

IGNITING SYSTEMS CHANGE FROM WITHIN →

Charting the systems
change journey of a national
frontline children's charity

Lankelly Chase

**SYSTEMS
CHANGERS**

**The
Children's
Society**

Our learning from the Systems Changers 2018-19 programme (and beyond) about the role of large civic organisations in enabling systemic change to tackle multiple disadvantage.

Dr Caitlin O'Neill Gutierrez
Systems Change Lead
The Children's Society

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, The Children's Society embarked on an exciting partnership with The Point People and Lankelly Chase. Working together, they adapted and developed the Systems Changers programme into a new form to enable staff working with young people facing roles in the children and young people's sector to learn, embrace and undertake change in the systems they work within.

A 10 month programme followed, which took the cohort on an immersive learning journey diving into the theory and application of systemic thinking into their day-to-day roles. This report documents that learning journey from the perspective of The Children's Society. It shares the approaches taken and, importantly, the learning along the way.

The aim of this report is to inspire colleagues to consider systems change and the role it can play in their work, and spark ideas for how a systems change programme can be developed for operational staff. As such, the report is purposefully detailed. It is the intention to share the experience and thinking that has emerged.

The report is structured to share our definitions and understanding of systems change in the context of the systems we operate. It provides detail on the structure of the Systems Changers programme, including design principles and the curriculum followed. Space is given to reflect on the learning at an individual level for those participating in the programme, and also for the organisation. The enabling conditions for change are described, as are the lessons learnt in relation to impact and evaluation.

The Systems Changers programme is very important to The Children's Society. It has influenced our thinking, ambitions and opened our eyes to the systemic change that we can collectively achieve for the benefit of young people. We've built on the learning – with colleagues directly using the skills, tools and techniques and curious thinking in their day-to-day work – challenging, pursuing and working together to make change for good.

01

INTRODUCTION - THE NEED FOR SYSTEM-WIDE CHANGE



[W]e can't save the world by playing by the rules. Because the rules have to be changed. Everything needs to change. And it has to start today.'

Greta Thunberg,
Youth Climate Activist

Our world is changing rapidly. Children and young people are at the forefront of the seismic shifts we're witnessing – socially, politically, economically, digitally.

Whilst lots of young people have access to brilliant new opportunities, many face increasingly difficult problems in their lives. The most vulnerable in our society are struggling under the weight of a decade of austerity and cuts to vital services. Inequality is becoming more extreme and social divisions deeper.

The systems – networks, structures, processes, laws – that are supposed to protect young people and enable them to thrive are instead failing them.

Through The Children's Society's frontline work with over 10,000 children and young people annually across the country, and our in-depth research, we know that some young people are facing problems of increasing severity and complexity.

When young people present at our services, they rarely do so with just one issue they need help with – instead they often experience multiple disadvantages in their lives.

RESPONDING TO MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE

Our sector¹ runs on the energy and expertise of thousands of brilliant individual colleagues who come to work or volunteer everyday to help young people. The services provided are predominantly of high quality, and make a real difference to individual young people's lives. As a sector, we're getting better at capturing and evaluating the change we're able to effect through individual interventions.

However, we're also acknowledging that despite excellent progress in multi-agency working, information sharing, and cross-disciplinary education, the social care and voluntary sector systems that support children and young people – and the services that sit within these – remain highly siloed.

Services tend to be focused on particular issues such as child sexual exploitation, substance misuse, poverty and destitution, or being looked after by the state. Issues that we know, instead of being separate or distinct, are often intimately interconnected. These siloes tend to be the result of divisions in expertise across social care, commissioning arrangements, and financial cuts.

Whatever the reason, as a result colleagues at the frontline of social care often struggle to respond to young people's needs and strengths in a holistic way.

Young people who face multiple disadvantage do not often receive the full support they need, or they fall through the gaps of provision entirely when services are not built to see and support their whole selves.

WHAT DOES 'SYSTEMS CHANGE' OFFER US?

At The Children's Society, we believe 'systems change' offers us a framework for thinking holistically about the world around children and young people, and a set of approaches for achieving wide-scale and more sustainable change for them.

How did we gravitate towards systems change and why do we now hold it as one of the key underpinnings for how we can achieve sustained impact for young people?

It's been a journey. There have been immense highs, revelations, and achievements, many new approaches to test out and get to grips with. There have been challenges to overcome – both in terms of practical delivery of our various systems change programmes, and also the personal emotional journeys we've asked our colleagues to go on along the way. We have learned a lot and we're happy to share our learning so we can help more young people, and empower more colleagues to be Systems Changers.

We know that we alone cannot tackle the multiple and devastating disadvantages faced by many young people in the UK today – systems change is at its heart rooted in partnership and collaboration.

We're already working with lots of colleagues across the children and young people's sector to devise new ways to tackle our shared 'wicked problems'.

THIS REPORT

This report focuses on the key learning of the Systems Changers 2018-19 programme.² It also explores the wider ripples of impact the programme has had on our organisation's learning journey towards systems change, and its possibilities for igniting widespread change across our sector.

This report does not constitute an evaluation, but instead an honest account of, and reflections on, the journey we've been on as a cohort of individuals, and as a national children's charity.

02

SYSTEMS CHANGE AT THE CHILDREN'S SOCIETY - EVOLVING OUR DEFINITION AND APPROACH



Systems change is about fundamentally transforming the world around young people in order to tackle the root causes of their disadvantage.

It is a purposeful approach to deconstructing and redesigning a particular system – in our case, the system young people's lives develop within.'

Working definition of systems change, The Children's Society, January 2020.

When we first embarked on our systems change journey two and a half years ago, a core group of colleagues – those of us exploring how we could respond to young people's multiple disadvantage in new ways – understood the framework's basic premise of:

- Taking a wider, holistic world view.
- Seeing the interconnectedness of the constituent parts of a system.
- Naming and exploring complexity.
- Being comfortable with ambiguity.
- Harnessing design approaches to make small tests in the system, with the potential to take those that look promising to scale.

We liked that systems change offered us some new language and tools to start to explore alternative ways of organising, designing and delivering our work with young people.

It's honest to say that it wasn't until we got into the detail of the Systems Changers programme (which is described in the next section) that we really started to understand more deeply what systems change actually is, and how it can inform the work of The Children's Society.

We soon realised that whilst the systems change underpinnings we've mentioned are important, using plain language and highlighting examples of how they can be manifested in real life were critical from the very beginning.



We've come to the end of the programme and we want to look at how to continue this movement around systems change, the programme was just the beginning of this, there is still more work to come.'

- Systems Change Co-ordinator

We knew very quickly that in order for others in our organisation – especially those who hadn't had the benefit of going on an intensive programme – to engage with systems thinking and approaches, we'd need to proactively reframe systems change as:

- Immediately relevant to the children and young people's sector.
- Rooted in real-life examples.
- Presented in plain english.
- Demonstrable through visuals, diagrams, photos and videos.
- Conveyed directly by our trailblazing colleagues, such as the Systems Changers colleagues, helping them be the voices and educators taking the message out there to other colleagues.

Our definition of and approach to systemic change has evolved directly through our experiences of trying these out.

A systems change approach at The Children's Society needs to take three forms:

- We can **'think'** in a systemic way – by acknowledging and mapping the interconnectedness of people and processes in the system.
- We can **'do'** systems change by using practical approaches and interventions to change how structures or processes work, and to alter the wider outcomes they result in for young people.
- We can **'be'** systemic in how we live, work and respond to each other – developing a mindset that is open, holistic, questioning, inquisitive, multi-disciplinary, humble, generous, dynamic, and proactive.

A critical point for us when we talk to our frontline staff is that systems change isn't a completely new, separate or alternative approach to their current ways of working. If anything, systems approaches reinforce the need and value for other holistic approaches, which are rooted in strong evidence around what works well to support young people and their families in a person-centred way. We have found that talking to colleagues in their language and with reference to their existing disciplines really helps them understand how systems change is relevant and helpful to them.

LANKELLY CHASE

In the year before The Systems Changers 2018-19 programme began, The Children's Society and The Lankelly Chase Foundation developed a strategic partnership to jointly explore how multiple disadvantage impacts young people's lives and our ability to support them. In our many conversations, our colleagues at Lankelly Chase shared lots of the live learning that was emerging from their other partnerships – particularly in how place-based frontline organisations were trying new approaches to working with (predominantly) adults facing multiple disadvantage. Systems thinking and systems change began to emerge as frameworks that resonated with the frustrations and opportunities we were seeing on the frontline when working with young people facing complex problems. We wanted to try out some new approaches ourselves, and Lankelly Chase wanted to explore what their learning around systems change might have to offer a particular sector or system, in this case, the children's social care system. We were inspired by Lankelly Chase's openness to learn-on-the-go, particularly as we knew we were onto something with multiple disadvantage and systems thinking – but we didn't know exactly what outcomes we were aiming for, or what route to take to get there.

With our mutual appetite to test some new approaches at the frontline, we decided to jointly reignite the Systems Changers programme designed by The Point People, this time in a new setting and with a focus on colleagues working with children and young people. Unlike some more traditional funding arrangements, Lankelly Chase were keen that the project be more of a learning enquiry, where the programme – with the underpinning structure of the curriculum – could evolve and grow according to the needs of the cohort, our organisation and the 'sector'. This was really liberating for us as it gave us 'permission' to trust the cohort and project team to guide us through uncharted waters and adapt as needed.

As this report details, we had some challenges navigating this new way of learning and working – sometimes extra freedom in the unknown is more challenging to work with than rigid but clear boundaries! But it was always reassuring knowing that Lankelly Chase were there on the journey with us, not just funding and making space for the project, but figuring it all out alongside us.

This was most clearly manifested in Programme Director Jenny Oppenheimer's deep commitment to the programme with her near constant presence at all the residentials, and frequent face-to-face and remote meetings with the project team. From the outset Jenny made an effort to get to know the individual members of the cohort, and offer herself as a support to us. Whilst there were occasional points where it was potentially awkward to have a 'funder in the room', this eased, and for the vast majority of the time it was reassuring to know that the ongoing development of the programme was our shared endeavour and achievement. Jenny was open about the learning she was taking away too, so we hope that working with us has given Lankelly Chase some valuable insight into how they can support system learning and systems change within organisations like ours.

One of the key benefits of having worked with Lankelly Chase on systems change has been the wider community they have opened up to The Children's Society, and that we have then developed with them. The cross-pollination of learning from different organisations, or local areas doing local systems change work, has enormous potential that we've only just scratched the surface of.

Lankelly Chase



Most people that choose to work with children and young people do so because they want to change things for them. They are sad and outraged at inequalities and unfairness they see young people face in our world, and want to make a difference to that. They want to help make these young people's lives better. I know this is why I came into this work and why I am still doing it 35 years later. However, despite our best efforts and intentions we often find ourselves facing the same issues again and again.

The impact we seek at best happens at an individual level. This kind of impact can of course be powerful for the individual, or even for a group of individuals, but more often than not the underlying issue that created the barriers for that young person remains. Systems change is about looking at things from many different angles and truly understanding the root cause of a problem. It uses the voice and experience of young people and practitioners to surface the issues and play a central role in designing the solution.

Systems change has the power to drive change and impact in ways that we have all dreamt about. It is messy, difficult but ultimately essential in our quest to bring opportunity and hope into the lives of all young people, even in their most difficult moment.

Dara de Burca

Executive Director for Children and Young People
The Children's Society

03

SYSTEMS CHANGERS
2018-19 - THE PROGRAMME

Systems change is having the confidence to think "is what's happening in our system right for young people now? Can we look at doing things better or differently?" I think, what The Children's Society is doing here now gives us that opportunity to reflect, then change and challenge to deliver on something better.'

Practitioner – The Children's Society

Systems Changers 2018-19 was a 10 month programme delivered between June 2018 and March 2019. It sought to build capacity and confidence amongst youth sector frontline professionals to enact change to the systems affecting young people facing multiple disadvantage.

The programme consisted of:

- A series of face-to-face sessions and monthly residentials delivered to 10 frontline youth sector professionals, who tested and implemented their learning through live projects in their everyday practice in between the monthly residentials.
- A learning lab to capture learning from the programme, feed iterative learning back into the programme as it developed so cohort experience could be improved, and disseminate learning to the wider organisation and sector.

