

Changing local systems

Practical guidance for people working to
improve local responses to homelessness

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Foreword

It isn't hard to conceptualise homelessness as one of the biggest systems fails of all time. People become - and remain - homeless not because of the choices they make, but because of the choices we make as a society. We choose to view housing as a commodity rather than a basic human necessity. We choose to set welfare benefit rates at below the real cost of living. And we choose to reduce spending on key public services that might help to prevent people becoming homeless in the first place. The cumulative impact of these choices has been an exponential rise in the number of people finding themselves without a place to call home.

For these and many other reasons it is now imperative that we address the systematic causes and contributing factors that conspire to make homelessness one of the great scandals of our age. The choices of the past do not necessarily have to define our future. We can change our minds as a nation, and change the systems that are not working for the common good. There is now much greater flexibility in the choices that local areas can make, and this may hold the key to wider systemic change.

This report highlights the kind of local systems activity that can profoundly alter the life courses of many individuals. It shows what is possible when people work together to achieve changes they could not achieve on their own. On the one hand there is nothing 'special' about the organisations that are featured here: they are fairly typical of the many hundreds of Homeless Link member organisations up and down the country. What they do have though – and in plentiful supply – is the courage to see beyond the limits of their own organisations, to understand that real, systemic change is the work of many. It is hard work, and takes energy, commitment and a certain generosity of spirit. When we at Homeless Link talk about 'creating a movement' of likeminded organisations committed to ending homelessness, it is precisely this kind of thing we had in mind.

We are proud to have commissioned the piece; are grateful to the authors for their sterling work in putting it together; and want to thank all the many and varied organisations that have contributed their stories and experiences. We commend you to read and reflect on its contents, and to consider how you could apply its many lessons in your local context. I can assure you that Homeless Link will do the same.

We are only limited by the scale of our ambitions. Let us imagine and work together towards a different kind of future.

Rick Henderson

CEO

Homeless Link

Introduction

There's a lot of theory about systems change. This publication is about practice.

It is based on a simple insight: **everything that is needed to transform local responses to homelessness is already happening somewhere**. The problem is that it is just not happening in every place at the same time. There is no reason why it couldn't, and the aim of this publication is to change that; to support everyone working for real and lasting change in the response to homelessness within their locality.

Why systems change?

Homelessness is a difficult problem to solve. This is, not least, because it is often the outcome of a confluence of many other inter-related and complex problems. Adding to this complexity, the drivers are structural as well as personal, global as well as local, immediate as well as reflecting policy failures over a long period of time.

Systems change is about working together to shift the factors holding complex problems like homelessness in place. It is about identifying what those factors are and working to dislodge them one by one.

Brilliant organisations can make a huge difference to the lives of individuals. But addressing the causes of homelessness requires a collective effort.

In the following pages, we tell the stories of people who are making change in the places where they work. They are from small local charities, and large national organisations; some work in local authorities, others build social movements. Their stories show how leadership for local systems change can come from anyone and anywhere, and how organisations of all sizes and from any sector can play a role.

Drawing on the lessons from these stories, we develop two frameworks for people who are looking to address two important questions:

1. **What might a healthy local system to address homelessness look like?** What roles would different types of organisations be playing, and what difference would this make to people who are homeless? This is about the objective of systems change.
2. **How can this be achieved within any locality?** How can people work together to create the change that is needed? This is about the process of systems change.

The two frameworks are designed to support practical action. Every situation and context is different, so the frameworks we have developed are not prescriptive. They suggest only the kinds of roles different organisations might play, and the kinds of steps those working for change may want to take, based on the learnings from the stories of those who have already walked a similar path.

Before digging into the frameworks, it is worth starting with the mindset required for effective systems leadership. This differs slightly from the mindset required to run brilliant organisations, with all the challenges that entails.

It is a core idea of systems thinking that – for complex problems with many variables – programmes and organisations can make important differences to the lives of individuals, but outcomes overall are the products of systems. To change outcomes consistently and in a sustainable way, it is the system you need to attend to.

The mindset shift for effective systems leadership is to look beyond narrow and often pressing organisational concerns, to see the system that the organisation is part of as a whole. This system has not been designed intentionally: it has

emerged over time, the product of a thousand mutations. Some were the result of intentional acts, such as changes in policy or decisions about resource allocations. Many others were more random. The resulting system parameters limit the range of possible responses to problems that emerge. But they can be changed. The purpose of systems leadership is to move from passive acceptance of those inherited constraints. It is to change them by design, so that other futures are possible. This requires a different mode of operating: less certain about answers and more inquisitive; maintaining clarity about purpose, but being flexible and adaptive in approach.

Mindset shifts for systems leadership

- Think system, not just organisation
- From passive, reactive problem-solving to co-creating the future
- From answers to questions, conversations and learning
- From fixed methods to flexible adaptation.

Finally, in writing this publication we have encountered a common objection: why is the focus on local issues when the real drivers of homelessness are beyond the control of local actors? Our response is that this publication is based in an argument of hope. Not everything can be changed, but some things can: start there. Not everything is within the control of local partners, but some things are: make the most of those resources. Working together to achieve small changes strengthens relationships of trust. As this collaborative capacity grows, issues which were initially out of reach can be worked on together. Gradually, over time, this increases the scope to address the most stubborn of problems.

Part A: Healthy systems in place

Introduction

In this section we focus on roles and outcomes: what would a healthy local system look like? What roles would different organisations be playing, how would they be working together, and what difference would this make to people who are homeless?

Through the case studies in this section we highlight the roles organisations are currently playing in local systems around the country and the difference they are making. These include:

- Local organisations influencing local systems through practice innovation, collaborative working and effective advocacy, like the **Booth Centre** in Manchester who are redefining what it means to work in partnership with the people they serve; and the **YMCA Liverpool and Sefton**, where the organisation and work are shaped around a specific psychological approach.
- Larger/national/specialist organisations supporting local efforts, like **P3**, a large national organisation working closely with local organisations and building local capacity; **Porchlight**, a county-wide organisation providing specialist services to specific groups of people who are homeless across Kent; and **Groundswell**, bringing the voices of people who are or have experienced homelessness to policy and practice.
- Local authorities, such as **Torbay** where commissioning is done differently, shifting power to the people decisions are affecting; and **Westminster** where a commissioner is supporting practice innovation by finding new support solutions to underserved groups.
- Connectors and coordinators supporting local collaborative efforts, like the **Oxford Homeless Movement**, a local network combining, connecting and coordinating the efforts of many different local people and organisations from every sector; and **Crisis Skylight Brent**, the local chapter of a national organisation, who started, support and chair a homelessness forum for organisations in the borough.

In the framework below we draw the learning from these case studies to show the results of our thought experiment: **what if this kind of activity was all happening in the same locality?**

Healthy systems in place framework

The framework below shows a simplified version of a local system. At the centre is a person who is homeless. They are the subject of the system: the person who the system serves or fails through its outcomes (understanding that the person who is homeless is not a passive 'victim' of the system but also has their own agency, preferences and capabilities). Good 'system outcomes' for a person who is homeless might include:

- I am treated as a person, not a problem
- I am listened to with sensitivity and my perspective is respected
- I am supported to live the life I choose
- I am an active participant in support to meet my needs
- My strengths are recognised and built on
- I am in greater control of my own life: I make decisions about this that affect me
- I get the support I need: in the form I need it, when I need it, where I need it
- The support I get makes a positive difference to my situation, in a way that I value
- I'm given the opportunity to use my experiences to help other people and to shape the development of services.

