WHAT METHODS AND CONDITIONS HELP, AND HINDER SYSTEMS CHANGE?

A case study of one system change initiative in children's services

early action
system change
Renfrewshire

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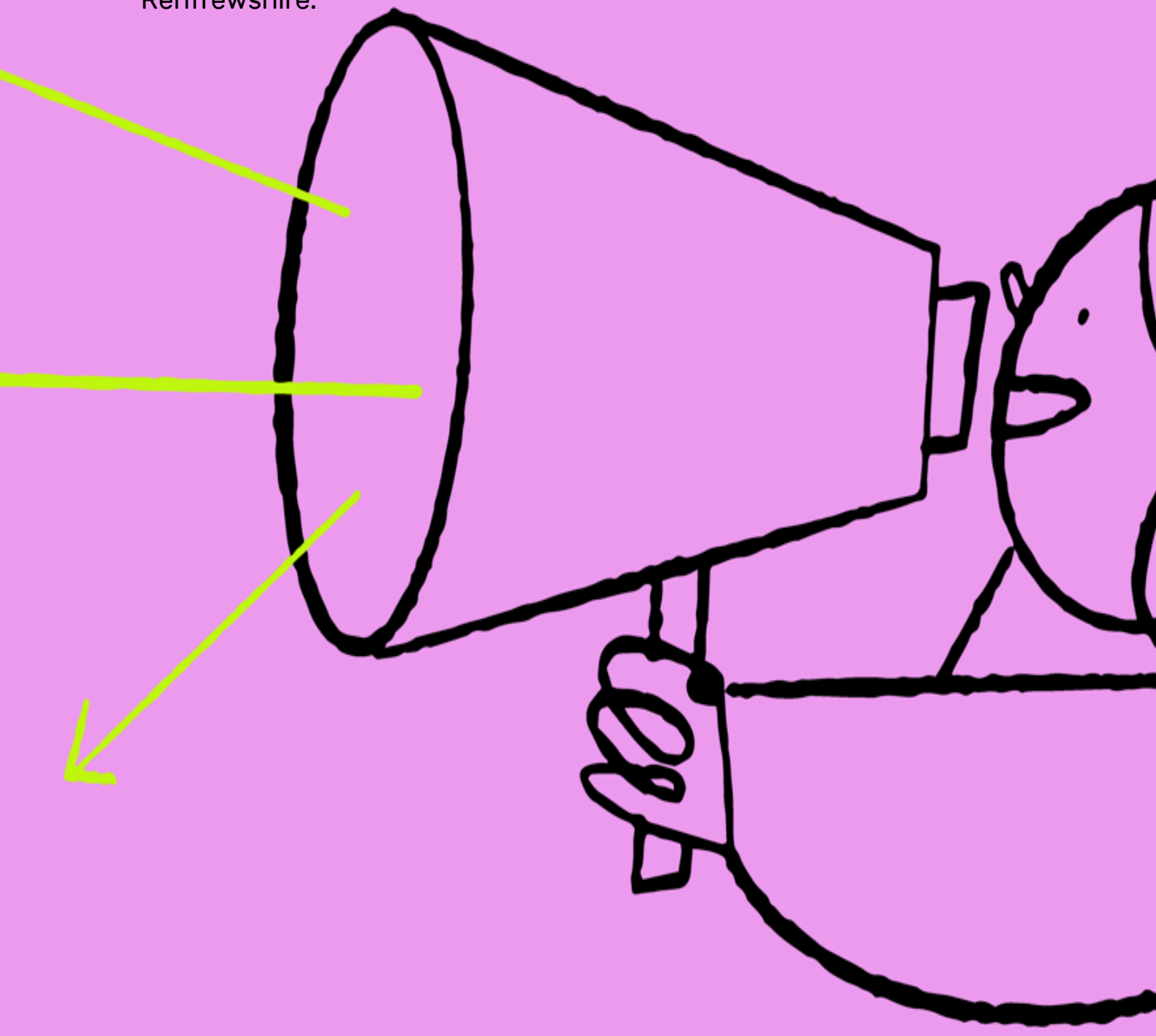
This insight summary is for:

- Funders interested in designing investments and packages of support to progress systems change
- Local partnerships interested in progressing transformational change in children's services

This insight summary seeks to deepen our understanding of how to progress transformational change programmes. It builds upon decades of experience trying to achieve systemic change in children's services. It focuses on the lessons learned from one system change initiative delivered as part of the National Lottery Community Fund's Early Action System Change Fund in Renfrewshire.



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This insight piece was made possible thanks to funds provided as part of the Early Action System Change Fund from The National Lottery Community Fund. We would like to thank the thousands of children, young people and families in Renfrewshire who shared their views, experiences and ideas to bring about a positive change. We would also like to thank the committed staff and volunteers across the public and voluntary sectors working day in and day out to provide support within their communities.

As Director of Children's Services in Renfrewshire, I am delighted to introduce a new report exploring what it takes to bring about transformational change. It discusses both enablers - and crucially the barriers often presented when trying to achieve systems change in public services.

Meeting the needs of our communities, including our most vulnerable brings increasing levels of challenge and especially within a decreasing financial envelope. Strong partnership working and collaboration across public services, the voluntary sector and communities is more vital than ever. We must be willing to critically evaluate and address barriers that impede progress and leverage the enablers that can support change and better outcomes.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the barriers and enablers that can impact on our ability to achieve systems change. It offers a critical but fair reflection through the example of trying to move resource towards early intervention and prevention. It highlights the complexities of how we often see 'resource' and the challenges of genuine partnership approach. People are our greatest asset. The insights and recommendations can support and enhance meaningful change in future work of this nature across public services in Renfrewshire and beyond.

I am grateful to the authors of this report who worked tirelessly to build strong relationships with the services and partners involved. In doing so, they have been able to develop an evidence-based analysis of the challenges and opportunities we face. The report offers a balance, addressing where we can build on existing good practice but also, and importantly, highlights 'what could be done differently?'. If we can move beyond seeing this as a criticism and instead use this as a catalyst for new learning, then the potential for meaningful change becomes much more likely.

I would also like to thank the hundreds of young people who participated directly in the wider work. They provided the insights as to what they'd like to see done differently, with some co-creating a suite of tools and resources to support other young people in Renfrewshire. We are committed to learning from this report and honouring the work they've done.

I would urge all stakeholders to carefully consider the findings of the report and use it to support our aims of working collaboratively towards the goal of even better services and supports for children, young people and families.

Steven Quinn
Director of Children's Services

SETTING THE SCENE: SYSTEM CHANGE IN SCOTLAND

What is the policy context?

Scotland has one of the most progressive and innovative policy landscapes in the world when it comes to supporting children, young people and families. There is a fertile ecosystem of policies which **prioritise prevention**; **empower communities** and support participation; strengthen **partnership working**; seek to collect and use **rigorous data to understand and inform systems change** and; **uphold and defend children's rights**. These policies include commitment to incorporate UNCRC into Scots Law; the radical reimagining of the care system as part of The Promise and Implementation Plan and the Child Poverty Action Plans to work towards meeting the 2030 targets set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. Scotland has been on a long, ambitious journey to prioritise **prevention and early intervention in public services**. It has been over 10 years since the seminal Christie Commission set out the clear and radical vision for the re-design of public services. At that time, a clear call was made to public services. They could not continue with their current approach and operating model.

Yet, we know from existing research – including Dartington's work - that prioritisation of prevention within children's services falls short. **Too many children are being failed by existing systems of care despite the best of intentions** (see The Promise). Others have spoken about Scotland's implementation 'gap' or 'crisis' (see blog here and roundtable discussion here). The many incremental changes have not made the difference at the scale and size hoped for children and young people. The data reveals the need for improvement when it comes to the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families in Scotland and across the United Kingdom - **particularly those at increased risk of systemic discrimination** (see Rights Respecting? Scotland's approach to children in conflict with the law).

What is the role of philanthropy?

Philanthropic investment has the potential to create conditions to bring people together in new ways, make the space for change and disrupt the status quo. While the totality of public service expenditure far outstrips philanthropic investment, philanthropy has the potential to act as a powerful catalyst for systemic change to improve outcomes for children and young people.

Philanthropy is often in a position to **hold a higher degree of risk and uncertainty** – and respond **more quickly and flexibility** to changing circumstances - than those with responsibility for commissioning statutory public services. As a funder, philanthropic organisations also hold **substantial convening power** to bring together various parts of the system in **more**

equitable ways to understand different perspectives and **amplify marginalised and seldom heard voices**. All of which are necessary to develop innovative ways of working with the standard modus operandi to facilitate systemic change.

Philanthropy has a unique and distinct contribution to make within the wider ecosystem of supports for children and families in Scotland.

The role of philanthropy therefore goes beyond providing funds directly to charitable and community organisations. Of course, this is an important part, and many organisations simply would not survive without it. Indeed, this will be even more acute as public service expenditure becomes squeezed further as the cost-of-living crisis deepens. The same level of investment will not be able to cover basic operating costs for most organisations. Our typical ways of working and funding are not fit to address the scale and severity of the complex social challenges. There is a clear need for philanthropy to leverage its unique and distinct role to trial and experiment different approaches to help facilitate and achieve systemic change.

A powerful example of an innovative and experimental philanthropic investment is the Early Action System Change Fund. Launched in 2017, the fund recognised the vital importance of **prevention**, tackling **inequalities** and the necessity of **partnership** working to achieve systemic change. The fund provided money and time for the public and voluntary sector to come together in new and different ways to create and deliver on a shared vision that prioritised prevention and early intervention. **The Early Action Systems Change Fund was one of the first of its kind for The National Lottery Community Fund in Scotland.** Funding was awarded to eight partnerships across the UK. The present paper focuses on the Renfrewshire partnership.

What was the approach to system change in Renfrewshire?

The approach for Early Action System Change in Renfrewshire drew from a long, historical body of experience trying to achieve systemic change in children's services throughout the UK.

