CardiffMet

cawr

Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research

MetCaerdydd

cyigll

Canolfan Ymchwil ar gyfer Iechyd, Gweithgarwch a Lles

Understanding the role of strengths-based development in systems leadership: An analysis of CliftonStrengths in developing physical activity for 'Together an Active Future'

A report written for Together an Active Future

Together an Active Future

Professor Niki Bolton, Dr Paul Sellars, Professor Stephen Mellalieu, & Professor Diane Crone

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TaAF's strengths-based leadership programme had a positive influence upon strengths- and system-based working for physical activity promotion. Participants reported developing self-awareness, confidence, reflective practice, and systems thinking, with higher levels of programme engagement linked to higher levels of impact. Overall, the programme was deemed valuable as part of TaAF's longer term systems leadership approach, and contributed to the promotion of physical activity across Pennine Lancashire.

Project Overview

This project sought to understand the impact of TaAF's strengths-based leadership programme upon physical activity across Pennine Lancashire. 175 people who participated in TaAF's programme completed an online survey, with 9 undertaking a one-to-one interview. Participant experiences regarding perceived impacts of the programme were collected, and the main findings were:

- **Overall experience:** The programme was reported to be a positive experience across all leadership levels.
- **Leadership:** The programme was suggested to enhance self-awareness, confidence, reflective practice, and systems thinking, strengthening leader ability to recognise and apply their strengths and those of others in seeking to promote physical activity.
- **System leadership enablers:** System leadership enablers were reported to be influenced ('somewhat' to 'a lot') by participating in the programme.
- **Socio-ecological (systems) impact:** Programme engagement was reported to impact the ability to influence physical activity change across the system. Impact varied based upon leadership status, programme engagement, systems thinking competency, and leadership approach.
- **Programme engagement:** Greater engagement was associated with higher impact across all outcomes.
- **Barriers and facilitators:** The most cited barrier to impact was 'resource constraints / capacity' - and the most cited facilitator was 'designated time'.
- **Long-term change perspective:** To support future physical activity promotion across the whole system, a longer sustained effort over time was suggested. Greater engagement and support was requested from senior leadership, in conjunction with resources, protected time, and practical guidance.
- **In practice:** The programme was deemed most effective when embedded as an ongoing leadership development approach. From a socio-ecological (systems) perspective the strongest impact was reported to occur at the individual and organisational levels where leaders have greater direct involvement with relationships and ways of working.

Bolton, N., Sellars, P., Mellalieu, S., & Crone, D. (2026). Understanding the role of strengths-based development in systems leadership: An analysis of CliftonStrengths in developing physical activity. A report by Centre for Health, Activity, and Wellbeing Research (CAWR), Cardiff Metropolitan University written for Together an Active Future (TaAF).

Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research

Canolfan Ymchwil ar gyfer Iechyd, Gweithgarwch a Lles

Together an Active Future

Understanding the role of strengths-based development in systems leadership: An analysis of CliftonStrengths in developing physical activity for Together an Active Future

A report for Together an Active Future

Professor Niki Bolton, Dr Paul Sellars, Professor Stephen Mellalieu, & Professor Diane Crone

Bolton, N., Sellars, P., Mellalieu, S., & Crone, D. (2026). Understanding the role of strengths-based development in systems leadership: An analysis of CliftonStrengths in developing physical activity. A report by Centre for Health, Activity, and Wellbeing Research (CAWR), Cardiff Metropolitan University written for Together an Active Future (TaAF).

RESEARCH TEAM

Together an Active Future (TaAF) commissioned a team from the Centre for Health, Activity, and Wellbeing Research (CAWR) at Cardiff Metropolitan University to conduct the current research project. CAWR's vision is to be a world-leading transdisciplinary research centre working with a diverse range of communities that makes a difference to people's health and wellbeing across the lifespan.



The team from CAWR that conducted this current research project



Professor Niki Bolton | CAWR Management Team / Cardiff School of Management



Dr Paul Sellars | CAWR Research Associate



Professor Stephen Mellalieu | CAWR research Lead for Wellbeing in Demanding Environments



Professor Diane Crone CAWR Director

The team would like to thank all those involved in this project with particular thanks to all those who shared their stories and gave up their time

Thank you / Diolch

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 6
Research context 6
Strengths-Based Leadership Programme 7
METHOD 8
Aim and objectives 8
Approach: Design and analysis 9
Participants 9
RESULTS 10
Survey 10
Part 1 - Leadership 11
Part 2 – Experience and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme 16
Part 3 – Leadership and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme 41
Part 4 – Barriers and enablers 61
Interviews 67
Interviews Summary 72
CONCLUSION 73
Limitations 75
External implications 75
Summary 76
APPENDICES 78
Appendix 1: TaAF justification for selecting CliftonStrengths 78

Bolton, N., Sellars, P., Mellalieu, S., & Crone, D. (2026). Understanding the role of strengths-based development in systems leadership: An analysis of CliftonStrengths in developing physical activity. A report by Centre for Health, Activity, and Wellbeing Research (CAWR), Cardiff Metropolitan University written for Together an Active Future (TaAF).

CardiffMet
cawr
Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research

MetCaerdydd
cyigll
Canolfan Ymchwil ar gyfer Iechyd, Gweithgarwch a Lles

INTRODUCTION

Research context

Together an Active Future (TaAF) is tasked by Sport England with bringing about sustainable changes in physical activity across Pennine Lancashire, covering the six district councils and Active Lancashire (see Figure below). Seeking to achieve a sustainable change in physical activity, TaAF implements a multi-sector action plan across the region, and one area of focus is leadership development.

The leadership development component of TaAF comprises three elements:

1. Strengths-based leadership programme;
2. Executive Leadership Academy; and
3. Leadership communication opportunities (including webinars).

This report specifically refers to the ***strengths-based leadership programme***.



Figure: Map of TaAF locations taken from taaf.co.uk

Strengths-Based Leadership Programme

The strengths-based leadership programme utilised by TaAF is underpinned by the CliftonStrengths assessment tool (see Appendix 1 for TaAF justification for the selection of CliftonStrengths). Developed by Gallup the tool is described to reveal unique talents of individuals by measuring 34 research-based themes, which supports individuals to discover and develop their strengths for greater personal and professional success.[1] TaAF's strengths-based leadership programme comprises four participatory routes, which included a combination of three aspects (see table below).

Aspect of CliftonStrengths	Details[2]
CliftonStrengths assessment	An online assessment that helps people identify their natural patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving and supports them to intentionally develop these into strengths.
CliftonStrengths coaching	Participants were offered between one and three one-hour coaching sessions, delivered by a TaAF or Gallup-certified strengths coach, to deepen their understanding of their CliftonStrengths report and support them to apply their strengths in addressing complex challenges.
3-day strengths coaching course	A structured programme designed to build the confidence and capability of aspiring coaches to use and apply the CliftonStrengths tool, while creating a connected network of coaches able to influence practice, culture and systems across organisations.

The four participatory routes were:

1. CliftonStrengths assessment only
2. CliftonStrengths assessment and CliftonStrengths coaching
3. CliftonStrengths assessment and 3-day strengths coaching course
4. CliftonStrengths assessment, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course

Individuals were recruited through a targeted approach that involved identifying and engaging key partner organisations based within, or working across, Pennine Lancashire. These organisations were selected based on their alignment with physical activity and TaAF's priority areas and supported the identification and engagement of suitable participants. The opportunity was offered to individual on a voluntary basis.

[1] https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252137/home.aspx
[2] Details provided by TaAF

METHOD

Aim and objectives

The aim of this research was to assess the ways in which a strengths-based leadership programme (informed by CliftonStrengths) contributed to systems leadership effectiveness, which in turn, contributes to system-level changes that seek to promote physical activity across Pennine Lancashire. Accordingly, this evaluation focuses on participants' experiences and perceived impacts, rather than seeking to attribute direct causal impact on physical activity outcomes.

To achieve the aim, four objectives were sought:

1. Understand the role of strengths-based development in systems leadership in promoting physical activity across Pennine Lancashire;
2. Explore the ways in which the CliftonStrengths (with and without coaching) has influenced leadership knowledge and approaches/behaviours in relation to physical activity promotion;
3. Consider how CliftonStrengths has supported leaders to impact physical activity levels across the different levels of a socio-ecological model (individual, social environment, organisations, physical environment, policy, and norms and ideologies); and,
4. Examine the findings of this evaluation in relation to TaAF and identify implications and potential future opportunities for the promotion of physical activity across Pennine Lancashire.

Approach: Design and analysis

A mixed methods approach used an online survey and one-to-one interviews following participant engagement with the strengths-based leadership programme.[3]

Survey & Interviews

The survey considered:

- Demographic information
- Individual leadership status and previous leadership training
- Experiences of engaging with CliftonStrengths
- Impact of CliftonStrengths upon systems leadership
- Impact of CliftonStrengths upon wider physical activity system across Pennine Lancashire
- Systems thinking

The survey was administered by TaAF on behalf of CAWR (further details provided in 'participants' section) and it was estimated to take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Following survey completion, quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. Open-ended text responses were analysed through content analysis. Participants were offered the opportunity to be selected for one-to-one online interviews, from which a sub-sample of participants (n=9) took part via Microsoft Teams. The interview guide was co-produced between CAWR and TaAF and the interviews lasted between 25- 47 minutes (total time - 304 minutes), and a mean time for each interview of approximately 35 minutes.

Participants

The survey was sent to 601 individuals who had taken part in the strengths-based leadership programme delivered by TaAF since February 2023. Upon closing, 281 individuals had accessed the survey (29% return rate). Following data cleaning 175 surveys were taken forward for analysis[4]. Participants had a mean age of 42.56 years, 66% identified as female, 73% identified as 'White British'[5]. Of the nine participants who engaged in the interviews five were female and four male.

[3] Research Ethics was approved by Cardiff Metropolitan University in November 2025 (ethics number Sta-11625).
[4] While a 175 responses were received, the presentation of the results will show different number of responses for different questions which reflects the relevance of the question and whether the participant chose not to respond to certain questions.
[5] Demographic details were only available for 85 of the participants

RESULTS

Survey

The survey results are presented over four sections, and after each section a summary section is provide in a green box which provides a combined description of the findings.

Part 1 – Leadership

- Leadership status
- Strengths-based leadership programme engagement
- Previous strengths or leadership training
- Systems thinking competency
- Part 1 Summary

Part 2 – Experience and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme

- Experience of strengths-based leadership programme
- Perceived impact of strengths-based leadership programme - Systems Leadership Enablers
- Perceived impact of strengths-based leadership programme – Socio-Ecological Model
- Part 2 Summary

Part 3 – Leadership and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme

- Leadership status and perceived impact
- Strengths-based leadership programme engagement and perceived impact
- Strengths-based leadership programme engagement and systems thinking competency
- Systems thinking competency and perceived impact
- CliftonStrengths 'theme lead with' and perceived impact
- Part 3 Summary

Part 4 - Barriers and enablers

- CliftonStrengths - barriers/challenges and future enablers/solutions
- Part 4 Summary

Part 1 - Leadership

Strengths-based leadership programme

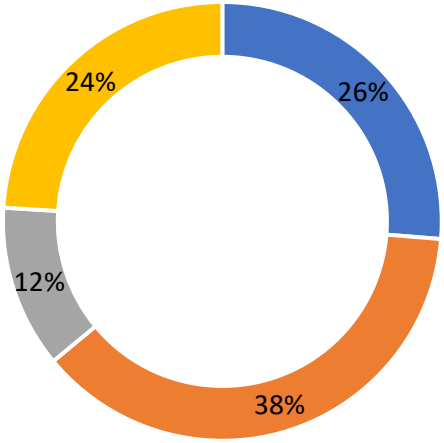
175 individuals responded to the level of engagement with the strengths-based leadership programme, which included four options.

Assessment tool only (n=46)

Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching (n=66)

Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course (n=21)

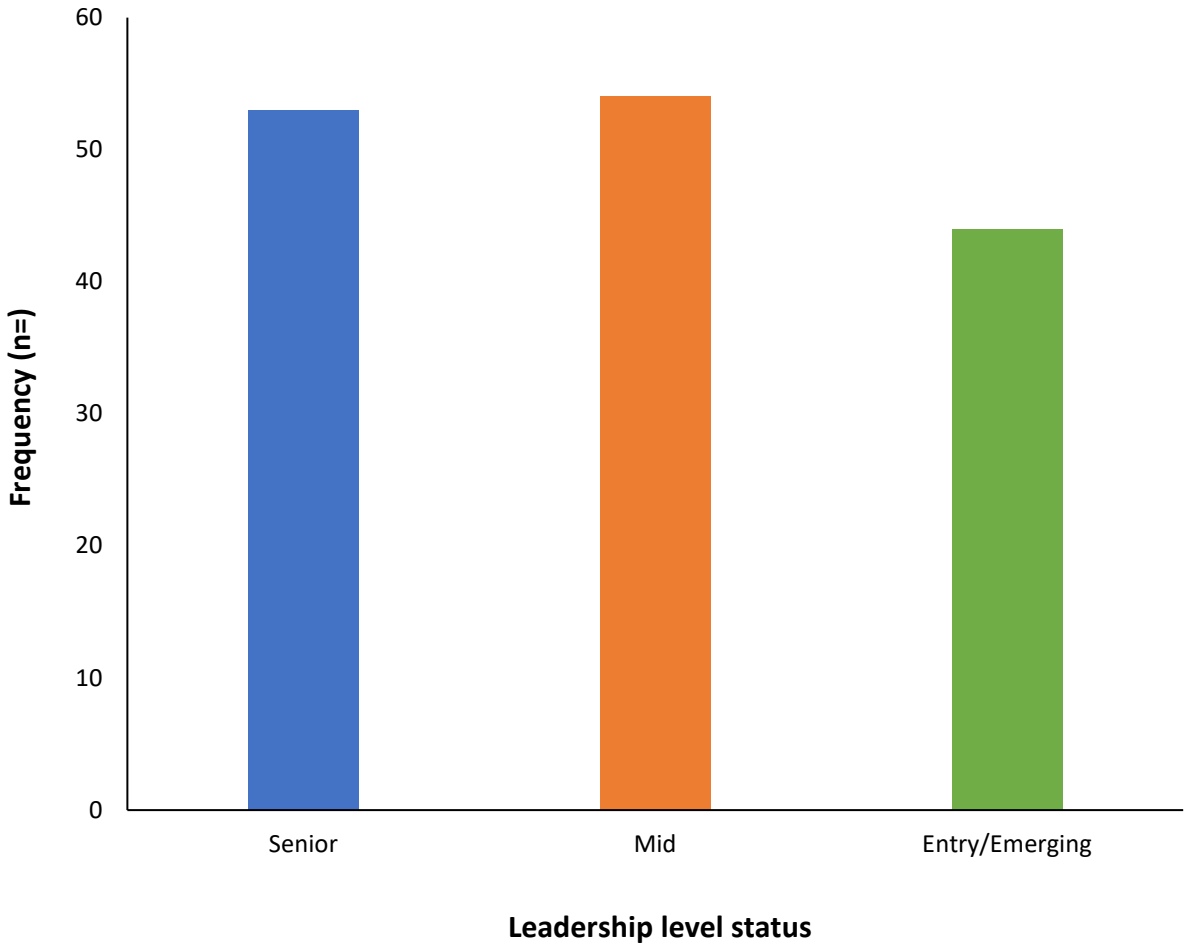
Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course (n=42)



Leadership status

151 participants responded to the leadership status question. The question provided three status options, each of which was accompanied by a description.

- Senior-level leader – "You are a leader with high levels of responsibility within your organisation and might lead on a range of programmes/ projects and regularly support strategic decisions making." n = 53.
- Mid-level leader – "You are an experienced leader with responsibility for a team or department." n = 54.
- Entry/Emerging-level leader – "You are currently working in a first-line management/ leadership position and are developing experience of being a leader. This might also be your first leadership position." n= 44.