The Systems Changers programme was first designed and developed by the Point People and Lankelly Chase in 2015. They ran two prototype programmes in 2015 and 2017, with frontline workers from across a range of different services working to address severe and multiple disadvantage. The Systems Changers programme had always been conceived as something to test out and explore in different contexts, and a sector specific one (as well as a place-based one) were on the list. In 2018 The Children's Society, Lankelly Chase and the Point People began discussions about a version of the Systems Changers programme being prototyped across the 'children and young people's sector.' Eventually this became The Children's Society programme, though it is available to staff working across many different programmes. The Point People worked with The Children's Society and Lankelly Chase to adapt the programme. See this [report](#) and [website](#) for detail and learning from the previous Systems Changers programmes, which hosted colleagues from different organisations across the social sectors.



Systems Changers 2018-19 was a partnership between The Children's Society, The Point People and the Lankelly Chase Foundation.



The Point People designed the Systems Changers programme around these principles:

1. Systems not solutions. Be systemic throughout. Embrace complexity. Ensure that people see themselves as part of an interconnected whole. Emphasise discovery and sitting with questions, rather than finding answers.
2. Collective intelligence not just individual insight. What does the system/group/network know that the individual can't? Hold and value multiple perspectives.
3. Separate insights from action. Understand that the people generating the insights might not be the same ones who go onto make the change.
4. Reveal the system to itself in an ongoing way.
5. Make change tangible and experiment with it.
6. Experiment with power. Create authorising environments where there is permission to question power.
7. Be generative and dynamic. Focus on feedback loops, amplification and momentum.
8. Strengthen and nurture peer relationships.
9. Create integrated processes. Ensure that new content is combined with personal reflection and immersive examples.
10. Create space, time and slowness.

Throughout the programme, in addition to engaging with the main content on systems change, a huge dimension of the journey for the cohort and project team was to explore what these underpinnings meant for them in practice. We found that many of the most exciting and challenging elements emerged as we played around with how to manifest these principles through the programme and also in the cohort's regular practice worlds.

3.2 PROGRAMME CURRICULUM

Systems Changers 2018-19 brought systems thinking and service design methodologies into practice in three core stages. We explore the more detailed content and activities that made up these stages – and our resultant learning – in the next section of this report.

SEEING THE SYSTEM

Understanding systems theory, and starting to map the systems that frame young people's lives, our work with them and the problems we're trying to tackle.

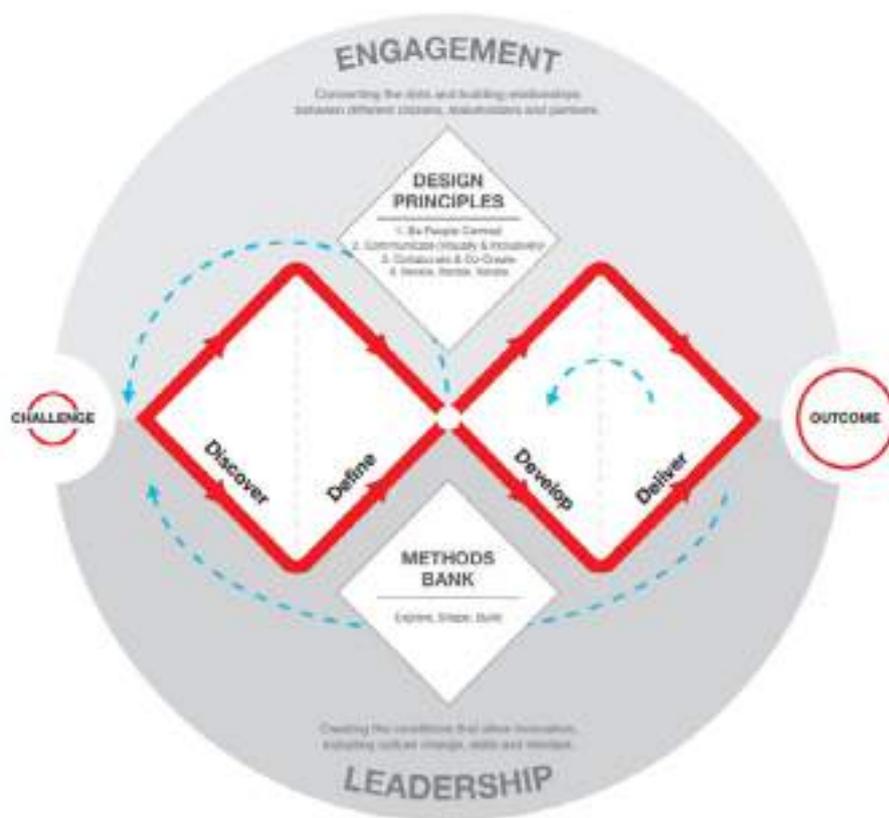
FINDING THE FLEX

Identifying opportunities in systems for changing how we work and using design methodologies to develop and test new ideas.

MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

Experimenting with how to scale up small interventions that have the possibility of changing systems for the better and for the future.

As Cassie Robinson of The Point People explains in her [blog post](#) about the design and rationale for the Systems Changers curriculum, this journey from systems thinking through design and testing to scale, was not intended to imply to participants that systems approaches are completely linear – we know they are cyclical, messy and often happen simultaneously. Instead, the programme was about offering the cohort a wide range of cognitive and practical frameworks – including the [‘double diamond’](#) approach – that when applied with flexibility and contextual nuance could help them shed light on, unpick and redesign the systems they operate within.



The Design Council’s evolved [Framework for Innovation](#) or ‘Double Diamond’, 2019

Indeed, Systems Changers wasn’t ‘an incubator or accelerator programme fixated on solutions. The programme is about surfacing, nourishing and directing the wisdom (insights) from the frontline to influence change. It was always a challenge to hold this space — people on the frontline like springing in to action and are great "do-ers" and problem solvers’ (Cassie Robinson). We reflect on this dynamic later in the report, but whilst it definitely was hard for participants to resist jumping immediately to seeking solutions to test, many reflected later that ‘just’ having the space to think and develop their systemic insights was incredibly powerful in their busy action-focused professional lives.

The programme also sought to help participants ‘build their literacy in plural



perspectives and holding both the micro and macro view'. At every stage participants and the project team were prompted to frame their learning at these three levels simultaneously:

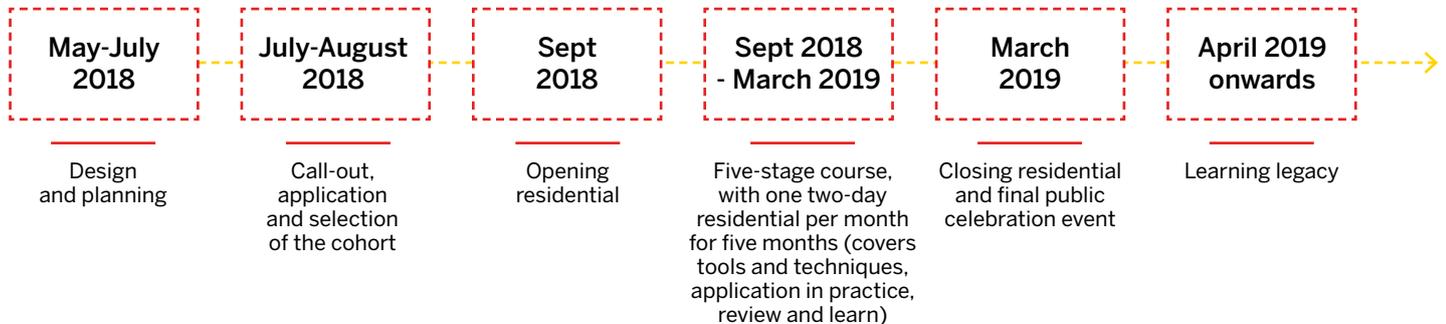


The focus was always on the collective insights (intelligence and wisdom) of the group as much as on each frontline worker's individual journey and experience. What does the collective know that the individual can't? How can a collective sense-making across a system be useful in generating new insights?'

This framework was especially helpful for us as an organisation. Individual participants and the wider project team were always thinking about how we could develop our learning along with wider colleagues who were not on the programme, and also what it meant for our organisational and wider sector systems.

The programme phasing:

Residential locations alternated between Birmingham and London, with the final learning and celebration event held in Birmingham.



Each residential followed a core format:

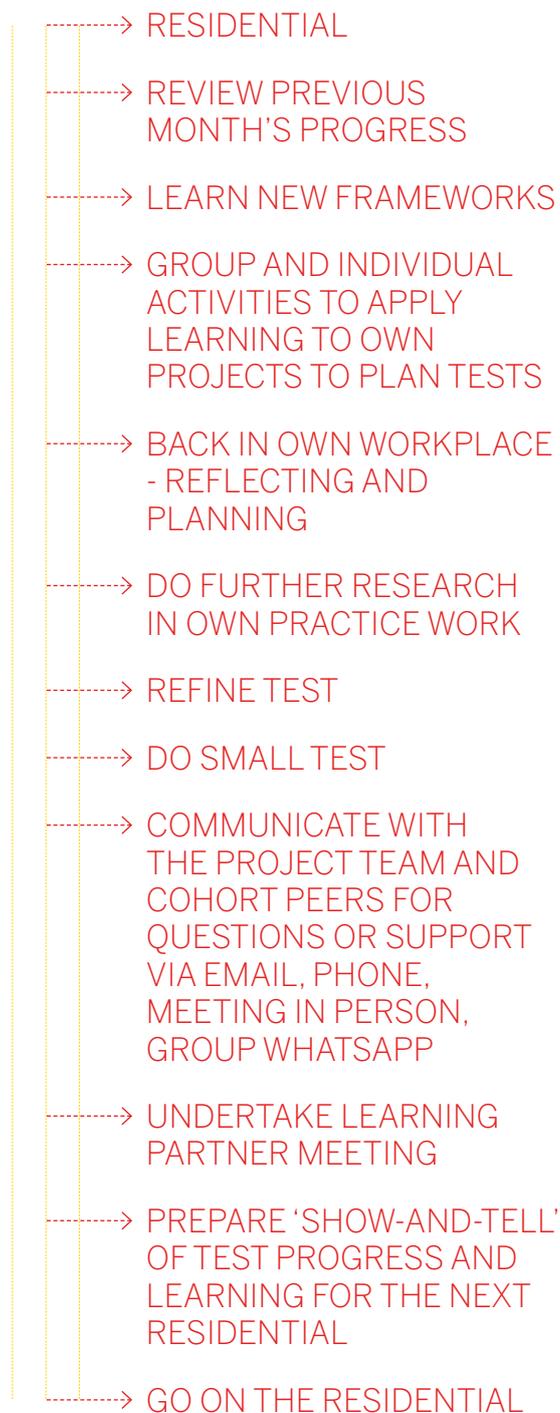
- Check-in.
 - Reflections on how the last month has gone, particular experience of taking back learning and trying out new things in the day job. What are colleagues' responses? What changes have you seen? What's been positive/surprising/hard?
 - Systems change content sessions, run by expert facilitators from across the systems, design and related industries.
 - Studio time – open space for participants to work on their projects, individually or together, with floating support from facilitators.
 - Collective insight session at the close of each residential to surface the insight the group were generating together, and how they were building a shared identity as a collective going through a unique learning and change experience.
- spaces' where they displayed programme materials and their developing project work in their public office spaces to keep their systemic change work front-and-centre and to ignite conversations with other colleagues.
 - Formally and informally introduce and/or train colleagues in systems change, supporting their teams to identify and work through systemic problems together.
 - Engage external colleagues to build cross-system relationships to explore shared problems and opportunities for change.
 - Reflect on learning and experience with coach and learning and youth engagement partners.
 - Most importantly, try to deepen their new learning by applying it to their practice, through the test and learn process detailed on the next page.

In practice between residentials, members of the learning cohort were supported to:

- Set up Systems Changers 'work

An experiment in 'test and learn'

The test and learn cycle for Systems Changers 2018-19.