The partnership was led by Dartington Service Design Lab (Dartington). Dartington holds over 50 years of experience working in partnership with the public sector, voluntary sector and funders across the UK to achieve change in children's services – with a focus on prioritising prevention and early intervention for the last decade (see Transforming Children's Services: Using the best evidence to get it right for every child). Over this time, Dartington have been developing and refining methods and approaches to facilitate systemic change. **We have had varying degrees of success.** The work has provided a deep understanding about the dynamics within local partnerships that can help or hinder change for children, young people and families.

In the Renfrewshire EASC project, we took an **integrated approach** to systemic change. We consolidated our previous learning on systems change and brought together **co-production approaches** and **design thinking** together with **systems thinking** and **system dynamic methods** to try and achieve change. **This integrated approach, bringing together these methods was the first of its kind at Dartington** and has fed into a number of subsequent projects helping us to further refine our approach**.** Another, in a long line of 'firsts'.

The present paper provides a summary of the methods applied in Renfrewshire as a case study, and highlights some of the lessons learned to support future system change initiatives.

PARTNERSHIPS: CONFLICTS ARE AN INEVITABLE AND NECESSARY PART OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE

What approach did we take and how did it support system change?

"The whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts."

We all know partnership working is important, it almost feels redundant to state it at this point. The countless initiatives aimed at fostering partnerships continue to demonstrate its value.

This stems from a recognition that **our problems** – and therefore **solutions** - are interconnected. The social challenges we are experiencing require a collective response bringing together different parts of the system. Only by bringing people together can we understand, collectively problem-solve and take joint action.

Let us be clear however, working collaboratively is hard. It's *damn* hard.

In order to bring about change in complex and emergent systems, we need more **networked decision-making structures** that do not rely so heavily on top-down power structures. It challenges us to move beyond traditional **hierarchies of 'command and control'** – which is particularly dominant within public systems. We need partnership working that enables **genuine power sharing** built around **reciprocal accountability**, **empathy** and **shared action**.

This can feel **liberating** for some, and deeply **uncomfortable** for others. It pushes those who are familiar with linear, hierarchical decision-making far beyond their comfort zone. It involves bringing people together across a system - at different levels - to work collectively in new ways with **freely chosen** and **mutually shared principles**.

Collective ways of working unearth different ways of 'seeing' and 'being' - sometimes for the first time. These shared spaces can add **depth** and **understanding.** They can also surface **contradictions** and produce **tensions**. **Conflicts and disagreements** are **an inevitable - and healthy -** part of effective partnership working.

Partnerships, however, will begin to fail if tensions are surfaced without the mechanisms or supports to make sense of and resolve them. We retreat to familiar ground. There will be a powerful pull to maintaining the status quo – back to the existing systems, goals and power structures. Partnerships require **empathetic relationships** underpinned by **shared spaces to facilitate reciprocal and equitable communication** to hold and resolve these tensions.

This goes beyond having a clause in the contract about mediation 'if' conflicts arise (which they will, and should). Rather this is about building in these collaborative processes and **'rupture and repair' cycles** to allow for timely course correction in response to these adaptive and emergent systems.

Effective partnership working also goes beyond having a **detailed terms of reference**, a **well-represented steering group** from across different areas of the system or a **comprehensive delivery plan** with clearly defined **roles and responsibilities**. Of course – these are useful tools. Indeed, all of these helped structure the partnership in this case. However, achieving change in complex, adaptive systems must go deeper. It seeks to understand **organisational cultures** underpinned by people's **assumptions**, **values** and **mindsets** that drive decision-making and system behaviours.

Ultimately, systems change is about people. Using collaboration as a tool for system change helps system actors to 'see' these differences – and understand how different actors within the system can best function to contribute to shared goals. This requires a learning mindset and letting go of our control mindsets.

What helped and hindered this approach and what did we learn?

- **Conflicts are an inevitable and necessary part of systemic change.** As a partnership we made mistakes and didn't always get this right. Conflicts were surfaced, but not always responded to in equitable and relational ways. Open conflicts are deeply uncomfortable. People can react in many ways (avoidance, denial, defensiveness etc.). It takes time and experience to strengthen this muscle for working effectively with the open conflicts that system change surfaces. We need to be more intentional in building the capacity and skills so we are able to learn in and work with a diversity of thought and experience.

- **We cannot try and 'strong arm' change by issuing directives from those who hold more power, to those who hold less.** We cannot disrupt the status quo by replicating the same inequitable 'command and control' power dynamics that exist elsewhere in the system. This is encapsulated by the warning from the writer and activist Audre Lorde: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house". Those who hold power (philanthropy, commissioners etc.) have the potential to both disrupt *and* reinforce the status quo.

- **We move at the pace of trust.** Previous experience working as a partnership on system change initiatives helped accelerate progress early on. Early Action System Change in Renfrewshire had a head start of sorts. The partnership was formed of relationships that had been built over

many years of shared labour on different projects (see Common Language, ChildrenCount). This provided a foundation of trust and shared understanding of values and assumptions amongst the partners about how to undertake transformational change within the system. Latterly, there was a fracturing of trust in the partnership that impacted progress. The potential withdrawal of funding (due to proposed changes in the delivery plan) undermined trust, motivation and progress with various partners in the project. It damaged relationships from which it was difficult to recover.

- **Connect local work to national networks.** Lifting up and connecting the work to national platforms and bodies helped increase the visibility, profile and accountability of the work amongst partners. The Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland publicly recognising, celebrating and spotlighting the co-design work of young people in Renfrewshire enforced the weight and legitimacy of both the process and what had been produced.

- **Create and protect space for *both* strategic and operational discussions**. There was a period of consolidation and reconfiguration of boards and reporting mechanisms within Renfrewshire to minimise the number of meetings with the same people. While this was necessary, an unintended consequence was a conflation between reflective and operational spaces. There needs to be protected time and space for both, with clarity in who should take up which spaces. The risk otherwise, is spaces for strategic reflection end up becoming about operational updates. Conversely with this conflation, there can be too much discussion and not enough action to drive progress forward. Both spaces are needed. It is a tension we've seen play out in other system change initiatives.

- **Build capacity to tolerate and work with uncertainty**. This is to prevent the scales tipping towards 'avoidance activities' such as overplanning, or seeking more and more information resulting in 'analysis paralysis' and the inability to enact change, defaulting to the powerful status quo.[1] Building tolerance for uncertainty also helps prevent the scales from dipping too far in the *other* direction, with short-term reactive responses to a series of disjointed events and insights losing sight of the overall long-term goal. We need to be able to resist the urge for quick solution or 'fixes that fail' because we're frustrated or uncomfortable with the complexity. This ability to hold and work with uncertainty helps us know when to reflect and when to act.

PUBLIC SECTOR SYSTEM CHANGERS: CREATING THE SPACE, SUPPORT AND CREDIBILITY TO DISRUPT THE STATUS QUO

What approach did we take and how did it support systems change?

Too often, having protected time and space to think differently within our roles is cited as a considerable challenge to achieving system change. Staff can have a range of competing demands on their time and attentional bandwidth. This is both at a strategic level (with broad remits and oversight across multiple workstreams) and at an operational level (with high caseloads, and reporting requirements).

We created two new full-time system change roles. This was to allow staff protected time, space and freedom to step outside their normal roles, work across system boundaries (i.e. health, education and social work), identify opportunities and form new collaborations. Creating the job titles and profile to drive change also helped signal the importance of this work to the wider system.

Careful consideration was also given to where the posts would be located that would help bring together different parts of the system. Based on past experiences, we felt it was important to have the system changers fully embedded within the public system. This was intended to help progress change in two ways:

1) It created creditability for convening and relating with colleagues in the public sector and;
2) It provided close proximity to the processes and changes of the public system so they could quickly identify blockages and work to find leverage points.

The staff seconded into the roles of system changers had well-established networks. As such, they were in a position to leverage these relationships to drive forward system change activities. System changers also acted as a trusted face for the system change project and were able to champion this work across professional meetings and work. System changers were able to bring their system knowledge to the design of the project. For example, they were able to feedback to partners about the feasibility of project plans, connecting to other relevant people or work in the local authority area which could support the aims of the project.

System changers needed to work in very different ways. It required speaking truth to power; identifying opportunities to disrupt inequitable power dynamics between the public system and communities; pose challenges to the status quo

and work nimbly and collaboratively across different services to create opportunities for change.

Taking on the role of a disruptive system changer is challenging, complex, relentless work. It can be isolating working in the liminal spaces, pushing against established ways of working. Two system changers were appointed to provide peer-to-peer support. The system changers were also connected to other 'system changers' across different parts of the UK. This was intended to help deepen understanding about different approaches and common challenges within other system change initiatives in different contexts. It was to also function as an informal learning network to build broader capacity for delivering this type of demanding work.

Initial job specification, roles and responsibilities were developed, alongside a Theory of Change to provide a roadmap for progress. At the outset, training and development support was also provided around methods and values to help enable system changers to take action to support the change initiative.

What helped and hindered this approach and what did we learn?

- **We can empower system leadership at different levels, and within different parts of the system.** You often hear 'we need senior level buy-in to make this work' or 'this isn't going to work if senior leadership aren't on board'. This is an increasingly out of date hierarchical model for change. This model of training and support of system changers at different levels challenges this assumption. It demonstrates people *can* be empowered to create and craft changes across diverse parts of the system. Change does not need to come from the top alone. It can be identified and driven at a range of different levels.

- **There was a missed opportunity to build system leadership capabilities more widely across the system.** This draws inspiration from another Early Action System Change initiative in South Lanarkshire. System leadership training was delivered to a diverse range of practitioners within the system. It led to a series of micro changes in the way particular services / approaches were delivered which grew and evolved over time. In Renfrewshire, system leadership training and support could've extended far beyond the two system changers initially appointed to further support sustainability beyond the lifetime of the grant. This is an important learning point around building the systems capabilities of different practitioners. A programme of training, and coaching support could be designed and delivered in the future.