Previous strengths or leadership training

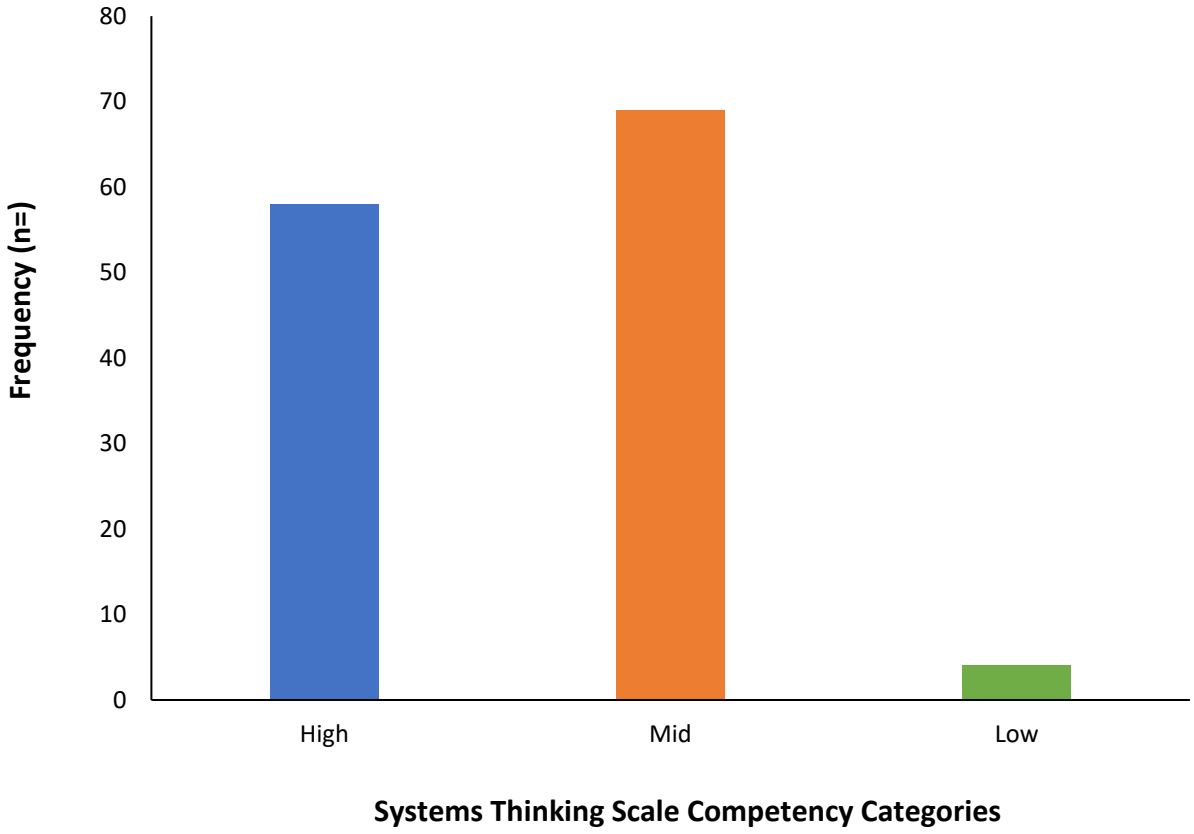
Participants (n=148) selected the option which best described their previous level of training regarding strengths or leadership. Responses ranged from '*5 = I have a high level of leadership and strengths training*' to '1 = *Before CliftonStrengths I had never done any leadership training'*. The mean score was 3.3 (SD=1.22)[6], with the most common selection being 4 and 3.

Previous strengths or leadership training	**N =**	**Percentage**
5 = I have a high level of leadership and strengths training	25	16.89%
4	45	30.41%
3	45	30.41%
2	15	10.14%
1 = Before CliftonStrengths I had never done any leadership training'.	18	12.16%

[6] SD= Standard Deviation, the spread of the data points away from the mean

Systems thinking competency

Participants completed the Systems Thinking Scale (Moore et al., 2010), a 20-item self-report questionnaire, which indicates an individual's level of competency in systems thinking. Scores range from a maximum of 80 and a minimum of 0, with >60+ representing a high level of competency, 40 to 59 mid, and <40 low[7]. In the current research, the mean score was 57.84 (SD=9.09).



[7] Kakemam et al. (2025). The impact of nurses' perceptions of systems thinking on patient safety competencies: a cross-sectional study. BMC Health Services Research. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-025-13456-4

Part 1 Summary

TaAF's strengths-based leadership programme resulted in 74% of participants completing the assessment tool and at least one of either the CliftonStrengths coaching or the 3-day strengths coaching course. The leadership status of those who participated in the survey was consistent with senior leadership status accounting for 35%, mid 36%, and entry/emerging 29%. Prior to participating in the strengths-based leadership programme over 75% had previously participated in strengths or leadership training to a mid or high level, and only 12% had never done any leadership training. Finally, when exploring participants competency in systems thinking, the majority were categorised within the mid or high groups, with only 3% viewed as having a low level of systems thinking competency.

Part 2 – Experience and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme

Experience of strengths-based leadership programme

Participants were asked "Using only a few words, what comes to mind when you think about your experience of CliftonStrengths?". A word cloud of 155 responses was created using the 25 most frequently cited words.

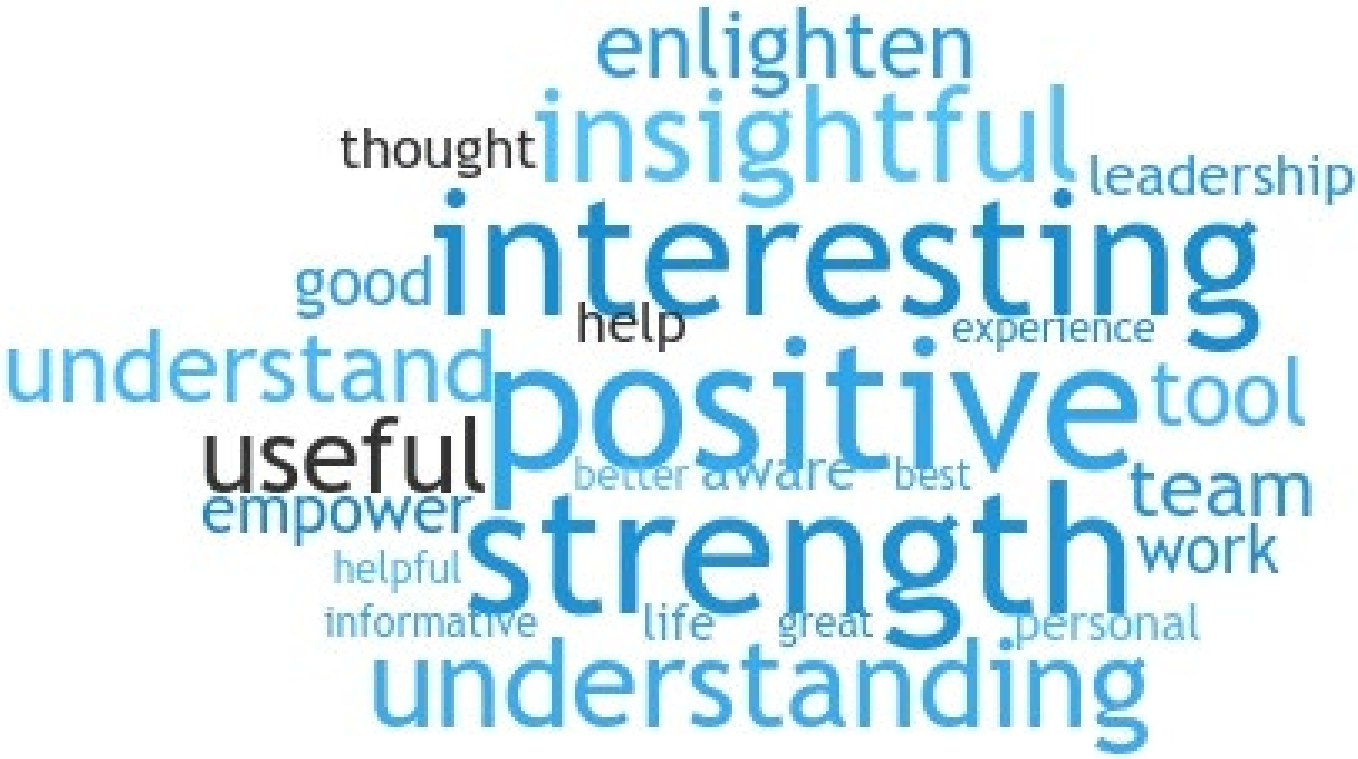


Figure: Word cloud showing experiences of CliftonStrengths delivered by TaAF

Perceived impact of strengths-based leadership programme - Systems Leadership Enablers

To better understand the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon system leadership, participants were asked about the impact of the programme with regards to five categories of 'system leadership enablers':

1. Developing connections and networks
2. Learning together through reflective practice
3. Influencing and relationships
4. Authentic brave leadership
5. Investing in strengths

Each of these system leadership enablers has five specific aspects (see Table below for an example).

Table showing example of system leadership enabler and specific aspects of enabler

System leadership enabler	Aspects of system leadership enabler
Developing connections and networks	• Build a sense of common purpose with both internal and external stakeholders • Develop an external network of influential partners • Make myself visible to others in the organisation • Proactively share stories and experiences that help build connections • Make an effort to understand others

The questions about systems leadership enablers involved three stages. First, participants selected which aspect of the each of the five system leadership enablers CliftonStrengths most positively influenced, with a sixth response offered, 'Not applicable - CliftonStrengths did not positively influence my development of connections and networks'.

Next, participants stated the degree to which they felt the selected 'aspect' was influenced by participating in CliftonStrengths, using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = *A great deal*, 4 = *A lot*, 3 = *Somewhat*, 2 = *A little*, 1 = *Not at all*).

Finally, participants shared (via open text) how the system leadership enablers were perceived to influence change organisationally or across the wider physical activity system. Tables 1 to 5 below provide an overview of the results regarding each of the five enablers, (including open text comments from respondents) followed by a set of pie charts illustrating the perceived level to which strengths-based leadership programme influenced system leadership enablers.

1. Developing connections and networks

Aspect of "Developing connections and networks" which CliftonStrengths most positively influenced	**N**	**Level to which the aspect was influenced by participating in CliftonStrengths** *(5 = A great deal, 4 = A lot, 3 = Somewhat, 2 = A little, 1 = Not at all)*	**Ways in which selected "Aspect of developing connections and networks" has influenced change organisationally, or across wider system, supporting change in approaches to physical activity** **Example quotes**
Build a sense of common purpose with both internal and external stakeholders	36	M = 3.97 SD = 0.77	*"Working with a partner for them to take over the delivery of health and wellbeing sessions, and for these sessions to incorporate part of their own offer."*
Develop an external network of influential partners	12	M = 3.83 SD = 0.94	N/A[8]
Make myself visible to others in the organisation	17	M = 3.88 SD = 0.78	*"It's helped me increase my profile and credibility across a partner network, enabling me to deliver skills development topics in areas such as behaviour change and systems thinking, to physical activity partners"*
Proactively share stories and experiences that help build connections	18	M = 3.78 SD = 0.88	*"Proactively sharing stories has helped build trust across NHS partners, creating clearer connections and supporting a more collaborative, system-wide approach to physical activity"*
Make an effort to understand others	74	M = 3.64 SD = 0.88	*"I think it has enforced the need to ensure everyone's perspectives and strengths are considered when looking to work with partners and influence change."*
Not applicable - CliftonStrengths did not positively influence my development of connections and networks	18	-	N/A

[8] No comments were provided

Build a sense of common purpose with both internal and external stakeholders

"By improving my ability to build a sense of common purpose with both internal and external stakeholders, I've been able to support the development of trust and stronger relationships across the network. This has helped encourage distributed leadership and fostered a shared commitment to a new town-wide vision. As a result, teams and partners are more aligned, collaborative, and invested in driving change, which has strengthened approaches to physical activity and created a more connected, system-wide effort."

Make yourself visible to others in the organisation

"Increased confidence to contribute in environments that I may have not previously. Believing in myself and leaning into my strengths having a greater awareness of how I can use my strengths to improve/increase my visibility. My ability to speak confidently is influencing senior managers within our organisation to think differently about regeneration, planning, wellbeing, "place" and people when providing and designing services. I have been invited to sit at strategic tables and conversations that were previously unavailable to me, to influence other decision makers and share insights about our communities and what people tell us they would like/need/aspire to achieve."

Proactively share stories and experiences that help build connections

"The majority of my work is on the ground with grassroots clubs and community groups. Showcasing their stories and best practice provides relational and meaningful opportunities for learning and change which can be shared with other clubs and community groups."

Make an effort to understand others

"Improving my ability to make an effort to understand others has positively influenced change both organisationally and across the wider system. By actively listening to participants and partners, I've gained a better understanding of individual needs and barriers to physical activity, allowing approaches to be more inclusive and person-centred. This has led to practical changes such as greater flexibility in how activities are planned and delivered, increased use of participant feedback, and stronger collaboration with partners. As a result, physical activity opportunities are better tailored to communities, supporting increased engagement and more sustainable participation."

2. Learning together through reflective practice

Aspect of "Learning together through reflective practice" which CliftonStrengths most positively influenced	**N**	**Level to which the aspect was influenced by participating in CliftonStrengths** *(5 = A great deal, 4 = A lot, 3 = Somewhat, 2 = A little, 1 = Not at all)*	**Ways in which selected "Learning together through reflective practice" has influenced change organisationally, or across wider system, supporting change in approaches to physical activity** **Example quote(s)**
Proactively seek feedback without being defensive	17	M = 3.35 SD = 0.86	*"I am more open to consciously receive feedback without being defensive. I do not proactively seek feedback (still shy about it)"*
Admit mistakes and gain insight from experiences	13	M = 4.08 SD = 0.78	*"This has strengthened relationships. Being in a position to reflect on mistakes and articulate those reflections with a common language, or at least understandable for people who have not done CliftonStrengths, has helped in this. Onward impact has been to not be 'precious' about taking things forward and seeking to 'get it right' rather than 'be right'."*
Cultivate a safe environment of learning together from mistakes	14	M = 3.86 SD = 0.66	*"It has promoted open and transparent conversations and vulnerability-based trust"*
Create the environment where others can be creative and imaginative	33	M = 3.91 SD = 0.84	*"I already had the tendency to try and empower others, but I feel I do this even more on the back of the CliftonStrengths results, coaching and workshop we have had."*
Create time for reflection for yourself and others	75	M = 3.67 SD = 0.92	*"My CliftonStrengths, alongside the facilitators has given me the understanding and insights as to why and how I work the way I do, I have since implemented this into my day to day and have found this very beneficial."*
Not applicable - CliftonStrengths did not positively influence my learning together through reflective practice	23	-	N/A

Proactively seek feedback without being defensive

"The collaborative culture that the CliftonStrengths brings with it means people are willing to share experiences and seek feedback openly."

Admit mistakes and gain insight from experiences

"As CEO, I believe that my ability to recognise where I might have done things differently, and reflect using my CliftonStrengths has been seen as a positive within my organisation. It has given other the permission to do the same as opposed to being defensive about decisions or actions that might have been tackled in a different way."

Cultivate a safe environment of learning together from mistakes

"Sharing teams strengths has enabled a safe space where we all learn together to achieve a common goal and rely on the strengths of others within the team."

Create the environment where others can be creative and imaginative

"Knowing my strengths has enabled me to be braver to hold the space for others to collectively problem solve. Prior to CliftonStrengths training I would have seen it as my own problem to solve and would have felt incompetent when I could come up with the solutions"

Create time for reflection for yourself and others

"By creating time for reflection for myself and encouraging it for others, I've been able to pause, step back, and better understand myself, my work and the organisations and systems I'm operating in. I think this has helped our wider team and partners connect the dots, focus on what truly matters, and align efforts more effectively. Being more reflective, in personal timeouts, and one-to-ones have supported more thoughtful planning, improved prioritisation, and strengthened shared decision making. I think this in turn has enhanced approaches to physical activity by fostering collaboration, innovation, and a culture of continuous learning across the wider system."

3. Influencing and relationships

Aspect of "Influencing and relationships" which CliftonStrengths most positively influenced	**N**	**Level to which the aspect was influenced by participating in CliftonStrengths** *(5 = A great deal, 4 = A lot, 3 = Somewhat, 2 = A little, 1 = Not at all)*	**Ways in which selected "Influencing and relationships" has influenced change organisationally, or across wider system, supporting change in approaches to physical activity** **Example quote(s)**
Communicate a compelling vision to motivate and inspire others around a common cause	32	M = 3.81 SD = 0.86	*"I believe part of my wider system holds similar values and beliefs to me around supporting targeted audiences. We've made some great progress in streamlining our event calendar to focus on children and young people who lack opportunities"*
Encourage collaboration and partners with others to achieve shared objectives	48	M = 3.83 SD = 0.81	*"Through CliftonStrengths, I have been able to coach members of the wider organisational team and see where colleagues are compatible or where colleagues have quite different strengths. This has then helped to inform the different ways we could work within the smaller teams but has also given us more incentive to combine colleagues for different teams to work together."*
Build a sense of common purpose and shared accountability between groups or partners with different aims	24	M = 3.71 SD = 1.00	*"It gave us an opportunity to look at how we work together and manage expectations, through different behaviour / styles"*
Create an inclusive environment	38	M = 3.50 SD = 1.03	*"Similar to my earlier response, the CliftonStrengths work has ensured when working within place or partnership I look to have an appreciate of everyone's strengths and what they bring to the table. For example, ensuring we get a view from everyone in the group on matters, rather than just the most dominant personalities."*
Gain commitment from others to deliver change	12	M = 3.50 SD = 0.67	*"Thinking about my strength of Harmony and consistency makes my call to action really powerful. Everyone deserves the opportunity to move more, regardless of the place, setting or mindset of organisations. I am able to strongly articulate why this matters."*
Not applicable - CliftonStrengths did not positively influence my influencing and relationships	21	-	N/A

Communicate a compelling vision to motivate and inspire others around a common cause

"Doing things differently, being brave and bold and acknowledging that we don't have all the answers, has provided a platform which can be used to share a clear vision and communicating this with others."

