

What Matters to You?

Becoming Allies in Change

A summary of learning about voice-led system change

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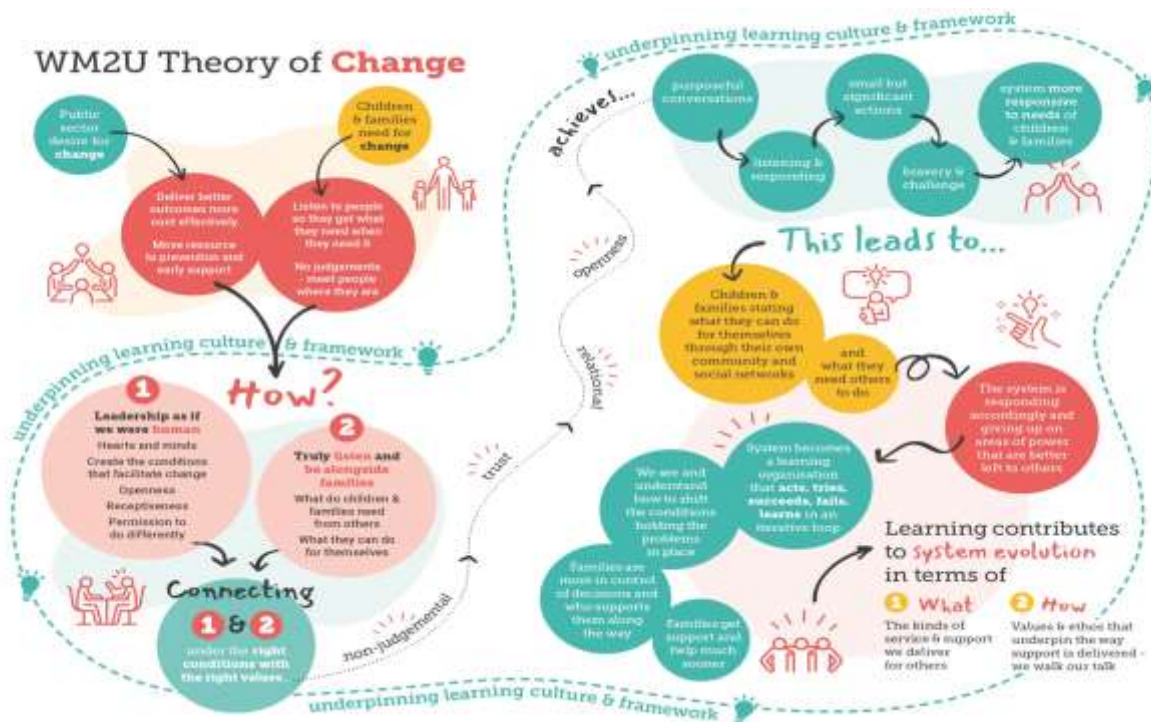
1. Our Ambition and Approach

For over five years, What Matters to You (WM2U) has been working alongside families in Dundee and East Ayrshire. Funded by BBC Children in Need and the Hunter Foundation, the ambition has been to learn how to move public resources to offer support earlier, so that children can flourish within their own families.¹

What is 'What Matters to You?'

'What Matters to You?' is a direct personal and dignified appeal to people and communities to engage, inspired by similar initiatives.² It addresses the inequity of access which has become built into public services.

WM2U has sought to use the voice of people with lived experience to achieve 'system change', which is understood as shifts in the cultural and organisational values, mindsets and practices, that are often taken for granted or unnoticed. In this respect, WM2U has not been a traditional project or programme that works with children or families as direct and identifiable beneficiaries, and this brings important distinctions and challenges for planning, implementation, learning and evaluation.



The WM2U Theory of Change visualises the connections between a desire for change amongst children, families and public services, the place of connections, leadership and listening in mobilising the values needed for change and the 'purposeful conversations' that

¹ The Hunter Foundation (THF) is a proactive venture philanthropy fund with a strong entrepreneurial focus and roots in Ayrshire, Scotland. BBC Children in Need uses public donations to change the lives children and young people across the UK.

² This phrasing was introduced to the funders by Sir Harry Burns a former Chief Medical Officer for Scotland.

identify small but significant actions that can lead to change, with learning threaded throughout.³

WM2U has deliberately tested out different local interventions to learn what difference it makes to hear what matters to those people that are often not heard or whose views are discounted. In seeking system change, WM2U offered Columba 1400 values-based leadership development experiences (VBLEs) to senior leaders, practitioners and community members.⁴ The work has explored different ways to subsequently help people to put 'values into action', amplifying what is working, and finding ways to address the barriers to improving the lives of families who face significant adversity. This links community-rooted and -led developments with the strategic and organisational conditions and developments needed to embed and sustain change.

Learning together from evidence and practice

In the absence of any defined pathway for this way of working we have sought to be learning-led. WM2U has combined existing national and international evidence with collaborative and experiential evidence drawn from and tested out in practice through action research, producing timely insights able to notice and celebrate change and support decision-making about next steps.