- **The system changers' strong foundation of knowledge and existing relationships within the public sector helped with engagement and buy-in.** Both system changers were already based in the public system

(one in an operational-focused role, and the other in a development and capacity building role). They were able to shape communications so that it spoke to the reality that other practitioners were experiencing in the system. They were able to provide critical push where activities needed to be restructured so that it was more feasible for busy practitioners to attend and engage.

- **Robust training was provided around the methods and aims to help keep the project closely aligned with the ethos of the initiative**. Training around system change concepts were provided by the specialist partner. This helped provide a roadmap for what we were trying to achieve, how and why.

- **In future, more explicitly building in formal and regular reflection.** The pairing of two system changers at the outset was invaluable. It helped create spaces to troubleshoot, plan, and reflect together around challenges and respond to opportunities as they arose. Future work should focus on setting up the processes and support that foster learning spaces amongst peers. Having such structures are particularly important if staffing changes occur (as happened in this case) so these spaces and supports are not lost if personnel move on.

- **COVID-19 had a profound impact on staff roles and wellbeing, which also meant the system changers were partly recalled back to service delivery**: This meant redistribution of the system changers' time (i.e. working less per week on the initiative, but over a longer period of time). Whilst manageable, the intention of the system changer post was to free up the time, space and capacity to progress change – which can be difficult whilst simultaneously holding significant operational pressures brought about by the pandemic.

- **Despite the intention to have a health system changer, this did not progress.** The initial plan was to have one system changer position within the local authority, and another system changer positioned within the health service. For a range of reasons (capacity, staff shortages) this was not achieved. Instead, two system changer posts were managed by social services. This meant (i) additional work was needed to ensure the initiative was not seen purely as a 'social work initiative' and; (ii) an opportunity to strengthen relationships with health was lost.

- **The potential funding withdrawal meant uncertainty about the future of the system change role**. This meant there was a recalibration in some of the activities and relationship building to develop a contingency plan if funding was withdrawn. It also required expectation setting with a range of partners who'd been brought along on the journey that the initiative may not continue – in turn losing some of the momentum that had been built up over the last year and a half.

MAPPING INVESTMENT AND STAFF CAPACITY: FOCUSING ON PEOPLE AND WAYS OF WORKING TO INCREASE EXPENDITURE IN PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

What approach did we take and how did it support systems change?

Original approach: re-directing of expenditure from high end provision towards prevention and early intervention.

The initial intention of the Early Action System Change Fund was the redirection of 1-5% of expenditure towards prevention and early intervention in an effort to tackle root causes of inequality.

Financial systems are not currently set up to accurately capture the size of investment in prevention and early intervention activities. This needs to be retrospectively done using best estimates from managers and budget holders.

As such, the Renfrewshire partnership sought to achieve this by embarking upon the following fund map methodology which sought to:

1. Understand the current level of resource and investment in children's services across education, social work and health;
2. Understanding the size of the population currently being served by public services and;
3. Understand the size of workforce supporting children and young people and the proportion of their time spent delivering prevention and early intervention activities.

There are a couple of important points to take note of in the design of the work:

- We purposefully did not map voluntary sector resources. There were a few reasons for this. Some of the information was deemed commercially sensitive. More importantly, funding in the voluntary sector was deemed to be more volatile (compared with what you see in the public sector), so less useful to helping inform change for subsequent years.
- Only part of the health budget was mapped, leading to an underestimation of health's investment in children and young people's outcomes. This was due to the way health budgets are broken down across multiple local authorities.

We produced a comprehensive picture of both financial and human investment in children's services. A series of visualisations (see figures below) helped demonstrate:

1. Levels of investment in prevention compared with high end support
2. Size of the workforce in children's services
3. Outline of services with highest investment
4. Comparison of greater levels of investment in prevention and in high end provision
5. The average investment per child

Adapted approach: focusing on ways of working to increase prevention and early intervention activities.

It became clear in the dissemination of the financial data in sessions with senior leaders that it was not going to be possible to re-draw and move budgets from one area to another. This was compounded by an ambitious programme of reform being launched in the authority that looked to significantly reduce public expenditure. Instead, there was a re-orientation to focus on people. Over 3,000 staff members were identified as supporting children's outcomes. People are our most powerful asset when it comes to systems change. An alternative approach developed was to support existing staff to work in different ways that prioritised prevention and early intervention.

What helped and hindered this approach and what did we learn?

- **Using data to surface and challenge assumptions.** Surfacing assumptions about levels of investment in prevention and early intervention using reflective questions, quizzes and good data was necessary to 'meet people where they are at' and plan feasible routes forward for change. A useful activity was inviting participants to estimate the percentage of investment in current prevention activities and observing reactions to the data when presented (whether it affirmed or challenged expectations). Interestingly, there were stark differences in estimates between different groups (with some groups significantly overestimating the amount of investment in prevention). By posing reflective questions, getting participants to be explicit about their assumptions, and sharing robust data - we can surface differences and contradictions about how we see the world and enable us to help plan suitable next steps to achieve change. For example:
    - Is prevention and early intervention a priority for them?
    - What do they currently believe to be the levels of investment in early intervention and prevention?

- Is there a belief in what the data is saying about the level of investment?
- Is there a belief that investment in prevention should increase, and do they feel this is realistic?
- If so, is there a belief about the best way for this to be achieved?

This is about 'meeting people where they are at' in the journey of prioritising prevention, early intervention, and building from there.

- **Financial data *and* staff capacity data were crucial for identifying opportunities for change.** The data on staff capacity provided the crucial insights and opportunity to focus on cultural changes in the workforce – and help move past the roadblock experienced by the partnership in trying to move money from one budget line to another. Future iterations of the fund map could look to deepen our understanding of staff capacity. At present the fund map collects data on the number of staff within each service and the proportion of time they spend on prevention and early intervention activities. This could extend into further detail about the types of prevention and early intervention activities, as well as how much 'flex' there is within roles. Ultimately concentrating on a monetary figure created the roadblocks, which will be even more acute within the current financial climate. In future system change initiatives, greater attention needs to be paid to recognising staff as the greatest resource (e.g. what their role is and how we can collectively re-define their role from reactive to proactive work etc).

- **Focusing on moving money triggered a scarcity mindset.** The initial focus on moving money from one part of the system to another ended up creating a focus on what can't be changed around budgetary lines, detracting from potentially more fruitful conversations around what can change around policies and practice. While the initial focus on financial data and the idea that the most reliable indicator of systems reform is change in the flow of public monies was helpful to explore assumptions and gain a snapshot of the broader picture. However, the focus on moving money did not help subsequent discussions around changing culture, practice and policies. In fact, it had a knock-on effect impacting progress on identifying opportunities for changing practice, roles and culture.

- **Pressure to reduce public expenditure compounded a scarcity mindset about not having 'enough' (time, money, or staff) to create change**. A scarcity mindset creates challenging conditions for meaningful partnership working, innovation and change. The critical question becomes how do you work within the boundaries of finite (or reducing resource), without tipping into a scarcity mindset (and it's unintended, negative consequence for creativity and innovation)?

- **Financial public systems are not yet built to systematically code for universal, targeted prevention or high need provision**. This needs to be a new exercise each time through the fund mapping. If we wish to understand levels of investment in prevention and early intervention over time, additional work could be done to build this into the existing financial systems and mechanisms within public services.

