: wicked problems and complex harms. We also present examples of practical frameworks for interrogating and resolving wicked problems and complex harms.

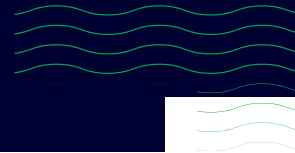
3.1 Wicked problems

In a seminal article published in 1973, design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber introduced the term ‘wicked problem’ to draw attention to the complexities and challenges of addressing planning and social policy problems under the uncertain conditions inherent in modern society.¹⁰ They argued that one of the intractable problems of the time was that of “defining problems (of knowing what distinguishes an observed condition from a desired condition) and of locating problems (finding where in the complex causal networks the trouble really lies)” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 159). They argued that an equally intractable problem was that of “identifying the actions that might effectively narrow the gap between what-is and what ought-to-be because as we seek to improve the effectiveness of actions in pursuit of valued outcomes, as system boundaries get stretched, and as we become sophisticated about the complex workings of open societal systems, it becomes ever more difficult to make the planning idea operational” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 159). At the time when they were writing, Rittel and Webber identified a growing public disillusionment with planners and other professionals who were responding to societal problems. The public were complaining because these professionals had not succeeded in solving the problems they claimed they could solve by applying their discipline expertise.

According to Rittel and Webber, at the heart of this disenchantment was the inappropriate application of an approach to addressing complex social problems that was rooted in the rational approach central to the applied sciences and engineering paradigm. They argued that this approach did not work with the types of problems emerging in open societal systems. They described the problems that scientists and many engineers have usually focused on as ‘tame’ or ‘benign’, with known and fixable challenges: for example, solving a mathematical equation, analysing the structure of an unknown compound or a chess player attempting to achieve checkmate in five moves. For tame problems, the goal is clear and falls within the competencies of one or more professional disciplines. It is also possible to be more certain about whether the problems have been solved due to clear outcome metrics. In contrast, many problems in social or policy planning domains are ill-defined. Social problems, they suggest, are never solved but “[a]t best they are only *re-solved* over and over again” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 160).

Rittel and Webber outlined ten distinguishing properties of wicked problems which they argued are present in nearly all public policy issues. These are summarised in the table below.

¹⁰ When referring to planning problems, they have in mind “problems of governmental planning, and especially those of social or policy planning” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 160).



Defining Wicked Problems

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem

"In order to *describe* a wicked problem in sufficient detail, one has to develop an exhaustive inventory of all conceivable solutions ahead of time ... The formulation of a wicked problem *is* the problem! The process of formulating the problem and conceiving a solution (or re-solution) are identical, since every specification of the problem is a specification of the direction in which a treatment is considered."

2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule

"In solving ... a mathematical equation, the problem solver knows when he has done his job. [With wicked problems] there are no criteria for sufficient understanding ... and no ends to the causal chains that link interacting open systems, the would be planner can always do better."

3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad

"Solutions to tame problems are usually unambiguous and they can be independently verified by other experts in the field. With wicked problems, "judgements are likely to differ widely [according to] group or personal interests ... special value-sets, and ... ideological predilections ... assessments of proposed solutions are expressed as 'good' or 'bad' ... 'better or worse', or 'satisfying' or 'good enough'."

4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem

"For tame problems one can determine on the spot how good a solution-attempt has been With wicked problems, on the other hand, any solution, after being implemented, will generate waves of consequences over an extended – virtually an unbounded – period of time" [Sometimes the unintended negative consequences of the solution when implemented may be so bad that it] would have been better off if the plan had never been carried out ... The full consequences cannot be appraised until the waves of repercussions have completely run out, and we have no way of tracing *all* the waves through *all* the affected lives ahead of time or within a limited time span."

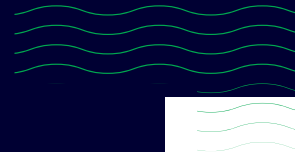
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation'; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error, every attempt counts significantly

"With wicked ... problems every implemented solution is consequential. It leaves 'traces' that cannot be undone ... Large public-works are effectively irreversible, and the consequences they generate [are long lasting] ... *Every trial counts*. And every attempt to reverse a decision or to correct for the undesired consequences poses another set of wicked problems, which are in turn subject to the same dilemmas."

6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable ... set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan

"Normally, in the pursuit of a wicked ... problem, a host of potential solutions arises; and another host is never thought up. And it is, of course, a matter of *judgement* which of these solutions should be implemented. Chess has a finite set of rules, accounting for all situations that can occur ... But not in the world of social policy ... For example, 'what should be done to reduce street crime? ... repeal the laws that define crime [Such as legalising drugs] ... Give away free loot to would-be-thieves ... and so reduce the incentive to commit crime? ... In such fields of ill-defined problems and hence ill-definable solutions, the set of feasible plans of action relies on realistic judgement."

Table 1 Defining Wicked Problems



7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique

"There are no *classes* of wicked problems in the sense that principles of solution can be developed to fit *all* members of a class ... Part of the art of dealing with wicked problems is the art of not knowing too early which type of solution to apply ... In the more complex world of social policy planning, every situation is likely to be one-of-a-kind."

8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem

The process of resolving a problem starts with the search for a causal explanation. "There is nothing like a natural level of a wicked problem ... the higher the level of a problem's formulation, the broader and more general it becomes: and the more difficult it becomes to do something about it. On the other hand, one should not try to cure symptoms: and therefore one should try to settle the problem on as high a level as possible."

9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution

The choice of explanation for a wicked problem "is arbitrary in the logical sense ... People choose those explanations which are most plausible to them ... The analyst's 'world view' is the strongest determining factor in explaining a discrepancy and therefore, in resolving a wicked problem."

10. The planner has no right to be wrong

"The scientific community does not blame its members for postulating hypotheses that are later refuted – so long as the author abides by the rules of the game, of course. In the world of ... wicked problems no such immunity is tolerated. Here the aim is not to find the truth, but to improve some characteristics of the world where people live. Planners are liable for the consequences of the actions they generate; the effects can matter a great deal to those people that are touched by those actions."

To summarise, the term 'wicked problems' refers to significant social problems and issues. These types of problems and issues are 'knotty' and have multiple interacting layers; they morph, adapt, displace or manifest themselves in new ways and are very resistant to change.

Wicked problems often attract a limited set of potential conventional solutions. There are no immediate or ultimate tests of success because success can be contested between different stakeholders. In this respect, there is a distinction between wicked problems characterised by differences in values and perspectives and more technical problems such as typical challenges in engineering and computational science. Whereas 'tame' problems such as these can mostly be solved using existing forms of knowledge, solutions to wicked problems are usually a matter of judgement involving differing perspectives and can only be addressed through multiple stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, wicked problems *persist* despite significant state, voluntary and community sector interventions. Indeed, despite best intentions previous interventions may have deepened the harms experienced by citizens and created legacies which undermine fresh attempts to reconcile them. Wicked problems are unlikely to be much affected by off-the-peg, evidence-based programmes, especially where these prescribe solutions that are linear and are not sensitive to the problem in question.



3.2 Complex harms

In addition to its use of the concept of wicked problems, the LLP draws inspiration from the work of Professor Malcolm Sparrow of Harvard University, another key theorist in this area.¹¹ Sparrow's book *The Character of Harms: Operational Challenges in Control* is a key text that informs the programme (Sparrow, 2008). The central aim of Sparrow's book is to present the case for organisations to concentrate on the fixing of harms. Harm as a concept, he suggests, tends to mobilise and focus activity in a way that prevention discourse does not, inferring that people are particularly motivated by existential threats. However, fixing harms demands different thought and organisational processes that corral resources collectively and purposively as opposed to diverse organisational perspectives applying or modifying existing programmes in reaction to harms that appear. This type of work, Sparrow suggests, requires "an attitude of mind, peculiar to the control of harms, intently focused on the harm itself" (Sparrow, 2008, p. 31). This involves studying the specific harm intensely with a view to resolving it. This is a distinct approach which requires those involved in the control or mitigation of harms (of any type) to "examine the distinctive operational challenges that the task of *controlling harms* entails, [and understand] the distinctive character of this task ... mastering some distinctive patterns of thought and action that go with it" (Sparrow, 2008, p. 1). Ultimately, he contends, it is this "pattern of thinking" that can often lead to the formulation of "resource-efficient and remarkably effective interventions, exploiting the particular character of the harm to be undone" (Sparrow, 2008, p. 32).

Sparrow makes a distinction between this type of harm-focused approach and broad prevention programmes, asserting that they are different but not mutually exclusive. Nothing is lost, he argues, "by understanding the nature of the beast. No preventive strategy is precluded. No tool or technology is excluded ... But it is surely a mistake to use broad preventive programs because of an *a priori* preference for them, especially a preference that obstructed open-minded examination of the harm itself" (Sparrow, 2008, p. 37). In this way, the form of intervention and selection of tools become tactical, problem-specific choices.

Sparrow categorises a number of special classes of 'complex harms' which are particularly challenging:

1. Invisible harms

"where low rates of reporting or detection make the bulk of the problem invisible, the underlying scope of it uncertain, and the effects of any intervention difficult to discern" (Sparrow, 2008, p. 173).

Examples here would include illicit drug supply, intimidation and violence in relation to drug debt¹² and domestic abuse¹³ where rates of reporting are conventionally very low and thus are not adequately described by official statistics. Low rates of reporting may be due to fear of reprisal or lack of faith in the criminal justice system or simply that a 'harm' is not monitored or recorded.

2. Harms involving conscious opponents

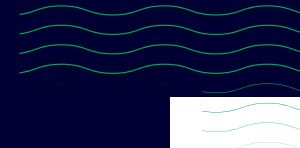
"where those responsible for control find themselves engaged in a dynamic game played against adaptive opposition, each side seeking to outsmart the other ... The existence of a brain behind the harm introduces the possibility of deliberate adaptations to defeat or reduce the effectiveness of control operations into a game of intelligence and counter-intelligence" (Sparrow, 2008, p. 199).

Hourigan (2011) in her book *Understanding Limerick: Social exclusion and change* describes the lengths that criminal networks went to to prevent and frustrate any improvements to housing estates so as to maintain control over their criminal enterprises (Hourigan, 2011, p. 74). She explains how, in certain estates, "criminal gangs had used their propensity towards violence and their surveillance of the community as a means of becoming the de facto governing authority in the area and their power

¹¹ <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty/malcolm-sparrow>

¹² See, for example, Connolly and Buckley (2016).

