



what  
matters  
to **you**

**Voice-led Community-based Systems Change**  
Codifying our Learning to Support Scale

[www.wm2u.co.uk](http://www.wm2u.co.uk)



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## Foreword

**What Matters to You (WM2U) is a voice-led community-based systems change programme working alongside families in Dundee and East Ayrshire. The ambition of WM2U is to move public resources to offer support earlier, thereby enabling children to flourish within their own families. To change the system.**

As funding partners and alongside the delivery and learning team, we have drawn together our collective insight and experience of the work we have been doing in this space since 2019. We have confidence that we are now able to articulate the key components that have made change possible. We want to work alongside others with similar purpose and build an effective movement for transformation across Scotland.

For us system change has meant deeply understanding and then shifting the conditions that keep a problem in place: the cultural and organisational values, mindsets, practices, and behaviours that are often taken for granted or unnoticed. We have found that this work is ultimately about changing patterns of behaviour and belief, finding new ways of working that recognise complexity and prioritising working on the deeper levers of change by building relationships.

From the start we have invested in continuous and collective learning rather than traditional evaluation. Our experience shared here is based on a distillation of wider evidence about how to develop system change from national and international sources. Whilst useful, this evidence base does not provide a clear-cut blueprint. There's nothing to lift off the shelf and simply

roll out. There's no certainty that for every £10 we spend we will get £100 back. Such proof of impact - one that meets the common expectations of SROI in situations that are complex, and dynamic will remain elusive. In any case, we don't have time to wait, the issues are urgent. Everyone's insight and commitment to change is needed. Yet, we don't start from scratch, we value existing research, and build on those lessons, test out what seems to be promising, and generate our own evidence of the difference we are making, developing our own understanding of how we got there.

We faced many false starts, dead ends and worked through changing personnel and the fundamental challenges of Covid, but we have remained true to our purpose despite the frustrations and challenges.

*Our work has fundamentally been about understanding what it takes to make the change. To move from aspiration to execution, the space seen as the "implementation gap".*

Ultimately, learning, scaling and sustainability are linked; we have come to understand that embedded, learning-focused practices are a key part of our developing system change methodology.

We have paid attention to how to make everyone feel more safe, welcome, and heard. The safety, trust and sense of belonging created encourages growing individual and collective agency amongst all key stakeholders who are supporting children and young people, including practitioners as well as parents and carers, often despite considerable personal hardship and trauma.



With this kind of support, people are able to create safer environments for themselves, sometimes taking the first steps out of the house, building friendships and wider connections, learning to trust others and feeling able to ask for help, playing a more active role in supporting other people, and finding trusted people that can vouch for and help to access wider services.

WM2U, alongside its partners, has had to be determined and tenacious to counter despondency and weariness. Despite slow progress at times, we have recognised our responsibility to share and to learn. To make a collective commitment to keep alive the belief that it is possible to make a difference and to recognise that we can no longer tolerate the negative experiences felt by our children and families.

This paper sets out our current practice wisdom, learning from our ongoing learning & evaluation and supported by lessons from our literature and practice review. As with all transformation work, ours is an evolving model that is supporting our ambition to embed and scale this work deeply where we currently work and share with others who are interested in doing similar.

**A series of updates are available that give more detail of the evidence basis of our learning over several years at [www.wm2u.co.uk](http://www.wm2u.co.uk)**

## What is driving WM2U?

Our four strategic objectives are:

- 1 Create conditions and structures that sustain change by working alongside families to co-produce and embed new ways of working and accelerate existing and effective interventions
- 2 Scale the WM2U approach deeply across Dundee and East Ayrshire.

**In achieving these two, the system change we expect to see is:**

- 3 Public Services will increase investment in prevention, thus in the medium term making significant public sector savings for reinvestment and enabling children to flourish within their own families.
- 4 Our influencing strategy achieves a redesign of children's services locally and contributes to how national policy is implemented and practice is shaped nationally.

The WM2U Strategic Plan is available at [www.wm2u.co.uk](http://www.wm2u.co.uk).

## Our five key components of system change:

1

### CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE - LEADERSHIP, CULTURE AND TRUST



#### It takes time... a lot of time... to build trust

We took time to be consistently visible and prove that we deserved trust; that we were worth the time and respect of busy families and staff; that we valued what was working well and that we were responsive and flexible because we were listening and as a result understood what mattered to people individually and collectively.

