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**IMPLEMENTING CO-CREATION AS A POLICY NORM
IN SWEDEN — STEERING STRATEGIES FOR A ROBUST
MUNICIPAL ORGANISATION**

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ORCID no. 0000-0003-0413-5028**e-mail:** inga.narbutaite-aflaki@kau.se**Abstract**

Building upon findings from a strategically selected case study of a pioneering Swedish municipality, Jönköping, a participant in a Horizon2020 project on co-creating public service innovations in Europe (CoSIE), this paper illustrates how local municipalities may take a systemic approach to creating the necessary conditions for sustainable co-creation and assesses whether this illustrates an ongoing paradigmatic shift in service management and culture. The strategic change management efforts in adapting a public sector organisation to a co-creation culture, are assessed against a normative theoretical framework for such a transformative change (Finansdepartementet 2018; Torfing et al, 2016;). The study employs the concept of co-creation to highlight the paradigmatic shift in the approach to citizens as service end users from passive clients to active citizens with resources and capabilities to exert an impact on service design, delivery, and value creation. The article offers new insights into how a robust organisation may be moving towards a new public administration paradigm that accommodates co-creation, and especially how a new approach to management based on trust may be strategically implemented as a key factor in facilitating systemic change (Torfing et al, 2016). Against the background of a significant shortage of studies exploring how conditions for such a transformative change are created at different system levels, the article examines a longitudinal real-time study and illustrates new management approaches, strategies, and tools used. The study also contributes a normative framework to explore a shift to more trust-based steering and a more nuanced explanation of an ongoing managerial shift towards a 'co-creation' paradigm. It argues that achieving trust-based steering has major potential to facilitate a co-creation culture but that a paradigmatic shift towards such a culture requires congruence in discourses and actions on different system levels and a major transformation of approaches, roles, and relationship dynamics between senior and first-line management.

Keywords: co-creation, systemic change, strategic management, co-creation governance, robust organisation

Introduction

In the last decade, co-creation has captured an increasing interest among policy makers, organisations, and service practitioners in western democracies, as an essential element

in reforming the public sector in terms of value creation, and democratisation (Torfing et al, 2016; Voorberg et al, 2017; Osborne, 2018). *Co-creation* in public services often relates to innovative collaborative efforts of several actors (Torfing et al, 2019), but is here taken to mean active involvement of citizens and communities in a reciprocal relationship with professionals in the co-initiation, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment of these services for the purpose of individual and public value enhancement (Fox et al, 2021; Osborne, 2018). The rationale is that services and their improvements bring more value when designed and implemented in conjunction *with* citizens, rather than *for* them (Alves, 2013). In the area of social policies, important benefits of co-creation are building trust and empowering individuals, enhancing service users' capacities, higher control over their lives, and participation in society as part of their citizen rights and wellbeing.

'Co-creation' represents a new paradigm in public administration and management that differs from both the bureaucratic state and market logics (Torfing et al., 2016), especially in terms of its view of the nature of the public sector and the roles of politicians, managers, and the population (Fox et al, 2021; Hartley, 2005). Being an innovative relational norm (Fox et al, 2021; Osborne, 2018), it blurs the distinction between public service providers and users/beneficiaries pertinent in a linear service logic, and effects profound changes in the relationships between the political system and the citizen, and within the service system in professional identities and roles.

Earlier research has questioned whether, and if so, how a co-creation culture is attainable on a larger scale, beyond individual projects, considering its complexity (Peters, 2017), highly demanding governance, and management efforts (Fox et al, 2021; Osborne 2018), and resistance to change among public professionals because of value tensions, and unfavourable contexts (Jaspers & Steen, 2019). The steps to implementing and sustaining a co-creation culture in public sector organisations (PSOs) are thus often challenging and time demanding (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2015, Torfing et al, 2016), due to many path-dependencies and governance barriers such as short-sighted efficiency aims, risk adversity, and professional ethics that justify power imbalances, or sustain disabling narratives (Narbutaite Aflaki and Lindh, forthcoming). Securing service user influence may be sustained as part of organisational rhetoric rather than real changes in individuals' mindsets and service practices (Karlsson, 2019). The abilities of PSOs to adjust – culturally, systemically, and ideologically – to collaborative, user oriented, and co-creative practices are still in their infancy (Tuurnas, 2016).

To be integrated and sustained, co-creation requires specific service ethics, tools, and a (new) approach to steering and management (Fox et al, 2021). In Sweden, there is a political consensus on the need to shift the public sector towards more trust-based steering within and between system levels, to increase the value in welfare services rather than focus on pure efficiency goals (SOU 2018:47). Trust-based steering shifts focus from steering by objectives and rules towards steering based on service professionals' skills and judgement, and increased user influence. It has been singled out as a key *systemic change* necessary to support and sustain a co-creation culture (SOU 2018:47; Torfing et al., 2016). Co-creation is associated with collective, facilitative, coaching, and transformative leadership (ibidem) that together with health promoting and asset-based approaches (Antonovsky, 1996) increasingly challenge ingrained approaches to managing social service provision (Österström, 2018). Yet, so far, there is little knowledge of the role of strategic management in aiding the shift to a co-creation paradigm (Torfing et al, 2021) on a larger

scale. The aim here is to explore municipal strategies for a systemic shift to co-creation with regard to new and more trust-based management approaches and the role of different management levels.