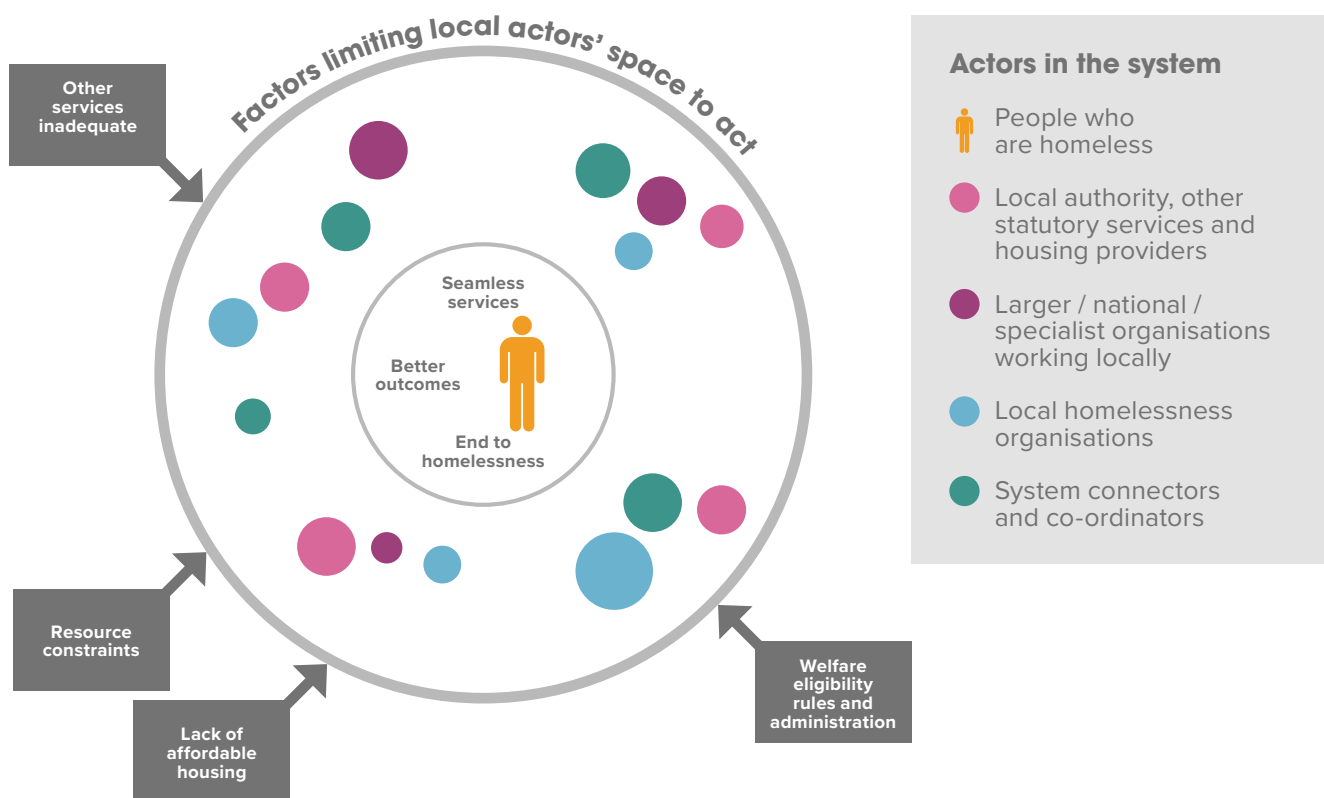
Around the person who is homeless are the various types of organisations with an interest in homelessness in a typical locality. These organisations can operate on their own, or they can work together to optimise the resources they control. This might be, for example, by coordinating activity to fill gaps in support or by joining up delivery so that support is easy to navigate and seamless.

The effectiveness of a local system in improving outcomes for people who are homeless depends not just on the roles different organisations play, but on how they approach working together. It helps, for example, when they are willing to see beyond the perspective of their own organisation and take a whole system perspective. It helps when they know they are best placed to step up, and when they should step back; when they are open to new ideas; when they are willing to build relationships, share power, and learn from others.

The perimeter circle represents how the organisations are constrained in their space to act by factors outside their control, both from within the locality and beyond. This boundary is not fixed: it can shift in or out as, for example, national policy changes.

The aim of local systems change could be conceived as improving outcomes for people who are homeless through either or both:

- **Optimising the impact of factors local organisations control** (the space between the two circles) through active collaboration; and
- **Working to influence and change the factors they can't control** (shifting the perimeter outwards) through effective advocacy.



In this abstracted depiction of a healthy local system every type of organisation would be playing their part to improve outcomes for people who are homeless. Going beyond the excellent support to people who are homeless every organisation would be providing; the systemic role of each actor would be:

- **For local organisations:** influencing local systems through practice innovation, collaborative working and effective advocacy
- **For larger / national / specialist organisations complementing local actors:** providing specialist knowledge, capacity or capabilities as scale allows
- **For local authorities, other statutory services and housing providers:** system stewardship
- **For connectors and coordinators:** amplifying the efforts of others.

Framework: Roles and outcomes

1. Local organisations influencing local systems through practice innovation, collaborative working and effective advocacy

Our systemic role is: to work with others to provide the most effective support to people experiencing homelessness

We do this by:

- Understanding our context and listening to people experiencing homelessness
- Collaborating with others to coordinate activities, provide complementary, joined-up services, and advocate for change.

This enables:

- Stronger local voice
- Local collaboration built on trust
- More effective local support for people experiencing homelessness.

Case studies 1

Local organisations influencing local systems through practice innovation, collaborative working and effective advocacy

Booth Centre, Amanda Croome, CEO

“Involving people is the work”: an organisation redefining what it means to act in partnership with the people they serve.

The Booth Centre is a Manchester day centre for people who are, or have been, homeless. For over a quarter of a century, under Amanda Croome CEO, the Centre has sought to involve the people it serves in organisational decision-making. In the last five years, it has drawn on this heritage and made a decisive shift to test the limits of this approach in everything it does. What they are discovering is that a deliberate approach to working in partnership with the people they serve – based on principles of equality and compassion, and the goal of self-efficacy – leaves few areas of the organisation untouched. It has changed the culture and the language they use; how decisions are made and who makes them; and how support is delivered and who delivers it. This approach also has a systemic impact: people who have developed skills and experience at the Booth Centre are now involved in shaping policy and practice right across Manchester.

This impact hasn't happened by chance, but through deliberate shifts in organisational culture, policy and practice, and constant refinement of its approach as the Centre learns more and challenges itself to go further. The foundation of the Centre's unique culture is language: of 'partnership' with 'people' – those who come to the Centre – and valuing the contribution people bring. Built on this foundation is a well-developed system for involving people in organisational decision-making, and in the delivery of services through volunteering. This includes involvement in decisions on budget allocations, on hiring, and on how support services and activities are planned and evaluated. Working within agreed parameters, groups – which are open to anyone relevant – typically determine how budgets for activities are set, and the outputs and outcomes that will determine success. "These decisions may typically be seen as a manager's job," says Amanda Croome, "for us, involving people is the work."

Involving people in decision-making values the contributions of everyone and develops skills of self-efficacy. These skills are valuable for individuals, but they are also valuable to the organisation. At present, a sixth of trustees, and over half of staff and volunteers are people who have experienced homelessness. It is also creating a valuable resource for Manchester, with over 30 people from the Centre involved in strategic advocacy at the city level last year. People from the Booth Centre have, for example, helped to shape emergency accommodation standards and given the impetus to create LGBT specific accommodation, sat on recruitment panels for city employees, and were involved in developing the City's homelessness strategy. "It took time to get the City Council on board at first," says Amanda Croome, "but now there is some real commitment to involve people in designing services and we work with them to do this. Everyone now gets the importance of partnership working."

The approach the Booth Centre has taken is not an easy option. Many organisations have similar values, but struggle with putting them into practice. It has taken the Centre a long time to embed the culture in everything they do, and to develop and refine the practice. Maintaining the commitment takes a lot of training, reflective practice, and sheer hard work, with a typical 2-hour meeting of a group taking up to 6 hours of work to set up in the right way. But though it is difficult, Amanda Croome insists, "There is nothing magic about what we do. It is completely transferable and completely scalable. Others could do it too: there is nothing secret about it."

YMCA Liverpool and Sefton, Ellie McNeil, CEO

A local organisation that has transformed itself and its work by taking a psychologically informed approach: "When we change ourselves, it provides the space and opportunity for our client group to respond differently."

Every organisation, large or small, can make a systemic difference to the effectiveness of the local response to homelessness. For Ellie McNeil, CEO of YMCA Liverpool and Sefton, this means three things:

First, it means playing their full part as an effective and innovative organisation, through the quality of the services they provide. To achieve this, the YMCA's support is deliberately relational, acknowledging the trauma experienced by people who are homeless, but also the possibility of hope. In the six years Ellie has led the organisation, the lodestar for creating this kind of psychologically informed environment has been cognitive analytic therapy (CAT). This is a therapeutic approach which – when applied to organisations – seeks to understand past and present issues, decisions and dysfunctions through a contextual, relational lens. At YMCA Liverpool and Sefton, CAT runs like a stick of rock through everything the organisation does, from how staff are hired, motivated and managed. "We diagnose issues relationally, rather than through processes, mapping the whole team and looking at underlying ways of relating," explains Ellie. It has also led to changes in how services are conceived and run. "We used to serve warning letters and then evict. Now we draw up a behaviour contract, jointly. It is about doing with rather than doing to." YMCA Liverpool and Sefton have evaluated the impact of CAT on the organisation and found it has led to better outcomes for the people they serve, and better outcomes for staff. "They are working at the sharp end of complexity with a very challenging client group," says Ellie. "It has made them more resilient." CAT is not a rigid, rules-based approach, but neither is it a free-for-all: rather, it allows for understanding and flexibility within a safe framework. "CAT gave us a framework to work within, a shared language and understanding," reflects Ellie. "When we change ourselves, it provides the space and opportunity for our client group to respond differently."

Second, it means looking beyond just what the YMCA can do and taking a broader, systemic view on the response to homelessness. For Ellie, the way services are commissioned across the country creates unhealthy, unhelpful and unnecessary competition. “Too often, the best organisations don’t win the contracts because the focus has been too heavily on cost and not quality,” she notes. It also undermines future attempts at collaboration. To change this dynamic, Ellie chooses not to bid against incumbents running high quality services. Instead, she will try to support their bid or partner with them if the organisations’ offers are complementary. “Instead of competing, we should be getting alongside each other and supporting each other.”