This is our first strategic objective and from the start, we were clear that we had to establish, maintain and tangibly demonstrate that our approach was to 'work alongside' rather than 'do to'. This applied to working with families, communities, individuals and staff. At all levels and in all sectors.

Specific and focused opportunities to work together at every level within and across organisations have proved a critical piece of the jigsaw. Our experience is that as an investor and partner you need to be prepared to take the time early on to create the conditions that make change possible. Building in Year 0 to the plan in order to foster the trust and strong relationships required for this kind of challenging work is key. We recognise that change is about people and relationships, not about systems, plans or policies.

It took 3 years and multiple trials to find the right routes and approaches to build trust and see signs of culture shifting at system level. In our first three years we navigated the COVID pandemic, deciding to retain staff and continue the work which felt more important than it ever had. Despite the unimaginable challenges the team faced, this time of connecting and being there for communities and the staff working in them turned out to offer an opportunity for strengthening and grounding our relationships based on that shared experience in a way that has endured.

#### Culture is created by many and therefore we need to listen to multiple voices...

As funders, we required WM2U to demonstrate that voice was central by action and impact and not just intent. We recognised early on that investment of time and money to enable families and local practitioners to work and grow together on change was essential to build confidence and capability.

Our learning shows that the Columba 1400 Values Based Leadership Experiences (VBLEs) have played a critical role in the development of people, their ideas and communities they work within. Most of these have been residential although several were online during COVID restrictions. They bring together practitioners and families to identify their shared values and commitments and develop ideas for implementing changes together to improve the lives of children and families in their neighbourhoods. We didn't always get those we thought should be attending and decided to go where the energy was, working with those who showed the greatest interest. It took time to really embed an understanding of the role of VBLEs. This work was both won and lost in the preparation. We needed to take time to get the right people in the right place to make the impact.

The VBLE experiences were designed to support parents, practitioners, and strategic leaders to work together to put what matters to families first. We began by delivering these in discrete groups – leaders, frontline staff and families enabling them to draw strength from their commonality. Real change happened when we brought them together.

Feedback from successive VBLEs has been consistently positive. For parents, it has provided a new sense of possibilities, for themselves, their children, and the community and new perspectives on the role of professionals and services.

Over time this work engendered curiosity due to the peer-to-peer conversations about the impact the VBLE's had made on people and the liberation they felt to be courageous around what they believed would make change. Detailed learning from the VBLEs and examples of how they are supporting parents and practitioners is available [www.wm2u.co.uk](http://www.wm2u.co.uk).

By providing opportunities to connect leaders with families, leaders recognise their responsibilities and opportunities to be positive communicators of the changes that are either already happening or have potential. We are finding that being more exposed to families supports leaders to be braver in countering the narratives that progress is stuck in an "implementation gap" or that we can't listen and act with families and communities because of lack of resources or adhering to "the way that it has always had to be done". Connecting them in this way makes them both more hopeful and more accountable to the people who really matter.

Such spaces have been opportunities to find allies in change and act as a catalyst for action. This emerges out of well facilitated conversations about what needs to change and why. Genuine listening and learning, bringing collective assets to the solution. They offer an opportunity to connect around a set of shared values that each person holds the other to account for. Challenge becomes less about who does what – or not, and more a reminder of how we do the work. We have found that much of what families and practitioners need is the same...Hope & Purpose, Places & Spaces.

The power and potential of bringing parents and professionals together is evident; this creates space for conversations about change and better understandings of different perspectives, pressures, and roles. The stories shared highlight common humanity and purpose. This enables the development of insights into what works and what still needs to change, with impacts on individual professional practices.

**Some structured support is needed to maximise the investment in VBLE's and keep forward motion...**

However, we quickly learned that such experiences are insufficient if planned as a one-off or regarded as 'training'. Bespoke, direct support is needed to take good ideas and green shoots of change forward as viable opportunities for transformation. At times, additional support has been necessary, for example, through; regular check-ins; coaching to sustain and hold true to principles of achieving voice-led change. Keeping bringing people back to purpose just when it all gets too tough has been important.