This article questions whether, and, if so, how local governments, acting as robust organisations, may be shifting towards a more trust-based approach in steering, as part of the systemic change towards co-creation. We understand robustness as the organisational ability to maintain its functionality while allowing space for agency, such as strategic management, to intervene in adapting some essential structural features to the new conditions (cf., Capano and Woo, 2017). This article assesses and explores a systemic change in management approach in a local municipality against the criteria of a novel normative framework for more trust-based management and leadership (Torfing et al, 2016; SOU 2018:47). The findings build upon a longitudinal real-time case study of a strategically selected Jönköping municipality, in Sweden, that sees itself as the forefront of reforming social service management to facilitate co-creation. Given the significant shortage of studies exploring how conditions for a transformative change are created at several system levels (Torfing et al., 2016), and the role of management (Torfing et al, 2021), this article contributes insights into how local municipalities may be creating necessary systemic conditions to aid co-creation in public services by strategically managing and leading with the help of a trust-based approach and novel relationship dynamics between senior and lower/first-line managers.

The article is structured as follows. After presenting the theoretical approach on systemic change and more trust-based steering, the study presents the Swedish case and explores major municipal change strategies from the trust-based steering perspective. We conclude with major findings on managing change (strategically) and thoughts for reflection.

Theory: Systemic Changes Necessary to Support a Co-creation Paradigm

According to public sector reform and management theories, co-creation is not simply a new normative goal, but represents a change of a paradigm in service governance, management, and culture, which represents a more relational, collaborative, dynamic approach to public policy and service production and learning (Torfing et al, 2016; 2021; Voorberg et al, 2017; Osborne et al, 2016). Public sector organisations are no longer viewed as sole producers of service value, but rather as its facilitators or co-creators (Osborne, 2018). This implies altering deeply held values about public service ends and means not only in macro policies but also in particular service settings; thus, simply changing policy instruments or reorganising will not suffice (cf., Cashore & Howlett, 2007). A general claim is that for co-creation to gain ground in PSOs, drastic *systemic changes* are needed, including change of perspectives, values, and relationships in specific local contexts (Hall, 1993).

While the conditions necessary to facilitate co-creation remain contested, at least five interrelated *systemic changes* have been singled out (Torfing et al, 2016) as major factors affecting the readiness of PSOs for adopting and implementing co-creation, and so enhancing their robustness. One of the factors refers to *a shift in steering models*, from top-down, control-based managerial and bureaucratic steering oriented at predefined performance outputs towards more value and trust-based steering that recognises fluctuating service environments and demands and relies on constant learning from (self)evaluations of innovative practices.

Other related systemic changes are a *shift in accountability practices and the time horizon*, from short-term gains and "risk-averse, 'zero-error' culture" (Torfing et al, 2016:41), towards more focus on quality and openness for experimentation aiming at public service sustainability and long-term gains. Also, a *transformation of professional culture*, from professionals being the primary knowledge source, to a culture open to dialogues, and citizen perspectives, and in which the roles of the professionals are as knowledge mediators between administrators and citizens. In this cultural transformation a *shift in ICT use* from being a tool to improve the administrative efficiency and communication on user cases within the organisation in the "back office" to becoming a tool to facilitate debates, user/citizen involvement, and communicate their perspectives, that is, "front office" tasks (Torfing et al, 2016). Finally, a co-creation paradigm requires a shift in focus from the rule-based justice and service standardization by detailed steering *towards emphasizing input and output legitimacy* in service production. Such a Systemic change does not just happen; it needs to be advanced strategically, by collective efforts of supporting politicians, top strategic managers, organisational entrepreneurs, individual employees and even citizens (Torfing et al, 2021; Torfing et al, 2021).

Figure 1. The guiding principles in trust-based steering

TBSL Principles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Citizen/User focus: focus on citizen experiences and knowledge, and try to understand what they value.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trust: aim at trusting those you collaborate with, and have positive expectations and a relational approach to transactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Delegation: allow professionals more freedom of action and co-determination but also clarify roles and mandates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collaboration: aim at coherence and collaboration across organisational silos and borders.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support: support the street-level professionals administratively, psychosocially, psychologically, and create conditions for their contributions and engagement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Openness: show willingness to share information with others and to allow different approaches, and experimentation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learning: prioritise knowledge development from multiple sources and evidence, and stimulate learning

This study centres on systemic change in the steering logics and the cultural norms in preparing a municipal organisation for co-creation with citizens in social service delivery. Arguably, co-creation requires a shift from the rational to the relational approach (Lejano, 2021; Fox et al. 2021), in which public service delivery is seen primarily in terms of the working of relationships among stakeholders. Researchers agree that for this purpose, the often ingrained mistrust-based bureaucratic and market steering grounded in detailed regulations, top-down control, or standardised measurements of quality through

predefined objectives, do not do justice to professionals' expertise or service value and democratic legitimacy (Osborne, 2018; Qvist and Fransson, 2018; Montin, 2016; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011, Torfing et al, 2016; 2021). Instead, steering that is rather based on values, trust in professional judgement and situated knowledge, and open to learning about stakeholder roles, relationships, and service outcomes is argued (ibidem) to facilitate shared responsibilities for co-creation.