Encourage collaboration and partners with others to achieve shared objectives

"It has allowed a shift in mindset and challenge to ourselves and partners who are ultimately trying to achieve the same outcomes. I believe it has allowed us to look at the capability and capacity that exists across the system and how they be best utilised or realigned to deliver collaborative work. We have small examples of this which suggests to me that the reframing has gained support."

Build a sense of common purpose and shared accountability between groups or partners with different aims

"Making the 'golden thread' clearer to staff has helped to show how their role plays an important part in the overall role of the organisation."

Create an inclusive environment

"Participating in CliftonStrengths has significantly influenced my ability to create an inclusive environment. It has helped me better understand and value individual strengths, perspectives, and ways of working, which has increased my empathy and awareness. As a result, I am more intentional about creating spaces where people feel respected, supported, and confident to contribute, helping to foster a more inclusive and collaborative environment."

Gain commitment from others to deliver change

"Having a better understanding of colleagues strengths has allowed me to think through the best way to communicate with them and secure their support.

4. Authentic brave leadership

Aspect of "Authentic brave leadership" which CliftonStrengths most positively influenced	**N**	**Level to which the aspect was influenced by participating in CliftonStrengths** *(5 = A great deal, 4 = A lot, 3 = Somewhat, 2 = A little, 1 = Not at all)*	**Ways in which selected "Authentic brave leadership" has influenced change organisationally, or across wider system, supporting change in approaches to physical activity** **Example quote(s)**
Respond positively to setbacks and obstacles	28	M = 3.68 SD = 0-.94	*"By understanding my strengths and particularly blind spots I am more able to share accountability and lean on others when we need to rethink a process or change a way something is going."*
Be comfortable taking risks to try new ideas and approaches, even if they might fail	32	M = 3.72 SD = 0.92	*"Through the coaching, I pitched an idea to exec directors on system leadership. It didn't land at all well, on reflection I don't think my bosses understood how it could work, however I am using this as a strategic priority in my new role and it is going really well."*
Cultivate a feeling of energy, excitement and optimism in the team	21	M = 3.95 SD = 0.80	*"CliftonStrengths has helped me to believe that I have certain strengths that support and enable me to successfully mentor young people. It has helped me to work towards objectives and outcomes with young people that will lead them to better things in the future."*
Constructively challenge the status quo	28	M = 3.36 SD = 0.68	*"I use the strengths matrix in a way that encourages positive feedback. It's not 'personal' to challenge - it's the CliftonStrengths way."*
Encourage others to try things outside of their comfort zone	38	M = 3.47 SD = 0.92	*"I have encouraged my staff to take risks outside their comfort zones, knowing that they have my support and guidance."*
Not applicable - CliftonStrengths did not positively influence my authentic brave leadership	28	-	N/A

Respond positively to setbacks and obstacles

"Using a strengths approach has improved my ability to respond positively to setbacks and obstacles as it has encouraged me to be adaptable and change the way we do things to encourage more young people to engage in physical activity."

Be comfortable taking risks to try new ideas and approaches, even if they might fail

"I think it has contributed to a growing confidence within the wider leadership team to explore new ideas and approaches, being proactive. The stronger relationships have enabled more cross-service collaboration."

Cultivate a feeling of energy, excitement and optimism in the team

"I have been able to understand that I lead through building relationships which helped my confidence to be energetic and enthusiastic even when others aren't. I have a habit of matching people's energy (empathy is strong) but this can mean I lose my enthusiasm when others aren't. However, understanding that my energy and excitement is an asset, I've been better able to protect that energy and continue to lead with it."

Create an inclusive environment

"Using several of my top ten strengths and allowing the next five in order, where I have worked hard at communication and connections, I have been able to give better time for arguments to be made, remove preconceptions, but balance with context known and then have a clear and prepared response, that has become more articulate, to add a compelling case/ argument... Where in past experiences I may have jumped in with support, now I would take better time to assess if that is the best course, making sure my staffing resource is used wise and effectively. Understanding where people are coming from is key here at times, but to remind them of the bigger picture and why it matters. Taking responsibility to present a quality offer and position is sometimes needed to challenge for those why may struggle. or need help. My strengths and appreciation of those has allowed this to happen.

Encourage others to try things outside of their comfort zone

"We spent lots of time as a team exploring our own and each other's top strengths but also understanding where something might not be their 'go to' approach. Giving people ideas of how to build those strengths that were lower down on their list gives them additional tools."

5. Investing in strengths

Aspect of "Investing in strengths" which CliftonStrengths most positively influenced	**N**	**Level to which the aspect was influenced by participating in CliftonStrengths** *(5 = A great deal, 4 = A lot, 3 = Somewhat, 2 = A little, 1 = Not at all)*	**Ways in which selected "Investing in strengths" has influenced change organisationally, or across wider system, supporting change in approaches to physical activity** **Example quote(s)**
Know my strengths and use them positively	85	M = 4.02 SD = 0.96	*"I feel that opening up to my strengths has enabled me to be more confident when approaching new ideas. Staff feed off a positive environment - so this has been helpful"*
Spot strengths in others and encourage them to use them	53	M = 3.96 SD = 0.88	*"Understanding and spotting people's strengths has opened the opportunity to develop physical activity programs through getting the right people in the right place with the right strengths. Whether helping to develop a sustainable physical activity programme or developing a strategy."*
Identify and develop talent within the organisation	12	M = 3.75 SD = 0.97	*"Strengths has helped me to spot strengths in others and support and guide them in the best way, concentrating on what's strong rather than what's wrong"*
Share expertise and guide others to solve tough problems	8	M = 3.88 SD = 0.35	*"As a CliftonStrengths coach I am able to mediate between pairs and groups to resolve areas of challenge or conflict and to facilitate a group conversations to direct strengths towards tackling challenges and opportunities by drawing upon what people do best."*
Celebrate bold action in others, whether they succeed or fail	5	M = 3 SD = 0.82	*"I believe that you have to try to turn ideas into execution. CliftonStrengths highlighted my strengths around relationships and execution, therefore where others are pro-active and try new approaches, I am looking to celebrate that bold action and dynamism."*
Not applicable - CliftonStrengths did not positively influence my investing in strengths	12	-	

Know my strengths and use them positively

"Improving my ability to understand and use my strengths positively has helped drive change both organisationally and across the wider system. By playing to my strengths with greater confidence, I have been able to lead more effectively, build stronger relationships, and contribute more purposefully to decision-making around physical activity. This has supported more focused and consistent approaches, improved collaboration with partners, and helped shape physical activity opportunities that are better aligned to community needs."

Spot strengths in others and encourage them to use them

"It has helped me to try and look at people through different lenses and appreciate that others will have different strengths that underpin their behaviours, attitudes and approaches. I have begun to delegate tasks to people whose strengths are best suited to the action needed and explained to them and the wider team why I have taken that approach."

Identify and develop talent within the organisation

"By recognising people's strengths and supporting their growth, I've helped build a more capable and motivated team, which in turn has improved our collective ability to collaborate on physical activity initiatives."

Share expertise and guide others to solve tough problems

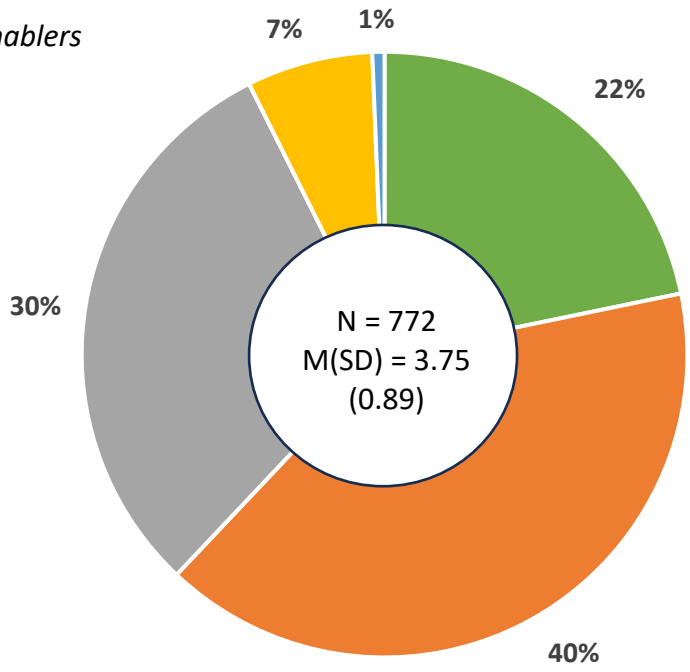
"Helped us to share positives and reflect on achievements, important words of encouragement were shared from Senior Leadership Team to help boost morale and guide each other."

Celebrate bold action in others, whether they succeed or fail

"We now have a pot at work we put all our achievements in and read them at the end of each month".

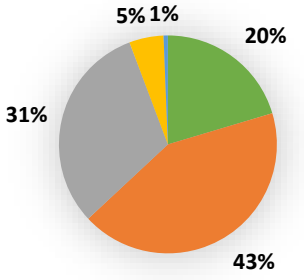
Pie charts illustrating level to which strengths-based leadership programme was perceived to influence system leadership enablers

Combined - All system leadership enablers



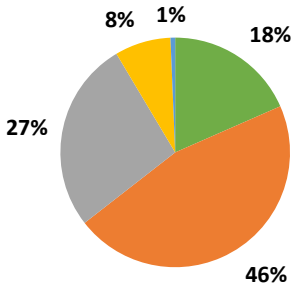
Level of agreement:
A great deal = 5
A lot
Somewhat
A little
Not at all = 1

Developing connections and networks



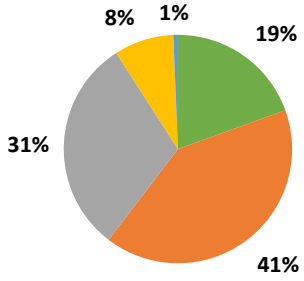
N = 157
M(SD) = 3.77(0.85)

Learning together through reflective practice



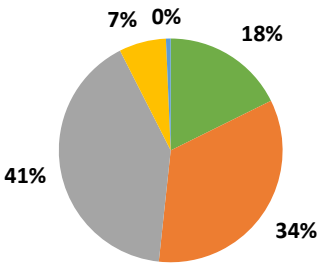
N = 152
M(SD) = 3.74(0.87)

Influencing and relationships



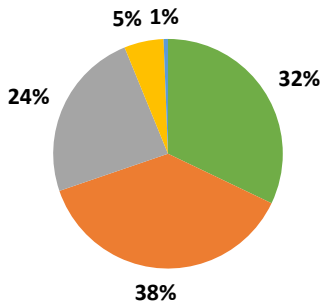
N = 154
M(SD) = 3.70(0.90)

Authentic brave leadership



N = 147
M(SD) = 3.61(0.88)

Investing in strengths



N = 163
M(SD) = 3.95(0.92)

Perceived impact of strengths-based leadership programme – Socio-Ecological Model

Participants were asked to state the extent which CliftonStrengths impacted their ability to influence change at the six different levels of the socio-ecological model (see image below). 986 responses were provided across the six different levels with a mean change of 1.98 (SD=1.36) - the highest score was 4 "*Impacted a great deal*" and lowest 0 "*Not at all*".

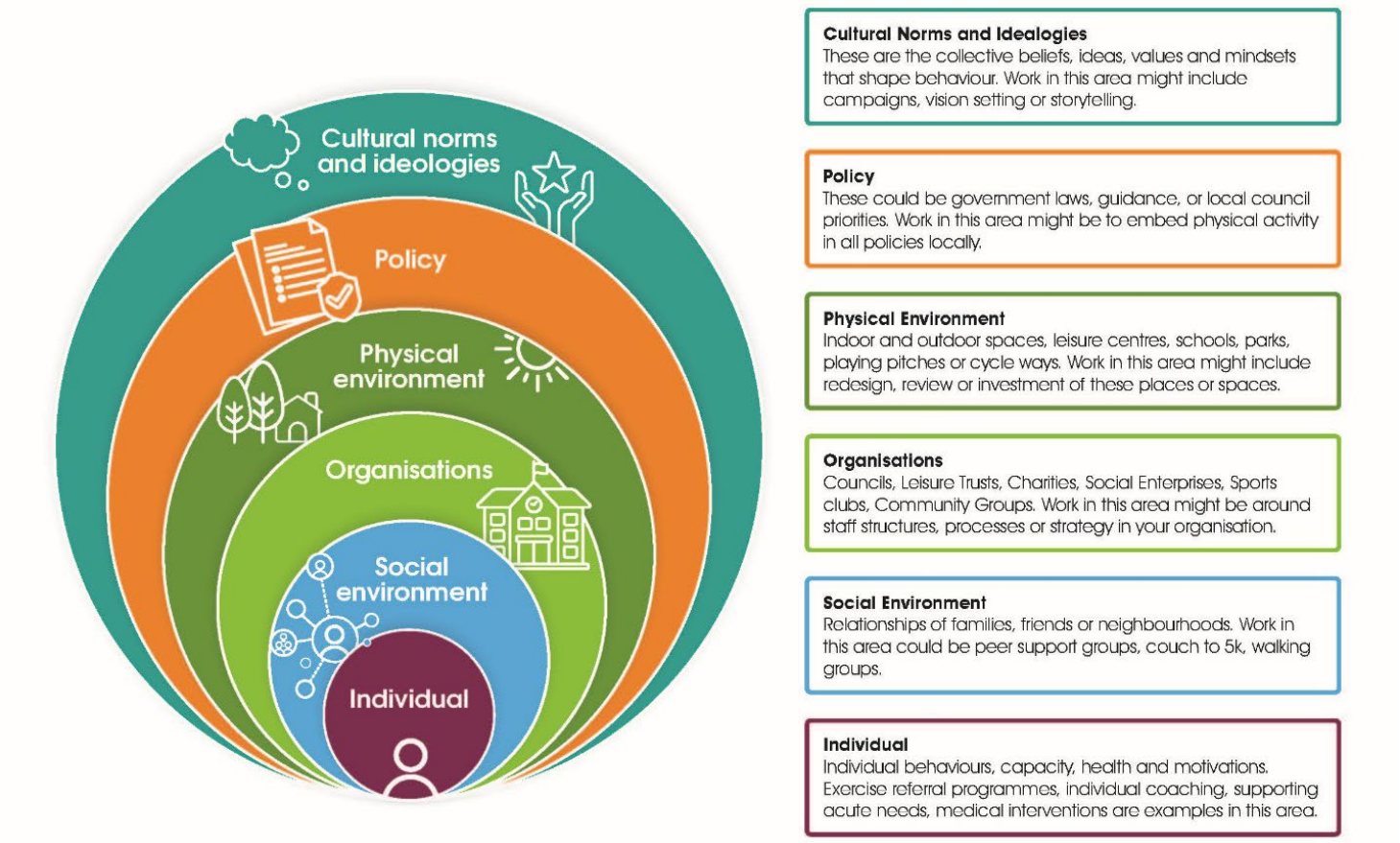


Figure of Socio-Ecological Model with accompanying descriptions[9]

[9] Figure taken Sport England '[Leading the Movement'](#)