Figure 1: Renfrewshire investment by level of intervention

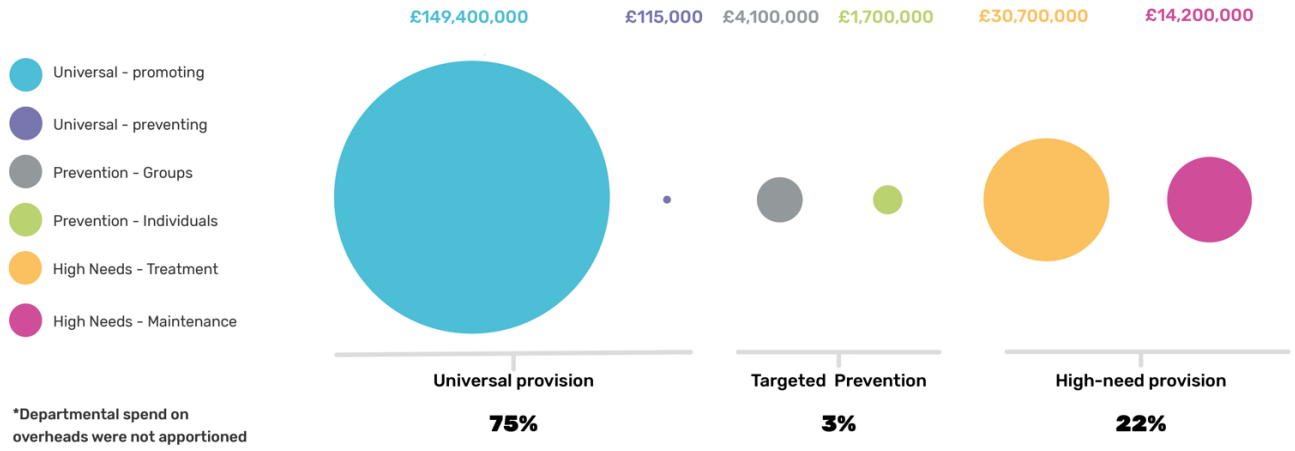


Figure 2: Comparative investments

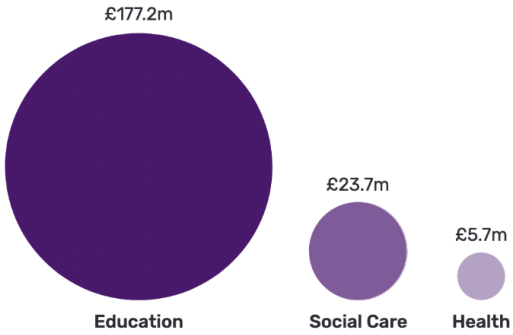


Figure 3: Intervention profiles

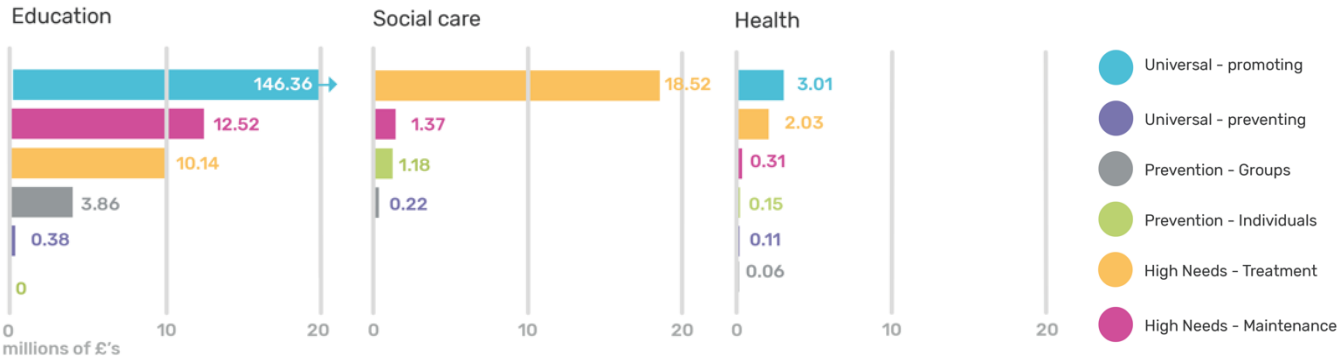


Figure 4: Workforce resource and service activity

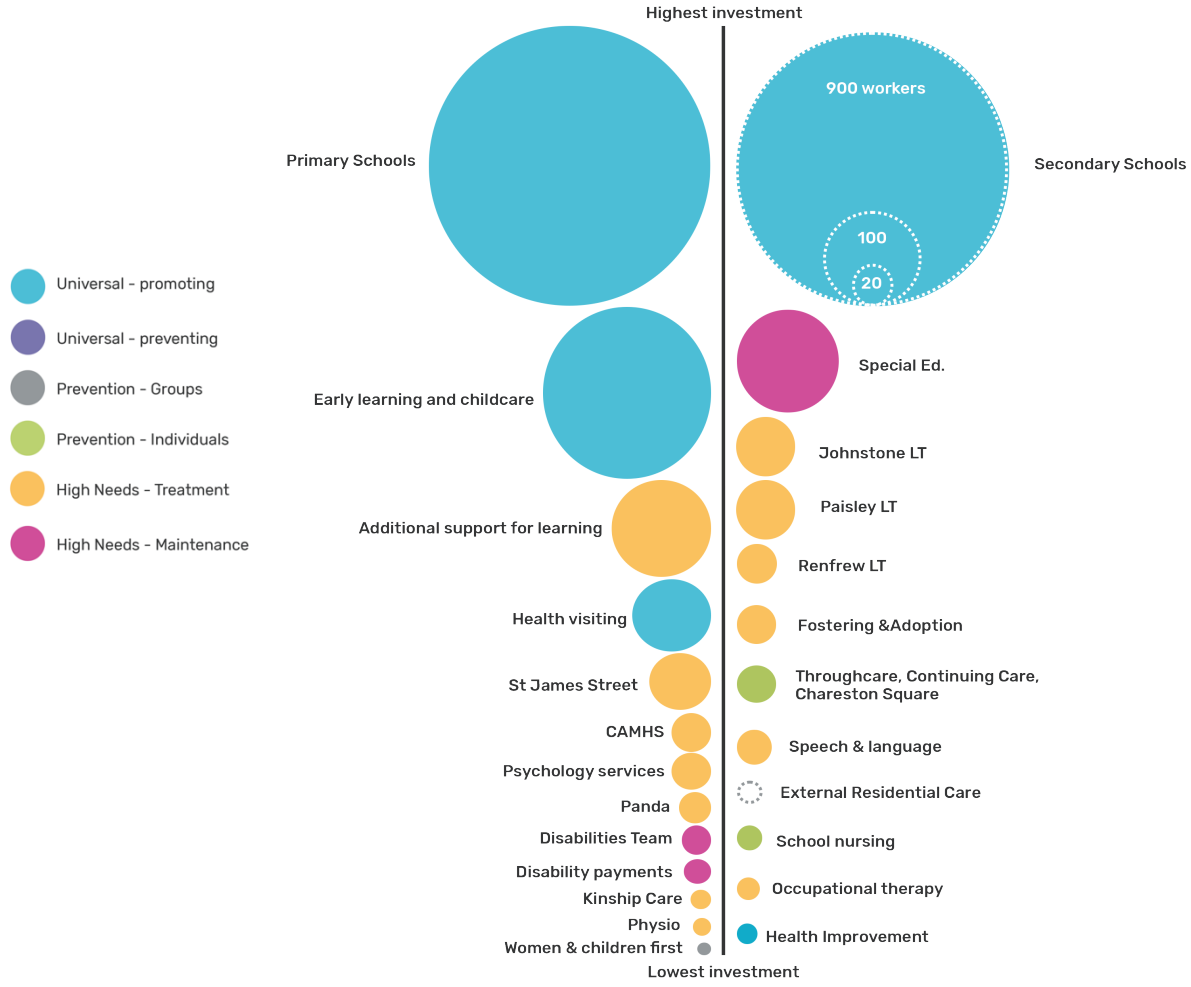
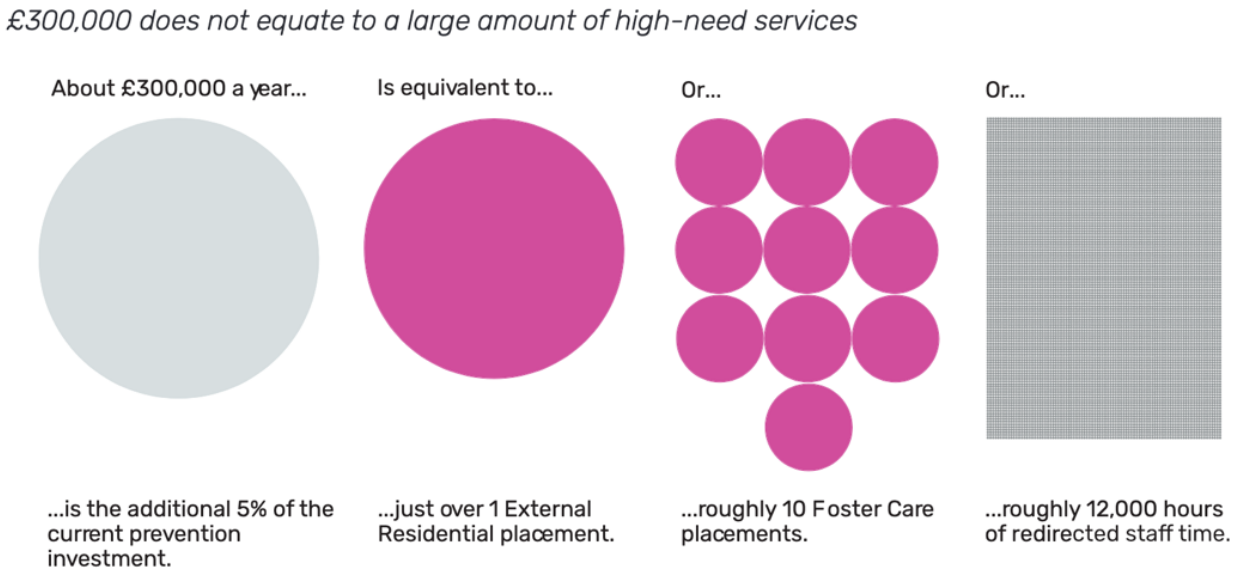


Figure 5: Services with the highest investment per child

Rank	Services with high investment	Per child
1	External Residential Schools	£258,900
2	Fostering and Adoption	£29,400
3	Special Education	£28,500
4	Children with Disabilities Team	£12,800
5	Kinship	£7,900
6	St James Street (D&A)	£7,000
7	Secondary	£6,600
8	Primary	£5,300
9	Self-Directed Support	£5,000
10	Throughcare / Continuing Care	£4,800

Figure 6: £300,000 expressed as alternative investments



SYSTEMS THINKING: A SYSTEM THAT KNOWS ITSELF CAN CHANGE ITSELF, PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND PATTERNS CAN ALTER THEM

What approach did we take and how did it support systems change?

If we fail to understand the broader picture, we end up missing opportunities to more effectively intervene in the system. A classic public health allegory illustrates this point:

A passer-by sees a child fall into a river from the bridge above. The passer-by jumps into to save the child and bring them safely to shore. Looking back to the river, they notice another child has fallen in, and then another. They swim out, exhausted, to bring both children back to shore. While rescuing the children, they see another fall in. They call to another passer-by on the shore to help. **A crisis response** is jumping into the river responding to the immediate need. **A prevention response** is putting a fence on the bridge to stop the children falling into the river in the first place. Both are necessary. But, we have a tendency to focus on the most immediate and visible need in front of us, rather than taking an upstream view.

This broader understanding of the bigger picture is necessary for systems change. A system that knows itself can change itself**. Our work tells us again and again that people know their part of the system incredibly well, but not necessarily how it connects and impacts upon other aspects of the system**. The service mapping work seeks to understand both the **tangible (e.g. referral pathways) and intangible factors (e.g. beliefs and assumptions)** that connect the system and drive its behaviours. We need to understand both the **visible and invisible dynamics that drive system change** in order to position interventions and approaches in the most impactful places.

