



# Purpose - the ambition and key elements of the What Matters to You approach

## Report 1: What Matters to You: Evaluation Reports 2024

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December 2024

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## Acknowledgements and thanks

Thanks are due to very many people who have contributed to the work of WM2U in East Ayrshire and Dundee over the years.

The families, communities, practitioners and senior leaders have made us feel welcome and shared their perspectives with us in many important ways. Whilst the measurement of change is not commonly the focus of the members of the public, we know that communities want to see concrete change on the ground and to be confident that public service resources are well used. Their engagement has helped to create a stronger ethic of mutual care and learning, where we all pay attention to our values, to the trust and relationships between us, and the responsibilities we have towards each other. This portfolio of reports is written in service of those ambitions.

Columba 1400 have been an important partner throughout and with the funders BBC Children in Need and the Hunter Foundation have maintained their original commitment to a family and community-led funding programme to help children and their families thrive even as it has shifted shape and pace. All of us have also had to contend with the challenges of Covid-19 and the inevitable false starts and dead ends of any programme that aspires to be firmly rooted in learning.

The Learning Partner team are, Cathy Sharp (Research for Real), Jo Kennedy (Animate), Emily Whyte (Research for Real) and Douglas McKelvie and Donald Scott (Symmetric Scenarios). In 2024, WM2U is also supported by Kerstin Jorna an analyst on secondment from Dundee City Council, with support from the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund.

As learning partners, most of us have been alongside since 2019 as both participants and observers, with a commitment to support learning to enable the success of the work. We have come to know the people and the work in unusual and privileged ways. In writing this account, we acknowledge that there will be different perspectives. Whilst we hope that it is an authentic and fair account, we are responsible for any errors and omissions.

## Preface

Since 2019, there has been a series of learning partner reports, literature reviews and learning updates, many of which are available on the WM2U website.<sup>1</sup> Now in 2024 we are issuing “*Becoming Allies in Change*” a Learning Digest that summaries a portfolio of four learning and evaluation reports based on the experience of working in East Ayrshire and Dundee.

Each of the set 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 funding concluded in East Ayrshire in October 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.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/our-reports>

## 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](http://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 reconstructor 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.

## Executive Summary

What Matters to You (WM2U) has been working alongside families in Dundee and East Ayrshire to change the way support is offered in communities since 2019. Funded by BBC Children in Need and the Hunter Foundation, the original commitment was for up to £1m in partnership, with the specific ambition to move public resources to offer support earlier enabling children to flourish within their own families.

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

In both local authorities, parents and the different professional stakeholders have been united in their desire to improve the lives of children and families. WM2U takes place in the context of long-standing local and national ambitions for public service reform, alongside a range of interventions including The Promise and the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund that seek to support early intervention and prevention.<sup>3,4</sup>

WM2U has a clear interest in promoting the conditions that enable positive change, giving voice to people that are often not heard or perspectives that are discounted. 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, focused on what they have to offer. System change based on the voice of lived experience is often proposed, but rarely implemented.

This first report introduces a portfolio of four learning and evaluation reports based on the experience of working in East Ayrshire and Dundee between 2019 and 2024. These are accompanied by a digest that summarises the four reports, *“Becoming Allies in Change”*. Together this work crystallises and contributes further to the evolving understanding of the components of system change, initially articulated by the funders in early 2024.<sup>5</sup>

This report is written as a basis for further reading and details the key elements of the still evolving WM2U voice-led, place-based system change methodology.

The funders have been candid about their own uncertainty at the start. Their experience over more than five years has deepened their practical understanding of a voice-led systems change approach that can be adopted and adapted in other places.

This report illustrates the general scope of the ambition and practices of WM2U, the approach to learning and the overall evidence base. These elements are explored more fully in the East Ayrshire and Dundee local reports (Reports 2 and 3) and the Measures that Matter report (Report 4). Here, in describing this evolution, we highlight that:

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

<sup>3</sup> <https://thepromise.scot/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/whole-family-wellbeing-funding/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/codifying-our-learning-support-scale>

- Our literature and practice reviews of evidence from elsewhere have sought to illuminate learning about how the work of system change to support early intervention and prevention might proceed.
- Without a defined pathway for this way of working, we have sought to be learning-led, combining existing national and international evidence with collaborative and experiential evidence drawn from and tested out in practice through action research. This recognises complexity, viewing implementation as an adaptive, collaborative process rather than a simple delivery mechanism.
- In this spirit, WM2U has tested different local interventions to support values-based leadership, provide direct funding, generate ideas from community members, and promote learning amongst participants, which have all offered important lessons.

System change is ultimately about changing ways of thinking and doing, norms and power relations to shift the deeper levers of change. Key insights include:

- Seeking system change requires an approach that listens to local people first, understands communities as resourceful, and reconsiders strategic and operational assumptions about service responses.
- The success of the WM2U approach depends on the meaningful involvement of parents, practitioners, strategic leaders, statutory and third sector agencies. This has implications for the design and evaluation of any programmes that seek systemic impact.
- System change is a continuing endeavour, which can be supported by values-based leadership experiences. A deliberate, intentional approach to convening for change is needed to assemble people together from across traditional boundaries and silos, to mobilise their common interest in making change happen on the ground on an ongoing basis.
- The structures to support change processes, such as learning communities and 'accelerator' programmes, need to be highly purposeful, appropriately adapted and paced to suit local communities and practitioners.
- Setting up local direct funding mechanisms within communities is an approach with considerable potential to catalyse and galvanise system change.
- Relational practice<sup>6</sup> questions established notions of whose experiences and knowledge are valued, and which views of the world prevail, and it is the foundation for systemic change.
- Assumptions about early help and prevention, embedded in policies and practices, often reflect deficit thinking and a focus on services, which risks viewing children and families' needs as events, requiring a service-led response.

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'relational practice' describes a way of being, an underpinning ethos, which enables the building and maintenance of healthy relationships. Relational practices aim to foster and maintain trusting and strong relationships, as a basis for creating systemic solutions to the issues that matters to communities.



Evaluation is an important part of the prevailing model of public service, that can influence decisions about policy and funding and yet, can feel abstract and remote.

Traditional evaluation practice is rooted in established notions of what counts as evidence and what kinds of knowledge are valued. In this work and in drawing conclusions, we have given weight to the views of parents and community members and sought to bring them in as active partners in sensemaking.

This is an important approach to the co-production of knowledge. The stories that inform this work ground it in the human realities of life in communities. Ultimately, the willingness of parents to engage in learning together have contributed to our belief that it is possible to move towards different evaluative practices that create a more collective accountability for improving the opportunities for families in our communities. Their engagement has helped to create a stronger ethic of mutual care and learning, where we all pay attention to our values, to the trust and relationships between us, and the responsibilities we have towards each other.

The funders suggest that their learning from WM2U has been significant. They have had the confidence in the approach to extend the programme funding on two occasions in October 2021 and June 2024. In East Ayrshire, the funders in consultation with the Council, concluded its funding from October 2024, to enable the Council to focus on its significant strategic developments and service reviews. In 2024, funding has also been extended to Clackmannanshire's Family Wellbeing Partnership to support the WM2U approach to achieving voice-led system change.

# 1. Introduction and overview

## The purpose of WM2U

What Matters to You (WM2U) has been working alongside families in Dundee and East Ayrshire to change the way support is offered in communities since 2019. The specific ambition is to move public resources to offer support earlier enabling children to flourish within their own families. This is built on a theory of change that by listening to the voices of children and families and acting on their insights, local authorities will be able to redesign services and invest in early intervention meaning that fewer children will need to be looked after and the need for expensive care provision will diminish.<sup>7</sup>

Asking ‘What Matters to You?’ is a direct personal and dignified appeal to people and communities to engage, inspired by similar appeals in healthcare in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> WM2U has a clear interest in promoting the conditions that enable positive change, giving voice to people that are often not heard or perspectives that are discounted.

The intention is to support practitioners and community members to connect with their values and put ‘values into action’, amplifying what is working, and finding ways to address the barriers to improving the lives of families who are struggling. The work is led by families and local practitioners, with a coordinator on the ground, Columba 1400-led values-based leadership experiences, small grants, programme management and a learning partner, all funded by the Hunter Foundation and BBC Children in Need.<sup>9</sup>

## The Funders

There have been long-standing partnership arrangements in place between the two funders, between them. The Hunter Foundation (THF) is a proactive venture philanthropy fund with a strong entrepreneurial focus and roots in Ayrshire, Scotland.