We have and are still trialling processes that help people to build their confidence further and take their ideas from concept to reality. Much of this work needs a structure to support forward motion and a network to sustain people working through the inevitable shifts that arise with change. We have learned that families and practitioners want practical ways to work on system change and seek opportunities for local communities to learn from and support each other. In 2021 we worked with The Lens to support the development of ideas into action. Now we are trialling some work with the Circle Academy a local organisation with a CEO who has set up her own organisation to support others in her community who also wish to make a difference, in the face of similar challenges. This feels both grounded and inspiring to the women who are part of the first group to go through the programme.



**“** It had stuck in my mind that one of the parents at the recent values-based leadership experience had said 'it's the small things that make a difference'. I realised that we were asking too much of the mother. Every service had bombarded her with information all at once. I said, 'I think we need to stop! We are giving you mountains to climb' – and she said 'yes, and I can't even get out of bed'. So, I changed tack and instead I asked, 'what can I do today?' **”**

East Ayrshire practitioner

**We needed those who can unblock to step up to that responsibility**

The establishment of an Oversight and Enabling Board in both local authorities of strategic leaders helped clarify at the outset what was needed and with the aim of giving permission if needed. We purposely chose the phrase enabling and built the behaviours and actions this would necessitate into the remit and purpose of the group. It is important that those with the greatest power understand the ways in which they are expected to exercise that in relation to what the staff and communities tell us is important to them AND what is getting in the way.

Developing the 'Theory of Change' (appendix one) at the start has proved essential to keep the focus on the difference we are trying to make and sustaining clarity about roles, responsibilities and accountability.

Our expectations of leaders have changed, and we have found many are shifting from "giving permission" to being part of the change; asking what more can I do to support; to help accelerate the pace; what barriers can I remove to achieve greater progress?

Being able to shine a light on good work and change, what we are creating rather than what we are preventing, has been important to sustain the belief that change is not only possible but that shifts in practices are already happening. This feeds hope and hope builds opportunity.

**2**

**VOICE IS NOT ENOUGH – WE NEED TO ENABLE THE AGENCY OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND LOCAL PRACTITIONERS**

Establishing that the voices of children and families was the driver for all our activities and sticking to this consistently, even when difficult or when easier routes presented themselves, meant we could emerge with strong and credible learning about the impact voice-led system change can achieve.

In looking for 'system change' the WM2U approach gives voice to people that are often not heard or perspectives that are discounted either because they are undervalued or because they seem too hard to act on (link to voice strategy). Given the commitment to voice – this principle applies to communities (& we give greater weight to their views) – but – we see the importance of bringing voices together to include those of practitioners: the value lies in the mix. Our emerging evidence suggests that (community/collective) lived experience is getting a hearing and collaboration amongst us is improving.

At local levels, the skills and behaviours of practitioners is inspiring. They understand and appreciate the difficulties local people face. They see what is needed and that things must be done with families – not to them. There is tremendous scope for the voice of families and communities to have an impact on change at local or community levels if there is consistent follow-through.

This consistency must be long-term, sustained and determined. Most of the families we are working alongside had been asked frequently what matters to them with little change in response.

Follow-through is a non-negotiable for both families and local practitioners, if leaders are serious about committing to system change.



**We need to be prepared to respond to what matters to people in a way that is real and tangible...**

In 2021 we trialled making cash available directly to families in response to our question – What Matters to You. Our Make it happen Fund (MIHF) operated in a space between crisis funding and long-term preventative support and illustrates the importance of access to support before crises arise. Developing the fund has been an opportunity to learn about unmet needs and how public service responses can create further problems and costs for families.

The MIHF was a modest experiment to test out the difference that offering a relatively small amount of money directly to families can make. It was undoubtedly an unusual offer, that in giving people choices raised and challenged embedded ideas about charity or handouts, and the stigmatizing experiences of other funds intended to alleviate poverty and address basic needs. Some people were surprised to be offered a budget and initially felt uncomfortable or wondered if there was a catch.

When faced with a real choice, parents were thoughtful about how they exercised it. Some felt that talking about what to spend it on with a group of trusted others was important, generating ideas and making it feel acceptable to use the Fund. Several parents took the opportunity to ask their children what they would like and were often surprised by their ideas. Their decisions about what to ask for were taken with their children in mind, for example, creating a better home environment, or as a direct result of a child's request for something that would have been a previously unachievable treat, such as going to the Zoo.

Those who did take part are convinced that it had or would make a difference and improve the families lives in ways they would not be able to afford to themselves. Funds were spent in ways that developed confidence, helped to make progress towards getting a job and general wellbeing that enables families to thrive.