Such trust-based steering supports service professionals in their efforts to ensure citizen participation and influence in the entire service cycle by utilising their various assets to enhance service value. In 2018, in Sweden, a special Government Commission of Trust developed a guiding framework for reforming the public sector to better fit the purpose of value co-creation with citizens as users. It proposed trust-based steering and leadership (TBSL) logics based on at least seven principles (Finansdepartementet, 2018), see Fig 1.

The Swedish Association for Municipalities and Regions has acknowledged these key principles (Fig 1.) in transforming the steering mode and culture at all levels in public service delivery.

For the purpose of our analysis, we operationalised trust-based steering according to the Torfing et al (2016) framework based on the proposed TBSL criteria, by adding such aspects as being *focused on citizen* experiences and understanding what they value, *supportive* of professionals administratively and psychosocially, willing to *create conditions* for their contributions and engagement, *open* to experimentation, new approaches, and *collaborative* aiming at knowledge exchange, dialogues and learning across organisational silos for greater service coherence for the user.

The successful application of TBSL depends on the interplay between system levels in adhering to these principles and requires reciprocity to maintain trust (Finansdepartementet 2018; Quist & Fransson, 2018). This study explores the application of trust-based steering of FLMs as managers and professionals, and this interplay in a municipal context. There are two ways to detect systemic changes: by identifying a change in the public *discourse*, that is, how people talk of a phenomenon and frame it to justify such change, and by exploring *institutional* changes or new practices (Olsson et al, 2019). I refer to some major rhetorical features here, but focus mainly on changes in management practices.

Background: regulations and policies supporting a co-creation paradigm

The idea of improving public service quality by involving citizens as service users, especially in social and health care services, is not new in Sweden. NGOs, especially those representing people with disabilities or the elderly, and government agencies, such as the National Board for Health and Welfare (NBHW), have been promoting a user-oriented mindset and service personalisation in social policies since the 1980s.

The latest social service regulations oblige local service providers to deliver a legally stipulated service quality (SOSFS 2011:9) and identify service improvement potential by involving concerned staff and users (the Act Concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments (1993:387), and the Social Services Act (2001:453). The laws employ such concepts as 'participation, 'self-determination,' and 'service personalisation' alongside other stipulated public sector principles of economic efficiency, equality, *adequacy*, and the rule of law (Pettersson, 2007). The legal acts work as so-called framework legislation; they specify the overall policy framework and objectives, but af-

ford implementing municipalities some discretion to interpret and shape their implementation. In line with this, the NBHW has outlined public sector responsibilities for systematic service quality development towards the ‘best value for users’ (SOSFS 2011:9).

While the aim of user participation and influence in social services has been sanctioned by the government through regulatory and discursive policy steering, this has achieved limited success so far (Eriksson, 2015). To bridge the gap between policy aims and practice, the national association of municipalities and regions has increasingly been urging the adoption of co-creation as a norm for service improvement, innovations, democratisation, and better resource utilisation (SKL, 2010; SKL, 2016). To support user-focused service improvements, the national government initiated a “trust reform” in 2014 aiming at transforming the public sector towards a more trust-based steering with user needs in focus (Finansdepartementet 2018). In this context, some municipalities stand out in how they strategically manage (Torfing et al, 2021) the aimed service reforms in local contexts.

The Social Service Department at Jönköping municipality in Sweden has been a forerunner in reforming its service governance towards a participatory, and co-creative paradigm for enhancing service quality/value. A key role in this strategic change was undertaken by its Elderly and Social Boards, which in 2012 decided to support a five-year reform strategy for the municipal social, health, and elderly care, called DIALOGEN (Jönköpings kommun, 2014), by refocusing on such values as citizen needs and empowerment, service innovations, and coherent social services. This has meant a more intensified work with service quality improvements in dialogues, not least with citizens. The senior social services management (hereafter SMs) may be seen as the stewards of the local reform by justifying its necessity and value for both users and municipal staff. They actively pushed for the reform in the political boards and further strategically steered it by outlining its benefits in the DIALOGEN goals, principles, steering documents, numerous stakeholder dialogues, and published progress reports (Jönköpings kommun, 2014; 2016; 2018). Their aim was to implement a systemic approach to service quality improvement and transformation of organisational culture that would bring more value to the citizen through “a systematic way of working based on citizens’ needs (...) within the frame of available economic resources” (ibidem) and, ultimately, improved health and wellbeing. The present study identifies at least three more implicit partial goals of the management reform: achieving a *novel mind-set* in service management, improving ways of *systematic user involvement* as co-creator in service and organisational development, and finally, continuously adjusting reform guidelines and *support* to service improvement initiatives by “systematic testing and follow up.”

A few years into the reform SMs recognised the tremendous amount of work needed and the time it required. They also recognised that the change required the active engagement of the first line managers (hereafter FLMs) in shifting to a more conversational governance mode, delegating responsibilities, allowing trials and mistakes, and learning from change practice. For example, to make sense of the reasons and paths towards this change, involving the entire social service department, SM offered successive collaborative manager dialogues in the early phase, during 2012–2014. These resulted initially in at least 100 improvement ideas (Jönköping kommun, 2014), some of which – especially those related to increasing service value for citizens – were taken up and tested, and new ideas are continuously evolving.