This Learning Digest highlights the key lessons from WM2U based on four learning and evaluation reports (2024) which tell the story in more detail and draw from a series of learning reports and literature reviews going back to 2019.⁵ Building on that earlier evidence, the funders issued a report developing their thinking about the components of system change and this Digest contributes further to that evolving understanding.⁶

The outcomes and progress reported here are drawn from the learning framework for each local authority. The development of this framework has been a pragmatic and collaborative process, rooted in the local work over several years. The content and language reflect and reconcile the desired on-the-ground changes amongst the different stakeholder groups. This has underlined their shared vision, allowed for differences in perspectives, and demonstrated how what matters to families, practitioners, and strategic leaders connects with the high-level and longer-term expectations of the funders of WM2U.

Setting the scene

In Scotland there is a long-standing desire to reform public services.⁷ Several national and local programmes including The Promise and the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund have similar ambitions.⁸ Our emerging lessons are relevant for others interested in planning and

³ This was developed in 2021 by the WM2U Delivery Team and Learning Partners as a second iteration of an earlier theory of change graphic.

⁴ Columba 1400 is a high-profile organisation in Scotland and facilitate values-based leadership experiences for young people, parents, practitioners and Senior Leaders based on their long-standing leadership academies. <https://columba1400.com/>

⁵ These and further reports and literature and practice reviews are available <https://wm2u.co.uk/our-reports> We believe these to be an authentic and fair account and are responsible for any errors and omissions.

⁶ <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/codifying-our-learning-support-scale>

⁷ <https://audit.scot/publications/blog-christie-10-years-on>

⁸ <https://thepromise.scot/> <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/whole-family-wellbeing-funding/>

evaluation of programmes that seek shifts to early intervention and prevention, with wider implications for the evaluation of system change more generally and the place of learning within it.

Many policies propose 'system change', co-production or voice-led change, but it is not always clear what this really means or how to go about it. And it is not easy for practitioners and organisations to change the established way that they work.

The funders have been candid about their own uncertainty at the start.

"This work began with a theory of change, but no real delivery plan. We had the traditional sort of buy in by Chief Executives, but it would be fair to say that none of us really understood the journey we would ultimately be embarking on...."

We hope that sharing this experience will help to unpick the 'implementation gap' between high-level policy ideals and changing practices on the ground.

Section 2 highlights the key outcomes achieved, followed by our learning about early help and prevention, highlighting fresh approaches to working with data and stories in section 3.

Section 4 develops a still emerging system change methodology, not as a blueprint or prescriptive approach, but shared in the recognition that we are still learning.

2. What Outcomes Have Been Achieved?

Overview of outcomes

Our Learning Framework sets out outcome and leading indicators that reflect agreements amongst community members, practitioners and senior leaders about the most important measures of changes that people want to see, expressed in their words. The five outcomes are:

- A positive difference on the ground
- Real supportive support at the right time
- A sense of belonging to a valued group, feeling that you matter and are valued within it
- Better mental health for children and families
- A sense of looking towards a positive future

The ambition and momentum in communities is making a positive difference on the ground. Tangible improvements have been made, much of it led by local people in both East Ayrshire and Dundee.

Such visible change is a pivotal outcome that parents and carers and others have always seen as central to any measure of success of this work. Communities have also articulated their desire to see the development of 'real supportive support'.

Community members are thinking differently about themselves and what they can contribute to their own communities. They feel more confident and are more connected. This has led to the growth of community and peer-led activities offering a wide range of

practical support. What 'real supportive support' means in practice is now better understood as community members experience it with each other, and in their relationships with practitioners.

Such tangible, practical outcomes are necessary, but WM2U will not achieve sustainable outcomes at scale without 'scaling deep' by making an impact upon the 'below the waterline' embedded cultural values and beliefs that are barriers to change and continue to reproduce unwanted patterns in complex systems.

East Ayrshire

In East Ayrshire, WM2U has worked in partnership with a small number of highly committed local people in the community and the Corra Foundation. Community leadership is making a **positive difference on the ground**, principally through the establishment of the Nest Wellbeing Group as a community-rooted, peer-to-peer constituted charity at the forefront of developing a range of health, wellbeing and social activities in Cumnock.

- The Nest provides a **sense of belonging** and **real supportive support**. The realisation of their own vision, now grown significantly beyond the initial desire for a 'home from home' community space, is of immense significance and benefit to the mental and emotional wellbeing of the community.
- Significant examples of real supportive support include taking the first steps out of the house, building friendships and wider connections, learning to trust others and feeling able to ask for help, wanting to play a more active role in supporting other people, and finding trusted people that can vouch for and help to access wider services.
- The Nest are focused on informal, practical support and are in a much better position having secured new funding from a range of sources, much of it related to issues of mental health and wellbeing.
- There have been positive developments for some practitioners through their connections to the Nest, which has made them feel more welcome in community meetings and spaces. This has created important benefits for practitioners, including access to supportive, practical help, advice and other resources in and from the community, with some able to do elements of their professional practice differently.
- The shared commitment to **better mental health for children and families** is a community priority and a galvanising force. Recent positive signs of progress in aspects of mental wellbeing include better understanding about what is needed in the community, wider awareness of adverse childhood experiences and neurodiversity, and the impact of parental mental health on children.
- The achievements of the Nest are based on their growing strengths as a community group and there is a better **sense of looking towards a positive future**. Their work addresses the impact on individuals of trauma and living with poverty, understanding and supporting recovery in non-judgemental ways. Despite setbacks, their focus and matter-of-fact attitude towards the future is likely to help them to continue to learn and thrive.



