SYSTEMS CHANGERS

'From where I stand'

How frontline workers can contribute
to and create systems change

A report on the 2016 Systems Changers Programme

Lankelly Chase

Lankelly Chase

THE POINT PEOPLE
WHERE WORLDS MEET

SNOOK

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It feels really exciting to be launching this report that pulls together the insights from people working in frontline roles on the Systems Changers 2017 programme.

The systems they work in give them a unique vantage point, and it is from this position that their insights stem. Yet, throughout this programme I was reminded again of how scant the opportunities are for the people working in these roles to speak out and more importantly to be listened to.

I was struck by how much the badge of the programme gave them and their organisations space and permission to reflect, question and experiment with creating change. Opportunities that are sadly too rare.

I was also struck by how much they questioned their right to speak and to be heard even though they are crucial parts of the system which we all work, use and live in – issues such as race, class, ethnicity all being factors in this.

As with the last set of people on the previous programme, I've been amazed by the dedication, wisdom, warmth, humour, determination and insights they have as workers on the frontline of services. When people found the confidence to speak out, share their insights and articulate their visions they revealed refreshing and inspiring ways for the systems that support people who face severe and multiple disadvantage to flex and adapt for the better.

I believe that given the permission, the space and some additional skills, front line workers, together with people using support services, have the passion and knowledge to be leading and implementing the change that is so badly needed for all members of society to live rewarding and fulfilling lives.

I would encourage all of us to start seeking out and listening to frontline workers more.

Alice Evans, Director - Systems Change

SUMMARY

Frontline workers form the lifeblood of the systems which support those experiencing complex and multiple disadvantage. They deliver the policies formed in the corridors of power in Whitehall and the services commissioned in town halls. They are the ones who have day-to-day contact with people experiencing homelessness, abuse, mental health crisis, addiction or a combination of these. Yet their perspectives rarely form part of developing the policies and services they deliver and their insights are rarely included in efforts to reform the multiple systems they work in. These systems include public service systems, support systems and the systems in their organisation. Frontline workers rarely possess the power to make these systems work for the people they support.

Lankelly Chase saw this gap and partnered with Point People and Snook to tackle it with the Systems Changers programme. The programme was first piloted in 2015 in the North East and North West and in 2016 ran with 11 participants from across the South East. The ambition of the programme is to enable frontline workers to contribute to and create systems change. To empower people to gain a sense of agency to influence the multiple systems they work within.

**The programme is structured in three stages:
(i) seeing the system (ii) 'finding the flex' in the system and
(iii) experimenting with making change happen.**

It combines led sessions across a range of disciplines with practical tools, visits to those doing systems change work, one-on-one support and space for reflection. The 2016 cohort demonstrated the specific contribution to change that the frontline can make, if they are given time, permission and tools.

This analysis of the programme is structured around three questions: (i) what's the value of the frontline perspective? (ii) how can frontline workers contribute to and create systems change? (iii) what factors are needed to support systems change at the frontline?

VALUE OF THE FRONTLINE PERSPECTIVE

The programme highlighted that frontline workers have a unique vantage point on the systems around complex disadvantage. They see the life context of the people they support **and** the complexity of public services and support systems. They can see dissonance where these rub up against each other. Frontline workers have the ability to see cracks that can be invisible further up in these systems. They can see where services don't align; where people are falling through the gaps when things go wrong. They are often forced to find creative 'workarounds' to mediate their clients' needs against the rigid structures of the various systems people experiencing complex disadvantage need to engage with.

WAYS FRONTLINE WORKERS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO AND CREATE SYSTEMS CHANGE

Ultimately, systems change is when people see things in new ways, when they are able to translate this shift in perspective into new ideas, and then translate these new ideas into new ways of being and new ways of doing.

Participants in the 2016 Systems Changers programme experienced two fundamental shifts of perspective.

1. Participants **saw the systems they work in differently.** They went **from** battling for clients and working from their own perspective within the system with their heads down, **to** seeing other perspectives, seeking more information, seeing flex and questioning the status quo. From being relatively isolated in their own work, participants started to open up two-way conversations within their organisations and wider dialogues with people in the systems they work in.

2. Participants **saw their power within the systems they work in differently.** They went **from** feeling frustrated, powerless and fearful, **to** having a sense of their own agency along with the value and validity of their perspective. This was true for people whether they were looking outside their organisation or inside their own operations.

Once participants' perspectives and sense of agency shifted, they then took a mix of approaches to making change happen. There was no one type of 'frontline change'. Instead, participants played different roles and adopted different styles.

THE DIFFERENT ROLES & STYLES

Reveal: Reflecting systems back to the people who work in them, showing what is really going on and sharing new perspectives more widely.

Generate ideas: Developing possible solutions to problems in their system.

Drive: Directly initiating change, often through testing, showcasing and evidencing what could be done.

Convene: Bringing people together to explore the systems around complex disadvantage and look at the potential for change open the way for positive change.

Advocate: Actively pushing for action on problems that are revealed in the system.

Sustain: Building wider networks to catalyse and then support the process of change.

Support: Championing and encouraging others.

FACTORS NEEDED TO SUPPORT FRONTLINE WORKERS TO CHANGE SYSTEMS

Most participants tried several or all of these approaches. There is no right or wrong mix. The approach is determined both by the unique set of ingredients in each individual's environment; what there is space, permission and time for; and each individual's unique personality.

The programme demonstrated how all these roles and processes are important and one is not more powerful than the other. Often when looking for evidence of change, new tools, products or services are seen as the ultimate measures of success. The programme showed the power of more subtle changes. For example, the participant who was emboldened to work collaboratively outside of her organisation, or the one has gone from treating encounters with other services as adversarial, to being collaborative and collegiate.

These changes in behaviour can make huge differences to the public service systems they work within.

The programme has revealed some of the ways in which the insights of the frontline and their contribution to change can be unlocked. We have synthesised these into five principles. These principles complement other work that has been done around understanding the conditions needed to cultivate systems change, such as Lankelly Chase's 9 Behaviours for Systems Change which will be part of their forthcoming Theory of Change.

1. **Create time and space.** Frontline workers need time and opportunity to think about how their system is working and how it could be improved.
2. **Disperse power.** Give explicit permission to staff to question how your system is working, don't assume that people will speak up if things aren't functioning well.
3. **Take down language and evidence barriers.** Break down 'official language' and jargon and accept new forms of evidence. This will level the playing field for those wanting to create change.
4. **Nurture community.** It's very hard to make change happen alone. Help staff form peer relationships to support each other.
5. **Model system change behaviour.** Wherever you sit in an organisation, take on some of the ways of being and doing we've just described.

While this report focusses on the frontline, the findings also have wider relevance. Just as frontline workers lack voice and power within the systems around multiple disadvantage, so in every system there is a group that tends to be subordinated and unheard. Change agents working for a fairer society face similar challenges no matter where they sit. We hope the findings will be useful for a wide range of people.

Throughout the six month programme it has been our privilege to travel alongside the Systems Changers: 11 passionate and committed individuals tackling severe and multiple disadvantage. The programme has confirmed the value and power of the frontline perspective in effecting systems change.

"What has happened as a result of Systems Changers - either for you, your organisation or more broadly?"

Jo Goldspring, Rising Sun Domestic Violence and Abuse Charity, Canterbury:

"Systems Changers helped me to grow in confidence and take on a more active role within the organisation, looking for opportunities to develop our service and deliver our key messages to the public."

My aim is to develop our services further and we have started to run a self-development programme for our service users, as well as a youth club. Both of these initiatives developed from listening to our service users. Essentially, Systems Changers helped me to take my blinkers off and think outside of my role.

As we are a small grassroots charity with few formal management structures we are able to develop creative ideas quite easily, so in that respect Systems Changers hasn't fundamentally changed my organisation. We are currently looking for funding to enable us to run more creative workshops and I am continuing to develop links with probation and the Gypsy and Traveller Community so that we start to reach a wider client group and develop our service accordingly to meet their needs.

Lewis Appah, The You Trust, Basingstoke:

"My journey as a Systems Changer has helped me immeasurably, it's changed the way I work, think and this has been so positive for me as a person."

It gave me a voice and tools I can now use to challenge things I think aren't right, and provide evidence in a constructive way if I have to present it to stakeholders.

Bryony Albery, Wycombe Homeless Link, High Wycombe:

"I ran a few workshops with volunteers about our drop-in advice centre which sparked a number of subtle, but important changes to the service. It has demonstrated the value of our volunteers' perspectives and now we are going to build them and our clients' insight into our annual service review. We are also beginning to prototype a new approach to our tenancy support service using the principles and tools I learnt through the programme."

We have been bolder in our approach with statutory services. We are now looking at what expertise and partnerships we'll need to build to advocate for change more effectively.

As for me, I am a lot more confident and feel able to create change having sparked the changes above. Personally I've started blogging about systems and my experience as a support worker, which I've had some really great feedback about. I turned one of the blogs into a poem which has so far won me a poetry slam… and made one person cry.

Martin Curtis, Equinox, Brighton:

"As a direct result of being on Systems Changers I am now getting involved with Frontline Network and plan to apply to them for funding to pilot an idea to prevent homelessness when clients leave rehab in an unplanned way."

Also, Brighton local rehabs, adult social care and Equinox outreach services have held their first multidisciplinary meeting to tackle complex and challenging cases. Feedback from the first meeting was really positive; the rehab service felt it was useful and the Equinox staff found it useful to get information about when to refer a client, what the process is and how to marry up detox discharge date with the entry into rehab.

Tracy Jesson, Elmore Community Services, Oxford:

"Systems Changers helped me to look at problems systematically and holistically. Rather than just looking at an issue from the point of view of my organisation and our clients, we learned to look at the situation from the point of view of every agency or individual in the system. This has changed my way of looking at things and has allowed me to look for solutions in a new way, and to see things I didn't see before."

I have used this approach at multi-agency meetings, and it has been particularly important in developing our relationships with the other organisations in a new multi-agency partnership we are part of. These organisations come from both statutory and third sector agencies, some of whom have very different points of view and have in the past had competing, or even clashing, interests. I have found that many people within these organisations are frustrated by the same problems, and are as keen as we are to work on these and try new ways to find solutions. It has enabled me to start working with these organisations in a really collaborative and cooperative way.

Another important lesson I learned from Systems Changers was that often I don't have to take no for an answer, I just have to find a new way to put the question.

John Broadway, Two Saints, Portsmouth:

"As an individual, I am more confident, more analytical (developing tools) and more compromising. The Systems Change ethos has become part of my everyday life, not just at work. I ask less 'should' questions and more 'perhaps' questions."

In terms of the wider systems, we've made submissions via the Improving Lives consultation. We've started dialogue with the Head of Local Council, the local Homelessness Tsar and the local Housing Options departments. We've also requested a meeting with the Secretary of State.

Maron Ehata, Elmore Community Services, Oxford:

"There has been a huge positive and direct impact in my interaction with clients. One of the jewels I have from Systems Changers is a principle; 'if you want to make a change, you need to keep on trying and have hope.'"

Now I am less affected by failure, knowing it is part of a road to success. The impact on clients support is enormous. I have gone from fear to championing change.

Within my organisation I've highlighted the fact that we think that we are bonding very well, but in my opinion we are just functioning in dislocated and isolated small groups. Many people are talking openly about this now and we are going to have more team away days as the direct result of questioning our own system. As a direct result of the programme, Tracy and I are also going to be attending Adult Mental Health Team partnership meetings to help facilitate strong working relationships with our organisation.

The programme gave me the stamina and daring to explore the systems I work in. I am planning to look harder at why people are so scared of questioning and exploring a system.