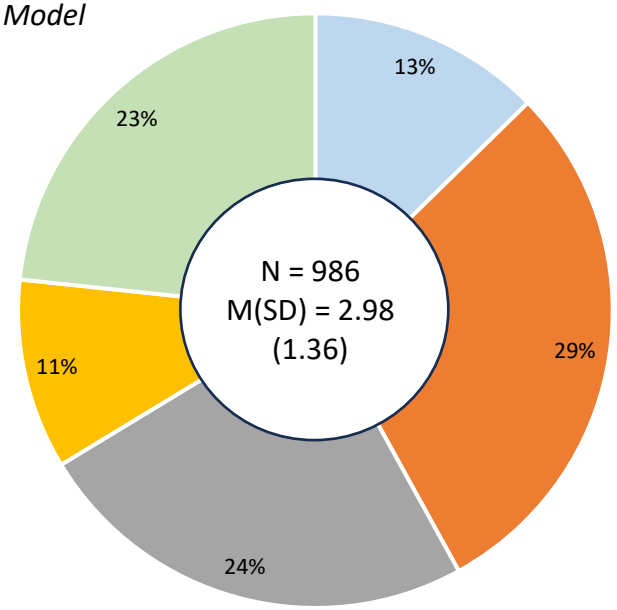
Table showing the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme across the Socio-Ecological Model

Level of Socio-Ecological Model and number of responses (n=)	Extent to which CliftonStrengths impacted individual's ability to influence change at specific level '5 = Impacted a great deal' to '1 = Not at all'	Example(s) of change at the level which supports TaAF's aim of enabling sustainable change in approaches to physical activity.
Individual N = 166	Mean = 3.57 (SD = 1.19) Mode = 4; n=59; 35.54%	*"By helping an individual identify and lean into their strengths, I enabled them to contribute more effectively to collaborative work on physical activity. Their increased ownership and motivation helped improve communication between partners on a key project."*
Social Environment N = 165	Mean = 2.99 (SD = 1.30) Mode = 4; n=55; 33.33%	*"We are due to launch a new partnership project with the wider system, including adult social care and the local authority to use existing resources to support people with mobility issues and those at risk of slips, trips and falls. This has been achieved through a systems conversation."*
Organisations N = 165	Mean score = 3.28 (SD = 1.27) Mode = 4; n=58; 35.15%	*"Local Authority - communicate and regularly share progress updates on impact and embedding physical activity. Engaged with schools to talk about Creating Active Schools"*
Physical Environment N = 165	Mean = 2.69 (SD = 1.40) Mode = 1; n=52; 31.52%	*"I have influenced change at the physical environment level by adapting spaces to better reflect the needs, strengths, and confidence levels of participants. By listening to feedback and observing how people engage, environments have been made more welcoming, flexible, and accessible, such as using familiar community spaces and adjusting layouts to reduce intimidation. These changes have helped create more comfortable and inclusive settings, supporting sustained participation and long-term engagement in physical activity."*
Policy N = 164	Mean = 2.48 (SD = 1.38) Mode = 1; n=64; 39.02%	*"By using strengths-based insights, I am able to support stakeholders to reframe policies around collaboration and system enablers, encouraging more sustainable approaches to physical activity."*
Cultural Norms and Ideologies N = 161	Mean = 2.84 (SD = 1.31) Mode = 4; n=52; 32.30%	*"It is early days, but my approach to campaigning and storytelling has changed as a result of CliftonStrengths work. I am being more creative in how we create a narrative to suit an audience"*

Pie charts illustrating level to which strengths-based leadership programme was perceived to influence change across the level of the Socio-Ecological Model

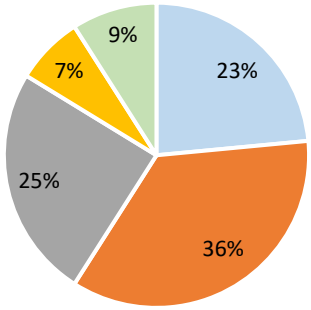
Combined - All levels of the Socio-Ecological Model





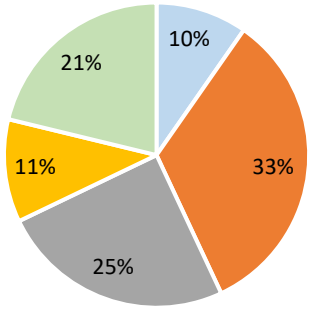
Extent to which CliftonStrengths impacted individual's ability to influence change
A great deal = 5
A lot
Somewhat
A little
Not at all = 1

Individual



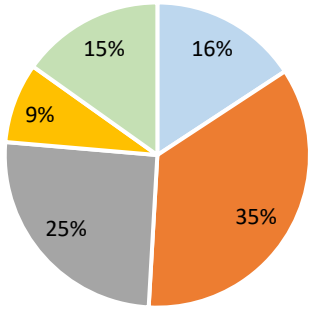
N = 166
M(SD) = 3.57(1.19)

Social environment



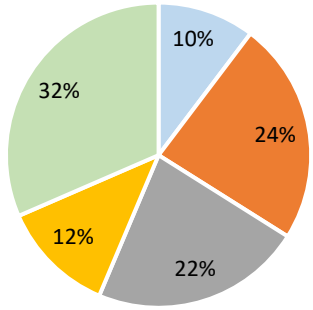
N = 165
M(SD) = 2.99(1.30)

Organisations



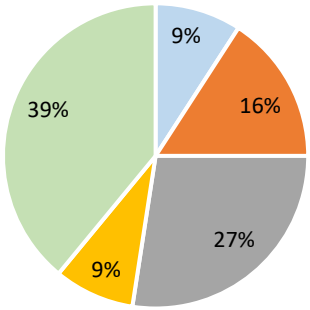
N = 165
M(SD) = 3.28(1.27)

Physical environment



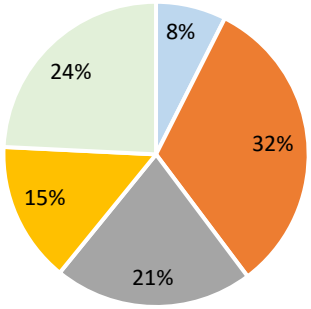
N = 165
M(SD) = 2.69(1.40)

Policy



N = 164
M(SD) = 2.48(1.38)

Cultural norms and ideologies



N =161
M(SD) = 2.84(1.31)



Impact at the individual level

"CliftonStrengths is fundamentally about investing in yourself, your skills, values and behaviours so that you can be the best version of yourself. On this basis it has allowed those involved to take a view of how they best operate, including giving permission for people to fit physical activity into their daily routine."

"Internally we have a greater understanding of one another which leads to more efficient ways of working, it has also allowed us to better support individuals in the community we are working with as we adopt a strengths-based approach with ourselves it becomes easier to work with individuals looking at their strengths rather than what's going wrong"

"[I] used strengths-based conversations to build others' confidence and motivation, helping individuals reframe physical activity as achievable and meaningful, and supporting more sustainable, self-directed behaviour change."

"One way I've influenced change at the individual level is through personal reflection and self-awareness. By understanding my strengths, how I work, and how I'm perceived by others, I've been able to adjust my approach, make it more considered

3.57 /5

Mean score for the extent to which CliftonStrengths impacted individuals' ability to influence change at the individual level.



Impact at the social environment level

"I have influenced change at the social environment level by helping to create more supportive and inclusive group settings for physical activity. By recognising and valuing individual strengths within groups, I have encouraged peer support, shared leadership, and positive social connections. This has helped shift the focus from performance to participation and enjoyment, creating a welcoming environment where people feel comfortable attending regularly. As a result, groups are more socially connected, which supports sustained engagement in physical activity overtime.

"Used own strengths (e.g. Relator, Connectedness, Responsibility) to set up small social cues and rituals—such as defaulting meetings to walking where possible, celebrating colleagues who try new activity offers, or pairing people up to attend local sessions—thereby increasing 'social opportunity' for physical activity in COM-B terms."

"CliftonStrengths has had a significant impact on my ability to influence change at the social environment level, largely by enhancing how I understand people, shape culture, and foster the relationships and conditions that enable physical activity to thrive across the system."

"In the prisons I lead I have encouraged approaches to building better engagement with health and substance misuse services. I track engagement and outcome, and I have set targets to improve continuity of care rates."

2.99 /5

Mean score for the extent to which CliftonStrengths impacted individuals' ability to influence change at the social environmental level.



Impact at the organisational level

"CliftonStrengths along with wider system leadership training has influenced how we approach place working as an organisation. For example, in Place Based working in Preston, we have looked to develop a working group with a wide range of perspectives and safe space where everyone can offer their views. Previously many member organisations that are part of the group have been very focussed on a project/KPI based approach, of just wanting to get on with the work, rather than taking time to reflect and fully consider a complex problem."

"Following my engagement with CliftonStrengths, one of the most significant organisational-level changes I have influenced is the shift in how Lancashire FA thinks about its purpose and role in the wider physical activity system. Understanding my own strengths — particularly those that help me think strategically, connect ideas, and see broader patterns — allowed me to lead the organisation toward a more expansive and socially-driven vision. I used my strengths to guide the organisation away from viewing itself solely as a football governing body and towards recognising its wider capacity to influence: community wellbeing, long-term physical activity behaviours, collaborative system-wide outcomes, social connection, confidence and inclusion. This was woven directly into the development of our new strategy, where I shaped organisational conversations to focus on physical activity as a whole-system opportunity, not just participation in football formats… This is a fundamental organisational change powered by a strengths-based approach — enabling Lancashire FA to influence physical activity in a more sustainable, human-centred and system-aware way."

3.28 /5

Mean score for the extent to which CliftonStrengths impacted individuals' ability to influence change at the organisational level.

Impact at the physical environment level



"Though my organisation has led this as an internal development, the decision to invest our own money in a new Active Wellbeing suite at one of our leisure centres was promoted through our revised mindset of how we can have a positive impact on the health of our local community… e.g., we recognise that we have an ageing local population who are challenged by mobility issues and loneliness. The result is a remodelled area within one of our leisure centres to include a power assisted fitness suite and new cafe area. We have no doubt that, once launched, we will attract partnerships with local health services."

"The system leadership and CliftonStrengths training has helped progress discussions with health and leisure colleagues about opportunities about co-location and shared spaces. For example, in Preston, a group has been established to look at the co-location of facilities and joint delivery of services."

"I think this is an area we haven't really considered change happening in however the system leadership programme has really brought to life how many environmental assets we have, and we are exploring how these can be better utilised. Also, we have a healthy places officer now who will be looking at influencing future infrastructure to improve physical activity."

"Used strengths-led collaboration to influence the design and use of spaces, ensuring physical environments were more welcoming, adaptable, and community-informed, supporting every day, inclusive opportunities for physical activity."

2.69 /5

Mean score for the extent to which CliftonStrengths impacted individuals' ability to influence change at the physical environment level.

Impact at the policy level



"Physical activity now features in the strategic direction and planning of NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB. This has not been the case historically. Again, whilst I am not solely responsible, I have been part of the partnership that has pushed this forward (and will support it being delivered)."

"Clifton Strengths has helped to influence change with health colleagues, to the extent that they have been influenced to include physical activity in their plans for the next 12 months."

"I feel more confident in my ability to challenge physical activity-based policy/governance and to expect that this will be slow process of influence."

"I feel that strengths coaching supported my ability to let others take a lead to influence policy as I understood my blind spot around responsibility in struggling to say no"

2.48 /5

Mean score for the extent to which CliftonStrengths impacted individuals' ability to influence change at the policy level.

Impact at the cultural norms and ideologies level



"In my role in Move Together Blackpool I have begun to influence a change in narrative around behaviour change and that the choice to be physically active goes beyond "wanting to" or "education that it is good for you" - people want to and they know it is good for them. The challenge is in how we support people to be physically active holistically, taking into consideration all the wider challenges of life that require immediate attention. There is a lot still to do here... but the conversation is shifting.

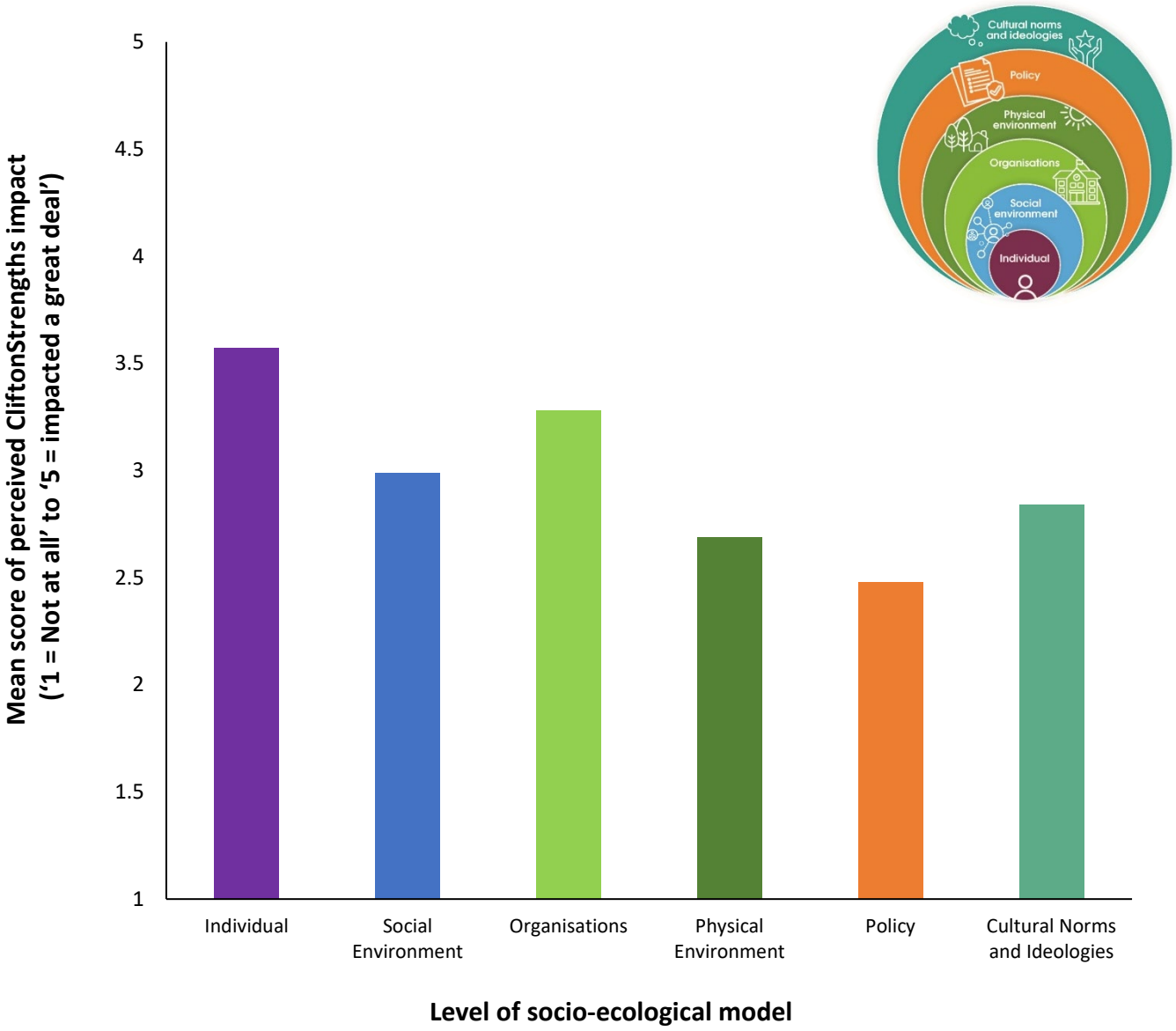
"My whole mindset has changed to be more open to new ideas and how to adapt and to think out of the box when re-designing our vision"

"Challenged deficit-based narratives by promoting a strengths-led culture that values wellbeing over performance, normalises diverse forms of movement, and reframes physical activity as part of everyday life rather than a narrow sporting ideal."

2.84 /5

Mean score for the extent to which CliftonStrengths impacted individuals' ability to influence change at the cultural norms and ideologies level.

Bar chart showing extent to which strengths-based leadership programme impacted an individual's ability to influence change at the specific level socio-ecological model



Part 2 Summary

The overall experience of the strengths-based leadership programme was positive, as reflected in the word cloud, with terms such as “positive”, “insightful”, and “interesting”. Participants also reported that the programme had a positive subsequent impact upon physical activity promotion. When examining system leadership enablers (i.e., defined as the individuals, roles, or conditions that support collaboration across organisational boundaries) the programme was perceived to influence these enablers ‘somewhat’ to ‘a lot’. Mean scores across the five enablers (developing connections and networks; learning together through reflective practice; influencing and relationships; authentic brave leadership; and investing in strengths) ranged from 3.61 to 3.95 (1=*Impacted not at all*, 5=*Impacted a great deal*). Particular aspects found to be impacted the most positivity, include: building a sense of common purpose with internal and external stakeholders; admitting mistakes and gaining insight from experiences; cultivating energy, excitement, and optimism within teams; knowing and positively applying personal strengths; and spotting and encouraging strengths in others. The lowest rated aspect was ‘celebrating bold action in others’, with a mean score of 3.