Senior leaders in East Ayrshire see the importance and potential of these community-led developments but everyone involved wanted to see greater impact and scale by this time.

The small group of practitioners that were part of a joint VBLE with parents in 2022-23 remain committed to a voice-led approach but have not felt able to enact this beyond fragmented individual responses and some new connections.

The early promise of collaborative leadership amongst strategic leaders to develop the potential for wider, systemic impact has not been sustained and individual insights amongst practitioners have not translated into wider team or organisational learning. East Ayrshire Council have acknowledged the need to improve collaborative leadership to achieve deep rooted changes in the way that public services operate. In October 2024, the WM2U funders in consultation with the Council, concluded funding to enable them to focus on their own strategic developments and service reviews.

Dundee

In Dundee, after a gradual start in which foundations were laid, but progress was limited, more recently the pace of change has accelerated.

There is now a **positive difference on the ground**: families in Charleston, Kirkton, Menzieshill, St Marys, Ardler, Lochee and Whitfield are all benefiting from the additional activities being run by Dundee City Council Community Learning and Development (CLD) and supported by WM2U.

- Parents testify to **better mental health** for themselves and their children as a direct consequence of attending leadership experiences and participating in family activities.



Real opportunities are beginning to emerge **for long-term system change** and funding for this work will continue to 2026.

- Parents are now leading on providing activities for other local families and fundraising for their local communities. There are solid plans to embed and extend the achievements so far.
- The decision to work with Community Learning and Development practitioners has helped the approach become well-grounded and able to proceed at greater pace.
- There is now a common vision and purpose amongst different stakeholder groups and a clear sense that they can only achieve that purpose together.
- New spaces are being created for listening and understanding each other's perspectives and most importantly acting together to develop ways forward. Mutual understanding and acknowledgement of strengths and capabilities is growing and there is a fresh willingness to work together.
- The approach is changing professional practices, structures and services. It has the backing of strategic leaders.
- Local analytical work is changing conversations about what happens to children and young people in the system, generating questions about how to provide more effective support. This raises the prospect of making data-informed judgements about the questions at the heart of system change such as where to invest to ensure that fewer children experience care in the future.
- There are governance and accountability structures that are not working well enough for the benefit of communities. Strategic leaders are beginning to test out more positive and responsive practices, addressing power imbalances and devolve decision making as much as possible.

3. Learning About Early Help and Prevention

Our learning challenges common policy and public service assumptions about early help and prevention. Policies and practices reflect deficit thinking which risks viewing children and families' needs as problems which services need to solve. Instead WM2U works alongside community members and practitioners to improve opportunities for families.

We have learned that *both* community and service responses can play a part in providing 'real supportive support' whether together or separately. Seeking system change requires us to listen to local people first, understand communities as resourceful, and reconsider strategic and operational assumptions about service responses.

The experiences shared with us by families and practitioners illustrate the unique value of community-led and peer support, including many ways of helping people to reclaim a sense of control over their own lives and create safer environments for themselves.

The community-led developments suggest that 'real supportive support' may sometimes be of the kind that *only* communities can provide and that practitioners benefit too.

"It's hard to categorise what The Nest does. We might do a funeral one week, fill in a form, help a Mum clean a cooker because she doesn't know how, to then getting a couch for the housing support team, to supporting a police officer the next, giving mindfulness techniques to a nursery teacher, to going to the mental health team.... I think we have made a massive difference, not only to community members, but also to people who are staff. It's for everybody." ⁹

There is no single 'right time'. Rather than being 'too late' (after crisis) or indeed, 'too early' (before crisis), 'prevention' is best thought of as a dynamic, relational and responsive process, where actions at any time can make a difference, whether from the community or by practitioners:

*"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?'... [now] she decides what's important and we tackle it together, but she takes the lead."*¹⁰

Active collaboration with communities

There are many ways in which community can play an active part in improving the lives of local people, if strengths and contributions are recognised and actively supported.

Regular supportive conversations with families can reveal the things that will help. We have found that this focus on what they have to offer supports families to feel like they have

⁹ The Nest Wellbeing Group, 2024

¹⁰ East Ayrshire practitioner, 2023.

agency both in their own lives and in making change in their own communities, with and for others.

The work has primarily focused on engagement with parents and carers. Where there has been direct engagement with children or young people, their different views have reminded the adults of the value of not imposing adult views, worries or preconceptions onto children and young people.

The routine inclusion of either families or children in designing support or contributing to staff learning and development depends on active collaborative leadership and the continuing engagement of senior leaders and practitioners, open to this influence on their practice and with the skills, permissions and opportunities to engage.

