

Lankelly Chase's Knowledge Action Inquiry

Brief for new partnerships

Introduction: our relationship with knowledge

Lankelly Chase is a charitable foundation focused on [changing the systems which perpetuate severe and multiple disadvantage](#). Rather than through sets of 'projects' or 'initiatives', we operate through action inquiry methods – learning and reflecting as we act, and being comfortable with trying things and not knowing the answers. We are more focused on *how* change happens and *who* is involved than on *what* exactly the end goal or 'output' is. We are guided by a [set of behaviours](#) which we think characterise healthy systems.

We have a set of major themes around which we have organised action inquiries, including [Power](#) (as something which shows up throughout our work), [Place](#) (how to change systems defined by geographical boundaries), [Field](#) (how to build the field of people capable of analysing, changing and disrupting systems) and [Governance](#) (how decisions are made and by whom, both within Lankelly Chase and the wider systems in which we operate). We think that [Knowledge](#) is also a critical issue: we want to explore how knowledge about severe social harm is created, interpreted and used; by whom; using which methods; for what purpose; and under what assumptions, frameworks and mindsets. Put together, the 'ways things are done' in these areas define our core understanding of social harm and also frame our responses to it: 'knowledge', like power, is a theme which consistently shows up right across our work and is deeply embedded within it. We have reached a reasonable working analysis of the limits of our current framework, and would like to explore and support some alternative thinking and approaches which can challenge the boundaries that we currently operate within.

The paradigm

We think that our current knowledge system is characterised by:

- The individualisation and medicalisation of social problems
- The location of solutions primarily within services and/or via the delivery of effective interventions to these individuals...
- ...which are measured on a linear, causal basis of 'if we do X then Y will happen', with Y as a predetermined benefit for which services are held accountable...
- ...which, in turn, operate under a market and performance management paradigm whose central features include control and value for money...
- ...with all of this set against a cultural backdrop which sees some people as 'needy' or 'bad' and others as 'normal' and 'good', amidst a complex web of emotions and historical traditions including paternalism, charity, pity and disgust – and more simply, 'othering'.

This translates directly onto what our knowledge economy looks like: what is looked for, what is seen as valuable, which methods are privileged and credible, whose voice is heard, and so on. It has a direct impact on how our systems of care and welfare are conceptualised, designed, run and understood, and shapes the actions and thoughts of everyone involved in them. We are swimming in knowledge about the 'scale' of particular problems, usually understood as how many people they affect or how much they cost – from how many children are 'vulnerable', to how many adults have

‘multiple needs’, to how many families are ‘troubled’. There is a huge market for information on the effectiveness of interventions in delivering clear, measurable change – usually to one person at a time. Our paradigm defines the limits of our understanding of the scale, nature, impact and potential solutions to severe and multiple disadvantage: we are forever focused on intervening at the *individual* rather than the *systemic* level. We think this is a problem.

We have lived within this paradigm ourselves (both organisationally and as individuals) and have operated within its limits, assumptions and rules. It has shaped the way that we have funded, commissioned, acted and talked in relation to severe social harm. When we coined the term ‘severe and multiple disadvantage’ it was an attempt to contextualise the relationship between issues too often seen as separate (addiction, homelessness and involvement in the criminal justice system), but in reality it has become another silo in its own right: ‘multiple needs’ has, in turn, become a defined problem affecting an identifiable number of people who need to be helped (or fixed) by interventions and services. It has been difficult to explore alternatives or create the space for different kinds of conversation and understanding.

So what are we after?

Building on the above, we are interested in people, organisations, institutions and initiatives who are approaching knowledge in a different way: particularly on the themes of **ownership, value and connection**, and especially in line with our [system behaviours](#). We’d like to develop this more intentionally, but it’s also not all new work – plenty is showing up already in our existing partnerships. Our areas of focus are:

- ***Modelling principles of participation, democracy and equity in the creation, interpretation and use of knowledge***
- ***Collective sense-making and the involvement of multiple partial perspectives, particularly at community level***
- ***Working across and/or challenging academic and evidential hierarchies, including equalising the relationship of power and prestige between clinical, learned and lived experience***
- ***Exposing and questioning core frameworks and assumptions (for example about what and who is deemed valuable, or our concepts of progress, productivity, growth, success etc)***
- ***Challenging the way that knowledge is created and used to separate rather than connect people, issues and communities.***

These are the **things we’d like to see more of** in the world, in contrast with ‘how things are done’ at the minute. We think our role is to a) find, support, connect, promote (and where necessary instigate) examples of these approaches; and b) help create the conditions for more of these ‘good things’ to emerge.

Why do we want these things?

The approaches above map directly onto the wider '**change we want to see**'¹, including:

- Intervening on the 'mindset' level: helping to reveal, question and renew the written and unwritten rules and assumptions that govern how we act; and questioning the assumptions, frameworks, knowledge, research and information on which our systems of care and wellbeing are based
- Wanting to find people who are focused on changing the terms of engagement, and build capacity and skills among people who want to rewrite the rules of our systems so they become useful, healthy and just
- Questioning how decisions are made, by whom, in whose interests, with what values/assumptions, and to what/whose purpose
- Emphasising *who* is involved and *how* they are working, over and above *what* they may intend to 'produce' as an 'output'
- Resourcing networked activity between 'active change agents' engaged in collective inquiry about how power is shifting or being used differently, who is being drawn in, what unexpected results are emerging and what kind of future they're building towards
- Relinquishing harmful practices and finding transformational ones.

Overall, and again in the words of the 'change we want to see' paper, we hope that the approaches outlined above are starting to **model what a new set of systems might look like, based on fundamentally different ways of thinking and acting**, and that they will help to move us towards systems that are governed in the interests of those they serve, with social justice, mutual care, action learning, lived and learned experience, transformative optimism and interconnection at their heart.

Funding & partnerships

Quite a lot of our work is already relevant to the Knowledge inquiry, but to push this work forward, we are pursuing a group of funded partnerships explicitly on a 'knowledge' basis alongside people/initiatives/organisations who are questioning 'how things are done' and modelling alternative assumptions and frameworks. This will likely take the shape of modest pots of core funding, with the aims of supporting and learning alongside existing activity; agreeing questions in which we have a joint interest; engaging in wider discussion and inquiry with other partners and in the 'places' where Lankelly Chase has invested funds; and developing advisory roles in the medium term so that new and different voices can help to shape the inquiry in future (2021/22 and beyond).

¹ An updated Lankelly Chase strategy document, currently in draft form.