The programme’s impact on individuals’ ability to influence change within the socio-ecological model (individual, social environment, organisations, physical environment, policy, cultural norms and ideologies) ranged from ‘*a little’* to ‘*somewhat*’ (approximately 3/5). Overall, 42% of participants indicated that the programme influenced their ability to create change ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal’, while 34% felt it had ‘*no impact*’ or ‘*a little impact’*. Notably, the impact varied more widely across the levels of the socio-ecological model compared with the system leadership enablers. At the individual level, the mean score was 3.57, with nearly 25% of participants reporting a ‘great deal’ of impact and only 9% reporting ‘none’. In contrast, at the Policy level, only 8% reported a ‘*great deal*’ of impact, while almost 25% reported ‘*no impact at all’*. The findings suggest that the strengths-based leadership programme was most impactful at the individual and organisational levels, with a reduced impact at the outer levels of the model.

Part 3 – Leadership and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme

Part 3 involves further statistical analysis (using IBM SPSS Software) combining findings from parts 1 and 2 to explore if there are any significant differences between different groups and measures.

- Leadership status and perceived impact
- Strengths-based leadership programme engagement and perceived impact
- Strengths-based leadership programme engagement and systems thinking competency
- Systems thinking competency and perceived impact
- CliftonStrengths 'theme lead with' and perceived impact

Leadership status and perceived impact

The impact which the strengths-based leadership programme had upon both the systems leadership enablers and the socio-ecological model was explored via leadership status (high, mid, emerging/entry level). Analysis was conducted using one-way Anova's. Perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the enablers and levels of the model are scored between '1 = *Impacted not at all'* and '5 = *Impacted a great deal'*.

Systems leadership enablers:

- Across the three leadership statuses, mean scores for perceived impact upon the systems leadership enablers ranged from 3.47 to 4.19.
- All leadership statuses scored 'Investing in strengths' as highest for the perceived impact which the programme had upon enablers.
- No significant differences across the leadership levels were found regarding the impact which the programme had upon the five different system leadership enablers.

Table showing leadership status and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the system leadership enablers

Systems leadership enablers	**Leadership status**		
	Entry (n=44)	Mid (n=54)	Senior (n=53)
Developing connections and networks	3.90 (0.85)	4.00 (0.73)	3.81 (0.79)
Learning together through reflective practice	3.77 (0.73)	3.98 (0.11)	3.88 (0.85)
Influencing and relationships	3.87 (0.82)	3.91 (0.82)	3.86 (0.86)
Authentic brave leadership	3.47 (0.73)	3.93 (0.95)	3.81 (0.80)
Investing in strengths	4 (0.79)	4.19 (0.89)	4.16 (0.13)

Mean scores and SD are presented for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme. Scores ranged from '1 = Impacted not at all' and '5 = Impacted a great deal'.

Socio-ecological model:

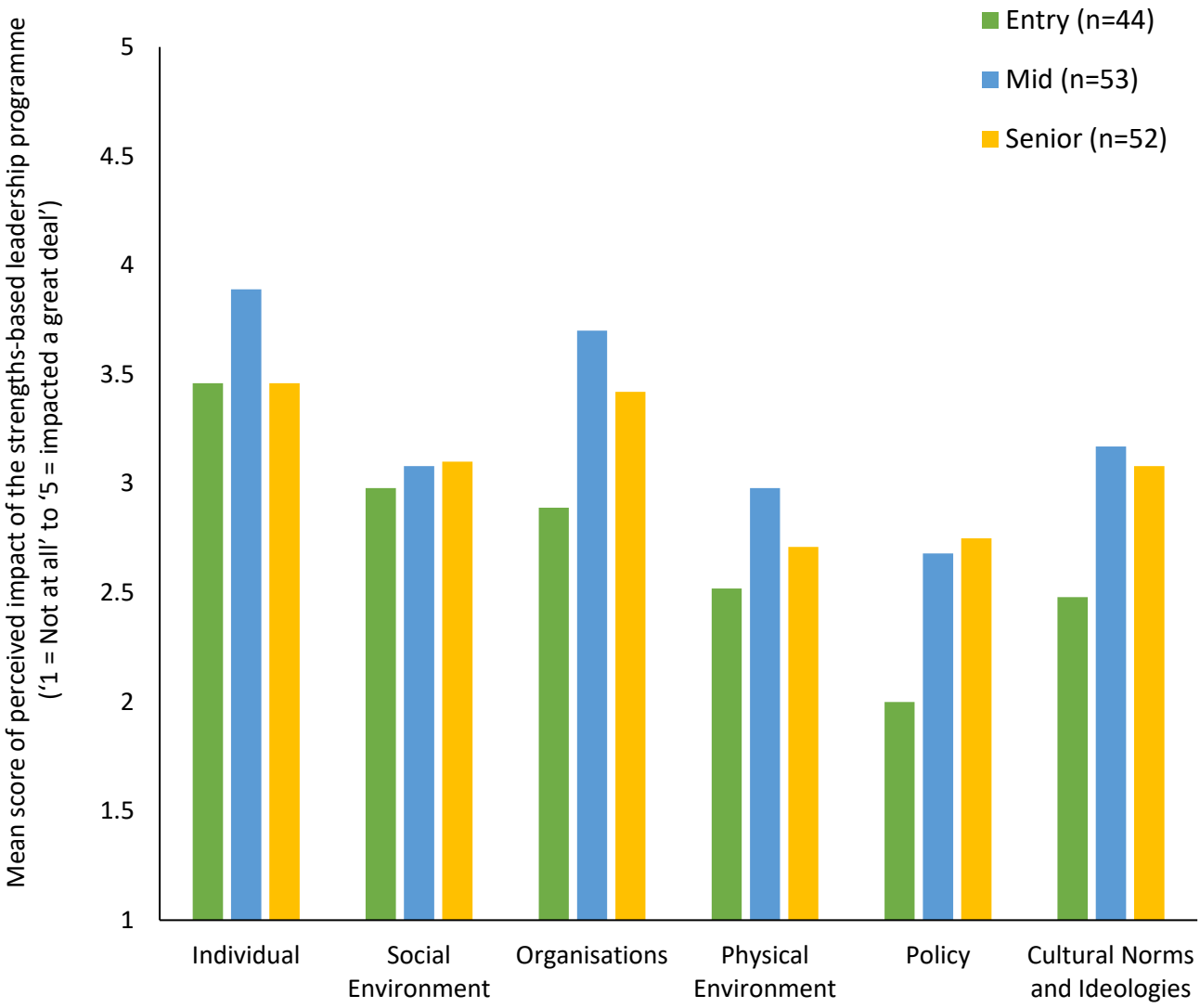
- Across the three leadership statuses, mean scores for perceived impact at the socio-ecological model levels ranged from 2 to 3.89.
- Entry level leaders' consistency scored lowest for the perceived impact of the programme across the socio-ecological model levels
- Mid-level leaders scored significantly higher than the emerging/entry leaders for the level of impact at the organisational level[10].
- Senior-level leaders scored significantly higher than the emerging/entry leaders for the level impact at the policy level.
- Both senior and mid-level leaders scored significantly higher than the emerging/entry leaders for the level of impact at the cultural norms and ideologies level.

Table showing leadership status and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the levels of the socio-ecological model

Socio-Ecological model level	Leadership status		
	Entry (n=44)	Mid (n=53)	Senior (n=52)
Individual	3.46 (1.23)	3.89 (1.07)	3.46 (1.18)
Social Environment	2.98 (1.32)	3.08 (1.43)	3.10 (1.23)
Organisations	2.89 (1.28)	3.70 (1.09)*	3.42 (1.24)
Physical Environment	2.52 (1.41)	2.98 (1.47)	2.71 (1.27)
Policy	2.00 (1.18)*	2.68 (1.44)	2.75 (1.33)*
Cultural Norms and Ideologies	2.48 (1.34)	3.17 (1.24)*	3.08 (1.19)*

Mean scores and SD are presented for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme. Scores ranged from '1 = Impacted not at all' and '5 = Impacted a great deal'.

[10] * Indicates a significantly higher score, $p < 0.05$



Graphs showing mean scores for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the different levels of the socio-ecological model as a function of leadership status

Strengths-based leadership programme engagement and perceived impact

The level to which an individual engaged with the strengths-based leadership programme (Assessment tool only; Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching; Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course; Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course) was explored along with the impact of the programme for both the systems leadership enablers and socio-ecological model. Analysis was conducted using one-way Anova's. The perceived impact was scored from '1 = *Impacted not at all'* to '5 = *Impacted a great deal*'.

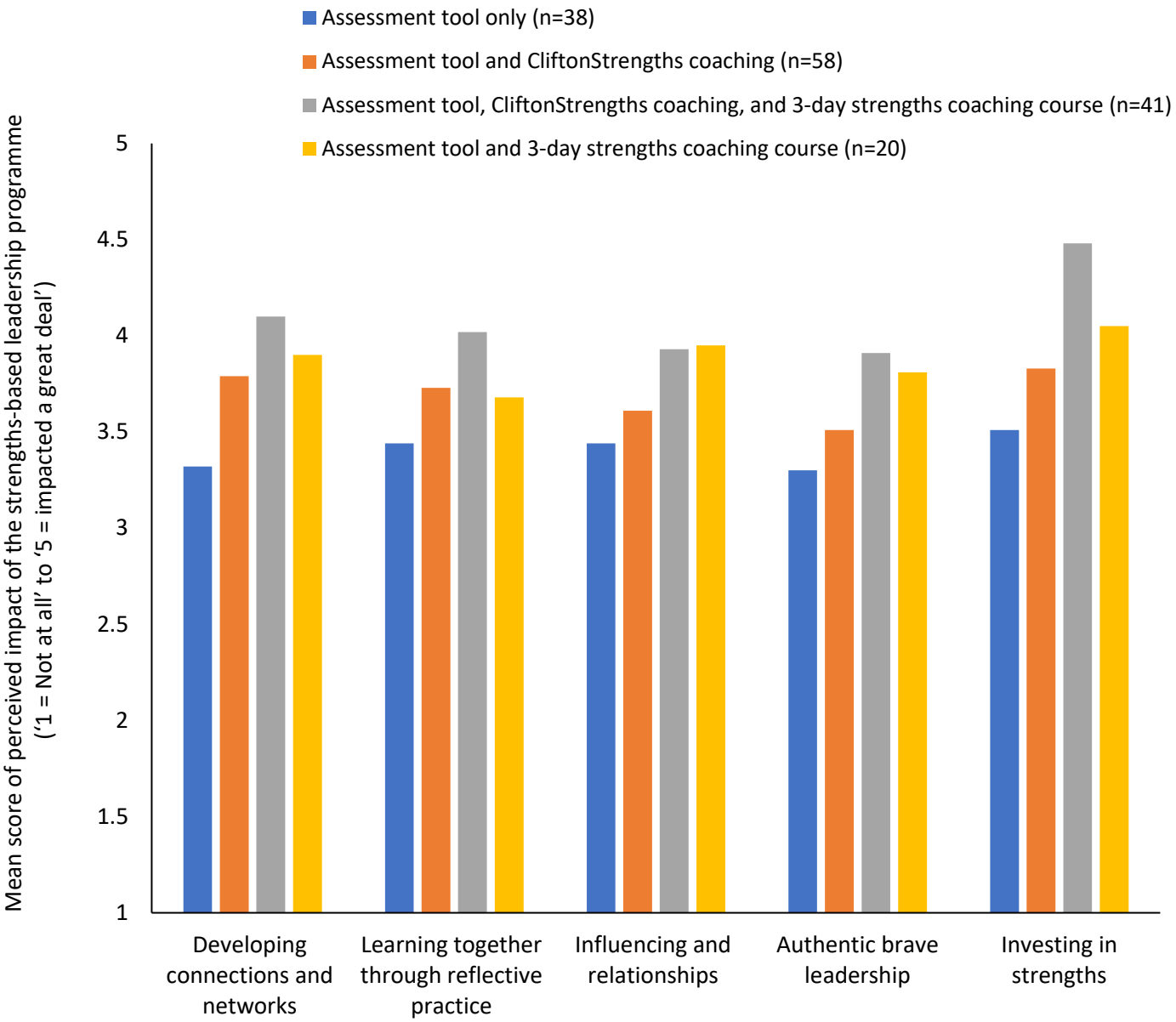
Systems leadership enablers:

- Across the four engagement levels, mean scores for perceived impact upon enablers ranged from 3.3 to 4.48.
- All engagement levels scored 'Investing in strengths' as highest for the perceived impact which the programme had upon enablers.
- 'Assessment tool only' was scored as lowest for impact for all enablers
- Developing connections and networks – 'Assessment tool only' scored significantly lower than all other groups for the level of impact.
- Learning together through reflective practice - 'Assessment tool only' scored significantly lower than 'assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course' for the level of impact.
- Authentic brave leadership – 'Assessment tool only' scored significantly lower than 'assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course' for the level of impact.
- Investing in strengths – 'Assessment tool only' and 'Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching' scored significantly lower than 'Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course' for the level of impact.

Table showing level of engagement with the strength-based leadership programme and the and perceived impact upon the system leadership enablers

Systems leadership enablers	**Level of engagement with the strength-based leadership programme**			
	Assessment tool only (n=38)	Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching (n=58)	Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course (n=41)	Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course (n=20)
Developing connections and networks	3.32 (0.90)	3.79 (0.79)*	4.10 (0.74)*	3.90 (0.74)*
Learning together through reflective practice	3.44 (1.03)	3.73 (0.84)	4.02 (0.76)*	3.68 (0.75)
Influencing and relationships	3.44 (1.03)	3.61 (0.87)	3.93 (0.87)	3.95 (0.69)
Authentic brave leadership	3.30 (0.91)	3.51 (0.86)	3.91(0.85)*	3.81 (0.75)
Investing in strengths	3.51 (0.97)	3.83 (0.87)	4.48 (0.71)*	4.05 (0.87)

Mean scores and SD are presented for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme. Scores ranged from '1 = Impacted not at all' and '5 = Impacted a great deal'.



Graphs showing mean scores for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the different levels of the socio-ecological model as a function of programme engagement

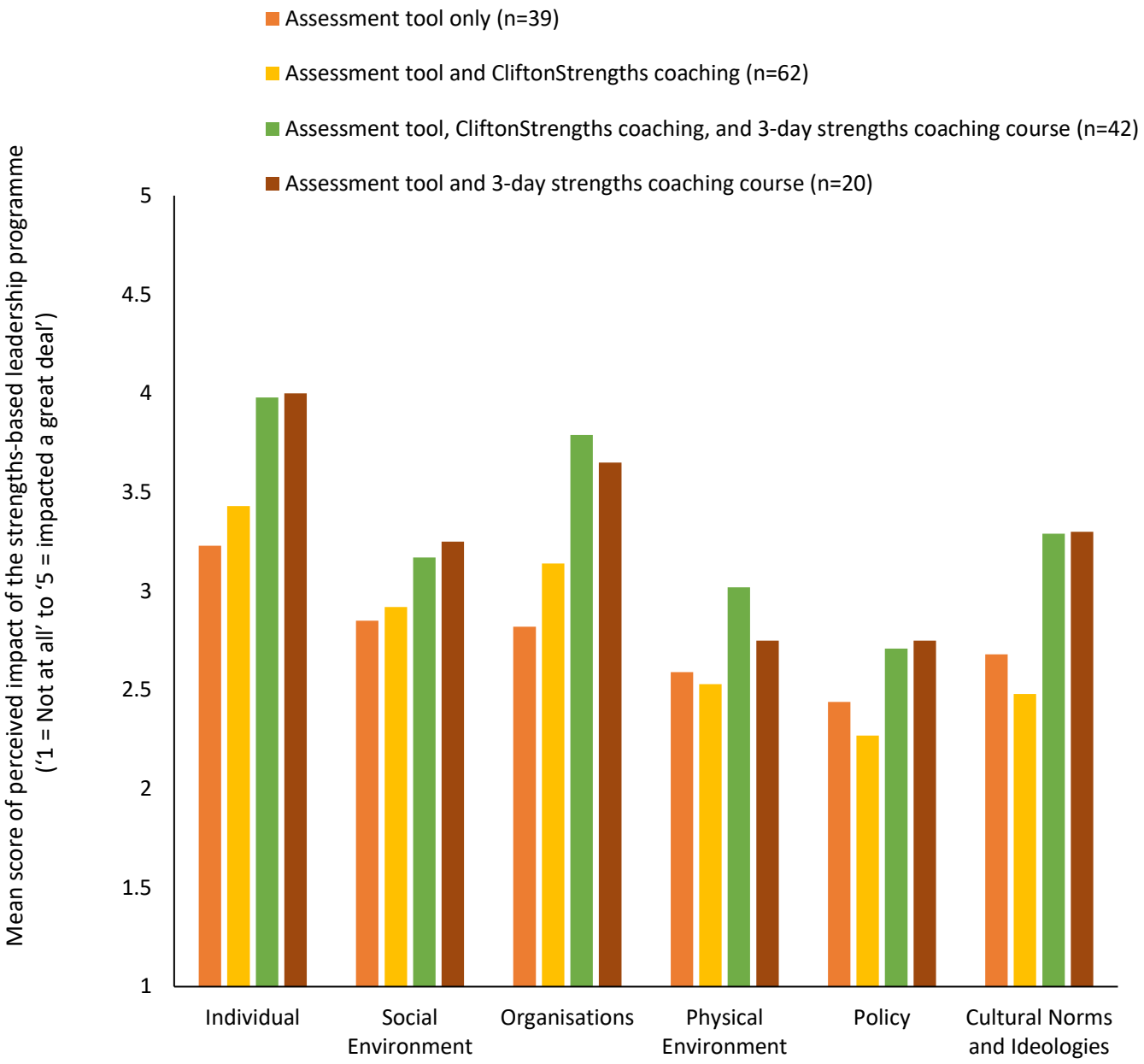
Socio-ecological model:

- Across the four engagement levels, mean scores for perceived impact at the socio-ecological levels ranged from 2.27 to 4.
- Impact at the 'individual' level was scored as highest for all engagement levels.
- 'Assessment tool only' scored lowest on impact for the majority of the levels.
- Individual – 'Assessment tool only' scored significantly lower than 'Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course' for the level of impact.
- Organisations – 'Assessment tool only' and 'Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching' scored significantly lower than 'Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course' for the level of impact.
- Cultural Norms and Ideologies - 'Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching' scored significantly lower than 'Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course' for the level of impact.