Michelle Gavin, Friends Families and Travellers, Brighton:

"My team have reviewed the way we approach our work and have embedded systems change at the heart of what we do. We are working collaboratively with other organisations and forging stronger relationships. We are no longer working in silos and we have a systems change approach when developing projects, forms and funding bids."

The tools and learning I gained from Systems Changers has influenced the way that I personally work. I now approach problems looking through multiple lenses ...to find the flex.

Charlotte Price, Porchlight, Kent:

"The programme has been incredibly enriching for me personally. I was given the tools to purposefully reflect upon the common issues that we face on a day-to-day basis, in different and exciting ways. Being exposed to a new and innovative environment, where fresh perspectives and ideas could be worked through was an unbelievably stimulating experience. I now think on a much broader scale, in terms of how change needs to occur and what may help or hinder those changes. I also then have the luxury of tying this back into the micro perspective, when working one-to-one with an individual using our services."

The coaching aspect of the programme really developed many interpersonal skills and confidence, which are essential in being able to effectively question the everyday, mundane practices that we have become so accustomed to. Only then can we push forward a case for change, in the hope of having a real impact on those around us and hopefully wider society. I have also met some amazing people, and learnt so much from them.

I have been involved in creating and facilitating a large staff involvement project in my organisation, which aimed to bring multiple perspectives to the same table, over the future direction of the charity. I love the ethos behind getting everyone talking about the big things, face-to-face. The amount of passion and experience in the room was overwhelming. I would now like to look deeper into why some may not have felt inclined to participate and what we can do to change this in future.

Cath Stamper, York Road Project, Woking:

"The impact of Systems Changers on my organisation and on me as a person has been phenomenal and completely unexpected. I have a renewed energy and I am looking differently at the way I work and this has led to my organisation being far more inclusive."

We are implementing a staff 'board' who will feed into the strategic direction of the organisation which will directly affect the client support we offer.

Vanessa Ball, Oasis Project, Brighton:

"The experience of being on the Systems Changers programme has highlighted for me the enormity of the challenge faced by frontline workers desperate to be part of making changes to our services. We are overwhelmed. This has been a block to my progress, not enough time or space to be actively available to work towards making positive change, and ultimately this affects those who need our services."

Each corner cut, each double booked appointment, each message not responded to and each worker forced to leave is the reinforcement of a theme that runs deep in the veins of those who need our services, those already marginalised. They hear our failings as 'we are not important, people don't really care' and this pushes them further away from the support they so desperately need. This has to change!

As frontline workers are the ones who face the failings of the system on a daily basis, we are in a position to take this experience forward. I will continue to look for flex, to observe, record and take what I find forward so we as a system can continue to improve and those who need our services need not feel undervalued and unheard anymore.

This project has been the beginning of something for me. When I first came I wanted to make large scale monumental change, once I came back to earth I realised it was about small but meaningful changes. Despite my own personal sense of not having achieved as much as I would have liked on the programme I know my eyes have been opened, I have been empowered and I now recognise the value of my role on the frontline as being influential in making change. I continue to believe that the tools and knowledge I have gained will lead me to improve the services we provide.
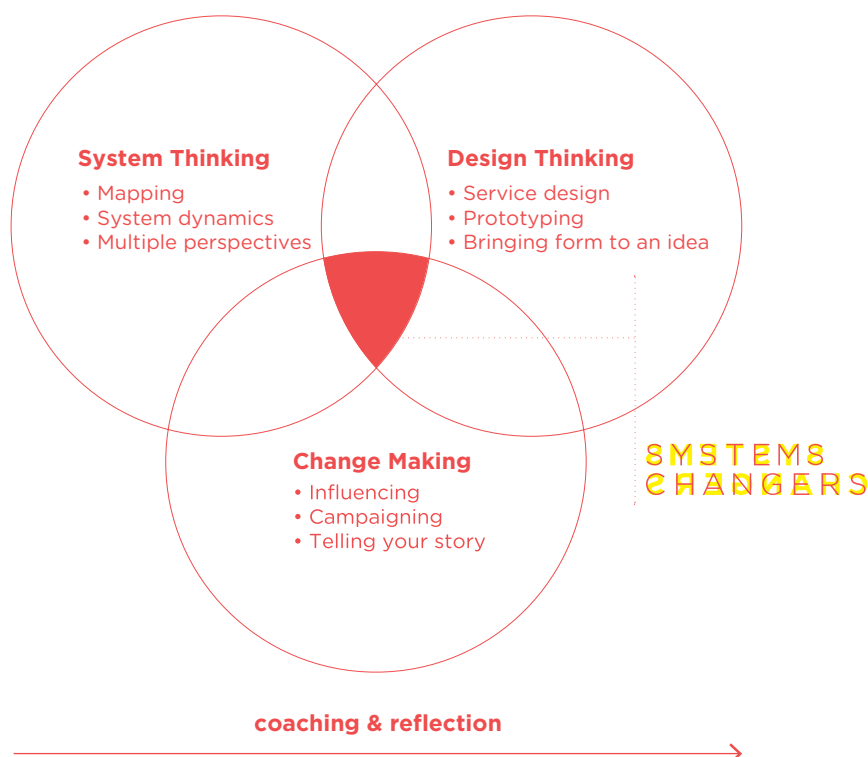
THE PROGRAMME

The 11 Systems Changers came from across the South East. They were a varied group in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, background and the fields of work. Participants worked on issues of homelessness, domestic abuse, mental health, substance misuse and with the Gypsy Traveller community, and several people we selected also had lived experience of these issues. We selected people on the basis of their potential to think beyond their own perspective to the wider public service systems they worked in.

The ambition of the programme was to enable frontline workers to contribute to and create systems change. To enable people, from where they stand in their system, to gain a sense of agency to influence the systems around complex disadvantage they work within.

Systems change needs to work across multiple perspectives. Whilst many 'change programmes' focus on either innovation, or campaigning, or service design, Systems Changers draws from all of these disciplines and others.

**The programme was structured in three stages:
(i) seeing the system, (ii) 'finding the flex' in the systems and
(iii) experimenting with making change happen.**

The programme began and ended with residential retreats. In between, participants met monthly to learn new content, visit others working on systems change, reflect on their experiences and support each other. The group was equipped with a range of practical tools they could take away and experiment with in their workplaces and personally. There was an emphasis on 'experiential and peer learning' that allowed people to see, feel and experiment. Alongside this they received one-on-one support. Towards the end of the programme there was a one-day session with managers from participants' organisations, to share some of the most impactful inputs from the programme.

System Thinking
- Mapping
- System dynamics
- Multiple perspectives

Design Thinking
- Service design
- Prototyping
- Bringing form to an idea

Change Making
- Influencing
- Campaigning
- Telling your story

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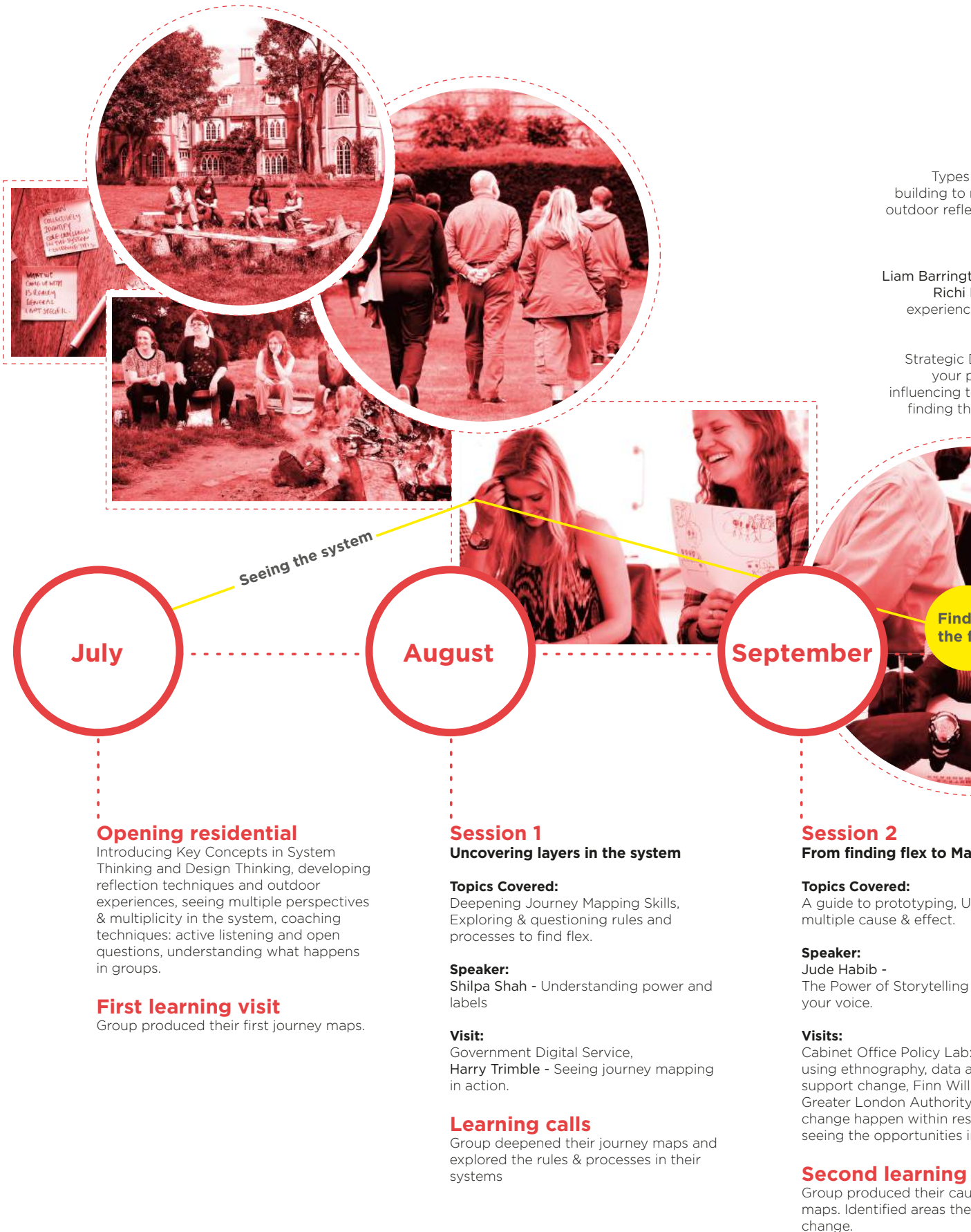
coaching & reflection

This was an emotional journey just as much as a practical one. Starting to make change in any system brings up strong feelings, like fear, doubt and confusion - the participants all experienced these emotions at various times in the programme.

Supporting this emotional understanding was built into the programme via:

- Giving dedicated time for 'checking in' at each event in London. This enabled participants to share how they were feeling and to support each other.
- Incorporating support into their monthly phone calls with Learning Mentors.
- Designing time to reflect at each event, often in the outdoors. These exercises often supported participants to focus on how they felt, how others around them might feel and what to do about this.
- Incorporating feelings, particularly those that block or enable change, into the systems thinking inputs throughout the programme.

For more information on the programme including session content and tools, see **Lankelly Chase's website.**

Seeing the system

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July	August	September

Opening residential
Introducing Key Concepts in System Thinking and Design Thinking, developing reflection techniques and outdoor experiences, seeing multiple perspectives & multiplicity in the system, coaching techniques: active listening and open questions, understanding what happens in groups.

First learning visit
Group produced their first journey maps.

Session 1
Uncovering layers in the system

Topics Covered:
Deepening Journey Mapping Skills, Exploring & questioning rules and processes to find flex.

Speaker:
Shilpa Shah - Understanding power and labels

Visit:
Government Digital Service,
Harry Trimble - Seeing journey mapping in action.

Learning calls
Group deepened their journey maps and explored the rules & processes in their systems

Session 2
From finding flex to Mal

Topics Covered:
A guide to prototyping, Ur multiple cause & effect.