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*“We focus on our partnerships and leverage to maximize impacts and stretch our cash further. We also take calculated risks against stubborn challenges; in other words, we gamble – in an educated manner. Often the gambles pay off, but occasionally we fail. And to the point of failure – If we simply did what others have always done, where would we be? Philanthropy is about taking risks, pushing the envelope and hopefully changing the dynamics of situations for the better.”* (Hunter Foundation, CEO, undated)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/our-story>

<sup>8</sup> This phrasing was introduced to the funders by Sir Harry Burns a former Chief Medical Officer for Scotland.

<sup>9</sup> WM2U is now supported by a headline commitment of £3.3m of which almost £2.1m has been spent to date across three sites.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.thehunterfoundation.co.uk/who-we-are/general-information/foreword-ceo/>

BBC Children in Need uses public donations to change the lives children and young people across the UK experiencing a wide range of challenges and issues, particularly those arising from poverty and deprivation, mental health, family issues and social inequality.<sup>11</sup>

The choice of Dundee and East Ayrshire was originally based on existing relationships between the Hunter Foundation and local leaders. WM2U officially started in late 2018, with the appointment of a learning and a delivery partner followed by the appointment of the coordinators in 2019. Before then the Hunter Foundation played an active local role building relationships and a shared vision for the work amongst local leaders.

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*"It's a little bit of the 'perfect storm' in both local authorities. There has been a strong sense that the status quo is unacceptable and of the need to do things differently. [The local authorities] are 'up for the change' ... its driven by pressures on money, but it's not only that we can't afford it, it's also that we have to do something for children and young people." (Hunter Foundation, 2019)*

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In considering the prospects in early 2019, BBC Children in Need acknowledged that this lead in time was difficult:

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*"The journey was overly long and protracted – but it hasn't led us to a bad place. There is now a good level of thoughtfulness and flexibility. I am beginning to feel it will do something positive. Maybe the journey will turn out to have been needed?" (BBC Children in Need, 2019)*

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The differences in ethos, accountabilities and working practices are recognised by both funders, but they suggest that 'patience, pragmatism and clarifying respective roles' helped to get to a reasonable 'starting point' in 2019. Given their location and approach, the Hunter Foundation have continued to play a more active operational role on the ground in Scotland, with BBC Children in Need adopting an oversight function, including developing an initial theory of change and managing the contract with learning partners. Staff from both funders sit on the WM2U Programme Board, which is co-chaired by their respective CEOs.

Looking back, the funders have been candid about this early period, acknowledging the inherent uncertainty of their approach and optimistic spirit in which they embarked on this work.

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*"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 went where the energy was and in the initial stages of the*

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbcchildreninneed.co.uk/>

*work began by utilising contacts we already had to act as door openers.”*  
(Funders, Codifying Report 2024)<sup>12</sup>

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As we learned together and from others, WM2U began expressing the ambition as ‘voiced system change’: using voice to shift the cultural and organisational values, mindsets and practices, that are often taken for granted or unnoticed.

Both funders have articulated their view that change is about people and relationships, not about systems, plans or policies and they have made a commitment to being ‘purposefully more involved and dynamic’ than conventionally may have been the case, willing to ‘take the time to build trust and find the right ways to intervene’.

As the funder on the ground, the Hunter Foundation ‘venture philanthropy’ approach has adopted 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. The Hunter Foundation elements of their approach as:

- Working with CEOs and other senior leaders to build relationships and trust, investing time and brokering new connections through their own networks. In turn, 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.
- 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, including with the Robertson Trust, The Promise Scotland and the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund.

Other operational elements of the funder’s practices were:

- The establishment of an Oversight and Enabling Board of strategic leaders in each local authority.
- A conscious decision not to fund local authorities directly, with the rationale to ensure the best chance of sustainability once funds end.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/codifying-our-learning-support-scale>

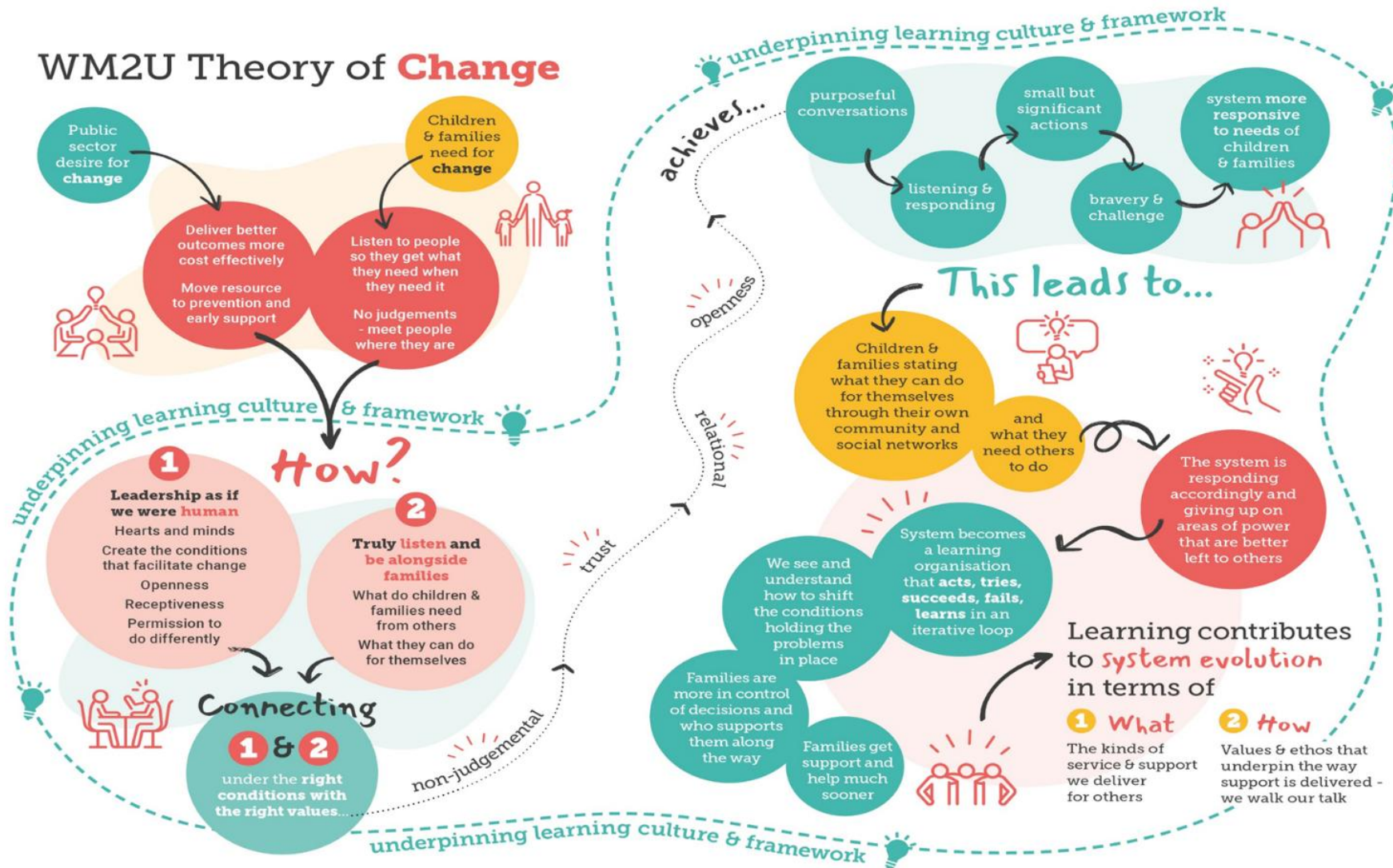
- Retention of staff and continuation of the work throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, seeing it as an opportunity for strengthening and grounding relationships based on that shared experience.
- Adopting a ‘test and learn’ approach: anticipating ‘false starts’ and ‘dead ends’ but being prepared to take time and multiple trials to find the right routes and approaches to build relationships and trust and see early signs of change.
- Having a learning partnership rather than a traditional evaluator in place from the outset, initially seeking a sound basis for decisions about direction and progress, and ultimately understanding learning-focused practices as a key part of a system change methodology.
- Extending the programme funding on two occasions in October 2021 and June 2024, with anticipated conclusion in 2026.

