Place Action Inquiry:
Our learning to date,
December 2018

Lankelly Chase

Contents

Introduction

In late 2016, as part of its ongoing journey into understanding the role a foundation can play in changing the systems that perpetuate severe and multiple disadvantage, Lankelly Chase (LC) began exploring how to support places work better as systems, from the perspective of those who are most marginalised.

From here, LC set up an action inquiry that asks how do we support places to build the system behaviours?* To do this, it is guided by four sub questions:

- Is the Lankelly Chase approach helpful?
- What are the skills, methodologies and processes required to support areas to develop the desired system behaviours?
- Are the system behaviours the most useful ones, and what would it take for them to flourish?
- How are the narratives of place changing?

To help answer these questions, LC engaged us as a learning partner for the action inquiry. This report provides an overview of what we've learnt so far in relation to the main question and the underlying ones. There are more detailed reflections on each question in the Place Action Inquiry section on the Lankelly Chase website.*

The learning in this report is provisional. Drawing from multiple sources, initial analysis of interviews with LC staff and associates, and some of the people in the places themselves, together with analysis of the reflective practice sessions of LC staff and associates – it is our reflection on the sum of these sources. Using this material as a stimulus for conversation, further reflection and sense-making with LC staff and associates, will be undertaken.

Toby Lowe & Max French, Newcastle Business School, **December 2018**

Question 1

Is Lankelly Chase's approach helpful?

In this section, we (Toby and Max) will briefly outline what LC's approach to the action inquiry has been.

Publishing desired system behaviours

Through commissioning research, and in conversation with a range of partners, LC observed that the systems which are effective in responding to severe and multiple disadvantage have some common qualities. We call these qualities system behaviours and they help to provide an answer to the question: what does a healthy system look like?

The behaviours are about perspective, power and participation.

Perspective
- People view themselves as part of an interconnected whole
- People are viewed as resourceful and bringing strengths
- People share a vision

Power
- Power is shared, and equality of voice actively promoted
- Decision-making is devolved
- Accountability is mutual

Participation
- Open and trusting relationships enable effective dialogue
- Leadership is collaborative and promoted at every level
- Feedback and collective learning drive adaptation
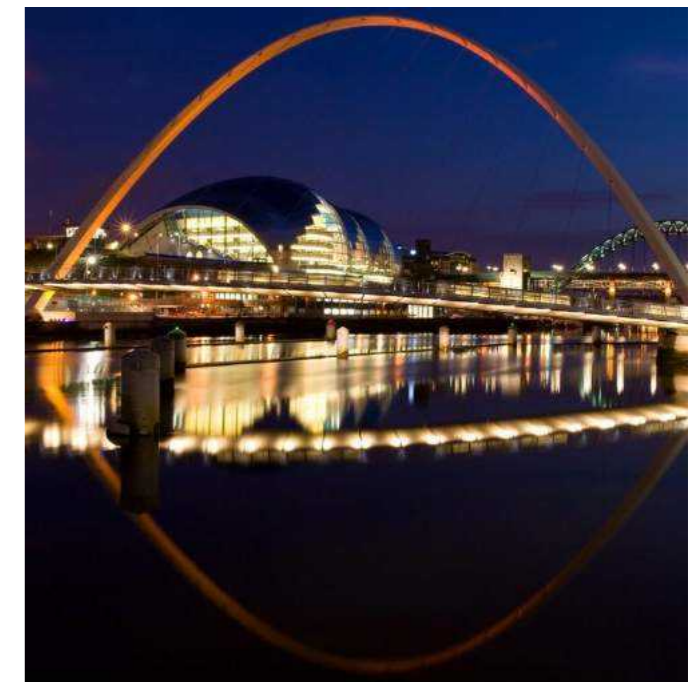
Choosing places with which to work

LC decided to explore how it is possible to enable these system behaviours to flourish by working with several places where there was already some form of pre-existing relationship with LC. They were places that LC had funded a particular organisation or intervention which had sought to create systems change, or where LC staff were in dialogue with people from that place discussing transformative change.

These places are:
- Barking and Dagenham
- Barrow in Furness
- Gateshead
- Manchester
- York

Creating a set of roles and relationships which help to bring about those behaviours in each place

Lankelly Chase broadly envisaged four roles that would be played within the action inquiry:

Actors in place

These were the actors that made up the local system that served (for better or worse) people who experience severe and multiple disadvantage.