The Systems Changers programme launched at the same time as a new lottery funded delivery programme for criminally exploited young people called Disrupting Exploitation. At the time, this was The Children's Society's only other programme to have a formal test and learn approach embedded into it. Supporting a group of practitioners to try out test and learn practices in their everyday work has been challenging but really valuable. The Children's Society are embedding the test and learn approach across a wide range of workstreams across the organisation.

 Test and learn is an approach embedded within the Disrupting Exploitation Team and it's helped us investigate problems and identify opportunities for change.

The programme gives us permission to spend time and really use tools to make sustainable changes, not only for young people but for the systems too and we are starting to see changes already.'

- Disrupting Exploitation Team

This was a new approach for The Children's Society.



3.4 OUR PEOPLE

The Systems Changers themselves



Photographer: Thom Bartley – thombartley.com

The Systems Changers cohort of included nine from [The Children's Society](#), one from [Coin Street Community Builders](#) and one from [The Place](#), Nottinghamshire. They came from across England, and we were keen to make sure that their experiences of the programme were rooted in their local, place-based work and closely connected to the live systemic issues they were seeing in different parts of the country.

The cohort was made up of people from a variety of professional backgrounds and at different stages of their careers – youth workers, social workers, therapists, local project managers, national programme managers. All of them had identified challenges in their everyday work that were tricky to grapple with and which appeared to have deep systemic roots.

→ The professional and geographical diversity of the group surfaced some really powerful learning:

- **Context is key** – every local area faces its own nuanced make-up of problems, key people in the system, and potential solutions. Local history, politics, social practices and decision-making structures all shape young people's experiences of 21st century life.
- At the same time, although Manchester and Chelmsford (for example) are very different places, **many of the challenges faced by young people and the professionals trying to help them are similar.** There is a lot of learning colleagues can share across organisational and geographical boundaries that people can adapt and apply in their own areas.

The opportunity to attend the programme was shared widely across the children and young people's sector. The participants were recruited onto the programme in two ways: most applied themselves, while a couple were placed on the programme when they began working for The Children's Society, as their roles were in key systems change delivery programmes. All were inducted onto the programme alongside their manager, as we were keen to secure buy-in, 'permission', and ongoing support for the Systems Changer colleague, which was important learning from the two previous Systems Changers programmes.

From the outset of the programme we were hearing honest insight from the cohort into the high levels of

investment and commitment that was being asked of them. It was hard for them to have the ability and capacity to step out of their day-to-day work to give time and space to explore something outside of their regular role.

As a project team we reflected towards the end that, given the flux in our sector, it was remarkable that the whole cohort stayed engaged for the duration of the programme. We had previously aimed to recruit a larger cohort, but even with their deep personal commitment and our organisational support, it was challenging for the individuals to maintain energy for it given the intense nature of their everyday work. It's likely that these challenges would be reflective of the whole sector. Their brilliant progress throughout the programme is testament to the cohort's passion for effecting real change in the systems affecting young people.

 What we've learnt from this programme is that when you give the time and the space for frontline practitioners, they realise the power that they have and it builds their confidence on an individual and collective level. That has such a huge impact on the change that they can make with and for young people.'

- Systems Change Co-ordinator

THE FACILITATORS:

Immy Kaur

Immy is the Co-founder and Director of Civic Square – a public square and neighbourhood lab in Birmingham. She is a member of Project 00 and of Dark Matter Laboratories. Immy was the Programme Facilitator for the programme. She facilitated the residential workshops, and provided a golden thread through the sessions to help participants see the connections between learning and action.

Sarah Drummond

Sarah is the Chief Digital Officer for Northgate Public Services and CEO of Snook. Sarah delivered the past Systems Changers programme with Lankelly Chase from 2015. In our programme she supported the group to reflect on a story of systems change and their role within it. She supported with systems prototyping, and how to plan and test ideas that test new ways for the system to work.

Jennie McShannon

Jennie is a consultant at Tavistock Consulting, supporting leaders, teams and organisations working in complex systems to connect, develop and thrive. On the programme, Jennie supported the group to develop an understanding of systems thinking and apply it into their context with a focus on revealing the ways in which the good ideas and change projects often get stuck or fail to have the desired impact, and how they might work with the whole system in mind to rethink how to approach them.

Cassie Robinson

Cassie is the founder of The Point People and Senior Head, UK Portfolio at National Lottery Community Fund. The Point People originally designed the Systems Changers programme with Lankelly Chase in 2015. Cassie worked with The Children's Society and Lankelly Chase to adapt the Systems Changers programme and continued in a stewardship role.

Tazeen Ahmed

Tazeen was an award-winning news reporter, investigative journalist and Founder of EQ Matters. Tazeen was a coach on the programme, opening the residential with sessions on emotional intelligence. Towards the end of the programme Tazeen was tragically diagnosed with cancer and sadly passed away on November 6th 2019. Tazeen's obituary can be found [here](#).

Suncica Getter

Suncica is a Systemic Coach and supported the cohort and project team to reflect on their individual and collective learning journeys at the end of each residential – shedding light on the shared knowledge that emerged.

Jenny Oppenhiemer

Jenny has worked in the charitable sector for over a decade, as both a funder and as a trustee of two grassroots charities. She is part of the Lankelly Chase team where her role is to build the systemic capacity and capabilities of people, organisations and wider systems. This involves supporting and working in partnership with changemakers, organisations and networks to analyse, change and disrupt oppressive systems. Jenny was previously the UK Programme Manager for the Ariadne network of European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights. She was Grants Manager at the Pilgrim Trust and Chair of the Corston Independent Funders Coalition, a coalition of donors who work on issues that relate to women and girls with complex and multiple needs.

Her roles for the programme were:

- Steering Committee member

Budget holder. Partnership brokering.

- Learning Lab contributor

Worked with the Learning Lead to agree the learning questions for the programme and to incorporate a learning framework that looked at change at the individual, organisational and systems levels. Providing challenge at times and facilitating connections where possible.

- Attending residentials

The work of systems change can feel isolating, so Lankelly Chase ensured that it was a visible presence throughout the programme. This supporter role was important to show our commitment to the participants, to the organisations involved and to the work of system change in the youth sector.

The project and support team from The Children's Society:

Sarah Bell

Sarah worked at The Children's Society and has nearly 20 years experience working with vulnerable young people, managing and delivering youth work projects. As Programme Coordinator she held the whole Systems Changers programme together, both logistically and emotionally, providing ongoing support to the cohort and project team.

Caitlin O'Neill Gutierrez

Caitlin is Systems Change Lead at The Children's Society. Caitlin helps the 140 year old organisation to test out new systemic approaches to tackling tough problems facing young people in the 21st century. She supported the Systems Changers cohort, team and organisation to gather and apply their learning from the programme to their everyday work.

Jim Davis

Jim is Head of Youth Engagement, one of numerous roles he has had in the 39 years he has worked for The Children's Society. Jim was part of the management team that developed the partnership with Lankelly Chase. In the programme Jim attended all sessions to help participants connect their learning with their direct work with young people and to ensure a constant reference back to their needs and perspective.

The Children's Society's Youth Engagement Team:

Cath Morris, Jo Petty, Helen Maitland and Suraya Skelland

Cath Morris, Jo Petty, Helen Maitland and Suraya Skelland each have over 10 years' experience of listening to the voices of children and young people, both within The Children's Society and externally. The aim of their role supporting the systems changer participants through the duration of the programme was to meet with the participants regularly to support their reflection on what they were learning, discuss how it could be incorporated into their direct practice, and consider young people influencing the development of their systems change approaches.

04

OUR SYSTEMS CHANGE
LEARNING JOURNEY

As our journey through the programme unfolded, we realised our learning wouldn't just centre on the transference of systems thinking onto practitioners, but instead would need to pay attention to the dynamics between:

- The **theoretical** – the conceptual content itself.
- The **pedagogical** – how the content was taught and how people experienced the programme.
- The **practical** – how people tested and applied their learning in real-life.

This has meant we've learned a lot about:

- Systems theory and practical design tools or approaches.
- The experience of the test and learn process, particularly on bringing learning back into everyday practice.
- How and when to engage young people in systems change work.
- The personal emotional experience of thinking systemically and engaging in this kind of intensive programme.
- The development of a cohort's group identity and the role this plays in learning.
- The support and enabling conditions needed to hold space around colleagues going on this learning and reflective journey.

We realised quite quickly that it's not just **what** you learn about systems thinking and approaches, but **why** you're learning it, **how** you learn it, **when** you learn it (in what sequence) and **who** you learn it with.

These areas are explored in the following sections with the intention that they are useful for other colleagues or organisations considering how to embark on a journey of systems change. We take a chronological order because of how the programme played out, but many of the themes were present throughout and people's experiences were more circular than linear – i.e. they would regularly cycle through different feelings and states of learning.

4.1 SEEING THE SYSTEM

(Months 1-3: September and October)



Mapping the systems that frame young people's lives, our work with them and the problems we're trying to tackle.

The first stage of Systems Changers was trying to encourage participants to pause, and not think immediately about change – which was hard given it was what they thought they had signed up for. We wanted to introduce participants to some new ways of thinking, as well as remind them of some older, more intuitive and person-centred approaches to working with people and for the social good.

This first stage helped practitioners to consider the following questions:

- What is a 'system' and what do the systems we work in really look like?
- How can we identify all the various people, agencies, processes and dynamics involved in the systems that shape young people's lives and our work with them?
- What is our own role in these systems? How are we positioned in relation to others? What power do we have ourselves to influence the system?
- What is it about our current systems that stop us from being able to tackle the multiple disadvantage faced by young people?
- Where are the blockages and good practice examples in the system?

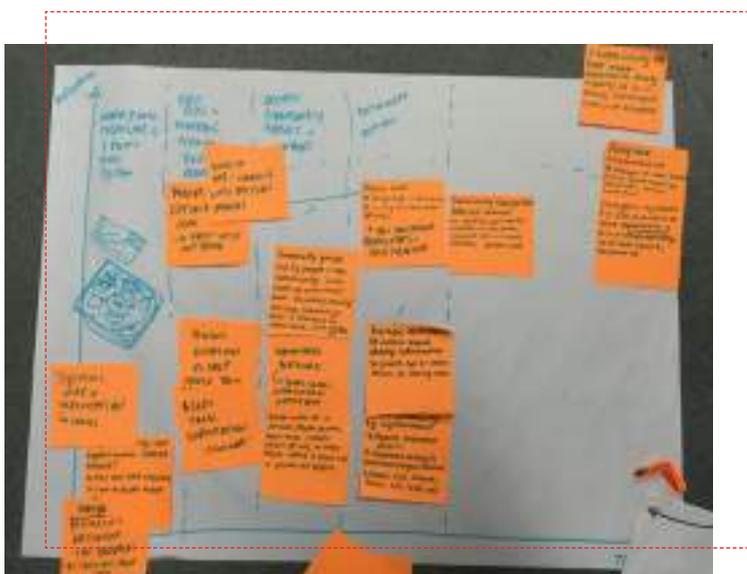
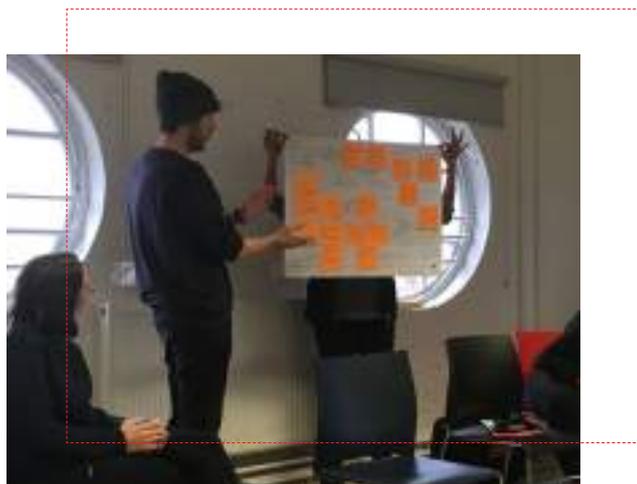
Mapping systems

To help colleagues explore these questions and be able to start to make wider change to help young people, the first couple of sessions centred on in-depth training on systems thinking and user design. These sessions sought to give the cohort a strong theoretical grounding that they could build their practical explorations on.