This approach is outlined in the theory of change graphic in Figure 1.1.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This was developed in 2021 by the WM2U Delivery Team and Learning Partners as a second iteration of an earlier theory of change graphic.

Figure 1.1: WM2U Theory of Change (2021)





## Strategic Objectives and Indicators

An initial set of Strategic Objectives was agreed in 2021, and subsequently updated in the Strategic Delivery Plan March 2023 – June 2026.<sup>14</sup> These objectives express the ambition of the funders as it evolved, and together with nine impact indicators form part of the Learning Framework for all stakeholders.

**S01: 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.**

- a) Families have voice & agency and are at the heart of change for themselves and others.
- b) The contribution & achievements of families, communities & local decision makers are visible to them & others.
- c) Families, communities, and decision makers pay attention to learning to sustain continuous change.

**S02: Scale the WM2U approach deeply across both Local Authority areas.**

- d) Those working alongside families put their voice at the heart of their work, have new insights about what matters to families and express confidence in applying these in their day-to-day work.
- e) The degree of scaling is seen through a combination of changes in the embedded cultural values and beliefs experienced within the system; changes in formal organisational policies, protocols, and structures; and increasing numbers of people engaging in this approach.

**S03: By listening to the voices of children and families Public Services will increase investment in prevention, thus in the medium term making significant public sector savings for reinvestment and enable children to flourish within their own families.**

- f) Public service leaders have shifted resources and focus to offer support earlier, enabling children to flourish within their own families.
- g) Local authorities and their partners can use data to measure the shift to prevention & identify how they reduce the number of children who are care experienced or in formal measures, such as their Child Protection Register.

**S04: Our influencing strategy achieves a redesign of children's services locally and contributes to how national policy is implemented and practice is shaped nationally.**

- h) Genuine voice-led policy and practice is visible, experienced, and contributing to local, redesigned children's services.
- i) Learning influences understanding of how voice can be mobilised to influence the design and implementation of national policies.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/sites/default/files/Strategic%20Delivery%20PLAN%20FINAL.PDF>

## 2. Our approach to learning and evaluation

In the absence of any defined pathway for this way of working we have sought to be learning-led, combining existing national and international evidence with collaborative and experiential evidence drawn from and tested out in practice through action research.

WM2U seeks to adopt an equitable approach addressing the systemic and structural barriers that get in the way of people being able to thrive. This recognises that those most affected by inequality must be equal partners in this endeavour, and this important principle extends to how we approach learning and the evaluation of impact. WM2U and the learning partners have sought to embed continuous and collective learning, as an essential component of making change. This is discussed more fully in Report 4.

### 2.1 How we Grow as We Go

Our initial literature review highlighted the need to develop a learning approach that engages with all partners and involves them in developing a 'Learning Framework'.<sup>15</sup> We wanted to create a culture which values embedded collaborative and experiential learning. This meant working alongside families to test different forms of response, capturing impact, identifying enablers, unpicking barriers to change, and ultimately finding ways to share learning so that others may incorporate it into their own work. We call this approach "Grow as We Go" (GAWG) expressed in the Blueprint in Figure 2.1.

This approach is important in capturing the shifts in practice that are necessary for system change: amplifying what is effective and adjusting where needed. Approaching evaluative practice as a shared interest and responsibility helps those involved to have a sense of value and progress, maintain their perseverance, and generate truly valued outcomes.

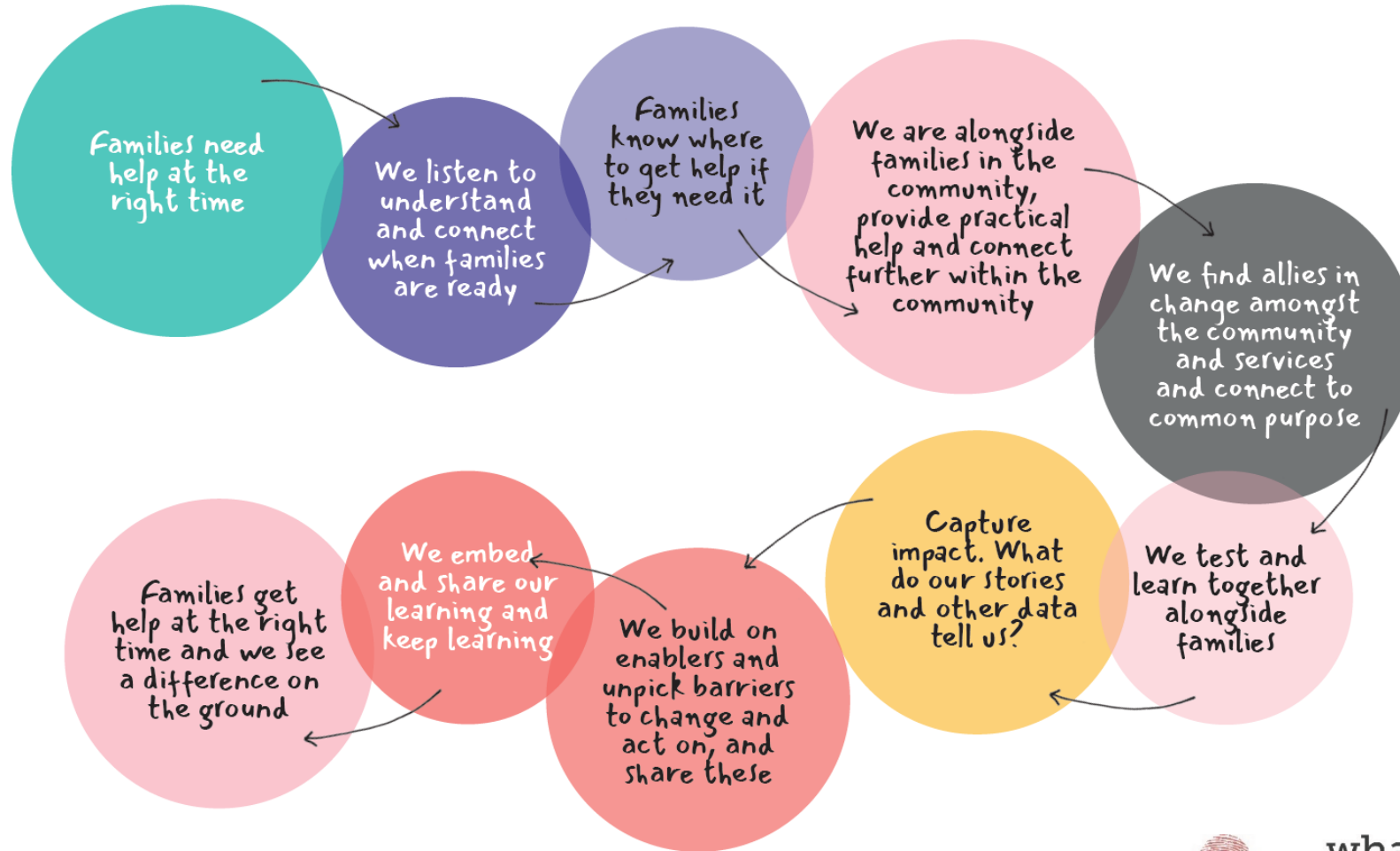
The GAWG approach includes developing realistic and shared expectations about measuring impact, aligning the direction of travel with the long-term strategic intentions of funders and local sponsors. We recognise the balancing act of demonstrating achievements whilst acknowledging uncertainty and offering enough reassurance that resources are being well used. Report 4 explores some of the challenges inherent in the approach in more detail and reflects an important part of the unanticipated learning from WM2U of wider relevance to other programmes concerned with preventative and early help interventions and those designed to improve outcomes for children and families.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/brief-literature-review>



Figure 2.1: A blueprint of our learning approach



## 2.2 Research and evaluation methods

The learning partner role blends expertise in research and system dynamic modelling, with facilitation of on-going and one-off reflective and social learning processes and programme evaluation.