Table showing the level of engagement with the strengths-based leadership programme and perceived impact upon the levels of the socio-ecological model

Socio-Ecological model level	**Level of engagement with the strengths-based leadership programme**			
	Assessment tool only (n=39)	Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching (n=62)	Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course (n=42)	Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course (n=20)
Individual	3.23 (1.21)	3.43 (1.27)	3.98 (0.98)*	4.00 (0.86)
Social Environment	2.85 (1.29)	2.92 (1.26)	3.17 (1.40)	3.25 (1.21)
Organisations	2.82 (1.25)	3.14 (1.28)	3.79 (1.14)*	3.65 (1.04)
Physical Environment	2.59 (1.35)	2.53 (1.38)	3.02 (1.42)	2.75 (1.45)
Policy	2.44 (1.48)	2.27 (1.28)	2.71 (1.37)	2.75 (1.48)
Cultural Norms and Ideologies	2.68 (1.40)	2.48 (1.26)	3.29 (1.15)	3.30 (1.30)

Mean scores and SD are presented for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme. Scores ranged from '1 = Impacted not at all' and '5 = Impacted a great deal'.



Graphs showing mean scores for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the different levels of the socio-ecological model as a function of level of engagement in the programme.

Strengths-based leadership programme engagement and systems thinking competency

The level to which an individual engaged with the strengths-based leadership programme (Assessment tool only; Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching; Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course; Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course) was explored along with their score on the Systems Thinking Scale (Moore et al., 2010). The scale is a 20-item self-report questionnaire, which provides a score of an individual's level of competency in systems thinking. Scores range from a maximum of 80 and a minimum of 0.

- The engagement levels of 'Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course' and 'Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course' scored highest on their system thinking competency score.
- No significant difference in system thinking score based upon the level of engagement with the strengths-based leadership programme.

Table showing level of engagement with the strengths-based leadership programme and the system thinking competency score

Level of engagement with the strengths-based coaching programme	**Systems thinking competency score** (0 = lowest, 80 = highest)
Assessment tool only	56.90 (10.60)
Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching	56.63 (9.69)
Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course	59.17 (7.38)
Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course	60.86 (6.82)

Systems thinking competency category and perceived impact

System thinking competency was further explored via individuals being placed in a category depending upon their score in the system thinking competency. Three categories were used, a score of >60+ represented a high level of competency, 40 to 59 mid, and <40 low. Following categorisation, only four were 'low', as such, to support the rigour of the analysis the low and mid categories were combined. The 'high' and 'mid to low' competency groups were explored along with the impact of the programme for both the systems leadership enablers and socio-ecological model via independent sample t-tests. The scores of perceived impact ranged from '1 = *Impacted not at all*' to '5 = *Impacted a great deal'*.

Systems leadership enablers:

- The high system competency category scored higher for impact across all enablers.
- Mean scores across the system thinking competency categories for perceived impact upon the systems leadership enablers ranged from 3.59 to 4.07.
- Both categories scored 'Investing in strengths' as highest for the perceived impact which the programme had upon enablers.
- Learning together through reflective practice - significant difference between the groups with the higher systems competency group, scoring significantly higher.
- Influencing and relationships - significant difference between the groups with the higher systems competency group, scoring significantly higher.

Table showing leadership status and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the system leadership enablers

Systems leadership enablers	System thinking competency category	
	High (mean n=52)	Moderate to low (mean n=60)
Developing connections and networks	3.86 (.87)	3.71 (0.84)
Learning together through reflective practice	4.00 (0.78)*	3.67 (0.91)
Influencing and relationships	4.00 (0.81)*	3.64 (0.90)
Authentic brave leadership	3.78 (0.87)	3.59 (0.77)
Investing in strengths	4.07 (0.89)	3.95 (0.83)

Mean scores and SD are presented for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme. Scores ranged from '1 = Impacted not at all' and '5 = Impacted a great deal'.

Socio-ecological model:

- The high system competency category scored highest for the impact at five of the levels and equal on one.
- Mean scores across the system thinking competency categories for perceived impact at the levels ranged from 2.17 to 3.64.
- Policy - significant difference between the groups with the higher systems competency group scoring significantly higher.
- Cultural Norms and Ideologies - significant difference between the groups with the higher systems competency group scoring significantly higher.

Socio-Ecological model level	System thinking competency category	
	High (mean n=58)	Moderate to low (mean n=69)
Individual	3.64 (1.27)	3.61 (1.09)
Social Environment	3.05 (1.42)	2.97 (1.27)
Organisations	3.50 (1.27)	3.25 (1.19)
Physical Environment	2.67 (1.38)	2.67 (1.40)
Policy	2.71(1.39)*	2.17 (1.22)
Cultural Norms and Ideologies	3.19 (1.29)*	2.57 (1.21)

Mean scores and SD are presented for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme. Scores ranged from '1 = *Impacted not at all*' and '5 = *Impacted a great deal*'.

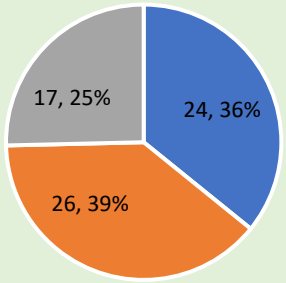
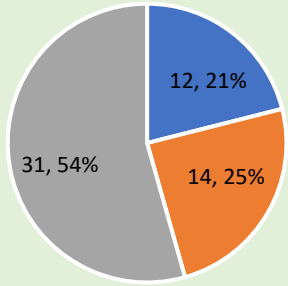
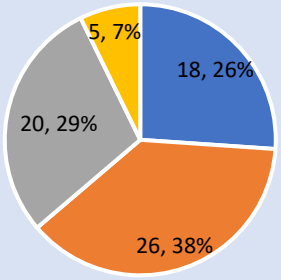
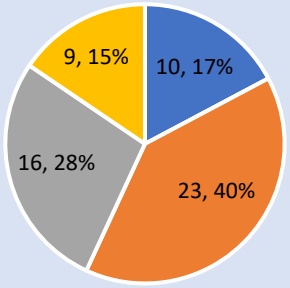
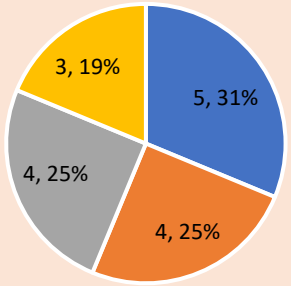
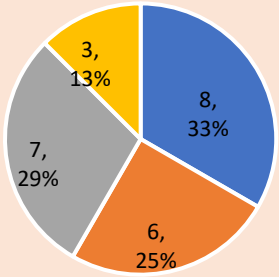
Systems thinking competency category and leadership status, CliftonStrengths engagement, and 'leadership theme lead with'

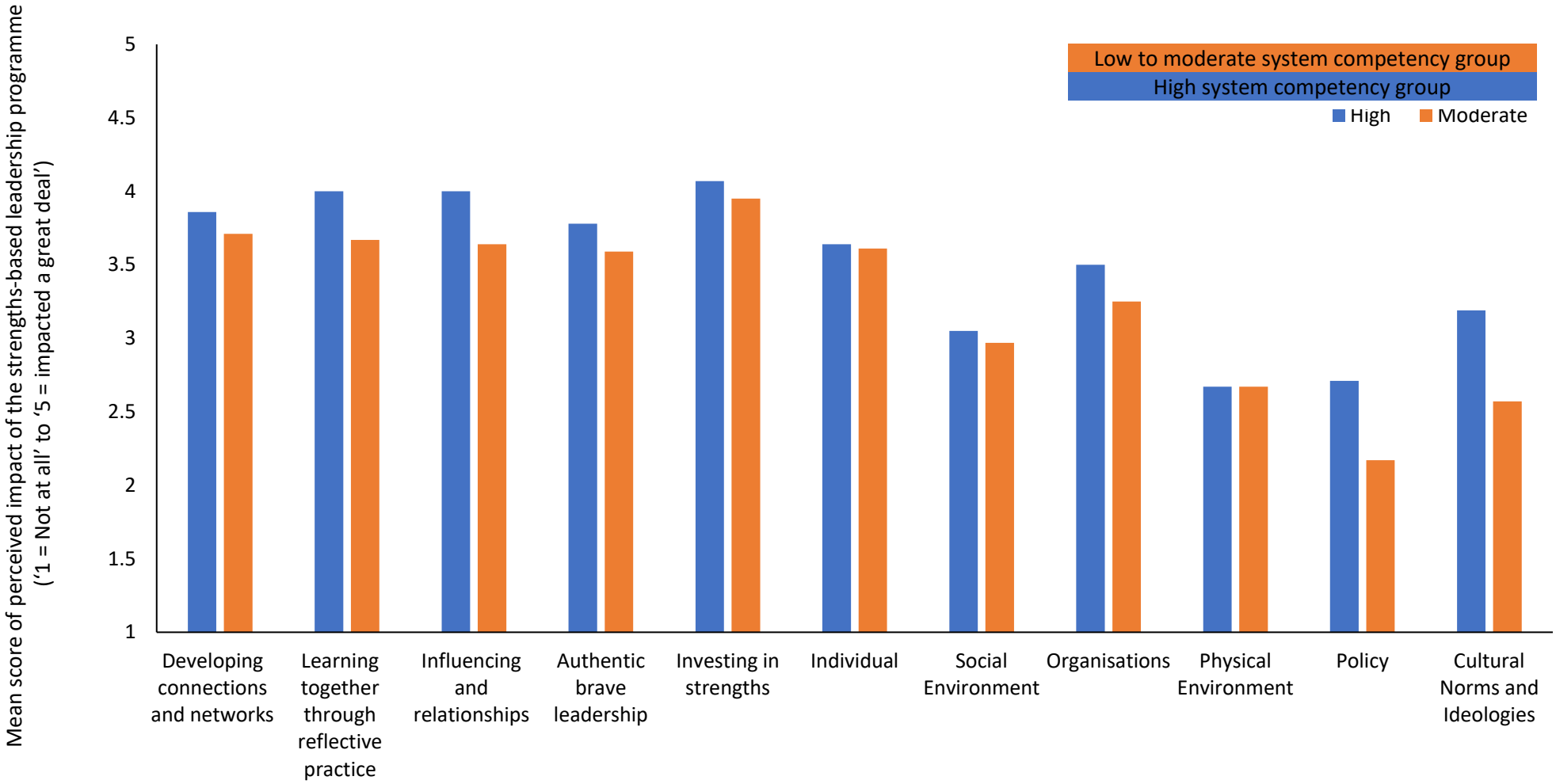
To better understand the details of the two system thinking competency categories, frequency counts and percentages were calculated for leader status, strengths-based leadership programme engagement, and 'theme led with'.

Table showing the details of the system competency groups as a function of leadership status, strengths-based leadership programme engagement, and 'themes led with'

	System competency grouping frequency (%)	
Leader status (n = 124)	**Moderate to low**	**High**
Entry	24 (19.4%)	12 (9.7%)
Mid	26 (21.0%)	14 (11.3%)
Senior	17 (13.7%)	31 (25%)
CS engagement (n=127)	**Moderate to low**	**High**
Assessment tool only	18 (14.2%)	10 (7.9%)
Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching	26 (20.5%)	23 (18.1%)
Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course	20 (15.7%)	16 (12.6%)
Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course	5 (3.9%)	9 (7.1%)
CliftonStrengths 'theme lead with' (n=40)	**Moderate to low**	**High**
Relationship building	5 (12.5%)	8 (20%)
Strategic thinking	4 (10%)	6 (15%)
Executing	4 (10%)	7 (17.5%)
Influencing	3 (7.5%)	3 (7.5%)

Pie charts showing the details of the system competency groups as a function of leadership status, strengths-based leadership programme engagement, and 'themes led with'

	Low to moderate system competency group	High system competency group
Leader status		
Entry/Emerging		
Mid		
Senior		
CS engagement		
Assessment tool only		
Assessment tool and CliftonStrengths coaching		
Assessment tool CliftonStrengths, and 3-day strengths coaching course		
Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course		
'Theme lead with'		
Relationship building		
Strategic thinking		
Executing		
Influecning		



Graph showing the systems thinking category and perceived impact across the system leadership enablers and at the levels of the socio-ecological model

CliftonStrengths 'theme lead with' and perceived impact

The impact which the strengths-based leadership programme had upon both the systems leadership enablers and the socio-ecological model was explored via the CliftonStrengths' theme they lead with (relationship building, strategic thinking, executing, influencing). Analysis was conducted using one-way Anova's. Perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the enablers and levels of the model are scored between '1 = *Impacted not at all*' and '5 = *Impacted a great deal*'. It should be noted that the numbers for this analysis were low across the groups, thus impacting the robustness of the analysis.

System leadership enablers:

- The enabler 'investing in strengths' was scored highest for the impact across all groups of the CliftonStrengths' 'theme lead with'.
- Mean scores across the CliftonStrengths' 'theme lead with' categories for perceived impact upon enablers ranged from 3.7 to 4.5.
- There were no significant differences across the groups.

Table showing CliftonStrengths' 'theme led with' and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the system leadership enablers

Systems leadership enablers	**M score (SD) out of 1 to 5**			
	Relationship building (n=20)	Strategic thinking (n=11)	Executing (n=11)	Influencing (n=6)
Developing connections and networks	4.11 (0.66)	4.27 (0.79)	3.82 (0.75)	4.00 (0.89)
Learning together through reflective practice	4.05 (0.71)	3.90 (0.74)	4.00 (0.78)	4.33 (0.82)
Influencing and relationships	3.80 (0.83)	4.09 (0.83)	4.00 (0.78)	4.33 (0.82)
Authentic brave leadership	3.79 (1.13)	3.91 (0.70)	3.70 (0.82)	4.17 (0.75)
Investing in strengths	4.25 (1.12)	4.36 (0.81)	4.09 (0.70)	4.50 (0.55)

Mean scores and SD are presented for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme. Scores ranged from '1 = *Impacted not at all*' and '5 = *Impacted a great deal*'.