The participants found these sessions intense but really stimulating, many of them saying how they appreciated the opportunity to delve into more theoretical material outside of their heavily practice-focused day jobs. Some commented that it felt rare to be given the opportunity to 'stop and think' in new ways about how the world works before diving into trying to solve problems.

With an emergent systems lens through which to look at their own everyday work lives, participants then began to describe the systems that surround them and the young people they work with. In order to shed light on processes that are usually very hard to name, they learned how to do:

- Systems mapping.
- Rich pictures.
- Journey mapping.
- Storytelling.



Systems mapping was one of the cohort's favourite and most enlightening activities – they kept returning to mapping and multiple cause diagrams (discussed shortly) throughout the programme. They all said that being prompted to lay out and visualise all of the people, processes, issues and structures around a young person, for example, really helped them make sense of very complicated real world dynamics. Through exploring 'dark matter', participants were able to reveal the different (and often hidden) dynamics, norms, emotions and cultures which play a powerful role in how young people are treated in a system, but which are almost never articulated explicitly.

Once these issues were exposed, practitioners said they felt more able to consider how these elements of a system might be able to adapt, or if they are more resistant to change.

The first stage in the programme was also about carefully introducing the cohort to ways of identifying their own roles in the system. They did this through identifying themselves in the maps and pictures they drew, or by using journey maps to see what role that had in particular scenarios and when. Many said it was powerful visualising their positions in relation to other people and departments – they began to spot dynamics that they hadn't previously identified as being important in their work but which they could dismantle or enhance in the future to better achieve their aims.

Exploring their 'personal power' also made them reflect on the embodied identities they perform at work, and

what privilege they do or don't have in their part of the system. Participants reflected that this was one of the most interesting and also uncomfortable parts of the programme – whilst all were used to the reflective nature of formal supervision (by their line managers), most hadn't previously been challenged to really unpick the power they hold at work.

We found that when staff were tuned into systems thinking, they saw systemic connections and problems everywhere, making links between issues and people that they hadn't previously seen. They have documented and conveyed the systemic challenges to other colleagues and the structures that govern young people's lives. This included creating **feedback loops** and ways that regular members of staff can reflect the system back to itself, critique processes, and then find ways of changing them.

Mapping the system allowed staff to become more confident in 'showing the system to itself' e.g. in meetings with other colleagues in the sector, and challenging things that aren't working.



The systems can feel so massive and so broken you start to think "where do I start?" That can feel demoralising because you want to help but there is so much resistance to it.'

Practitioner - The Children's Society

We found that system mapping activities in themselves can build teams – we have since used them as opportunities to learn about colleagues, what's important to them, what their worldviews are. In our wider work with the organisation since Systems Changers, we have found that teams felt stronger and better connected to tackle local problems together more effectively because of their shared identity. Maps have also highlighted which voices are missing, or where disproportionate power lies, allowing us try and correct these.

Systems Changers showed us that it is powerful for people to explore the multifaceted nature of systems with other colleagues who are positioned differently in their systems, or in different but associated systems. Together they can learn about new perspectives and have a richer understanding of the problems and opportunities present in their shared systems as a result.

We also learnt that seeing the system around young people requires in-depth and conscious research with them to understand their perspectives and experiences of the system. **Young people, families and frontline staff are the experts in understanding where systems work or do not work.**

Colleagues also reflected that when given the space and supportive ear tuned into systems thinking, young people are able to describe systemic problems in great detail and with clarity.

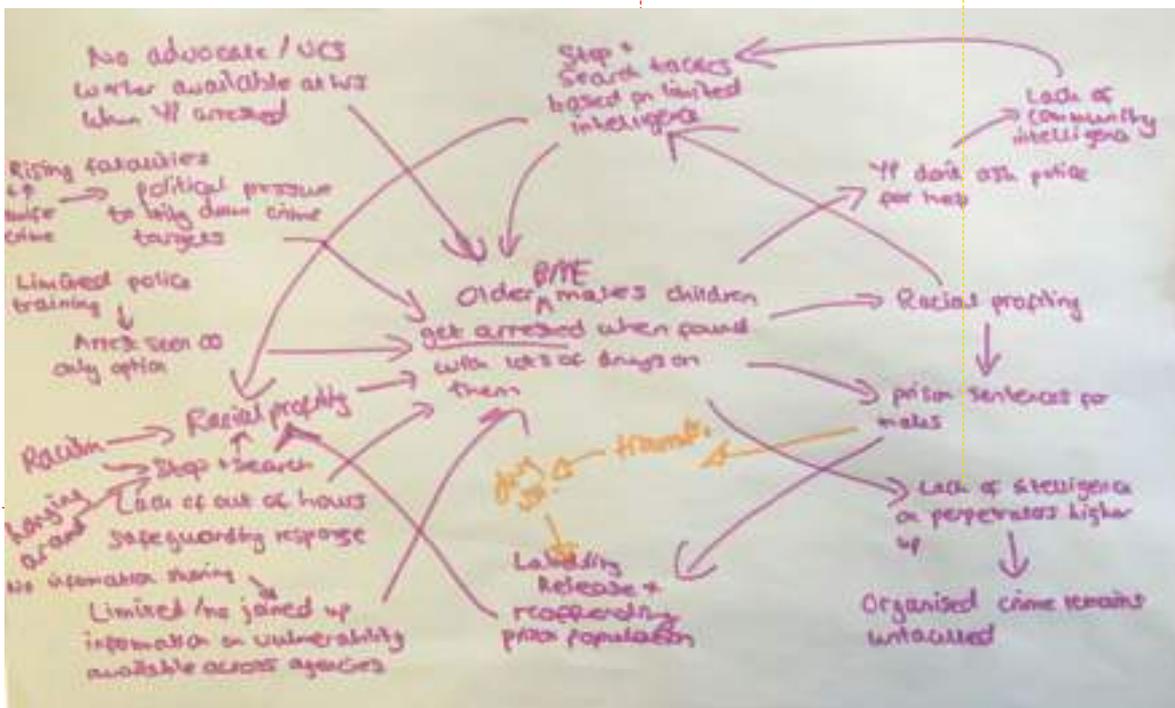
Young people have deep insight from their lived experience. Staff became adamant that in addition to offering high quality support services, **we need to create spaces and relationships that allow this insight to emerge.** They said that workers also need confidence to create these spaces, and the skills to listen and spot systemic issues.

Design approaches

Once the cohort had begun to map their systems, this first stage of the Systems Changers programme also introduced them to being '**design-led**' – considering how they could use design tools to test out and enact ideas for change in collaboration with young people and other partners.

In the process of mapping their systems and the problems they witnessed at work, participants had begun to deepen their understanding of the specific problems they wanted to work on. Mapping and researching often had the effect of shining a light on the root causes of a problem, allowing staff to develop 'problem statements' that were increasingly specific and focused.

They tested these problem statements with colleagues between residentials to see if they resonated with others' experiences, and adapted them accordingly. Participants used other tools such as journey maps to deepen their understanding of how things work at particular points in a young person or staff members journey through the system.



Developing collective insight

The Systems Changers programme sought to expose professionals to different perspectives across the systems they work in. Collective insight was a core underpinning of Systems Changers – working with colleagues across a system to **create a shared knowledge** about the system that would not be possible individually.

Throughout the programme, we supported practitioners to develop their voice as frontline experts and tell compelling stories about the problems they see and are trying to tackle. This helped them to build a community of colleagues who could collaborate based on a shared understanding of the issues in a local area.

We encouraged the cohort to engage from the outset with their other colleagues not on the programme to keep them informed with what they were learning, but also to stay tuned into their colleagues' perspectives on the system problems they were working on.

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING JOURNEYS

Most participants said they found the programme content interesting and inspiring. They described starting to see how – with time and support – they could apply their learning to tackling problems in their local systems. They reflected that the programme days were quite an intense and at times an overwhelming experience, although most said they appreciated being challenged with new concepts and approaches in the Systems Changers programme space.

Many initially found it difficult to frame how the course components and concepts fitted together into a narrative arc – not yet literate in systems change 'speak' and not yet fully comfortable in ambiguity. Colleagues said at various points in the first phase that they would benefit from having a more down-to-earth explanation presented to them to help them process and work through the evolutionary content.

In the first two sessions in particular, participants reported not always immediately seeing the relevance to their practice – they seemed to have a desire, perhaps understandably given their practical day jobs, to be able to immediately apply what they were learning to real-life situations.

They balanced this desire with also appearing to relax into the approach of letting the content come to them as it is delivered, trusting that there is a rationale behind it, and not feeling pressured to 'get it' immediately. By month three, many said that 'things are falling into place' or 'clicking'.

Participants really enjoyed and found useful the range of practical tools and activities that enabled them to visualise and test out the conceptual frameworks they were coming across. They highlighted systems mapping, rich pictures, journey mapping, multiple cause diagrams and influence/time diagrams as being understandable, helpful and replicable.

The third session was especially positive for participants because it started to focus more explicitly on bringing the concepts and methodologies into practice and applying them to real-world problems. Participants seemed enthused and proactive at employing the various tools to 'find the flex' in their local systems, taking away with them some concrete plans for how they could further research, define and understand the problems they wanted to conduct test-and-learn activities on.

All of the participants in various ways took their learning back into practice between taught sessions and said they were keen to bring their colleagues along on their learning journey. Some found it fairly straightforward to explain systems approaches to their peers by using examples or trying activities with them, whilst others felt some pressure to be 'experts' in systems change early on, which they found harder while their learning was still evolving.

An overarching reflection from participants and The Children's Society project team was that more thought was needed on balancing the course framings around it being a personal development course where participants were asked to make themselves vulnerable and explore their personal position in systems, and the desire to get them to openly and proactively share their learning journey. These drivers were potentially in tension with each other, especially at the outset of the programme when participants were new and finding their way with the content and each other. The initial difficulty in piecing the programme together appeared to have also partly contributed to participants' hesitancy around sharing or communicating their learning externally – something that we were trying to promote, and which after the third session seemed more likely to happen given participants' growing sense of confidence and ownership of the programme.

By month three, many participants were looking forward to sharing their learning more widely and igniting dialogue with their sector colleagues to see how they could embed systems thinking and approaches in their shared systems to make sustainable change for young people.

GROUP LEARNING JOURNEY

The Systems Changers 2018 Collective

The cohort quickly built a group identity that participants said they felt was centred around trust, support, openness, respect and constructive challenge.



Participants said the group discussions and joint activities were really insightful, and allowed them to consolidate their understanding of the programme content. Some said that when they have had trouble comprehending content, informal discussion during or after the sessions has been what's helped them 'get it', or for 'things to click'.



Also from the programme we've been given a suite of tools which we have been able to take back into practice, in order to explore change in a more systemic way, being able to share that with our colleagues and more broadly within the sector.'

- Systems Change Co-ordinator

ORGANISATIONAL

- Nine participants worked for The Children's Society, one worked for Coin Street Community Builders, and one worked for The Place - Young People's Company. For the latter two organisations, this was the first time a colleague had undertaken learning around systems change, and they felt there was an opportunity for them to be 'intrapreneurs' for leading the way with change within their organisations.
- There were frequent reflections from the participants working at The Children's Society that they felt power and support from all being from the same organisation – both in terms of having colleagues 'on the same page' who can build an alliance and have more impact together, and also in terms of knowing there is organisational buy-in and support to embed learning in a sustainable way across the national network of services provided. One of the external facilitators who the cohort visited in Session 2 fed back that he believed that the majority coming from across one organisation was a strength, especially given the difficult work of systems change is much more manageable and less burdensome on the individual if they are surrounded by supportive peers. The Children's Society includes a large network of geographically-dispersed and diverse services, so it is also important to remember that its participants didn't tend to work together regularly, and still felt at times like they were the trailblazers for systems change in the part of the organisation they worked.
- As the time of the launch of the Systems Changers programme, there was a coalescing of interest, energy and activities around systems change across The Children's Society, primarily building on the programme, The National Lottery Community Fund-supported Disrupting Exploitation programme, and the School of Systems Change programme for senior leaders. Strengthening systemic thinking and embedding approaches was starting to become a core component of the organisation's strategy for tackling multiple disadvantage.
- Participants' managers reported that the approaches, tools and methodologies taught in the Systems Changers programme quickly started to aid colleagues to put these strategic aims into practice – both in terms of surfacing new insights into systems and highlighting blockages or opportunities to act, and also in offering colleagues a language through which to recognise and articulate where they already change systems.