During the reform period, the SMs engaged all managers in exploring new approaches to service management and culture, especially the so-called *health promoting* and resource-based leadership, which recognises all stakeholders (managers, service professionals, and citizens) as important resources in enhancing meaningful service value for the citizen. Lately, SMs have introduced the concept of trust-based steering and leadership, but also indicated a need for joint sensemaking dialogues to interpret it in their service contexts. In 2018, the same political boards, showing consistency in their policy aims, approved the revised DIALOGEN as a ‘permanent’ quality management and improvement strategy all in one. In short, numerous actors have contributed to strategically steer (Ferlie et al 2021) towards the systemic change – elected politicians, SMs, some proactive mid- and first-line managers, employees, and even citizens assisted by services.

Analysis: more trust-based steering and leadership strategies

This section illustrates and assesses the DIALOGEN principles and evolving strategies towards co-creative paradigm from a perspective of trust-based steering and leadership.

Our results are based on a longitudinal study of the Social Services, and particularly Disability Services, covering 2098 users and circa 1400 permanent staff from around 2014, the start of the DIALOGEN reform, to 2020. The study data sources consist of document analysis, repetitive semi-structured interviews and in-depth conversations with Social Services senior and mid-managers, first-line managers (FLMs), pedagogical tutors, and an employed action researcher (in total 34 interviews), 9 participatory observations over two years (2018–2020) and 2 seminars with managers from several service areas.

The constant manager and service personnel rotations and shortages (due to low status jobs, complex and demanding work tasks, challenges associated with new service ethics, and recent more restrictive government disability assistance policies) have affected the social services in Jönköping, as elsewhere in Sweden, leading to a continuous struggle to sustain reform-based learnings or institutional memory. In response to this changing service environment, SMs have been developing a whole range of strategies to adapt managerial support and secure organisational capacity to systemic shift and organisational robustness.

Focus on citizen as end user – as a means to democratise knowledge for policy

The political support of the reform and its focus on a participatory approach among the municipal boards puts Jönköping in a better position compared to many other municipalities regarding adjusting management and organisational support to enhance co-creation beyond the institutionalised representation channels and to implement social policy intentions. To this end, the DIALOGEN has, since its start in 2013, advocated a shift in perspectives from treating FLMs and service professionals as service providers knowing what is best *for* the user towards co-creating *with* the user, thus advancing moral values such as user self-determination, integrity, and worthiness (Jönköping kommun, 2016:16).

The DIALOGEN recognises both professionals and citizens as important assets with abilities and resources to co-create service value in terms of comprehensible, meaningful, and manageable social support in citizens’ daily lives. This is in line with the salutogenic or health promoting approach and the sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1996)

that is thought to positively affect personnel motivation and the users' ability to achieve more power and independence, and ultimately better health or wellbeing, which is the long-term goal of the DIALOGEN (Ledningssystem, 2018). Accordingly, SMs have been encouraging the FLMs to search for new ways to secure more opportunities for citizens to have legitimate influence on a more regular basis in the services that affect them, and in more generic service improvements of value to the entire target group. This resulted in prioritising improvements in approaches, relationships, and processes instead of more superficial reorganising.

Alongside user 'participation' and 'influence' in service delivery as frequent legal norms in the SM and FLM discourses, since around 2018 the 'co-creation' concept has also started to be used increasingly (Jönköping kommun 2018), with some piloting areas exploring the concept even closer through sensemaking dialogues (Narbutaite-Aflaki and Lind, forthcoming). Since 2018, DIALOGEN has increasingly signalled that services of meaningful value are to be achieved by working together with the user (Socialförvaltningen, 2018) rather than by being solely based on professionals' knowledge and judgement. Thus, user knowledge and influence are presented as contributions in the process of democratising and legitimising social services. Several of the tested and implemented improvements in specific social service areas have had a focus on the user's best interest and value co-creation, which is illustrated below.

Steering: Delegating responsibilities for engagement in change and innovations

As a major effect of the DIALOGEN, the SMs abandoned steering based on a multi-layered hierarchy of control, typical of both bureaucratic and market-based steering logics, and introduced a 'flatter' organisation with only two managerial levels – senior and front-line – where the latter is allowed to set operational unit goals adapted to service realities within the frame of DIALOGEN and political aims. The DIALOGEN built on the logics that continuous and systematic service improvement work should mainly be driven by, and first tested at, the lowest organisational level, but with the approval and some support from SMs, based on feedback from the FLMs through self-evaluations and learning. It was unique in the municipal social service organisation in Sweden that the task of identifying needs and drawbacks and analysing service improvement potential and testing improvement ideas was *delegated* primarily to the c. 200 FLMs (Interviews SMs). The management levels in-between were expected to coordinate coherence in broader areas and assist implementation of new culture and practices.

Granting the FLMs freedom to translate the DIALOGEN strategy and yearly SM goals into service realities was expected to increase FLM's sense of ownership and responsibility in co-steering and implementing the change (Interviews Manager 2, 4). This can be evidenced in some of the implemented improvement pilots in which FLMs drove and directed the change. Although the SMs also saw service personnel as key actors in transforming and sustaining service culture, their abilities to contribute were deemed heavily dependent on the FLMs abilities to lead all personnel towards such change, especially with the help of a salutogenic and resource-based approach (Narbutaite-Aflaki and Lindh, forthcoming, Antonovsky, 1996). The DIALOGEN aims at such a culture where both managers and personnel notice the needs for improvements and are willing to undertake them (Jönköpings

kommun, 2014, p. 97). The SMs metaphorically called such a shift of perspective and organisational adaptation ‘a journey’ and were aware that it takes consistency in goals and time for the majority of FLMs and staff to join in (ibid.; Interviews). Thus, besides elected politicians and SMs, the FLMs were given the key role in the strategic management of the service reform. What is more, by 2020, FLMs had got used to setting individual annual goals for their service units and conducting self-evaluations, but also experienced some drawbacks of the flattened organisation, especially an accumulating “vacuum” in terms of available systematic guidance, monitoring, and support to FLMs themselves to act as change leaders. This is one of the reasons why SMs recently initiated the support program “Manager in Focus.”