Embedded learning has become an increasingly important part of the WM2U approach and has provided the funders with a sound basis for decisions about direction and progress. Our ambition remains to ensure that local stakeholders are well placed to sustain the momentum of the work after the external funding ends in 2026. For further information on the learning partner approach see Report 4.

The data on which this report series is based is rich and varied. The deeper consideration of impact in this report has relied upon the previous reports, themselves rooted in many formative and summative social research methods, data analysis and sense-checking exercises. In addition, we have drawn on recent fieldwork in 2024 to provide a more summative view. Over the course of the work, the research methods used include:

- In-depth face to face, online and telephone individual interviews, including repeat interviews with key active partners, including parents, practitioners and strategic leaders
- Focus groups and small group interviews with key informants, e.g. The Lens review, the Make It Happen Phase 1 review, The Nest, Street Soccer, The Hackathon facilitators, the Dundee CLD team.
- Online surveys, including VBLE feedback and occasional topic focused surveys.
- Story gathering and analysis, including group reflective practices at Oversight Boards.
- System Mapping using System Dynamics.
- Community Research including Photovoice and arts-based methods.
- Larger group facilitation approaches including World Café style events and workshops.
- Grow as We Go reflective sessions – on-going collective analysis and sensemaking.
- Collaborative data collection, collaborative analysis and resonance testing at national stakeholder events (Sept and Nov 2022, May 2023 and April 2024).

## 2.3 Our quality criteria for evaluating systems change

To reflect our ambition for the GAWG approach, we developed a set of quality criteria for WM2U that are systemic, inclusive, and participatory. These are included in Report 4.

Our immersion in the context has enabled us to build relationships with parents, practitioners and strategic leaders before, during and after data collection to gain mutual understanding and respect, value contributions and integrate diverse perspectives. We are

confident that this has enabled conditions in which parents, practitioners and strategic leaders have felt able to share, authentically and honestly.

We have found that having absolute clarity of purpose and sensitivity to context when generating and using evidence are fundamental. We seek to uphold ethical standards including negotiation of informed consent, confidentiality, and the respectful use of and credit for contributions. There are constant challenges to balance voice and anonymity: we have always sought to share this dilemma with participants and negotiate an appropriate, bespoke solution.

In developing stories, we have shared field notes and drafts, so that participants retain decision-making power on what and how material is presented and the conditions under which material is shared and for what purpose.

We are thankful for the active interest, willingness to share, and candour shown by participants. As authors we retain responsibility for decisions about this report and for any errors, matters of interpretation, and any omissions. Report 4 includes our own reflections on this element of the work.

## **2.4 The Learning Framework: bringing our theories of change to life**

The learning framework is a scaffolding that ‘wraps-around’ the work underway and reflects jointly made decisions about the most important formative or ‘leading indicators’ and summative or outcome measures.

By 2021, two years into the work we were clear that making an impact and achieving it at scale needed to be a conscious choice.<sup>16</sup> To help WM2U to make that deliberate choice in each locality, we needed to develop an understanding about where we want to go, where we have got to and how we got there through a learning framework which seeks to:

- establish collective prioritisation, a sharing of ownership of and accountability for initiatives going forward, including a focus on what is or is not WM2U.
- support the design and learning from small ‘tests of change’ able to generate insights about creating the conditions for system change.
- Ensure we measure what matters to the key stakeholders and enable funders, commissioners, and senior leaders to hold the uncertainty about impact and the use of resources.
- Clarify assumptions (eg. the ideas embedded in our theories of change) and how might they have been challenged or affirmed by continued financial austerity, the pandemic and recovery from it,
- Consider realistic timescales over which we expect to see change and establish real sustainability of the impact of WM2U.
- Consolidate a collective understanding of our ambitions, our theories of action in relation to scaling, and each of our contributions.
- Help us to ‘grow as we go’ through supporting ongoing dialogue across each system and the creation of accountability for learning to best serve this work.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/what-matters-you-how-do-we-go-scale> This is also discussed in Section 4.

- Identify key quantitative and qualitative indicators to assess the impact of WM2U, likely to include analysis of existing and new primary data.

The details of the outcome and leading indicators for each locality are included in Reports 2 and 3. The desired outcomes are expressed slightly differently in each locality as a set of five outcome indicators. The desired 'leading indicators' are also slightly differently expressed in each locality reflecting the way that WM2U has developed in each place. These are framed as three related but distinct sets of indicators for parents and carers, practitioners, and senior leaders, sitting beneath the Strategic Indicators valued by the Programme Board.

The leading indicators reflect the shared interests in relationships that enable:

- The development of safety and environments in which people feel welcome and heard
- The ability to work alongside others in the community and amongst different professional groups
- Recognition of achievements and learning together
- Confidence in strengths and roles
- Developing trust, recognition of contributions
- Willingness to test out new approaches and learn from success and failure.

These behaviours are expected to lead to:

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

As we work together in this way, we expect to develop a good understanding of local conditions, organisational and community priorities and values, what enables the changes we seek and what gets in the way. We are confident that through sharing our learning together, we will be more likely to achieve real and enduring system change.

## 3. Creating the conditions: policy and practice perspectives

Sections 3 and 4 provide an overview of developments that apply to both Dundee and East Ayrshire. Section 3 provides an overview of policy and practice perspectives, including two local reports from 2019 and 2021. Section 4 provides an account of funded interventions and emerging learning from WM2U. Together these signpost readers to important elements of the WM2U approach as it evolved and sets the scene for discussion of progress in each area in Reports 2 and 3 and the measurement of change in Report 4.

### 3.1 Readiness for system change, 2019

In May 2019, the WM2U Programme Board considered a learning report that built on the lessons for systems change shared in a report by the Robertson Trust.<sup>17</sup> The difficulties they had encountered operating in a similar context identified several 'risk factors' relevant to WM2U. Their insights were supplemented by reflections based on a series of interviews with funders and strategic leaders from East Ayrshire and Dundee.

Together these reflections highlighted the complexities of funding a programme in the public sector designed to promote better outcomes for children on the edge of care, which necessarily requires significant system change.

The readiness review suggested that there was appetite for the approach and an understanding that WM2U was about collaboration and co-design, a model based on 'working alongside' rather than 'doing to'. Partners agreed that the prevailing situation for children and young people was unacceptable. The investment of significant time by the funders prior to 'launch' in 2019 helped to establish a strong partnership approach, acknowledging the risks and barriers to change, the legacies of established ways of working and negative perceptions created by 'well-meaning efforts' of the past.

There was a shared vision, commitment to making a difference and conviction that the direction of travel was the right one, with confidence that the work could move into a new 'accelerated implementation' phase. The ambition to reconfigure services, with potential disinvestment in some areas and realignment of resources towards approaches that are effective was affirmed.

This summary of the issues and challenges identified then, supports the evaluation of progress to 2024.

Systems change work is a difficult space within which to operate, and a huge degree of patience and tenacity is required. There were no rules to follow, and the processes and outcomes are uncertain. In considering the 'readiness for system change' amongst WM2U and their partners, notable factors were:

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<sup>17</sup> This was based on their decision to withdraw financial support from the Transforming Pathways programme designed and delivered in partnership with CELSIS (University of Strathclyde).

- The need to ensure that children, young people and their families feel ownership of the process and to ensure that each intervention is tailored to meet local needs and reflect local messages about 'what matters'.
- Systems change work can be frustrating and messy. There will need to be challenging conversations about cultures, assumptions and mindsets.
- There is a need to become comfortable with uncertainty, to hold it lightly, whilst still being accountable and producing results.
- The value of experience and evidence from elsewhere, drawing on examples from literature, policy and practice, rather than privileging such knowledge.
- The importance of finding a common language in developing true partnership working, for example, using 'What Matters to You' rather than talking about 'children on the edge of care' as a way of engaging with people, rather than labelling them based on their adverse circumstances.
- The value of developing a 'Theory of Change' to keep the focus on the difference the partners are trying to make and help to create clarity about roles, responsibilities and accountability.