We have seen the power of very small grants to oil and accelerate action, principally for the use of families or those working on their behalf. Flexibility of funding has enabled local communities and practitioners to move quickly and responsively. It has built confidence of families that change can happen. Our learning on this work can be found here (link).

We have now earmarked a significant budget from the total WM2U funding pot to roll out a Make it Happen Fund (MIHF) which will be used to scale voice-led system change, with a particular focus on empowering communities to shape and prioritise resource alongside those practitioners who work there. The decision-making process will be based on their analysis of what is needed to enable children to live with their families and thrive.

It is our experience that you cannot embark on this type of voice led transformation if you are not prepared to prioritise and invest in agency alongside voice.

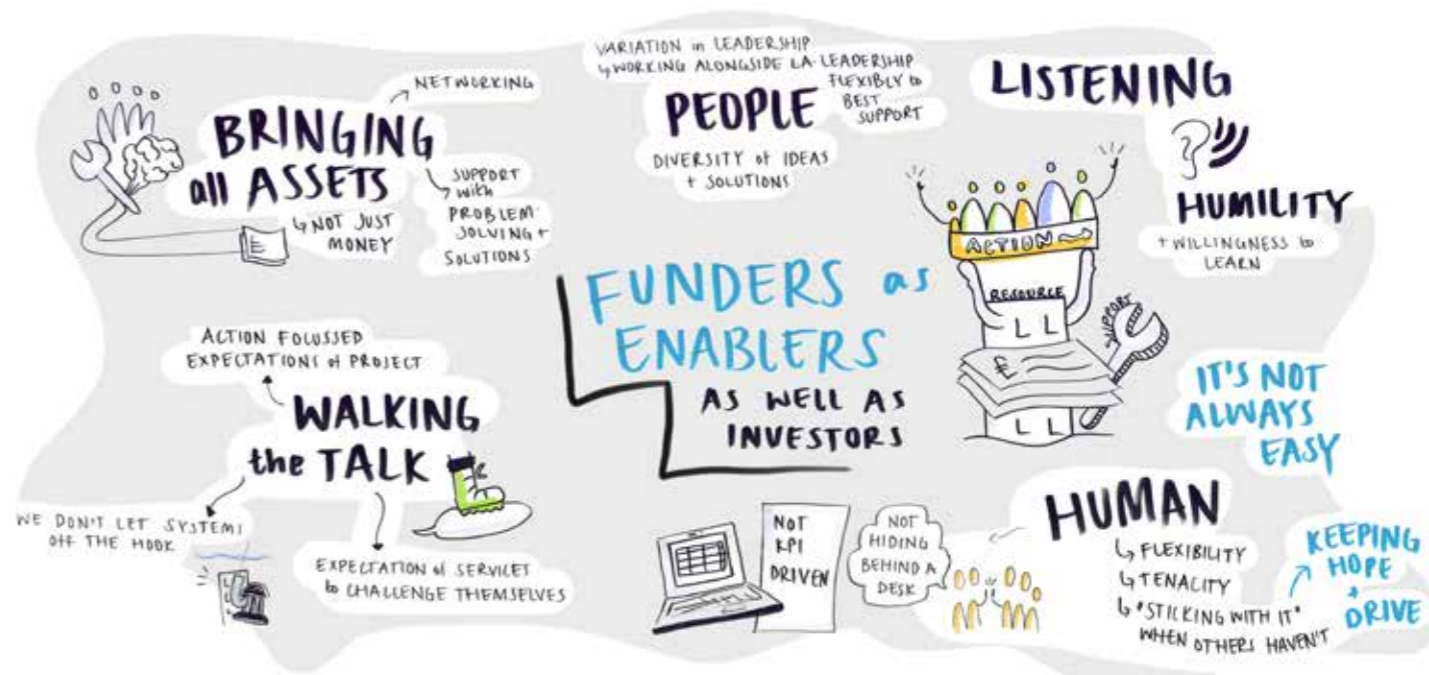
The Fund will support the fundamental role of voice-led change in the WM2U work by demonstrating that outcomes for individuals and communities who face greatest inequality improve when parents, carers, children and young people are seen as the experts in their own lives, and critically, have agency.