Strategies to support change leadership and agency

The SM adopted several strategies to steer and support the implementing personnel and FLMs during the systemic shift towards co-creative culture.

(Re)organising support to assess the needs and test new ideas

Achieving a change of mindset among staff was seen as the major reform aim and the condition for the desired systemic transformation. Several years into the reform, SMs pointed out that their major task hitherto was developing support functions to offer fruitful methods and staff trainings (Interview SMs). The reform resulted in major changes of service steering.

Four interlinked steering procedures on the operative and central level were introduced to identify and support organisational and service improvement areas, also regarding user participation and influence, and to achieve more coherence (Socialförvaltningen, 2018; Interview SMs):

1. Identifying and analysing user experiences and service improvement needs,
2. Opening for testing innovative ideas and offering support,
3. Implementing approved piloting ideas and,
4. Following up, learning and readjusting organisational processes.

During this chain process, the users were seen as valuable contributors. Thus, channels to increase their influence were reviewed and novel methods tested. In Jönköping, all major changes in the social service organisation and practice were preceded by an extensive annual service quality analysis, following these steering procedures. The fulfilment of the DIALOGEN strategy aims was monitored through a double accountability system in which both economic efficiency and qualitative service criteria were used on an aggregated level.

Local service improvement work was largely, but not exclusively, conducted through piloting activities, which FLMs and their personnel jointly initiated. This was a way to test the SMs commitment to take adequate facilitatory measures. Examples of SMs contributions to reform were extending administrative and digital assistance to FLMs and service personnel in broader service areas or introducing more centralised and professionalised procedures for recruiting motivated managers and personnel. The improvement ideas based on the salutogenic approach and that would affect several service areas were especially considered for testing. The senior management then followed up to see if suggestions for improvements fitted the DIALOGEN criteria, and if so, how they could be supported.

Other examples of SMs support were organising new structures and resources to facilitate the implementation of a new manager support programme, “Manager in Focus” or, unlike to many other municipalities, placing decision-making and service implementing units in disability services under the same manager for smoother communication, change steering, and coherence. Another recent example of joint strategic management is the development of a model to support a user centred, co-creative leadership culture, and help in prioritising internal improvement projects to finance during the coming 5 years (2021–2026) in elderly care services. That SMs have secured political and professional union support in utilising the government financing for this indicates a long-term organizational commitment.

FLMs also undertook some supportive leadership roles especially in experimental improvement areas (such as personal assistance, housing assistance, newcomer integration, or psychosocial care of children) by identifying common obstacles to engaging in co-creation and looking for ways to address competence development, and administrative or technical support needs. Examples of this are organising exploratory task groups among personnel, expressing improvement suggestions to SMs, securing personnel access to technical infrastructure, such as portable ipads, to ease recording of user voices, and input to service implementation on the spot. Such leadership where FLMs undertook change leader roles on the operative level sent signals for more support and coherence on the higher system level.

Legitimising and facilitating piloting improvements

The SMs treated piloting improvements in selected service areas as a fruitful way to speed up and advance the ongoing reform and as crucial sources of knowledge on change facilitators and impediments. A successful strategy for experimenting increased user participation in particular service areas was to firstly identify service shortages based on FLMs, and service professionals’ experiences and in the next step to attain senior management, or even political, support, and perhaps additional financial resources to implement improvements. Insights from pilots have been used to help adjust organisational processes to facilitate co-creating service value and improvements in broader service areas.

In selecting some of the latest pilots in disability services areas (housing assistance and individual assistance), the senior management intended to test *new ways of leading* service improvements by collective sensemaking and to achieve greater coherence and deeper understanding of the salutogenic approach in the service ethics among FLMs and staff involved in decision processes and implementation. In housing assistance services, the piloting improvements were driven by a user group aware of the DIALOGEN ambitions. Improvement needs and methods were explored with the help of a participatory researcher assigned by the SMs in a co-creative manner through a chain of focus groups with users and stakeholder dialogues. As a result, after about two years of dialogues and testing, a municipal agreement, unique in the Swedish context, was reached to switch decision-making practices from a detailed to more framework-oriented model with a view to better adapt to users' health status and individual needs of support.

Recruiting ‘right’ competencies

To help implement the DIALOGEN intentions, the SMs also employed smarter internal and external recruitment strategies, for example, by promoting the managers to key organisational positions whose leadership style was supportive of dialogue, trust-based and

asset-based approach and co-creation, or who engaged in 'leading by their own example'. This symbolises SMs approval and willingness to spread a new leadership approach to all manager levels, especially FLMs.