Challenges, difficulties and significant uncertainties were anticipated, with an acknowledged need to keep a range of people on board and manage expectations, resisting a desire for quick fixes and impatience to see results. In addition, the funders acknowledged that it would be important to:

- Ensure the on-the-ground delivery of what matters to people locally, which may entail adapting services to meet the needs of families, shifting spend and challenging cherished ideals amongst partners.
- Secure the visible support of those at a high level in the statutory authorities. Their presence at meetings helps to clarify what is needed and 'gives permission' where needed.
- Accept that mistakes will be made. This requires a commitment to developing trust, whilst showing humanity, humility and humour in response to whatever transpires.
- Keep learning. Learn to share stories, particularly small instances of 'good practice': noticing and acknowledging small steps are important, making these visible, motivational and sustainable. Less conventional 'indicators' are as important as statistical or quantitative metrics. Using insights from the ongoing learning and feedback processes helps to inform whether to continue or not, despite the uncertainty about ultimate outcomes.
- Be prepared to adapt interventions, including the 'Columba 1400 VBLE model' in the light of emerging learning to meet the specific needs and interests of each community.
- Maintain support for the WM2U Coordinators to sustain their focus and enable them to thrive despite the uncertainty.

### 3.2 Exploring local and national policy and perspectives

We have produced three reports drawing on literature and practice and local and national policy perspectives about how to achieve change (December 2019, December 2022 and March 2023)<sup>18</sup>. The key insights which informed our direction were:

- Putting voice or lived expertise at the centre was seen to be an important missing ingredient in the practice of public service reform, key to both understanding the realities of the operation of the system, and the ultimate test of whether reform is being progressed.
- Relationships need to be built and sustained with people and communities and with individuals who may also require support in developing confidence in speaking up. Processes need to be developed for considering and dealing with issues that emerge.
- Staff working with the public need to build confidence and skill in a more relational approach. That, in turn, requires managers and policy makers in the different sectors and organisations to provide an enabling, supportive environment.
- Change cannot be ‘delivered’, but implementation is a collaborative learning process. Any blueprint or plan needs to be subject to critical and continuous review in the light of emerging experience and small, valued successes.
- The rootedness of an approach in local, small-scale interactions, even where these are widely adopted, must be combined with the strategic, planning, and managerial concerns about scale, resource allocation and effectiveness at the population level.

### 3.3 Taking stock: how do we go to scale? 2021

The second strategic objective of WM2U is to scale the approach deeply across both Local Authority areas. The March 2021 Interim Report “How do we go to scale?” reviewed progress and sought to inform decisions about the future direction of the work.<sup>19</sup> At this time, ambition, hope, and expectations were all high. The interim report explored the prospective impact of WM2U and how to evaluate system change.<sup>20</sup> It highlighted that:

- WM2U had a clearly expressed and compelling purpose: to amplify and share the voices and authentic experience of people whom systems are supposed to be serving, to create impetus for system change.
- For parents, their engagement in WM2U was making a difference, not just in building trust but in enhancing confidence, self-esteem and hope in the future, both for their own lives and their communities. The continuing Covid-19 crisis brought the very practical aspect of the role of the coordinators into sharp relief, linking parents with services able to support them.

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<sup>18</sup> These are available here <https://wm2u.co.uk/our-reports>

<sup>19</sup> This drew on material from earlier reports dating back to the commencement of the work in early 2019, including the initial literature review. <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/what-matters-you-how-do-we-go-scale>

<sup>20</sup> These are also explored in Report 4.

- In both areas, there remained positive relationships with senior leaders, although securing their time to focus on creating the conditions for long-term change was difficult.
- WM2U offered the potential to be a practical demonstration of system change, although this would rely on wider engagement, ownership and accountability amongst local stakeholders and the creation of a more strategic way forward in each local area.

The learning support helped the funders and delivery team to crystallise their thinking about WM2U, not as a single coordinator-led project, working with defined 'service users' and with limited capacity to reach people in the community, but as an *approach* that crucially depends for impact on the wider involvement of key groups of practitioners and statutory and third sector agencies.

This important insight did not alter the fundamental theory of change but influenced thinking about how to go to scale. Scaling is often thought of as 'rolling out' a successful intervention or programme, extending the reach of the work to greater numbers of people. The report distinguishes between three types of scaling, all of which have merit.<sup>21</sup>

- 'Scaling Out' is most akin to the traditional view of 'going to scale' or rollout where the focus is on replication of a successful intervention with greater numbers of people.
- 'Scaling Up' refers to impacting on the formal and institutional structures that might hold a problem in place.
- 'Scaling Deep' refers to the embedded cultural values and beliefs, whether formally expressed or otherwise, that continue to reproduce unwanted patterns in complex systems that act as barriers to change.

For any systemic change, scaling needs to happen at all three levels. This was especially pertinent to the work of WM2U at that time to explore thinking amongst all stakeholders about how to achieve system change. Positioning 'scaling deep' as a route to 'scaling out' was seen as crucial for the wider impact and sustainability of the work

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<sup>21</sup> Riddell and Moore (2015) Scaling Out, Scaling Up and Scaling Deep: Advancing Systemic Social Innovation and the Learning Processes to Support It: October [https://mcconnellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ScalingOut\\_Nov27A\\_AV\\_BrandedBleed.pdf](https://mcconnellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ScalingOut_Nov27A_AV_BrandedBleed.pdf)



## 4. Creating the conditions: local interventions and learning

### 4.1 Values-based leadership experiences (VBLEs)

Values Based Leadership Experiences (VBLEs) were funded to create the foundations for the system change which WM2U seeks to promote and embed. VBLEs are designed to support parents, practitioners, and strategic leaders to work together to put what matters to families first. Columba 1400 has delivered their model of leadership academies for over 20 years across the public and not-for-profit sectors, with a strong focus on school leadership.<sup>22</sup> Their methodology is rooted in the principles of humanistic psychology and relational practice, characterised as a form of ‘servant leadership’. The principle of ‘warmth of welcome’ is fundamental to creating a psychologically ‘safe space’ in which to have in-depth and meaningful conversations, enabling participants to develop trusting relationships which can facilitate collective action.

Columba 1400 is a high-profile organisation in Scotland, with substantial credibility with policy makers and previous participants. This profile undoubtedly plays a part in attracting people to take part in VBLEs, particularly professionals, and in overcoming scepticism amongst those that find it hard to justify taking time out from the commanding pressures of day-to-day work to focus on their own development.

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*“Our belief is that by creating the right conditions for people to reflect on their own leadership capabilities and connect with other people on their shared humanity, we enable people to ‘be the change’ in their own lives, schools, communities, and systems.” (Columba 1400)*

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Others interested in the type of leadership needed for system change share relevant allied perspectives:

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*“Relationships are the essence and fabric of collective impact. What’s critical for those who facilitate collective impact efforts is to support relationship development in ways that build true empathy and compassion so that authentic connections happen, particularly between diverse participants. These deeper connections can form new avenues for innovation to address the social problem at hand”.<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/our-partners>

<sup>23</sup> Stanford Social Innovation Review: the Relational Work of Systems Change: Milligan, Zerda and Kania 2022

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*"[system convenors] And we need them more than ever. In a world with multiple crises and competing agendas, joining the dots, shifting world views, and becoming more agile is a survival imperative. This is true at all levels of scale; cross-boundary engagement and innovative thinking are required for global challenges as well as local community strengthening."*<sup>24</sup>

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The purpose of the VBLE within the wider context of WM2U, is to support parents, practitioners, and strategic leaders to work together to put what matters to families first.

The VBLE sessions with parents have focused on building their confidence, recognising their own strengths, and using their experience to articulate the difference they want to make in their communities. The VBLEs with strategic leaders, and with practitioners, have had a stronger focus on reconnecting with values and collaboration. Reflecting local conditions, there have been differences in the way that Columba 1400 have operated in each locality: in East Ayrshire there has been greater fidelity to the original notion of the three-day values-based leadership experience, both face-to-face and on-line, whilst in Dundee there has been greater variation in offerings to include more ad hoc facilitation of conversations.<sup>25</sup> The first VBLE that brought parents and practitioners together in a single cohort was held in East Ayrshire in late 2022.

## Feedback from VBLEs

By August 2024, there had been fifteen different VBLE cohorts across the two local authorities, engaging with a total of 186 people.<sup>26</sup> Feedback from successive VBLEs has been consistent: participant's responses in both areas and across all the groups are highly positive. Practitioners 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. Others have become more motivated to make changes in their own community and this has proved to be a good foundation for their further efforts, such as the development of The Nest in East Ayrshire and The Wee/Big Night In, and Charleston Matters in Dundee.