- Some of the ways programme participants began scaling their learning to other colleagues across their organisations included:
 - Leading a local systems mapping session with their regional team.
 - Setting up Systems Changers areas in their offices, including curating interactive post-it walls to invite colleagues to ask questions about the programme and content, and suggest areas for exploration or test and learning in their everyday work.
 - Pinning a regular item on to their team meeting agenda to share concepts and tools with colleagues.
 - Leading a 'systems change 101' seminar touching on key concepts and practices, and delivering mini-masterclasses on journey mapping with 70 colleagues.



BUILDING THE FIELD

- Once the participants felt settled into the sessions and programme delivery was established, we moved into a broader phase of sharing and communicating the learning with the sector to try and build the field of systems change.

- **There were a range of communications and engagement activities undertaken:**
 - Development of the Systems Changers 2018 website – to communicate content and ongoing learning, particularly showcasing insight from participants about how they are applying learning in practice.
 - Learning Lab workshops with external colleagues to surface emergent learning and explore what would enable the wider sector the gain as much insight as possible from the programme.
 - Conversations with key colleagues across the children and young people's sector to explore where there is opportunity for sector collaboration to build upon the learning from Systems Changers.
 - [Blogs](#) to share the personal and real life experiences of our Systems Changers along the way.

Participants also started to share learning with their local systems, for example:

- A journey mapping workshop with a cohort of Frontline's social workers to understand young people's social care journeys and the language used about them at various stages.
- A workshop at a Safeguarding Practice Update meeting for multi-agency professionals in Greater Manchester to explore the various responses to child criminal exploitation (CCE).

4.2 FINDING THE FLEX

(Months 4-6: November and December)



Identifying opportunities in systems for changing how we work and testing new ideas.

Once colleagues identified the multiple people, organisations and structures in their systems, the next stage of the Systems Changers programme gave them the tools to understand the relationships, influences, gaps or flexibility between them.

Exploring the following questions allowed practitioners to identify where opportunities for change might exist:

- Which parts of the system have influence over other parts and what are the effects of this influence?
- If we face a problem in one part of the system, how can we understand the range of causes or influences on it?
- Are there any unintended consequences of behaviour in one part of the system on another?
- How can we identify the best place in a system to act to make the most effective and sustainable change?

Identifying opportunities for change

Most of the participants had begun the programme with an idea of what they thought they wanted to address. They had seen systemic failings affecting the young people they work with, and wanted Systems Changers to help them figure out how to start taking action. Many wanted to jump straight in – but as explained previously, the purpose of the programme was to offer colleagues a deeper degree of systemic insight into problems before they sought to find solutions. Once they had started to do this in the ‘Seeing the System’ stage, they were ready to start exploring options for change.

The Finding the Flex part of the programme helped practitioners to understand systems dynamics, what elements of a system appear fixed, and where there might be room for movement. We taught practitioners how to use tools such as **multiple cause diagrams** to help them see the effects that actions or decisions in one part of a system may result in somewhere else.

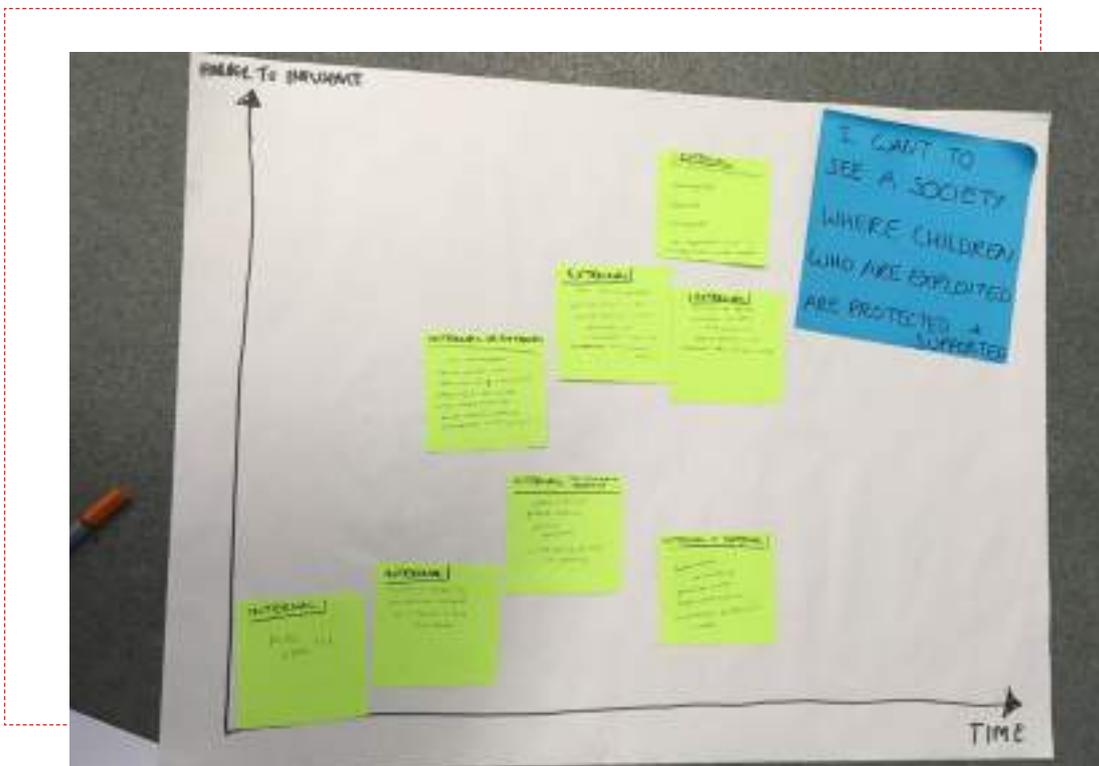
Defining problems and projects to tackle them

It was in this second stage of the programme that the cohort were supported to start to unpick a problem and consider options or steps might exist for them to try out in response.

The cohort were taught a range of techniques to identify where in a problem could they most impactfully act, and they began to define the live practice projects that they would focus on for the remainder of the programme.

Some of the approaches and tools we used to do this included:

- Multiple cause diagrams or causal loop diagrams.
- Timescale and influence axes (to break down complex problems and map multiple approaches to tackling them – including the effort/input/time required, and the potential impact they can have).
- Doing deeper user research.
- Prototyping – designing and testing ideas and responses to a problem.



We learned that we don't need to have all the answers, but facilitating spaces where people can explore the issues together is powerful and surprisingly rare – people are always pleasantly surprised when they take part in these spaces. Systems approaches can help people find solutions to their own or joint problems just by bringing a group of people together into a room or virtually.

'Admitting' you don't know the answer, being humble, especially in a position of seniority or power, is encouraging to other colleagues and opens people up.

Sharing ideas for change early or when they're incomplete is also freeing for the individual. It means ideas are put out into the world for others to help develop and work together on, to find solutions.

INDIVIDUAL

Individual participants all experienced different learning journeys over the course of the first five months – characterised by many of the same types of 'aha!' moments or realisations, but occurring at different times and having different impacts on their approach to their project work and 'day jobs'.

In general, after the first couple of months where participants felt somewhat overwhelmed by all the new information, they settled into Months 3 and 4 feeling more comfortable with and increasingly inspired by the process and content.

Many said that the content started to make more sense and they could see how it fitted together. They felt a growing ability to translate their learning into reality and apply to their job roles, current work, systems change projects, and local systems.

Many reported that they felt a greater sense of permission to 'do things differently', or not wait for explicit permission to do activities necessary for systemic change. Many said they felt able to take bolder actions at work, such as invite themselves along to meetings that they would otherwise not go to, but which they deem are now necessary for them to enact change or influence other key systemic actors.

At this point in the programme, the cohort tended to feel full of enthusiasm both in terms of how their local systems change projects/ tests were going, but also for how they were feeling personally in their own change journeys.

At the same time, they were all recognising that being change-makers and leading systemic change can be challenging and tiring, and many of them said they fluctuated between feeling positive and energised by the changes they're seeing, and also feeling frustrated, hopeless and exhausted when they hit barriers or resistance. They all seemed to feel comfortable expressing these ups and downs during programme sessions, and were reassured to hear that others in the cohort felt similarly, and that these feelings are very common and to be expected in any kind of change process such as the ones they were trying to enact.

There was understandably some anxiety around the programme ending as participants had built very strong bonds with each other and felt worried about how they would be able to continue finding the space, time and energy required to keep their systems change endeavours going without the structured support. This was especially the case for members of staff from the two smaller organisations. Participants wanted a community to continue.

Participants started, without prompting from the project team, planning lots of individual and group ways of spreading systems change learning throughout the organisation and their local sectors.

Participants quickly became serious and eager champions of systemic thinking and design methodologies and they had fantastic ideas of how to reframe/repackage the learning and approaches in more down-to-earth, relatable ways for colleagues.

The issue of systems change language continued to stay at the forefront of people's minds – they started working on a joint exercise to surface what 'helpful' and 'unhelpful' language is that cuts through the jargon and makes systems change learning as accessible as possible.

ORGANISATIONAL

Individual participants were proactive at taking the approaches, tools and concepts they learned on the programme out to their colleagues in their wider organisations. They did this in a variety of ways – some were deliberate where they were leading workshops to distil and convey key systems change or service design concepts to their teams, or using a tool to explore a shared problem.

Other strands of sharing and connecting were less defined but as important – such as adhoc conversations with colleagues about what they were learning. Participants thought and had received feedback that they had been modelling systems behaviours to their colleagues. Working in this way was really powerful for making others aware of and eager to learn more about the benefits of systemic approaches.

SECTOR/SYSTEM

Most of the participants said they were working with considerably more external colleagues than previously. This was either because they now felt more able to identify the key partners they need to work with, or because they feel more proactive about or able to approach local partners they know but wouldn't necessarily have worked with much before.

Some of this rippling out to the wider sector has taken the form of increased multi-agency working or collaboration on projects focused on direct work with young people, or it has been to share learning or train external colleagues on using systemic and design approaches.

Participants in the programme experienced a maturity of external relationships they hold, as a result of working in more systemic ways. Building allies of systems change advocates across wider partners has developed over time. We've seen partnerships strengthen to operate beyond the micro individual level - to collaboration on common problems needing collective solutions.

4.3 MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

(Months 7-9: January, February and March)



Implementing and scaling up the interventions that change systems for the better and for the future.

Building upon their ability to **see the systems** that frame young people's lives, and where **opportunities for flexibility** lie, this last stage of the Systems Changers programme helped the cohort refine the different approaches they could take to making **positive and sustainable change to the systems affecting young people's lives.**

This part of the programme asked:

- How can we apply our systemic learning and approaches to making change happen?
- Who do we need to work with in order to make change happen? Who are our allies?
- How do we build relationships with colleagues and young people which are based on trust and authenticity?

- How can we build confidence and skills across our organisations to work in more systemic ways?
- How can we share our approaches so that we make change as wide-scale as possible?

Testing and scaling change

In this final stage of the programme, we supported the practitioners to push themselves towards more explicitly implementing all their learning about systemic thinking and design approaches through their projects, if they hadn't already started doing this.

Building on the skills they'd learned when 'finding the flex', practitioners learned how to reflect on and adapt experiments on an iterative basis, in conjunction with colleagues and partners – taking a test and learn approach and trying to embrace 'failing safely'.

We found that once individuals saw themselves 'doing' more tangible system change activities, especially with external colleagues and in their local systems, they were really keen to find ways of documenting and evaluating the changes they were part of. They wanted to be able to say **'look, this is what a systemic approach can do!'** – to shed light on both bold and tangible changes, as well as more incremental or intangible ones. It challenged them to use their new storytelling skills and novel methods of communication (blogs, videos) to convey change in new ways to new partners and audiences. It also challenged our existing service evaluation approaches (as we touch on later and discuss in more detail in [this blog post](#)).