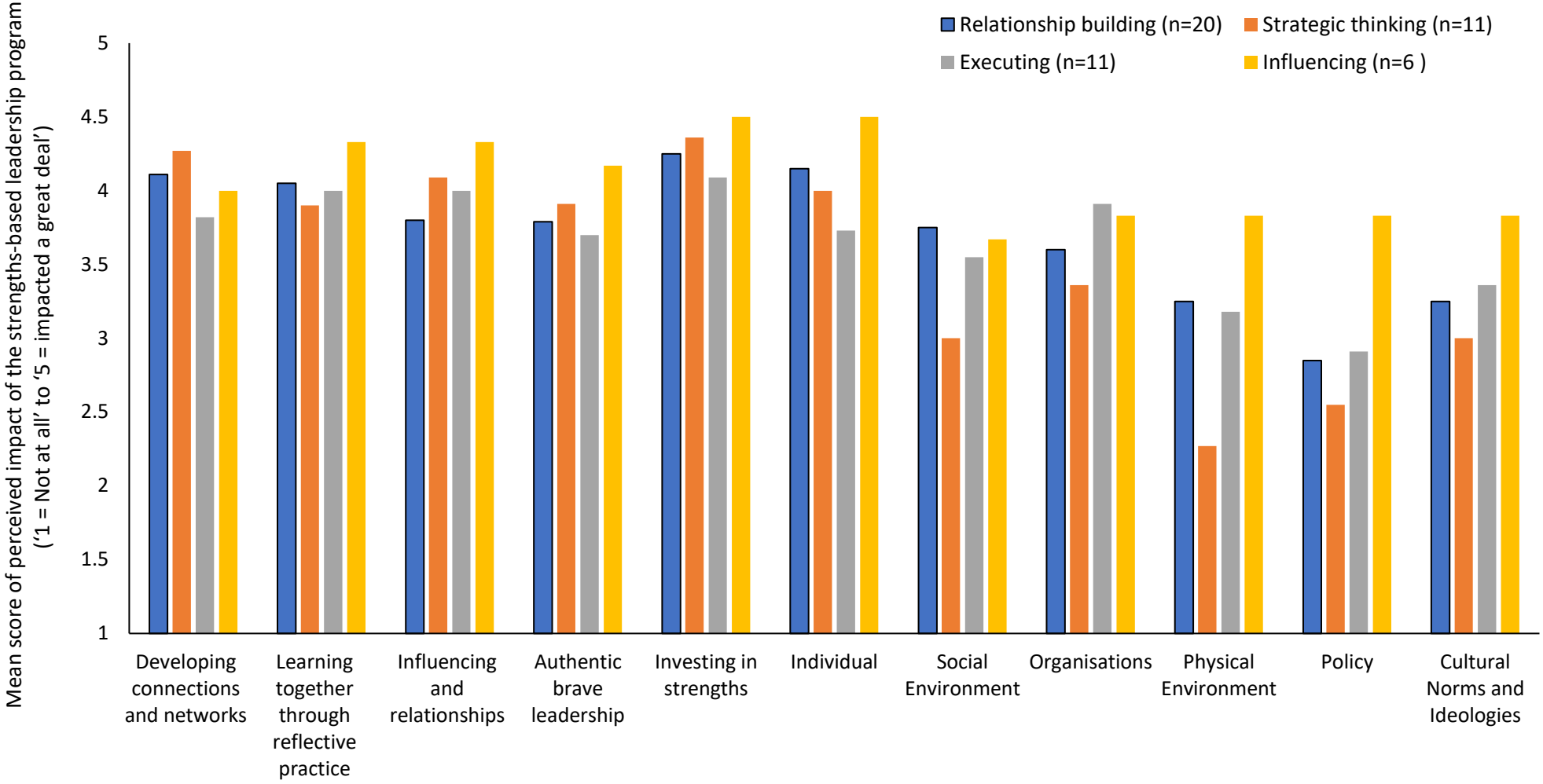
Socio-ecological model:

- Impact was perceived highest by the majority of the groups at the individual level and lowest at the policy level.
- Mean scores across the CliftonStrengths' theme led with for perceived impact at the levels ranged from 2.27 to 4.50.
- There were no significant differences across the groups.

Table showing CliftonStrengths' theme led with and perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme upon the levels of the socio-ecological model

Socio-Ecological model level	**M score (SD) out of 1 to 5**			
	Relationship building (n=20)	Strategic thinking (n=11)	Executing (n=11)	Influencing (n=6)
Individual	4.15 (0.75)	4.00 (0.89)	3.73 (1.19)	4.50 (0.84)
Social Environment	3.75 (1.25)	3.00 (1.41)	3.55 (1.21)	3.67 (1.03)
Organisations	3.60 (1.39)	3.36 (1.21)	3.91 (0.83)	3.83 (1.60)
Physical Environment	3.25 (1.62)	2.27 (1.35)	3.18 (0.75)	3.83 (1.60)
Policy	2.85 (1.63)	2.55 (1.37)	2.91 (0.83)	3.83 (0.98)
Cultural Norms and Ideologies	3.25 (1.25)	3.00 (1.41)	3.36 (1.29)	3.83 (0.98)

Mean scores and SD are presented for the perceived impact of the strengths-based leadership programme. Scores ranged from '1 = *Impacted not at all*' and '5 = *Impacted a great deal*'.



Graph showing the CliftonStrengths' theme led with and perceived impact across the system leadership enablers and at the levels of the socio-ecological model

Part 3 Summary

Using statistical analysis, relationships between the different leadership variables (leadership status, strengths-based leadership programme engagement, systems thinking competency, and CliftonStrengths theme led with) and the perceived impact they had upon the system leadership enablers and across the levels of the socio-ecological model were explored.

Across all ***leadership status*** groups (entry, mid, and senior), 'investing in strengths' was perceived as the system leadership enabler to be impacted the most. On the other hand, for entry level leaders the lowest impacted enabler was 'authentic brave leadership', for mid 'influencing and relationships', and for senior leaders 'authentic and brave leadership' and 'developing connections and networks'. However, these differences across the leadership levels were not significant. In contrast, significant differences were found for the perceived impact of the programme across the socio-ecological model levels. Mid-level leaders scored significantly higher than the emerging/entry leaders for organisational level impact, senior-level leaders scored significantly higher than the emerging/entry leaders for policy level impact, and both senior and mid-level leaders scored significantly higher than the emerging/entry leaders for cultural norms and ideologies impact. Across all leadership levels, perceived impact was highest at the individual level, and lowest at policy and physical environment levels. Overall, perceived impact scores ranged from 3.47 to 4.19 (ranging from 1=*impacted not at all* to 5=*impacted a great deal*) for system leadership enablers and from 2.00 to 3.89 for socio-ecological model levels.

When exploring ***strengths-based leadership programme engagement***, those that engaged in the 'assessment tool only' scored lowest for the impact to the systems leadership enablers across all engagement levels. These scores were significantly lower than 'Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course' across the majority of the levels, with this group scoring the highest on 4 of the 5 enablers. Similarly, 'Assessment tool only' scored lower on the socio-ecological model, and significantly lower than respondents involved in either the 'Assessment tool, CliftonStrengths coaching, and 3-day strengths coaching course' and/or 'Assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course'

System thinking competency levels scores were not significantly different across the engagement groups, however the highest scores for perceived impact were consistently from the two groups which included engaging in the 3-day strengths coaching course. When system thinking scores were categorised into two groups ('high competency' or 'mid to low competency'), the high competency group scored higher for perceived impact across all but one of the enablers and across the socio-ecological model. Statistically significant differences between the competency groups were found at four levels of the socio-ecological model (learning together through reflective practice, influencing and relationships, policy, and cultural norms and ideologies). When exploring the group details, the individuals within the high systems competency group compared to the low to moderate group, included: a greater percentage of senior leaders and a lower level of entry and mid-level leaders; and, a higher frequency of those who had completed the assessment tool and 3-day strengths coaching course and a lower number of the assessment only.

Finally, a subgroup of 48 respondents provided details of their CliftonStrengths' reports in which they were found to ***lead with the CliftonStrengths' themes*** 'relationship building', 'strategic thinking', 'executing', or 'influencing'. The highest scores for impact were reported for the system leadership enabler 'investing in strengths', and at the 'individual' level of the socio-ecological model. However, there were no significant difference found between the leadership approaches. It should be noted that this analysis included a relatively small number of participants and therefore limits the robustness of the findings.

Overall, statistical analysis indicates that the strengths-based leadership development programme is most impactful when leaders engage beyond the assessment tool, particularly through coaching and the 3-day strengths coaching course. Additionally, both a higher level of engagement and systems thinking competency are associated with a greater perceived impact upon physical activity. Impact is particularly apparent at the individual and organisational levels of the socio-ecological model, while influence at wider levels may come from mid- and senior-leadership levels.

Part 4 – Barriers and enablers

CliftonStrengths - barriers/challenges and future enablers/solutions

To better understand potential barriers/challenges to the impact of CliftonStrengths, the survey included a two-part question: (i) the reasons for reduced impact of using experiences from CliftonStrengths to influence change; and (ii) the ways in which the issue(s) identified could be solved or reduced to enable better use of experiences from CliftonStrengths in the future.

Reasons for reduced impact of using experiences from CliftonStrengths		**Ways in which identified issues could be solved or reduced to enable better use of experiences from CliftonStrengths in future**	
Themes relating to the reasons for reduced impact of CliftonStrengths (n=times cited)	***Examples of reasons for reduced impact***	***Themes of solutions***	***Examples of solutions***
Additional CliftonStrengths support required (2)	"Need more support on how best to use strengths"	i. Designated time	*i. "Having more time!"*
Challenges in application • *Applying learning into practice (3)* • *Authenticity of language (1)* • *Language and understanding of CliftonStrengths (1)* • *Not directly linked to physical activity (2)* • *Used as an outcome rather than process (1)*	"It's one thing knowing what you are naturally good at, but another thing altogether to apply these in the right way on a regular basis." "I think CliftonStrengths is a language of its own and thus when others have not been involved in either assessment or coaching there is a disconnect that prevents change influence."	i. Resources for sharing ii. Organisational commitment	*i. "Additional support, in the form of easy-to-understand videos etc"* *ii. "I believe that there is a necessity to have organisational commitment to really strengthen the way that you discuss Clifton strengths, it doesn't stop you leading in a strengths-based way, but it's harder to gain wider buy in."*
Inconsistent use of CliftonStrengths by self and others • *Changes in staff / leaders / organisational structures (3)* • *Lack of consistent CliftonStrengths use (6)*	*"A change in staff, and staff leaving has sometimes halted how much we have been able to drive CliftonStrengths."* *"It felt like, at first, we would be delving more into our strengths and how to implement/celebrate them within our*	i. Designated time ii. Greater Senior Leader involvement iii. Provision of CliftonStrengths to partner organisations	*i. "More time to drive change and CliftonStrengths."* *ii. "More involvement from Senior leaders."* *iii. "For anyone that TaAF works with, we offer CliftonStrengths*

• *Requires knowledge on others CliftonStrengths (2)* • *Do not think about CliftonStrengths (1)*	*team/working environment. However, the initiative seemed to lose steam and not much was done after the first few meetings/reflections."* *"I can't understand how they're useful on an individual level. I think it's more important to understand how other people think/learn/do. It's fine me knowing my top 5 strengths, but I knew them already without having to do a quiz. It is more important for me to understand it about OTHERS. That way I could maybe change the way I handle situations."* *"If I'm honest, I don't think about CliftonStrengths, I just do my job with compassion and commitment."* *"Changes to the curriculum have meant that active learning is not used as much in the classroom. Classroom settings have limited teachers' ability to take on board these strategies."*			*assessment and coaching as standard."*
Individual confidence • Individual traits (1) • Self-acceptance of strengths (1) • Level of self-confidence in ability (3)	*"Only myself, I am shy and a nervous person. It is hard to 'put myself out there'"* *"My strengths are what I'd class as 'soft' strengths so I can sometimes worry about how other people feel and it causes a little self-conflict. I'm learning though"*		i. Role modelling and self-reflection	*i. "I think seeing how other people do things and although it's not up there in my 'natural' skillset, learning different approaches and adopting some of them"*

Job role limiting factor (3)	*"Nature of role restricts the reach I could have, as well as belief in the importance of using CliftonStrengths - feel like focusing on it so much can get in the way of the actual 'doing' of things when many people also recognise what they are best at."*		i. Giving voice to all ii. Examples of practical application iii. Self-reflection and positivity	*i.* *"More involvement from frontline staff on policy making decisions."* *ii.* *"Practical application, or seeing how they can work in practice"* *iii.* *"Participating in CliftonStrengths has helped me recognise where I can have impact and rather than trying to control everything at once, it's a reminder that meaningful change often takes patience, and focussing on working within your sphere of influence."*
Resistance to change • Bureaucratic processes limit change (1) • Buy in / resistance to change (14) • Lack of CliftonStrengths training in organisation / team buy in (10)	*"Strengths like 'Activator' or 'Maximiser' are blocked by bureaucratic processes, requiring multiple sign-offs for even small changes. Strengths focused on speed or efficiency feel constrained by rigid structures. The current political focus is on immediate, visible 'quick wins', and my strength will be undervalued and ignored."* *"I work in a challenging environment to change travel behaviours. Motonormativity is deeply embedded in both my organisation and the national norms."*		i. Increased participation in CliftonStrengths ii. Greater Senior Leader involvement iii. Examples of practical application	*i.* *"Currently looking at management development opportunities to include CliftonStrengths into our corporate approach. From this it is hoped that this can be cascaded across departments and influence our supervision and appraisal processes"* *ii.* *"Steadily trying to introduce within senior leadership team*

	"Using the analogy of a board game and trying to rewrite the rules. It's hard to get everyone on board with a new game with a new set of rules." *"If other members of the team don't have this knowledge it can be a barrier to working collaboratively."*			iii. *To address scepticism, I believe it would help to share concrete examples of how CliftonStrengths has led to positive organisational or system changes, offer peer learning sessions, and create forums where colleagues can discuss and reflect on their strengths. This would increase engagement and enable more effective application of the insights hopefully, but putting this into practice is the biggest hurdle."*
Resource constraints / capacity (28)	*"Time to really ingest and process my full report and how these impact my role"* *"Time barriers, when undertaking day to day role and having the dedicated time to give to strengths to give it a bigger presence across the organisation."* *"Budget limitations mean that even when ideas are supported, implementation (e.g., active design features or workspace adjustments) can be delayed or scaled back."*		i. Designated time ii. Funding iii. CliftonStrengths reminders iv. Time for reflection v. Examples of best practice	i. *"We are looking to find ways to ensure that we use CliftonStrengths in a proactive way as part of project preparations. Ensuring we make the time and space to think at the start of a project how everyone's strengths can be used in the best way."* ii. *"Sourcing investment specifically to develop this work to its potential*

	"I would love to have had opportunity to learn more about how to coach people to use their strengths effectively. Yet the design of three days consecutively has been too challenging to find the time to attend the three day course."			*iii. maybe an update, reminders every couple of months or so - saying have a look at your strengths have you changed? What are your next steps?"* *iv. "Create a specific time or space to reflect as a team"* *v. "Examples of good practice with CliftonStrengths reinforces it, I think that is essential across the network"*
Challenge of strengths focused approach (2)	*"Sometimes I see my strengths as they can get in the way. Also, with such a focus on the strengths, I feel the strengths listed lower down are often ignored and could be looked at to develop as a person even further."*		i. Identification of strengths development	*i. "Focusing on lower strengths that are often forgotten and look at seeing if any CPD training can be considered."*

In addition to the identified approaches 15 participants stated that nothing could be done, or that they were unsure of what could be done (e.g., *"Not that I can think of. But any tools / reminders of how to leverage and empower individuals is always welcome!"; "No, I just need to shut myself off from the world to do it!").*

Part 4 Summary

Proposed reasons for a reduced impact of using experiences from CliftonStrengths comprised eight themes: 1) additional CliftonStrengths support required; 2) challenges in application; 3) inconsistent use of CliftonStrengths by self and others; 4) individual confidence; 5) job role limiting factors; 6) resistance to change; 7) resource constraints/capacity; and, 8) challenge of a strengths focused approach. Suggestions for ways in which these identified issues could be solved or reduced to enable better use of experiences from CliftonStrengths in the future were also themed (e.g., greater Senior Leader involvement, examples of practical application). Overall, the most cited barrier was 'resource constraints/capacity', and the most suggested facilitator was 'designated time'.

Interviews

To complement the survey data, nine participants took part in one-to-one interviews which explored four main areas: experience of engaging with CliftonStrengths, using CliftonStrengths in practice, CliftonStrengths and its impact across the socioecological model levels, and any shortcomings/areas for further development.

Participants comprised five females and four males; one 'entry level leader', six 'mid', and two 'senior'; with a previous strengths and systems training experience of 'none' (n=1), 'low' (n=3), 'mid' (n=4), and 'high' (n=1). Thematic analysis (using NVivo software) resulted in 7 themes and 27 sub-themes, presented below.

Table showing the developed interview themes, sub-themes, and overview of the findings.