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*"I love this. I know we're going to make a difference. It's going to be a huge difference to some people. My passion helps me to stay with it – and that I feel like part of a family. We're on a journey, but it's actually only just begun."*

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<sup>24</sup> Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, Systems Convening, A crucial form of leadership for the 21st century, Social Learning Lab, 2021

<sup>25</sup> Due to the pandemic some of these experiences have had to be facilitated online, although the Family and Communities Leadership Academy and the Allied Health Professional programme in East Ayrshire were delivered face to face.

<sup>26</sup> East Ayrshire: 80 people across eight cohorts. Dundee: 106 people across 7 cohorts.

*WM2U - it doesn't just stop at Columba 1400. That's where it starts. They're like a steppingstone into what can be possible" (EA Parent, Oct 21)*

*"... I feel like I have unlocked a whole new part of myself that I never thought I had the time to explore. It has giving me a new outlook on a whole range of aspects in my life, I feel different, I think differently, and I am in a much more positive place mentally. I have been stuck for a while, but now I am ready to do something, be something! ... I am excited to use these new skills to continue to take on new learning opportunities and grow as a person. (Dundee parent, Nov 23)*

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Strategic leaders appreciated the time and opportunity that a VBLE offered to connect with each other and consider how to listen to families.

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*"It was a great experience. I think it brought everybody together... It certainly made us think a wee bit differently, but it also showed that we all wanted the same thing for children and young people, which was really valuable. And it helped us maybe to think outside the box, if you like a bit more and to think about working in different ways. ... people still talk about it." (EA SL, 24)*

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In September and October 2023, WM2U sought to convene a further VBLE in East Ayrshire for the Grange HEART cluster that would have brought together a range of partners that work from the CentreStage building in Kilmarnock. This was delayed several times and ultimately did not proceed due to a lack of clarity amongst local authority partners about the purpose, and therefore who should attend. This was acknowledged to be frustrating and disappointing by WM2U and Columba 1400 and staff from the HEART team. It is notable that in Dundee, where strategic leaders have already taken part in the parallel VBLE known as the Families and Communities Leadership Academy (FCLA), there has been a strong commitment to supporting the implementation of WM2U across the whole.<sup>27</sup>

## **4.2 Developing values-into-action**

Over time, it became clearer that whilst VBLEs are a crucial part of interventions to engage people in WM2U they are only a part of what is needed to see change on the ground and across the system. Practitioners said that they felt authorised to work differently, although they struggled to make time to both to listen to families directly and to collaborate with each other. Some planned VBLEs were halted which was frustrating and time consuming for all involved.

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<sup>27</sup> The FCLA has been separately funded by the Hunter Foundation.

This exposed both a gap in the original design-thinking of WM2U with unclear expectations of what would happen after a VBLE, and the struggle to implement VBLEs in their original form in the circumstances of the pandemic.

Such a leadership experience could be characterised as a form of ‘convening for systems change’: systems are made up of people and a deliberate, intentional approach is needed to assemble people together from across traditional boundaries and silos, bringing together different perspectives, practices, and institutions around a common interest in ‘doing what it takes to make a real difference’. The composition of each cohort, how people are selected or invited to take part, and the expectations that are created during the time that is spent together, are all crucial.

In the absence of a clear VBLE follow up plan, local coordinators became integral to the maintenance of connections and relationships amongst those that had been part of the WM2U in each locality and led to the trialling of learning communities.

### Learning about learning communities, 2021-22

Initially, the model of learning communities was seen as a way of putting the ideas generated in the values-based leadership experiences into practice, to enable and sustain system change.

These were largely on-line spaces, designed by WM2U with learning partner support. The original offer was to host six sessions, held roughly every 4-6 weeks, to launch and test out the interest in taking this work forward in each locality, with the hope that the groups would continue to meet on a self-sustaining basis, perhaps with support or input from key stakeholders from the local authority or health and social care partnership.

The first learning community began meeting in Dundee in August 2021, at the request of the Changemaker VBLE group that had met online earlier in the year.<sup>28</sup> It was seen as a chance to stay connected to and embed the WM2U approach and identify enablers and barriers to feed back to Strategic Leads.

Participants offered each other mutual support and encouragement and shared their ideas for changes to put families at the heart of their practice, which led to some new examples of joint working. The experience also became the basis of developing indicators of the change for families and practitioners, which have been included in the WM2U Learning Framework. This Dundee group retained a real desire to work collaboratively to improve what was on offer for families but didn’t have a strong enough connection to one common goal or one community to sustain momentum in the longer term.

An East Ayrshire learning community met between December 2021 and June 2022.<sup>29</sup> The learning community participants came from across the local authority, including Social Work, Vibrant Communities, the NHS, the third sector and Ayrshire College. The group were

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<sup>28</sup> Fourteen people signed up to be part of the learning community. This group met six times, including once in person. Attendance varied between 5-11 people.

<sup>29</sup> Eleven people attended the first session from a wider group of around fourteen people, of which about six had been part of the online Changemakers VBLE.

keen to learn more about how this work might take shape, eager to build on their earlier experience and interests and valued the 'protected time with people you don't normally get to talk to'. There was agreement about the value of hearing from parents, and questions about how the children's voices could also be heard.

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*"I think this highlights that our ongoing need is not necessarily for more clinicians and professionals, it's about normal people who can help connect and signpost people to the right services and support (which actually would help free up other professionals time in the long run) - support from someone relatable, caring, and proactive who as you say can ask the right questions, notice the signs." (EA, learning community participant, Dec 21)*

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The participants expressed a need for protected space for action and reflection to enable them to make a difference on the ground. The WM2U Coordinator and learning partner also hosted drop-in sessions with learning community members to facilitate a greater mutual understanding of the purpose of the community and the part people may play in it. Subsequently the group discussed their on-going work, and new ideas for small tests of change. The group emphasised the importance of building in meaningful measures of impact and contributed to the development of the learning framework.

Despite their ambition to work with families, it was difficult to make this a practical reality: again, participants struggled to develop a shared focus of activity given their existing workloads and to prioritise their engagement in the learning community. By June 2022, some of the members of the learning community were involved in developing ideas alongside parents as part of the Lens, and this became the focus.

By this time WM2U had begun referring to a follow-on or 'values-into-action' phase and since then the approach to convening VBLEs has evolved to be more selective and purposeful. We learned that there is a need for clear, shared purpose in establishing any kind of 'leadership' programme; and that systems change is a continuing endeavour, that goes well beyond the confines of a one-off training course or experience.

There have been several further VBLEs in Dundee and in both areas Columba 1400 have worked with the local WM2U Coordinator to clarify the focus of what is on offer and this is discussed in Report 3.

### Using funding to support voice: Make it Happen Fund (Phase 1)

The WM2U funders saw the piloting of a *Make it Happen Fund* (MIHF) as a demonstration of how funding might be used to mobilise the voice of parents. The establishment of the Fund involved consultation with parents about the setup, distribution, and management of the funds. Families contributed to the design of an application process, and some were involved in the management of the fund. Delayed by Covid and difficulties in setting up an accountability structure for dispersing the funds, it became operational in June 2021.

- A total of just over £6,500 was awarded to fourteen families in summer 2021. In Dundee, seven families received MIHF support, with a small number declining to take part. Seven families connected with WM2U in East Ayrshire have received MIHF support.

Phase 1 of the MIHF was a modest experiment to test out the difference that offering a relatively small amount of money directly to families can make. An internal learning review reported to the WM2U Programme Board in April 2022.

This demonstrated that the overall response to the fund from those who have benefited was unwaveringly positive, giving families a sense that they are valued. The operation of the fund was non-stigmatising. It gave people choices and challenged embedded ideas about handouts. Some people were surprised to be offered a budget and initially felt uncomfortable.

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*“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.” (EA parent, 2021)*

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When faced with a real choice, parents were thoughtful about how they exercised it. Most parents took the opportunity to ask their children what they would like and were 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.

Phase 1 of the MIHF demonstrated early progress towards, and the potential to meet, the WM2U desired outcomes at family and community level to promote better mental health for children and families; provide real supportive support at the right time; a sense of looking towards a positive future; and of belonging to a valued group, to feel that you matter and are valued within it.