Third, it means genuine collaboration with consortium partners to raise the standard of support to people who are homeless. YMCA Liverpool and Sefton leads a consortium of seven local and national providers delivering accommodation-based services across the city. From the start, consortium partners asked themselves a question: what difference would it make if the practice in each of our organisations reached the standard of the best within our group, and how can we do that? Starting with transparency about staff structures and pay, this led to sharing of organisational capabilities and practice. Drawing on their own expertise, YMCA Liverpool and Sefton led on how to create psychologically informed environments. “All partners have now done CAT training,” says Ellie. Partners worked together to create a shared compliments and complaints process, shared evictions and abandonments processes, shared annual report, and a shared commitment to fair and equitable access across the service. She takes pride from knowing that, as a consortium, they provide consistently high-quality services, and values the support of the other CEOs. “It can be lonely being CEO of a charity,” says Ellie. “Now I have a peer group I can rely on. They understand.” Best of all, the consortium works together to advocate systemic change in Liverpool. “We have a positive partnership with the city council,” she says. “But when you are arguing for change it is more powerful having seven voices instead of one.”

2. Larger / national / specialist organisations complementing local actors

Our systemic role is: to complement the work of local organisations, providing specialist knowledge, capacity or capabilities scale allows.

We do this by:

- Not competing with local organisations already doing a good job
- Partnering with local organisations to combine the best of both: local intelligence and organisational benefits of scale
- Advocating for change on issues that reach beyond the locally.

This enables:

- Stronger local voice
- Local collaboration built on trust
- More effective local support for people experiencing homelessness.

Larger / national / specialist organisations complementing local actors

Mark Simms, P3, CEO

A national organisation working closely with local organisations and building local capacity: “An organisation like ours has a stewardship role. This means we must attend to the whole garden, not just our own crops.”

Getting local actors working together is critical to changing local systems. But the role played by large organisations operating across multiple regions can be just as important. Such organisations can bring advantages of scale and scope to a locality: from technical capabilities smaller local organisations may not have developed; to large balance sheets which can absorb or take risks; to knowledge of practice from other areas where they work; or access to the ears of national policymakers. Deployed responsibly, these advantages can strengthen the capacity of local actors to coordinate and develop activity, and advocate for change.

A great example of this is the approach taken by P3, a large charity and social enterprise providing support to people who are homeless. P3 work across multiple localities, providing services aimed at improving the lives and communities of people who are socially excluded and vulnerable, as their mission statement puts it, ‘to unlock potential and open up new possibilities’. “We are national with a small ‘n,’” says CEO Mark Simms. “We work all down the trunk of England.”

For P3, working with others to create the best outcomes for the people they support is a core organisational value. “You can’t silo a homelessness service. It won’t be effective,” says Mark. “We work well with others because we approach every service we work with as a collaborator, not a competitor.”

Because collaboration is central to its effectiveness P3 are choosy about where they will work and who they will work with. “Mission alignment is key,” says Mark. When deciding whether to bid for work in a new location, P3 take a rigorous, deliberate look at the specific difference they can make. For example, if the language used in a tender document doesn’t suggest alignment between the motivating values of the local authority and P3’s mission, they don’t bid. “Lots of organisations in this sector talk about being values or purpose driven, but surrender that in the name of a contract. We are clear about our purpose, mission and values. So, before we bid, we ask: will this service allow us to be kind?”

If they are aware of an existing local provider doing a better job than P3 feel they could do or are anchoring a larger flow of resources into an area, they don’t bid. “Competition has forced too many good players out of the market,” says Mark.

If P3 does want to be involved in an area, they look for local partners who are mission aligned and doing good work. “We have to agree values before we talk about money,” says Mark. They then look to how they can best support the efforts of local partners to achieve results for people who are homeless. In some cases, this has even meant bidding in consortiums with smaller local organisations with P3 as the prime contractor, and then giving the work back to the others. P3’s added value here might be in bid writing, in technical support, in deploying the organisation’s balance sheet to manage cashflow and pay sub-contractors in advance or to show how the consortium could manage financial risk. In one case, P3 created a Special Purpose Vehicle to help another organisation expand into a new market. Although P3 did “all the work” to set up the opportunity, “we shared the income and the work with them 50:50,” says Mark.

When working in a consortium with mission aligned local partners, P3 shares data, learning and ideas for improving practice across the group. It also means being a “good citizen” and fully engaged with the locality. “We are centrally

led,” says Mark, “but we are locally managed,” which includes recognising the importance of certain services retaining their local identity and not being branded as ‘P3’.

While it has belief and pride in the services it runs, addressing homelessness is not something P3 can achieve alone. It can play its part through running great services, but – given its mission and values, its scale and its capabilities – it is also aware of its responsibilities to support the efforts of others. “An organisation like ours has a stewardship role,” says Mark. “This means we must attend to the whole garden, not just our own crops.”

Groundswell, Jenny McAteer, #HealthNow Director

A small organisation bringing the voices of people who are or have experienced homelessness to policy and practice: “Successful systems change is only possible if power is given up.”

As the work of Voices of Stoke and other organisations shows, the ‘proof-points’ for a system are the experience of individuals. Viewing the system from the perspective of individuals who are experiencing homelessness shows clearly what is wrong and what needs to change. Groundswell was set up by people who had been homeless. They had found themselves affected by decisions of policymakers who did not understand the situation they were in. Listening to the voices of people who are, or have been, affected by homelessness and using their experiences to motivate action to create systemic change has been a guiding principle since Groundswell was founded in 1996. As its mission statement puts it, “Groundswell exists to enable people who are homeless to create solutions and move themselves out of homelessness – to benefit of our whole society.”

What this has meant in practice has evolved over time. Following a period of activism and ‘speak out’ groups the focus was peer-led research, to uncover systemic failings. These were particularly evident in relation to health provision, where people who were homeless were frequently falling through the gaps: health services didn’t see homelessness as their responsibility, and homelessness organisations did not consider health as their business.

From this research, Groundswell responded by developing a model; Homeless Health Peer Advocacy: training people with experience of homelessness to go with clients to their appointments and support them to speak up and claim their rights. This simple model became a huge success in the London boroughs where it was conceived, improving the lives of those it served as well as saving significant amounts of money for services.

Given the success, Groundswell was encouraged to take the approach national and partnered with two of the country’s biggest homelessness organisations, Shelter and Crisis, to do this whilst also using this as a way to achieve system change which tackles the root causes of health inequality. Groundswell made a successful partnership bid for Lottery funding of the #HealthNow Project. These partnerships were practical, but they were also strategic. Practically, they ensured Groundswell had sufficient infrastructure and personnel for a national programme to succeed. Strategically, they sought to influence the way the homelessness and health sector worked together. In each new locality partners consult with local organisations, build relationships and rely on and strengthen local structures where possible. This means that Groundswell’s peer-led way of working is being applied by a wide range of organisations across the sector.

This far-reaching systemic change process began with a very tangible, locally identified problem and solution, based on the insights of people with direct experience of homelessness. At its most basic level of impact, the approach supports individuals in navigating current systems more effectively. But it is also creating change in local systems as, for example, in #HealthNow alliances, NHS Trusts, CCGs and Local Authorities are able listen to the experiences of people who are homeless and then work together to respond. “Successful systems change is only possible if power is given up,” says Jenny McAteer, HealthNow Director at Groundswell. “It needs the voices of peer researchers and advocates. If it is just a discussion amongst professionals, it won’t work.” For

Jenny, relationships are key. “Often, systems are understood in a very abstract way. Actually, it’s about individual or organisational relationships. Fostering those relationships is crucial. By setting up local alliances we try to get people to talk to people they wouldn’t normally talk to. It’s the whole ‘forming, norming, storming’ group dynamic. Once people become peers it changes the situation and allows decisions to be taken collectively.”

Groundswell’s approach shows how much the experiences of individuals matter. “‘Systems change’ can appear abstract,” says Jenny. “That’s why it is critical to focus on small, tangible details like how appointments are booked, and then build from that.” In understanding where the system is failing individuals it is possible to understand where the system is failing overall? The urgent task is to listen.

Porchlight, Mike Barrett, Chief Executive

A county-wide organisation taking an asset-based approach to providing specialist services to specific groups of people who are homeless across Kent: “It is sinful,” he says, “to tolerate the waste of talent in the people we serve.”

Porchlight is Kent’s largest charity for people who are homeless and vulnerable. In addition to the range of services it provides, Porchlight also plays an important systemic role across a county with more than 1.5 million residents. For example, through its helpline, it provides a single point of contact for homelessness services and can signpost the 27,000 callers each year to the most appropriate local service. This single access point is not common in other areas. In addition, because Porchlight operates at a county-wide level it can provide specialist services to populations with particular needs. For example, for members of the LGBTQ+ community across Kent, Porchlight provides specialist housing services to those who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, runs a specific support network, and works with families to prevent homelessness among young people who identify as LGBTQ+. These specialist offerings complement services offered within each locality.

