

# What Matters to You: our developing practice

## Learning Update, May 2020

### 1. Introduction

*What Matters to You* (WMTY) is a community-based systems change initiative working alongside families in two communities in Dundee and East Ayrshire. It focuses on shifting public resources to offer support earlier, thereby enabling children to flourish within their own families. As the learning partner we are accompanying the process and writing short briefings to summarise the learning within the team and share our experience with a wider audience.

The main purpose of this learning briefing is to outline the methodology underpinning *What Matters to You*, to pin down elements of the practice itself and begin to identify early signs of progress. We have used experiences and insights, drawn from practitioners on the ground, to draw out the way WMTY works.

The update also views our experience within the wider context of other systems change initiatives across the UK. The WMTY Literature Review (December 2019) was a small-scale attempt to outline what is known about a systemic approach to supporting families where children are deemed to be on the edge of care.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. The purpose of WMTY

WMTY started with a compelling purpose which can be summarised as families who need extra support are not getting the support they need. When there is a crisis, the interventions that may then be made, such as taking young people into care, can result in lifelong trauma. This is evidenced both in the findings of the *Independent Care Review* (March 2020) and in our own literature review.

The publication of the work of the *Independent Care Review* provides important context and momentum for the ambitions of *What Matters to You*. “The Promise” of the Care Review seeks a fundamental shift in how decisions are made about children and families and in the way that families are supported to stay together in Scotland. It strongly endorses a person-centred and relationship-focused approach to care and support and seeks to make early intervention and prevention a reality, through ‘proper, holistic support for families’ and a ‘significant upscale in universal family support services’. Notably it also calls for a ‘concerted effort to be made to hear more from parents and wider family members with children who are on the edge of or in care’.

### 3. How does WMTY work?

The focus of WMTY is on developing relationships. WMTY is essentially about connecting with people who are needing extra support and asking them what **they** want (rather than what anyone else thinks they might need), and then helping them to access that. This

---

<sup>1</sup> This is available separately on request.

engagement work has been initiated by the two dedicated local coordinators in Dundee and East Ayrshire. They have connected into local community-based organisations and schools to reach out parents who wanted to part of something.

The delivery of WMTY has at its heart an ethos of ‘warmth of welcome and hospitality and the commitment to being on a shared journey’<sup>2</sup>. The delivery partner, Columba 1400, facilitates values-based leadership experiences to families and practitioners, separately in the first instance.

Feedback has been very positive with both groups going away feeling more confident, more hopeful and more motivated.

The intention is to bring the two groups together to develop interventions which will prove effective in supporting children and young people not just to stay within their families, but to flourish within them. The WMTY local coordinators offer 1:1 and peer group support locally, crucial for engaging parents and encouraging them to take part in the leadership experiences. They have continued to stay in contact with parents afterwards, encouraging them to ‘lean on’ one another and if necessary, to ask for the support which is really going to make a difference to them and their families. This include access to support for their children, or funds for basic household necessities.

Together as Columba 1400 and WMTY they adopt a relational approach (described below) to working across the whole system in both Dundee and East Ayrshire.

#### [Working directly with parents and families](#)

The WMTY approach is appreciative and relational. The coordinators have invested considerable time in developing strong, non-judgemental supportive relationships with parents. Their approach is to listen first, as fellow human beings, understanding the strengths that each person brings, recognising the variety of need and experience and deliberately working to build empathy and create trust between people.

They make sure that the parents know that they are there, available to offer support when needed. There is no ‘assessment’ process or delving into the past. They don’t give advice, unless specifically asked, and use their judgement and skill to ask questions sensitively. They have been responding to immediate practical needs, facilitating contact to other professionals, using their own networks; accessing additional funding and benefits checks and providing immediate emotional support to the families. This ‘brokerage’ role ensures that families do not have to tell their story multiple times. Partnerships previously forged with other organisations are proving very helpful. It shows the value of networking and collaboration in a very small community.

The coordinators themselves have recognised how hard it is to be in up a role which means just ‘being there’ to offer support rather than direction. They are taking the risk to listen, encourage and ultimately, trust parents, knowing that this is the only way they too will be trusted. Part of developing this trust is creating a space for reciprocity, responding more

---

<sup>2</sup> This ethos is at the heart of all the work of Columba 1400

freely and naturally to questions about their own lives, than they might have done in the past or in other roles. The relationships they are developing feel more equal and real, preparing the ground for co-creating what might work for these families in the future.