Such a shift in routine practices and mindsets takes sustained effort, honesty, humility and willingness to compromise; to ask, understand and act on what matters to families and children. And there is a need to recognise what support communities require from senior leaders and practitioners to feel empowered to share their aspirations.

Measuring change for the population of children and young people

Given the ambition of WM2U to learn how to move public resources to offer support earlier, we have used System Dynamics (SD) modelling to explore how the wellbeing of children and young people at an aggregate or population level changes over time.¹¹

Our original assumptions about data abundance and availability have been overturned.

The realities of data availability and configuration limit the ability of local authorities to identify inefficiencies in systems, create new responses on the basis of local data, implement changes effectively, and understand the impact of any intervention to improve the lives of children and families.

This highlights the lack of integrated evaluative information about population level outcomes for children and families.

- Scottish local authorities categorise their service responses typically using four Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) levels. This terminology is in common use to describe levels of intervention for statutory and third sector services. However, there is no Scottish Government universal descriptor for these levels and there are local variations in terms. While there are agreed GIRFEC levels of intervention at points in time, children are not assigned levels that would be consistently recorded across systems from different agencies to allow tracking.
- This means that neither local authority with which WM2U is engaged could provide data to gauge the numbers of children at each GIRFEC level at specific points in time.

¹¹ System Dynamics provides a way of understanding how complex systems change over time by creating useful computer simulation models.

- This request could have been met by the practice of recording a single item of data, from which to derive patterns of movement. Additionally, data is held in different data sets operated by education, social work, and various parts of the health system that would need to be linked to provide the single summary measure of GIRFEC level of intervention.

This is a strategic challenge for all programmes or interventions, and probably for all Scottish Local Authorities.

New analytical possibilities

Additionally, our modelling has highlighted the limitations of relying on prevailing forms of data reporting and presentation in public services that tend to focus on data items per service but do not reveal how individual data items are dynamically connected.

The insights about interconnections have already challenged our assumptions about the routes that children and families take through the system and reveal the number of changes that children and families experience in their engagement with a range of services.

This work demonstrates how we might use data differently to improve service responses and raises useful questions for planning and practice, highlighting where work might be prioritised.

*"[this local] data is the most sophisticated and forensic set of data we have ever had. Instead of being defensive we can be curious."*¹²

Both quantitative and qualitative data are needed. Using stories has been trialled extensively in meetings with community members, practitioners and strategic leaders and enables more inclusive, focused and collaborative sensemaking.

Prospects and potential

Strategic leaders and analysts have recognised the value of these quantitative and qualitative insights and see that they can be applied to support learning across a range of local and national roles.

- In Dundee, work continues to analyse data to understand how to tip the balance towards prevention.
- In East Ayrshire, there is internal sponsorship of work to enable greater use of data to support improvement and ultimately enable any evaluation of a shift of resources to early intervention and prevention.

¹² Dundee Strategic Leader, 2024

4. Developing a System Change Methodology

Over several years, our literature and practice reviews of policies and evidence from elsewhere have demonstrated that whilst there is no shortage of calls for voice-led or system change, there is a lack of clarity about how to achieve it.

The work of WM2U has sought to illuminate how the work of system change can proceed, drawing on the existing evidence base, learning about the challenges of implementation and contributing further to emerging insight about promising practices and evidence of impact. The evolving methodology foregrounds implementation rather than 'delivery', recognising complexity, and viewing implementation as an iterative and adaptive, collaborative process.

The funders articulated their understanding of the key components of system change in their report issued in early 2024.¹³ In the past year, WM2U as a whole has deepened its understanding about the work, crystallised its thinking and identified scope for further learning.

Our learning has been with and through communities – not treating them as a separate group of people to be consulted but developing a shared ambition for change, based on realising the potential of the community.

Co-create the conditions for change: shared purpose, collaboration and language

Taking a relational and systemic approach is a significant challenge to prevailing organisational and leadership cultures.

Developing a shared and compelling purpose. WM2U funded Columba 1400 facilitated Values Based Leadership Experiences (VBLEs), to support parents, practitioners, and strategic leaders to work together to put what matters to families first.

- Immediate feedback from successive VBLEs has been consistently positive.
- Practitioners and senior leaders have appreciated the chance to reconnect with their values and focus together on what will really make a difference to families.
- Parents have come out of the sessions feeling more confident about their own strengths, to such an extent that some have gone on to get paid employment or make changes in their own lives and in their communities.

Collaboration amongst strategic leaders. Where there is support from strategic leaders and active collaboration amongst them, practitioners have experienced a shift in mindsets and fresh perspectives, enabling them to act on their values to support community-led change.

- Without that strategic leadership, professional agency is restricted and individual responses by practitioners remain small scale and fragmented.
- The involvement of strategic leaders is also essential to 'scale-up', to change the formal and institutional structures that are no longer working well enough for communities or

¹³ <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/codifying-our-learning-support-scale>

remain based on outmoded strategic and operational assumptions. For example, finding ways to embed more positive and responsive practices within the governance and accountability structures in operation, address power imbalances and devolve decision making as much as possible.

Language matters. We had to learn how to define the problems and the ambition in an engaging and compelling way. Initially the focus of the work was described as ‘children on the edge of care’ but we realised that this language undermined community engagement.