Speaker:
Jude Habib -
The Power of Storytelling your voice.

Visits:
Cabinet Office Policy Lab: using ethnography, data a support change, Finn Willi Greater London Authority change happen within rest seeing the opportunities ir

Second learning
Group produced their cau maps. Identified areas they change.

Session 4

Seeing where your project sits in the system & thinking about scale, presentation skills and tricks,
Exploring barriers to making change: self-authorisation, boundaries, restrictions and what unlocks these

Speakers:
Ruth Kennedy –
The Public Office: Using form to create impact and drive empathy and achieve change.

Jude Habib –
Using video to tell stories

Managers Session

Exploring the role of frontline insight, Key systems change concepts & tools, Finding Flex, Shilpa Shah - Power and labels, reflection on their organisations.

Final learning visit

Group actively working on change projects

Session 3
Working with Change

Topics Covered:
of Change: from movement making, Street Wisdom – an ctive experience, forcefields and resistors to change.

Speakers:
on Bush – Campaigning 101,
Ellis – User Voice: from lived e to making change happen

Studio Time:
Design Support – what form project could take, coaching, echniques, project planning, e crux of the issue, practical design support

Closing residential

Reflecting on the programme and the story so far, project presentations, long term view & plurality maps

Newsroom:
Recording the group's voices on the programme
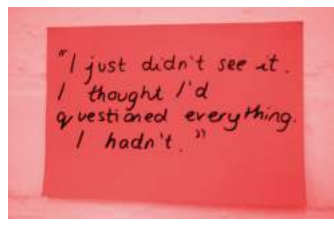
Ripples of impact:
Understanding how we affect & support each other, nighttime reflection walk and group appreciation, system reflections, developing a Frontline Manifesto, building a network for the future.

Experimenting with change

October   **November**   **December**

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"I just didn't see it. I thought I'd questioned everything. I hadn't."

THE VALUE OF THE FRONTLINE PERSPECTIVE

ABOUT THE FRONTLINE

We define frontline workers as those who have day-to-day interaction with people experiencing complex disadvantage. The nature of that interaction can vary a great deal. For instance, a call centre worker may be the first and main point of interaction in a system but have no face to face contact, or the CEO of a small organisation may be actively involved in working with clients. What constitutes frontline is also changing as the way in which services are delivered shifts and diversifies. For local authorities and councils where services are contracted out, the closest point of interaction with clients may be a commissioner or policy maker.

Whilst the frontline isn't a homogenous and clearly boundaried group, there are some common characteristics. Frontline workers usually work closely with those they are seeking to help. They mediate the rules and processes of public service and support systems with the human need they see. Many bring lived experience to their work, or a perspective that is grounded in proximity to the issues in their community. They lack time and space for reflective and strategic thought, often firefighting day-to-day issues.

THE VALUE OF FRONTLINE WORKERS

a)   A unique perspective

The programme found that frontline workers have a unique vantage point in the systems around complex disadvantage with the **potential** to see:

- The life context of the people they support and the complexity of the public service and support systems. With this comes the ability to see the gaps and cracks that can be invisible further up in these systems.

All of the group were able to describe the complex lives of the people they support, and how this fitted (or didn't) alongside the specific criteria they were required to 'comply with' to access services and support.

For example, Martin often worked to help his clients access drug treatment services, however, to do this they had to demonstrate 'motivation' through regular and repeat attendance at drop in services. Often their drug and alcohol dependence or wider mental health issues prevented this. Martin was able to describe to the Systems Changers group that his clients were motivated to be treated, but that they struggled to demonstrate this in the officially required ways. He was also able to see the ways in which services could adapt to meet people's needs so that they did not need to be excluded. Martin worked to develop a way forward on these issues in the programme.

- The ways in which power operates and is distributed (or not distributed) in the system through information flows and the use of labels.

"We don't get certain information, there are things that we aren't party to. How then can we solve things? How can I get to the root of an issue?' It feels like we are told that 'we don't understand' but how can we when we don't get the full information? When we raise issues and get no feedback people don't bother to speak out again."

b)   Countering the Medusa Effect

There is a 'Medusa' effect within systems around complex disadvantage. Systems take the fluidity and dynamic nature of people, particularly those facing complex problems, and turn them into stonelike, inflexible outputs, diagnoses and assessments – often boxes on forms.

Frontline staff often talk about feelings, relationships and how people are doing. For example a homeless drug user is traumatised by a failed rehab stint, a client is frustrated and demotivated by a rejection, a Traveller has panic attacks and anxiety at the thought of interacting with DWP. This is set against a support system which is designed around process, formulaic questions, steps and flow charts. Even motivation – a key 'measure' for rehab becomes a KPI not an emotion that changes. Human needs and relationships are 'turned to stone.' In order to get good outcomes, frontline workers frequently have to find ways to translate between their clients' needs and these rigid structures.

John commented that it often seems like the systems for people facing complex problems was designed for people with simple straightforward needs and could not cope with complexity presented by people facing many factors of disadvantage (e.g. drug addiction, homelessness and poor mental wellbeing).

"There are 50 boxes to fill out on an ESA, 50! One asks if you can pick up a pound coin from a desk. My client can't really move his arms but he's learned to push the coin to the edge of the desk and catch it when it falls off. So I guess the answer is yes. How does that help him at all or tell anyone about what he can or can't do to work?.....When you speak to a call handler for an ESA their KPI is a 28 minute call, so that's what they are worried about - not helping someone get the most accurate answers."

Frontline voice and insight are vital complements to user voice. They bring perspective not just on what the user experience is but also why that particular system is experienced in that way. They are able to show how the reality of someone's life is not catered for by the system. They are then uniquely placed to develop ideas for change, to test and iterate these and to evidence impact.
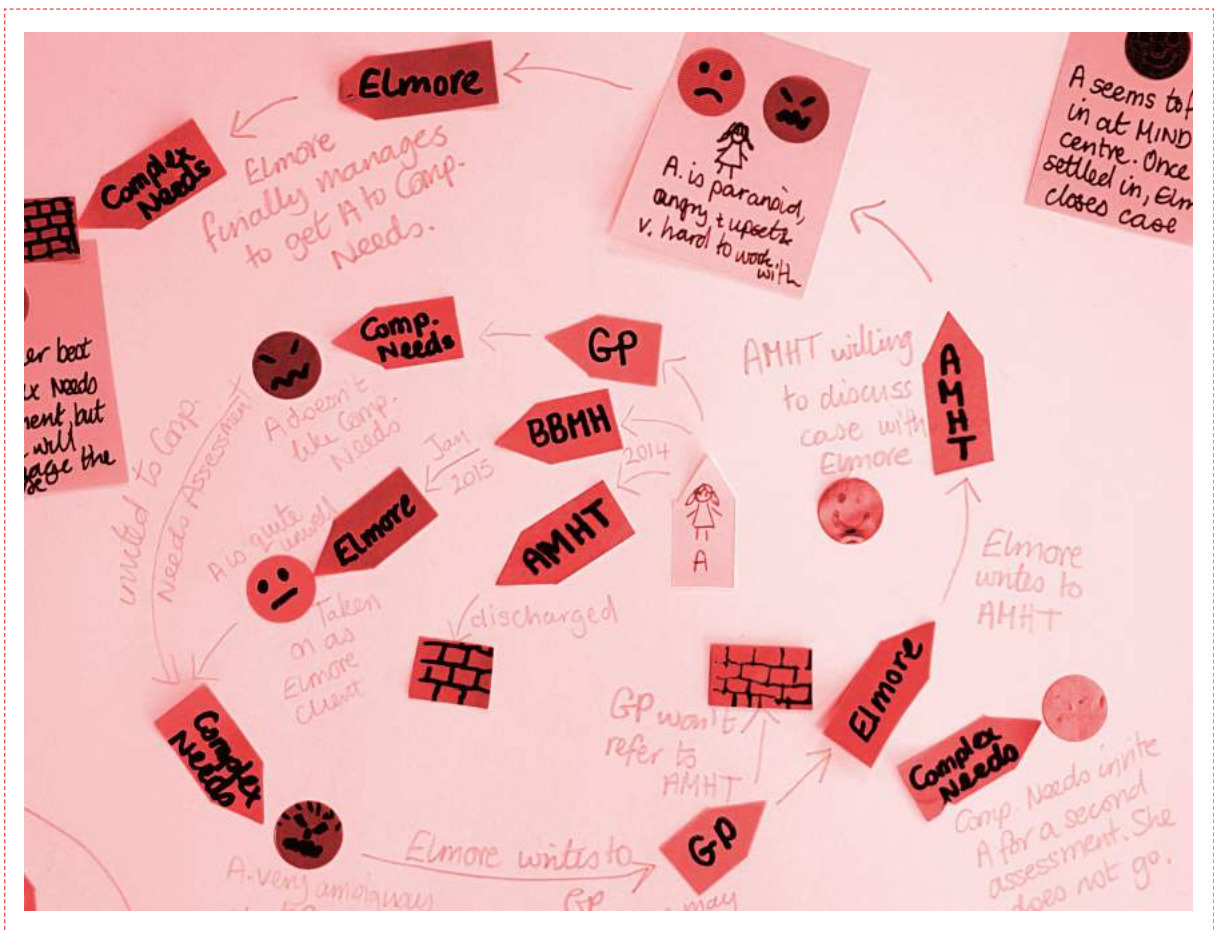
# HOW CAN FRONTLINE WORKERS CONTRIBUTE TO AND CREATE SYSTEMS CHANGE?

**The programme was structured in three stages:
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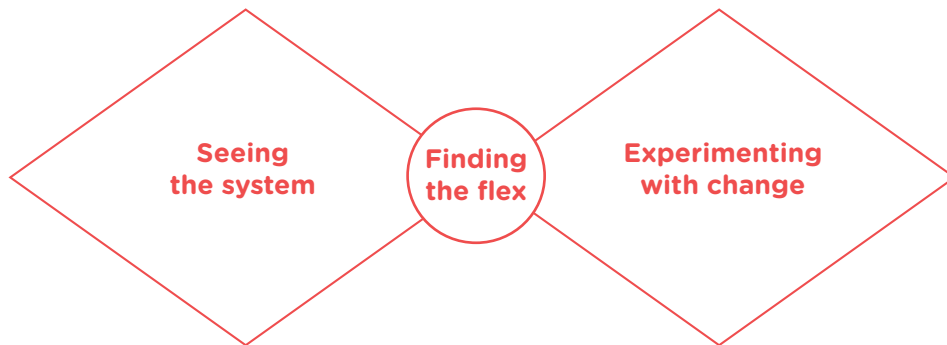
The first part of this section outlines what participants observed when they analysed the systems they work in. The second part looks at the issues that came up when they started to find the flex in the systems they work in. The third part focuses on how they started to make change happen in the systems they work in.