We need to take into account the wider picture, otherwise we focus on the symptom (e.g. setting targets for CAMHS waiting lists) **rather than the cause** (e.g. increasing the capacity of the system and quality of supports *before* crisis point is reached).

In response to this need to 'see' the bigger picture, Dartington facilitated a number of 1:1 sessions and participatory group sessions with senior managers and practitioners from across the voluntary and public sector to apply a systems lens on their work in Renfrewshire.

The purpose of this systems thinking work was to create a shared understanding of the number and reach of services explicitly targeting the priority outcomes related to the system change initiative – mental health and coercive control.

These activities sought to:

- Map out the stakeholders' hypotheses around causes and consequences of the priority outcomes.
- Identify both the intervention points which could either help address these challenges, or further exacerbate them.
- Build capacity for systems thinking by delivering workshops that help to surface mental health models, assumptions and beliefs that drive system behaviours.
- Support practitioners and managers to identify causal relationships between different aspects of the system.
- Facilitate practitioners and managers to take a long view of trends over time to see patterns of behaviours, rather than 'isolated events'.
- Identify and understand feedback loops and how changes introduced to the system lead to both intended and unintended consequences.

A range of resources were produced. These included:

- A visual 'glossary' of services explicitly targeting the two priorities to represent the distribution of services across prevention and early intervention. See figures 7 and 8.
- Causes and consequence of poor emotional wellbeing - and how these interact with one another. See figure 8.
- Causes and consequences of coercive control within adolescent relationships - and how these interact with one another. See figure 9.

In addition to these resources, we also made an interactive tool to explore the dynamics of coercive control. This tool was designed to support young people and their families, carers or supporting practitioners to 'play out' different scenarios involving coercive control and wellbeing.

This tool helps young people and practitioners to identify the complex interplay between the individual characteristics of people involved in a relationship, such as levels of power or self-esteem and inter-personal behaviours, such as controlling behaviour.

Using personas helps young people work with different types of behaviours to see what happens in the relationship. Importantly, the tool also offers participants an opportunity to learn about intervention points, so that they see how a relationship can become healthier. <see link to tool here: tinyurl.com/easccoercivecontrol>

What helped and hindered this approach and what did we learn?

- **Systems thinking concepts are often inaccessible**. We learned that workshops on systems thinking offered new ways of thinking which

practitioners and managers found stimulating, but applying a systems lens in practice is very challenging for most people working in the current model of public service delivery. Systems thinking concepts highlight the importance of looking at data across multiple years to understand trends. For example, there may be a seemingly small increase one year to the next, but if this is understood within the context of small increases *each year* it highlights there may be a concerning reinforcing systems loop at play that needs to be disrupted (e.g. increasing number of children becoming looked after at home).

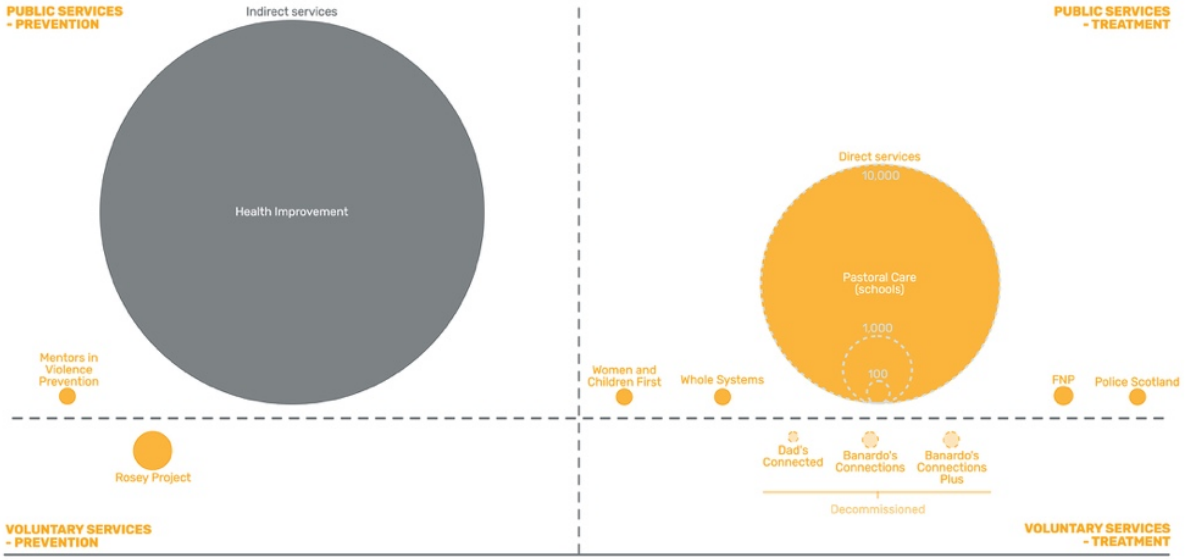
- **Practitioners have an intuitive experience of systems dynamics**. People working in services have experiential knowledge of patterns and systems dynamics – but rarely have the reflective time to make sense of these experiences. Most practitioners and managers can intuitively draw from their own experience to identify systems concepts, such as unintended consequences, or feedback loops which help or hinder their own operational delivery of services.

- **The experience of the workshop is sometimes more worthwhile than the output**: The feedback we received on the experience of producing causal loop diagrams suggest it is useful as an exercise in sense-making, where practitioners and managers get a chance to speak to the many contextual barriers to positive outcomes they notice in their professional work. Naming these challenges is often felt to be cathartic and people leave feeling they are working collectively to address the challenges. But the organisation of public services is fragmented so that professionals can rarely maintain a sense of the collective once they are back into day-to-day service delivery and management.

- **Understanding 'how' to intervene in a dynamic is one of the most important insights our work produced.** The interactive systems dynamics tool provides participants with an opportunity to experiment with different configurations of behaviour so that they can see how a relationship might become more or less healthy. This opportunity to see how a relationship might 'play out' was felt to be an important insight by the young people and practitioners who tested out this tool.

- **Making a tool interactive and accessible takes time – and resource**. The tool we made for the EASC project could have been made even more accessible with images and illustrations rather than text and graphs. This tool was designed as a test to share information and see if the interactive approach worked. We concluded that it did work – but it lacked additional resource in the project to make the tool more dynamic and user-friendly.

Figure 7 Distribution of services across prevention and early intervention



Glossary of Services:

Banardo's Connections (<25yrs)
Works with young people experiencing domestic abuse. Direct. Decommissioned.

Banardo's Connections Plus (<25yrs)
Programme for young women affected by domestic abuse. Direct. Decommissioned.

Dad's Connected (<25yrs)
Programme for male perpetrators of domestic abuse. Direct. Decommissioned.

FNP (<19yrs)
National programme for first time young mothers and their family. Module focus on relationships. Direct.

Health Improvement (0-18yrs)
Consultation and training to school staff to improve awareness and knowledge of the issue. Indirect.

Mentors in Violence Prevention (11-16yrs)
Peer mentoring to reduce conflict & violence through bystander training. Direct.

Pastoral Care in schools (11-18yrs)
Designated teacher per child to support emerging well-being needs. Direct.

Police Scotland (4-18yrs)
Specialist officers delivering talks within schools on coercive control. Direct.

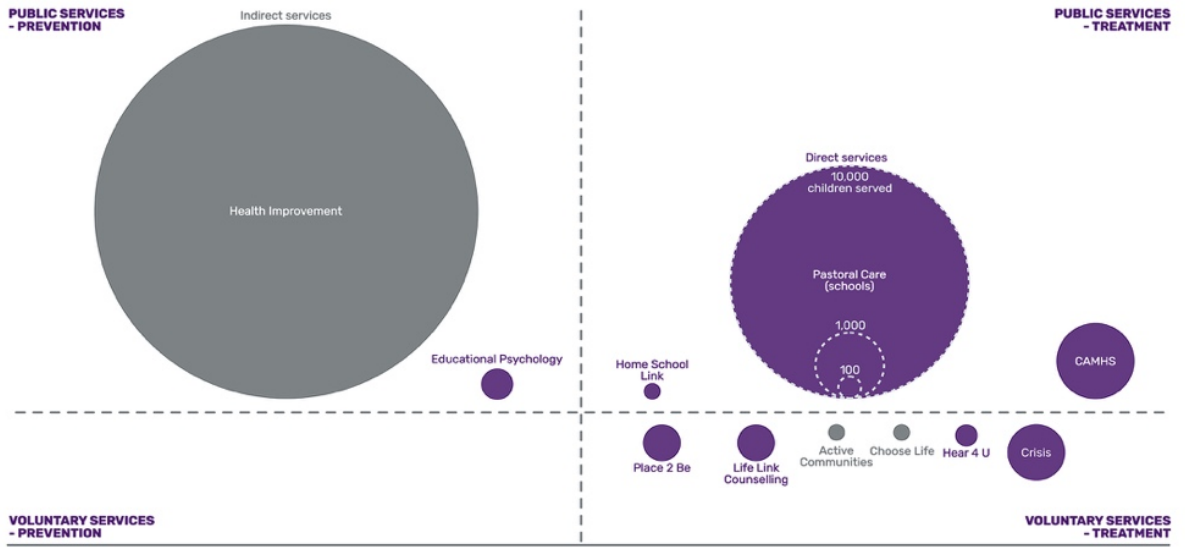
Rosey Project (13-25yrs)
Sexual violence prevention programme providing universal support & education. Direct.

Whole Systems (14-18yrs)
Specialist intervention working with young offenders on healthy relationships. Direct.

Women & Children First (<18yrs)
Support programme for families experiencing domestic abuse. Direct.

Source: Each service listed provided data estimates based on their own internal data keeping and processes.
Notes: Only services that specifically focus on Emotional Coercive Control are shown. PSE content focused on relationships is currently undergoing review. Not included within the map.

Figure 8 Distribution of services across prevention and early intervention



Glossary of Services:

Active Communities (4-18yrs)
Training for peer led sessions including mental health. Indirect.