- Deficit-based and stigmatising language is never an invitation to partnership in developing solutions with community members. And yet it is deeply embedded in how public services define the problems to be tackled and can be hard to spot.
- Talking about the potential for children to flourish recognises need but shifts the focus to working towards a hopeful future. Such issues are not ignored, but problem definition and problem solving are brought together.

Using the term ‘system change’ suggested a desire for fundamental change that was not disputed, even if initially it was hard to pin down exactly what was meant. In 2021, WM2U started to use the term ‘voice-led system change’ as we recognised that it was the voice of communities that would challenge power relations and shift established ways of thinking and doing.

- Digging deep into the formal and informal conditions that keep things as they are, even when they are not working well, is necessary so that change is real, not superficial, fragmented or fleeting.
- Opportunities to explore meaning and find shared language are important to support real collaboration with local people.

Facilitate the voice and agency of both community and practitioners

Values-into-action. Leadership development programmes that provide time and space for reflection, new connections and reconnection with values all play a part, but system change is a continuing endeavour, that goes well beyond any one-off leadership or engagement experience.

- Recruitment to leadership programmes must be purposeful, to support people to work together to put their values into action. This needs a deliberate, intentional approach to convening to assemble people together from across traditional boundaries and silos, rather than relying on status, turn-taking or formal position.
- Bringing parents and practitioners together has supported better mutual understandings and helped to mobilise their common interest in making change happen on the ground.
- Collaborative leadership needs to be an everyday, embedded practice across all parties, based on, but going further than collaboration amongst senior leaders. How meetings are convened and facilitated is a significant element of organisational culture as this offers space for people to feel heard and to take a leadership role in their own lives and within their job role, regardless of seniority.

The significance of relational practice. WM2U has found that many people in professional roles value a more relational approach to their work that enables them to 'work alongside' people. An essential element of the realisation of the ambitions for co-production, 'being alongside' still offers a significant challenge to prevailing organisational cultures and ideas about whose experiences and knowledge are valued and whose views are acted upon.¹⁴

- Given these challenges, the significance of relational practice as a basis for system change and any kind of collaborative endeavour cannot be overstated.
- Relational practice looks for and recognises existing strengths, achievements and potential contributions of individuals and communities. It builds from stories, met with appreciation and curiosity, finding value in what already exists and building on individual and community interests and capacities.
- Working 'alongside' people requires flexibility, taking time, staying curious, perseverance, integrity, pragmatism and humility, and valuing individual and collective capabilities. This fosters trusting and strong relationships, as the basis for identifying and co-creating solutions to the issues that matters to communities.
- Such trust is mutually reinforcing; individual practitioners and their wider teams and agencies need to be open to what they hear from individuals and within the community and resourced with permission, time and budgets to act upon it.

Safe and welcoming spaces matter for everyone. The development of safe and welcoming spaces where people can come together, and trust can grow both in the community and between community members and professionals, enables continuing mutual access to practical help, advice and resources.

- Professionals at all levels can be fearful to ask people what matters to them and don't necessarily feel welcome or safe in community spaces.
- The value of getting out into the community to experience the warmth of welcome, listen to people and build relationships has been demonstrated, with impacts on the professional practices of some individuals. More practitioners and senior leaders need to themselves become participants in community.

Put money at the heart of the community. WM2U has facilitated speedy access to small amounts of money to meet the immediate needs of local people, initiatives and organisations.

- Proactively offering funds to a community or peer group helps to reduce stigma and the 'indignity of asking' for individual support, generates trust and enables more community participation.
- Such funding can facilitate relational practice. Small grants provided by WM2U have been approved more quickly than would be usual in the formal local authority processes, enabling practitioners to offer more agile responses to community requests for the kind of activities that really appeal to families.

¹⁴ <https://www.coproductionsotland.org.uk/news/blog-so-where-to-begin-with-embedding-co-production>

- Other ways to deploy funding have included the establishment of a WM2U Make it Happen Fund that involved consultation with parents about the setup, distribution, and management of the funds. Community members contributed to the design of an application process, and some were involved in the management of the fund.
- This small-scale trial offered challenge to preconceived ideas about needs and demonstrating that families can be trusted to make the best choices for themselves and for their children. There is scope to explore how to use funds of this kind to catalyse and galvanise voice led system change.¹⁵

Grow as We Go: adopt learning-focused practices

The contribution of learning. Many prevailing understandings of evaluation can see it as primarily a technical rather than adaptive issue. We have found that embedding learning as an evaluative practice is a crucial part of systemic change, not just measuring change, but seeking to contribute to it, and able to include the active engagement of families in learning processes. 'Grow as We Go' is the shorthand way in which we refer to this approach to learning and evaluation.

Learning, scale and sustainability are linked. WM2U is an 'approach', not a traditional project or programme that works with children or families as direct beneficiaries. This challenges traditional ways of thinking about how to measure the differences being made (learning as a noun) and notice, spread and sustain successful practices (learning as a verb).