The Covid-19 crisis has brought the very practical aspect of their approach into sharp relief. Early feedback shows that the local facilitators are gaining the trust of local families, who are turning to them more and more frequently, particularly during this 'lockdown' period. Currently this support is provided 1:1, rather than in groups, although the coordinators continue to offer the opportunity to meet with other parents virtually. This period is proving to be a real test of the trust and strength of relationships that have been developed so far.

It is a test too for the local coordinators who are attempting to find a meaningful role in a context which is changing rapidly. Although they are confident in their relationships with parents, they are finding it hard not to be able to provide enough of the immediate concrete support that is so urgently needed and can feel underused.

They have been able to work alongside organisations providing direct support and the communication and sense of collaboration is strong. They are consulting with the wider team on how to provide more direct and specific support to meet families' needs in the current crisis.

### Amplifying the voice of local people

Amplifying the voices and sharing the authentic experience of people whom systems are supposed to be serving, is known to be a powerful mechanism for creating an impetus for change. The local coordinators are doing this on an impromptu basis as they link parents with services which can support them. They are also finding their role more strategically as working collaboratively has meant that they are now able to represent the voice of parents in the planning of new local services and support, in informal ways. Because they are independent of any other service whether third sector or statutory, they have no other vested interest, and can hold a strong and credible position. In time, it is expected that the joint values-based leadership experiences will provide a forum for parents, practitioners, and strategic leaders to develop the way forward together.

The team are currently working on amplifying that voice in the short term, finding temporary 'landing spaces' for insights through using their own networks, as they continue to develop long term 'meeting spaces' where families and professionals can collaborate.

Building on lessons from elsewhere, we expect that this investment in ongoing engagement and relational working with people whose voices have been marginalised is an important element in building 'authentic trust' amongst all parties, not just with those in the community.<sup>3</sup> From such trust, a sense of shared purpose, hopefulness and possibilities can grow.

---

<sup>3</sup> Authentic trust is a mature, articulated form of relating based on reflection, that 'recognises the possibility of betrayal and disappointment' and therefore must be continually cultivated. Cited in Diane T. Finegood, What does it mean to have a systems perspective on policy development and evaluation? SRA, June 2018 [http://piru.lshtm.ac.uk/assets/files/Diane\\_T.\\_Finegood\\_1.pdf](http://piru.lshtm.ac.uk/assets/files/Diane_T._Finegood_1.pdf)

## 4. Collaborative approaches leading to system change

The literature review shows that some early approaches have not given enough attention to the expected system change and the wider collaborative and partnership work needed.

WMTY has been able to build on this lesson: the values-based leadership experiences delivered by Columba 1400 to the statutory sector partners in both Dundee and East Ayrshire are building skills around facilitation and brokering to enable people to have better conversations across sectors and with communities, 'focusing on the heart as well as the head'. They are beginning to show early signs of success: new conversations are taking place across the social work, education and the third sector, which are empathetic and generative. There is a real acknowledgement of their shared purpose and a willingness to adopt new ways of approaching the issues collaboratively.

Evidence from families is beginning to highlight the 'cracks in the system' and suggest alternative approaches. In one locality, they have signalled their intention to develop the Children's Services Plan differently in line with "the Promise" of the Care Review, starting with families and having love, compassion and kindness at the heart.

There is also recognition of the existing resourcefulness and courage shown by people working within the system; for example, staff who work 'under the radar' providing direct supportive interventions to families, which circumvent any written or unwritten rules, making a judgement and taking a risk to 'do the right thing'. One local authority has already mandated this approach encouraging staff to do what they feel is right. And they are asking themselves how they can do more in creating the conditions for these actions to be openly acknowledged and celebrated, without fear.

These conditions can enable different ways of thinking about risk, so that as people start to view themselves more clearly as part of an interconnected whole, other professionals can be 'allies in risk taking', rather than feeling that courageous individuals have to bear all the responsibility themselves.

We are confident that this work is beginning to identify the conditions that enable positive change, helping to build the fitness of the system to generate actions likely to move us towards our goals.