We see from our trial work that if people are able to decide how funds are spent, they will spend those funds on different things and /or in different ways to services. In extending this work alongside our public service partners and underpinned by our learning framework, we anticipate that services will learn about what individuals and communities can do for themselves and where services might better fit in the longer term, creating a new form of public service.

“ Nobody feels that they are ‘deserving’ of it, it’s not just the money. I admit it made me a bit nervous. I think choices can make people panic and perhaps be a bit suspicious or worry that there’s a catch. But giving people a choice tells them that they are not invisible. It takes someone from their knees and gives them strengths to stand up. ”  
Parent

**3 FUNDERS AS ENABLERS AS WELL AS INVESTORS**

WM2U’s role at local level is increasingly clear: we are not local community workers. Our role is to support and empower local practitioners to enable them to do their work effectively – whether that is to offer support to work alongside families; providing a little money to make things happen for communities; facilitating access to senior leaders and asking questions and offering learning for how much more effective local practitioners could be if were able to exercise greater agency and flexibility in their role.



**We had to be prepared to lead from the front and walk the talk...**

As funders, we agreed we would purposefully be more involved and more dynamic, willing to take the time to build trust and find the right ways to intervene with a specific focus on achieving visible support for WM2U from a high level. This involved contributing to the local authority’s wider transformation ambitions and leveraging in networks and connections and using our wider convening role to build connections between WM2U and wider national strategic and policy ambitions, and across a range of stakeholders.

We have resourced additional specialist capacity if necessary and on an ad hoc and temporary basis. This has brought a valuable flexibility to engage other expertise as and when required, rather than being fixed on an agreed long-term budget. We have extended the work and investment on two occasions to follow the opportunities we could see were within our reach and anticipate concluding in 2026. This long-term investment of funders has generated trust amongst senior leaders and practitioners, helping them to be open and willing to invest time and take risks.



### The importance of storytelling to help us understand others reality...

We developed our learning framework in a participatory and iterative way over many months involving families, practitioners, local authority leaders and the funders Programme Board members. This approach has enabled shifts in thinking and expectations about impact – what it can be and how it can be measured. It took time for all partners, including us as funders, to recognise that the less conventional ‘indicators’ are as important as statistical or quantitative metrics. For example, families identified leading indicators of the changes in behaviour and language amongst the professionals that would make them feel valued, listened to and their views acted on. Furthermore, we have learnt that much of the data that we would need to measure changes for children at the population level, is not available.

We believe that the qualitative experience of children, young people and families is an important overlooked source of information and knowledge in this space. This experiential data is valuable: it illustrates both how unwanted patterns and outcomes for children and families continue to be reproduced and gives insight into what matters to families and what might be different.

Sharing stories and instances of changing practice, has been key to the learning approach we employ and is helping us identify what we mean by ‘success’. Noticing and acknowledging small steps has been important and making these visible, motivational, and sustainable has enabled all parts of the system to ‘grow as we go’.

In East Ayrshire the participation of parents as ‘community researchers’ has supported the learning process by enabling story gathering and the co-hosting and facilitation of community-based learning events.

In Dundee having a data analyst seconded to the team supports the learning by enabling access to the numbers and the stories behind them which are likely to tell us something meaningful about the individual and overall experience of children and families in the city and about where early intervention could make a difference.

### Two different approaches to delivery that are both right for their context...

Our theory of change gave us the foundations to embark on this new and exciting journey. Our knowledge of the two locations gave us a sense of where the energy was, but it was our existing contacts who provided the first opportunities to begin delivery. It would be fair to say that none of us really understood the journey we would ultimately be embarking on.

In East Ayrshire, the primary focus was originally on working with parents in the community, latterly bringing them together with practitioners to shape joint interests and ideas to be taken forward, with an Oversight and Enabling Board of Senior Leaders drawn from different services. This approach is now evolving to engage more closely with a range of universal services in a specific locality, alongside East Ayrshire wide work on data alignment.

In Dundee, after a similar start to East Ayrshire, WM2U shifted to operate as a strategic enabler, working alongside practitioners with strong authorisation from Senior Leaders, using in-house Community Learning and Development (CLD) activities as a vehicle for learning and embedding system change. The Tayside Collaborative – a separate VBLE initiative funded through a partnership between The Hunter Foundation and The Scottish Government that brought together the three co-located local authorities and their wider public service partners also helped in creating conditions for change.