By the end of the formal programme, all of the participants had their own tangible systems change projects underway – including both formal or direct attempts to change how particular parts of a system affecting young people worked, and more indirect educative projects to help other colleagues be more systemic in their work.

Some of the live systems change topics and projects the cohort were working on included:

- Transforming local information and intelligence sharing practices between police and social care, to make them child-centred.
- Chronic/repeated school exclusions for child victims of exploitation.
- Creating trustful and safe spaces for young people in urban neighbourhoods.
- Transforming language use of professionals when talking about young people.
- Exploitation and young people's positioning as victims/perpetrators of crime at point of arrest and also point of charge.
- Embedding systemic approaches in a residential children's home.
- Empowering young people to understand and challenge the systems that affect them.
- Rolling out trauma-informed practices and training across a city-wide social care system.
- Mapping and challenging gender stereotypes in professionals' approaches to child sexual and criminal exploitation.



The cohort also moved rapidly into initiating external outreach and partnerships with others in their local and national systems. They:

- Shadowed police officers in a police station to witness how young people are charged with offences.
- Ran education sessions on systems thinking at multi-agency safeguarding meetings in Greater Manchester.
- Developed a joint project with Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) around social care professionals' use of inappropriate/pejorative/judgemental language about/with young people.
- Led a discovery and prototyping session about the issue of school exclusions with young people and staff at one of our mental health services in Shropshire.
- Met with pastoral support colleagues at local schools to understand/act on school exclusions.
- Redesigned one of their charity's work experience programmes through co-creation with young people.
- Worked with Frontline to deliver journey mapping training to social work trainees.
- Designed and ran systems change education sessions with nearly 40 colleagues across Essex and London.



We have supported the education system – working directly with schools to unpick when they fine families for young people not turning up and impact this can have – also the exclusion process and how these young people are at higher risk of exploitation and attribution.'

Practitioner - The Children's Society

Participants reflected on their journey. Here are some of the things that were said:

☞ The whole programme has been fundamental. It's been a factory reset [for me]. The language and way of thinking about it. Learning about systems change should be mandatory across the organisation. But it can go wrong - not too fast. The language needs to be right, we need to take people on journey with us.'

System Changer 2019 - Residential
Next month I will...

**REFLECT ON
MY SYSTEM**

*Make sure there is
an understanding
in my team of my
commitment/time
this involves*

**Draw a map
of disrupting
exploitation**

**Talk to others
about what
I'm doing**

*Going to try and apply
the techniques to my
own work. Make a
SC space in the office.*

**Think about
practical
applications**

*Be less cynical about
free association and
make sure I
properly reflect*

**I will ensure
I feedback to my
team and take them
on my journey!**

**Do more
journey
mapping**

*I am going to make
my war room (SC2018
office area) and talk
to Caitlin about the
Learning Lab.*

What have you appreciated most about this process?



Peer support
(resilience and
emotional)



Hearing and learning
from people outside
the organisation



Protected time –
having the time and
space to explore
systems change



Being pushed to be
brave by my peers



Being challenged to
share things externally



How it has shaped me
and helped me grow



It's helped me bring
my whole self



Sharing the fears as
well as the good bits



Spending time learning
from and being with
colleagues from across
the organisation and
country



Learning from each
other: Different teams -
Different locations



Collective reflection
and problem-solving
in a safe space



Some of the speakers.
Real language



Feeling like I have peers.
I don't at work – that
is hard!



Permission to be: Integral,
Authentic, Courageous



Camaraderie from
the cohort



Genuine support: No-one
gave up on me. Allowed to
experience in my time

We held a final public event in Birmingham to celebrate the completion of the programme, and to shine a light on the achievements they had made in their personal development and practical projects.

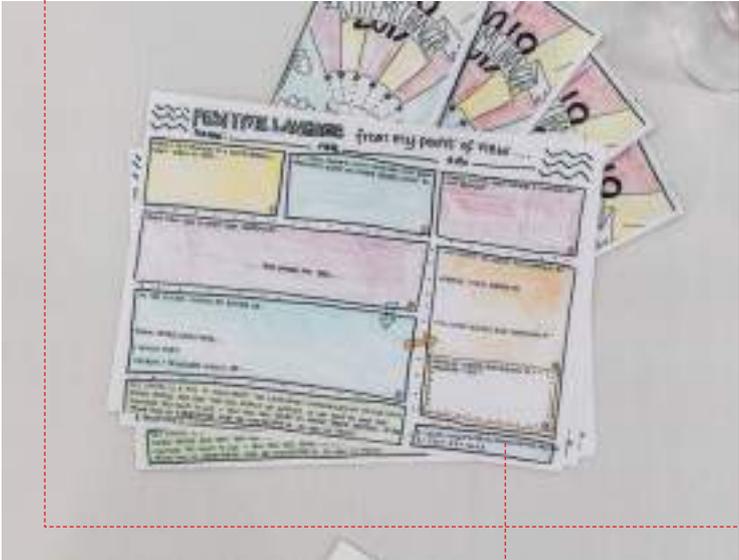
- They all said how powerful it was to see their work go out into the open, and how proud they felt of their colleagues. It was a really special day – photos and a video can be seen [here](#).

- At the final event, the cohort also shared printed copies of a 'zine they had created together to capture their Systems Changers experience.

You can read about it [here](#).



Photographer: Thom Bartley – thombartley.com



Photographer: Thom Bartley – thombartley.com

05

KEY LEARNING ABOUT SYSTEMS CHANGE AND THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SECTOR

5.1 INDIVIDUALS AS SYSTEMS CHANGERS

Exploring and embracing Systems Change as a framework:

- Enables frontline professionals to **map and make sense of the very complex societal problems** facing young people and the multi-layered systems that frame their lives.
- Gives frontline professionals the **language** and **evidence** to articulate **how** their current small-scale, directive and intervention-focused work with individual young people must occur in conjunction with agitating for **wider contextual change** to the unwieldy and frustrating systems that perpetuate disadvantage.
- Brings together charities in the sector, working across policy, campaigning and direct service delivery.
- Lays out **permission to 'do things differently'** and **act quickly on small problems**, which in turn allow them to feel more confident that they can make wider and more lasting change at higher levels.
- Results in individual staff feeling bolstered by hearing different perspectives from other people in their systems that **validate** and **enlighten** their experiences of the same problems.
- Enables aspiring leaders to **role model the behaviours and approaches** they want to adopt as managers, and/or feel their managers should adopt.

This enables 'change from within' and a sense of intrapreneurship.



5.2 YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

By Jim Davis, Head of Youth Engagement

Before the programme was finalised and the cohort of participants recruited, we considered whether young people could be co-participants on the programme or whether the programme should run with adults first. After some deliberation we settled on the latter as we couldn't be sure what the programme would demand of participants and whether young people would be at a disadvantage when adults were paid to be part of the programme. Running the programme with adults first would allow us to better understand what was involved and how it might need to adapt to include young people in any future programme.

Consequently the programme began with two young people's questions in mind:

- **Could this programme be run for young people, and in particular young people who we work with?**
- **How can this cohort of adult participants engage young people in learning as they progress through the programme?**

In terms of the first question it became apparent early on that the programme as it was delivered would require significant adaptation to make it suitable for young people. The vulnerability and exposure it brought out in participants suggested additional risks to vulnerable young people that would need to be managed in considerable detail.

The language used to deliver the content was complex and the demands on participants to contribute and reflect would have been challenging for young people. That is not to underestimate the capacity of young people, but a realistic understanding of the young people would have wanted to participate. The content facilitators had limited experience of direct work with young people or in delivering their specialist area and expertise to young people, let alone those who are particularly disadvantaged.

To pursue the second question we worked with the Youth Engagement Team from The Children's Society. Each participant on the programme was assigned a member of the team who would explore with them the question about engaging young people in their learning. The expectation was that after each two-day workshop the participant would meet with their Youth Engagement support to reflect on what they had learnt and how they might relate that experience to the young people they work with.

That process proved to work well for participants who valued that opportunity to reflect and explore the learning. But the focus on engaging young people was hard to maintain as participants grappled with what they were learning and their reactions to the workshops. The time spent with Youth Engagement support became a more general support and reflection, and for some it took on a more of a mentoring feel.

As a Youth Engagement Team we revised our support to firstly enable participants to think about how their learning could be applied to their work, and then to consider where young people could contribute to that learning or benefit from it. What we sought to avoid was adding what could have felt like another pressure to achieve by asking participants to show how they were engaging young people. By the end of the programme participants were able to express clear ideas about how their learning could and was being applied to their work, and how they could begin engaging young people more fully.

Overall the key lessons learnt are:

- 1. We value and prioritise the voice and influence of young people in all that we do. But in applying a system change approach, we have to be prepared to make the change more significant than the involvement of young people.**
- 2. We have only just started to apply what we have learnt to the way we engage young people. There is scope and enthusiasm to progress with tangible applications of tools and learning in youth-focused activity.**
- 3. Participants have found their own voice and realise their own valuable insight has equal value to that of the young people they work with.**

Jim Davis

Head of Youth Engagement
The Children's Society

5.3 CREATING AN 'ENABLING ENVIRONMENT' FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Attempting systems change isn't something we can ask individual colleagues to do alone. The large-scale and long-term nature of systemic work – particularly in social care where there are so many factors at play that influence our beneficiaries' outcomes – means that we have to work together and across traditional boundaries. This includes colleagues, processes and structures across our organisations and systems.

In the process of delivering the programme and scaling systems approaches across our organisation over the last two years, we've learned that making systems change real and 'do-able' requires a host of enabling factors to be embedded and invested in – both within individual people and the organisations they work in.

We had brilliant commitment and energy from our frontline practitioners on Systems Changers, and they started to see the impact of thinking differently in their everyday work. We realised quite quickly though that if The Children's Society wants to enable staff to be 'systems changers' and embed systemic approaches into our work in order to realise our strategy to improve young people's lives, we need organisational commitment and action to put these enabling factors into place.

It's not just about being effective in changing complex systems or achieving our strategy – we also now know that working in the system is a hard and emotional endeavor. As an organisation who cares about our staff and who we've invited to engage in this, we realised we have a responsibility to support them and protect them as they embark on what for some might be quite a profound and challenging journey.

Some of these conditions can be created quickly and easily and others take more time and effort to foster. Whilst we can retrofit systemic approaches into some of our existing programmes of work, it will become critical to build time, space and resource to foster these enabling factors.



Eleven enabling conditions for systems change

As the programme progressed we developed our own 'Enabling Conditions' for what needs to be in place in large organisations, workplaces and other collectives to enable people to engage in systems change.

Managers and senior leaders have a particularly important role by practically manifesting these enabling conditions in three ways:

'TRAILBLAZING'

Proactively modelling and creating space for new and positive opportunities that enable and propel colleagues forward.

'CLEARING THE WAY'

Freeing people up by deliberately questioning and removing barriers that otherwise hinder their progress.

'CREATING SAFETY'

Being a source of reassurance and safety as colleagues test out systemic approaches, and offering them clarity on how these new ways of working can positively interact with existing frameworks for practice, such as safeguarding.



06

PRACTICAL LEARNING ABOUT DELIVERING A SYSTEMS CHANGE PROGRAMME

We quickly learned that running a systems change learning programme is very different to more traditional professional development courses.

As well as taking the participants on an immersive and intensive learning journey, the programme team were also learning about how to run such a programme. We've tried here to be as honest as possible about the experience of delivering this kind of unique programme. The content of this section comes from regular programme team meetings, our final team review, and the Learning Lead's ongoing observations.

We gathered ongoing feedback and insight from the cohort through individual monthly reflection sessions – both on the logistics of the programme/experience, and on their individual learning journeys. These were intimately intertwined – how people felt in the moment strongly impacted on their ability to learn and feel confident in their learning experience.

Programme set-up and initiation

- Setting up a development programme on such a wide-ranging, complex, novel and potentially disruptive subject like systems change is intense – it requires a great deal of communication, preparation and

pre-launch admin to make sure the programme gets off to a smooth start, and is able to support individuals and the group to get the most out of it.

- There was great engagement between partners in the months preceding programme initiation. However, communication and planning in the final weeks could have been more streamlined.