## 5. Building learning into our work

WMTY does not offer a 'standardised service', it is constantly adapting to meet the changing needs in the context. As a learning team, we are doing the same, developing processes that build learning into the work as it progresses, in a continuous process of feedback and collective learning that supports adaption and refinement of the WMTY approach.

Working with the core team of the Coordinators, Columba 1400 and one of the funders, we have regular 4-6 weekly action inquiry meetings (which we call Grow as We Go) to share the experience and reflect on the learning together. Each meeting starts reflecting on our experience providing material for collaborative analysis and reflection and ends with actions derived from our learning. We pay attention to desired futures and solutions, rather than focusing on what is wrong with existing statutory or third sector practice. Using an

appreciative approach, grounded in real experience, gives insight and provides direction for positive future development.

We are all working towards the high-level outcome of enabling children to flourish within their own families. The literature review proposes that the people who are close to an issue must be central to sense-making and devising and evaluating solutions. And that the process of learning requires disciplined attention to the range of voices and experiences, and to all other forms of evidence that can help to shed light. We have not got to this level of participation yet. But we have begun a process that we hope will ultimately engage families, practitioners and leaders in developing an outcome framework that measures what matters, because it matters, rather than because we have the data, so there is not dissonance from our focus on 'what matters to you'.

At this point, in each Grow As We Go meeting, we ask "Is this good work?" as a form of self-scrutiny and reflection on our actions. We are focusing on the following indicators that reflect our priorities at this time:

- We are trusted to provide support to people and in turn, people in communities feel trusted themselves
- Families feel less lonely or isolated
- Families feel more hopeful, able to look ahead
- We have asked people what they need – parents and professionals
- We enable families to support one another
- We connect families to the support they need
- We have maintained momentum and are in an even better position to resume face-to-face locality work once that becomes possible
- From the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, we look out for the move from disintegration to design and have not lost sight of the long-term goals of What Matters to You
- We can articulate our approach to What Matters to You and measures of success in ways that resonate with and motivate others.

We have been reflecting on the skills both needed and evident in the team. The coordinator role requires courage, resilience, patience, flexibility and creativity. It is both inspiring and challenging. They need and are getting regular 1:1 support and are also part of team meetings with Columba 1400.

During the current Covid-19 crisis when the situation has been changing quickly, we have met more frequently. This period has coincided with the introduction of two new team members who have considerable experience of working with children and families. Bringing fresh perspectives has helped to affirm and support the progress made to date. Such sensitive relational work can seem painstakingly slow and, from the midst of it, it can be hard to recognise just how far the work has come and maintain confidence to keep going. This has proved to be especially valuable at such a crucial time.

Alongside this action inquiry approach to learning, we are developing a *Dynamic Impact Analysis* approach based on a System Dynamic Model. This offers the ability to assess what

difference the programme is likely to make to people and to budgets. This will help key stakeholders in each locality to define a clearly identified target population for their interventions and consolidate a good understanding of the nature and consequences of preventable need associated with this population, here children entering the care system.

There is a good fit between the modelling approach and the Grow as We Go (GAWG) approach, in that both are explicitly iterative, with a focus on learning, systemic change and feedback. The GAWG approach offers a complementary, more in depth understanding of the measurement of change and what matters to different stakeholders involved in the process, which can help to address some of the limitations identified in the modelling.

## 6. Looking ahead: the promise of WMTY

This section looks ahead by drawing on the experience to date and paying attention to what we can learn from others engaged in similar work across the UK. It flags up further lines of inquiry explored in the final section.

The literature review suggests that it is time to learn from communities about what they want and co-produce a vision for the future. The ambition of WMTY endorses this perspective and we acknowledge the importance of supporting all stakeholders to see things afresh and adopt new more generative behaviours, as they discover their roles in relation to bringing about system change.

We have learned what others in systems change processes can testify to, that this must always be a human process involving the development of relationships and mutual confidence, enhancing communication. We must continue to pay attention to the framing of the work and language used in everyday communication and how this may enable or act as a barrier to engagement.

The local coordinators can testify that it takes time to build the trusting relationships that enable effective dialogue in conditions of significant adversity in communities and in which conflict, disagreement and uncomfortable emotions can be surfaced and harnessed for a common purpose.