Our learning to date suggests that starting with strategic leaders establishes a seriousness and credibility that is important to practitioners whilst starting with community helps create well-grounded insight into the realities for communities, and hence greater credibility with community members and practitioners. Both are significant but the convergence of these approaches, which is where we are now, is key.

## 5 COMMUNICATING HOPE AND CHALLENGING NEGATIVE BELIEFS ABOUT CHANGE



We see communication as a key driver of change and is our fourth strategic objective. The work in this space ties directly to that of our learning partner, making visible the change and creating the conditions for scale. The set-up of WM2U; its funders and its values emphasise connection and we are working at every level and across partners to emphasise positive practices and possibilities that are in plain sight and to counter arguments to the belief that change is not possible. We are confident that our experience to date is showing what is already underway and what more is possible, and this demonstration is the route to creating change that sustains.

Sharing our own learning and discovering other wider practice has been generated through literature and practice reviews and a series of national events. These events have been co-hosted with the Robertson Trust and involved a mix of practitioners and parents. These have enabled exploration about effective practices and how to use that learning to improve our work now and in the future.

We continue to create and use opportunities to highlight the work and the learning in these local authority areas, taking care to link developments to those that are already happening within communities and what this means for national policy making and resourcing. This wider networking provides a chance to check out our thinking and practice – signalling the common challenges we face. Knowing we are not alone is helpful.

We are unapologetically proactive and challenging in our communications to those leaders who can create the conditions to support change and help shift those that are preventing change. We are deepening our alliances with key stakeholders and tailoring our communications to their needs. This will give them the compelling narrative needed to determine how to make voice-led change visible and viable.

Our messages are and will continue to be unashamedly hopeful, optimistic and positive. Our story telling will enable families and local practitioners to describe and own how change is possible and its impact, if leaders in the system listen, value, work alongside and take action to achieve change.



## Some current developments we are still working through

### Useful data for effective investment of resources

We have learned that there is no local authority or children's services partnership which can describe confidently the numbers and flow of children who are moving between GIRFEC levels and, therefore, what may be effective in enabling them to live safely and happily with their family. This gap has been highlighted by others, #KeepThe Promise, for example.

There is a huge range of data and evidence held by the local authority and their partners, but additional support and capacity is required to match this to shifting investment to community and family-based support.

We want the long-term impact of this work to be that more investment is available for children to flourish within their families and communities (SO3). This objective is echoed in the National Performance Framework and across all national policies that impact on children, young people, families and communities and also the objectives of similar funders operating across Scotland and the UK.

WM2U's close partnership in Dundee and East Ayrshire has led to agreement to test, review and identify improvement in how this data can be gathered with minimal impact on the time for recording required by practitioners; how it could support children's services partnerships shift to investment in prevention and community support and how these communities have greater agency in determining the local supports that will make a difference to them.

This work has taken time to begin but we have achieved trust that WM2U's support will build on current arrangements with the aim of streamlining and focusing on data that matters. We can see that local systems are burdened by the complex, multiplicity of demands and reporting requirements. Our partners trust that we will support, not add to their challenges.

We think it is important to use our convening power to share our learning; to learn from others, build collaborations and identify how across Scotland, we can gather data and evidence which will help secure national aims of keeping the promise; getting it right for every child; whole family support, among others.

*Without useful data and without using it effectively, Scotland will continue to make failing investment in services.*

### Our third strategic objective is still to be fully realised... but there are reasons to be hopeful

We acknowledge the environment and culture of services and supports for children, families and communities is disconnected and overly complex, at every level – national, local and neighbourhood. This cannot be an excuse for giving up.