There were lessons about both being better at meeting material needs in the right way, at the right time, and about developing structures and systems that are led by families themselves to help each other.

The success of this phase gave WM2U funders and the delivery team the confidence that:

- A relational approach generates trust, in turn, opening new possibilities and choices.
- The peer group approach helps to reduce stigma and the ‘indignity of asking’ for support.
- What we might think people need and what they want are not necessarily the same. Families can be trusted to make the best choice for themselves and for their children

- There is a wider impact on the whole family from small scale expenditure.
- There is scope to use funds of this kind to catalyse and galvanise system change.

In 2021, the MIHF was used to support the Lens. Phase 2 of the MIHF has now been established in partnership with Corra, the Robertson Trust, Northwood and William Grant and became operational in Autumn 2024.

## Generating ideas from the community: The Lens

In December 2021, WM2U commissioned The Lens, an organisation which specialises in supporting ‘intrapreneurs’, to set up and deliver a programme in each area to move ideas into action.<sup>30</sup> The WM2U team invited local people and practitioners to put forward their ideas and assessed these using investment criteria which reflected the values and vision of WM2U.

In Dundee, eight ideas were submitted, which was reduced to three that the panel felt met the criteria all focused on providing out of hours or holiday provision for children and young people. In East Ayrshire, fourteen ideas were submitted and five taken forward, many of which were linked to the desire of parents and people working in the community to have a welcoming space, referred to as a ‘community living room’ or Wellbeing Hub, with the aim of bettering the lives of people in Cumnock.<sup>31</sup>

This process culminated in ‘investment day’ events in each locality in May 2022 and a video based on each event is available.<sup>32</sup> The review undertaken by the Lens recognises the success of the investment days and some of the challenges of the process for participants. This also identifies the role played by the WM2U Co-ordinators to create a ‘bridge’ for The Lens team to engage with parents.

Given interest in these kind of ‘co-design’ processes, the learning partners undertook a light-touch feedback process in particular to identify practical lessons for how to work with community members in generating ideas and developing action. This concluded that:

- The programme provided an opportunity for parents to develop their ideas alongside others.
- The investment day events gave people a platform and opportunity for conversations that they would never have had otherwise. Seeing people speak out on stage was a highlight and made visible the flourishing that can happen. Witnessing the ideas coming to life, provided a sense of satisfaction and of possibility for the future.
- The Lens team were always upbeat and positive, and flexible where they could be: but there wasn’t time or opportunity to adapt the process very much, particularly in relation to session content, language and other aspects that created anxiety.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.thisislens.co.uk/>

<sup>31</sup> In Dundee, all three ideas pitched secured a total of £40,000 worth of investment and a commitment from wider stakeholders and senior leaders. In East Ayrshire, all five ideas pitched secured a total of £31,300 worth of investment and senior managers and partner organisations publicly supported the approach.

<sup>32</sup> East Ayrshire <https://vimeo.com/720192911> Dundee <https://vimeo.com/720195922>



- Many of those who took part were wary about repeating the process which didn't always seem to fit with the voice-led ethos and thinking of WM2U. This experience does offer some lessons to ensure that community voice remains central in any co-design activity, including how ideas are developed collectively, the pace and stress of the process, and how elements of language and practice can take account of the lived experience of trauma.

Reviewing the situation in 2024, it is clear that not all the ideas have been able to proceed at the anticipated pace if at all. Progress is explored for each area in Reports 2 and 3.

### 4.3 Developing a voice strategy

The third strategic objective sees listening to the voices of children and families as the basis for shifts in investment in preventative and 'upstream' public services. Success for the WM2U approach means changing the system by shifting power in decision-making based on 'voice': listening to and empowering children, young people, and families.<sup>33</sup>

In April 2022, WM2U issued an initial Voice Strategy that set out how the voice of families should drive the work and help to influence change. Our learning at that time showed that whilst there were insights about children's lives, the direct voices of children and young people had been largely absent from the work, which has focused on engagement with parents and carers.

The strategy was subsequently revised in January 2024 to update and reconcile different perspectives amongst the funders, and further revised after the July 2024 incorporation into Scots law of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to ensure the rights of children and young people are respected and upheld.<sup>34</sup> Article 12 of the UNCRC explains that children and young people have a right to be listened to, empowered and involved in decisions that affect them. Additionally, children and young people have the capabilities and should be given the agency to offer their perspectives and insights about their lives, if they are asked about what matters to them.

Based on the Lundy Model of children and young people rights-based participation, the voice strategy now has a specific intention to record children and young people's expectations and ideas and share these appropriately with key influencers to achieve systemic change.<sup>35</sup> It proposes that these insights are likely to be best achieved 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. This is likely to be an important part of the ongoing work in Dundee.

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<sup>33</sup> This issue was also explored with parents in East Ayrshire and is discussed in Report 2.

<sup>34</sup> See Annex 1.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/case-studies/childrens-participation-lundy-model.html>



## 4.4 The importance of relational practice to systemic change

WM2U's first strategic objective is to work 'alongside' individuals, families, and communities to co-produce and embed new ways of working. The term 'relational practice' describes a way of being, an underpinning ethos, which enables the building and maintenance of healthy relationships. Relational practices aim to foster and maintain trusting and strong relationships, as a basis for creating systemic solutions to the issues that matters to communities. We note that:

- Evidence of the importance of relationships and relational practices in enabling professionals to understand the realities of 'everyday dynamics' of life for children and families is compelling and highlighted in both our reviews of literature and practice.<sup>36</sup>
- Our December 2022 review highlighted that starting with asking and responding to what matters to individuals is a promising way to build relationships and gain trust, a potential gateway to deeper and more sustainable change.

The importance of working in this way to shift the focus 'upstream' to more preventative to work is widely acknowledged. Whilst relational practice is not unique to WM2U, the specific ambitions of the approach and the positioning of the coordinators as independent of the local authority and their third sector partners has been an opportunity to explore and deepen understanding of the importance of such practices for systemic change.

In practical terms, it is through the work of the WM2U Coordinators with local families, practitioners and community organisations that this ambition becomes manifest. Such approaches are evident too in the work of Community Learning and Development in Dundee, and in the work of the Corra Foundation and the Nest group in East Ayrshire.

A key element of the WM2U Coordinator role is the flexibility and time to develop strong and trusting relationships rather than following a traditional approach that focuses on predefined agendas, plans or outcomes. The WM2U Coordinators themselves have different histories and approaches, so whilst not offering a template for relational working, we have identified four key themes in their work that seem to be most significant in helping to create the conditions to sustain change. The qualities of flexibility, time, curiosity, perseverance, integrity, pragmatism and humility, and the valuing of individual and collective capabilities, forms a robust foundation for systemic change. These are explored more fully in the East Ayrshire and Dundee reports.

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<sup>36</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/brief-literature-review> (Dec, 2019) and <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/literature-and-practice-review> (Dec, 2022)

## 5. Reflections on learning

Traditional evaluation practice is rooted in established notions of what counts as evidence and what kinds of knowledge are valued. Evaluation is an important part of the prevailing model of public service, that can influence decisions about policy and funding and yet, can feel abstract and remote.

Here, 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.

These four reports build on insights from the emerging evaluation literature that recognises complexity and the relational foundations of systemic work.<sup>37</sup> Important methodological elements have included an emphasis on improving rather than ‘proving’, to support design and implementation that is responsive to emerging learning and able to improve practice over time. In this work and in drawing conclusions, we have given weight to the views of parents and community members and seeking to bring them in as active partners in sensemaking.

This is an important approach to the co-production of knowledge. The stories that inform this work ground it in the human realities of life in communities. Ultimately, the willingness of parents to engage in learning together have contributed to our belief that it is possible to move towards different evaluative practices that create a more collective accountability for improving the opportunities for families in our communities. Their engagement has helped to create a stronger ethic of mutual care and learning, where we have sought to pay attention to our values, to the trust and relationships between us, and the responsibilities we have towards each other.

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.