As part of the recent organisational programme "Manager in Focus", a shift in personnel policies occurred in manager vacancy advertisements, which focused more on leadership than administrative managerial abilities as was the case with earlier recruitments (Interview SM, 2020–12–21). The recruitment included around 30 manager posts, especially FLMs, to reduce the FLMs workload as a prioritised measure to develop social services with state money. An experienced leadership psychologist was hired, marking another novelty in management approach, to help both with manager recruitment processes and further development of the leadership support programme.

Yet another SMs strategy was headhunting expertise to a special pedagogical unit to help tutor FLMs and their personnel teams in the co-creative approach and methods to facilitate user (with disabilities) influence. This comparatively large team for methodological support (TSM), currently consists of four method tutors, a family member consultant and a user ombudsman, and assists all Disability Services areas. The TSM members provide *personnel trainings* in health promoting approaches and act as *practical support* in different dialogue formats between service professionals and citizens, such as focus groups, not least in piloting improvement areas. Apart from this, the TSM team is frequently called upon to *advise* service personnel in individual social assistance cases to achieve a fruitful dialogue. Currently, much of the TSM workload concerns solving urgent conflictual situations, but the longer-term goal is its less reactive and more proactive use.

Another strategic SMs move was to select some area managers who were seen as forerunners in change leadership for the working group in the new manager support programme and they are expected to engage with framing the cultural change and act as sensegivers or "ambassadors" in their respective service areas. An additional example of smart external recruitment is capitalising on user-driven dialogue initiatives on service improvement and employing an active disability service user to act as a "voice" and resource, a kind of ombudsman for a particular user group.

The change pioneering managers were committed to new leadership approaches, including a salutogenic and a more recent trust-based leadership, but also accepted that such substantial change would take years to implement on all manager levels. While indicating consistency over the longer period, the management also signalled awareness of the political aspect of the reform, the goals of which may be potentially "moving targets."

Another expression of supportive leadership was the senior management ability to identify the need for cultural change and, especially, some of its preconditions. This resulted in freeing budgets to employ several ambassadors to consistently and in a more structured way train and support the participatory and co-creative approach among service professionals and the FLMs.

Offering trainings and pedagogical support

As an outcome of the DIALOGEN, the SMs started adjusting and centralising some functions to support service improvements on the ground and enhance coherence in service delivery. Among those were upgrading the pedagogical support function with reflective trainings in co-creative service ethics and a salutogenic approach to all new service im-

plementing staff as well as expanding individual tutoring capacities for deep listening and dialogue tools to broader group of FLMs and their personnel.

An aggregated analysis from all social service areas conducted as part of new management strategy showed large variations in personnel knowledge and understanding of the DIALOGEN goals. One SMs way to remedy the gap in FLM abilities of “being good at goal communication on paper rather than in practice” was introducing training on communicative leadership aspects to help managers, especially FLMs, to be better at communicating the new operational goals related to user influence and the health promoting approach in a contextualized, meaningful way, and at including service personnel in setting development goals for specific service areas.

Creating sensemaking arenas and facilitating sensemaking

Additional SM strategies developed in interplay with entrepreneurial mid-managers to support the service reform were creating opportunities and arenas for reflective sense-making conversations about change (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016). One example was the so-called “manager days” organised five times per year involving all 250 managers at all levels in the social service department. With time, reportedly, the focus and format of these meetings shifted from information heavy talks towards more reflective dialogues to make sense of, and explore, manager roles as change leaders, relationships, and the required individual and team efforts and support. Here, SMs acted as sensegivers (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016) in framing the need of new perspectives. Some entrepreneurial mid-managers introduced this sensemaking approach to their FLMs teams and so contributed to the systemic cultural change.

A more recent example of strategic SM role in shifting the organisational culture towards responsible and health promoting leadership are plans to free some time and organise dialogue platforms (as part of the “Manager in Focus” programme), where all managers, not least FLMs, could jointly explore and redefine what it means to lead based on trust, and other TBSL principles, in their situated contexts. For this purpose, the programme leading group promoted the open, respectful, and even humble approach of “others know better than me” in exploring how to get there. Yet, to fuel the change, a constant exchange of meanings between all management levels is recognised as essential.

Developing common language and methodological guidance

In 2019, social services managers in Jönköping introduced all staff involved in service decision and implementation functions to the methodology offered by the NBHW, namely “individual needs at the centre” or IBIC (Socialstyrelsen 2021), which other municipalities now also prepare to implement. The aim of such *steering through norms and methodological guidance* is to support a common approach to, and language about, user centeredness by employing common concepts in daily practice.

Managing processes and platforms to facilitate organisational learning

During the whole period studied the SMs had a firm belief in *collaborative* knowledge production to advance learning and adaptation, and acted to involve their own staff in regular self-evaluations, piloting trials, and to enhance interactivity between researchers and

practitioners. They also provided resources to “bridge theoretical and practical knowledge” (Jönköping kommun, 2018) by repeatedly enrolling participatory action researchers who reportedly (Ibid.; Narbutaite Aflaki & Lindh, forthcoming) facilitated FLMs and personnel sensemaking about their service improvement work. Action researchers were also used to help mediate the knowledge or act as ‘sensetakers’ and ‘sensegivers’ about service-level insights (Narbutaite Aflaki & Lindh, forthcoming) upwards to the SMs and ‘sensegivers’ or translators of DIALOGEN aspirations and spirit downwards. Resources were also secured for a dedicated pedagogical team for developmental purposes and were meticulously protected from austerity measures.

