



**WIGAN BOROUGH  
COMMUNITY FIRST**

# **Taking the Lead**

## **Dispersed Leadership Model**

### **Operational Handbook**

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## Purpose of this Handbook

This handbook sets out how the Dispersed Leadership Model operates in practice.

It provides guidance for groups, representatives and partners across the VCFSE sector, supporting a shared understanding of how leadership, representation and communication function across the model.

It is designed to support consistency and clarity, while allowing flexibility in how groups engage, recognising the different contexts, capacities and ways of working across the sector.

This handbook should be read alongside the Dispersed Leadership Model Strategic Framework, which sets out the overall structure, principles and intent of the model.

## Overview of the Model in Practice

The Dispersed Leadership Model operates through a connected structure, where insight is gathered across the sector and translated into collective priorities for strategic influence.

In practice:

- Insight, experience and challenges are shared across the VCFSE Collective, including networks, forums and thematic spaces
- Sector Leadership Groups bring this together, identifying shared themes and priorities
- These priorities are explored through strategic discussion at the Voluntary Sector Leadership Board (VSLB)
- Agreed priorities are shared into wider system conversations and decision-making spaces
- Updates and outcomes are fed back across the sector

This creates a consistent flow of information and influence, ensuring that while not all groups are directly represented at strategic level, all have a clear route to contribute.

## Roles Within the Model

The model operates through a number of distinct but connected roles, each contributing to how leadership, representation and communication function in practice.

## **VCFSE Collective (Groups, Networks and Thematic Spaces)**

The VCFSE Collective is where insight is generated.

This includes thematic circles, networks, forums and working groups across the sector.

These spaces are responsible for:

- Sharing lived experience and frontline insight
- Exploring challenges and opportunities
- Identifying emerging themes

They are not expected to resolve issues at a system level or produce formal outputs at every meeting. Their primary role is to explore and understand what is happening across the sector.

### **Group Hosts & Representatives**

Within groups across the VCFSE Collective, the role of hosting or facilitating a space is distinct from that of a representative.

Group hosts or facilitators are responsible for:

- Organising and facilitating discussions
- Supporting participation within the group
- Helping to draw out key themes and areas of focus

Representatives, by contrast, are responsible for:

- Supporting communication between the group and the wider model
- Identifying and bringing forward key themes
- Contributing to discussions beyond the group

These roles may be held by the same individual where appropriate, but this is not expected. Separating these roles can help to:

- Distribute responsibility
- Reduce pressure on individuals
- Ensure that both facilitation and representation are carried out effectively

### **Sector Leadership Groups**

Sector Leadership Groups sit within the VCFSE Collective and operate as groups in their own right, providing a space for leaders to share insight and contribute to wider sector understanding.

Due to their position within the sector, these groups are often well placed to recognise patterns, connections and emerging priorities.

Within each group, a nominated representative takes on a specific role in connecting the group into the wider model.

The group itself focuses on:

- Sharing insight and experience

- Identifying themes and priorities
- Contributing to collective understanding

The representative is responsible for:

- Bringing forward key themes identified through the group
- Contributing to strategic discussions at the Voluntary Sector Leadership Board
- Supporting communication between the group and the wider model

Not all members of Sector Leadership Groups are expected to take on a representative role.

## **Representatives**

Representation within the model operates at two connected levels, each with a distinct role.

### **Representatives within the VCFSE Collective**

Many groups within the VCFSE Collective identify a representative to support communication and coordination.

This role is primarily focused on ensuring that the voice of the group is visible within the wider model.

They are responsible for:

- Sharing key themes, insights and emerging issues from their group
- Supporting communication between their group and the wider model
- Contributing to a broader understanding of activity across the sector

This role is not intended to be formal or overly time intensive. It acts as a point of connection, rather than a strategic function.

### **Representatives within Sector Leadership Groups**

Representatives within Sector Leadership Groups take on a more active role in shaping how insight moves through the model.

They act as a key point of connection between the VCFSE Collective and strategic discussion.