- Making a clear impact at any kind of scale depends on building relationships and trust, widening engagement and changing the practices of many different people, so that new ways of working can become routine.
- This kind of change cannot simply be mandated or 'rolled out' in a conventional way. It will look different in every place as people adapt approaches and learn more about what works well or what blocks change.
- This is live action research, exploring ideas and testing out what's possible and noticing difference. False starts and dead ends are inevitable. We have learned that it takes time and multiple trials to show people what's possible, build trust in early signs of change and explore the potential for wider systemic change.

Recognise complexity and the messiness. WM2U has shone a light on the complexities of system change and the issues of power, safety and trust that affect everyone involved.

- Recognition of complexity demands a focus on actual practices and experiences, rather than policy intentions. It is important to meet these realities with a relational response, not disputing the stories people tell, being defensive or worried that services will not be able to meet anticipated expectations.

¹⁵ Future learning and evaluation will help to influence the further evolution of the fund and the ways in which local public services are delivered for children and families facing multiple challenges.

- There are different perspectives at play and for practitioners and strategic leaders, a need to maintain essential services and do more with less money whilst also seeking to improve.
- Fuller engagement with and resilience to the unavoidable complexity, might help to unpick the 'implementation gap' between high-level policy ideals and changing practices on the ground.

Measures that matter. All funders, commissioners and local authorities want to be confident that they will achieve value for their investment of time and funding. They can seek reassurance by imposing complex sets of frameworks and indicators, relying heavily on quantitative measurement and assumptions both about what it means, and that data is available.

- We know that communities also want to see concrete change on the ground and to be confident that public service resources are well used.

The learning framework seeks to recognise and sufficiently reconcile these common and distinct interests.

"We want to measure what matters, because it matters, rather than because the data is available."¹⁶

- Our learning demonstrates that participatory and qualitative methods, including the involvement of parents as community researchers, are well suited to provide, deepen and share insight with others, to create shared ambitions, foreground learning, enable collective sensemaking, and generate valid evidence of emergent and systemic change.
- The co-design of the WM2U learning framework with parents, practitioners, senior leaders and the WM2U Programme Board has enabled discussion and agreement about the desired on-the-ground changes amongst the different stakeholders. This approach has enabled discussion about the 'measures that matter'.
- Leading indicators provide a way to talk about achievements, contributions and learning. Looking for the 'green shoots', we learned to focus on signs of change, understanding what is being created and how it is supporting families and communities, rather than focusing on what has been prevented, which is harder to measure in any meaningful way.
- The leading indicators point to signs of essential changes such as shifts in the mindsets, practices, and behaviours that are often unnoticed or seen as too hard to measure. These include the development of trust, safety, mutual understanding and a willingness to work together. We have found it important to describe the desired changes in positive terms providing early feedback and encouragement to participants.
- Both qualitative and quantitative data are vital. Making better use of combined numerical data and stories can generate possibilities for wider and deeper

¹⁶ Learning Partner Update to the East Ayrshire Strategic Board, August 2020

understanding of what matters and a more insightful, focused and collaborative analysis for planning, improvement and evaluation.

Share stories of change as a basis for creating change. Our understanding of the significance of multiple, small-scale changes has grown. 'System change' can sound grandiose and rather daunting, but it can be broken down.

- Given the need to explore values and ways of thinking it is important that people can 'start where they are and do what they can'. Sharing stories shows there is no singular starting position or perspective.
- Stories are best shared with care, not as admonishment to others, but to encourage people to reflect on their own ways of thinking, practices and possibilities, encouraging people to offer their own insights and perspectives that they might not previously have been aware of or have felt able to share.
- Sharing stories has been humanising and levelling, supporting more inclusive, collective and timely sense making.
- Stories help listeners to develop new sensitivities to others, provide vivid and useful examples of ways that good outcomes can be facilitated or frustrated, and point to changes that would make a real difference for families.
- There is a need to build the confidence and capabilities of people to understand what kind of stories might be worth sharing, and to help decision-makers understand the validity and complementarity of qualitative data, including how it can help to understand wider contexts and high-level population change.

Funders as enablers and learners

There have been long-standing partnership arrangements in place between the Hunter Foundation (THF) and BBC Children in Need, although there are important differences in governance, leadership styles and roles in WM2U and each have acted as enablers and learners in different ways.

Staff from both funders sit on the WM2U Programme Board, which is co-chaired by their respective CEOs. The Programme Board has benefited from two site-specific meetings in East Ayrshire (October 2019) and Dundee (October 2023) and also from the participation of community members in online Board meetings on several occasions.

BBC Children in Need adopted an oversight function, including developing an initial theory of change and managing the contract with learning partners.

As the funder on the ground, there has been a more active strategic and operational role for the Hunter Foundation as part of the WM2U delivery team, based on long-standing local connections and established relationships. Elements of their 'venture philanthropy' approach are:

- A specific focus on achieving visible support for WM2U from a high level within local authorities by seeking to contribute to each local authority's wider transformation

ambitions. These are shaped by the wider public service reform agenda in Scotland and the regulatory and Scottish Government funding environment.