Judging by the available data, some progress has been made towards the DIALOGEN aimed organisational learning, such as enhancing FLMs motivation to change, by conversing about the reform aims, by delegating goal setting and self-evaluations, and by (occasionally) facilitating sensemaking about service narratives. Yet, to advance to the next step, more proactive SMs steering and leadership is desirable to help bridge the organisational silos and to facilitate the sharing of experiences and insights and the singling out of new practices to be uptaken across several units for greater coherence. Here, recent attempts by the NBHW to discursively steer towards coherence in services by promoting a unitary method for user need assessments IBIC among municipalities seems to play a role and puts even greater pressure on organisational learning but also allowing sensitivity to contextualised needs.

Trust-based steering and collaboration

The TBSL model builds on an assumption that SMs grant the lower managerial levels and their personnel greater freedom of action based on their *trustworthiness* (Finansdepartementet, 2018). This trustworthiness is grounded in abilities, integrity, or adherence to accepted principles and willingness to commit to change.

In our case, at least three types of cross-cutting trust-based steering and collaborations on the reform aims could be observed: i) between SMs and lower-level management, ii) between decision-making officials and service implementing units, and iii) between the SMs and the elected representatives. It is an effort and time demanding task to establish trust and collaboration; yet, we could see examples of SMs and FLMs collaboration in co-steering, in the regular dialogue meetings, which could be seen as a form of dialogical governance and accountability practices (cf., Bonde et al., 2018), and in the recruitment of driven FLMs for reform roles and providing support to entrepreneurial FLMs in their experimental improvement work to enhance organisational readiness for co-creation. The most evident form of collaboration is the yearly formative service self-evaluations provided by FLMs to SMs as an integral part of internal auditing for central priority and budget planning.

Collaboration across units can be most visible in pioneering improvement activities. For example, in some disability services sensemaking, dialogues were initiated between implementing FLMs and decision-making officials aiming to clarify the guiding service ethics and air some misunderstandings that undermine service coherence (Narbutaite Aflaki and Lindh, forthcoming). Yet, there was still little evidence of a systematic collaboration on knowledge exchange from pilots on a larger scale, other than in individual interactions, formal dialogue meetings, and public policy reports.

Finally, as providing political legitimacy and adequate economic resources to implement the DIALOGEN aims is crucial to its success, the SMs conducted extensive dialogues with the two concerned political boards throughout the entire studied period. Representatives from both municipal boards composed the DIALOGEN Steering Group, while senior social service managers formed the DIALOGEN management group (Jönköping kommun, 2018). A crucial strategy was integrating results from service quality analysis in the political goal setting and budgeting work (SM2 Interview). Fewer goal setting and reporting layers effected a more coherent and focused message to the steering political boards and SMs experienced having significant power in the political goal setting.

Conclusions

The Jönköping case evidences how a municipal organisation can tap into multi-level service reform towards a more co-creative social service delivery culture by undertaking a bold systemic transformation, especially involving rethinking its approach towards management and senior and first-line manager relationships and roles in leading the change. The case findings illustrate an ongoing (pioneering in Sweden) systemic change in the local policy context and, especially, how management based on trust and learning – two major TBSL principles – has been increasingly used to support managers and personnel on the frontline. Overall, the SMs strategies based on TBSL principles seem to especially facilitate the systemic shift by enhancing FLM readiness and contributions (see Fig. 3).

Among the most interesting findings are the variety of contextually innovative strategies used by the SMs and FLMs (see Fig. 2) towards more user-centred, co-creative service culture.

A characteristic feature of the local TBSL model is the attempts to create more balance between SMs expectations and steering and bottom-up feedback, for example, by introducing new integrative analysis processes, allowing FLMs and their personnel time to experiment, adapt, and provide support. Openness to shared sensemaking by establishing processes to engage all management levels in social services in extensive dialogues is another key feature. The SMs learning took the form of adjusting (centralising and decentralising) pedagogical, administrative, and IT support to a range of service areas and, not least, engaging with research and action researchers to explore and test the most relevant approaches to change management. The SMs demonstrated strategic leadership not only by identifying the need for cultural change but also by showing awareness of its key pre-conditions, the time it takes, and the need for consistency over a longer period.

Given the scope and inherent complexity of the intended systemic change, it should not be surprising that (initial) SMs strategies faced challenges, and needed to be successively adjusted to be more in line with the TBSL approach, while still competing with other, especially market based, management logics. One of the challenges so far, has been an overly reliance on FLMs willingness and abilities to undertake the delegated role of change leaders without adequate support. Additionally, while valuable insights on improving co-creation have been accumulated from the implemented pilots and pedagogical support, to judge by FLMs experiences, knowledge sharing across different service areas still remains embryonic and overly reliant on individual manager initiatives. This points to some potential weaknesses of the TBSL when adopted in a highly decentralised organisation with