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*“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”* (Hunter Foundation, 2024)

*“It’s been a complete learning journey and has influenced our other work”*  
(BBC Children in Need, 2024)

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The Hunter Foundation recognise that their ‘venture philanthropy’ approach is quite different to the way that local authorities and many other funders conventionally work. This rests on them being able to recognise that ‘some things are not working’ and have sufficient

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<sup>37</sup> <https://research-for-real.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/CLS-Where-nothing-is-clear-and-everything-keeps-changing-february-2019.pdf>

trust as a basis on which to work together. In Dundee, the approach of WM2U has been better understood, the vision for change has been clear and there has been a greater sense of readiness for change. The commitment of the funders has earned them the trust of senior leaders, local practitioners and community members and supported a further extension of funding to 2026.

In East Ayrshire, whilst there has been no question that individual senior leaders want to improve the lives of all children and families and they value their long-standing relationship with the Hunter Foundation, there has not been consistent and functioning strategic leadership able to support the vision for voice-led system change. Given this, it was agreed that funding would conclude from October 2024, to align with significant strategic developments and service reviews underway at the Council.

In April 2024, the funders issued a codifying report that built on the learning to date and articulated their emerging practice wisdom.<sup>38</sup> Their report describes the evolution of the approach and distils their learning into five key components of system change. These four reports and the Digest now contribute further to that evolving understanding.

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.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://wm2u.co.uk/resource/codifying-our-learning-support-scale>

# ANNEX 1: Voice Strategy - Valuing the voices of children and young people

## Valuing the voices of children and young people

The different stakeholders involved in WM2U have come together to support children and their families to achieve the positive changes they wish to see in their communities.

The communities we work in have historically been distanced from the decisions and services that affect their daily lives. WM2U is a human-centred approach which seeks to create a future where children and families can play an influential role in determining place-based solutions to the challenges faced in their locality; be that within their local area or home.

The publication of the work of the Independent Care Review (2020) provides important context and momentum for these ambitions.<sup>39</sup> “The Promise” of the Care Review seeks a fundamental shift in how decisions are made about children and families and in the way that families are supported to stay together in Scotland.<sup>40</sup> It strongly endorses a person-centred and relationship-focused approach to care and support, seeking to make early intervention and prevention a reality.

As funders seeking to address structural and systemic inequity and exclusion, we have a critical role to play. We seek to work in a way which centres equity, diversity, and inclusion to create positive outcomes for the children, young people, and families we work with.

There is a significant amount of data that describes these health and social inequalities and outcomes. This can be useful to give a descriptive flavour of the social conditions of the communities in which this work is taking place.

Much existing data is a barrier to engagement; it is usually deficit-focused, does not foreground the voices and perspectives of local people, risks stigmatizing people and communities and is a poor basis on which to engage the energy, commitment, and resources of local communities.

We believe that the qualitative experience of children and families is an important overlooked source of information and knowledge. 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.

### Making it meaningful

Success for the WM2U approach means changing the system by shifting power in decision-making based on ‘voice’: listening to and empowering children, young people, and families.

In April 2022, WM2U issued a Voice Strategy that set out how the voice of families drives our work and helps to influence change. Our learning shows that whilst there are insights about children’s lives, the direct voices and experiences of children and young people have

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.carereview.scot/conclusions/independent-care-review-reports/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://thepromise.scot/>

been largely absent from the work of WM2U which has focused on community engagement with parents and carers.

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*We want to treat children and young people as a significant part of the community and as key stakeholders in the decisions that affect them. We believe such engagement is worthy of fuller exploration.*

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Our Strategic Objectives include an explicit intention to hear from children and young people: *S03 – By listening to the voices of children and families, public services will increase investment in prevention and enable children to flourish within their own families.*

Our approach seeks to:

- Empower children and families to explore and communicate what matters to them by cultivating their own leadership capabilities.
- Positively influencing the structure and culture of children and family services to listen to and value the voices of children and families in the decisions that affect them.

There is scope for WM2U to lead or support specific work to listen and act on the voices of the children and young people. There are challenges to how this intention is best operationalised, so that the question of child's voice is an active and iterative inquiry-led approach that supports us to 'grow as we go'.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) came into Scots law in 2024 to ensure the rights of children and young people are respected and upheld. Article 12 of the UNCRC explains that children and young people have a right to be listened to, empowered and involved in decisions that affect them. Additionally, children and young people have the capabilities and should be given the agency to offer their perspectives and insights about their lives.

We know that many adults want to be advocates for children. but it is also important to recognise that children and young people can advocate for themselves when supported by an approach that enables them to voice their views and experiences. By truly listening to and acting on what children and young people share, we can create environments where their voices are not only heard but also influence decisions.

To bring these principles to life, we propose the adoption of the well-recognised Lundy Model of children and young people rights-based participation. The model includes four key concepts:

- SPACE: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- VOICE: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- AUDIENCE: The view must be listened to
- INFLUENCE: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/case-studies/childrens-participation-lundy-model.html>

We remain interested in seeking out the routine opportunities for adults to have meaningful conversations with children and young people. We want to be alongside parents, local practitioners, and senior leaders to encourage them to seek out the views of children and young people allied to the work they are doing.

Noting that WM2U is not a traditional intervention or programme that works with children or families as direct beneficiaries, we can best achieve such insights by using our influence to encourage others in the following ways:

- Adults (individuals and groups) need to be prepared to invest time and energy into supporting rights-based participation, including senior managers taking rights-based participation into account in strategy and planning and providing ongoing support for frontline staff.
- Adults working alongside children and young people who have established relational trust with children and young people, play a key role in being proactive to ask what matters, sharing decision-making power, and acting on the views and experiences of children and young people with key influencers such as other parents, practitioners, local authorities, funders, and decision-makers. This requires creating welcoming, accessible spaces that encourage open participation, designing engagement approaches that cater to different personalities and needs, and ensuring that quieter, non-speaking or marginalised voices are equally heard and valued in decision-making processes.
- Other stakeholders, including parents, are in a more direct relationship with children and young people, where opportunities to generate new knowledge about the realities of children's lives are available and could be enhanced. However, we also need to be mindful of the power dynamics within parent-child relationships and consider how we can support children and young people in feeling truly heard within these contexts.

Working alongside the many stakeholders engaged in WM2U, including the children and young people themselves, we aim to bring the aspirations, thoughts and solutions proposed by children and young people, to the attention of key influencers in order to achieve systemic change. These might include individuals within a child or young person's immediate environment who have a significant influence on their lives. This might be someone working in a community centre or a youth worker that holds the ability to make changes. Recognising this broader network of influence ensures that the voices of children and young people are heard by those who matter to them, and who have the capacity to influence change at both local and systemic levels.

All parties need to bear in mind that:

- Tokenism, coercion, manipulation, and decoration are ethical risks. WM2U must avoid, and support others to avoid, such formulaic approaches that risk maintaining or reinforcing the existing structural inequalities affecting children and families, rather than realising true systemic change. We propose a cultural shift towards a more relational and longer-term approach that emphasises collaboration and co-

creation with children and young people. By developing solutions together with children and young people we foster deeper trust, build meaningful relationships, and work towards systemic change.

- We might also look for specific opportunities to seek 'feedback', be aware of what data is available and who has access to data, being ethical, pragmatic and iterative in our methodology and encouraging others to do the same.
- Whilst not offering detailed methodological advice, our requirement is that such voice work is trauma-informed and takes place in appropriate contexts, with attention to ethical practices that ensure fully informed consent, anonymity, inclusion, and protection. Children and families should be provided with feedback about how their insight has made a difference.

### **On-going inquiry: how does the system respond to children's voices?**

With such new insights and knowledge from children and young people, we are primarily interested in systemic responses to this knowledge.

- Is children and young people's voice seen as significant in all contexts? Is it accorded value and status as one of the core values underpinning service design and delivery?
- Do we have the local mechanisms that allow their insights to be gathered, fed into decision-making processes, and acted upon, whether on an individual level or collectively so that every contribution is valued and has the potential to influence change?
- Are practitioners enabled and facilitated to develop and refine the skills, time and space needed to engage collaboratively with children and young people?
- How might we expand and harness the power of practitioner's relational abilities to support meaningful and ongoing involvement in the issues that matter to children and young people?
- How do those holding decision-making power within the system deal with tensions and contradictions in what they hear from children, young people, parents, and practitioners?
- What shifts in power can we observe when those who have traditionally held power in decision-making listen and respond to these voices?
- How can we support children and young people in recognising their own potential as leaders in their own right?

## Bibliography of Learning Partner Reports

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

### *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 that are of most relevance or have been 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.