The primary actors who played this role, across different places were:

- People with lived experience of disadvantage
- Local Authority members and officers
- Other public servants operating in those places
- VCSE organisations operating in those places – particularly those that were currently (or previously) funded by LC

Associate

Lankelly Chase created the role of 'Associate' to support local people's efforts to create systems change within each place. These people and organisations were resourced by LC so that they could offer their time and expertise to the actors in each place, enabling those actors to reflect on how their place was operating as a system which served (and was partly constituted by) people who experience disadvantage, and what needed to happen in order to make that system work better.

LC Staff

From the outset, LC staff envisaged that they would have a role in the action inquiry in each place. This role was to choose which places the inquiry would operate within, and maintain an ongoing dialogue with those places about how the work was progressing, and the future needs of that place-as-system.

LC staff would also play a role in helping the actors in each place, and the associates to recognise and meet their development needs, through the provision of capacity-building and training.

Learning Partner

The role of the Learning Partner was envisaged as a mechanism to help the people and organisations playing the various roles to be able to reflect on their work and build understanding about the process of place-based systems change. It was envisaged that the learning partner would (a) act as a mirror to:

- the activity that was happening in each place,
- the associates
- LC staff

And (b) support those playing the other roles in the action inquiry to make sense of the information they saw through that 'mirroring' work.

Finally, the role of the learning partner was also to support the other roles to produce a Learning Framework. This would deepen the understanding of the action inquiry process and of how learning was driving place-based systems change.

The relationships within the action inquiry

The structure of the action inquiry, as originally envisaged, and as manifest in the roles and the relationships between the roles, was therefore like this (note it did not operate in exactly this way in each place):
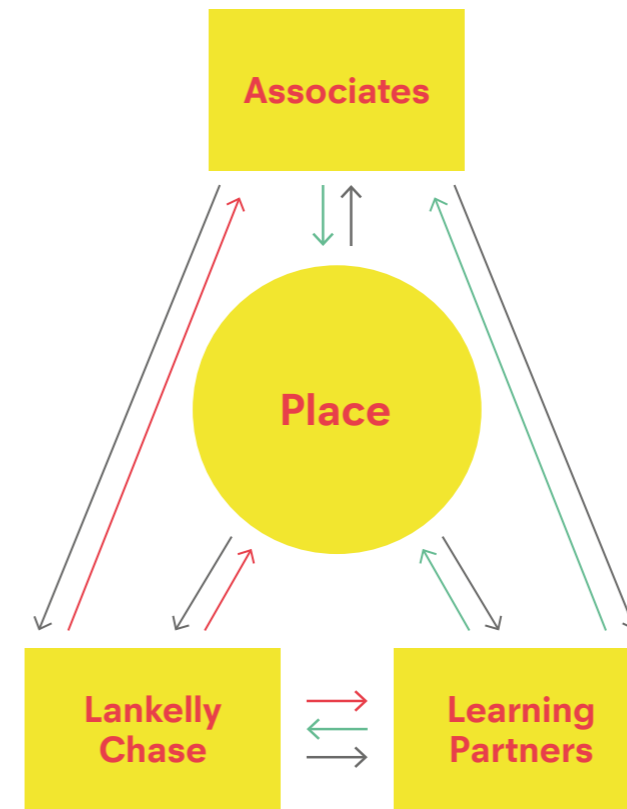
← **Learning and sense-making**
← **Money** ← **Information flow**
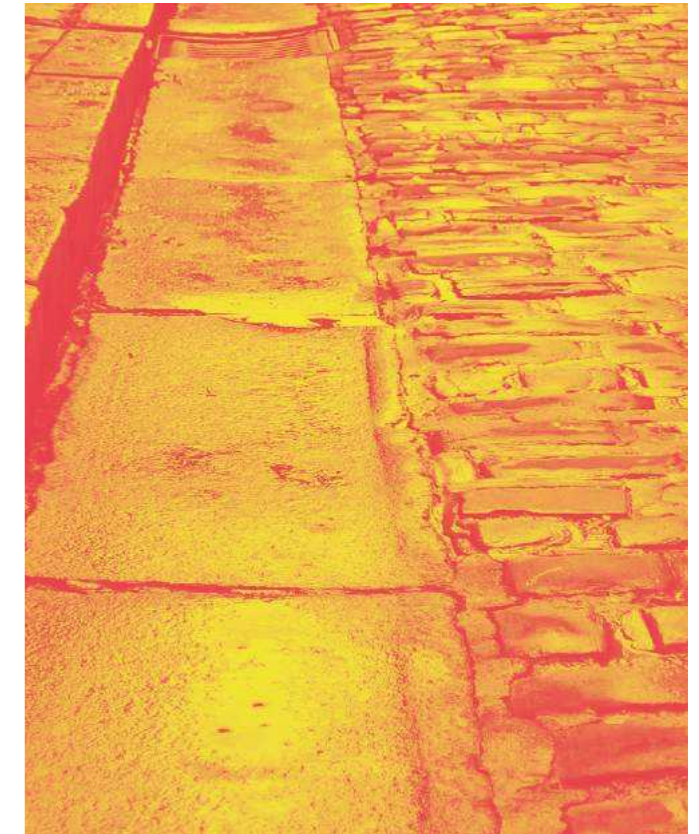
The development of a learning approach