For CEO Mike Barrett, the biggest challenge is working with the sheer complexity of statutory services to provide support that is holistic and sensitive to the trauma many people who find themselves homeless have faced. Kent, for example, has the largest number of women who are homeless, 80% of which in Kent have experienced domestic abuse. It also means valuing the strengths people have and the insight their experiences have given them. Too often this is not the case. “It is sinful,” he says, “to tolerate the waste of talent in the people we serve.”

3. Local authorities, other statutory services and housing providers

Our systemic role is: System stewardship.¹

We do this by:

- Listening: to people experiencing homelessness, and homelessness organisations
- Mapping services: to understand pathways and gaps
- Joint commissioning with partners: in ways that create high-quality seamless support, provide long-term security, enable learning, and promote collaboration rather than competition
- Building systems infrastructure: to enable better coordination and deeper collaboration.

This enables:

- More joined-up services, informed by lived experience
- Better coordination and deeper collaboration between organisations
- System stability, to enable work on system constraints and deeper problems
- For people experiencing homelessness improved outcomes, better experience, and more control over their lives.

Case studies 3

Local authorities breaking the mould

Torbay Council, Debbie Freeman, Strategic Commissioning Officer

A Council commissioning differently, shifting power to the people decisions are affecting: “The shift in thinking was to change who was ‘we’ – so that it was not just the council, but wider partners.”

Torbay Council have transformed the way they are working to address homelessness by taking seriously one essential truth: there can be no real collaboration with partners unless power is genuinely shared. “It’s not complicated,” says Torbay Council’s Homelessness lead Debbie Freeman, “but it is really hard.” Working with homelessness charity Shekinah through an alliance contract, ways of working have changed beyond recognition. Decisions are made jointly, communication has improved, provision is more joined up, workers have more autonomy and services are more effective. There is still work to do, but the sense of progress is tangible amongst those working to address homelessness. As one worker commented, “Compared with two years ago, I feel there is hope now.”

How did the transformation occur? Back in 2016, Torbay’s response to homelessness was at a low ebb, with austerity meaning that most services had been decommissioned. Voluntary organisations were doing their best to meet the immediate needs of people who were homeless, but this was not a sustainable situation. The Council couldn’t address homelessness without the help of other organisations, but the other organisations were constrained in what they could do by the council’s approach to working with them. Something more fundamental needed to change.

To discuss the situation, Debbie began meeting regularly for coffee with Shekinah CEO John Hamblin and Stuart Bakewell, then of Westward Housing Association. They met without an agenda and continued to meet for a year. “Meeting regularly allowed us to reflect together,” says Debbie. “It gave us space to think and be creative, and to support each other.”

1. Read more on ‘systems stewardship’ in the Exploring the New World report, referenced in appendix

The group discussed the issues and identified examples of solutions from around the world that inspired them, all the time strengthening their relationships of trust. While the group were attracted to models based on Housing First, they realised that any solution wouldn't work in isolation: it had to be part of a wider system change. Key to this would be a joint approach to problem solving, with decision-making power shared. "The shift in thinking for me was to change who was 'we' – so that it was not just the council, but wider partners," Debbie reflects. "That was the shift in thinking. A lot of times that is just words, and councils hold onto the power. We've tried to overcome this, but it is hard to let go of power as – ultimately – the Council is still responsible."

The key lay in the approach to commissioning being pioneered in Plymouth, where Shekinah was part of an alliance contract. With Plymouth showing what was possible, colleagues in Torbay were gradually persuaded and adopted a similar approach. Instead of needing to know all the answers at the start, this approach allowed for a process of joint problem solving and discovery, looking across the whole system not just service by service. To allow for flexibility in the approach, decision-making power was put in the hands of those working directly with people who were homeless, whenever possible.

As with many processes of change, for Debbie, relationships have been key to building trust and bringing others along. "I felt I was a lone voice within the council," she says, "but now many others are on board." There was also some resentment at the start from smaller voluntary organisations who had felt excluded, but that is diminishing as everyone sees the benefits. For Debbie, it is the right approach for a relatively small area like Torbay. "I don't know if it would work at a bigger scale," says Debbie. "It gets more complicated the more partners you have, and power differentials become more apparent." However, the approach has been so successful in Torbay that the Council are now looking to extend it to drug and alcohol services and responses to domestic abuse.

"I was never comfortable with the traditional relationship with the sector," says Debbie. "Alliance work really resonated with me. How can it not be better to have more people focused on solutions? If you have more perspectives, you get more ideas. Once you take competition out of the equation, you can focus on joint problems solving."

Westminster City Council, Victoria Aseervatham, Rough Sleeping Commissioner

"I'm the queen of the £10k pilot": A commissioner supporting practice innovation by finding new support solutions to underserved groups.

While there are many examples of excellent practice, there is widespread acceptance across the homelessness sector that many people who are homeless are ill-served by current responses. Westminster Council's Rough Sleeping Commissioner Victoria Aseervatham knows that only too well. Due to its location, the borough has the largest population of people who are sleeping rough in the country. Victoria has spent the last 16 years trying to find solutions.

"The sheer numbers in Westminster mean that it is easier to see how services are failing to meet the needs of particular groups of people," she says. She highlights the situation of people who are homeless but also autistic, or have suffered brain injuries, or have gambling problems. The needs of older women with mental health issues are different from the different needs of younger women facing domestic abuse or who work as sex workers. What these groups all have in common is that they have been poorly served by existing services. "The one positive in this situation is that the scale of the issues in Westminster means we can see problems that might remain hidden elsewhere," she observes, "And so we can try to find solutions."

To innovate takes courage, because the only way to succeed is to be willing to fail. This creates a moral dilemma – the first principle for public action must be to do no harm, and this is especially true when working with people in situations of vulnerability. But Victoria is clear that doing nothing is already creating harm: the moral imperative is

to try to make things better. The risks of failure also create reputational risks. Here, Victoria's 16 years of work has given her licence. Over those years she has established strong relationships of trust, and has built a lot of credit if some experiments were to fail. "I can absorb a lot of risk because of my track record," she says. She is clear that the time has to be right and is prepared to play the long game if she encounters organisational resistance. "If I have to wait a couple of years to try, I'm not going anywhere," she says, "and the problems are not going away either."

Victoria has shepherded the process of innovation to develop new types of responses to many of the groups she has identified such as the Green Room, a women only night space, or new psychologically informed responses for people who have experienced trauma. Her process is simple, but based on years of experience and the knowledge – formal and tacit – she has gleaned along the way:

1. **Understand the issue.** Victoria decides to address a particular issue based on data from the comprehensive audit of rough sleepers Westminster does every two years.
2. **Book a big room.** Victoria invites anyone who may have insight, bringing together a range of people with different perspectives. This diversity is key. The group start by mapping existing responses and gaps in provision, and then generate ideas for creative alternatives. She advises that these ideas are categorised into those that would "cost nothing", 'cost a bit' and 'cost a lot.' This can be helpful in deciding which ideas to move forward with, depending on the context for the work.
3. **Manage risk.** Once the decision has been made about which ideas to try, Victoria's strong advice is to start small and to work with experienced people. Working at small scale with people and organisations she trusts because of their track records of quality work means that, in practice, the failure rate of the pilots she has begun has been very low.
4. **Focus on learning.** "Don't over-plan or over-monitor," says Victoria. "Instead," she advises, "use the pilot as an opportunity to test new ideas. Respond to feedback and then adapt and refine the approach." The learning that is generated at this stage of the work is mostly qualitative. "Document that learning," she says.
5. **Keep the focus on learning as the pilot is expanded.** Once an effective model has been developed on a small scale, try it on a larger scale. "You might need to work with a larger organisation, at this stage," Victoria suggests, "The aim now is to shift from qualitative evidence to quantitative." She has worked with academics to ensure the evidence base is robust and can be relied on by others.
6. **Share the learning.** Contexts may differ, but Victoria understands the responsibility to share learning generated in Westminster with others working with individuals in similar situations across the country. "We have the scale of certain problems in Westminster, so it gives us both the reason and opportunity to innovate. But then we have to share the knowledge we have generated with others."

Finding ways to improve services to people who are homeless is both urgent and difficult work. Victoria's experience in Westminster shows the courage, commitment and skill it can take. But it also shows what is possible for those willing to try, including how the risks can be well managed by starting small and following a thoughtful step-by-step process. The result of Victoria's work is the proof of it: "I'm the queen of the £10k pilot," she says.

4. Connectors and coordinators

Our systemic role is: to amplify the efforts of others.

We do this by:

- Connecting people and convening groups
- Increasing information flows
- Identifying and filling gaps
- Supporting sharing of practice and learning.

This enables:

- The sum of efforts locally to be much greater than the parts.

Case studies 4

Connectors and coordinators supporting local collaborative efforts

Oxford Homeless Movement, Yvonne Pinner, Project Manager

A local network to combine and enable anyone in Oxford to play their part in ending street homelessness in the city: “If we make every bit count, it has a cumulative effect. All the small things start to add up.”

Over a number of years, Oxford City Council had observed the numbers of people sleeping rough on its streets rising. In 2017 they knew they had a serious problem. They initiated a city-wide conversation with a wide range of local partners about how to respond. It was from these first conversations that an independent group – Oxford Homeless Movement – was born.

The Movement is built on a simple idea: rough sleeping is not inevitable or acceptable in Oxford, but everyone will need to play their part to end it. The challenge was to mobilise the broadest base of support, and guide what it does to have the biggest impact. This is what the Movement aims to do: to provide the infrastructure needed to support a collective effort on a city-wide scale. “Our goal is to make it easy for everyone to do their part,” says Yvonne Pinner, the Movement’s project manager and sole employee. No contribution is too large or too small: everyone – individuals and organisations – can do something to help end rough sleeping.

It is an idea that has caught the imagination. Already almost 50 local businesses, community and voluntary organisations, statutory partners, three Oxford Colleges, and the Students Union have signed up as members. Through the Movement’s Charter, they have jointly committed to “work constructively together to increase public awareness and understanding of rough sleeping, to generate funding and commitment in kind, and to find and deliver effective, lasting solutions to end rough sleeping in Oxford.” In practice, contributions have ranged from pledges on inclusive employment and procurement approaches, to donations, to a local football club who are starting a community team to build new relationships between people who are homeless and other community members. Individuals as well as organisations can sign up to the Charter (the address is www.oxfordhomelessmovement.org.uk).

Agreeing the Charter was itself an important stage in the Movement’s development. “It surfaced a lot of tensions,” recalls Yvonne. There were clear differences in emphasis. Some, for example, emphasised the importance of human responses to human needs. Others worried that such acts of charity were counterproductive and wanted a greater focus on addressing underlying issues. “We struck a balance,” says Yvonne, “In the end, we wanted it to be as inclusive as possible and based on evidence.”

One of the core values the Movement agreed was that, “People with lived experience of homelessness should have a voice and a say in finding the answers to their own issues, to rough sleeping, and in the wider world.” To put this into practice, the Movement set up a Lived Experience Advisory Forum, known as ‘LEAF’. LEAF meets monthly and provides feedback and advice to the Movement’s steering group. LEAF’s feedback is the first item on the agenda at Movement steering group meetings, and how the steering group responds is then fed back to LEAF. “The feedback loop is really important to us,” says Yvonne. “We want LEAF to be holding us to account. Sometimes the feedback can be quite uncomfortable.” Who LEAF allows into the room when they meet is decided by the group. “I can only go if I am invited,” says Yvonne. “I was pleased to be invited to the last meeting!”

Growing the Movement and maintaining its cohesiveness across a wide range of partners is a challenge. “If you want to build a partnership that is sturdy and has foundations it takes time,” says Yvonne. “Building trust takes time, and your backers need to understand that.” But, for Yvonne, taking on the challenge has been worth it as the impact of the Movement starts to become clear. “There have been bumps in the road,” she says, “but, in general, people feel things are moving in the right direction. Just because you can’t do everything, doesn’t mean you can’t do something. If we make every bit count, it has a cumulative effect. All the small things start to add up.”

Crisis Skylight Brent, Atara Fridler and Sumathi Pathmanaban

The local chapter of a national organisation, who started, support and chair a homelessness forum for organisations in Brent: “It is really paying back and creating actual solutions.”

Local organisations working together is critical to changing local systems. But the role played by large organisations operating across multiple localities can be just as important to success in a particular place. Such organisations can bring advantages of scale and scope to a locality: from technical capabilities smaller local organisation may not have developed; to large balance sheets which can absorb or take risks; to knowledge of practice from other localities where they work; or access to the ears of national policy makers. Deployed responsibly, these advantages can strengthen the capacity of local actors to coordinate and develop activity, and advocate for change.

A great example of this is the role being played by Crisis in Brent. Here they are working to bring the disparate voices of the local sector together, to develop shared approaches to problems in the borough, to work with the council, and to advocate for change.

For a decade since the demise of Supporting People, there had been no homelessness forum in Brent. Engagement with the Council had become sporadic and reactive. So, when the opportunity presented itself for a few voluntary organisations who worked closely with the Council to develop a local hub of services, Atara Fridler, Director of Crisis Skylight Brent, took the initiative. She consulted with other key homelessness organisations in the borough, who were supportive, at least for creating a place to share information.

Although Atara envisaged the organisation of the forum as a collective endeavour, after the first meeting she realised that few organisations were in a position to help. This created a dilemma: if Crisis didn’t step up to support the forum it would likely not survive. But if they did, how would others perceive it? Her solution was for Crisis to take on the nuts and bolts organisation of the forum, but to distribute the leadership. Atara would chair the forum and employed Sumathi Pathmanaban to administer it, but the task and finish groups would be led by others. This reflects the terms of reference for the forum, which were broadened out beyond information sharing to include influencing policy and strategy, and developing tangible solutions to problems identified.

These solution-focused task and finish groups have been a real success, developing new responses to the challenges posed by migrants who are homeless, and those with complex needs. Brent Council have been engaged with the challenges the forum has chosen and have listened and responded. Drawing on the experience of Westminster, Brent

has now established a 'complex needs panel' chaired by St Mungo's Outreach Manager. This has the power to flex service criteria where needed to ensure individuals receive a holistic package of services.

For Atara, the success of the forum is, in large part, due to the focus on fostering collaborative behaviours, strengthening relationships, distributing leadership, mutual support, and a good dose of tenacity. As a result, working together on the forum has fostered a culture of trust and collaboration between organisations that extends well beyond it. But it has also depended on the financial support of Crisis, and on the critical coordination role played by Sumathi. "It's taken a surprisingly large amount of resource to support the forum and make it effective," says Atara. "It has been good to be able to offer that and it is really paying back and creating actual solutions."

With the homelessness forum having established its value and legitimacy, the challenge now is to ensure its sustainability – Crisis only having agreed to fund it for three years. And even with the success come new challenges. The sector speaking with one voice has made it easier for the Council to engage and the relationship has become more productive as a result. But for Atara this closeness with the Council creates new risks. "You need to collaborate with those in authority to influence decision-making and achieve change," she reflects. "But you shouldn't lose sight of your purpose: sometimes you still need to be an agitator."

Part B: Making change locally

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point is to change it.”

Inscription on the tomb of Karl Marx

Introduction

In Part A above, we set out a framework for understanding the variety of roles different organisations would be playing in a healthy local system, how they might be working together, and the difference this could make to people who are homeless. This sets the objective of systems change.

The first framework presents these roles in abstract terms. The case studies show how these roles are being played in practice. The case studies reinforce the central thesis of this publication: everything we are arguing for is already happening somewhere. The task is to extend the practice, so something similar is happening in every place, in ways appropriate to each differing context.

Part B is about supporting people to do just that: to change local systems to improve outcomes for people who are homeless. It is about the process of systems change.

Once again, we use case studies to tell the stories of people and organisations leading change efforts around the country. This is difficult work, so the stories tell of the challenges they have faced as well as the progress they have made. They also tell of the lessons learned along the way, which may be of value to others. They include:

- Local authorities, such as Reading where the Council has changed the local system by knowing its role and, even more importantly, its limitations; and Middlesbrough, a council in the middle of the challenging process of changing long-existing systems
- VOICES, a local organisation in Stoke-on-Trent inspiring others with its holistic approach to individuals and the system
- Encompass Southwest, a local organisation taking the initiative and getting partners to buy into Housing First.

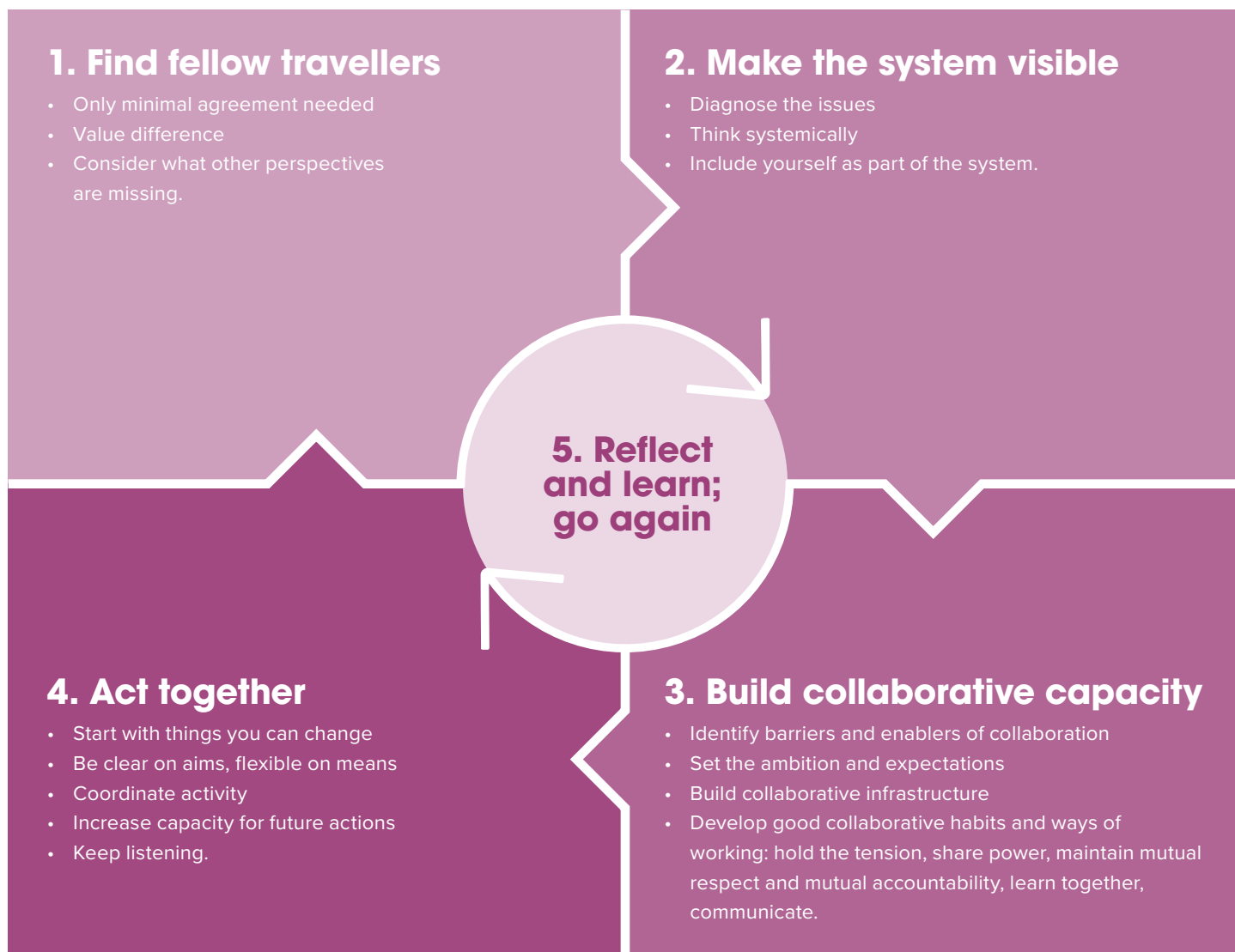
We draw on the learning from these case studies – as well as practice elsewhere – to develop a second framework below. This framework is a guide for people wanting to lead systemic change in the places they work.

The challenge for us in devising a framework like this is to strike a balance: to provide enough specificity to help people know where to start and what to attend to, while offering sufficient flexibility for people to adapt to circumstances. We hope we have achieved the right balance. The framework is presented as a sequential, iterative cycle, and we chose the order of steps for a reason. But reality is not like that and processes of change are never linear. Adapt as necessary. Systems change requires flexibility, and that applies as much to the process as to the actions that need to be taken.

A framework for systemic change

In the introduction, we discussed the mindset shift required for systems leadership. The framework below is designed to help put that mindset shift into action.

It is divided into four quadrants, starting in the top left and moving around clockwise to the bottom left. There is a logic to this ordering but, as indicated above, it is not intended to be prescriptive. Most importantly, the framework is intended to be iterative. As each cycle is completed, the momentum, relationships and collaborative capacity built should enable greater ambition: problems that were initially too daunting might now be in reach. This iterative intention is captured by the arrow circle at the centre, which emphasises the importance of reflecting and capturing learning before going to work once again.



Quadrant 1: Find fellow travellers

Systems change is, by its nature, a collective endeavour. Fellow travellers are needed for the journey. But it does not mean they must always agree. In fact, differences in perspective are very helpful. There is no single truth about a system: what it looks like depends on where you stand. Every perspective brings a different aspect of reality, that needs to be attended to. The case studies above and below emphasise the value of including the perspectives of people who are, or have been homeless, in developing effective responses. As you recruit fellow travellers, consider what perspectives you are missing, and what important aspects of reality this might be making you blind to.

In fact, only minimal agreement is needed: the recognition that problems in the locality are bigger than any organisation can solve alone. They are system problems and they require collaborative action to change. This can be a hard recognition to come to, as the case study below on Torbay shows. It was only when the local authority truly embraced the need to share power and work collaboratively with partners that they were able to move forward. And the result was transformative. Beyond that, the challenge is to work with difference, holding the tension between common purpose and differences in perspectives.

Quadrant 2: Make the system visible

One danger for groups seeking to make change is the rush to action. It is a natural impulse. But taking time to diagnose the problems to be addressed and to understand the systemic context in which they sit will pay huge dividends. It will help you develop strategies for action that have a greater chance of success.

So, what are the problems that need to be addressed? This is where differences in perspective are valuable: a problem that seems of great importance to some might seem of trivial importance to others. The reasons for the differences in priority can reveal important information about differences in values or power that the group might need to wrestle with to move forward. It can also make the group confront a critical question: in whose name are we acting? Case study examples on the Booth Centre in Manchester and the work of Groundswell show the difference it makes when those with experience of homelessness set priorities and shape services.

Many people are familiar with the idea of mapping services from the perspective of a person who is homeless. This helps to understand where there are gaps in services or duplication, and where attention is needed. In the Reading case study, for example, they map support pathways as part of their commissioning cycle. The same is true in many other places. In the Westminster case study, the Council uses a similar 'mapping and gapping' approach as part of their innovation cycle. After using survey data to identify populations of people who are underserved, the Council invites a large group of stakeholders to map the availability and appropriateness of support for them, before trying to generate new ideas for solutions.

Many problems are obvious. The more difficult question is to understand why they haven't been addressed already. This requires taking a hard look at what is holding the problem in place, to understand what needs to be shaken or dislodged. It can be helpful to identify the type of problem it is: is it a technical problem with a known solution, and the only issue is getting it implemented? Or is it more in the nature of an adaptive challenge where there is no known solution, or solutions are difficult because there is a conflict in values? The problem may overlap with many others, so it is worth considering issues of sequencing: what other problems need to be fixed first before this problem can be worked on? Often there are issues of timing: are there parts of the problem that are ripe to be worked on now?

To develop effective strategies for change, it is critical to understand the systemic context in which a problem sits. Who are the relevant players? Identify potential allies, adversaries, and those who might be persuadable. How could they be persuaded? Consider the relationships between the players and the power each player has: who could block change, and who could enable it? What are the other obstacles and opportunities for change? In systems thinking, points of leverage are places where small changes in policy, practice, or resource allocation can have a disproportionate impact on outcomes. Look for such opportunities. Consider how actions might need to be sequenced to make the biggest difference, and where there are untapped resources – individual, community and commercial – which could be mobilised.

Roughly mapping the system in this way helps to generate new ideas for solutions and to develop effective strategies for realising them. It shows where energies are likely to be best spent to make a difference. It also saves wasted time pursuing ideas that have only a small chance of success. This mapping does not need to be elaborate to be effective.

Finally, you are part of the system you want to change. Consider the role you or your organisation currently plays within the system. Could you do more? Should you do less? What is the best role you could play?

Quadrant 3: Build collaborative capacity

Working with others, especially across organisational boundaries, can be challenging. Doing so well is the key to systems change. It requires investing time to develop relationships of trust which are the foundation for effective collaboration. In the case study from Torbay, a small group met weekly for coffee for an entire year before sensing a clear way forward. This sense of common purpose, and the trust that underpinned it, made all the difference. Sometimes in a place, the biggest barrier to collaboration is history. Past enmities, disagreements and disappointments will need to be set aside.

There are as many different ways to collaborate as there are groups, from simple information sharing or coordination of activities through to fully integrated services. What matters more than the specific form is clarity and alignment of expectations: about the purpose of the collaboration and what you are seeking to achieve, and about how you will work together.

At Collaborate we have developed the concept of 'systems infrastructure' to support work across organisational boundaries. The idea is simple, aimed at replicating across a system the kinds of capabilities which commonly exist within well-functioning organisations. These include things like shared purpose, shared metrics, shared data and shared learning. Building this kind of infrastructure between organisations transforms collaboration from a heroic activity by extraordinary individuals to something that is possible for all. There are other good models for supporting effective collaborative action, such as the Collective Impact model, for example. In the case studies on the Oxford Homeless Movement and the Reading Street Support Network they are showing how, with the right infrastructure in place, it is possible to mobilise a wide range of community resources. They are making it possible for everyone – individuals, businesses and social organisations – to play their part.

Finally, it helps to develop good collaborative habits and ways of working. These maintain the sense of shared endeavour, but also make the collaboration more effective by maintaining wide engagement and drawing on the widest range of individual and organisational capabilities.

They are fairly obvious to identify, much harder to do. They include things like distributing leadership, so ownership of the process is shared; a sense of mutual accountability so everyone is playing their part and the work stays on track; shared exploration and learning; joint problem solving; clear communications; and mutual respect for differences in perspectives, values, motivations and approaches. It requires holding the tension between common purpose and a diversity of views, to gain the benefits of both. Maintaining engagement is key: as Myron Rodgers captures it pithily in one of his 'maxims', "People own what they create."

Quadrant 4: Act together

Change requires action, but action requires thought. That's why we put this quadrant fourth. Systems change requires collaboration. That's why we emphasise the importance of acting together.

Starting with ripe issues – things that are ready to be changed and can be changed more easily – helps to build momentum. Success breeds success, and working together to achieve a joint success helps to strengthen bonds and develop collective capabilities.

Addressing complex problems requires clarity over ends, infused with the purpose that drives the work. But it requires flexibility about means, with a focus on learning by doing. It requires a willingness to experiment and a tolerance for failure, learning from steps back as well as steps forward. The case study from Westminster on innovation in practice shows what can be achieved if you start small, stay flexible, and then build on successful practice as it emerges.

In Part A we highlighted the value of different types of actors playing different roles. Acting together is not about doing the same things. It is about coordinating activity towards a common purpose. Divide up the work, and then play your part.

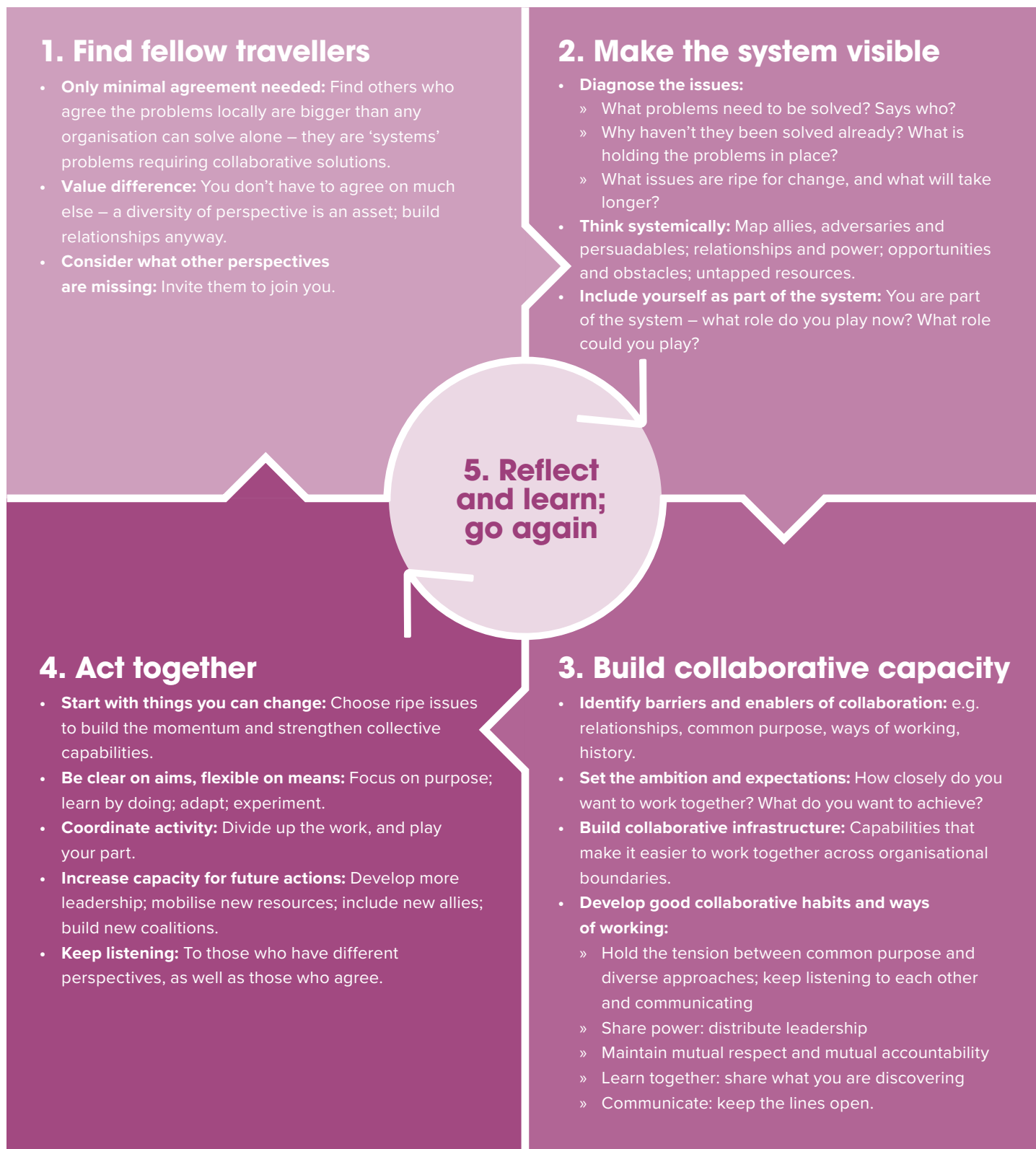
With every action, consider not only what can be achieved today, but how actions today can increase capacity for future actions. Processes of change are iterative, and the framework reflect this. Building collaborative capacity now will make it easier to achieve more change in the next cycle of actions. So, seek to spread responsibility and develop more leadership within the group. Seek to mobilise new resources, perhaps by bring new allies into the group or building broad coalitions of support. The Oxford Homeless Movement case study shows how, with the right structures and approach, it is possible to mobilise support from across the community, building a coalition that stretches across every sector.

Finally, keep listening, not just to those who agree with you, but also to voices of dissent. Every perspective is bringing an aspect of reality. Understanding this will make the change you achieve more sustainable.

Step 5: Reflect and learn; go again

At the middle of the framework, the circle of arrows shows that systems change is always iterative. Be deliberate about taking time to reflect together on where and why you have made progress, and where you still have work to do. Then go again! The work of the systems changer is never done.

Summary



Reading Borough Council, Verena Hutcheson, Homelessness and Housing Pathways Manager

A local authority that has changed the local system by knowing its role and, even more importantly, its limitations: “People like us being just one player among many, not always leading.”

For many organisations, it can be difficult to understand the best role they can play within a local context. When should they step up and do more, and when it is better to give space to others? For a local authority, this can be especially challenging due to the nature of their responsibilities. Ultimately, the buck stops with them, so the temptation is to try to limit the risk of failure by retaining control.

In Reading they are trying to take the opposite approach. Their insight is that tackling homelessness requires a broad-based response, where everyone must play a part. As Verena Hutcheson, Homelessness and Housing Pathways Manager in Reading Borough Council, puts it, “There are limits to a local authority’s influence at a grass-roots level. We want to mobilise a wider group to provide the best offers of support for an individual, with the greatest chance that they will engage with that offer.”

To generate shared ownership of the response to homelessness first requires shared ownership of the problem. Paradoxically, the more the Council seeks control, the less effective it may be because it can constrain the contributions of others. To be most effective, the council’s role cannot always be to ‘do’. “People like us being just one player among many; not always leading,” says Verena. Rather, she sees the council’s primary role as to create conditions in which others can also do. This is the essence of system stewardship.

In Reading, a key focus of the work is to reduce rough sleeping. As part of their commissioning cycle, Verena has worked to map pathways of support for people who are homeless, to identify gaps in provision and coordinate the response. In challenging fiscal circumstances, these gaps have increased. The local community has responded, but with much of this provision focused on meeting immediate needs. “The challenge is to coordinate these responses to avoid duplication and, where gaps are identified, to move resources further up the chain of support,” says Verena. “We need to move away from simply meeting the immediate needs of people who are street homeless, towards actions that will end their homelessness.”

In Reading, the Council had previously hosted a homelessness forum, but engagement from the voluntary and community sector was low. “It wasn’t working well with the Council in charge,” says Verena. “It needed to be run independently.” This is what has happened with the recent creation of Street Support Reading and Reading’s Homelessness Partnership. Instead of being a creature of the council, Street Support is an independent charity, “connecting people and organisations locally, to tackle homelessness in Reading,” as its strapline puts it. It is based on similar models in Manchester and elsewhere. For people who want to play their part, the Street Support platform offers information, education and alternatives to giving money to people who are street homeless.

It is still early days, but already the partnership is convening workshops to focus on solutions to specific problems, with these and other sub-groups working towards development of a shared vision. It is shifting the focus of community support away from meeting immediate needs, towards actions to support people to maintain their tenancies. This doesn’t absolve the Council of its responsibilities. Rather, it allows it to focus some of its efforts where it is best placed to make a difference, playing a system stewardship role. It can help to coordinate support, both formally and informally, based on its overview understanding of where the gaps are. It can broker relationships and commission in ways that foster collaboration rather than competition. It can ensure the support it commissions is trauma informed, understanding that, as Verena puts it, “People are a product of their experiences.” And it can be an advocate beyond the locality. “We advocate to MHCLG, to try to change the bigger issues that limit the local response,” says Verena. “We do a lot of that behind the scenes. Our advocacy is so much more effective when we can talk about solutions we are developing locally, working with other areas who are also trying new approaches.”

Middlesbrough Council, Polly Wright and Julie Marsden, Commissioning Team Leader for Prevention and Community Support Manager

A local authority in the middle of the challenging process of changing long-existing systems.

Although the status quo is failing people, it can be hard to bring about the change that is needed. Just ask Polly Wright and Julie Marsden who lead on homelessness at Middlesbrough Council. In Middlesbrough, the vision is to transform support available to people who are homeless and others with complex needs. Instead of looking at homelessness, domestic abuse and substance misuse separately, they want to bring it together in one holistic service. Instead of multiple assessments for each service, people will only have to tell their story once, and that story will be added to as new information is known. Services will work together, also working more closely with mental health services, to take a holistic view of an individual and a creative approach to solutions. Instead of a person being pushed from pillar to post, support will be delivered by placing the 'team around the individual', led by the service with the strongest existing relationship.

Trying to innovate is always difficult. Trying to do so while serving a vulnerable population is especially so. It requires striking a careful balance between gaining benefits from experimentation while also managing the risks. In Middlesbrough they quickly realised that to balance these risks responsibly they needed more control of the process. Where they had intended to commission the new approach to services, they soon realised they needed some of this work to be done in house. "We didn't know what the model would be," says Julie. "We were clear about the purpose, but we needed the freedom to learn."

This learning process has been hard at times. It has taken creativity for Polly, Julie and their colleagues to imagine a different future is possible. It has taken courage to walk towards it when they didn't have all the answers, to experiment and to learn. It has taken resolve to continue in the face of inevitable setbacks, and wisdom to know when to press ahead and when to change course. It has been difficult to get buy-in from partners. Political support has been critical. And it has all taken so much longer than they expected. "It's certainly been much harder than we thought it would be," reflects Polly. "There's a fear of the unknown." But for all the challenges, Polly and Julie know the progress is real and important. "If we can crack it for people who are homeless or with other complex needs, we can improve services for everyone," says Julie.

VOICES (Fulfilling Lives), Andy Meakin, Project Director

A local organisation in Stoke-on-Trent inspiring others with its holistic approach to individuals and the system.

VOICES is a Lottery funded Fulfilling Lives programme in Stoke-on-Trent which, since 2014, has sought to test and embed effective approaches to supporting people with multiple needs, many of whom are homeless.

Based on the MEAM approach to local systems change, it recognises that too many people with multiple needs do not get the holistic support they need. To address this, 'navigators' act as intermediaries, supporting people to engage with services. Through this work with individuals, navigators develop an understanding of the wider systemic barriers and blockages people face, identifying the gap between how the system thinks it works and how it actually does. Navigators then engage in 'assertive advocacy', working with others in the system to develop solutions for the individual, and in doing so change system culture, custom and practice to close the gap. Often the obstacles are based simply on cultural understandings or custom and practice, not legal or regulatory requirements. They can be changed.

VOICES' approach is not one that delivers immediate results. Assertive advocacy is challenging for all involved. "To be honest," says Director Andy Meakin, "relationships with services got worse before they got better. But

sometimes you do need to raise the temperature and not shy away from a dispute.” Being independently funded by the Lottery has been helpful. As Andy reflects, “This enables us to be more assertive in our advocacy. A locally funded organisation could be more vulnerable to coercion. We can push back professionally without too much fear.” It has also taken persistence, and a recognition from those they work with that, as an eight-year programme, VOICES is not going away anytime soon. As Andy says, “People have realised that it’s simply easier and better to work with us, rather than against us. We will explore decisions as a critical friend, using professional curiosity.”

Over time, the appetite for change locally has increased as the impact of VOICES’ approach is seen more clearly. Measuring this impact has been critical. It has shown that once a navigator is in place there is a significant reduction in use of services in around a third of cases. In around a fifth of cases service use increases, but people are now accessing the right services in the best way. As a result, there has been a reduction in interactions with emergency services, magistrates’ court appearances, use of A&E and nights in cells.

VOICES has also sought to embed change systemically by capturing and sharing learning. They have brought people together to strengthen relationships between those working across Stoke-on-Trent, and organised training to develop skills. So far, over 3000 training places have been accessed by 800 different practitioners and volunteers on issues from psychologically informed practice to drug and alcohol awareness. Establishing Communities of Practice has allowed people to reflect on their practice and learn together, to understand the changes they can make, as well as the systemic changes that are needed.

For Andy Meakin, the key to positive change is to reinforce what he describes as the right “neural pathways” within the system. First among these is empathy. “Instead of judging a person’s life or attributing their circumstances to lifestyle choices,” he says, “stand in their shoes and see the world from their perspective.” From this all else flows.

Encompass Southwest, Claire Fisher, CEO

A local organisation taking the initiative and getting partners to buy into Housing First.

How does systemic change happen? In Barnstaple, a rural community in North Devon, it started with a moment of truth. This truth was the collective failure of services to meet the needs of a cohort of around ten people who had been sleeping rough for a long period of time. It wasn’t because the cohort of people was unknown to local services. All of the group were well known. They were frequent users of many local services. In fact, at the fortnightly homelessness hub meeting their situations were often discussed, but none of the solutions identified seemed to make a difference. The group continued to cycle in and out of housing, and around and around between services. It was time to face up to that fact and try something different.

To Claire Fisher, Chief Officer at Encompass Southwest – an advice agency working to reduce poverty and homelessness locally – the solution was clear. If the failure was collective, the solution would need to be collective too. But what could that solution look like? While partners were attracted to supported housing models like Housing First, they were worried about the cost. But what about the current costs of failure?

Claire’s impulse was to start small and to act together, based on an honest assessment of the costs of doing nothing. If the group could work with just one or two of the cohort to develop a shared, cost-effective ‘proof of concept’ this could be the catalyst for larger change. The group agreed, and once they had calculated what they were currently spending on just two of the cohort, they could see it made sense to invest in the pilot. The contributing partners included the local authority housing department and social care, Devon and Cornwall Policy, and Northern Devon CCG. And with every partner contributing to funding the pilot, every partner had an interest in how it progressed.

As it turned out, the pilot was only successful in relation to one of the people sleeping rough. But that was enough. “One year into the pilot and, after a conversation with a local police group, the Police thought he must have died as they hadn’t heard from him,” said Claire. Due to this success partners understood the concept and the financial case for it. As a result, the Housing First pilot was extended and most of the original cohort of people who were sleeping rough are now doing well, receiving the kinds of psychologically informed services they need. In addition, the success of the pilot has also changed the ways of working among partners and created a new sense of tackling problems together.

Claire is now working on how this collective approach can be extended to develop solutions for other groups of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. “We took risks,” she says, “but they were calculated risks, and we learned from failure. We had to be willing to spend money to stabilise the situation, while also working on longer term solutions. We needed to think differently and solve problems together. That was the key.”

Conclusion

This publication has not been about the theory of systems change, although it draws on theoretical foundations. It has been about the practice.

It is built on the stories of people working tirelessly in their communities to improve the response to homelessness. They show what is possible, and how leadership for local systems change can come from anywhere.

Within these stories are lessons for anyone following a similar path. It is the hard-earned wisdom of experience. The two frameworks we have presented try to distil these lessons, to create a guide to action. Neither of these frameworks is prescriptive: every situation and context will be different, and some of the guidance may resonate more than others.

The first framework in Part A points towards a destination: what a healthy local system might look like, the roles different types of organisations might be playing, and how they would be working together.

The second framework in Part B is guidance on a process to get there: how to collaborate with others locally to shift the factors holding a complex problem like homelessness in place. Building collaborative capacity to take action together is an ongoing process, not a destination. That's why this framework is iterative. Taking action together deepens relationships, strengthens bonds of trust, and develops collaborative know-how. It makes it easier to take on more challenging problems in the future.

Not every issue holding a complex problem like homelessness in place can be addressed by local action. But many can. Our argument is to start there.

Appendix: Additional links

In the text above, we have referred to other publications which may be of interest:

[Building Collaborative Places: Infrastructure for System Change](#), by Anna Randle and Hannah Anderson, Collaborate CIC, 2017

[Collective Impact](#), by John Kania and Mark Kramer, Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2011

[Exploring the new world: Practical insights for funding, commissioning and managing in complexity](#), by Dawn Plimmer and Toby Lowe, Collaborate CIC and Newcastle Business School, 2019



What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.



What we do

Collaborate CIC is a social consultancy that helps public services and organisations collaborate to tackle social challenges. We are values-led, not-for-profit and driven by a belief in the power of collaborative services as a force for social and economic progress. We create partnerships that get beyond traditional silos to deliver credible change on the ground, working with our clients across the UK.

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