Cohort make-up

- Getting the cohort right is important. We had a slightly unexpected cohort in that they were primarily colleagues from The Children's Society – this worked out well – but more time allocated for the recruitment of participants onto the programme would have allowed us to promote the programme opportunity to a wider group of colleagues across the children and young people's sector.
- This was the first Systems Changers programme focused on one sector. The cohort reflected that they found it useful to come together as colleagues from across different parts of a similar system. They said the variety of frontline youth professionals involved allowed them to understand different views of some shared

problems, and explore the content through relevant examples that they could all recognise. They also reflected that having a shared professional language around particular structures or processes (often with their own jargon and acronyms!) was helpful for understanding and offering ideas around each other's problems.

- Although the majority of the cohort was from The Children's Society, the cohort was diverse in terms of specialism, project, location and their own professional background – including whether people had any experience of systems and design approaches.
- Hosting a cohort primarily from one organisation allows for supportive and learning relationships to develop to a great depth between members of the group. The cohort felt a sense of closeness and understanding of the issues each was grappling with, and they could easily contact and work with each other outside of the formal learning space. Some said they felt more able to relax and open up with the rest of the cohort because there was the more likely prospect of them staying connected after the programme had ended.
- The impact of hosting this kind of project within/in close proximity to an organisation like The Children's Society, especially with the project team also embedded, is that transferring the weight of learning back into the organisation is likely to have been considerably more possible than if an individual was

to be the only one attempting to transform how their organisation operated as a result of their personal learning journey on the programme.

- At the same time, we reflected that with the majority of the cohort working at The Children's Society, there were times when discussions or views of the 'system' were framed through a particular lens or primarily from the standpoint of one organisation. We had to be careful and conscious throughout to try not to make the programme just an internal talking shop, and instead really push the cohort and ourselves as a project team to be open-minded and let go of our framings.
- More diversity in the cohort – for example, from other parts of the young people's sector – would also have been great to bring together other perspectives from across the system and develop sector-wide collective knowledge. For example, one of the non-The Children's Society participants was able to shed light on the holistic neighbourhood-based work she undertook, and this gave the other participants ideas for how they could connect with other partners across their own local areas.

Programme team roles

- Fluidity between roles occurred – this was positive, as it allowed us to be adaptive. However, at times the responsibility and remit of some of the roles was unclear.

- A role more explicitly focused on external communications and wider sector engagement would have been helpful, e.g. to develop and publish ongoing materials, publish through the website and build interest in wider community/sector (not just learning but broader communications about the programme itself). At the outset of the programme there was some communications support from Lankelly Chase, which was really helpful.
- Governance – programme team meetings did take place, but on reflection more frequent meetings would have been beneficial, as would greater transparency and shared understanding of how decision-making worked.

Programme content and facilitators

- Supporting people to develop as 'Systems Changers' can mean different things to different people depending on their sector and existing knowledge of systems change. All partners need to be on the same page with what the core objectives, content and support requirements of a systems change programme are from the beginning.
- We realised at the opening residential session that there were slightly different understandings between ourselves as delivery partners as to whether we were aiming to offer the cohort a chance to learn about systems change theory and approaches in a unique space outside of their everyday work, or also expecting them to translate their new insight into tangible change. In other words, were we satisfied to develop insight and change within people and let them choose if and how to act on it? Or did we want to more rapidly create changemakers who enacted wider change in the world around them during the course of the programme? Could one come without the other? Is it inevitable that if you 'just' teach people about systems change, they will become systems changers who change systems?
- We reflected later on that our varying interpretations of the programme's purpose potentially confused the cohort. Could they relax into 'just' receiving some systems change wisdom from some of the sector's leaders and see where they took it, or did they need to be planning from the get-go what systemic change they were personally going to make happen in their local areas?
- The individual programme content components were of very high quality – there was clearly lots of time and effort invested from the course designers in curating the programme to ensure it was rooted in both well-established and emergent systems change practice.
- The range of facilitators convened to run the sessions was excellent, and feedback from the cohort was very positive. It was brilliant that the frontline cohort got to learn directly from such experienced colleagues and leaders across the sector – some of whom have continued to have contact with each other to progress projects.



- Systems thinking and systems change approaches are complex and non-linear. For our cohort, who were completely new to it, it felt at times like the systems change programme appeared to have an unclear narrative arc or overarching curriculum – and this meant that the cohort struggled to put their learning journey in context. They had to trust in the mystique of a programme that promised to reveal itself to them gradually, but this hindered some people's ability to learn from the outset. It took time to build participant's confidence that they could actually engage with the content and they had experience and knowledge worthy of bringing to the collective learning experience.
 - Some individual sessions and facilitators were of varied relatability/applicability to the children and young people's sector and the cohort's everyday practice work. Therefore at times some participants struggled to know how to implement what they were learning in practice. This is understandable given that the content was not designed to be aimed at a specific sector, although some tailoring might be helpful in the future. The increasing use of examples by facilitators and the refocusing around young people by the Youth Engagement Lead really helped make this translation process easier. The cohort began to feel more confidence in engaging with the content as the programme evolved.
- Reflective spaces and pastoral support**
- We soon all realised that the programme would ask a lot of the cohort in personal and emotional ways, as well as professionally. At different points, the content and the intensity of the learning environment caused nearly all participants to feel overwhelmed. We made sure to provide the group with lots of opportunities and forums to express and work through what they were feeling.
 - Participants said a critical element of the programme was the time and space to reflect on their programme learning, their everyday practice, and their deeper motivations and professional career trajectories.
 - The delivery team and all of the participants spoke about the strong value of the collective insight sessions, and having a separate systems coach to explore their shared learning and build a close learning community.
 - Participants were offered individual monthly meetings with a personal coach. They had varied experiences of this coaching. Some found it very useful as a space to privately reflect, and for tying together what they were learning in the programme with their own professional and personal motivations and plans for work. Others found the coaching process difficult because they thought the questions or approach were too personal for something work-related. Some reflected that whilst

the premise of access to a coach is an excellent resource during this kind of development programme, it would have been good to have some options for coaches so that participants could find a coach they could connect with.

- Some of the participants said they would have liked more unstructured time as a cohort to reflect and work together.
- Consistent and in-depth support for individual participants from the programme co-ordinator was important both because some of the sessions invoked strong emotional reactions, and also because implementing systems approaches in practice brought participants face-to-face with challenge and difficulty for which they needed reassurance and support.

Structure and logistics

- The programme comprised a range of delivery methods – the cohort welcomed the good mix of presentations, activity sessions, reflection sessions and studio time.
- Off-site visits to external colleagues also formed part of delivery. These were considered interesting by the cohort, but some participants found that they could not always immediately see the relevance of the visit to the other content being delivered in that stage. This issue was perhaps more to do with how the visit was set in the context of other content, rather than the visits being irrelevant.

- It's important to make the most of people's time. Making the best use of people's time when spent away from home is important – elongating days and allowing travel time was valued.

Locations

- It was welcome that the programme was hosted in two different cities, making it less London-centric.
- The cohort felt that moving around too much to different venues was problematic. People need stability and physical safety when there is lots to grapple with cognitively and emotionally.

Programme close

- We received feedback from the cohort that they were pleased with the pace and focus of the final residential, which was co-designed with them to give the programme proper closure. We wanted people to have a quiet, protected space to come together for the last time, reflect on what they had been through and achieved, and solidify the emotional and professional ties they had built with each other. There were some studio sessions where colleagues could work on their projects individually or together, planning their next steps after the programme's formal end.
- The team learnt that greater clarity was needed about the framings and expectations of the programme in terms of personal development and also expectations around sharing learning with wider

colleagues – especially at the final event. There was a tension between 'going at your own pace', with ongoing learning emphasised as more important than having a product or solution designed by the end. However the final 'showcase' event was organised to allow the cohort to invite key internal and external colleagues to spread learning across their wider systems.

- We were careful to encourage and capture the cohort's desires for next steps and support needs after the programme ended to make sure that our systems change offer to staff was rooted in and co-designed with them – but as an organisation it's taken us some time to translate all of these into concrete offerings. One of the challenges we've faced is that without the firm dates of the programme fixed in, and everyone dispersed and back into their day jobs, it has been hard to coordinate creating more formal space or opportunities for them to work together across organisational boundaries.
- We have instead focused on developing a wider offer for all staff that is rooted in the learning from Systems Changers (which we touch on later). This is potentially fairer as it opens up learning opportunities for other colleagues across the organisation and strengthens our broader systemic capabilities, but risks losing some of the momentum and connection for the 'original' group of Systems Changers. To try and combat this,

we made systems change a core part of our cross-organisational Innovation Community and most of the Systems Changers regularly attend and lead sessions in those quarterly meetings. This has emerged as the key collective space they gather in, and it seems to have the benefits of allowing them to reconnect with each other and make connections with other staff who weren't on the programme to inspire them to embrace systemic ways of working.

- We took the opportunity to use some of the content, approaches and tools from the Systems Changers programme and form an action learning set for a group of colleagues that were unable to attend the programme. Whilst not as intense as the Systems Changers programmes, this action learning set has given a wider group of colleagues a shared understanding of systems change and introduction to the tools. It is something we are continuing to develop as an offer to staff internally within the organisation.

External engagement with the wider sector

Engaging colleagues across our sectors is critical when learning about and trying to enact systemic change. We are part of, and intimately connected to, other people and agencies in our systems. We need to find ways of bringing them on a systems change journey too if we're to have the collective impact we need to shift these systems. Reflecting on how the programme engaged the wider sector:

- We did less external communications throughout the programme time itself than initially planned, and this had an impact on our ability to engage with the wider sector, particularly early on. This was due to capacity in the programme team, and also us being unsure of the wider narrative arc, which made us hesitant to share quite so openly. As our confidence as a project team and cohort in embracing systemic practices grew, we felt more able to share our learning at an early stage, and felt less worried about our musings and tests not being perfect or 'finished' before sending them out into the world.
- At the beginning of the programme, we offered the cohort a range of ways of documenting and sharing their learning, such as encouraging them to write stories on our Medium [blog](#), and they had coaching on storytelling and finding their voice.
- The programme would have benefitted from an external communications plan agreed by and implemented across the project team. It would also have been useful to have better harnessed The Children's Society's and other partner organisations' existing communications support and channels to share learning and insight from the work.
- External communications improved in the latter half of the programme once the website and Medium page had been set up and people had more confidence in sharing their experiences online and via social media. Some participants and guests reflected at the final public event that given the shift in confidence towards the end of the programme and with the momentum built, if the programme had continued slightly longer we would likely have seen a continued rise in external engagement.

07

THE WIDER IMPACT AND JOURNEY
ACROSS OUR ORGANISATION

When The Children's Society commenced the Systems Changers programme there was confusion – largely around the language and how applicable the tools, concepts and approaches could be to the very operational focus of participants. But once we gained confidence and made the content our own, systems change really became something we were committed to and engaged in. We were willing to be vulnerable and test not only how to try out learning in practice, but also how to take other external colleagues along for the ride and be open about challenges/learning around implementation.

The Children's Society is now building systems change into many of our national programmes. We are also testing-and-learning on a wide scale, because we have seen the value and have the tools/approaches to do this. Our testing and learning has expanded beyond delivery to young people, and we are trying out new ways of working in different places in the organisation.

The programme forced the organisation to reflect on its own role in the sector, and system and the dark matter within. We, The Children's Society, are a system in our own right, as is the system 'out there' that we are part of around young people.

The programme has ignited a period of in-depth and open reflection across the organisation about the kind of organisation we want to be.

Tackling multiple disadvantage and improving young people's well-being isn't just about those young people we support – it's about investing in our staff so that they are valued colleagues who feel resilient, confident and supported to do the hard work of individual case work and systems change. We are committed to working to create the enabling conditions needed to support our colleagues to undertake systems change.

Some participant reflections made for difficult listening that the organisation is committed to consider. For example, being a participant on the programme exposed the feelings of restriction and lack of permission when they are working so hard in rigidly contracted roles/programmes of work. Some participants reflected on a lack of independence or autonomy to move outside of expected roles, which constrained their ability to make any systems change.