During the course of this process, participants underwent two fundamental shifts of perspective.
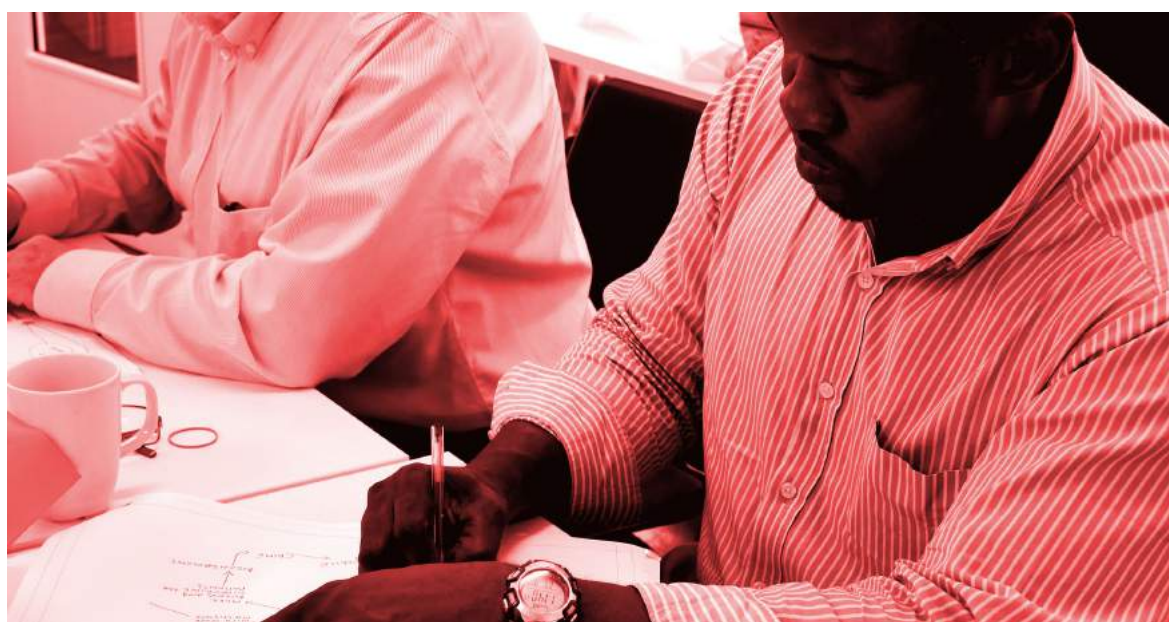
Seeing their system differently: The participants went from battling for clients and working from their own perspective within the system, to seeing other perspectives, seeking more information, seeing flex and questioning the status quo. From being relatively isolated in their own work, participants started to open up two-way conversations within their organisations and wider dialogues with people in their system.

HOW CAN FRONTLINE WORKERS CONTRIBUTE TO AND CREATE SYSTEMS CHANGE?

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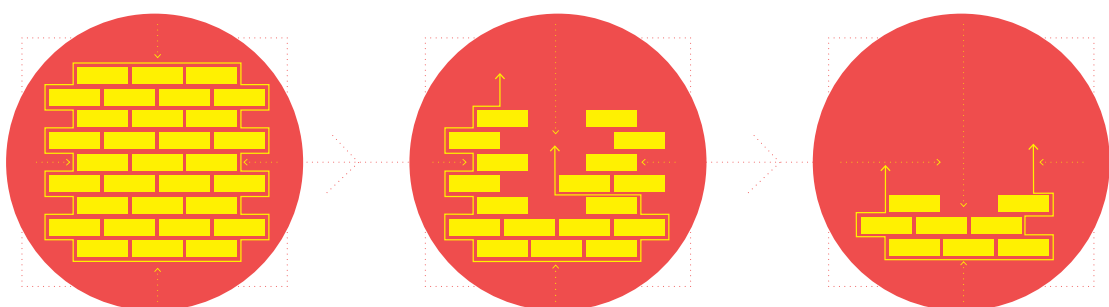
"You need to look beyond one service to understand success / failure in the system. You tend to have the same people coming over and over again. They move on and then a year later they come back, is that not a failed system? What looks like a success for each part of the system isn't really success."

Bryony opened up new kinds of conversations both internally and externally. She went from liaising with the volunteers working for her organisation around specific tasks to launching a programme of collaboratively identifying areas for improvement. With her manager she started to shift the relationship with the council to develop more two-way understanding and to be able to challenge more of their decisions meaningfully.

One Systems Changer realised that she was going into conversations with other agencies and services assuming they would not understand the cultural needs of her clients, and was taking on anger at that prejudice, going in combative and argumentative. She started to approach things in a more conciliatory fashion, still clear about rights and requirements but presuming ignorance rather than wilful disregard and discrimination.

Seeing their power within their system differently:
The participants moved from feeling frustrated, powerless and fearful to challenge or make any change, to having a sense of their own agency along an appreciation of the value and validity of their perspective. This was both through being heard on the programme, and recognition in their working contexts through using the tools from Systems Changers.

"I started asking 'why' about everything and not assuming it had to be that way." Michelle

Charlotte went from being reluctant to speak up and challenge, to being directly asked for her views by senior managers on a regular basis. This shift happened as a result of increased confidence and being able to use new techniques to present evidence. Charlotte is now collaborating with senior managers on bringing frontline voice into their organisational strategy.

Lewis went from being silent on the impact of a decision to remove rough sleepers' blankets from the streets during the day, to presenting the impact of this to key stakeholders in the local area. He has now been invited to present to senior leaders on the issue and to contribute to developing solutions to the problem.

All of the cohort came away from the programme more confident and actively questioning, suggesting, and leading change for the people they support, their teams and their organisations. For some this extended outside of work; Bryony took her newfound confidence and won a poetry slam using poems about what it means to be homeless in the UK.

A more confident empowered front-line workforce means greater advocacy for people facing complex disadvantage, more effective application of what is on offer and less stagnation of cases and need.

1. SEEING THE SYSTEM

Seeing the system

Finding the flex

Experimenting with change
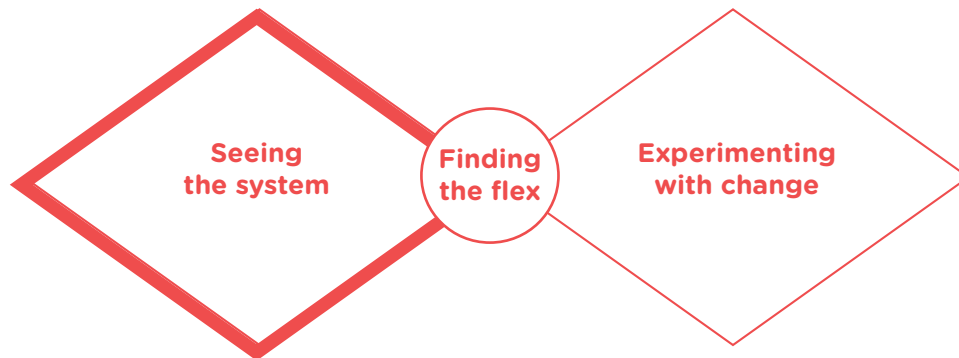
Systems are complex and interconnected. They are made up of people, processes, rules and culture. They include unspoken prejudices and presumptions about people. Before intervening in a system, it is helpful to better understand it. The first part of the Systems Changers programme was about helping frontline workers see the wider systems they were operating in more clearly and from other perspectives. The group also delved into some of the wider social frames such as race, gender and class, that impacted on their perceptions of power and on their agency.

It is as if at the start of the programme many of the participants were driving with limited visibility, only able to see the direct road ahead. This first part of the programme enabled them to uncover additional layers of visibility by looking in mirrors to see other perspectives, tapping into their peripheral vision, seeing the bigger picture of the road layouts and understanding new route options.

Frontline workers face a near perfect storm of pressure, which can mean they are forced to keep their heads down and often lack the time, space or permission to notice the multiple systems around them. Starting to explore these systems is not a process that can be rushed; it takes time, and as the group discovered, can throw up more questions than answers.

A range of content was used to help participants see their system including journey mapping tools that enabled them to better understand the experiences of the people they support and others in their system; sessions that encouraged them to adopt different perspectives; tools that helped them see 'power' in their system and better understand the impact of using labels like 'frontline', 'client' and 'service user'.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS FOUND WHEN THEY STARTED TO SEE THEIR SYSTEMS IN A NEW LIGHT

a) The importance of transparency around decision-making and information flows

Some of the first things participants noticed were the ways in which decisions in the public systems around complex disadvantage were either invisible to them and the people they support, or not communicated to them. In addition, information about people facing complex disadvantage was often not passed on between agencies or to the frontline worker and person affected. This can have significant implications for clients who may then disengage from services in general if they don't understand why they have been rejected for a form of support. It can also undermine their trust in a frontline worker who may equally be in the dark as to why something has happened.

"I realised that no-one had communicated to a client who was in prison that his hostel place had been closed or why the rules meant this had to be done. On the day he was released he came back to the service, he had no idea that there was no bed and was understandably angry. The experience set him back." Cath

"When services aren't meeting the needs of clients - it is very slow, very hard to get a hold of them to find out why, clients are discharged with little consideration for what will happen to them." Martin

Depriving frontline workers of access to information about why decisions have been made, or why services are structured in a particular way, can make it harder for them to achieve the best outcomes for clients, and harder for them to contribute to improving services, or simply making them work in the first place. It can add to the stress and strain that people experiencing complex disadvantage feel, thereby making the job even harder for the frontline worker

"Communicating changes to rules and procedures is vital, particularly when they change the nature of frontline day-to-day work. If this is done poorly it can lead to deep-seated resentment."

Tackling information flows in a system can be a first step in taking down some of the implicit structures that strip power and agency from both frontline workers and the people they support.

b)   A move from defensiveness to responsibility

As participants began analysing their systems, they saw the ways in which different parts of complex systems seek to pass on responsibility. They also noted a tendency for services and individuals to blame each other for issues that arise rather than to seek solutions. Several of the group noticed this tendency in themselves.

"I realised I was defending the client and blaming the service. I am now trying to take time to see the perspective of the other professional involved. Things seem to open up when you do this. I need to try and help the client show the face they show me, to others. Just defending the client can negatively affect professional relationships." Maron

"It's critical to consider policy positions and system choices from all perspectives – and try not to be too adversarial when advocating for an individual or a group of clients." Michelle

"I realised that how we ask questions changes the response." Cath

Most members of the group started to adapt their style and use more open questions when meeting other professionals within their system. As they did this they were often able to uncover why issues had arisen, move towards building stronger working relationships based on two-way dialogue, and start to resolve issues.

Developing a more positive and open approach to professional relationships enabled frontline workers to uncover more about the broad systems they worked within and to unlock their potential to work with others to improve outcomes for people experiencing complex disadvantage.

c)   The power of labels

People noticed how labels in their system tend to reflect the power structures, with labels spilling over into behaviours. For instance 'operative' and 'call handler' are labels that imply very little autonomy, just a rote programmed role underlining the sense that they cannot be questioned or challenged. Equally participants recognised how they carried assumptions around the label of 'manager', for example expecting that there would not be mutual understanding, or that they should not challenge them. Having a manager as part of the cohort helped surface how these assumptions were often inaccurate and that they also had a negative impact on those in senior positions. Without challenging the assumptions behind and use of such labels, power structures can be reinforced.
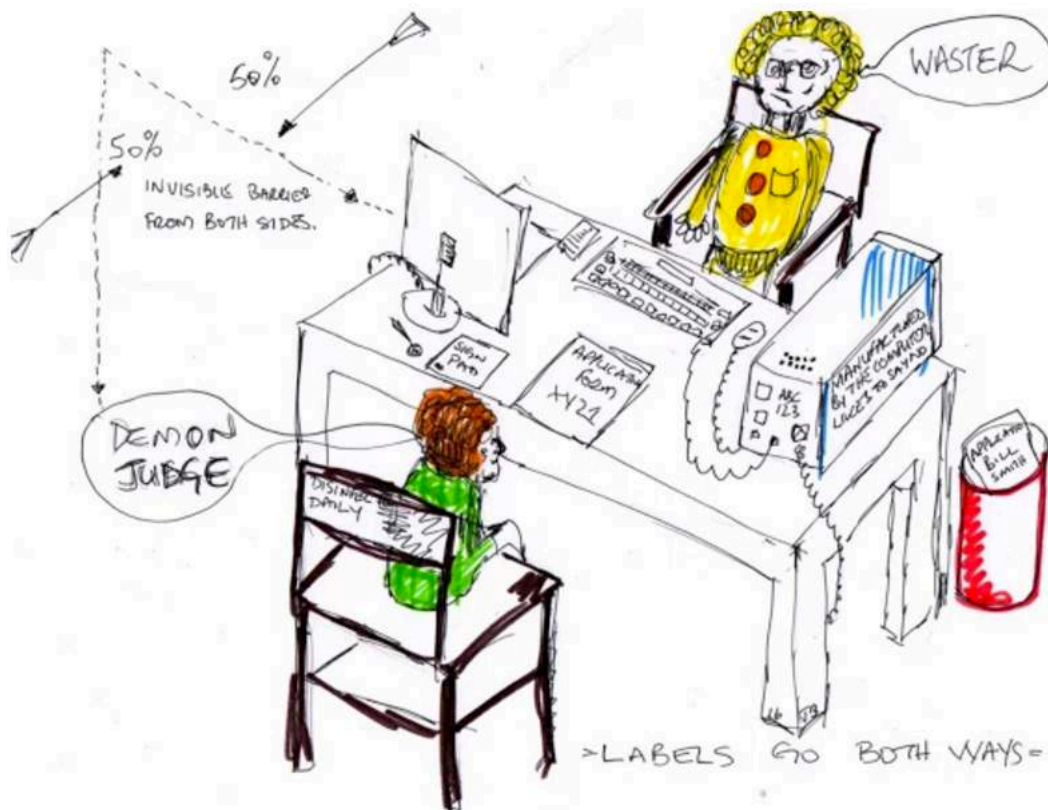

Illustration by John Broadway

People also noticed that some of these labels were not about the system they were in, but about the wider social structures in which these systems sit. Labels around education, background and socioeconomic status influenced interactions within systems around complex disadvantage, particularly in hierarchies. People were able to observe how wider social inequalities could manifest themselves in the delivery of services and support.