CAMHS (0-18yrs)
Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service offering specialist support at tier 3 and above. Direct.

Choose Life (11-18yrs)
Training to support young people who are suicidal or self-harming. Indirect.

Crisis (5-18yrs)
Counselling service that works with young people across a range of issues. Direct.

Health Improvement (0-18yrs)
Consultation and training to school staff to improve awareness and knowledge of the issue. Indirect.

Educational Psychology (0-18yrs)
Needs based assessments of children and delivery of short-term interventions. 40% direct activity (shown above).

Hear 4 U (4-18yrs)
Advocacy service for children. Direct.

Home School Link (3-18yrs)
One-to-one and group support to children & families struggling with school. Direct.

Life Link Counselling (12-16yrs)
Counselling offered in schools half day per school. Direct.

Place 2 Be (4-12yrs)
Mental health charity providing counselling & training through schools. Direct.

Pastoral Care in schools (11-18yrs)
Designated teacher per child to support emerging well-being needs. Direct.

Source: Each service listed provided data estimates based on their own internal data keeping and processes. Figures are estimates by service providers.
Notes: Only services that specifically focus on Emotional Well-being are shown. PSHE may touch on emotional well-being but is not specifically aimed at it so does not appear here.

Figure 9 Causes and consequences of coercive control within adolescent relationships

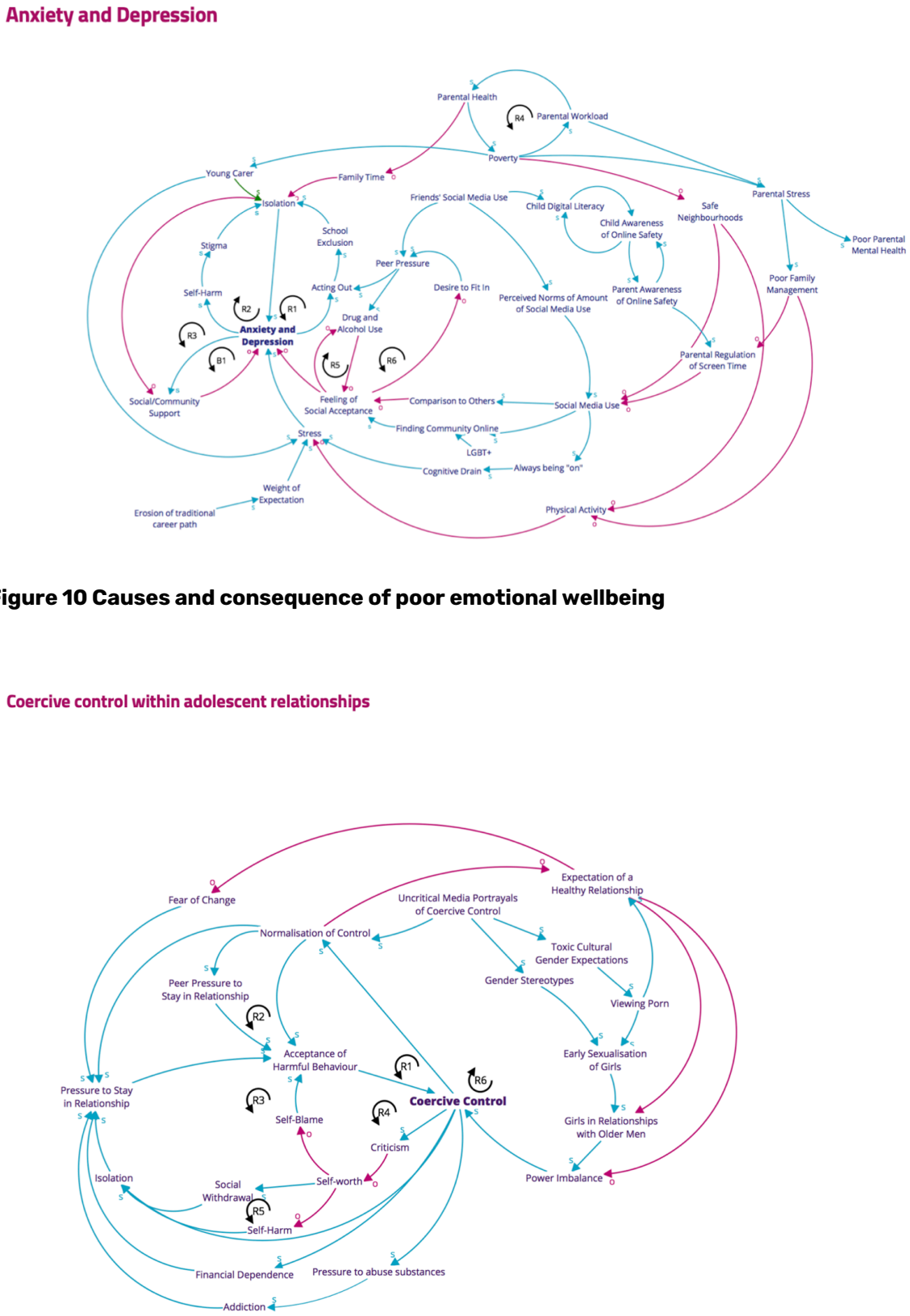


Figure 10 Causes and consequence of poor emotional wellbeing

THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR ROLE: A HUB FOR INNOVATION AND MODELLING EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITIES

What approach did we take and how did it support systems change?

Voluntary sector organisations embody a wide range of diverse skill sets. Expertise can range from: **designing and delivering specialist support with and for** marginalised and seldom heard populations; building **a sense of belonging** and **cohesion within communities** by creating spaces for connection and; mobilising and progressing **social movements** to reshape social norms, campaigning for change and challenging system practices and policies that adversely impact communities, particularly those at greatest risk of systemic discrimination.

We know from vast amounts of data that neither the public sector nor the voluntary sector **in isolation** can meet the rising level of community needs. It requires the different skills and capabilities of each to be brought together in equitable and mutually reinforcing ways to bring about change. Yet, we also know that the relationship between communities, the voluntary sector and public sector is complex, messy and constantly shifting. Therefore, a range of different factors can impact upon the quality of these relationships to enable or hinder systemic change.

In highly functional relationships, the voluntary sector and public sector acknowledge and celebrate their interdependencies, whilst also respecting their distinct characteristics and strengths. Voluntary sector organisations can function as advocates for communities. They can hold public bodies to account by identifying and reshaping policies and practices that could better serve communities. The voluntary and public sectors can work in mutually beneficial and reinforcing ways to better serve local needs – with the voluntary sector working to empower communities. **At its best, opportunities for change are collaboratively identified and met with humility, curiosity and willingness to learn.**

In their least functional relationships, voluntary sector organisations become an expendable extension of the public sector. Overly complex procurement practices and reporting requirements are developed in an effort to manage risk. These become imposed upon voluntary organisations creating a heavy administrative burden and an inflexibility within delivery that adversely impacts on the depth, quality and responsiveness of the work with communities. **It creates lines of accountability that prioritise system needs, rather than community needs**. Voluntary sector organisations end up becoming an easy and low risk 'cut', when there is pressure to reduce public expenditure on services. Most importantly, it becomes more difficult for voluntary sector

organisations to act as advocates for change. **At its worse, opportunities for change are met with defensiveness, minimisation and denial of different experiences.**

The Early Action System Change Fund in Renfrewshire provided an innovative opportunity to foster the 'best' working conditions between communities, the voluntary sector and public sector. We were explicit about identifying and working with the distinct and mutually reinforcing strengths of each partner.

For the voluntary sector, this was recognising the trusted relationships that had developed with local communities over time. The embedded nature of the voluntary sector organisations meant they were closely connected to local experiences and able to surface the issues most important to young people and families – particularly those at greatest risk of marginalisation.

For the public sector, this was recognising the considerable capacity it had to scale change within the system. They held the power to reshape far reaching policies, practice and wider culture in ways that was not possible for the voluntary sector and communities to achieve alone.

The commissioning processes were designed to facilitate collaboration amongst the different voluntary sector partners and the public sector (i.e. system changer/s). The process was intended to create freedom and flexibility for the voluntary sector to respond to a 'problem statement' in the best way they saw fit. It was built around trust based on the voluntary sector's deep local knowledge, expertise and existing community relationships. It was a collaborative commissioning process that brought together the different partners - Renfrewshire Council, Third Sector Interface, and the specialist system change partner Dartington – as well as representation and guidance from The National Lottery Community Fund - to co-design and make decisions together.

The commissioned voluntary sector organisations were brought together bi-monthly to review progress, discuss challenges, enhance learning and share resources. The role of the commissioner during these peer learning sessions was to strengthen each individual partner and draw out the collective contribution.

The approach to commissioning amongst the voluntary sector focused on trust, learning and supporting partners to try something new and innovate. This approach was different in important ways from many traditional approaches to commissioning that focused on management of risk and the creation of 'new services'. In contrast, this approach tried to focus on driving system change by creating the conditions for innovation and culture change that go beyond distributing money.

What helped and hindered this approach and what did we learn?

- **An independent Third Sector Interface was a vital conduit for change.** The convening power of a trusted, collaborative and productive Third Sector Interface (TSI) meant (i) it provided fertile ground for new and evolving partnership formations and; (ii) the partnership was able to hold relationships with voluntary sector partners during periods of uncertainty. The TSI regularly brought together a range of voluntary sector partners to explore local concerns, hear about best practice and foster partnerships. This made it possible to hold relationships with the voluntary sector during times of uncertainty. It was possible to use these *existing* structures and spaces to re-engage voluntary sector partners quickly, and at short notice, to regain momentum once decisions around future funding were confirmed. It also meant voluntary sector organisations were experienced at working collaboratively in this way (rather than needing to start such partnership conversations from scratch). Early Action System Change benefited from this strong foundation of ongoing shared trust and collaboration in the voluntary sector.