- Working with CEOs and other senior leaders to build relationships and trust, investing time and brokering new connections through their own networks.
- Drawing on the goodwill created to offer proactive and sometimes robust challenge to those leaders who can facilitate the conditions to support change and help shift those that are preventing change.
- A conscious decision not to fund local authorities directly, with the rationale of ensuring the best chance of sustainability once funds end.
- Drawing on their networks to find and fund additional specialist capacity as and when needed.
- Shifting budgets to reflect emerging and short-term needs and roles rather than being fixed on an agreed long-term budget.
- Modelling a different attitude to risk, learning from failures and testing a new approach.
- Taking on a wider convening role, using networks and influence to build connections between WM2U and wider national strategic and policy ambitions, partnering with others wherever conducive to shared ambitions.
- Seeing a communication strategy and consequent activity as a key driver of change.

Now, both funders suggest that their learning from WM2U has been significant, deepening understanding of a system change approach that can be adopted and adapted in other places.

“We know so much more now about what makes the difference...we have gone deeper with it... it was a methodology, but now it feels more fully embodied and understood”¹⁷

“It’s been a complete learning journey and has influenced our other work”¹⁸

The funders have had the confidence in the WM2U approach to extend the programme funding on two occasions in October 2021 and June 2024. In Dundee their commitment has earned them the trust of senior leaders, local practitioners and community members and supported a further extension of funding to 2026.

¹⁷ Hunter Foundation, 2024

¹⁸ BBC Children in Need, 2024

5. Looking ahead

Embedded learning has provided the funders with a sound basis for decisions about direction and progress and has become an increasingly important part of the WM2U approach. The priorities in the WM2U strategic plan (2024-26) reflect this learning. They include:

- Continuing delivery and learning partner support to embed and sustain the work in Dundee. This includes continuing the Grow as We Go approach to support senior leaders, local stakeholders and community members to review and track the real-time changes for the local communities involved. It also includes analysis of existing databases to generate data measuring change for the whole population of children and young people, using data differently to improve service responses and highlight where work might be prioritised.
- Extending funding to Clackmannanshire's Family Wellbeing Partnership to support the WM2U approach to achieving voice-led, place-based system change.¹⁹
- A focus on child's voice: recent revisions to the WM2U voice strategy reflect the Scottish government's legal adoption of Article 12 of the United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child. There is a refreshed and specific intention to embed child's voice in service design by using the influence of WM2U to encourage adults that work with children and young people to ask them what matters to them, and to share that information with key influencers such as other parents, practitioners, local authorities, funders, and decision-makers so that they may act on it.²⁰

Costs and savings remain an issue of great interest with scope for further exploration. We note that given the ever-harsher financial realities of local government, the assumption that any net savings that can be made will be protected and redirected towards preventative work, rather than being used to reduce deficits will be severely tested.

It is always difficult to prioritise learning, but we have found that embedding it enables all those involved to listen to what matters to families, make an honest assessment of what needs to change and work together to make those changes. As finances become even tighter and more difficult decisions need to be made it will become even harder, and even more important, to maintain a collaborative learning approach to action.

There is already much to celebrate. But it will take time and ongoing commitment for systemic change to be truly embedded with a long-term sustainable impact on the lives of families.

¹⁹ <https://centreforpublicimpact.org/resource-hub/what-does-it-take-to-build-a-new-system-of-public-service/>

²⁰ This is included in Report 1.

6. Learning Resources

WM2U Evaluation Reports 2024

Each of these reports are designed to be read as standalone reports, signposting readers to existing reports and accounts which reflect the history and evolution of the thinking and practice of this initiative. Each report has an executive summary and links to earlier WM2U and other relevant reports.

REPORT 1 - PURPOSE Our ambition and key elements of our approach: this paper contains an overview of the key and common elements of WM2U that relate to both areas, East Ayrshire and Dundee. We anticipate that most readers will find it helpful to start with this report, particularly those not already familiar with the work. It will help readers to understand the evolution of the ambition and practices of WM2U, the approach to learning and the overall evidence base.

REPORT 2 - EAST AYRSHIRE This report focuses on the development of WM2U in East Ayrshire and offers an account of the expansion of community-led support and the subsequent formation of the Nest Wellbeing Group (NWBG), now at the forefront of developing a range of health, wellbeing and social activities in Cumnock. This report contains important lessons about the gap between positive aspirations and implementation on the ground, how to enable the agency of community members and local practitioners, and the challenges of creating the strategic conditions for change. Whilst WM2U funders took the decision to conclude funding in East Ayrshire in September 2024, the far from unique challenges and insights are likely to be important for others to understand.

REPORT 3 – DUNDEE This report focuses on the development of WM2U in Dundee over the past five years. It details the ambitions and challenges of developing system change in a highly complex environment. After a gradual start in which foundations were laid, but progress was limited, more recently the pace of change has accelerated. The new approach has the backing of strategic leads and is becoming more strongly embedded in the work of local practitioners. Real opportunities are beginning to emerge for long-term system change and funding for this work will continue to 2026.