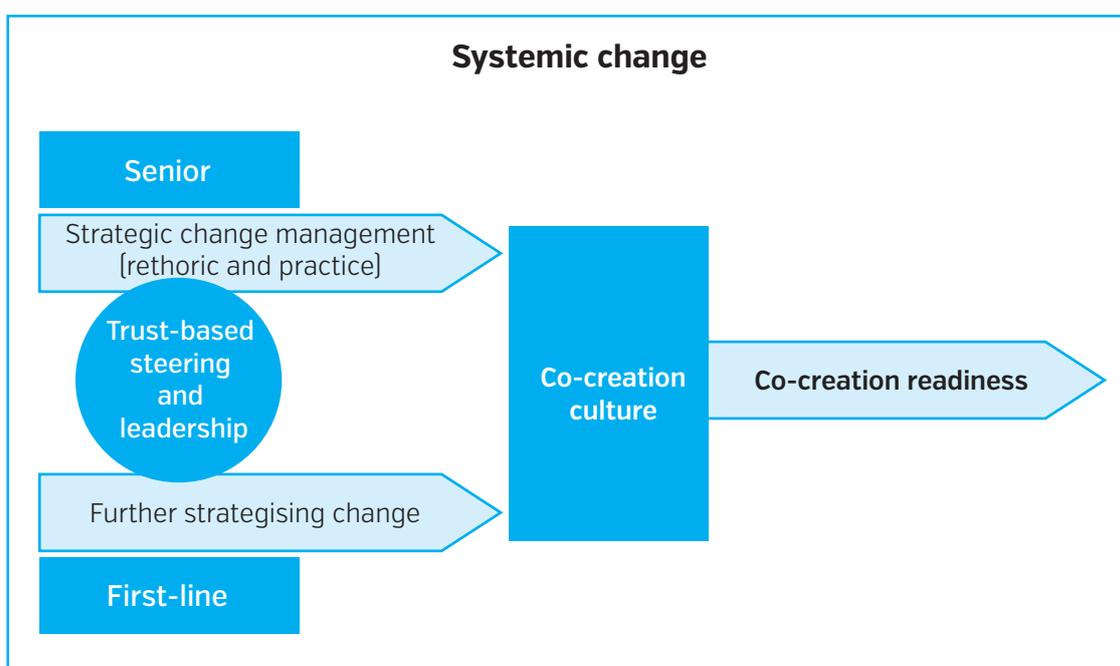
remaining vagueness on lower manager responsibilities for coordinating knowledge sharing about their insights and improvements across the organisational silos.

Figure 2. Interplay between senior management (SMs) and first-line manager (FLMs) strategies in TBSL

Principles	SMs strategy	FLMs strategy
1. Citizen/User focus	From 'for the citizen' to 'with the citizen' (rhetoric and practice)	Balancing professionals' and citizens' roles and perspectives
2. Trust	Showing trust through delegating responsibilities, tutoring, open conversations, dialogical accountability	Establishing trust in DIALOGEN goals and own abilities through received feedback and sensemaking dialogues
3. Delegation	Granting FLMs freedom of action in operationalising goals and self-evaluations	Self-evaluations, reporting, idea suggestions
4. Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Political and management collaboration, ▪ Supporting coherence between decision-making and implementation ▪ In goal setting and evaluations with FLMs 	Joining-up in piloting improvements
5. Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ by (re)organising analysis and support to test new ideas ▪ by approving tested piloting improvements ▪ by offering training ▪ by collective (facilitated) sensemaking ▪ by recruiting 'right' competencies ▪ by using common language and methodological guidance 	Undertaking sensemaking conversations and experimenting, using tutoring and trainings
6. Openness	Being open about aims, exploring implementation facilitators and challenges in dialogues, open to experimentation, tolerant regarding time, unique transparency	Sharing dialogue practices Openness in sensemaking
7. Learning	DIALOGEN books, meetings, SM adjustment, based on (self-)evaluations Weak steering/support for exchange of learnings, utilising research	Case-based learnings and changes Less exchange across silos

Alongside the many TBSL advantages, FLMs sometimes indicated a need for more hands-on steering by SMs to facilitate knowledge exchange and a more synchronised uptake of new meaningful practices to achieve more coherence in service implementation and greater justice towards user.

Figure 3. TBSL as a systemic change



The adapted normative theoretical framework has proved helpful to capture essential strategies towards more trust-based steering and thus allowed a more nuanced picture of the ongoing managerial shift towards the ‘co-creation’ paradigm, and is potentially of value in other contexts.

The study contributes the insight that a systemic change towards a co-creative service culture and management requires, not only tapping into national policies or reorganising, but further aligning discourses and intertwining strategic management actions at several system levels (cf., Torfing et al, 2021). Such change is not likely to result from some readily developed steering programme or model such as TBSL, but, as with the DIALOGEN, rather needs to be allowed to evolve in ways that are compatible with a learning organisation (cf., Jönköpings kommun, 2018), and yet without neglecting the consistency of SMs and political support. These findings are consistent with the recent claims of strategic management literature (Torfing et al, 2021; Ferlie and Ongaro, 2015) highlighting the multiplicity of actors and forces behind a paradigmatic systemic shift, where consistent political support and SMs change programmes and persistence are key factors, yet complementary to continuous sensemaking, learning, and change theory adjustment efforts at the front-line. The findings also indicate that a systemic change is facilitated when it starts promoting meaningful values for the target group and rethinking lower-level manager roles as stewards of change (ibidem). This in itself may affect reorganising, such as delegating FLMs a substantial change ownership and strengthening support functions. Equally important as change agencies are facilitating sensemaking, conducting pilot tests,

and embracing insights. In sum, the way the DIALOGEN reform was managed over time created a momentum in transforming the managerial approach, organisational culture, and professional ethos, thus legitimising Jönköping municipality as a learning and robust organisation in the ongoing paradigmatic policy change.

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