- **The voluntary sector is more skilled at working effectively with uncertainty.** Local voluntary sector partners are well versed at holding uncertainty, which meant they were able to adapt and respond to the evolving needs and conditions of the partnership. The voluntary sector has considerable experience holding and navigating uncertainty. This is for a range of complex reasons (e.g. short-term insecure funding cycles; managing multiple funding relationships; payment-by-result contracts; identifying and responding to new and emergent community need etc.). Putting questions of fairness aside (and the negative effects of insecure funding), from a practical perspective this meant within a rapidly evolving context, the voluntary sector was able to work quickly and effectively – at various points throughout the initiative - to engage and work with the young people whom they had built trusted relationships with over time.

- **The voluntary sector functioned as an innovation hub.** The local voluntary sector partners' experience of creatively responding to new and emerging community needs and commissioning arrangements meant they were able to generate tools, resources and approaches quickly and effectively with young people and families. The voluntary sector has extensive experience of identifying and designing responses to new and evolving community need. This meant they were able to flexibly respond to feedback from the partnership, and communities to collaboratively shape a suite of resources that could be embedded within practice.

- **Commissioning that fosters collaboration, not competition.** Commissioning is a central feature of systems change – but it needs to begin from the premise of interdependence and partnership, with each actor taking

on complementary roles and labour. The commissioning process was set up to enable partners to be collaborative with each other (rather than competitive), which strengthens the sector as a whole.

- **Leverage the distinct skillsets of each partner.** This involved recognising and bringing together the different strengths of each partner to achieve maximum impact: the innovation and adaptability of the voluntary sector paired with the reach and scale potential of the public sector. Both the voluntary sector and public sector bring distinct and complementary skillsets together that can achieve far more for young people's outcomes than if they were operating separately. Over 3,000 staff members identified within the public sector were working in children's services, representing a huge opportunity as resources are reviewed for scale and sustainability in practice.

ENGAGEMENT & CO-DESIGN WITH YOUNG PEOPLE: A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT, WHICH WE OFTEN STRUGGLE TO PUT INTO PRACTICE

What approach did we take and how did this support systems change?

There is big talk about the value of engagement, co-design and co-production, yet the way this translates in reality to achieve systemic change is often very different.

We can all think of instances where engagement and co-design has gone wrong. On one end of the spectrum, we can shy away or react dismissively when we hear things we don't like. We minimise and invalidate (either intentionally and unintentionally) someone else's experiences because it's different from ours, or because it doesn't suit our purpose. On the other end of the spectrum, we can be too quick to generalise lived experiences. We don't take enough time (or don't have the capability and skills) to reflect and analyse what has been shared. We don't bring in multiple perspectives and sources of data to better understand. We struggle to hold the nuance and heterogeneity of experiences *across* and *within* different groups. We don't have access to the reflective spaces (or know how to use these spaces) to dig into the diversity of these experiences (and conflicts) in equitable and respectful ways. So, we rush too quickly into 'fixes that fail' based on a partial picture, jerking disjointedly from one experience to the next.

Engagement, co-production and co-design with young people is therefore a specialism. It requires time, investment, space and experience to do well. It requires training and for us to be able to build a routine practice of reflection and growth. It requires us to create the conditions where these experiences can be acted upon meaningfully by those who hold power in the system.

A re-conceptualisation of engagement, co-production and co-design has been a fundamental right. It's not a 'nice to have', but a necessity. We can see this in the ambition to incorporate UNCRC into Scots Law, and specifically Article 12: the right of a child to express and have their views duly considered.

There is still however, a plurality of what engagement, co-design and co-production is and how to do it. Different frameworks have been developed to support the translation of Article 12 into practice (e.g. see the Lundy Model (2007) of child participation developed by Laura Lundy, a Professor of international children's rights at the School of Education at the Queen's University of Belfast).

In our experience, we consider four stages to be useful when thinking about engaging and co-producing with young people to achieve systemic change:

1. Generating *insight to* gain a better understanding of particular challenges
2. *Prioritise* elements of the challenges that are most important to children and young people
3. *Co-create* services, ways of working, adaptations, approaches and principles
4. Providing feedback to refine early prototyped designs or adaptations (before they are developed further and implemented). Create *feedback loops* to inform ongoing improvement efforts, to help progress new approaches in the 'messiness' of real life situations.

Underpinning all of this is creating the conditions that enable those holding power to respond. It requires us to continuously ask critical questions such as: Who is represented, and who is excluded? Who has agency and who has responsibility for change? Who is accountable and who are they accountable to?

Engagement and co-design with young people was the golden thread that ran through the entirety of Early Action System Change. Right from the very beginning of the proposal development, through to the public exhibitions.

What helped and hindered this approach and what did we learn?

- **Visibly and collectively celebrating key milestones.** We used exhibitions and public reflection as a tool for progress. At key stages in the initiative, bringing people together to celebrate what had been achieved functioned to raise awareness, secure buy-in, consolidate learning and progress next steps. There were two high-profile public events that brought people closely involved with the project (young people, voluntary sector staff, public sector staff) together with a wider range of local stakeholders. The first event came after the initial insight sessions and mapping and the second event was after the co-design work was concluded. These celebrations were important milestones for the project which validated and made visible the experiences and work of young people across the wider sector.

- **Co-design is one of the ways we can combine different forms of knowledge.** Systems change is about changing the conditions that hold a problem in place. One of the conditions within current systems of support is that service design and local commissioning processes are led by professionals and the specialist expertise that is rooted in training as – for example – a social worker, youth worker or nurse. Changing the conditions looks like combining the knowledge from lived experiences with the knowledge that comes from practice and professional training. Innovation comes from the creativity required to bridge these different ways of understanding services.

- **Producing co-designed innovations relies on the robustness of the co-design process – paying attention to 'how' co-design is working is just as important as focusing on the end results**. For example, the outputs will only be robust if they genuinely represent the ideas of young people, which requires young people to engage and trust the process (see accompanying co-design report for a fuller exploration of this).

- **Co-design will take longer than you planned.** Robust co-design involves time to build trust between different people involved in the process (e.g. youth workers and young people), time to agree how to work together, time to explore and ask questions – before working to create solutions, and time to make mistakes and learn from each other. The skills of youth workers to create the conditions for trust and the ongoing engagement of young people was an important enabler for this co-design process. The co-design process in this project took 6 months longer than originally anticipated. This slower process was due in part to the Covid-19 pandemic – but it is common for co-design to take longer because it is an emergent process which needs to be responsive to changing needs within the co-design group.

- **Co-design changes the conversation.** The meaningful involvement of young people directly affected by the issues fundamentally changes the conversation and nature of the resources and approaches produced. The active involvement of young people in the co-design was vital in ensuring that whatever was produced was important to them. People with lived experience of accessing services and supports have invaluable understanding of their needs – and the changes required in order to make those services most effective. Young people made resources and shaped approaches for each other. The young people who participated are part of growing movement in Scotland that champion youth-led change.

- **We need to 'meet young people where they are at'.** This means professionals are trained and equipped to provide young people with the support and means to engage that is appropriate and suitable for their developmental and cognitive needs. It is an approach that acknowledges and works with young people's past trauma and any previous negative experiences of the system so young people feel comfortable to engage.

- **Bring the workforce along in the journey.** Taking time to understand and support capacity building for co-design and co-production within the wider workforce, and whether staff feel able to defend and uphold young people's right to participation is key to supporting genuine power-sharing. There is a wide diversity of experiences and perception about participation within practice, from: 'nice to have', 'unrealistic' or 'what we already do'. Similar to meeting 'young people where they are at', a similar principle should be applied to the wider workforce.

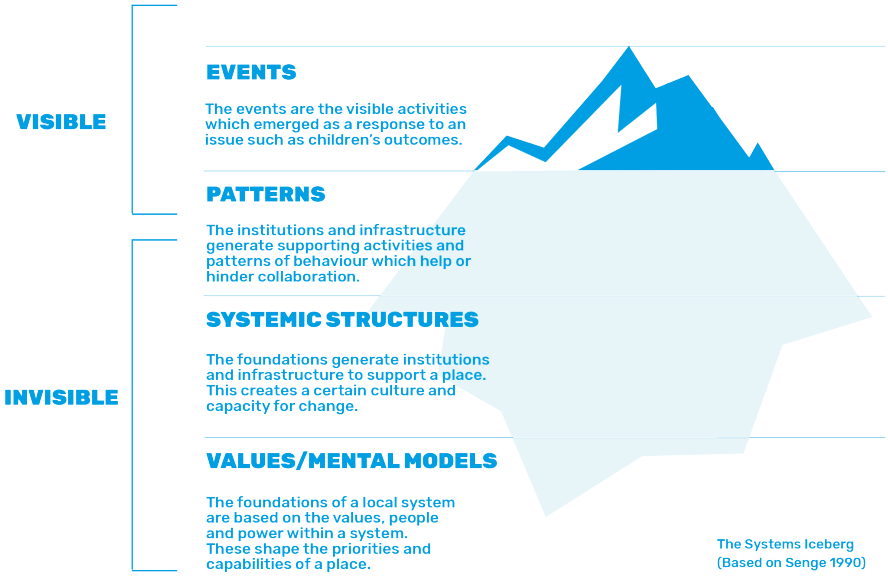
EVALUATION: CONTINUOUS AND TIMELY EVIDENCE IS NECESSARY TO ADAPT AND COURSE CORRECT

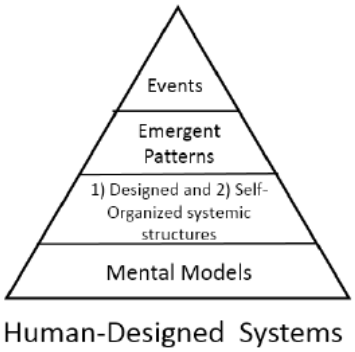
What approach did we take and how did it support systems change?