REPORT 4 - MEASURES THAT MATTER This report is dedicated to the fuller exploration of learning in relation to the conceptual and empirical elements of the measurement of change. It demonstrates our evolution in thinking about how to evaluate impact and brings further benefits of introducing local authorities to new ways of looking at data, working with stories and understanding change.

Bibliography of Learning Partner and Funders Reports 2019-2023

These reports are all available on the WM2U website. <https://wm2u.co.uk/>

Codifying Our Learning to Support Scale, Funders Report (April 2024)

Written by the funders, this paper sets out their current practice wisdom, learning from the ongoing learning and evaluation and supported by lessons from the literature and practice reviews.

Where Should We Look for System Change? Learning Update (August 2023)

This learning report shares our thinking about how to measure and evaluate system change and offers emerging evidence of impact so far. This report prepares the ground for a report planned for June 2024 that will provide a fuller five-year retrospective account and evaluation of progress towards the desired outcomes.

Practising What We All Preach (August 2023)

WM2U and the Nest Wellbeing Group co-hosted a local “Grow as We Go” learning event in June 2023. The report highlights the importance of opening clear and constructive dialogues between communities, the families that live within them and service providers as a tool to enact useful change and provide ‘supportive support’.

What Would Young People Like Adults to Know? (July 2023)

The “Hope-Hack” (Hackathon) was a full-day, large-scale event for young people held in June 2023 at Ayrshire College in Kilmarnock. This briefing is based on the perspectives of those adults that acted as facilitators and is designed to be shared amongst all those with an interest in enhancing the voice and agency of young people in East Ayrshire.

WM2U Contributing to Systems Change (March 2023)

This is a short policy-oriented briefing that highlights the potential for a ‘WM2U approach’ to contribute to the practical realisation of the goals of public service reform.

WM2U Literature and Practice Review (December 2022)

This review explores national and international allied developments amongst those looking to achieve system change in policy and community contexts similar to those of WM2U. It provides a brief synopsis of initiatives or reports of most relevance or those highlighted recently as being of likely interest, supplemented by several accounts of practice.

Our Digest of Practice Lessons (December 2022)

A short digest of the key elements from the Literature and Practice Review.

What Matters to You: How Do We Go to Scale? Interim Report (March 2021)

This interim report sets the scene at an important juncture of the work of WM2U, to inform decisions about the future direction of the work. It draws on material from earlier reports dating back to the commencement of the work in early 2019.

What Matters to You: a Brief Literature Review (December 2019)

This small-scale scoping review helps to position the WM2U approach in a context of what is known about work with children on the edges of care and place-based approaches to system change – and the connections between the two areas of work.

Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Columba 1400: A key delivery partner of What Matters to You, Columba 1400 facilitate values-based leadership experiences for young people, parents, practitioners and Senior Leaders based on their long-standing leadership academies. <https://columba1400.com/>

Delivery Team: the WM2U coordinator, programme manager and funders.

Grow as We Go (GAWG): the shorthand way in which the learning partner team refer to their approach to learning and evaluation.

Leading Indicators: signs of essential changes that might otherwise be missed, dismissed as intangible or hard to measure. They describe the changes we want to see in positive terms and give early feedback and encouragement to participants.

Learning Framework: a set of outcome and leading indicators that reflects jointly made decisions and agreements about the most important measures of changes that people want to see and helps to guide the work as it proceeds.

Learning Partner: a team of people dedicated to supporting learning throughout the programme, with backgrounds in facilitation, learning, research and evaluation and System Dynamics. www.research-for-real.co.uk <https://www.animateconsulting.co.uk/> and <https://symmetriclab.com/>

Make it Happen Fund (MIHF): a dedicated fund to shift power, budgets and control into the hands of families and communities.

Outcomes: the ultimate changes that we want to see happening that should be tangible and visible in the community.

Programme Board: a high-level Board made up of the two funders and their staff.

System Change: a way of talking about change that acknowledges the need to change established and deep seated ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour in organisations and communities that continue to produce unwanted outcomes.

System Dynamics (SD): an approach that provides a way of understanding how complex systems change over time by co-creating useful computer simulation models that explore how changes in a wide range of variables are dynamically or causally connected.

The Lens: an organisation which specialises in developing customer-led change, supporting people to develop their ideas for change into workable and fundable projects.

The Nest Wellbeing Group (NWBG): an East Ayrshire community-led charity at the forefront of health and wellbeing activities for the people of Cumnock and the surrounding area. They have a strong focus on recovery and peer support.

Theory of Change: this is a description and illustration of how and why desired changes are expected to happen in a particular context. Usually used in programme planning and evaluation it shows the assumed links between different activities.

Values-based leadership experience (VBLE): a leadership programme facilitated by Columba 1400, to support parents, practitioners, and strategic leaders to work together to put what matters to families first. VBLEs are usually two-day residential programmes, with an initial meeting and a reconnector day shortly afterwards.

Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF): Scottish Government funding for £500 million investment between 2022 to 2026 to support the whole system transformational change required to reduce the need for crisis intervention and shift investment towards prevention and early intervention.

What Matters to You (WM2U): a name settled on for this work as a neat shorthand that expresses what it is about. With roots in person-centred care and health services in Scotland, this work takes the question out into communities.