Several participants observed how whilst many labels could change, labels around race and ethnicity were fixed. There is also little choice for people around whether or not they can reveal that these labels apply to them. Even someone's name could reveal information about them that could lead to differential treatment and discrimination. This sort of discrimination can often be invisible to anyone other than the individual in question.

Recognising how labels applied to themselves was an important process and raised strong emotions for some of the group. In one case becoming aware of labels led an individual to notice ways in which he was treated, which he had previously ignored and put up with. He commented, 'once you notice labels you can't unnotice them.' For another participant recognising the way she was labelled, led her to see how she held herself back in certain situations.

"We use labels to build a wall between ourselves and the client, and with other professionals." Tracy

"As frontline workers we are often seen as the people who do the work with the clients and don't think about how the organisation is run or bigger strategic questions - that seems to be left to senior managers."

"It feels to me like the bigger the title, the more letters after then name, the less I feel able to question or challenge them. You can't say 'you're wrong' to someone who has 12 years experience and a medical qualification."

"I just call the person a call handler because they don't seem to have much to do with the client. They are just asking questions from a computer." Michelle

Participants also noticed how for people experiencing complex disadvantage, labels could be used to both unlock support or prevent them from getting it.

"People think that their labels are going to prevent them from getting access to a service because the label of Traveller is felt to be so negative. Other 'system' labels like 'poor mobility' or 'poor mental health' are also felt to be very negative and are very much barriers to support, not enablers or opportunities.. But there are some labels that people do want - e.g. when applying for a PIP someone is in effect asking for a label that means they can get support and the right award." Michelle

"What's the judgement we are making when we say someone is 'non-engaging'? What does this really mean and is it accurate or is it a way for people to hand over responsibility for dealing with a client's issues?" Charlotte

"When someone has a diagnosis of personality disorder then they don't have access to any other services because it can be felt they are manipulating the system, but they might have many other real needs." Maron

Creating awareness of labels and the power structures behind them enables people to start to question and challenge these.

d) The Gaps in the System and False Efficiency

Through using techniques like journey mapping, the group were able to deepen their understanding of their systems. All participants noticed gaps, cracks and inefficiencies in the systems around complex disadvantage and the impact of these on clients.

"Services are often changed or moved with little explanation and seemingly no thought for the customer... And many services have behaviours that suggest a disregard of the client's needs and feelings (eg Atos moving to Lewes and regularly cancelling assessments)." Vanessa

"Through journey mapping I realised we are very programme-based and there is no follow-on for those we work with. Even within our office we are working in silos, it's not because people don't want to work together, it's time." Jo

As frontline workers, participants often found themselves left trying to compensate for these gaps, either attempting to fill them or operating as go-betweens to negotiate access to public service systems. What was making one service or organisation more efficient sometimes simply moved the problem on, shunting time, effort and ultimately cost to other frontline workers. Many noticed that as you went 'up' the scale of engagement the system became more flexible but much more expensive so for example by the time you reached tribunal on ESA there was usually a positive outcome but at a cost of many tens of thousands of pounds.

"If people who handle ESA calls and in jobcentres could have more autonomy earlier on in the process - or even have face-to-face meetings at the beginning, we would save a lot of money, hardship and mental strain. We seem to have to wait for costly, time-consuming tribunals that usually result in the best outcome for the client anyway." John

HOW CAN FRONTLINE WORKERS CONTRIBUTE TO AND CREATE SYSTEMS CHANGE?

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One of the cohort described being asked to explain issues between two parts of the DWP. The Job Centre made a referral to a CV club and the independent frontline worker was asked to feed back to the Job Centre why the referral was inappropriate.

A regularly mentioned example of this was ESA payments suddenly being cut off, with frontline workers often stepping in to pick up the pieces and help people claim alternative support or make an appeal.

There are particular issues for immigrants and refugees in accessing appropriate support. This is an area where frontline workers often find themselves compensating for gaps elsewhere in public service systems. For instance, the processes for accessing support are designed on the assumption that people will have English as a first language, indeed the language of these systems is often highly complex even for those who do. Individuals may also be asked to provide documents that they are not able to produce such as birth certificates or passports. One member of the group described spending weeks liaising with an embassy to secure evidence for a person he was supporting so they could claim ESA.

One participant described supporting a Sudanese man with no IT skills who had to complete the online jobseekers process. The Job Centre had suggested that his seven year old daughter could help him do this. In the end it was the frontline worker who provided direct support. Yet they reflected that signing him up for this was really just box ticking as the man was unlikely to be able to use the system to actually find work.

Frontline staff are often involved in compensating for issues elsewhere in the surrounding systems they work within. What may make one part of a public service system more cost-effective can simply shunt costs to those working directly with clients.

2.   FINDING THE FLEX
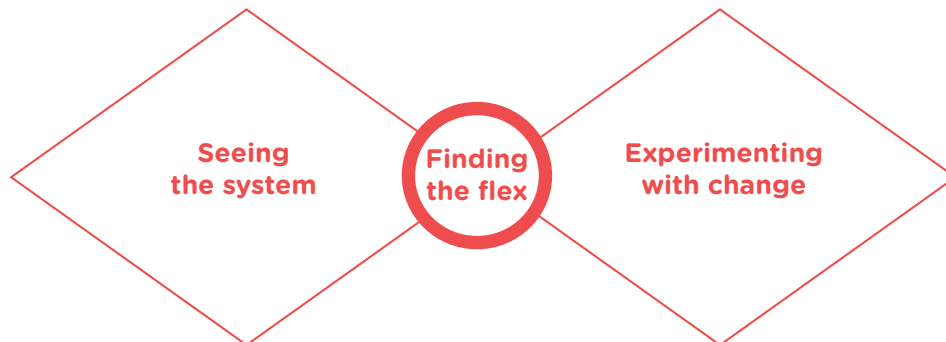
The systems around complex disadvantage often seem fixed and immovable. Having got a richer perspective on the systems they work in, the second part of the Systems Changers programme was about helping participants find where there was flexibility in the system and where they might have some power 'from where they stood' to make change. The process of finding flex had already started for some of the group as they started to see their systems more clearly.

As one participant noted *'there is always flex / whether big or small'.* It might be finding that there is a better alternative to the official way of applying for a particular benefit, or that a service doesn't have to be run according to the budget lines that have been created, or simply that you can change how you greet people when you meet them. For many this was reassuring as it meant they weren't trying to break and reconstruct their systems but instead making use of existing opportunities that were there, but were hidden.

This stage of the programme involved providing ways for participants to look at the rules and processes in the systems around complex disadvantage they worked in and tools for them to understand the causality of particular problems.

ISSUES THAT CAME UP AS SYSTEMS CHANGERS FOUND FLEX IN THEIR SYSTEMS

a)   Invisible rules and processes

Even prior to the programme, many of the Systems Changers were instinctively finding 'flex' in their roles, developing workarounds to problems they encountered. However, most of the group still saw the rules and systems around them as relatively fixed and presumed that improvement would require radical change outside of their control and remit.

When participants looked more closely at laws, contracts, strategies or processes, they started to notice areas of flex that had previously been invisible to them; from grey areas of the law, to forms and processes that could be changed, to permissions in laws and policies that had been forgotten or hidden by day-to-day practice. In many cases people had simply adapted to what was around them.

"I just didn't see it. I thought I'd questioned everything, I hadn't." Cath

"Everyone thinks you have to apply for ESA by phone with a 28 minute phone call. But if you look at the legislation you don't have to – you can go into a job centre and speak to someone with a form you have taken time to fill out." John

One participant talked about the case of a referral form that has been imposed on staff. They found it terrible to use. Even though the form was not strictly fixed, staff didn't feel it was possible to challenge it. Because of the difficulties with the form, services who referred in, encouraged clients to refer themselves, to avoid having to use the form. As a result some clients never called and referrals got lost. At first staff raised the issue, but over time they adapted to the form and stopped questioning it.

Another participant looked at a rule about how long a homeless shelter could take people for. It had seemed completely fixed, but when they dug deeper they discovered that it had not come from any law or contract, but rather was a human decision. The rule had been instituted just because a similar rule was in place in other shelters.

One member of the group found that some of the targets staff were working to had been assigned inappropriately where they were not needed or warranted. Someone, not that high up in the management chain, thought that it might be a good idea to incentivise their staff. In fact the targets were potentially damaging to vulnerable members of society who the service was working with.

Although potential areas for change can be invisible at first, the participants demonstrated that 'there is always flex'.

b)   Questioning the status quo

On discovering potential flex in their systems, some of the group felt inspired and excited, whereas others felt overwhelmed and powerless. Everyone developed an emerging understanding that you can question things, and you can find out more about why things are as they are. However, participants varied in how far they wanted to, or felt able to take this process, and in particular to move to the next step of trying something new.

Some of the Systems Changers discovered that other people in their systems had insight on the processes, rules and structures that weren't working, but that this insight was getting trapped at the frontline level. People tended to complain to other colleagues rather than raise an issue with managers.

"I'm seeing the processes that can change everywhere, but also people's holding onto them..." Michelle

"After Systems Changers nobody could stop me talking about it and asking questions. I've raised issues when before I'd have only moaned with other colleagues." Maron

"The control over the policies, regulations, KPIs etc that govern how you work is moving away from us and to the lead organisation on the contract. This makes it hard to feel in control and have a sense of ownership and autonomy about the work that you are doing. This is manifesting at every level - from senior leadership through to front-line workers and leading to a growing level of frustration and powerlessness."

Developing the ability to question is vital to uncovering flex and to start to make change around it.

c)   Access and permission

The journey of finding flex can reveal parts of public service and support systems that people don't have immediate access to or may feel they don't have permission to challenge. For some in the group understanding why a rule was in place, or why a particular service wasn't available to some, was a long journey and a change process in itself. It was often difficult to get access to someone senior enough, or in another service who was able to answer questions. In some cases participants realised that they were assuming barriers based on their perceptions of power and that these could be challenged and overcome.