The evaluation project sought to explore how systems change is understood within public sector systems – using the EASC project as a case study example of the opportunities and challenges of making system-wide change across public services (e.g. health, social work and education).

In this evaluation, we took a systemic approach to evaluation. Systemic evaluation involves examining the context which enables and constrains systems change, as much as looking at the interventions that were undertaken as part of this programme of work. Systemic evaluation seeks to understand the root causes of change – or of a lack of change.

We focused this evaluation on the public sector's approach to systems change because of the size of public sector budgets and the scale of public sector responsibility within local areas in Scotland. The evaluation developed evidence from interviews with core stakeholders in the public and third sector who could speak to the system change commitments made as part of the Early Action System Change project, as well as the conditions that enabled or constrained the delivery of those commitments. We produced an evaluation report using the systems iceberg model for human designed systems.





Systems thinking requires that we recognise that in human-designed systems, repeated events or patterns derive from systemic structures which, in turn, derive from mental models (Monat & Gannon, 2015).

In the context of analysis for the Renfrewshire Early Action Systems Change initiative, this helped us distinguish between events, patterns of behaviours and deeper drivers that advanced or constrained system change in the context of Renfrewshire.

In our analysis, three key narratives emerged concerning key constraints and enablers of change for system change. These are:

1. Strategic vision for change projects and their impact on children
2. The role of money driving priorities
3. Fragmentation of partnerships

These narratives are unpacked in more depth in our report titled: The invisible dynamics of public sector systems change.

The value of this approach is that it provides concrete learning on the specific contextual barriers and enablers for change in Renfrewshire, which can be used by other change programmes locally. This evaluation provides a case study of what works and doesn't work in place-based systems change which can support other place-based change programmes.

For example, public sector partners in the EASC initiative had committed to shifting 1-5% of their budget to preventative services and supports as part of being awarded the funding from NLCF. Over the course of the project, the ambition for this shift in spending was reduced as public sector partners revealed some of the challenges of using financial levers to drive systems change. The evaluation provides insights into the levers that do and don't drive systems change. It also provides reflections from Dartington about our own learning as a facilitator of systems change.

A fuller exploration of the evaluation approach and findings can be found in the accompanying document: The invisible dynamics of public sector systems change: Evaluation of the Renfrewshire Early Action Systems Change project.

What helped and hindered this approach and what did we learn?

- **Evaluation is a necessary part of systems change and should be built on iteratively**: Our evaluation was conducted at the end of a three-year systems change initiative and we learned much about our approach and the approach of our Partnership in Renfrewshire. Whilst it is incredibly valuable to have this learning to share more widely, we recommend that systems change approaches build in an iterative evaluation – and learning – cycle over the course of their programme of activity.

- **Evaluation requires trust**: When we began this evaluation, our Partnership was experiencing a period of uncertainty and conflict due to

the very different priorities and pressures held by different members of the project. Our approach to evaluation required several informal conversations with key stakeholders in order to progress an evaluation of the project's processes and outcomes. We were successful in building up trust around the evaluation because we promised our public sector partners that the focus of the evaluation was on learning – learning from what worked, and what didn't' work, learning so that Renfrewshire's approach to systems change could be strengthened going forward.

- **Evaluation also requires humility**: In our approach to evaluation, we need to embrace our own learning, and our own failings. It has been important for us to model a learning approach so that others can embrace the insecurity that often comes from opening work up to scrutiny. In the evaluation, we shared insights on where we could have improved our own approaches (e.g. our feedback and reporting to Partners involved in our workshops could have been more regular and easy to digest).

- **Evaluation benefits from an outsider's perspective**: Dartington conducted this evaluation, which means we were also evaluating our own work. In order to offset the challenge of being too close to this project to engage the critical distance necessary for evaluation, we involved two evaluators who were new to the project and could bring fresh eyes and distance to the evidence. We also tested findings with other staff to ensure the robustness of our analysis.

- **Evaluation needs to be oriented towards action**: Our approach to generating evidence has from the outset been focused on sharing the evaluation findings with Renfrewshire staff through 1:1s and roundtable conversations. Crucially, these 1:1s and roundtable conversations will be focused on how lessons learned will be carried forward within other system change initiatives in Renfrewshire.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

A range of different methods were integrated to facilitate systemic change in Renfrewshire:

- Formation of partnership bringing together the public and voluntary sector.
- Identifying, training and supporting public sector system changers.
- Mapping both the financial and human potential within the system.
- Creating a shared understanding of what the system is and its drivers for change.
- Leveraging the skills and position of the voluntary sector to work in equitable ways with communities.
- Recognising engagement and co-design with young people as a fundamental right.

The Early Action System Change Fund in Renfrewshire involved a **series of 'firsts'**. Considerable innovation was happening simultaneously and at different levels, across Renfrewshire and at The National Lottery Community Fund. The EASC Fund being the first of its kind for TNLCF. This is the first time these different disciplines have been integrated in this way to achieve systemic change. The Renfrewshire partnership were also the fastest to progress at the start (due to the foundation of relationships and shared understanding around systems change that already existed). The Renfrewshire partnership was described as '**the canary in the coal mine'** – signalling both the quick progress, as well the sharp change and challenge that emerged through the lifecycle of the project.

Alongside these 'firsts', the Early Action System Change Renfrewshire partnership also experienced a **series of 'quakes' or 'system shocks'**:

- The first being an ambitious **savings programme** launched in Renfrewshire - which required adjustment of the delivery plan.
- The second being the **potential withdrawal of funding** - which required a pause on some activities, and management of expectations amongst partners that the work may be discontinued.
- The third being the **COVID pandemic** – which required the adaptation of engagement plans with young people and communities.

After each 'quake' there was a period of disorientation, re-grouping, crisis planning and adapted delivery. Any project, initiative or body of work delivered over time will always come up against the unexpected; the 'unknown, unknowns'. The practice of systems change isn't about trying to anticipate every possible eventuality – it's about building the capacity of the system to learn and respond accordingly.

There was a range of "hard-won"[1] principles and lessons arising from these series of 'firsts' and 'system shocks' to carry forward and apply within other system change initiatives.

- **Power:** Acknowledging that power dynamics exists in all relationships, and so we must be intentional about how we use different types of power for different purposes (e.g. 'disruptive power', 'modelling power' or 'narrative power'). There is considerable opportunity for those holding power to model alternative funding arrangements that redistribute this power (e.g. participatory budgeting models).[2]

- **Leadership:** Embolden and create support for different types of leadership at *all levels*. Change doesn't only come from the top, nor should it. Building the capacity and space that empowers leadership within diverse areas of the system is necessary to achieve change.

- **Relationships:** We must identify and understand our interdependencies, whilst celebrating and working with the distinct and unique strengths of different partners. We need partnership working that enables genuine power sharing built around reciprocal accountability, empathy and shared action.

- **Accountability:** Create and maintain new structures that keep work visibly grounded and accountable to young people and communities, rather than serving bureaucratic structures of accountability to those who traditionally hold more power.

- **Uncertainty:** Building the tolerance and capacity of all partners to embrace complexity and work with uncertainty. This ability to hold and work with uncertainty helps us know when to **reflect** and when to **act**. Failure to do so can produce two different but connected systems behaviours: (1) 'Avoidance activities' such as overplanning or seeking more and more information leading to 'analysis paralysis' and the inability to enact change[1] (2) Short-term reactive responses to a series of disjointed events losing sight of the overall long-term goal. We need to be able to resist the urge for quick solution or 'fixes that fail' because we're frustrated or uncomfortable with the complexity.

- **Risk:** Re-conceptualising what we mean by 'risk' in the context of systemic change, building our tolerance to safely hold it, and spotlight the risks of *not* acting and the potential impact this will have on young people and communities.

[1] Taken from the "Learning As We Go" NLCF Thematic Briefing 3: "The hard-won lessons of enabling system change: lessons from Ignite."
[2] See Stephen Elstub & Oliver Escobar (2020) Democratic Innovation and Governance.

- **Rights-based:** Working to create the conditions that enable decisions following from co-production is just as important as undertaking co-production itself.

What does the future hold for Renfrewshire and other systems change work?

The hard work of systemic change is never ending. There is no fixed 'end' point. The Renfrewshire partnership are continuing to drive forward incremental changes beyond the lifetime of the Early Action Systems Change project. For example, Renfrewshire is changing roles and job descriptions to enable people to work in more preventative ways (e.g. see Ren10); establishing working groups to drive forward the resources and approaches created by young people and the voluntary sector and; sustaining and embedding the learning through continuous reflection, with an upcoming roundtable to share and carry forward the lessons learned to benefit other systemic change work.

We can't say yet if the Early Action System Change Fund has brought about a significant and sustained increase in public sector spend towards prevention and early intervention.

What we can say is that if the learning and system change methods of the project continue to be embedded, Renfrewshire will be in the strongest position it can be to better understand, respond and adapt to local need as the landscape shifts and evolves. Based on the learning provided in this report, and our other evaluations, we can say that responsiveness and adaptability is robust if it involves:

- Continuing to bring different perspectives and experiences together in equitable ways to understand the bigger picture.
- Revisiting and refreshing a shared value base and vision.
- Collaboratively problem-solving that does not seek to blame or shame, but instead seeks to empower and learn.
- Robustly monitoring population trends in wellbeing and coercive control over time.
- Creating and protecting spaces to slow down and reflect, as well as building spaces support momentum and action.

All of this creates a learning system that can bring about sustainable change.

Gardening metaphors tend to be overused in the systemic change space, but with good reason. These organic metaphors help us understand the evolving, long-term and cyclical nature of systemic change. The work of a gardener isn't immediately seen. It is a continuous labour; it's about helping create the right environment for seeds to grow.

The same can be said of the Renfrewshire Partnership and likely all the other partnerships. Ultimately, it's about creating the optimal conditions that allow these different partnerships to adapt and thrive by building the capacity of the system to continuously learn and grow.

With special thanks to the following partners: