

What Matters to You: Our Digest of Practice Lessons

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Introduction

System change is about shifting the conditions that keep a problem in place

What Matters to You (WM2U) is a community-based systems change initiative working alongside families in local 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.

There is no script or manual for this way of working, but there are key ingredients: this summary briefing distils some important lessons from a recent learning from practice and practice-based literature, which we expect to be useful to those working on system change in policy and community contexts across the UK.¹

To stay connected and contribute to our developing thinking and practice, please contact Jackie Brock, WM2U Programme Manager
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¹ The full Literature and Practice Review is available on request.

Approaches to system change

- Starting with asking and responding to what matters to individuals is a promising way to build relationships and gain trust and a gateway to deeper and more sustainable change.
- Shifting the focus in organisations from day-to-day work to examining values, core purpose and longer-term impact is crucial but difficult.
- Poverty is a significant barrier to system change when services fail to take account of it and compromises attempts to meet people early in their problems.
- The views of those living in poverty should be part of the development, implementation and evaluation of policies and actions, to ensure the understanding of it is reflected in all aspects of change processes.
- Strategic ambitions need to be translated into practical change on the ground, with consideration given to workload implications and resources.
- The challenges for staff of the shift to 'working with' and not 'for' people must be acknowledged and frontline staff must be able to see how it will transform their ability to help people.
- Engaged funders and third sector organisations can play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable families and young people. Their connections and access are highly valued by local authority partners, but the intelligence they gather is rarely used to support organisational learning or system change.

Experimentation and learning

- A 'test and learn' approach is commonly at the heart of approaches to system change with an emphasis on embracing uncertainty and learning from failures as well as success.
- Multi-agency professionals need to have a clear mandate to take initiatives forward as an integral part of their work, to stop prevailing practices felt to be unhelpful and to engage with community members in the co-design and evaluation of 'experimental' practices.

- Leaders with power to influence change need to be visibly involved and able to create the enabling conditions that allow for experimentation and the embedding of successful approaches into practice.
- Approaches should keep and build on some elements of past practice, as well as shift the emphasis away from some traditional metrics and approaches to learning and change. There needs to be a clear learning structure and time given to reflect on practice, synthesise lessons, embed promising practices, develop new ideas, and further explore and dismantle barriers to change.
- The creation of a learning community, with practical opportunities for participants to learn from each other helps multiple stakeholders, including parents or community members, to think of themselves as a collaborative network.
- To support system change, funders need to adopt an exploratory and enabling approach. Boards need to adjust to distinguish more clearly between the 'accountability space' and the 'learning space'; the former with duties and responsibilities clearly described and demarcated, and the latter as a more dynamic, creative space, where rewards and incentives are linked to curiosity and experimentation.

Understanding scale and impact

- Making change happen at scale is hard, complex, and non-linear. It can't be 'delivered' but is a collaborative endeavour that crosses organisational boundaries and must be co-created and shaped locally.
- Achieving impact at scale involves weaving different strategies together and building on what others are doing, recognising the limitations of what any brief experimental programme can achieve on its own.
- To achieve scale and impact it is helpful to distinguish between three types of scaling. These are: replication and greater numbers (scaling out), changes in formal and institutional structures (scaling up), and shifts in the embedded cultural values and beliefs (scaling deep). Scaling deep is a route to scaling out, shifting hearts and minds to fundamentally alter the conditions that continue to hold the problems in place.

- The participatory development of an agreed framework to explore progress can be a helpful strategy for learning. It can be used to outline the ambitions, help to make collective sense of evidence, and generate insights leading to a common understanding of impact.
- Approaches that centre on the use of stories, from those in and closest to the community, offers an approach to outcome measurement that recognises complexity and brings in different perspectives. This can develop collective understandings of impact and highlight how those closest to the change understand what has made the difference.
- At the same time there is a need to reshape the data collected at national and local level to learn more about how to support the monitoring of early help and preventative measures, include the voice of lived experience, and build the skills and organisational cultures that use this data in decision making and practices.

Our work is on-going. We know that others are working in a similar way and have found real value in recent conversations with people from across Scotland. Please continue to share your own learning to shape the best of current thinking and practice on system change.

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