Systems change is commonly acknowledged for its reflective nature – not just personal, but also at the organisational level. To work systemically, we've learnt through Systems Changers that it's essential to create space where people feel they can openly critique their working environments, knowing they are safe to share their perceptions and that reflection and feedback will be received humbly and non-judgmentally. There is also a need to be open to change in response to what our colleagues are unearthing.



Our staff do systems change already. They work at multiple levels, on the frontline and also influencing policy change, for example. We make the space for cross organisational collaboration through our Communities of Practice and our Programme Teams, but we haven't ever really named systems change as a discipline or suite of opportunities before. **Naming it allows time and resources to be allocated and protected. It allows people to make the case for stopping and thinking, taking time to reflect and then act. It helps us acknowledge and start to capture and quantify the wider impact we're having to shift the status quo for young people.**

Having a mixed cohort (managers and project workers) helped people see each other as humans and relatable. This deconstructed and challenged the hierarchy and built people's confidence with working with people at different 'levels', valuing the unique perspective that each brings. This added to a sense of confidence and permission to proactively work across hierarchical, team or geographical boundaries to get the job done.

 So what we are doing with is working with the CYP directorate to look at how we can embed this into CYP practice and then wider in the organisation. We will also be working alongside the other system changers from this programme to build communities and networks of support to be able to allow them space to continue the work they have done around systems change already.'

- Systems Change Co-ordinator

I'm inspired and motivated to progress how we at The Children's Society translate the theory, ideas and concepts of systems change into a practical reality for our staff and volunteers. How we shape together the skills, capabilities and mindset needed to pioneer systems thinking and systems change practice in our organisation. How we balance the structures we need to ensure safe, quality practice – with the space to positively challenge and disrupt systems to make change for greater numbers of disadvantaged children and young people. All this points towards greater power and decision making for our staff and young people. It's such an exciting journey, and I am privileged to be part of it.

Nerys Anthony

Director of National Operations
The Children's Society



08

LEARNING ABOUT AND EVALUATING SYSTEMS CHANGE - EDUCATION AND 'ATTEMPTS'

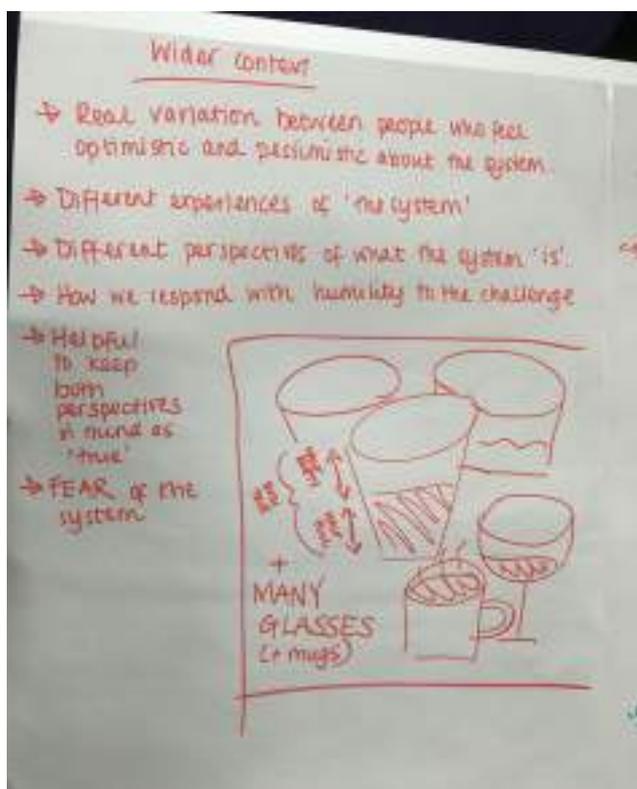
Our 'theory of change' – we use this term in the lightest sense for describing the logic that underpins our approach – is that if we support our staff to learn about systems change and equip them with the right skills, we should be able to trust them to go out into the world and make positive changes to the systems around them which affect young people.³

Two areas have emerged as important for us to chart our systems change learning:

- Staff education. What is the impact of systems change learning on individuals, their abilities to do their jobs and achieve impact for young people, and the wider collective knowledge held in and harnessed across an organisation?
- What is the impact of tangible 'attempts' at changing the system on the system itself and on the lives of young people?

Learning about and attempting systems change pushes us towards new ways of working and understanding how we achieve our impact for young people. More traditional documentation or evaluation methods are less appropriate for systems work because:

- It's **complex** – made up of lots of factors, people and processes.
- It **takes time** – we're unlikely to see seismic change immediately, but instead small indications of change over time.
- It's often **highly subjective or personal**, depending on who's attempting it, and who or what is on the receiving end of any action.
- It's often **hard to attribute** to any one person or intervention.



³ We have found the NPC resource on '[Thinking Big: How to use theory of change for systems change](#)' really useful for helping us think through our approach, particularly around identifying where we have power and opportunity to change systems, and where it might be more difficult.

Instead we realised we needed to take a more iterative, evolving and developmental learning approach – seeing what emerges gradually for individuals, the organisation, and the wider systems we're trying to work in. We have found the work by Collaborate and Toby Lowe on [managing and learning in complexity](#) really helpful for thinking through how we can create an ongoing learning culture when working through difficult social problems.

A big part of this different approach to learning and ongoing adaptation has been being open to different kinds of 'evidence' of change:

- with less emphasis on fixed, definitive data collected at a point in time ('we assess ourselves to be at this point in a known scale of change')
- and more on the narrative, fluid and ambiguous nature of change in complex environments ('I think my actions are having this effect, and here's an example in real life, but I can't be sure until I act, test, adapt and observe a bit more').

In a recent blog, our colleague Chloe Nelson reflects [on this](#):



It is important to measure the steps towards systems change, rather than just looking for the 'end goal'. For example, one of the most significant steps in systems change that The Children's Society is achieving across all its projects is around changing the way that individual (external) practitioners respond to young people. This may be around the language they use, how a young person is assessed or subsequently referred, where information is shared, and how they work directly with young people.'



Systems change education

As the Systems Changers programme progressed, our thinking and reflection deepened. The questions we are asking have evolved:

- 'How do you capture colleagues systems change learning journeys and understand the degree to which they are shifting their mindsets and behaviours in order to then be able to attempt systemic change?'
- 'How does individual learning scale and spread so that wider colleagues, teams, organisations and systems may also benefit from the learning, and does this influence culture change?'

We've been playing around with different mediums of capturing learning, including:

- Journaling
- Blogging
- Doodling, sketching and drawing
- Photography
- Mapping
- Weeknotes
- Sketchnotes
- Video and audio reflections
- Individual and group reflection sessions (often unstructured, using prompts to surface reflections)

Encouraging colleagues to try out these ways of charting their learning journeys has opened up new conversations and shed light on insights that we may have missed with more traditional or structured methods.

They have allowed people to tailor their own approach to documenting their learning – and this means they have been more likely to keep going and build reflection into their everyday work lives.

These methods have also supported them to 'learn and work in the open', since many of these mediums involve them sharing their learning in an ongoing way with their local and national colleagues. The feedback loops that emerge have not only helped staff deepen their own understanding, but have resulted in wider groups of staff learning about systems change directly from their peers.

Systems change attempts and endeavours

How do we identify and measure the impact of our 'attempts' to change the systems affecting young people?

We started the conversation trying to think about how we could capture the 'systems change impact' we were having through working differently. This was very difficult, for the reasons noted previously, and so we've shifted to thinking more about our systems change work as tangible 'attempts' to change a system, and then being open to feedback and learning about how those attempts appear to be resonating – hopefully towards positive change in the system.

As the portfolio and profile of our systemic work has grown both internally and externally, there has been increasing interest from senior leaders and our charity trustees in being able to capture, measure and demonstrate systemic impact.

This interest is brilliant because it shows growing awareness and commitment to systemic ways of working at all levels of our organisation, centres it as a core method of us achieving impact for young people, and helps our managers and colleagues to be supported and held to account on their systemic work.

At the same time we have encountered understandable requests to design an all-encompassing impact and performance metric that captures our systemic work – but we know that systems change is almost impossible to capture in one number or statement!

To respond to this, our systems change, evaluation and performance monitoring and impact teams have worked closely together to design a framework that allows us to capture some basic data about systems change learning and 'attempts' to make changes in the system that we can report on. We are also working with our senior leaders and trustees to help them understand the complexity of systems change, and think about how we can report and share learning on systemic work that portrays this complex picture better than singular metrics are able to.





EVALUATION FOCUS: DISRUPTING EXPLOITATION

We recognised that we need to get better at gathering evidence on how to achieve systems change, and understanding our impact in this area. We look to embed learning and evaluation approaches across key projects and services, so that we can continue to support staff and young people in this area. For example, our Disrupting Exploitation programme is being evaluated by Cordis Bright, an independent consultancy organisation.

They are looking at our impact in three areas:

1. System pathways – i.e. pathways for children and young people, either with an organisation or across several organisations, which are designed to move them through a series of steps, supporting them to achieve positive outcomes.
2. System structures – i.e. policies, laws, regulations and organisational cultures which affect how children and young people interact with support services.
3. System collaboration – i.e. the level of collaboration, joint-working and sharing of information between organisations involved in providing support to children and young people.

One of our key pieces of learning so far is the difficulty of relying on validated quantitative data sources to reflect systems change. As a result, we have focused more on qualitative data, speaking directly to people to seek their perspective on how things have changed, and directly to young people to understand if their experiences are different.

09

CONCLUSION AND WHAT NEXT?

THIS KIND OF PROGRAMME IS BENEFICIAL TO PRACTITIONERS – ITS TRANSFORMATIONAL SYSTEMS THINKING APPROACHES ARE IMPORTANT IF WE WISH TO ENACT SUSTAINABLE, YOUTH-CENTRED, WIDESCALE CHANGE.

Sharing our learning

We've started to take learning out to the sector, as we know we can't do it alone. People are interested. During Systems Changers we ran two sessions with external colleagues.

We continue to openly share our work through blogs and collaborative learning in the sector.

Some of the test and learn projects developed during the Systems Changers programme have now materialised into direct practice change in the wider sector. For example, the recommendations from our 'Stay Curious' pilot in custody suites, have been implemented by the Metropolitan Police, including training for officers and changes to the way that young people experience police custody.





Photographer: Thom Bartley – thombartley.com

Conclusions

Active participation in the Systems Changers programme has been hugely beneficial to The Children's Society and the colleagues that went on the journey. As this report shows, we have learnt significant amounts. Not just tools and techniques, but through deep reflection and practical tasks we are moving to understanding our role in the wider children's social care system and how we can affect change for good. Undertaking the programme, and the subsequent development of our approaches, has meant that the Systems Changers programme has allowed The Children's Society to more quickly see the potential for future change that it can make.

We continue to build on the foundations that the Systems Changers programme gave us, both in practice with our direct delivery with young people and the wider stakeholders in their lives, and also organisationally. For example, we have already translated the key approaches and methods from the programme into an Action Learning Set and tested it with a new cohort of staff. As we write, the new strategy for the organisation is being developed and within it will be a commitment to continue our systemic learning approaches to achieve change.

This is a journey which is ever evolving. Next, we are:

- Using the knowledge gained through the Systems Changers programme to develop a systems leadership approach across Nottinghamshire. This brings together cross sector organisations from both the adult and children and young people's sector locally to challenge the systemic issues contributing to multiple disadvantage across the county. We will develop a community of practice in Nottingham to test and learn to understand if this approach could work in other areas of the country.
- Sharing our learning so other organisations can adapt their own systems change journey.
- Working with Save the Children on the 'Funding for Systemic Change' project.
- Continuing to embed the tools, approaches and ways of working taught to the cohort during Systems Changers in our national programmes.
- Adopting test and learn approaches to delivering change within the organisation.

THE CHILDREN'S SOCIETY IS COMMITTED TO WORKING IN COLLABORATION, ADAPTING, LEARNING AND DEVELOPING NOVEL PRACTICE TO BUILD THE CAPACITY OF THE ORGANISATION AND ITS STAFF TO MAKE CHANGE.



Lankelly Chase

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2HANGERS**



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