"When I'm doing the mapping I see circles that I can't get to. People go into different service loops and disappear from view. e.g. prison, mental health services." Maron

"There is real opportunity and permission that comes from not receiving state / statutory funding but it can make it hard to be included in wider system design and system configuration conversations – it can be hard to create links and be seen as legitimate by other services." Bryony

"No one knows where the policies [on caravans on driveways] come from even though they can be really harmful to people." Michelle

"Everything is taken by the managers. The system is in the process of being changed. All of the criteria had been changed again and we hadn't been told. We also lack the time... It's their (the manager's) job to do this and it's our job to do that. We self-boundary."

Although getting access and questioning was sometimes difficult, the participants persevered and started to make breakthroughs in both understanding and in outcomes. Several used the fact that they were on a 'Systems Changers' programme as the basis for asking more questions and to get time with those in the system they may not normally have had access to.

"Be patient and listen to any adversaries that you discover along the way... In doing so you might unlock what you need to get them on board."

Uncovering flex in the systems around complex disadvantage can require access to parts of the system that may normally be closed to the frontline. Opening up permission for conversations and relationships outside conventional hierarchies is important for unlocking potential improvements.

d)   Understanding cause and effect
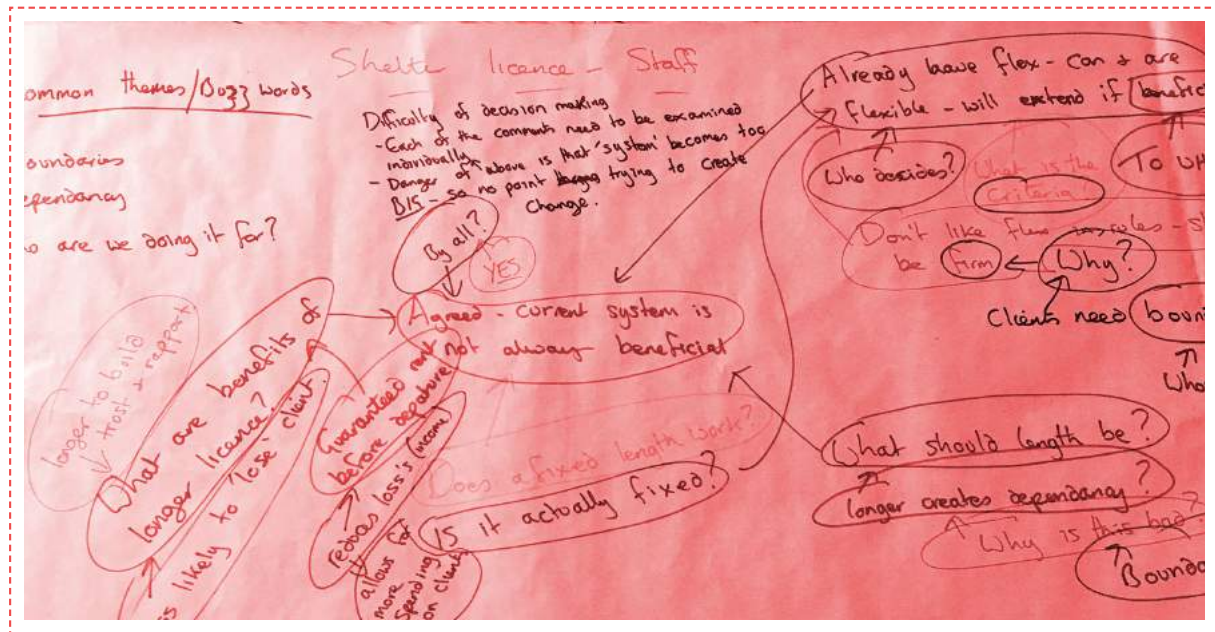
If the first part of finding flex was about identifying opportunities, this stage was about developing a rich understanding of what might be actionable opportunities. Identifying a problem area where there is flex doesn't mean that you automatically understand why that problem has emerged or how things can be improved.

When something isn't working, people will try and find the 'broken part' and will see problems stemming from this in a linear way. A systemic approach is based around multiple cause and effect. This both simplifies complex problems by identifying the different parts (whether these are relationships or processes), and unpicks the causal connections between those parts, in particular highlighting feedback loops (vicious or virtuous circles). Focusing on multiple cause and effect can offer greater clarity on a situation, stimulate debate about what's happening and surface possible interventions. It also presents complex issues in a way that can be understood by different groups.

Some of the group found the concept of multiple cause and effect diagrams off-putting at first and too much like an academic exercise. However, once they started to do their own diagrams the concept came more alive for them. The crux was getting them to focus on something that they really wanted to understand more about. As they worked through the process they began to see aspects of the problem that they were aware of, but hadn't really paid attention to.

For example in one hostel there had been an increase in the number of nighttime evictions leading to a higher vacancy rate. This coincided with a change to the nighttime staffing system. There weren't fewer staff on duty so it was difficult to understand if there was a direct correlation. What emerged from doing a multiple cause and effect diagram was that staff on duty were not getting the same level of supervision and this affected their ability to cope and respond to the high levels of need that some of the more chaotic clients presented during the night shifts. The Systems Changer noted that she already had, at the outset, all the data she needed, but it was paying attention to the connections which made the difference. Using the diagram the insight was more easily presented to her management team and trustees. Possible interventions were also more apparent and had fewer cost implications than the financial risk posed by evictions and vacancies.

Michelle identified an important feedback loop: "When I look at what happens when someone has their PIP appointment cancelled, I can see it adds to their anxiety which in turn makes it hard for them to apply and to attend which makes it more unlikely that they will have a good outcome - and when this happens more than once it's really harmful."

Being able to represent the causal relationships which underpin a systemic problem helps to both make the case for change and ensure that interventions are effective.

3. MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

Seeing the system — **Finding the flex** — **Experimenting with change**

The final part of the Systems Changers programme involved supporting participants to experiment with making change happen, building on their previous work around seeing the system and finding the flex.

This part of the programme included service design methods for prototyping and testing ideas, looking at how to tackle cultural resistance to change and building capacity in other methods of changemaking like campaigning and storytelling. Each participant was encouraged to find an area of their system to experiment with. At this point more individualised advice and support was also provided.

WHAT KINDS OF CHANGE DID PARTICIPANTS CONTRIBUTE TO AND CREATE?

All participants noted changes in themselves, in how they felt, in their confidence and in how they saw themselves in their organisation and their system. For others this change then extended into their team, their organisation and then beyond those walls.

Participants took a range of different kinds of action. Some of these are about what people do and some of them about how they do this.

THE DIFFERENT ROLES & STYLES:

Reveal: Reflecting systems back to the people who work in them, showing what is really going on and sharing new perspectives more widely.

Generate ideas: Developing possible solutions to problems in their system.

Drive: Directly initiating change, often through testing, showcasing and evidencing what could be done.

Convene: Bringing people together to explore the systems around complex disadvantage together and look at the potential for change open the way for positive change.

Advocate: Actively pushing for action on problems that are revealed in the system.

Sustain: Building wider networks to catalyse and then support the process of change.

Support: Championing and encouraging others.

The clearest distinction here was between those who ended up revealing the system to itself and those who ended up driving change. Those facing more restriction in their roles tended to focus on revealing the system often to people outside of their own organisation. Those with more permission tended to focus on participants that worked at both levels. It was also clear that not all frontline workers want to be the ones to drive system change. Supporting these people to better understand their system and question it still has significant potential benefits in uncovering valuable insight to inform system change, even where it is ultimately driven forward by others.

EXAMPLES OF CHANGE

Lewis

Lewis noticed how his local council's decision to remove homeless people's blankets and possessions from public places had caused wider problems in the system.

Reveal: Lewis worked to develop a cause and effect diagram to highlight the unintended consequences of the decision to remove people's possessions from public places. The policy had meant rough sleepers become hidden and stopped them engaging with services, therefore when housing did become available it was difficult to find people to house them. Lewis developed a detailed cause and effect diagrams from his observations and conversations.

Convene: Lewis then used an already arranged session to present his findings to a range of officials. There is now a high level of interest in developing a solution to the issue Lewis raised.

Maron

Reveal: Maron gathered a range of client-based testimony and evidence around how people with a diagnosis of personality disorder were not receiving services or support, and were being deemed ineligible for mental health assessment. Yet the needs of these people did not disappear and were causing huge costs to the NHS, policy, and time for Maron himself in providing support. Maron took this evidence to individuals who had power in key parts of the system and used it as the basis for opening a dialogue to understand the reasons for the issues he had uncovered.

Convene and advocate: Maron has convened meetings and conversations in order to find out why there aren't services for people with personality disorder. He has been able to bring together groups of professionals to discuss specific cases and transform outcomes. Two cases have now been reassessed

for their mental health needs and wider discussions are starting around service configuration and eligibility for people with personality disorders. Maron is now preparing to take evidence around the gap in services to make a case for the local CCG to tackle this.

Charlotte

Charlotte works on service user involvement at Porchlight in Kent. She had observed that many frontline workers felt that their voices were did not get heard.

Reveal and advocate: Charlotte is using a range of data to highlight that this this is acting as a barrier to service user involvement within Porchlight as frontline staff are responsible for enabling this yet some feel unheard themselves. Charlotte advocated for the permission to trial new ways to bring in frontline perspectives to Porchlight's strategy and service development. She continues to work closely with her senior management team to look again at the belief that frontline voice was already heard in Porchlight and tied her findings to wider organisational ambitions.

Drive and sustain: Charlotte is now leading on the design and delivery of a series of workshops with frontline staff to inform Porchlight's strategy. By fully including senior managers and frontline staff Charlotte has ensured that there is real buy-in to this process and the potential to extend the work beyond the initial workshops into a sustained strategy for frontline involvement based on its benefits to Porchlight.

Cath

Cath had a variety of ideas for issues she could make change on. Through testing what she initially viewed as a small idea, she then developed a project that is set to have a broad impact.

Generate ideas and drive: Cath had noticed that signs in the laundry room at her shelter were negative and assumed poor behaviour from residents. She decided to rewrite the poster in positive language working with the residents to do this. Seeing the positive impact of the change, she started work to rewrite a range of other policies and documents bringing in her wider organisation to support the process.

Reveal: It was through directly testing her idea for change that Cath was able to reveal a real issue around the impact that language in official policies and posters can have on how an organisation operates.

Drive: With support from the Systems Changers team, Cath developed a website called 'Human Language' to share what she was doing more widely and to open source some of the policies she had rewritten for others to use. The interest in the site and her work has been extensive and outstripped her available time. Cath is looking at how to respond to the potential opportunities to expand the work.

Convene: Alongside her work on human language, Cath has been working to shift the culture of her workplace. Cath's position as CEO with a frontline role has meant she has been able to act on her ideas without too much resistance. She is working hard to open up the same opportunities for all staff in her organisation.

Jo

Jo started to see how her service was only meeting some of the needs of those affected by domestic violence.

Generate ideas: She began develop ideas for how with scarce resources, the service could extend its reach or adapt to cover more bases. This involved rethinking some of the standard ways that the team was working.

Convene: Jo has also met a range of other professionals in different service areas such as probation to explore ways in which they could partner to reach more women. She is also working to bring together members of her organisation to expand Systems Changers thinking.

Reveal: Alongside her work on services, Jo has also been exploring how to gather evidence on the problems in the family court systems to support a system-wide case for reform.

Tracy

Generate ideas: Tracy explored a variety of different options for making change in the complex needs service she worked, from gathering information on the impact of ESA payments being suddenly stopped, to finding ways to encourage private landlords to rent to those on housing benefit.

Support: Tracy chose to focus on supporting her colleague Maron in gathering evidence and making the case for meeting the needs of those with personality disorder. In doing so, Tracy was making a decision on how to invest the limited time and space she had in her frontline role and using her capacity to amplify another project.

Bryony

Bryony has worked across the spectrum of activities.

Reveal: using journey maps she revealed that there were many opportunities in her organisation to improve the contributions of the committed volunteers she worked with, both in terms of what they did and also in their role in addressing operational challenges.

Advocate: she asked senior leadership for an opportunity to test her hypothesis with the volunteers. She worked with a number of shift leaders, using journey maps, to identify where there were opportunities for improvement.

Convene: based on this she then convened a group of volunteers to meet regularly to co-design solutions in response to these challenges. One of the other ways that she advocated for change was she asked her manager to attend the Systems Changers Managers' Day in order to engage in some of the tools and approaches to the work, particularly around the power of voice in securing improvement.

Sustain: Bryony has created a terms of reference and programme of work for her co-design group.

Michelle

Reveal: Michelle used cause and effect diagrams to show the damaging impact on Travellers of policies about caravans on housing association driveways. Ultimately they were forced to move into bricks and mortar (i.e. permanent) housing. She showed the impact on mental health, on physical health, on confidence and on trust in the system.

Advocate: having shown this, Michelle pressed for change on this policy – and as a result revealed something else. She showed that there is no consistent approach to caravans on driveways, that there is no real sense of where policies come from, how they are enforced etc. So she has embarked on a project to bring together as much data as possible about these policies. She has ambitions to then use this to develop model policies

and then advocate for adoption across housing associations and local authorities, thereby embedding a sustainable change.

Convene: while she was doing this, Michelle was also regularly bringing her colleagues together to show them new methods and tools she was learning about.

Sustain: as a result, her organisation are writing bids and tenders in new ways and prioritising the voice of their frontline staff in new ways. Since joining the programme Michelle has been promoted, bringing her wide and exciting range of skills to a more strategic role.

Vanessa

Reveal: Vanessa began her work looking to show what was happening outside of her organisation but quickly came to the conclusion that what was happening inside was particularly important to understand and address – and that internal ways of working may be presenting barriers to outcomes.

Convene: Vanessa in effect convened her colleagues, but did it through the use of anonymous surveys and one-to-one conversations so that the convening was done on paper and people felt safe to share their views and thoughts. Vanessa showed that while she and her colleagues delivered compassionate, person-focused services to their clients, they were not affording themselves and each other the same respect and consideration. This was in large part because of the pressures of their day job, the focus on targets and case management rather than casework and support.

Advocate: Vanessa used this insight to press for changes; some seemingly small but highly impactful, like a new message system from the front desk, and others much bigger like additional capacity in the team. Ultimately Vanessa found that the pressures of the day job were nearly too big and too all encompassing to make much headway with her findings. However, her own confidence and comfort with confronting and sharing challenging revelations – and then advocating for change – grew substantially.

Reveal: Martin invested significant time and energy in mapping his system, creating detailed and powerful cause and effect diagrams and journey maps with some of his clients. These revealed that there was a particular cohort of service users – people with drug or alcohol addiction and mental health problems – who were not being adequately served by local drug treatment facilities. The process for 'evidencing' that someone was ready for treatment, showing motivation by attending scheduled drop-in sessions, was not right for this particular group. The complexity of their needs challenged the treatment services and often the only option was out of area placement at vast expense and significant disruption to the person.

Convene: Martin brought together the various relevant parts of the local system – adult social care (the commissioner), the drug treatment agencies (the provider) and himself (the supportive advocate) regularly to problem solve these difficult cases.

Sustain: Martin created a detailed terms of reference in line with traditional ways of working but pushed the type of conversation that he was hoping to have to a new level.

John

Reveal: John embraced the work of revealing the system, creating in-depth, detailed maps showing the multiplicity of forces at work. He noticed things about the intersection between power and information-sharing and about the difference between the perception of how things have to be done versus what is really required.

Generate ideas: off of the back of this, John created a new way for frontline workers and people with lived experience to tackle one of the biggest system issues for people with multiple and complex disadvantage – the Employment Support Allowance (ESA).

Drive: John has created new user-friendly pamphlets to help people navigate the complexity and impenetrability of the ESA system to get the best (most appropriate) outcome.

Advocate: John is also pressing, in a range of ways, for a fundamental re-think of how the state supports people. He has shown, through his maps and other tools, that if someone is worried about their benefits and their income then they have little to no capacity to address long-term needs and long-term problems. So he has started to develop the idea of a 'Vulnerability Payment' that supports people who are working to overcome entrenched needs like drugs and alcohol abuse, trauma etc.

Convene: John is also actively convening the Systems Changers as a collective, giving opportunity for the community that was created during the programme to grow and evolve.

BARRIERS TO SYSTEMS CHANGE

Whilst the participants experienced many barriers to change, three stood out:

- Internal barriers
- Evidence barriers
- (Perceived) Scale barriers

INTERNAL BARRIERS

Reflecting on their experiences of the programme and making change, the participants spoke about the personal shifts they made and in particular getting past fear and limiting beliefs. This was a continuous rather than one off process, but as people started to voice or act on what they had noticed in their system, their sense of agency grew.

"Looking back on the past six months the main barrier has been fear; my fear as a frontline worker that it is not my place to suggest change, the fear of other organisations who are not seeing the system from my viewpoint and the fears of some other professionals who have become very defensive. I have countered my fear by discussing my observations with others, including those in other agencies. I have taken advantage of crisis situations to ask questions about the system and why/ where it all went wrong and then I have, with a little help, set up a once a month meeting to discuss joined up problem solving. I have come to realise that changing any system may not happen quickly, I have learned patience as a result."

"Sometimes the problem starts with us. Do I just follow the wind? Rather than waiting for my organisation to change, I can change the way I work. I am more assertive, I am talking more, I have something to back up my views. I am taking responsibility. If I keep doing things in the same way I will get the same results."

"As individuals we can limit ourselves through old beliefs that we are somehow not good enough. When we start to feel the barriers closing in around us, now we take a step back and examine what could be going on for us internally, before looking for external barriers. Systems Changers has enabled me to believe that I can do it. Having the support and space to reflect and immerse myself in the philosophy has been very motivating and rebuilt my confidence."

One Systems Changer realised that she was going into conversations with other agencies and services assuming they would not understand the cultural needs of her clients, and was taking on anger at that prejudice, going in combative and argumentative. She started to approach things in a more conciliatory fashion, still clear about rights and requirements, but presuming ignorance rather than wilful disregard and discrimination.

The very fact of being selected to be on a Systems Change programme backed by a major funder was seen as giving validation and permission to some in the group. Several had tended to do their change work under the label of the programme. One important component of the programme was encouraging people to find a way to record and share their thoughts, views and reflections through writing blog posts, recording videos and participating in an online community.

One member of the group, having never previously even considered writing about her experiences as a frontline worker, began to do so. Her first post went on to be published anonymously in the Guardian. The sense of validation, recognition and pride this gave represented a huge shift for that individual.

Finding voice can be a challenging process for those on the frontline. At an organisational level, it shouldn't be taken for granted that people feel able to speak. Instead it can take work to infuse a sense of permission and give people the confidence to raise issues and to actually make changes.

EVIDENCE BARRIERS

A real barrier for frontline insight can be the perception (and reality) of the type of language and evidence that people feel they 'must' use when speaking to those higher up in their system. Participants were initially sceptical as to whether a 'client journey' could be seen as valuable without cost figures. People also tended to be comfortable with having conversations rather than giving more form to the points they were wanting to make. Several of the tools on the programme became useful in helping overcome these issues.

One of the group used a cause and effect diagram to present to senior officials. The diagram helped give form and substance to the insights that they had. 'I felt like a superstar that day. They (other organisations) are interested in shifting how they do things now. A separate presentation session with higher managers has been set up and they are asking 'what is the solution?'

Another member of the group presented journey maps to senior officials. This achieved the same effect as talking about a 'client' but gave the process more substance and by using visuals, created something that was easier to explain. A similar impact was created by one member of the group using filmed clips of 'clients' views on their service.

There can be an assumption that evidence from people experiencing complex disadvantage isn't valid, that speaking in plain, upfront language isn't appropriate. Through putting tangible form to what might otherwise have been unguided conversations, people on the group were able to open up significant interest in their insights and evidence they had gathered.

(PERCEIVED) SCALE BARRIERS

Several participants expressed concern about whether their ideas for making change were 'good enough', 'big enough' or 'fast enough'. When working with the issues faced by people facing severe and multiple disadvantage, making shifts to organisational practices or

revealing the problems in a system, could seem like drops in the ocean. They are not making enough of a contribution to solving the big issues such as the level of available housing, or filling the gaps in mental health services. This concern was particularly pressing for people when doing 'change work' was perceived to be in direct conflict with delivering services and casework.

Through the programme, participants' views did shift with people recognising how a small idea could grow into something much bigger or how change can be slow and incremental. Often this shift in thinking occurred as people started to 'try change' instead of questioning whether their ideas were 'good enough'. Through making projects tangible, the positive feedback or direct impacts could be seen, giving people the validation to continue.

Cath's human language project started as a small experiment - redesigning one poster in a service. What seemed marginal has since turned into a project generating huge interest and significant potential impact.

At one point in the programme Maron questioned whether he'd actually made any change. The process of investigating the problem he'd identified was time-consuming but through the meetings he established he was actually making a real impact in opening up new professional relationships and a space for debate on what needed to be done to provide better services for people with Personality Disorder.

One of the group wanted to make the case for quite a substantial shift in organisational practice. They realised that doing something tangible could actually act as evidence for why a wider shift was needed. So by starting small, it was possible to build support and open a conversation that might have stayed closed without that tangibility.

Directly testing their 'ideas for change' by making them tangible, helped people overcome worries about the adequacy of these ideas as well as building support and evidence.

FACTORS NEEDED TO SUPPORT FRONTLINE WORKERS TO CHANGE SYSTEMS

Responsibility for enabling the potential of frontline to emerge cannot lie solely with one funder, one programme or individual frontline workers, it needs a systemic response. A programme like Systems Changers can take individual frontline workers a certain distance and enable them to start to take down the walls and boundaries that are around them. However, it cannot, should not, and need not be a one-way process.
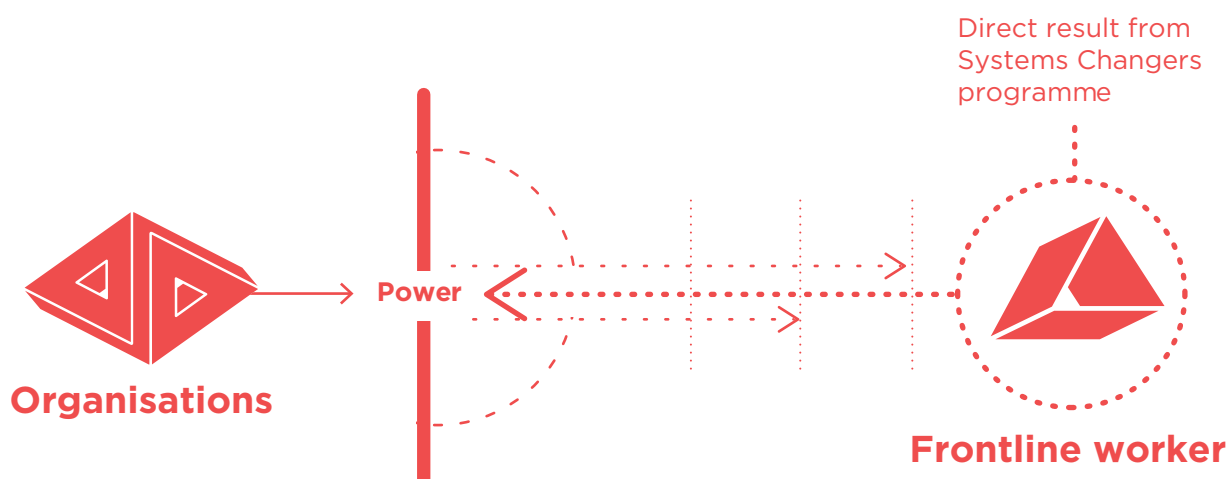
Direct result from Systems Changers programme

Organisations

Power

Frontline worker

The programme has revealed some of the ways in which the insights of the frontline and their contribution to change can be unlocked. We have synthesised these into five principles. These principles complement other work that has been done around understanding the conditions needed to cultivate systems change, such as Lankelly Chase's 9 Behaviours for Systems Change which come from synthesising learning across projects, research and a structured open conversation with partners. The behaviours will form the bedrock of Lankelly Chase's revised Theory of Change that will be published shortly.

PROVIDE TIME AND SPACE

Frontline workers need time and space outside of direct delivery to think strategically and notice the multiple systems around them. This is not just a practical matter of having lower caseloads, but also having time to shift mental gears from the type of thinking that frontline work requires i.e. fire fighting and crisis management, to the tools and methods of strategic thinking – e.g. mapping, collaborating and facilitation. A core component of the programme was creating this space, often quite literally and outdoors. For all of the Systems Changers this was immensely powerful, just being somewhere new helped spark new thinking and new perspectives.

Do you offer those in frontline roles time or opportunity to contribute to thinking about how their system is working and how it could be improved? Do people have any space outside of their delivery role? Do you allow people flexibility in their roles to make decisions and changes or do you lock things down in process?

DISPERSE POWER

The programme highlighted the need to acknowledge power structures, and to disperse power between roles and hierarchies. Just assuming people will speak up is not enough. Allowing and actively encouraging questioning from all levels in an organisation and outside of it, will bring real insight from frontline staff. Power is both explicit, e.g. what a frontline worker is able to do without signoff or approval; and hidden e.g. what it feels like to walk into a room where you're the only person not wearing a suit. Being open and responsive to questions, both on a personal level, but also through ensuring that there are genuine feedback loops in organisations.

Are you aware of how power is distributed in your organisation? Do you give explicit permission to staff at all levels to question how your 'system' is working with a view to improving it? Do you have genuine feedback loops in place that enable real dialogue rather than bottom up feedback?

TAKE DOWN LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Break down 'official language and jargon' and accept new forms of evidence. This will level the playing field for those wanting to contribute and create change. A real barrier for frontline insight can be the perception (and reality) of the type of evidence that people feel they 'must' use when speaking to those higher up in their system. Another powerful example of language as a barrier was the use of labels. Systems Changers and their managers explored what connotations different labels carried for themselves and for others. They identified that labels that went beyond roles in the workplace – labels of region of birth, of education status, of ethnic background, of having or not having lived experience and even of class came into play in the complexity of systems around multiple disadvantage.

Do you communicate in jargon and official language more than you need to? What space and encouragement do you give to voices that speak in non-official language or without a cost-benefit analysis? Do you give enough validity to different types of evidence? Are you aware of the labels you use and the impact they have?

NURTURE COMMUNITY

Change-making can be a lonely business. All of the Systems Changers said they felt alone at some point during the programme. They all found immense strength and resilience from the community of their cohort. There were some similarities that were important, like the type of services they delivered and some differences that weren't, like region and locality. The community, accessed both face to face and virtually, was an ever-increasing source of strength as people shared the ups and downs of being change makers. For those whose managers attended the Managers' Day, having someone else in their organisation who 'got it' was also very helpful as they felt less alone in carrying in new ways of seeing, thinking and being.

Do you enable staff to form peer relationships and communities to support each other? Do you encourage interaction beyond people's official roles?

MODEL SYSTEM CHANGE BEHAVIOUR

Through this programme and other related work, there is a growing understanding of the behaviours and mindsets needed to foster systems change. This can't just happen at the frontline. Staff at every level – particularly at the senior level – must model these behaviours. For example, they have to show it is ok to try and 'fail', to ask 'why', to engage with a range of voices and perspectives. In one of the participant's organisations, hierarchy in certain meetings seemed almost absent. When probed about why the tone was so inclusive, the most senior person in the room said 'well this is how our Chief Exec behaves. He goes around to all of the sites and sits down with everyone and anyone. The person before him was not like that and I've really learned a new way of working from him.'

Do staff at all levels demonstrate system change behaviours? Do they engage with a range of different perspectives? Do they show that it is ok to try and fail when making change to improve things?' Do they act outside of 'hierarchies' or seek to reinforce them?

WHAT NEXT?

The Systems Changers programme offers a time-limited input to enable participants to initiate change, however, we are keenly aware that many of the projects have significant potential to scale.

There are three main types of scale that can be considered when looking to extend a project beyond a test or pilot. These all form important contributions to 'system change' and none of these are inherently better or more valuable than others even if some appear to have more status.

Change

Scaling in **Scaling out** **Scaling up**
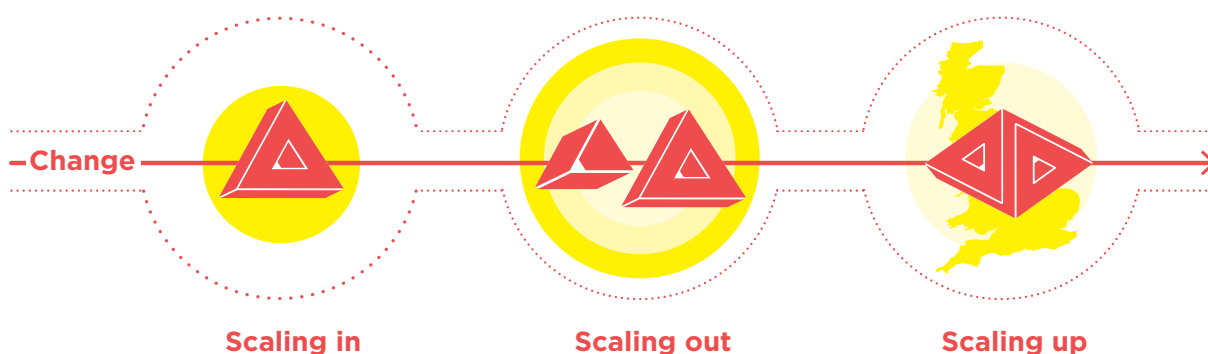
Scaling in: Extending 'change' within an organisation by shifting working culture or building broader backing for an idea that has been tested or piloted. Or bringing 'change' back into your organisation where you have worked with those in the wider system to demonstrate it.

"I feel like I am holding all the change right now, I need to build more support in my organisation and get others to become more actively involved."

"Once your voice is heard does it remain your voice." This participant saw how by sharing tools and approaches from the programme, they could go in unexpected directions and take on a life of their own."

Scaling out: Extending 'change' to other individuals or organisations in a local area. This might take the form of building wider partnerships around a new way of delivering services or a shift in ways of working. With policy and practice increasingly devolved, this more place-based approach is increasingly relevant. Sometimes there can be fear that sharing an idea could lead to others taking it over or it being 'shut down', leading people to work under the radar.

One member of the group negotiated to get clients flagged at the job centre so that if they missed appointments they were not penalised and would be given another. He was worried that if he shared his workaround, it would be shut down. Further investigation uncovered that the flagging process had actually been built into the system. What had seemed to have been a solution based on a good working relationship was actually something that had been purposely built into the system and which should have been more broadly used.

Conversely on the programme there were examples of work being done under the auspices of the Systems Changers programme, as participants feared the work would be shut down if they brought it within their organisations.

Scaling up: Extending 'change' nationally or via system wide bodies. This is perhaps what we traditionally see as 'system change' and has huge potential impact. However, in the absence of 'change' being rooted properly at an organisation or local level there can a risk of generating a lot of interest but less tangible action.

Cath's human language project has the potential to be scaled nationally but the resource required to do this goes beyond what Cath can provide. There is also an inevitable choice for Cath on how to balance this opportunity with driving forward other 'change projects' internally and locally.

ENDNOTE

The Systems Changers programme has shown both the value of frontline insight and the potential frontline workers have to improve systems around complex disadvantage.

Frontline workers bring unique and valuable perspectives about the lives of people experiencing complex disadvantage and about the systems these people interact with. They are also uniquely placed to develop ideas for change, to test these and to evidence impact.

The programme has shown a glimpse into what can happen when frontline workers are given the time, tools and confidence to develop their insights and turn ideas into action. Scaling up this approach has huge potential to improve systems around complex disadvantage.

Enabling frontline voice and contribution to system change needs to occur both in the field of complex disadvantage and more broadly. Just as now, we would not seek to design services without the insights of people with lived experience who use those services. Equally we should not design services without the insights of those frontline workers who have lived experience of delivering them.
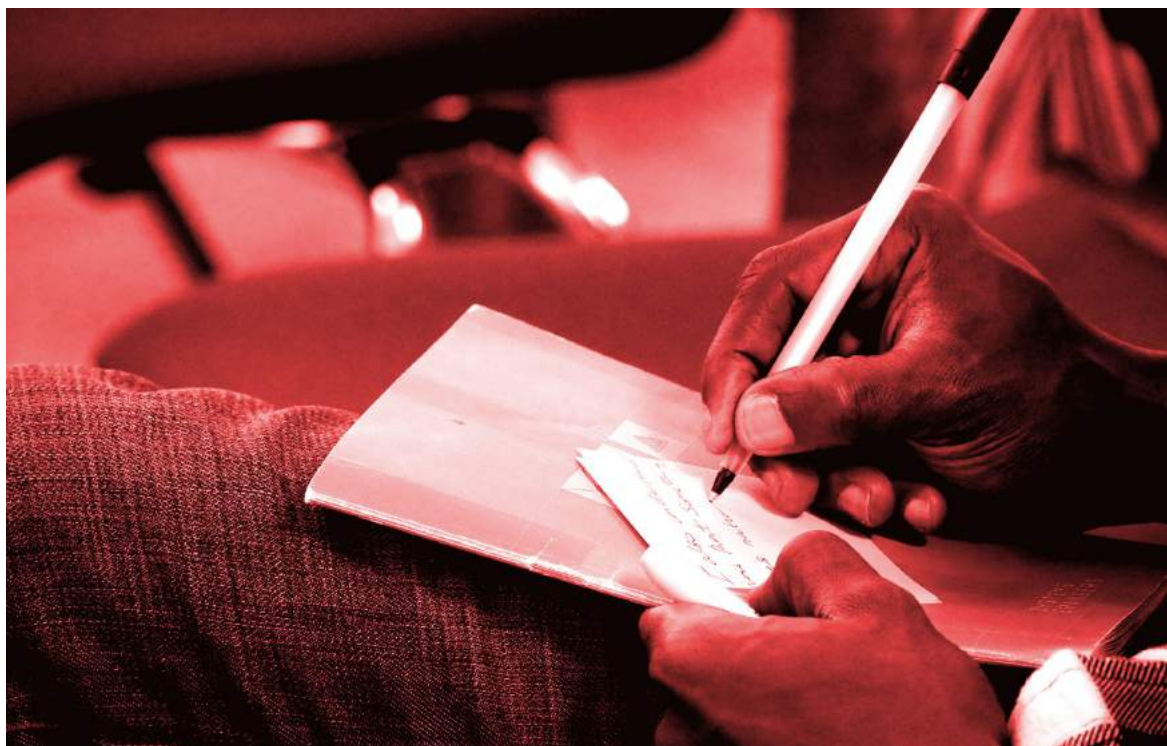
"The key to delivering life-changing services for our service users, is to fully enable and involve both the staff and service users in key decisions that are made in the organisation, but also the sector. This needs to be recognised at the top, so that policies that impact on our services are holistically informed, and real experiences are considered before making these decisions." Charlotte