Themes and sub themes	Overview from interviews
Understanding self and approach to leadership • Awareness of own strengths and blind spots • Gives confidence to be authentic • Results resonate and provide clarity	CliftonStrengths enabled individuals to understand themselves and their behaviours and subsequently enhanced their self-confidence.
Approach to leadership Confidence in self to perform in role Embedded into leadership approach Supported the impact upon physical activity	Leaders sought to embed CliftonStrengths into their leadership approach and subsequently was viewed to enhance systematic thinking and supported the impact upon physical activity.
Reflective practice Helps switch off Reflection tool supporting improvements	CliftonStrengths supported individuals to reflect and seek improvements in their role.
Influencing others Bringing people with you Confidence to delegate Getting best out of others Supporting others to achieve	CliftonStrengths was perceived to enhance leaders' ability to positively influence others via enhanced confidence, trust, and delegation.
Collaboration and teamwork • Accepting and understanding of others • Strengths alignment with others and roles	CliftonStrengths enhanced leaders' knowledge and understanding of others' strengths, supporting collaboration.

System and strength-based approach to physical activity • Awareness of physical activity through a systems lens • Person centred approach • Policy influencing through system • Positive lens • Buy in from organisations • Too early to say the impact	Leaders used the strength-based and systems thinking learnings from CliftonStrengths to promote organisational awareness of the importance of physical activity. However, it was acknowledged that changes to physical activity is a long process with outcomes not yet seen.
Barriers or required enhancements • Lack of time need dedicated time • Embedding reflection time • Need to be more proactive • Requires higher level support • Insight from those more experienced in CliftonStrengths • Leading large teams • Lack of CliftonStrengths knowledge from others • Lack of diversity and specificity from training	Leaders described barriers when discussing the impact of CliftonStrengths upon the promotion of physical activity and health more broadly. Specifically, they highlighted difficulties in having the required time to make changes and to reflected upon ways of working. Further, leaders identified a need for more support from those with experience of CliftonStrengths to better understand how to make practical changes. When working with and leading others, challenges emanated from others having a lack of CliftonStrengths knowledge and large groups. Furthermore, regarding the training, individuals described a need for diverse examples and a variety of facilitators to support the relevance and engagement in the programme.

Figure showing the developed themes accompanied by example quotes taken from the interviews.

Theme	Example quotes
Understanding self	• "[CliftonStrengths] just sort of just recaps me, these are my strengths, just trust yourself to do that. So, it's definitely given me a bit more confidence." • "How can I put that? It kind of, put everything in perspective, if you will. And then when I started reading everything, it was quite insightful, so that kind of gave it that validity in my mind, because it was really scarily accurate."
Approach to leadership	• "CliftonStrength has given me the awareness of where my strengths are to lead intentionally with them, to bring my own self-beliefs and the areas of work forward to be priorities" • "It just gave me more confidence and it's more about articulating it like and front loading it. When I'm having conversations with people, I can now rather than being apologetic about certain things, just say, 'okay, this is [correct] and I really like this'."
Reflective practice	• "It made you reflect on some of the ways that I work and that some of the things that I might need to consider to do to be a more effective leader" • "CliftonStrengths for me, well, TaAF in general, to be honest, has given me that chance to step back from things and to actually think, 'what have I done there? What impact has that had? And then how do I take that forward next time'"
Influencing others	• "It's now about how do I not only use my strengths to help me be good in my role, but help others to be good in their role." • "It also gives me confidence that my team members will trust where I want to go with things too. Up on the wall there I've got my [CliftonStrengths] first is strategic, I think then my team members are possibly more likely to trust where I want to go."

Collaboration and teamwork

- "I am becoming increasingly aware of how I need to change the way that I work in order to make sure that I'm speaking to the values of everybody on the team."
- "I think for us as an organisation, the way it's then helped also people to understand colleagues and ways they might want you to work with them based on their strengths is, you know, it's something that's then easy for us all to get behind."

System and strength-based approach to physical activity

- "I think then for us as an organisation, something like CliftonStrengths, where it is through that really positive lens, rather than thinking about, the deficit-based approach. I think that helps people get behind it."
- "It provides me a bigger lens, picture. Because sometimes we can be in the detail too much and not understand what might need to change just outside of that."
- "My thought right now is that this is fine, it's kind of working. The jury's still out on whether ultimately it will really have the sort of transformative change that I'm hoping for."

Barriers or required enhancements

- "Sometimes harder when you're in circles that maybe don't always have CliftonStrengths. So again, when I was in with TaAF, that was really easy because everybody was going through the same movement. But when you're in different circles and not everybody has it, that's where it's sometimes difficult. You've got to take the time to educate and things. So it'd be nice to see it more adopted on a wider footprint."
- "I think more time to dedicate towards understanding the strengths of the team would be really useful."
- "I think there's been quite a lot of resistance to it as far as an organisation and I think having more support from higher up would have been beneficial and having more enthusiasm for it from higher up as well."

Further example quotes from the one-to-one interviews

Could you provide a brief overview of how you feel CliftonStrengths has influenced your ability and your leadership role to facilitate physical activity in your local areas?

I think my role is all about trying to bring people together to create more opportunity, more prioritisation of physical activity and movement. I think the CliftonStrengths in terms of my leadership has helped me to think about when we're bringing people together, what are those strengths that people have got? How do we get the best out of people? How do we bring everyone to the table in a positive mindset? So I said earlier, even if someone's not done CliftonStrengths it does make you think about what are the best things? How do I get the best out of? How do I support a person to be their best self in the meeting? How do I get them to be in the best place to advance this piece of work? And ultimately, generally, all of my work is about physical activity. So when I bring that into the space, it's helping advance those physical activity discussions. And thinking about how do we overcome those challenges and how can I use my strengths as part of that discussion and certainly when I look at like having things like harmony and trying to use that to get everybody on that same page in terms of, okay, we're going to approach this positively, look at the strengths and try and do it as a collective. So, it's definitely helped my leadership style and, like I say, I really think about having that, what's good, what's strong, what's that approach to everything, even if a person hasn't necessarily done a CliftonStrengths assessment. ***(Male, mid-level Leader)***

I actually found it a bit of a revelation. And yeah, when I got my results back, I was just like, "God, that's so...that's just me, and suddenly it was like, "oh, that's why I do that, that's why I do this". And yeah, it's having that clarification. I think in many ways you're trying to push yourself into a mould that actually doesn't sit with you, it isn't the right thing to do. You know, so the way that I kind of, my delivery, if I'm doing a presentation, for example, has changed now because I use my CliftonStrengths rather than trying to fit myself into these academic moulds that I'm actually not an academic person. You know, I'm [me]. ***(Female, mid-level leader)***

I can't say it's [CliftonStrengths] been the deciding factor, but what I can say is it massively played a part in the way that I intentionally go about things now. And I think that's important that it directs you into going, well, if you're strong at that, and that is one of these strengths, how do you use that more to really make a change and make a difference? Because that's what we're all here to try and do. But also understand the bits that are missing, where do some others have that?
And also, I'm going to try and get my team to go through this at some point because I think it'd be brilliant then for it to be overlapped around. It's okay for me, but how does the team work towards it? How do we get better and lead with our strengths more? Again, making an intentional change. That's the idea of going through it with them. ***(Male, senior-level leader)***

Interviews Summary

The interviews with nine individuals outlined that CliftonStrengths supported individuals to develop greater self-awareness and understanding of their behaviours, which enhanced self-confidence and reflective practice. Leaders sought to embed CliftonStrengths within their leadership approach, contributing to improved systems thinking and a perceived ability to influence physical activity within their organisations. The approach was viewed as strengthening leaders' capacity to positively influence others through increased confidence, trust, delegation, and a deeper understanding of others' strengths, thereby supporting collaboration. Leaders also used strengths-based and systems-thinking principles to promote organisational awareness of the importance of physical activity. However, they acknowledged that such change is long-term, with outcomes not always explicit or yet evident. Key barriers included limited time and capacity, difficulties reflecting on ways of working, insufficient practical support from experienced CliftonStrengths practitioners, varying levels of CliftonStrengths knowledge among colleagues, challenges associated with large groups, and a need for more diverse training examples and facilitators to enhance relevance and engagement.

CONCLUSION

This research sought to assess the ways in which using a strengths-based development programme (CliftonStrengths) contributed to systems leadership effectiveness, which in turn, contributed to system-level changes that seek to promote physical activity across Pennine Lancashire. To achieve this aim, leaders who had participated in the programme (at any stage from its inception in Feb 2023) were invited to participate and provide their perceptions and perceived impact of the programme.

An even representation of genders, leadership status, and level of engagement with the programme was apparent, with the majority having prior experience of leadership or strengths-based development training. Overall, the survey and interview data illustrated a consistent view that the experience of the programme was positive.

Across the five systems leadership enablers the programme was perceived to have a moderate to strong impact, particularly in relation to “investing in strengths,” which most strongly influenced enabler across all leadership groups. In contrast, behaviours associated with celebrating bold action were rated lower, suggesting that while strengths investment was well developed, translating this into recognition for bold action was not impacted to the same degree.

In contrast, the perceived impact of the programme across the levels of the socio-ecological model showed greater variation. Impacts were perceived to be strongest at the individual and organisational levels and least at the outer levels of the model, particularly in relation to policy and the physical environment. This pattern suggests that while strengths-based leadership development may readily enhance individual behaviours and organisational practices, translation into wider systemic or structural change remains a challenge, potentially constrained by factors beyond leaders’ immediate control.

Statistical analyses showed those leaders who engaged to a higher degree in the programme, particularly those completing coaching and the 3-day strengths course, reported greater perceived impact. Further, individual categories in the high systems thinking competency group

consistently reported stronger perceived impact across both leadership enablers and socio-ecological levels. Differences by leadership status were most apparent at the organisational, policy, and cultural norms and ideologies level, where mid- and senior-level leaders perceived a greater ability to impact change. Such a difference is likely to reflect their seniority and ability to exercise influence, use networks, and taken decisions which may influence the future priority associated with systems leadership and using a strengths-based leadership programme.

The findings from the interviews provided further context and insights into understanding the overall positive experience of the programme. Participants described how the programme fostered a sense of greater self-awareness, confidence, and reflective practice, supporting more relational, collaborative, and strengths-focused leadership approaches. The insights from the interviews offered a more detailed and nuanced picture of how individuals have looked to use the strengths-based leadership programme as well as noting challenges and limitations.

Both survey and interview data identified several barriers to maximise the impact of the programme, including limited time and capacity, role constraints, inconsistent use of strengths across teams, and insufficient ongoing practical support. These constraints were reported to be particularly salient in relation to sustaining and scaling impact beyond individual behaviour change. Participants consistently highlighted the need for designated time, senior leader endorsement, and more applied, context-specific examples to support longer-term integration of strengths-based practice and to enhance the perceived impact of the programme.

The findings of the evaluation indicate TaAF's strengths-based leadership programme is most effective when embedded as an ongoing leadership development approach rather than delivered as a one-off assessment (i.e., CliftonStrengths assessment tool only). The strongest perceived impacts were found at the individual and organisational levels of the socio-ecological model where leaders are more directly involved with relationships and ways of working. Influence upon physical activity at the wider system levels (i.e., policy, cultural norms and ideologies) appears to require longer sustained effort over time. To facilitate impact across the whole system via the programme, leaders suggested greater senior leadership engagement and support, additional resources and protected time, and practical guidance.

Limitations

- Post intervention evaluation: The findings should be interpreted with caution as data were collected retrospectively (post programme) with no pre-programme data collected. In view of this, causal relationships cannot be inferred but not established.
- Participants: The recruitment processes may have led to an over-representation of individuals with positive experiences of the programme, in that those less engaged in the programme were potentially less likely to respond to the survey (and as such are under-represented in the survey and subsequent results). In addition, demographic information collected indicated limited diversity among respondents, suggesting potentially valuable insights have been missed from the cohort who undertook the leadership programme.
- Experiences and perceptions: The evaluation focused upon individuals' self-reported experiences of the programme and their perceptions of its impact. This evaluation did not seek to identify change over-time but rather gain insights from those who had participated in the programme.
- Recall: Some participants undertook the programme months or years prior to this evaluation, introducing the potential for recall bias.

External implications

This report has focused on the impact of TaAF's strengths-based leadership programme on the development of physical activity leaders from across Pennine Lancashire. The research reveals the positive impacts of the programme for physical activity promotion across the region. Additionally, the findings emphasise the role of leadership development for future sustainable place-based systems change.

Leadership development is one of the nine conditions for change identified by the National Evaluation Learning Partnership (NELP, led by Sheffield Hallam University). As a condition of change, leadership is identified as 'distributed and collective' and their focus is on the ways in which communities, groups, and individuals can work together to understand the barriers and enablers of physical activity. Importantly, everyone's contribution is valued in that established

leaders should be able to challenge the system while others working within the system can contribute positively to enabling active lives.

The widely available strengths-based leadership programme offered across the TaAF region means that individuals and organisations have been given the opportunity to influence the system by identifying and understanding their strengths and using this to support community actions and priorities. This report reveals a detailed understanding of how the TaAF leadership programme has influenced practice and importantly, this extends to individuals placed at various levels within participating organisations. Specifically, the strengths-based leadership programme reported here, provides strong alignment at the individual and organisational levels of the socio-ecological model as well as demonstrating for some (particularly those in more senior positions), that their impact extends to the outer levels of the model. The findings also provide strong connections to other ways of working such as 'collaboration across organisations' and 'community-led action.'

Overall, the impact of TaAF's strengths-based leadership programme demonstrates how leadership can drive systems-change and place-based working. The report reveals that distributed and collective leadership widely implemented is an important enabler for systems change and one which requires ongoing investment to ensure alignment to Sport England's long-term strategic priorities.

Summary

- TaAF's strengths-based leadership programme (using CliftonStrengths) is designed to support leaders to better understand their approach to physical activity promotion and the level of perceived impact when working across complex systems.
- Evidence from the programme, as presented in this report, suggests that it has had a positive influence upon leaders' use of strengths- and system-based ways of working, and contributed to the promotion of physical activity across Pennine Lancashire.
- The programme is particularly influential when engagement extends beyond the assessment tool alone and includes coaching.

- Taken together, the strengths-based leadership programme has value as part of TaAF's longer term systems leadership approach, while recognising that CliftonStrengths is part of a leader's 'toolkit', and that changes to physical activity outcomes are long-term, multi-faceted and connected to the overall complex system.
- To maximise impact over time it is suggested that there are several areas in which a strengths-based leadership programme could be further developed and these include: sustained leadership support, engagement from senior leaders, opportunities to embed learning into practice, continued investment in a whole-systems approaches to physical activity, and longer-term evaluative work.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: TaAF justification for selecting CliftonStrengths

- A strengths lens matches an asset based approach. TaAF is fundamentally about building on the good things that exist in communities and in the system, not just fixing deficits. A strengths lens does the same for individuals and teams. It focuses on what is already strong and how to use it intentionally, rather than asking people to work in ways they find tiring, inefficient, ineffective and uncomfortable.
- The tool had credibility and an evidence base that mattered at scale. CliftonStrengths is widely recognised internationally and sits within the broader evidence base related to positive psychology and strengths-based development. It is not perfect and isn't designed as a diagnostic or a label, but it is well established as a developmental tool. The CliftonStrengths technical material is clear that it is intended to support development rather than selection, and that profile comparisons across individuals are discouraged.
- It is personal and tailored without being exclusive. CliftonStrengths provides a unique profile for each person and doesn't put people into boxes or categories like many personality assessments. This meant it could work across very different roles and organisations, while still giving people something specific and meaningful to reflect on. It also supports inclusive participation, because it is not tied to one professional identity or sector language. It feels tailored and personally meaningful.
- It had practical fit with leadership in complex systems. We know that there are a range of things that enable systemic change, including improved collaboration, creativity and innovation, and increased courage in tackling challenges or managing difficult conversations. CliftonStrengths helps leaders with all those things, by supporting us to know ourselves and others better, and recognising our personal competencies and inclinations as well as guidance on managing our blind spots. More than any other tool, we felt that CliftonStrengths aligned with the needs of systems leaders working with complexity.

Bolton, N., Sellars, P., Mellalieu, S., & Crone, D. (2026). Understanding the role of strengths-based development in systems leadership: An analysis of CliftonStrengths in developing physical activity. A report by Centre for Health, Activity, and Wellbeing Research (CAWR), Cardiff Metropolitan University written for Together an Active Future (TaAF).



Cardiff Metropolitan University | Prifysgol Metropolitan Caerdydd

cawr

Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research

cyigll

Canolfan Ymchwil ar gyfer Iechyd, Gweithgarwch a Lles