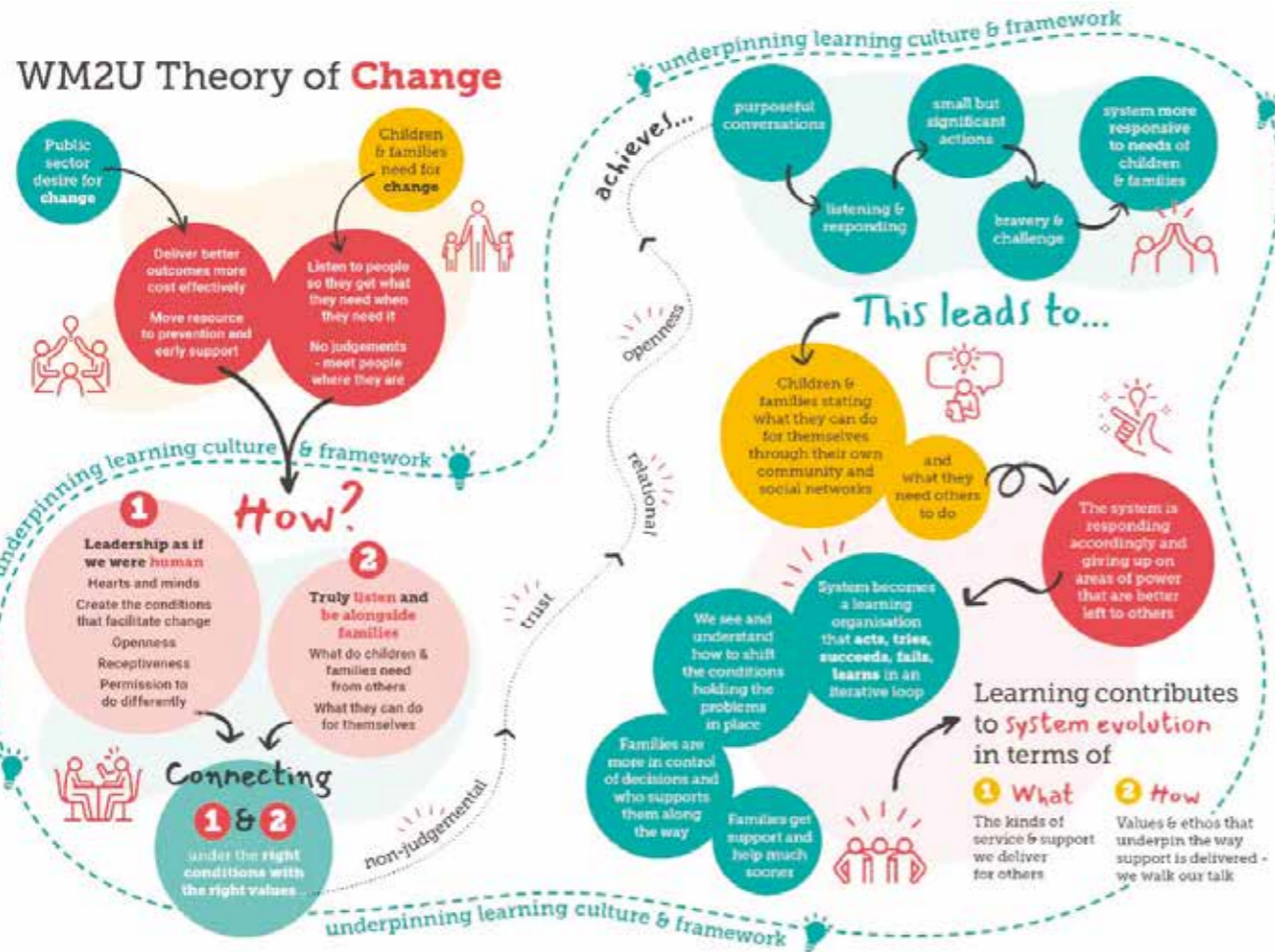
We have witnessed leaders now wanting to be braver to counter embedded and dominant narratives about change that suggest it is the responsibility of others, and more eager to adopt a system mindset that seeks to explore what is possible. They recognise that it is not enough to admonish people to 'proceed until apprehended' - recognition of power differentials needs a more active sponsorship role.

It has taken several years and multiple approaches to find the most promising routes and methods to build trust and eventually begin to see signs of culture shifting. All partners anticipated difficult conversations, but importantly have worked through these difficulties. As a result, where trust has been established, challenges are being increasingly well handled. We know we need to do more, to move beyond a shared vision to radical change that can make a positive difference on the ground that everyone wants to see.

What Matters to You began in earnest in 2019. Progress was impacted by lockdown although we kept working during that period. Progress and activity accelerated in 2023. Funding has been extended twice due to the funders' confidence in the work. WM2U will draw to a close in 2026.



# Appendix one



**BBC CHILDREN IN NEED**

**THE HUNTER FOUNDATION**

BBC Children in Need along with The Hunter Foundation are currently funding the What Matters to You (WM2U) approach in two areas in Dundee and East Ayrshire.





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