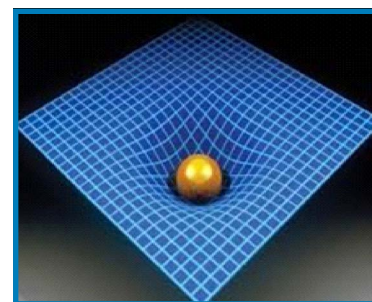
¹³ See, for example, Foley (2022).



had significantly undermined the capacity of state agencies to assert the legitimacy of law and order” (Hourigan, 2011, p. 74). By encouraging a ‘street code’ of antisocial behaviour in children, whereby local residents are intimidated into submission, Hourigan explains how core criminal families secure territorial strongholds as they require “pockets of estates where they can store guns and deal drugs from certain houses” (Hourigan, 2011, p. 79). This control strategy also extended to taking steps to maintain the physically dilapidated condition of areas under their control. This included “strategic illegal dumping and using children to litter, graffiti and vandalise residents’ homes. In a few cases, residents who took steps to improve their homes in the most disadvantaged parts of these estates were actively targeted by criminal gangs” (Hourigan, 2011, p. 86).

3. Harms in equilibrium.

These harms “behave like a ball-bearing sitting at the bottom of a depression: give it a little nudge and it merely settles back to its original position. The forces of gravitation, coupled with the shape of the terrain, pull it back to where it was ... In response to a perturbation, the ball-bearing may wobble around for a while at the bottom of its hole; but without a substantial shove it will eventually settle again in precisely the same position” (Sparrow, 2008, p. 231).



In his study for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Redmond describes the power of criminal networks and presents a lived reality of omnipresent control and negative influence for individual young people caught up in organised criminal activity (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016). Taken together, these influences support a culture of compliance and sustain a network of power and impact. “The weight of evidence in the study indicates that the criminal justice system, in the context of the Greentown network, is founded on questionable notions of rational and responsible action by both offenders and victims ... The state of *equilibrium* suggested by the study and sustained by A2’s (network member) family presence in Greentown, infers that short-term law enforcement (or other) campaigns will do little to disrupt the network’s essential *balance*. Shortening the individual careers of youth offenders is of little value if the network acts to generate a constant throughput of young people” (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016, p. 57).

3.3 Other frameworks for interrogating and addressing wicked and complex problems

In the decades since Rittel and Webber’s seminal article, thinking around wicked problems has developed significantly.¹⁴ There are many other models or approaches for understanding and responding to complexity including the Iceberg Model,¹⁵ the Cynefin Framework¹⁶ and Theory U¹⁷ which all adopt a systems thinking approach to help situate problems in order to develop innovative responses. The LLP draws on these sources which are summarised below.

The ‘iceberg model’

The iceberg model of culture was developed by Selfridge and Sokolik (1975) as a systems thinking tool to help understand organisations and the underlying causes of a problem or event. Most of what defines a culture is far below the surface, too deep for a casual observer to understand. Cultural researchers refer to these as *values* (Schmiedel, Vom Brocke and Recker, 2015). These values manifest themselves in actions and structures above the surface as “observable artifacts such as behavioural (e.g. manners, rituals) and structural (e.g. physical environment, technology) patterns that are the visible representations of the underlying cultural values” (Schmiedel, Vom Brocke and Recker, 2015, p. 4).

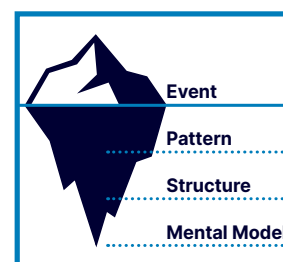


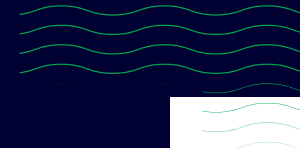
Figure 3: The ‘Iceberg’ model

¹⁴ See, for example, Head (2019).

¹⁵ Systems Thinking Resources - The Donella Meadows Project

¹⁶ About - Cynefin Framework - The Cynefin Co

¹⁷ Theory U | u-school for Transformation



It is typically presented in a visual manner as an iceberg image (see Figure 3), with acknowledgment of the event or problem above the surface of the water and the underlying patterns and causes at different levels below the surface. Just as ten per cent of an iceberg's mass is visible above water, the model advances the idea that more factors are usually involved in a problem than those that are initially apparent or observable. The model can be used to help identify hidden causes of problems so that they can be named and addressed.



Figure 4:
The Cynefin Framework

Cynefin, pronounced kuh-nev-in, is a Welsh word meaning “haunt”, “habitat”, “acquainted”, “accustomed”, “familiar”. It signifies the ‘multiple, intertwined factors in our environment and our experience that influence us (how we think, interpret and act) in ways we can never fully understand.’¹⁸

The Cynefin Framework was developed to help leaders understand challenges and make decisions in context.¹⁹ Distinguishing different domains (the subsystems in which we operate) enables us to recognise that our actions need to match the reality we find ourselves in through a process of sense-making. This helps leaders cultivate an awareness of what is really complex and what is not and respond accordingly so that no energy is wasted in overthinking the routine. Also, in appropriate cases, the complex nature of a phenomenon is appreciated so that we do not try to make it fit into standard solutions.

Dave Snowden emphasises the importance of recognising Cynefin as a sense-making framework rather than a model. While a model seeks to represent reality, a framework is a way of looking at reality. Disorder, at the centre of the framework, is the state of not knowing what type of system you are in: ordered, complex or chaotic. Cynefin calls upon leaders to assess a situation before reacting to it.

Cynefin divides order into two: simple and complicated. In a simple system, the relationship between cause and effect is linear. Everyone can see what the relationship is and nobody will dispute it. To illustrate, Snowden uses the example of how, in some countries, people drive on the left-hand side of the road while in others they drive on the right. When driving in another country, you establish what the standard operating procedures are in advance; the decision-making model is to *sense, categorise and respond* in accordance with best practice. In a *complicated* system, there is a solution but it is not obvious, except perhaps to an expert. It might require analysis, gathering of data and/or identifying the appropriate expert for advice. The decision-making model is to *sense, analyse and respond*. Here, best practice is applied depending on the particular context. In a complicated system, experts can be trusted within the branch of their expertise.

However, in a *complex* system they can only create hypotheses. There is no linear relationship between cause and effect. We do not know what the right solution is until we act. The decision-making model is to *probe, sense and respond*. If we think a system is complex and the evidence supports conflicting hypotheses, then we test and search out ideas and actions that are coherent and we experiment to reveal what is possible. Here, the practice is emergent or what Snowden calls ‘radical re-purposing’, where we re-purpose existing capability.

In a *chaotic* domain, there are no patterns or constraints. The first action is to create a constraint: you *act, sense and respond*. Governing constraints are rules. In a simple system, they are clear but some flexibility is still required. To return to the driving example, although one must drive on the left in certain countries if a child strays on to the road one would be expected to break the rules as an exception to avoid the child. In a complicated system, the boundaries are also defined but within them

¹⁸ <https://thecynefin.co/library>

¹⁹ See the video of Dave Snowden describing the framework: <https://thecynefin.co/about-us/about-cynefin-framework/> The following description is derived from Snowden's presentation. (Accessed 21st March 2025).

a greater degree of variation is allowed. Distinct from governing constraints are enabling constraints which Snowden describes as being like a heuristic or 'rule of thumb'. You manage a complex world, Snowden concludes, by discovering the enabling constraints.

Theory U

Theory U is a change-management model and blends systems thinking, innovation and leading change with a focus initially on overcoming personal biases, listening to others and engaging with the self.²⁰ It developed from the ground-breaking book *Theory U: Leading from the emerging future* by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) academic Otto Scharmer (Scharmer, 2016). For Scharmer and colleagues in MIT's Presencing Institute,²¹ what we, both individually and collectively, pay attention to, and how we pay attention is key to what we create. The ability to overcome many of the crises of modern society requires us to address what Scharmer calls our 'blind spot', the inner place from which each of us operates. Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) define dealing with the 'blind spot' as learning "how to respond to the current waves of disruptive change from a deep place that connects us to the emerging future rather than by reacting against the patterns of the past, which usually means perpetuating them" (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013, p. 3). Learning to become aware of our blind spot is critical to bringing about the profound systemic changes so needed in contemporary society. Theory U takes its name from the shape of the drawing used to depict it (Figure 5). Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) define it thus: "The quality of results produced by any system depends on the quality of awareness from which people in the system operate. The formula for a successful change process is not 'form follows function' but 'form follows consciousness'". The structure of awareness and attention determines the pathway along which a system unfolds (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013, p. 18).

Theory U is essentially about moving away from the past and embracing new ways of doing things. Moving down the left side of the U is about opening up, listening and connecting with others. It is also about moving away from habitual patterns of listening, or "downloading" (Scharmer, 2008, p. 53), which entails just listening to confirm what you already know. Suspending the Voice of Judgement (VOJ) and 'seeing with fresh eyes' is what Scharmer refers to as 'factual listening', "paying attention to facts and to novel or disconfirming data" (Scharmer, 2008, p. 53). Re-directing involves

being empathetic, putting oneself in another's shoes and being able to understand by "seeing the situation through the eyes of another" (Scharmer, 2008, p.54) or "sensing from the field" (Figure 5). It also involves overcoming the Voice of Cynicism (VOC). Presencing (a combination of presence and

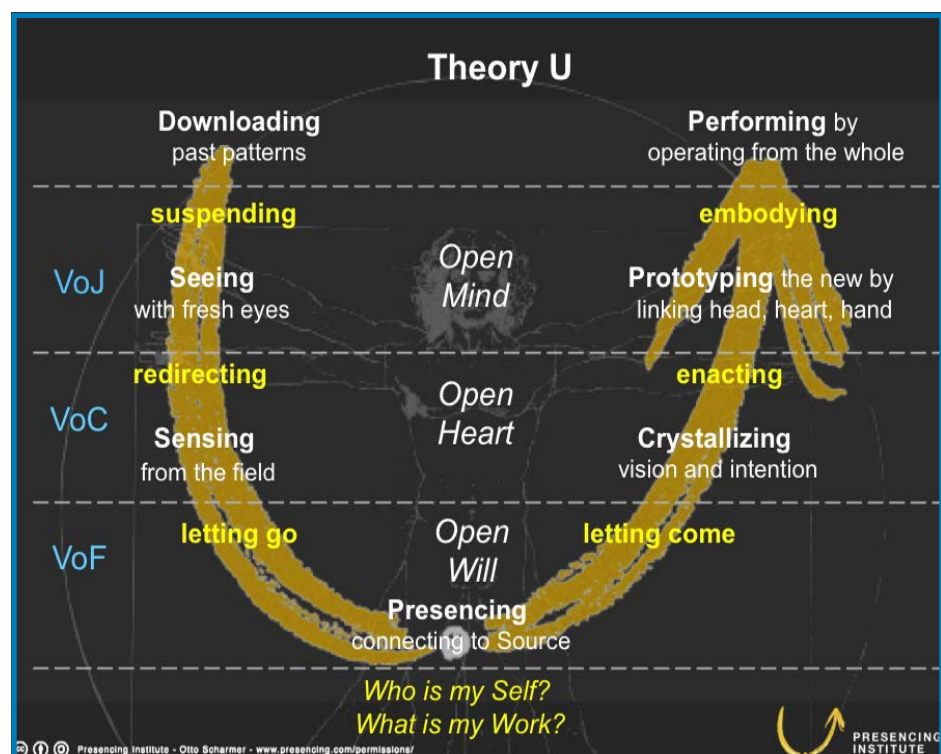
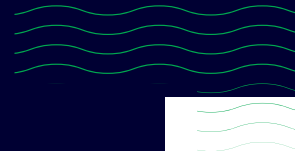


Figure 5: Theory U

²⁰ <https://www.u-school.org/>

²¹ The Presencing Institute was founded in 2006 to develop further the thinking behind Theory U: Presencing Institute – Activating and Supporting a Global Movement for Planetary Healing & Civilization Regeneration



sensing) involves 'letting go', ignoring the Voice of Fear (VOF), overcoming your ego and ignoring your favoured solution. Presencing also involves examining the self through mindfulness processes, for example. It is a key turning point in the processes as it also involves taking action or "letting come" (Figure 5).

Moving up the right side of the U involves having an idea or vision of what the emerging future might look like, "crystallising" (Figure 5) or defining your idea clearly, possibly with a small like-minded group. Then developing or 'prototyping' your idea without over-planning and then implementing your idea, or "performing" (Figure 5). For Scharmer, this involves a new way of working or, as he puts it, "the enemies on the way up the U are the three old methods of operating: executing without improvisation and mindfulness (reactive action); endless reflection without a will to act (analysis paralysis); and talking without a connection to source and action (blah-blah-blah)" (Scharmer, 2008, p. 59). Central to the purpose of Theory U is to connect to one's "best future possibility and creating 'powerful breakthrough ideas'", (Scharmer, 2008, p. 59) by balancing the head, heart and hand. Without this, "one of the three dominates—the hand in mindless action, the head in endless reflection, the heart in endless networking" (Scharmer, 2008, p. 59).

In summary, Theory U seeks to tap into the hidden dimensions of leadership. For Scharmer, for profound change to take place in response to contemporary crises there needs to be a shift of the mind, the heart and the will. "I have come to refer to this deeper shift as "presencing" ... [which] signifies a heightened state of attention that allows individuals and groups to operate from a future space of possibility that they feel wants to emerge. Being able to facilitate that shift is the essence of leadership today" (Scharmer, 2008, p. 59).



Section 4: Being problem-centred

In this section, we consider what it means to take a problem-centred approach, creating democratic and deliberative spaces to facilitate engagement with complexity, and the role of problem-solving processes and protocols. We then discuss the challenges involved in determining the right scale at which problems can be tackled and the task of problem definition.

4.1 Creating democratic and deliberative spaces

A central objective of the LLP process is to create a safe space and well-facilitated process through which participants can come together and engage with particularly challenging issues in their community or in their area of work.

Although Rittel and Webber did not provide detailed advice on how wicked problems might be managed in the future, they did advocate a process-driven approach: a “model of planning as an argumentative process in the course of which an image of the problem and of the solution emerges gradually among the participants, as a product of incessant judgement, subjected to critical argument” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 162). They highlighted the importance of accepting and embracing pluralistic approaches rather than trying to suppress dissenting views. Rejecting technocratic approaches to planning, the alternative proposition is stakeholder engagement through inclusive and trust-based processes of debate and dialogue. Such processes are necessary as differing perspectives and value systems can cause conflict which must be managed in an effort to reach a common understanding of the problem before moving towards consideration of potential solutions or improvements.

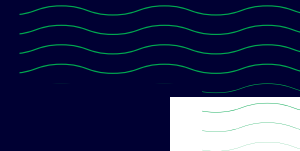
This accords with the approach advocated by Jurgen Habermas,²² philosopher and public intellectual. The essence of Habermas’ work is that people can only learn and truly understand things if they are active participants in the creation of knowledge. Essentially, knowledge is created by a process of ‘argumentation’ in which participants agree to listen to each other as well as putting forward their views, in an attempt to come to the best understanding of what to do about complex problems.

The LLP promotes collaborative inquiry involving stakeholders directly involved in or with particular experience or knowledge of frontline engagement with complex social problems in Ireland. Recognised expert on Action Learning, Reg Revans,²³ proposed the following equation: $L=P+QI$. He argues that all true learning (L) is a combination of building on received knowledge, which he called Programmed Knowledge (P), and the insight that is developed as people address complex problems. He called this Questioning Insight (QI). For Revans, the best learning comes through groups of people who are committed to each other, as they seek solutions to pressing problems for which there is no known answer but which they have to solve. He called such people Comrades-in-Adversity. In such situations, the problem is always shaped by a wider context yet change also depends on individuals having to confront their own ignorance and habits of thought and practice. He was dismissive of so-called ‘knowledge’ in the form of untested claims or knowledge that has no practical use. Following on from Revans, a key purpose of the LLP is to bring about change that matters to people in communities or at least to show how positive change could be brought about.

An inclusive approach is necessary because complex policy problems are value-based, involving different assumptions, interests and capacities from different stakeholders. This may lead to disagreements about the origins and nature of a problem, what is required to address it and what success may look like in overcoming it. The LLP seeks to bring participants together in a safe deliberative space away

²² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jurgen-Habermas>

²³ <https://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/action-learning/reg-revans/>



from their busy work and personal lives so that they have the time, free from distraction, to focus on complex problems and, with other committed professionals, develop innovative responses. In order to foster trust, accountability and friendship, the programme adopts a closed group approach,²⁴ seeking to ensure that the same group of people (Revans' Comrades-in-Adversity) interact with each other for the duration of the programme. Building in *trust* to LLP design is further enabled by adopting the Chatham House Rules principles, where anyone who participates in a meeting is free to use information from the discussion but not to ascribe a particular comment to an individual.²⁵ The purpose of these design features is to promote and enhance open discussion.

4.2 Problem solving protocols

As organisations have increasingly engaged with complexity, there also appears to be increasing convergence around the steps or protocols being adopted by different programmes in terms of how to respond to wicked or complex public policy challenges.²⁶ One of the most well-known problem-solving models is used by police organisations: the four-step SARA model (Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment).²⁷ This four stages that the model employs are:

- Scanning: identifying and prioritising potential crime and disorder problems. Scanning involves identifying persistent problems that cause harm, affect the community and call for police attention.
- Analysis: analysing potential problems by gathering information and intelligence to identify underlying causes of the problems.
- Response: developing and implementing tailored activities to address the causes of the problem identified in the analysis phase.
- Assessment: measuring the impact of the response to test if it had the desired effect and making changes to the response if required.

The SARA model is best used to precisely identify a specific type of crime that is suitable for problem-solving rather than a broad category of crime. For example, while everyone may agree that drug selling is a problem, what aspect causes the most crime or harm: the drug dealers selling in the vicinity of a school or playground? The younger children being recruited as lookouts or to deliver drugs?²⁸

The Working Group on Public Problem Solving is a group of public policy educators from across the United States who met at Stanford University in 2019 to present innovative approaches to teaching public policy and explore opportunities for collaboration.²⁹ The workshop participants concluded that traditional public policy education suffers from a number of shortcomings and found several commonalities among their own approaches. Arising from this, they developed a shared statement expressing a new direction for public policy teaching and established a website as a platform to invite and support others in joining this movement which they named the Working Group on Public Problem Solving. Key to the future of public problem solving in response to complex problems is the need to develop "expertise in the craft or practice of solving public problems ... understand the interests of key stakeholders, organize coalitions for change, communicate objectives, and implement policies in a world full of competing actors and binding constraints".³⁰

24 Closed group approaches are often used in therapy to address some forms of psychological distress. A specific number of people are brought together for a specific period of time and no one else is allowed to join the group during this period.

25 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>

26 See discussion in Sparrow (2008), pp. 157-160.

27 The SARA model builds on Herman Goldstein's *Problem-Oriented Policing* and was developed and coined by John Eck and William Spelman (1987) in *Problem-solving: Problem-oriented policing in Newport News*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. <https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/problem-solving-policing>

28 See the video example from the UK College of Policing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qBYU6KDq4E>

29 <https://fsi.stanford.edu/publicproblemsolving/aboutus>

30 <https://fsi.stanford.edu/publicproblemsolving/docs/statement-education-public-problem-solving>



From a review of various *ad hoc* programmes and methods for public problem solving, three basic tasks seem to be a common focus:

1. assessment or identification of problems in ways that draw heavily on local history and context, on fieldwork with and listening to how the people who are most affected see the problem, informed by an educated ethics and civic sensibility.
2. development of possible answers with a method for policy design, a method that includes arguments about operational objectives, theories about what to do and a choreography of actions that comprehend the relevant institutions and stakeholders.
3. an approach to implementation that is grounded in the field, learning from the experiences of the users, the participants and other stakeholders, expecting constant adaptation amid experiments and constant evaluation of evidence about what is going on.³¹

The LLP adopts Sparrow’s six-stage protocol or problem-solving template (Table 2). This consists of a sequence of distinct stages through which participants progress as they address their chosen issue or wicked problem. This is outlined in further detail in section 5. To date, the LLP concludes at stage four (*Develop solutions/interventions*) as participants might not necessarily have the resources or capacity to implement their proposals. This is also not the main purpose of the LLP, which is primarily aimed at increasing practitioner familiarity with practical tools for problem description, problem definition and the co-development and design of solutions.

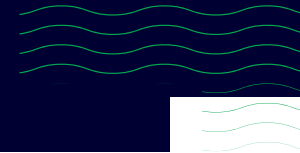
Problem-solving protocol (Sparrow, 2008, p. 158)
Stage 1 Nominate & select potential problem area for attention
Stage 2 Define the problem precisely
Stage 3 Determine how to measure impact
Stage 4 Develop solutions/interventions
Stage 5 (a) Implement the plan
Stage 5 (b) Periodic monitoring/review/adjustment
Stage 6 Project closure and long term monitoring/maintenance

Table 2: Problem-solving protocol

4.3 What size of problem is the right one?

As Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 164) point out, “every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem”, so choosing the level at which to address a problem can be challenging. Choose too high a level and one is likely to become overwhelmed by the scale of the task; choose too low a level and one is merely trying to cure a symptom at such a minor level that either nobody will notice or really care. The LLP is aimed primarily at practitioners or individuals who have experience of or responsibility for frontline activity in responding to real complex problems. Deciding how big or small a problem to take on, and in what dimensions a problem should be defined, are decisions that are best made by such people who are familiar with local context. As Sparrow points out, these types of decisions are routinely made “as part of ordinary operational practice” (Sparrow, 2008, p. 79).

31 <https://fsi.stanford.edu/publicproblemsolving/docs/statement-education-public-problem-solving>



In practice, given the range of choices available, such decisions are extremely challenging. In the LLP, to guide participants to choose problems at an appropriate level and which merit the time commitment of the programme, we draw from Sparrow's five-level framework (Figure 6) (Sparrow, 2008, p. 80).

Identifying <i>big enough</i> and yet <i>small enough</i> problems [Sparrow 2008]		
Scale	Focus	Comments
Highest level 5	Broad categories of harm [e.g. poverty, crime, health]	• Political/ideological differences • Macro-level analysis • Programme adjustments
High level 4	Specific Harms elevated to crisis level	• Public/political visibility • Inability to control generates embarrassment • Urgency requires concerted action
Mid level 3	Anything in between	• Small enough to present as optional • Large enough to require organisational innovation/uncontentional planning
Low level 2	Problems/Patterns can be dealt with by informal groupings of motivated practitioners	• Not big enough to require organisational innovation • Tailor made solutions • Innovations heralded as successes
Lowest level 1	One specific case or incident	• Routine processes • Workload distribution • Focus on service quality • Not part of a pattern

Figure 6: Levels at which harms can be identified and addressed

Level 1 and Level 5 are at two extremes. Level 1 represents problems that are so small that they represent one incident and are not part of a pattern. In all likelihood, organisations probably already have 'incident response' procedures and processes in place to react to such problems on a case-by-case basis. Examples might include responding to customer complaints or citizens' rights queries (Sparrow, 2008, pp. 79-95). At the other extreme are what Sparrow refers to as Level 5 problems where problems are not specific. They are made up of multiple factors although they may be defined simply: as poverty or crime, for example. Analysis of and responses to such problems often take place at a national macro, political level.

Level 4 problems are described by Sparrow as those problems which become publicly visible and cause embarrassment to the extent that organisations have little choice but to come together and find solutions. Homelessness leading to rough sleeping on the streets or murders committed by organised crime gangs would be examples of Level 4 problems. Level 2 problems are smaller problems which are taken on by motivated and creative individuals where "the agency itself does not have to do anything other than tolerate their initiative" and support innovation (Sparrow, 2008, p. 83). Examples could be changing the opening hours of a service to facilitate a specific group of users, delivering meals to isolated elderly people or adjusting but not significantly changing the nature of the service.

Level 3 problems are those problems which are 'in between' and which need an organised response and, according to Sparrow, "a system for supporting projects (because they are too large to be conducted by individuals without support), and a method for launching such projects as a part of ordinary operational practice rather than waiting for embarrassing failures to grow to crisis proportions" (Sparrow, 2008, p. 84). However, for many institutions, working on such issues appears optional unless a crisis emerges. Consequently, Sparrow earmarks what he calls Level 3 problems as being the ones which bring about the most effective deployment of problem-solving resources.

4.4 Developing problem statements and passing the crush test

At the beginning of an LLP, the objective is to identify a mid-level problem; come to an agreed description of the problem and its size and shape; develop thoughts about how the problem sustains itself; and then define or describe it in a short statement. In this exercise, participants are asked to come together, leaving their professional responsibility or agency role outside the door and collectively agree the problem definition. Sparrow uses the analogy of untying a knot to illustrate this process. To describe the “modes of thought and action which make harm-reduction efforts effective”, he compares the approach that an adult might take to a complex task with that of a child (Sparrow, 2008, p. 8).



Give a knotted mass of string to an adult, who has developed all of the relevant cognitive skills (and maybe had some experience too) and watch how they behave ... how they look at it this way, then that ... examining it diligently from all sides – careful ... not to pull or tug or to make matters worse – until they begin to understand the *structure of the thing itself*. As the structure of the knot becomes clearer, so the components or stages of a plan begin to form in their minds. By contrast, give the same knot to a child, who has yet to develop this set of cognitive skills ... Witness their frustration as they tug and pull and generally make matters worse. Note the alacrity with which the child jumps into action, applying crude methods that usually fail.

Problem statements seek to provide as much precision as possible in specifying the problem or harm to be addressed. In carrying out this task, which is about focusing attention, energy and resources on selected problems rather than on preferred methods or programmes, practitioners, as Sparrow points out, “will discover soon enough that the terrain in the task environment is considerably more complex, messier and harder to navigate than the neatly organised toolshed” (Sparrow, 2008, pp. 78-79). To assist participants in the LLP to determine the appropriate level and scale of a chosen problem, some guidance and navigational aids provided by Sparrow are utilised. These are listed in table 3 below.

Problem definition: Choosing the right scale and passing the ‘Crush’ test (derived from Sparrow, 2008, pp. 86-87)

Does the problem consist of a single, coherent object so that the analysis embraces all aspects of the harm, but aims in the end to produce just one successful intervention?

Does the analysis capture the whole of that object so that, once the job is done, it does not have to be repeated, or done elsewhere, to cover other parts of the problem?

How would you feel, as an individual, or as part of a small team, if you were made responsible for solving this problem?

- Would it feel overwhelming and hopeless?
- Or would it feel challenging, but possible?
- Can you imagine coming up with something that might make a real difference within a reasonable timeframe, even if you can’t think of it now?
- Is this something you could wrap your head around?
- Which is more likely: that the possibility of success would make your job more rewarding and exciting; or would you give up in despair, duck for cover, or look for another job?

Table 3: Problem definition: Choosing the right scale and passing the ‘Crush’ test

Participants are encouraged to spend some time thinking through and discussing the questions outlined above. This exercise enables them to develop realistic assessments of what commitment to addressing a particular issue might look like in their own role or organisation.



Section 5: Being evidence informed

In this section, we consider what it means to be evidence-informed and the need for, and conditions of, collective impact to bring about cross-sector coalitions. We then look at the role of evaluation.

5.1 Describing problems and using evidence

In making judgements under conditions of uncertainty, there is a need for real-time bespoke evidence to assist in decision-making. This means professionals setting strategies and choosing activities that have a reasonable chance of working. Rittel and Webber accepted that data, logic and expertise were useful and essential but saw them as insufficient for understanding wicked problems that are fundamentally contested by stakeholders. This is because “The information needed to *understand* the problem depends upon one’s idea for *solving it*” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 161). Improvements could only be made through participatory approaches where different value systems are embraced. In this scenario, discussions, debates and decisions need to be informed by a thoughtful combination of practice wisdom, consultation, theory, research findings and the sensible use of critical data to ensure effective monitoring, evaluation and review. The LLP takes this broad approach to evidence. This has been defined as “An approach that helps people and organisations make well-informed decisions by putting the best available evidence at the heart of practice development and service delivery” (Nutley, 2010).³²

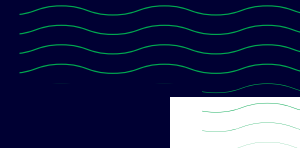
In the context of programmes such as the LLP, this approach to being informed by evidence must also be relevant to community-based learning. As Schorr states, “Communities will be able to act most effectively when they can combine local wisdom and their understanding of local circumstances with accumulated knowledge, drawn from research, theory, and practice, about what has worked elsewhere, what is working now, and what appears promising” (Schorr, 2003, p. 10).

5.2 Embracing emergence — the five conditions of collective impact

With wicked problems, “there is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 163). Similarly, in addressing the types of harms described above, “it is difficult to tell, in any systematic way, what has and has not been accomplished (in terms of changes in external conditions), then it is very difficult to see clearly what to do next” (Sparrow, 2008, p. 147). In the LLP, when confronted with complex problems participants are encouraged to innovate or think differently from their conventional approaches to such problems. In almost every programme to date, participants have highlighted the need to work effectively across different sectors. Kania and Kramer refer to this as Collective Impact, which is about working for change through “a highly structured cross-sector coalition” (Kania and Kramer, 2013, p. 1).

Being open to innovation is important, as predetermined solutions, ignorant of context, tend not to work when responding to conditions of complexity. They can be overly brittle and ill-equipped to adapt. “The process and results of collective impact are emergent rather than predetermined, the necessary resources and innovations often already exist but have not yet been recognized, learning is continuous, and adoption happens simultaneously among many different organizations” (Kania and Kramer, 2013, p. 2). The term ‘emergence’ is used in a way akin to the process of evolution. “There is no ultimate ‘solution’ beyond the process of continual adaptation within an ever-changing environment” (Kania and Kramer, 2013, p. 2). To say that a solution is emergent, however, does not mean that plans or structures do not have a central role. The five conditions of collective impact are set out in Table 4 below. These can be understood as “rules for interaction that lead to synchronised and emergent results” (Kania and Kramer, 2013, p. 2).

³² Quoted in Bamber, J., Rowley, C. and Power, A. (2012) ‘Speaking Evidence to Youth Work – and Vice Versa’, *A Journal of Youth Work*, 10, p. 47.



Embracing emergence – the five conditions of collective impact (Kania and Kramer, 2013)	
Agenda	All participants have a shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.
Common Shared Measurement	Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable.
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
Continuous Communication	Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
Backbone Support	Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies.

Table 4: The five conditions of collective impact

5.3 Logic models, theories of change and evaluation of complex interventions

Sparrow argues that creative, tailor-made solutions applied to carefully scrutinised problems “produce quite substantial reductions or, in some cases, virtual elimination of problems altogether” (Sparrow, 2008, p. 129). However, proving causal connections between changes to the problem or issue and the intervention can be challenging. Especially at the initial stage of a possible intervention, in the LLP groups are not burdened with high expectations about rigorous forms of evaluation. Better that they can build in simple data collection requirements and know how they will be able to answer simple questions like ‘Are we getting there?’ and ‘What difference have we made, or what have we achieved?’ Participants in the LLP address complexities in their emerging proposals by articulating them in a theory of change using a logic model. A theory of change is essentially a comprehensive description and illustration of *why* a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. They are among the key tools of complex evaluation which, as new ideas and proposals develop, can then provide credible connections between cause and effect.

A logic model is a tool which can be used in developing a theory of change. It visualises the intended relationships between needs, objectives, resources, activities and results, explaining *how* something should happen.³³ It is an adaptable tool underpinning an intervention that can be used to demonstrate why and how a programme or a policy will bring about a desired change. Logic modelling brings together:

- Needs to be addressed – needs analysis
- Main ways in which the needs will be addressed – objectives
- Resources available to support the work – inputs
- Activities that come from deploying those resources – outputs
- Intended results of the activities – outcomes
- Ways of gathering information about progress – monitoring and evaluation
- Information that supports the needs analysis, choice of objectives, selection of activities and likelihood of results – evidence

³³ For details and examples of logic models see, for example, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Program Development and Evaluation Division of Extension. <https://logicmodel.extension.wisc.edu/>



A logic model is often expressed in graphical format on a single page and explains how input x can be expected to lead to outcome y by way of activity z. It allows the user to systematically work through the connections and components of an intervention or process.

A theory of change, as well as identifying the steps to be taken to bring about the desired results, can also help to identify the assumptions behind the activities to be undertaken, the risks arising from those assumptions and a coherent evidence-informed narrative outlining how and why overall impact can be achieved. In the LLP, participants work collaboratively in groups to develop their theory of change, or plan, in response to the problem or issue identified.³⁴ A key focus of the LLP is to encourage participants to be open to embracing new ideas. As Abercrombie et al. (2018, p. 8) point out, “More important than any particular methodology is the mindset with which you approach it. It doesn’t ultimately matter very much whether it’s called theory of change, systems change or something else, as long as there is curiosity about how change can best be pursued.”³⁵

Attributing causal change to a newly designed intervention may not be possible. However, gauging the *contribution* it is making to improved outcomes for people in communities, for example, is of significant value. According to Mayne (2008, p. 1), contribution analysis is one means of exploring attribution through assessing the part that a programme is playing in achieving observed results, particularly where experimental designs are not possible or desirable. It sets out to provide “reasonable evidence about the contribution being made by the programme”. In so doing, contribution analysis pays close attention to other factors external to the programme of intervention and methodically gauges what influence they may have had on impact. For Mayne (2011, p. 31), “The aim is to build a compelling and credible *contribution story* or *claim* that a reasonable person would agree with; to build *plausible* association ... The structure for the contribution claim is the theory of change, and the credibility of the claim rests on the extent to which the evidence gathered from *multiple sources* supports the theory of change.”

Finally, the process also highlights the importance of monitoring and learning from progress as the programme or intervention is being implemented. Carefully considered suites of monitoring data assist considerably in evaluating any initiative. It is important to use existing systems for routine data collection and access existing information if possible and where these are adequate.

34 See <https://logicmodel.extension.wisc.edu/>

35 <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/thinking-big-how-to-use-theory-of-change-for-systems-change/>

Section 6: The Local Leadership Programme

In this section, we introduce the REPPP LLP, its key objectives and intended participants. It is then briefly described as a process of design and its key stages outlined: problem definition, developing solutions and making proposals.

6.1 Grappling with wicked problems in turbulent times

The objectives of the programme are to:

1. Increase practitioner familiarity with practical tools for problem description and definition and for developing solutions.
2. Enhance competence in evidence-informed approaches to making better decisions.
3. Improve cross-agency/disciplinary, integrated and collaborative approaches to dealing with complexity.
4. Produce co-designed proposals for new strategies and practices for more effective, collaborative and integrated solutions to problems that are fit for purpose.

The LLP seeks to bring participants together away from their busy work and personal lives so that they have the time and peace of mind to focus on complex problems and, along with other committed professionals with whom they interact locally or in their areas of work, increase their familiarity with practical tools for problem description and definition and for the co-development and design of solutions.

The LLP supports participants to critically examine the nature, character and facets of wicked problems. All programme stages and tasks contribute cumulatively to a considered, evidence-informed and realistic proposal for change. This work is supported by a number of structured inputs throughout the course of the programme, drawing from some key concepts in the field of complex problem theory. In this way, the programme seeks to support policy improvement by creating an opportunity to use a range of methods and lenses to support frontline leaders as they engage with complex social phenomena so that they can manage them better.

A motif for the LLP is *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, the 1633 painting by the Dutch Golden Age painter Rembrandt van Rijn.³⁶ Just as the development of sea navigation instruments over time supported sailors to 'weather the stormy seas', the LLP seeks to mobilise the social sciences and the field of evidence-informed policy ideas in support of public leaders as they grapple with complex problems in turbulent times.



³⁶ The inspiration for this comes from Peter L. Bernstein who uses the painting to convey the challenges of risk management in uncertain environments. See Bernstein, P. L. (1996) *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*. New York: Wiley.

6.2 Intended participants

The programme is best suited for leaders who are comfortable with stepping out of their conventions, engaging in new learning and actively participating in collaborative problem-solving and planning. The application process asks participants to consider the relevance of their roles to the aims of the programme, what they can bring in terms of experience and knowledge, what they would want to take from the programme and how they would want to apply the learning in their own organisation and more widely. Importantly, participants need the support of their organisations to participate and must be prepared to progress learning from the programme in the work setting. Many participants are frontline professionals and are likely to be engaged in significant attempts to improve services and are expected to contribute their own relevant knowledge and expertise. To enhance group dynamics and promote post-programme network development, they are also required to commit to the full programme.

6.3 A process of design

The programme format is adaptable. To date, programmes have typically taken place over three overnight blocks of two days; these are facilitated by members of the REPPP team.³⁷ During these blocks, participants receive theoretical inputs from team members and guest speakers with expertise on specific topics that might arise during the programme. Before the start of the programme and between blocks, participants participate in short online meetings. They are also expected to read selected articles and watch suggested videos. The bulk of the work, however, takes place during the residential blocks. During the residency, plenary sessions include 'stress tests' in which teams present ideas to peers for constructive suggestions and observations. Participants may also consult and seek additional information from outside the programme.

Figure 7 provides an illustration of the programme process. The programme takes participants through a systematic, deliberative process of design in relation to complex social problems. The intention is that they identify problems to examine that are sufficiently ambitious to make a recognisable difference but are also feasible in terms of marshalling the necessary resources and supports. Finally, teams of eight to ten participants, which are formed in the first block, present their ideas for change to a panel of experts for comments and suggestions.

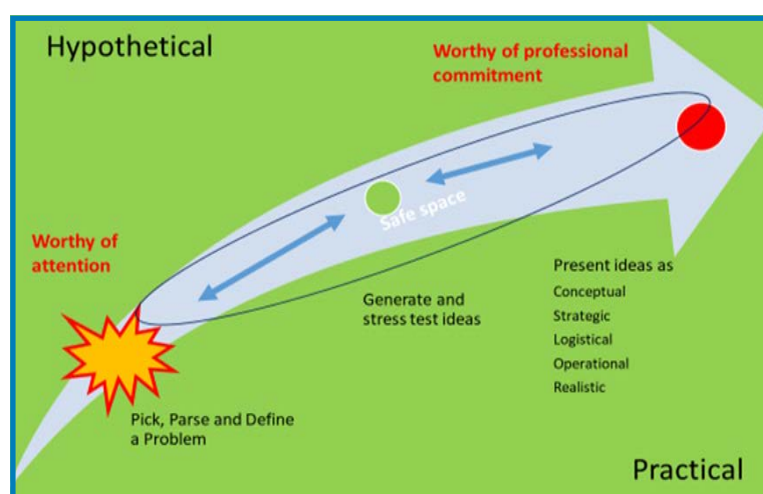


Figure 7: The Local Leadership programme - a design process

While the organisation of the programme can vary depending on specific requirements, it is usually scheduled in three two-day blocks. Each block has a theoretical and practical focus, with each day resting on one or two key ideas. The ideas constitute a heuristic, which is an aid to learning, discovery and problem-solving (see Appendix One). The three connected parts focus on problem description and definition, generating potential solutions and making proposals for change. The process begins with short inputs on the nature of wicked problems and bringing about social and organisational change. The theory is then applied to a small number of complex problems identified

by participants before the start of the programme (and agreed by the programme commissioning agent) or to three or four problems identified from a longer list generated on the programme by the whole group.

³⁷ During Covid 19 restrictions, programmes had to go online for some stages so they took on a blended format.



Block One: Problem definition

Block One gives significant attention to understanding the nature of the problems identified and how they sustain themselves. When identifying and developing solutions, allocating sufficient time to analysing the problem is essential. This should give a strong foundation for work at later stages as comprehensive problem description is an essential prerequisite for realistic, practical responses. Selecting and analysing problems is a pivotal part of the LLP. Choosing and agreeing problems can be challenging, however. Participants may come to the programme with multiple issues of concern. Participants are brought through a series of stages or structured questions to help them define and analyse the chosen problems.

This initial process of problem analysis can be frustrating for participants as they may already believe that they know the answer or that an answer is obvious. Alternatively, they may become exhausted and infuriated at the repeated probing of an issue. However, as Rittel and Webber emphasise, as every wicked problem is essentially unique, “part of the art of dealing with wicked problems is the art of not knowing too early which type of solution to apply” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 164). The potential for unintended negative consequences arising from poorly planned and rushed interventions necessitates a patient process of examination and deliberation.

Once participants have landed on a clear agreed problem statement, in Block Two they can turn their attention to thinking about potential solutions.

Block Two: Potential solutions informed by evidence

In Block Two, teams share their problem analysis in a peer review process with the larger plenary group. We have referred to this as a ‘stress test’. The purpose of this ‘stress test’ is to ensure that each smaller team has considered the problem from multiple perspectives and can convincingly articulate how the problem sustains itself. By surfacing often implicit and hidden assumptions, the process also aims to provoke thinking about unintended consequences (of particular risk with wicked problems). This process is intended to cultivate robustly designed, theoretically supported, realistic and grounded solutions to problems.

With complex problems, there are no simple, repeatable or proven solutions. They tend to come by drawing from existing knowledge and practices, however limited, and learning from attempts in real time to make positive changes. Block Two includes an input on how different sources of evidence can be used to inform both problem analysis and decision-making. Participants are encouraged to go systematically through their analysis of the problem and to consider what evidence is available to support their understanding.

The sources of evidence might include some of the following:

- research available in the academic literature
- demographic data and statistics
- consultations with users, residents, professionals or experts to get a better picture of what is happening and/or to inform planning
- information in an agency’s own internal systems of monitoring or evaluation, where these exist
- accumulated practice wisdom contained in good practice guidelines or quality frameworks, for example
- the location of the work, issue or problem within a specific evidence-informed policy domain
- theory or well-established concepts: for example, ‘experiential learning’.³⁸ This is the process of learning through reflection by doing, or ‘co-designing’, a participatory approach to developing solutions.³⁹
- learning contained in evaluation reports where these are relevant to the issue, problem or proposed line of action.

38 <https://experientiallearninginstitute.org/what-is-experiential-learning/> (Accessed 24th March 2025).

39 <https://www.beyondstickynotes.com/what-is-codesign> (Accessed 24th March 2025).



Not all of these evidence sources have to be in play but potentially they can all be useful. Evidence drawn from multiple sources can have a stronger base.

It is during the process of in-depth problem analysis that previous responses or interventions tend to be re-examined in a new light. It is also at this stage that we can see fresh thinking and novel responses to seemingly intractable problems emerging (Kania and Kramer, 2013, p. 1). As proposals are developed, reflections on the past provide a critical foundation for new ideas. The emphasis shifts to ensuring that design decisions, where proposed actions are clearly linked to intended outcomes, are fully supportable and can be feasibly implemented.

Block Three: Making proposals

In Block Three, ideas are refined by the teams and again peer reviewed by the wider group. The focus is on putting together and making a convincing case about the potential of the designed response to bring about the desired change(s). Effective solutions to problems are intrinsically capable of enactment. Also, communicating ideas effectively to a wide range of audiences is essential to collaborative problem solving. An external panel of experts, not dissimilar to a 'Dragons' Den',⁴⁰ examines the proposals made by each team and provides constructive feedback to further develop the ideas. It is not anticipated that teams will want, or need, to take proposals forward, as several outcomes are possible. The proposals are essentially considered design responses to social problems. Proposals can be subject to further development, contingent on approval from decision-makers where necessary or dependent on the availability of resources. Another possibility is that the team hands the proposal over to others who might be in a better position to carry it through to implementation. The logic behind the design focus of the LLP is not to worry participants too much during the programme about whether something is implementable at that stage; this could produce sub-optimal and possibly conventional responses. Although some ideas have been taken up post-programme, that is not its primary objective.

⁴⁰ Dragons' Den is a British reality television business programme where entrepreneurs pitch for investment from a group of venture capitalists.

Section 7: Programmes to date

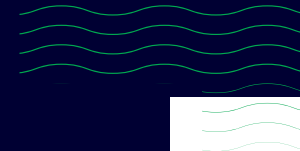
In this section, we review the programmes which have taken place to date. The programme themes and problem areas that participants have focused on are presented in anonymised form. Between 2019 and 2023, more than 150 professionals representing a wide variety of organisations from the statutory, community and voluntary and educational sectors participated in the LLP.

7.1 Problem themes addressed on previous programmes

The table below lists the types of wicked problems that participants grappled with on previous programmes.

- Stopping open drug dealing in a specific location.
- Improving the effectiveness of and fostering new community leadership.
- Developing a new way of working between the statutory sector and community and voluntary bodies.
- Addressing the educational impacts of school refusal and reduced timetables.
- Dealing with the effects of excessive staff turnover in child and family services.
- Encouraging innovation and flexibility in professional life.
- Addressing developmental delay in children in their formative years in homeless accommodation.
- Investigating ways of increasing school attendance, participation and retention in educational settings for marginalised children including Traveller and Roma children.
- Exploring how communications between marginalised groups and wider society can be improved and how such improvements can be supported with a robust research and evaluation framework.
- Investigating ways of improving supports for those leaving aftercare services.
- Enhancing rural connectivity between people and human services in remote rural areas through a 'no wrong door' approach.
- Reducing information technology poverty among older people in a remote rural area to reduce loneliness and social isolation and associated negative mental and physical health impacts.
- Strengthening connections between professionals in a remote location through expanded integrated working.
- Building sustainable relations between An Garda Síochána and the young black Irish community in a specific location.
- Developing integrated responses to criminal networks in an urban environment.
- Responding to anti-social behaviour in a specific Approved Housing Body estate.
- Improving the way Approved Housing Bodies respond to anti-social behaviour, including reforming regulatory powers, so that tenants can be sustained in their own homes while also reducing the impact of anti-social behaviour on other residents.
- Building community efficacy in housing estates so that residents feel safe in addressing their own community problems and improving quality of life.
- Establishing an autonomous centre for the Travelling community and addressing general exclusion of ethnic minorities in a specific town.
- Building resilience, self-care and safety in children as they transition from primary school in a rapidly evolving social and digital era.

Table 5: Types of problems addressed on previous Local Leadership Programmes



Programme themes to date

A number of broad themes can be identified across the LLPs that have taken place to date.

Anti-social behaviour, crime and policing

These include how to respond to anti-social behaviour and crime which emerged as issues in almost all programmes to date; responding to criminal networks engaged in open drug dealing; and building community efficacy in response to anti-social behaviour on specific housing estates. Responses also included enhancing the capacity of Approved Housing Bodies to address anti-social behaviour and sustain people in their tenancies through regulatory reform. In one LLP, the focus was on understanding the experiences of members of An Garda Síochána and black Irish children and young people so as to improve future interactions, particularly in relation to the use of police stop-and-search powers.

Enhancing partnership working

A key theme that emerged related to the challenges involved with professionals working effectively in partnership with other professionals. The challenges identified manifested themselves differently in each location. For example, in one location widespread trust issues between participants from different agencies, and especially between state and community and voluntary sector agencies, were evident. The group addressing this issue developed a proposal which called for a new way of working.

For a rural LLP, the concern was the isolated and peripheral location; availability of and access to suitable spaces to facilitate the delivery and take up of services; and information and knowledge about what services were available and how to access them. This group went on to explore the concept of 'no wrong door', as outlined in the Youth Justice Strategy, to support young people and families to access appropriate services.⁴¹ In a related activity, the same LLP programme also considered how to address similar issues related to rurality but in terms of strengthening connections and cooperation between professionals working in the area.

Education reform, disadvantage and vulnerability

The need to develop innovative ways of providing educational supports and other services to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups was a cross-cutting theme. In one LLP that spanned a rural and urban location, a group of participants considered how a small number of children and young people (less than 5 per cent of the specific cohort) were unsupported to participate fully in education. The group looked specifically at school refusal (where students for a variety of reasons refuse to attend school or have difficulty remaining in classes for an entire day) and reduced timetables (where, by arrangement with the school authorities, a student arrives at school after the usual starting time or leaves before the end of the school day). Reducing barriers to attendance, participation and retention in schools for children from minority ethnic groups was also a theme. The group also considered how to improve progression from Junior Certificate to Leaving Certificate for young people from minority ethnic communities. Participants in one programme considered how, due to the marginalisation of Travellers and Roma people in Ireland, their voices are often absent from discussions about policies that impact their lives. The group developed a proposal to rethink and reimagine ways of working with children and families from Traveller and Roma communities in educational settings.

The issue of education was also a focus of an LLP where one group considered how, through social media, children can be exposed to many negative influences in relation to illicit drugs and other substances that adults, service providers and policy makers often cannot access or fully understand. The proposal from the group aimed to build resilience, self-care and safety in children as they transition from primary school in a rapidly evolving social and digital era.

41 http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Youth_Justice_Strategy A 'no wrong door' approach aims to provide a streamlined service delivery and seamless and easy access to the right support for individuals. It sometimes adopts a trauma-informed approach and requires government agencies and services to adapt to the needs of service users instead of service users having to fit into specific criteria to access support.



Homelessness and aftercare

The issue of homelessness and the impact it can have on vulnerable children was a focus of one of the groups. It estimated that, at the time of the programme, there was a significant number of families including young children living in hotels, homeless hubs and hostels in the location. The focus of this group was on developing a way to address developmental delay in such children in their formative years (0-5) by providing 'reach-in' support services to them and their parents.

Minority rights

A cross-cutting theme was about protecting minority rights. Barriers to social exclusion included experiences of racism and discrimination; a sense of not feeling heard, involved or visible; and a lack of trust and understanding of voluntary and statutory organisations. To address this issue and to become a county where ethnic minority community members' voices and participation was meaningful, as a first step one group proposed the creation of an autonomous Traveller project. Although challenging to bring about, this initiative was seen as a potential catalyst towards addressing a much broader and complex range of issues.

The programmes addressed a number of other stand-alone problems. These included improving the effectiveness of, and fostering, new community leadership in one urban location; dealing with the effects of excessive staff turnover in child and family services, which was an issue common across many programmes; and encouraging innovation and flexibility in professional life through a re-balancing of frontline service provision and governance demands so that the former is prioritised and the latter not neglected. One programme in an isolated rural location, and which occurred during the Covid lockdown, considered how the restrictions imposed by the public health measures exacerbated rural isolation and loneliness. One group in this LLP aimed to reduce information technology poverty among older people to reduce loneliness and social isolation and associated negative mental and physical health impacts.



Section 8: The Local Leadership Programme – Reflections and future directions

Identifying suitable policy processes to address wicked problems has become the most important challenge for public governance in the modern era. (Head, 2022, p. 35).

In this section, we present illustrative feedback about the programme. Following the completion of each programme, participants are asked to complete a feedback form which invites them to provide comments on aspects of the programme. They are encouraged to provide constructive criticism from which future programmes could benefit. Based on the feedback, the programme has evolved over time. The feedback is summarised thematically below.

8.1 Programme feedback/learning

A number of outcomes were anticipated from the programme:

- That participants are exposed to new knowledge that is considered practical and applicable for dealing with complex problems.
- That practitioner familiarity with practical tools for problem description definition and developing solutions is increased.
- Competence in evidence-informed approaches to making better decisions is enhanced.
- Cross-agency/disciplinary, integrated and collaborative approaches to dealing with complexity are improved.
- Groups working together produce co-designed proposals for new strategies and practices for more effective, more collaborative, more integrated and fit for purpose solutions to problems.

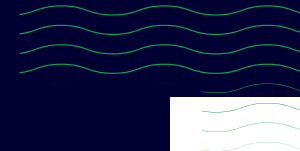
Progress in delivering on these outcomes is reflected in some of the comments below. Many of the 150 professionals who have participated in the LLP found it 'worthwhile', 'interesting', 'educational', 'enjoyable', 'of practical benefit', 'challenging', 'tangible', 'informative'. Many participants also referred to its benefit in terms of facilitating networking and the development and improvement of professional relationships and partnerships.

Exposure to new knowledge

It was hoped that participants would appreciate being exposed to new knowledge that is considered practical and applicable for dealing with complex problems in their work. The following comments reflect this:

Overall an enjoyable experience as I learnt a lot and I know I would be comfortable in bringing back the same templates in order to examine/explore wicked problems that we encounter in our advocacy roles with young people in care. *Limerick participant*

The programme was very beneficial to me personally with good insights into looking at complex problems in a user friendly academic setting for practitioners. It was a great example of practitioners and academia meeting and working together. The programme came out with a product of high quality and this was important also. *NIEC participant*



I found the readings hugely beneficial for both my organisation and I, and they gave me a richer vocabulary with which to express the issues I come up against in the NEIC. *NIEC participant*

Real good systematic approach to applying theory to practice. Really interesting course. *Limerick participant*

Programme format

The format of the programme in terms of taking a blended approach, combining online scientific inputs with three residential blocks, has been particularly appreciated.

Learned it's good to spend time on analysing a problem, learned not to be too afraid of looking at the problem and gathering evidence is time well spent and can often throw up more options in terms of addressing it. *Kerry participant*

Excellent programme, clearly well thought through with continuous emphasis on evidence from up-to-date literature and research. Ample time was built into the 6 days for exploring wicked problems in great detail – an excellent facilitator for our group with great skills and patience, I would highly recommend the programme to others, and it was a fantastic opportunity to enhance interagency cooperation in Longford. Thank you to all the team involved. *Longford participant*

Time to reflect

Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of getting away from their normal routine to escape from other distractions so that they had time to reflect on complex problems without rushing to solutions, which is normal practice.

The discussions that took place allowed for reflective thinking that are usually not available in typical work spaces or courses. I found this time of great benefit for myself in terms of how I think about and approach 'wicked problems' and my understanding of the complexities that exist in the NEIC. *NIEC participant*

The process adopted during the course was excellent for developing and designing proposals, solutions to problems and ways forward. It was challenging but fair and having the time to think, debate, critique and reflect undistracted from the normal day to day 'busyness' was refreshing and in reality the only way to effectively resolve 'wicked' problems. Replicating this outside the course is the challenge for all. *NIEC participant*

An opportunity for networking

Having an opportunity to network and work through problems with other professionals from different sectors or agencies in a safe space where trust can be fostered was also emphasised as crucial.

Really enjoyed the programme and networking with colleagues outside of our own general work areas – good learning all round. *Limerick participant*

Thoroughly enjoyable. It has enhanced my learning and has allowed for a practical and useful approach to achieving change at a local level. It was a fantastic way to network and collaborate with other stakeholders in the community and has allowed for strong connections and relationships to be built which is essential for policy change. *Longford participant*



Really great course, which has strengthened working relationships across several key community based and statutory services in Longford working in the Community Safety space. The projects are realistic and implementable, and the guidance of the facilitators was key to this. Would highly recommend this course. *Longford participant*

Thank you for providing us with the training. I really enjoyed it and on a side note I think the training also provided all participants with an opportunity to build stronger professional relationships amongst ourselves. *Limerick participant*

Neutral facilitation

Course participants repeatedly highlighted the guidance and support of neutral facilitators in helping to navigate complex issues and policy challenges with multiple and varied stakeholders.

The most beneficial piece for me was the learning that came from working through a problem with the group supported by the facilitator. The tools presented helped focus this but not dominate it. A good balance between theory and practice. *Limerick participant*

The programme excelled in providing comprehensive information, meticulous, relevant readings, and exceptional guidance from UL facilitators, contributing to an overall well-organised and high-quality experience. Suggestions for future programmes would be to involve more of the local statutory agencies. *Longford participant*

A broad approach to evidence

Another key feature that resonated with participants was the weight given to a broad evidence-informed approach, where practice wisdom is given equal standing with other evidence sources when grappling with wicked problems and where it is accepted that work of this nature is more akin to a craft than a science. Participants on the programme, from their invitation through the application process to the presentation to the 'Dragons' Den', are acknowledged as experts in their field, with the experience they have developed - often working at the frontline in challenging circumstances - formally recognised. The value of such experience may not always be sufficiently recognised at policy level or, when it is, sufficiently appreciated.

The programme gave us useful tools for problem-solving and improved our decision-making with evidence and tangible outputs. *Longford participant*

Excellent mix of practical discussion, academic understanding of problem identification, looking at impact and process evaluation and the sources of evidence needed. Very well structured and great to get critical feedback throughout the process. *Limerick participant*

Creative and feasible ideas

It was hoped that new ideas, worthy of leveraging senior support, would be developed in outline form during the programme.

The programme did really well in helping us understand and work towards social policy goals through careful problem analysis and designing effective strategies. It provided practical tools for problem-solving and improved our ability to make decisions based on evidence. *Longford participant*

There is a local commitment to address collaboratively the problem that we identified within the context of the programme. The work we invested [in] to date has ensured that we can hit the ground running. Thanks for giving me the opportunity. *Limerick participant*



We have developed a working group and hope to improve child health outcomes for children in homeless accommodation in Limerick. The programme supported the process of looking at the problem in more detail and working through the theory to make better, more evidence-based decisions. In day-to-day work it is difficult ... next to impossible to get the time to work through problems in a more logical, processed way. *Limerick participant*

Although seeing ideas implemented in practice is beyond the normal expectations of the programme, one of the recurring themes that have emerged from participants' feedback is appreciation that they have been afforded the time and 'head space' to grapple with complex problems in collaboration with other committed colleagues.

Managing conflict on the LLP

The feedback from the programme has been extremely positive. However, on some programmes there have been a number of challenging interactions. As discussed in Section 4, a central objective of the LLP process is to create a safe space and a well-facilitated process through which participants can come together and engage with particularly challenging issues in their community, their area of work or in wider Irish society. Although Rittel and Webber did not provide advice on how best to manage wicked problems in the future, they did advocate a "model of planning as an argumentative process in the course of which an image of the problem and of the solution emerges gradually among the participants, as a product of incessant judgement, subjected to critical argument" (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 162). They also highlighted the importance of encouraging dissenting views.

LLP participants are invited to engage fully and openly as different perspectives and value systems, and different professional and lived experiences, need to be examined to reach a common understanding of the problem before moving towards considering potential solutions or improvements. The experience of the LLP to date is that conflict can arise when dealing with, for example, local and professional power imbalances, issues around race and ethnicity and perceptions of prejudice or unconscious bias. Furthermore, as many wicked problems are legacies of past attempts at solutions, representatives of agencies perceived as responsible can be seen to be presently accountable. During the Covid 19 pandemic when programmes had to be conducted online, managing such issues was particularly challenging. This was, firstly, because engaging with sensitive topics requires a deep level of communication beyond surface-level interactions. It involves conversations that foster trust, understanding and connection. This requires people to be present, to listen actively and to share authentically. This is difficult to achieve remotely. It became apparent that the informal conversations over a cup of tea, during a cigarette break, at dinner or in the bar after the end of the formal sessions are also very important in terms of building trust and understanding.

A second challenge exacerbated by the public health restrictions during the pandemic was that, logistically, online programmes took a great deal longer to complete. Given the challenge of coordinating diaries, a programme that should have taken place over six days spread over four months instead took more than two years. That made it difficult to retain the same participants from agencies or organisations represented on the programme. The experience to date suggests that the use of closed group theory, discussed in Section 4, where the same people attend the programme from start to finish, is beneficial when dealing with sensitive matters.

In the final analysis, when people choose to take on wicked as distinct from tame problems, a degree of conflict is inevitable. It comes with the territory so the choice is to embrace and build on the learning that arises from it or to stick to the easy stuff.



8.2 Reflections on the LLP

The LLP is supported at government level and involves collaboration by the social sciences, statutory agencies, professionals and the community and voluntary sectors. As shown by its name — *Grappling with 'wicked' problems* — its aim is to make a distinctive contribution to problem-solving in the Irish policy landscape. A programme such as the LLP requires a developmental approach that emphasises adaptive management, learning and inclusive discussion. In this section, we reflect on some key aspects of the LLP to date. We then consider the potential for the programme to contribute further to policy development in response to complex public challenges.

In the LLP, most of the problems examined were rooted in poverty, inequality, ethnic differences, illicit drug use and community violence. These are structural and systemic problems and participants on programmes to date, most of whom were frontline workers or middle-level management, have been sensitive to the scale of such problems as in the normal course of their work they are often overwhelmed by them. Participants appreciate that many of the problems they encounter in their professional roles cannot be 'solved' or 'fixed' but rather need to be managed better.

In relation to this latter observation, it appears that Rittel and Webber's critique of primarily science-based or technical approaches to public policy and planning in response to complexity still has traction fifty years after its publication. As Head (2019, p. 182) points out on the continued relevance of wicked problem's analysis, "By drawing attention to the inherently political and conflictual dimensions of how enduring problems are defined and scoped, Rittel and Webber drew attention to the limits of scientific expertise in shaping appropriate policy responses to contested social issues."

Acknowledging the complexity or 'wickedness' of a problem enables us to identify what aspects of the problem can benefit most from focused attention and what kinds of interventions might be effective in tackling which part of the problem. The LLP is a stakeholder-oriented approach that uses an inclusive process to help build consensus towards shared goals using the best available evidence. It is an iterative-decentred approach to achieving progress. Focusing attention on mid-level problems, which are not so big as to be overwhelming and not so small as to be irrelevant in the overall scheme of things, enables policy makers and practitioners to achieve tangible progress, small wins or partial but significant solutions. The experience of the LLP to date highlights the inherent messiness of this process, particularly at the early stages. On the nature and importance of focusing on the difficult or messy stuff, Schon's metaphor of a swamp captures this point well:

there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the large society, while in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern ... There are those who choose the swampy lowland. They deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucially important problems and, when asked to describe their methods of inquiry, they speak of experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through.⁴²

Taking a problem-centred or harm-reduction approach, free from the confines of a particular programme and encouraged to innovate, solutions advanced on LLP programmes to date have been grounded, practical and commonsensical. Participants appear to be reflecting a sense that the problem as it presents itself is not *the* problem but that *the* problem may arise from how we have previously responded to the issues, with their attendant legacies. Participation on the programme shows a commitment to engage with such problems in new and different ways which requires fresh thinking and creativity.

Two key implications arise from these reflections which, we suggest, are relevant to the future potential of programmes such as the LLP. Firstly, it is important to not give up on the problems which are most challenging; secondly, effectively addressing wicked problems requires a different way of working.

⁴² Schon (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. Basic Books, pp. 42-43. Quoted in Head (2022), p. 51.



8.3 Focusing on the 'wicked' as distinct from the 'tame' problems — towards a new way of working

One of the most important distinctions that Rittel and Webber make is between wicked and tame problems. Maintaining this distinction is a central focus of the LLP. The intention is to spend time on the challenging issues rather than the easy ones. A key feature of the LLP, which can be challenging for participants, is the emphasis on spending time examining the problem until its nature and scope is understood and multiple and competing perspectives have been considered. In essence, this holds participants in that space when they would prefer to provide answers. In the LLP, while the focus is on wicked problems as defined by Rittel and Webber (1973) in Table 1, in practice participants have tended to converge around wicked features as part of a complex continuum or typology of problem types.⁴³

The experience of the LLP is that the process of agreeing and then collectively and succinctly defining complex problems and designing new innovative responses can be extremely challenging. As Sparrow (2008, p. 55) writes, "When institutions organise around specific concentrations of harm, rather than around functions or processes, they engage in a very different form of organisational behaviour. When they spot the *knots*, study them, and unpick them one by one, they depart from business as usual". This is also a collective, rather than an individual, process. Not only is the scale of the problems too large for individual resolution but problem solving is an operational method for working on identified harms that generally cross agency boundaries. A key theme that has emerged throughout the LLPs to date has been the importance of inter-agency and partnership working, focussing collective energy and creativity in the direction of one carefully selected wicked problem. This creates its own challenges. As Sparrow (2008, p. 67) further observes, "Absent any system for driving this type of work, and connecting it properly with everything else an agency does, whoever chooses to tackle a knot often has to invent the whole methodology themselves, provide all the energy and all the ideas, and enlist all the necessary partners." For Sparrow, problem-centred, harm-reduction oriented work is a distinct way of working.

8.4 Operationalising problem-centred harm reduction work

While I appreciate the courage and creativity of innovators, I would like the types of behaviour so far regarded as heroic and celebrated as innovative to become a little less exceptional. This would surely begin to happen more broadly if institutions learned to structure investments more often around pieces of the problem, and less often around pieces of the toolkit. (Sparrow, 2008, p. 78)

To date, the LLP has concluded at Stage 4 of Sparrow's problem-solving protocol (Develop solutions/interventions), referred to in Section 4. In practice, this has had both positive and negative consequences. As participants are invited on to the programme with the expectation that they will design as opposed to implement any proposals they produce, it can free them from their agency constraints and encourage blue sky, yet feasible, thinking. On the other hand, participants who have engaged in the process have produced demonstrable proposals that they believe should be implemented. After the programme concludes, participants can be frustrated that they or their agencies do not have the capacity or resources to deliver the carefully designed solutions that they have worked on, with the attendant hope that some other group or organisation might pick up their proposal and find the resources for its implementation. In essence, this means completing the stages in Sparrow's problem-solving protocol (Table 6).

This has a number of implications in terms of resources and approach. As Kania and Kramer (2013, p. 2) point out, creating and managing collective impact requires an organisation(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the initiative and to coordinate participating organizations

⁴³ See Head (2022) Chapter 2.



and agencies (see Table 4). Sparrow elaborates further on the practical implications of moving to a problem-centred organisational approach from a managerial and systemic perspective.⁴⁴ This includes a process for nominating and selecting problems; assigning responsibilities and resources; and establishing a recording and filing system, a reporting and reviewing system and a support system for team leaders. He also points to the need for a reward system for teams that achieve positive results and a system for learning in terms of what works (Sparrow, 2008, pp. 160-162).

Problem-solving protocol (Sparrow, 2008, p. 158)
Stage 1 Nominate & select potential problem area for attention
Stage 2 Define the problem precisely
Stage 3 Determine how to measure impact
Stage 4 Develop solutions/interventions
Stage 5 (a) Implement the plan
Stage 5 (b) Periodic monitoring/review/adjustment
Stage 6 Project closure and long term monitoring/maintenance

Table 6: Problem-solving protocol

Future iterations of the LLP may need to consider how such resources can be mobilised, particularly in the context of the already existing complex public governance landscape which involves numerous networks and partnerships. Partnership working has been a feature of government responses to policy imperatives for a number of years. Examples include Local Development Companies,⁴⁵ Children and Young Persons Services Committees (CYPSCs),⁴⁶ Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs)⁴⁷ and Local Community Safety Partnerships.⁴⁸ Clearly there is a policy commitment in Ireland to promoting partnership and collaborative approaches to public governance. There is also a commitment to responses being evidence-informed.⁴⁹

The key challenge or dilemma is how to incorporate a different way of working into the existing policy landscape. The experience of the LLP to date suggests that we have to be conscious that the process should not become resource-led and that there are merits in separating the best potential solutions from the resources available in order to break conventions and encourage blue sky thinking. For Sparrow, shifting to a task focus means moving beyond depending on existing processes and procedures and developing new operational practices where the organisation's central focus is on the nature of specific problems in the field. This, he writes, "is the moment where institutions discover the essence of craftsmanship, deploying combinations of tools around carefully defined tasks, and recognising more quickly when they need new tools" (Sparrow, 2008, p. 153). It involves organisations institutionalising a harm reduction approach and making it a core competence with supporting systems and structures to help manage it.

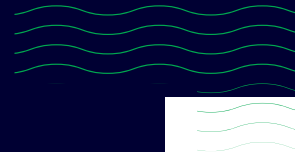
44 Sparrow refers to this as a managerial infrastructure.
45 <https://ildn.ie/about/local-development-companies/>
46 <https://www.cypsc.ie/>
47 <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/f4022e-local-community-development-committees-lcdcs/>
48 Policing, Security and Community Safety Act, 2023. For details of the Act, see A. Eustace, K. McGrath, I. Bailey I and J. Connolly (2024). *Local Community Safety Partnership Pilot: Final Evaluation Report*. Dublin: The Centre for Effective Services.
49 The Department of the Taoiseach is considering establishing a Programme Board to support the medium-longer term mainstreaming of a more coordinated and data-informed approach to responding to local challenges (Eustace et al., p. 78).



Section 9: Conclusion

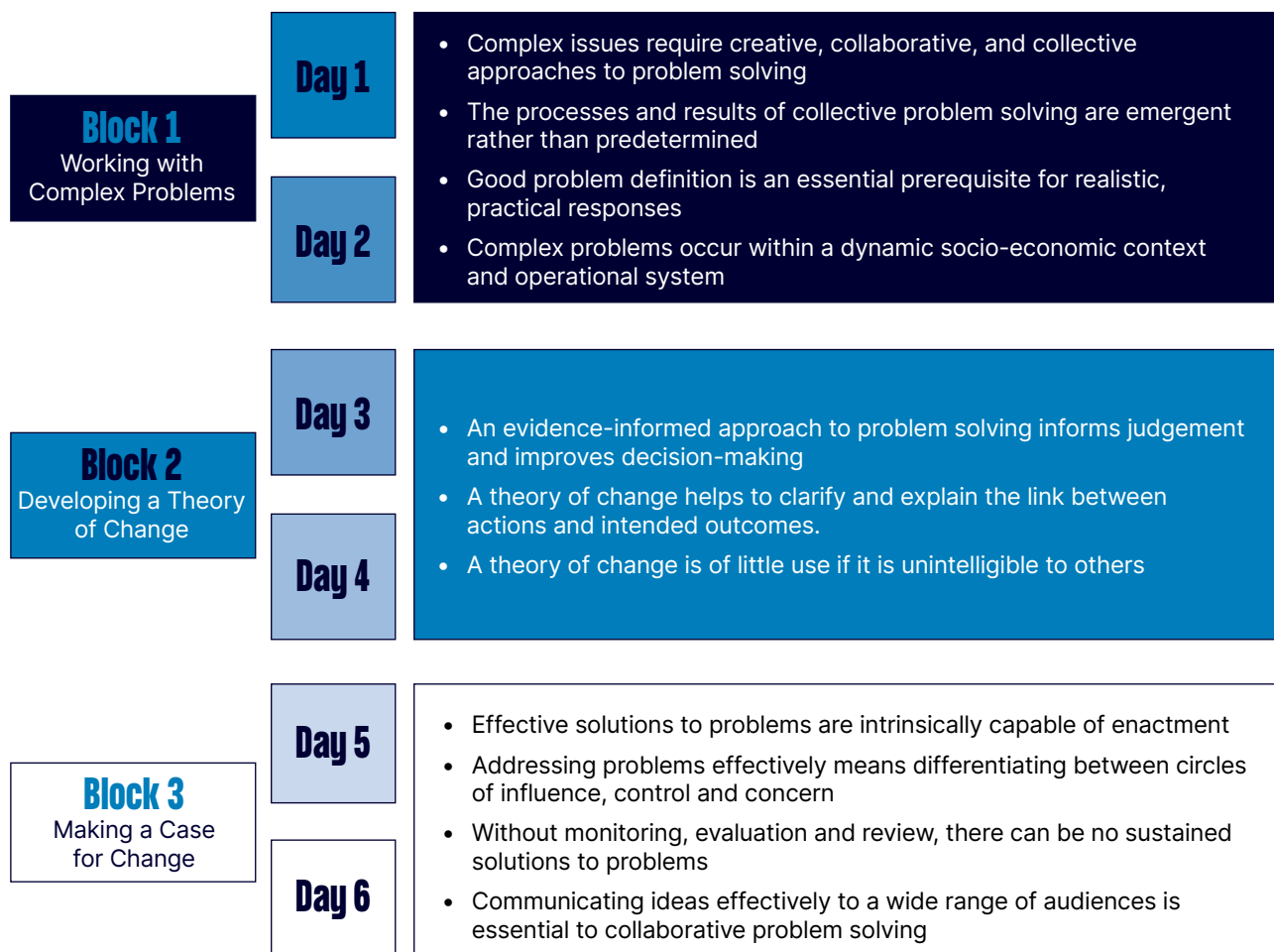
In this report, we have sought to set out and explain some of the key concepts and underlying thinking that informs the University of Limerick's LLP. We have described the key stages of the programme, reviewed past programmes and considered the feedback from some of the 150 professionals who participated in programmes from all over Ireland between 2019 and 2023.

Wicked problems are inherently complex and contested and the purpose of programmes like the LLP is to promote an approach to leadership that is more about successfully navigating turbulent seas than engineering clear and simple policy outcomes. The LLP offers a distinctly agile, evidence-informed and participative response to designing effective solutions. It is primarily aimed at increasing practitioner familiarity with practical tools for problem description and problem definition and the co-development and design of solutions. In a society often perceived by the public as threatening and unmanageable, it is an example of the social sciences being mobilised to assist local leaders and public officials to make sense of, and cope better with, contemporary societal challenges.



Appendix One: Key ideas in the programme – conceptual underpinning

The conceptual underpinnings of the programme are shown in the diagram below. Each block has a theoretical and practical focus, with each day resting on a key idea or two. The ideas constitute a heuristic, which is an aid to learning, discovery and problem-solving.





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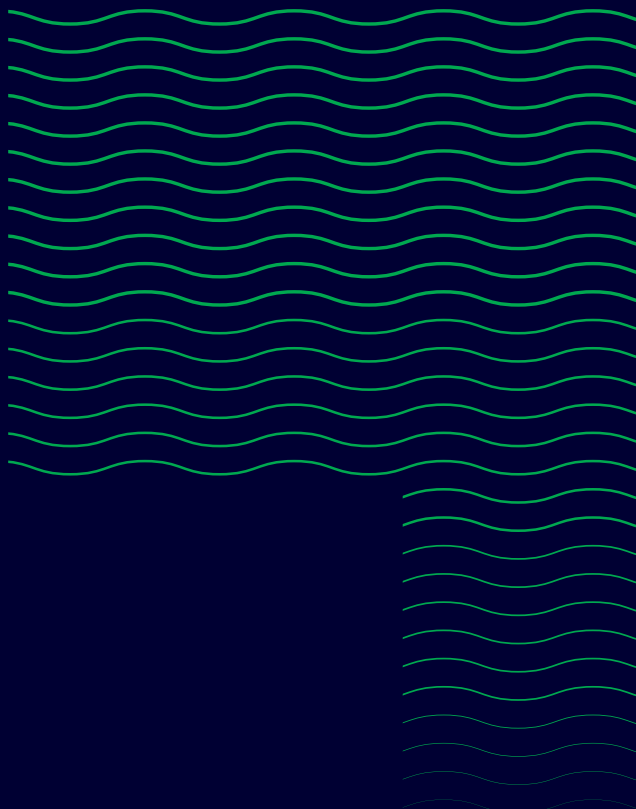
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Throughout the course, participants were asking 'what-next', as in what happens after we leave the course. This remains THE challenge but a guaranteed permanent benefit is the relations built between the participants. The ripple effects of this may never be quantifiable or obviously tangible but I suspect and hope it will significantly benefit the NEIC over time. It would be a mistake to in any way discount this particular impact of the course. Regarding the three specific proposals designed only time will tell if they are progressed but the positive is the proposals have been developed following a rigorous process involving people with considerable knowledge and experience, they are valid and they are now on the table for consideration. Importantly, they are the product of a process supported and funded by the State and resulted from a deliberative exercise underpinned by academic expertise from UL. These factors combined give the proposals significant weight, credibility and authority. Thanks again to all involved in organising, administering and facilitating the course!

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