Such engagement is not a phase, but a continuous activity. There is always going to be scope to bring in a wider range of voices, to consider who has not been heard and seek out diversity of perspectives.

Again, as others have found, framing this work as inquiry-led rather than a 'programme to be delivered' is a significant shift in thinking about public programmes and interventions away from attempts to proceduralise what happens in good human relationships. The coordinators focus on the capabilities and contexts which enable these relationships, using their discretion to provide support that is bespoke. Uncertainty is inevitable and remains a significant challenge.

We endorse the view that in systems change work, evaluation needs to understand the dynamics of and mechanisms for change in each locality – not just what changed. Greater

transparency and making the invisible visible are needed; this includes revealing the good work that's already happening that might be 'under the radar'.

Building on our experience to date and learning from elsewhere, we anticipate it will be valuable to use our Dynamic Impact Analysis and GAWG approach to fully embed learning so it becomes an integral part of how WMTY works. We know that creating space for learning can be difficult to prioritise, and that the intertwined relationship between learning and doing is being better understood. We are increasingly confident that our action inquiry meetings are becoming places where we can share our successes and anxieties, acknowledge the complexities and hold the uncertainties.

## 7. Reflections and lines of inquiry

Whilst we do not yet know when face to face work will resume in the two localities, we offer some reflections that feel pertinent to the future development of the work once it becomes possible. We anticipate that this period of lockdown and the focus on providing immediate practical support will prove to be a test of the trust and strength of relationships that have been already developed.

This is a period of both opportunities and risks. Thinking ahead to a time of 'regeneration' there will be opportunities in each of the local authorities and with their partners. The proposed WMTY joint leadership experiences are intended to create 'healthy systems' in which people are able to co-ordinate and collaborate more effectively. We anticipate this might happen quite quickly and here identify some potentially concurrent activities to consolidate and extend the integration of learning into all the ongoing work. There are also risks, for example, of losing momentum as key partners focus on managing the crisis and re-establishing of some kind of 'normality'.

### Conversations about outcomes

The outcomes of WMTY will be produced by whole systems, rather than individuals, organisations or programmes. Our 'theory of systems change' is that coordination, collaboration and 'buy-in' from all voices will improve outcomes.

We will be asking:

- a) How can we best convene conversations about our desired outcomes for WMTY and consolidate a collective understanding of our ambitions?
- b) How robust are our original assumptions and how might they have been challenged or affirmed by continued financial austerity and the current Covid-19 crisis?
- c) What are the timescales over which we expect to see change and establish real sustainability of the impact of WMTY?
- d) What is the intermediate offer we need to be making during this crisis to amplify the voice of families and influence the system response?

### Conversations about delivery

- e) How can we help to establish collective prioritisation, a sharing of ownership of and accountability for initiatives going forward?

- f) What supports funders and commissioners to hold the uncertainty and have the patience to ‘measure what matters’?
- g) What role do external facilitation and delivery agencies play in creating effective spaces for dialogue across a system and how can these spaces become owned collectively by the key stakeholders in the system?
- h) What forms of accountability for dialogue and learning might best serve this work – that acknowledges the push for and anxiety about performance targets and provides enough reassurance that resources are being well used?

### Conversations about learning

We want all partners and roles within WMTY to adopt a learning approach and be involved in the process of developing a ‘Learning Framework’ which will identify the key indicators of change and valued outcomes. This is still work in progress and we have found resonance in the lessons identified for learning partner roles in the literature review which shows that our experience is not unique.

- i) How can we best resource the capacity to learn and adapt to continuously improve outcomes?
- j) How can we use language that makes sense to everyone? How do we find the right language to describe who are working with, which feels respectful to families and clear enough for funders?
- k) How can we make sure that feedback from WMTY activities is timely and useful?
- l) How can we better navigate the ambiguity around the boundaries between the learning partner, coordinators and other roles within the action inquiry?
- m) How do we best judge how and when the Learning Partners can engage with those on the ground directly, with families and others, in ways that enhance the development of trust?
- n) How can we support people to tell their own stories? What data gathering and sharing protocols do we need to avoid repetition of stories told by families and others and duplication of effort by coordinators?