This includes:

- Engaging with a number of groups across the VCFSE Collective
- Reviewing themes, agendas and emerging issues
- Identifying patterns and shared challenges across different groups
- Distinguishing between local or operational issues and those with wider sector relevance

Rather than reporting all activity, their role is to filter and interpret insight, bringing forward the most relevant structural, infrastructure and strategic themes.

For example:

- An issue affecting a single group or organisation may remain within that space
- A theme affecting multiple groups, such as access to funding or shared resources, may be brought forward for wider discussion

They are responsible for:

- Bringing forward prioritised themes into strategic discussion
- Contributing to conversations at the Voluntary Sector Leadership Board
- Supporting a clear and manageable flow of information across the model

This role ensures that strategic discussions remain focused, while still being grounded in real sector experience.

### **Voluntary Sector Leadership Board (VSLB)**

The Voluntary Sector Leadership Board is the primary space for strategic discussion within the model.

It brings together representatives from Sector Leadership Groups, who bring forward prioritised themes and insights identified across the wider VCFSE Collective.

The Board does not receive all activity or discussion from across the sector. Instead, it focuses on insight that has already been brought together, filtered and identified as having wider relevance.

The VSLB is responsible for:

- Exploring and shaping shared sector priorities
- Identifying where issues require system-level influence
- Aligning themes across different parts of the sector
- Supporting a more coordinated approach to strategic conversations

Discussions within the Board are focused and purposeful, centred on the most relevant structural, infrastructure and strategic issues, rather than individual organisational concerns or isolated challenges.

This ensures that the Board remains manageable, effective and grounded in real sector experience, while maintaining a clear focus on influencing change at a system level.

### **WBCF (System Enabler)**

WBCF provides the coordination, structure and support required for the model to operate effectively.

This includes:

- Supporting communication across the VCFSE Collective
- Enabling Sector Leadership Groups and representatives
- Maintaining a clear overview of sector activity
- Supporting the flow of information across the model

WBCF does not lead on behalf of the sector but creates the conditions for leadership to emerge from within it.

### Rhythm of the Model

The Dispersed Leadership Model operates through a series of connected spaces, each contributing to how insight is generated, shaped and used across the sector. Rather than following a fixed or rigid schedule, the model works with a natural rhythm, allowing different parts of the system to operate at a pace that reflects their purpose.

### **VCFSE Collective (Groups, Networks and Thematic Spaces)**

These spaces meet as needed, depending on their focus and activity.

They provide the primary space for:

- Exploring issues in depth
- Sharing lived experience and frontline insight
- Identifying emerging themes and challenges

These spaces are intentionally flexible and are not expected to produce formal outputs at every meeting.

### **Sector Leadership Groups**

Sector Leadership Groups meet regularly to bring together insight from across the sector.

They focus on:

- Identifying common themes across different groups
- Considering where issues have wider relevance
- Preparing prioritised insight for strategic discussion

While the group itself acts as a space for discussion and shared understanding, a nominated representative takes on a specific role in connecting this insight into the wider model.

### **Voluntary Sector Leadership Board (VSLB)**

The VSLB meets periodically to allow for focused strategic discussion.

It provides a space to:

- Work through shared sector priorities
- Align themes across different parts of the sector
- Identify where system-level influence is needed

The Board focuses on prioritised insight brought forward through Sector Leadership Groups, rather than capturing all activity across the sector.

### **Wigan Borough Community First Board**

The WBCF Board operates as part of the organisation's governance structure. It meets regularly to provide oversight and direction, receiving sector insight through Sector Leadership Group representation and ensuring alignment between organisational decision making and wider sector priorities.

### **Community Network**

The Community Network brings the wider sector together at key points during the year.

It provides an opportunity to:

- Share progress and learning
- Strengthen relationships
- Reflect on how the model is working in practice

### **Group Start Up: Foundation Phase**

When establishing a new Sector Leadership Group or other structured group within the model, a phased approach is used to support the development of shared understanding, priorities and representation.

During this stage, additional support from WBCF may be provided to help facilitate early sessions and establish effective ways of working.

This takes place across the first three sessions, allowing time for relationships to develop and for the group to build a collective sense of direction before moving into representation.



### Session 1: Shaping Collective Direction

The first session focuses on bringing the group together and establishing a shared understanding of purpose.

This includes:

- Building relationships and establishing trust within the group
- Understanding the role of the group within the wider model
- Exploring key themes, challenges and areas of shared interest

At this stage, the focus is on discussion and understanding, rather than decision making.

### Session 2: Aligning Intent and Priorities

The second session begins to bring greater focus to the discussions.

This includes:

- Identifying common challenges and opportunities
- Exploring where there is alignment across the group
- Beginning to shape shared priorities or areas of focus

This supports the group to move from broad discussion towards a more collective understanding of where attention is needed.

### Session 3: Selecting Representatives

The third session focuses on establishing representation for the group.

This includes:

- Identifying individuals who are best placed to take on a representative role
- Ensuring clarity on the expectations and responsibilities of representatives
- Agreeing how communication will flow between the group and the wider model

By this stage, representation is informed by a shared understanding of the group's priorities, rather than being determined prematurely.

## Thematic Circles (Development and Delivery)

Thematic Circles may be developed and supported through targeted programmes or opportunities, particularly where additional resource or coordination is required.

In these cases, WBCF may:

- Facilitate initial engagement and design sessions
- Support the development of simple working practices
- Provide administrative or coordination support
- Enable access to funding or resources where available

This approach supports the development of thematic spaces that are:

- Led by the sector
- Grounded in shared priorities
- Supported in a way that enables effective delivery

The structure and support for thematic circles may vary over time, reflecting available opportunities and the needs of the sector.

## Approach

The rhythm of the model is intentionally designed to balance structure with flexibility, recognising the realities of how groups operate across the sector.

It does not rely on fixed processes or rigid timelines. Instead, it supports a consistent flow of activity, allowing different parts of the model to operate in a way that reflects their purpose, capacity and context.

This approach ensures that:

- Insight is generated through open, discussion-led spaces, without pressure to produce formal outputs
- Themes are brought together and shaped in a way that is manageable and meaningful
- Strategic discussions remain focused on the most relevant and impactful issues
- Representation is built on shared understanding, rather than being determined too early

It also recognises that:

- Not all activity will move into strategic discussion
- Not all groups will operate in the same way
- The model will develop and adapt over time

By maintaining this balance, the model supports a way of working that is both structured and responsive, enabling leadership to emerge from across the sector while ensuring that strategic spaces remain clear, focused and effective.

## Statements of Intent and Priorities

Statements of Intent and Priorities provide a clear and practical way for groups within the VCFSE Collective to capture what matters most at a given point in time.

They are not intended to be detailed reports or formal strategies. Instead, they reflect both the broader direction of the group, and the specific areas of focus that are most relevant for wider discussion.

Statements of Intent capture:

- Key themes and areas of focus
- Emerging challenges and opportunities
- The overall direction of the group

Priorities identify:

- The most relevant or pressing issues
- Areas where there is shared concern across organisations
- Themes that may require wider support or strategic influence

These are developed collaboratively within groups, typically as discussions begin to move from broad exploration towards areas of alignment.

They are:

- Reviewed and updated over time
- Used as a reference point for group discussions
- Shared with representatives to support communication across the model

Statements of Intent and Priorities do not need to capture all activity. Instead, they focus on the most consistent and relevant themes, helping to provide clarity without creating unnecessary detail.

In practice, they support representatives in identifying and bringing forward priorities that have wider relevance, ensuring that strategic discussions are informed by shared sector experience and remain focused on the most impactful issues.

## **Supporting Groups to Identify Intent and Priorities**

Groups may find it helpful to use simple prompts to support discussions and identify shared themes.

This does not require a formal process, but can be supported through open conversation, for example:

- What are we hearing consistently across this group?
- What issues are affecting more than one organisation?
- What feels most important to focus on right now?

- What might require wider support or influence beyond this group?

Facilitators may choose to capture key points during discussions, helping to identify common themes and areas of alignment.

The focus should remain on drawing out shared understanding, rather than producing detailed outputs.

### Representation Process

Representation within the model is designed to be flexible, proportionate and reflective of how different groups operate.

Rather than following a single fixed process, groups are supported to identify individuals who are best placed to take on a representative role at that point in time.

### **Selection**

Representatives are identified within groups using approaches that feel appropriate to that space.

This may include:

- Expressions of interest
- Informal agreement or nomination
- Consensus within the group
- Rotation over time

The emphasis is on identifying individuals who:

- Are engaged with the group
- Have a clear understanding of key themes and priorities
- Are able to contribute to wider discussion in a constructive way

There is no single approach to selecting representatives that works in all contexts. Different groups may choose different methods depending on their size, structure and ways of working.

What is most important is that the approach is:

- Transparent, so it is clear how individuals are identified
- Proportionate, avoiding unnecessary process or barriers to participation
- Grounded in trust, with representatives recognised and supported by their group
- Connected to the group, ensuring that individuals are actively engaged in discussions and aware of key priorities

Overly formal or rigid selection processes can create barriers to participation and may not reflect how groups naturally operate. For this reason, flexibility is encouraged, alongside a shared understanding of the role and expectations of representation.

## Different Levels of Representation

Representation operates at different levels within the model.

Within the VCFSE Collective, representatives act as a point of connection, ensuring that the voice of their group is visible and can be shared more widely.

Within Sector Leadership Groups, representatives take on a more active role in engaging across groups, bringing together and filtering insight to identify themes with wider relevance.

This distinction ensures that representation remains both inclusive and manageable, allowing a wide range of voices to be heard without overwhelming strategic spaces.

## Expectations

Representatives play an important role in ensuring that sector voice is meaningfully reflected within the model. While the role is not intended to be overly formal or time-intensive, there are clear expectations around how it is carried out.

Representatives are expected to:

- **Act in the best interests of the wider sector**, rather than promoting individual organisational priorities
- **Maintain an active connection with their group**, ensuring they are aware of key discussions, themes and priorities
- **Bring forward relevant and prioritised themes**, rather than reporting all activity or individual issues
- **Contribute constructively to discussions**, focusing on shared challenges and opportunities
- **Support a clear two-way flow of information**, ensuring that key updates and outcomes are shared in a way that is accessible and manageable

Representatives are not expected to:

- Act as formal decision-makers on behalf of their group
- Resolve issues on behalf of the sector
- Bring forward individual or isolated organisational concerns unless they reflect a wider theme

The role relies on a balance of judgement and communication, with an emphasis on identifying what is most relevant for wider discussion.

Where expectations are not met, groups may choose to review representation to ensure that the role remains effective and connected to the needs of the model.

### **Term of Role**

Representative roles are time-limited to support both continuity and wider participation across the sector.

While consistency is important to allow representatives to build understanding and contribute effectively, roles are not intended to be held indefinitely.

Groups may choose to:

- Agree a defined term (for example, 12 to 24 months)
- Review representation at regular points
- Rotate roles where appropriate to allow others to contribute

This approach helps to:

- Maintain fresh perspectives within the model
- Avoid over-reliance on a small number of individuals
- Support wider involvement across the sector

The length and structure of each role should remain proportionate and reflective of the group's context, while ensuring that representation remains active and connected.

### **Support**

Support is available to ensure that representatives feel confident, connected and able to contribute effectively within the model.

WBCF enables this through a combination of coordination, facilitation and relationship-based working.

### **Collaborations Lead**

The Collaborations Lead plays a central role in supporting the overall operation of the Dispersed Leadership Model.

This includes:

- Maintaining oversight of how insight is moving through the model
- Supporting communication between groups, representatives and strategic spaces
- Helping to identify and draw out key themes and priorities where needed
- Supporting consistency in how information is captured and shared
- Ensuring that different parts of the model remain connected and aligned

The role focuses on supporting the system as a whole, rather than directing individual groups or representatives.

### **WBCF Link**

Each group within the VCFSE Collective is supported by a named WBCF link, who acts as a direct point of contact.

This includes:

- Providing clarity on expectations and responsibilities
- Supporting communication between the representative and their group
- Helping to navigate where and how issues should be raised
- Acting as a sounding board where needed

This role is more relationship-focused, providing practical and accessible support at a group level.

### **Additional Support**

Support is not limited to specific roles and may be shared across WBCF where appropriate.

Additional support may be provided:

- During the early stages of a group's development
- Where facilitation or structure is needed
- Where additional guidance would support effective participation

Support is intended to enable, rather than direct, ensuring that representatives remain confident in their role while maintaining a system-enabled, community-led approach.

### **Communication & Feedback**

Clear and consistent communication underpins the effectiveness of the Dispersed Leadership Model.

The model relies on a two-way flow of information, ensuring that insight is shared across the sector and that outcomes from strategic discussions are visible and understood.

### **Flow of Information**

In practice, communication flows through the model in a structured but proportionate way:

- Groups across the VCFSE Collective share insight, themes and emerging issues

- Representatives bring forward prioritised themes through Sector Leadership Groups
- Sector Leadership Group representatives contribute to strategic discussion at the Voluntary Sector Leadership Board
- Key updates, outcomes and messages are then shared back across the model

This ensures that information is not only gathered, but shaped and shared in a way that is meaningful and manageable.

### **Sharing Insights**

Insight across the model is generated through discussion within groups, rather than through formal reporting processes.

Groups are encouraged to focus on identifying what is being heard consistently, rather than capturing all activity or individual contributions.

This includes:

- Themes that are being raised repeatedly across discussions
- Challenges or opportunities affecting more than one organisation
- Areas where there is a shared sense of importance or urgency
- Issues that may require wider support or influence beyond the group

Facilitators or group leads may support this by drawing out key points during discussions, helping to identify areas of alignment and shared relevance.

Statements of Intent and Priorities can be used to capture this in a simple and structured way, focusing on a small number of key themes rather than an exhaustive list.

The emphasis is on surfacing meaningful insight that reflects collective experience, ensuring that what is shared across the model is relevant, focused and useful for wider discussion.

### **Role of Representatives in Communication**

Representatives play a key role in ensuring that communication across the model is clear, focused and consistent.

Their role is not to relay all discussion, but to actively identify, shape and share the most relevant themes.

In practice, this includes:

- **Engaging with their group or assigned groups**, maintaining awareness of current discussions, agendas and emerging themes

- **Reviewing key points from meetings**, including notes or summaries where available
- **Identifying patterns across discussions**, particularly where similar issues are being raised in more than one space
- **Distinguishing between local or operational issues and those with wider relevance**
- **Bringing forward a small number of prioritised themes**, rather than a full account of activity

When contributing to wider discussions, representatives are expected to:

- Focus on issues that affect multiple organisations or reflect broader sector challenges
- Frame themes clearly and concisely, based on shared experience
- Avoid bringing forward individual or isolated concerns unless they indicate a wider pattern

Following strategic discussions, representatives are responsible for:

- Sharing key updates, outcomes and messages with their group
- Highlighting what has been discussed, what has progressed and what is relevant
- Doing so in a way that is clear and proportionate, without creating unnecessary detail

The role relies on active judgement, with an emphasis on identifying what is most relevant for wider discussion and ensuring that communication remains manageable and meaningful across the model.

### Sharing Meeting Notes and Updates

To support transparency and consistency across the model, key notes or summaries from group discussions should be shared with WBCF following meetings.

These are used to update individual network pages on the WBCF website, ensuring that:

- Activity across groups is visible to the wider sector
- Key themes and discussions are accessible beyond those directly involved
- Information is not held within individual networks or informal channels

This reflects a shift towards a more open and connected way of working, recognising that historically, information has not always been consistently shared across the sector.

The intention is not to create additional administrative burden, but to ensure that key points are captured and shared in a simple and proportionate way.

Where full minutes are not available, brief summaries of key themes and discussions are sufficient.

### **Digital Platform**

The WBCF website forms a key part of how communication and visibility are supported across the Dispersed Leadership Model.

It provides a shared and accessible space where information about the model and sector activity can be viewed consistently, including the [\*\*Dispersed Leadership Model\*\*](#) page and the [\*\*Networks\*\*](#) page, which provide context, structure and a central point of reference for how the model operates.

The overview and networks pages are maintained by WBCF and are intended to act as a clear and consistent guide to the model and the range of groups across the sector.

Alongside this, individual network pages are used to reflect the ongoing activity of each group. These are updated by WBCF following meetings, drawing on key themes, priorities and relevant updates shared by groups and representatives.

Network pages may include:

- An overview of the group and its purpose
- Key themes or priorities
- Updates or summaries of recent discussions, where appropriate

This approach supports:

- Greater visibility of activity across the sector
- Improved access to information for organisations not directly involved in specific groups
- A more transparent and connected model

The website is intended to support communication across the model, rather than replace direct engagement between groups and representatives.

### Decision-Making Approach

The Dispersed Leadership Model is not designed as a formal decision-making structure. Instead, it supports the development of shared understanding and sector priorities, which can inform wider decision-making processes.

Discussions within the model are shaped by:

- Collective insight
- Lived experience
- Shared sector priorities

Where groups are working towards a shared position, consensus is encouraged where possible. However, the emphasis remains on identifying areas of alignment, rather than formal decision-making.

WBCF supports transparency by ensuring that key themes, discussions and outcomes are captured and shared appropriately.

### Good Practice Expectations

All participants within the model are expected to contribute in a way that supports a constructive, open and collaborative environment.

This includes:

- Engaging respectfully and valuing different perspectives
- Sharing insight openly, while recognising the boundaries of confidentiality where appropriate
- Contributing to collective understanding, rather than focusing solely on individual organisational priorities
- Supporting a culture of transparency, where information is shared in a way that benefits the wider sector
- Participating in a way that is proportionate and realistic, recognising the different capacities across organisations

These expectations support a way of working that is collaborative, inclusive and focused on shared impact.

### Review & Development

The Dispersed Leadership Model will continue to evolve in response to sector experience, feedback and emerging needs.

Regular reflection will support:

- Understanding what is working well
- Identifying areas for improvement
- Ensuring the model remains relevant and effective

Feedback may be gathered through:

- Ongoing group discussions
- Community Network sessions
- Input from representatives and participants across the model

This approach ensures that the model remains responsive, adaptable and grounded in real sector experience.

### **In Practice**

Review and development take place through ongoing reflection across the model, rather than through a single formal process.

This may include:

- **Regular check-ins within groups**, reflecting on what is working well and what could be improved
- **Feedback from representatives**, based on their experience of how effectively insight is being shared and used
- **Discussions within the Community Network**, providing a wider opportunity to reflect on how the model is operating
- **Input gathered through WBCF Links and the Collaborations Lead**, identifying common challenges or areas of friction across the model

In practice, this means:

- Identifying where communication is working well, or where information is being lost
- Understanding whether priorities being brought forward feel relevant and representative
- Recognising where groups may need additional support or clarity
- Adjusting how different parts of the model operate to improve flow and effectiveness

Changes are expected to be iterative and proportionate, focusing on improving how the model works in practice rather than introducing unnecessary complexity.

### Supporting Resources

A range of supporting resources are available to help groups, representatives and facilitators engage with the Dispersed Leadership Model in a way that is clear and manageable.

These resources are designed to support discussion, communication and the identification of key themes, without introducing unnecessary process or administrative burden.

Examples of supporting resources include:

- Simple agenda formats to help structure discussions where helpful
- Meeting note templates to capture key themes, priorities and actions
- Light-touch formats to support Statements of Intent and Priorities

- Guidance to support facilitation and group discussions

These resources are intended as a guide only. Groups are encouraged to use them where helpful and adapt them to suit their own context and ways of working.

The emphasis remains on supporting meaningful discussion and communication, rather than creating additional process.

Where appropriate, WBCF may share, update or develop resources over time in response to feedback and learning across the model.

Supporting resources can be accessed via the Dispersed Leadership Model pages on the WBCF website.