The fact that LC's work in this field is framed as an "action inquiry" rather than a "programme" is significant. All partners and roles within the action inquiry have been encouraged to adopt a learning approach. To this end, one of the key developments at the level of the action inquiry was the process of developing a 'Learning Framework', which began to conceptualise how we view the role of learning as a facilitator of systems change might. Furthermore, it helps to identify how the different roles within the action inquiry contribute to this learning.

Francis Augusto

Learning Framework

This builds on a framework for action research developed by Torbert (1998) and Reason and Torbert (2001).

It is based on a set of ideas which describe:

- **First person action research** - which involves direct reflection on an individual's world and their actions within it

- **Second person action research** - which involves mutual action inquiry into shared issues among a social group

- **Third person action research** - which involves creating a wider community practice whose members are not known to one another and who do not communicate directly

Translated into the context of the action inquiry, this becomes:

- **First person learning** - the facilitation of systems change activity by associates, and their personal reflections on their own practice

- **Second person learning** - the group comes together to reflect on all the roles and practices within the action inquiry

- **Third person learning** - the communication of learning to people external to the action inquiry

Learning Points

The following is a summary of our reflections concerning the question "Is LC's approach helpful?"

| Action inquiry learning system	Who we are seeking to influence		Goals
First Person First-hand action and reflection by associates	Acts on →	Key local stakeholders Local systems	in order to →	Support the local creation of the 9 systems conditions
← Informs				
Second Person Shared inquiry amongst associates Reflection on practice by LCF & Learning Partners	Acts on →	Lankelly Chase Systems Change associates	in order to →	Tackle the 4 action inquiry Questions
← Informs				
Third Person External communications strategy Production of reports / documents	Acts on →	Academics Policy community Practitioners	in order to →	Enable others to learn from us and effect systems change more broadly

The structure of the action inquiry

- It is helpful to have external facilitation to enable places to work more effectively as systems – it enables actors in those systems to see themselves as a system, and helps to build relationships that may have previously been dysfunctional or absent.

- The external facilitation should not take on the role of looking after the health of the system. This is a role that people within the system should make their own.

- Therefore, there is a role within the action inquiry which has not yet been identified. We provisionally call this role 'Steward of Place'. This role (which could be played by a person or a collective of people) is responsible for reflecting on whether the state of play of the system behaviours in that place – for example, asking the question "Do people here view themselves as part of an interconnected whole?". Further, it is the responsibility of the Steward of Place to co-ordinate activity which seeks to promote a healthy system.

- There is currently ambiguity surrounding the boundaries between the roles within the action inquiry. This needs to be addressed. Most urgent are conversations concerning which role within the action inquiry leads on the relationship with actors in place.

- The learning partner needs to directly engage with actors in place.

- Uncertainty is a recurring theme – how can the anxieties around this be managed? How can living with uncertainty be made ok?

The approach to learning

- Learning is everyone's business – it is the driver for change at all levels.

- The system behaviours themselves have been an underused tool for shaping how systems in place develop.

- The action inquiry would benefit from more reflection time, and the people playing the roles would like more rapid feedback.

- When working in complex environments, ambiguity and uncertainty will arise. The learning mechanisms for the action inquiry must be able to bring these to the surface, enable conversation about them and build a container to hold the uncertainty.

The role of money in supporting systems change

- Money is very useful in buying time and capacity for reflection and for actors in place to create the information and relationships required to learn.

- Money can be useful in creating new examples of ways to respond to people's strengths and needs, but there is a danger that these examples release the pressure on existing services to change.

Stuart Bloodworth
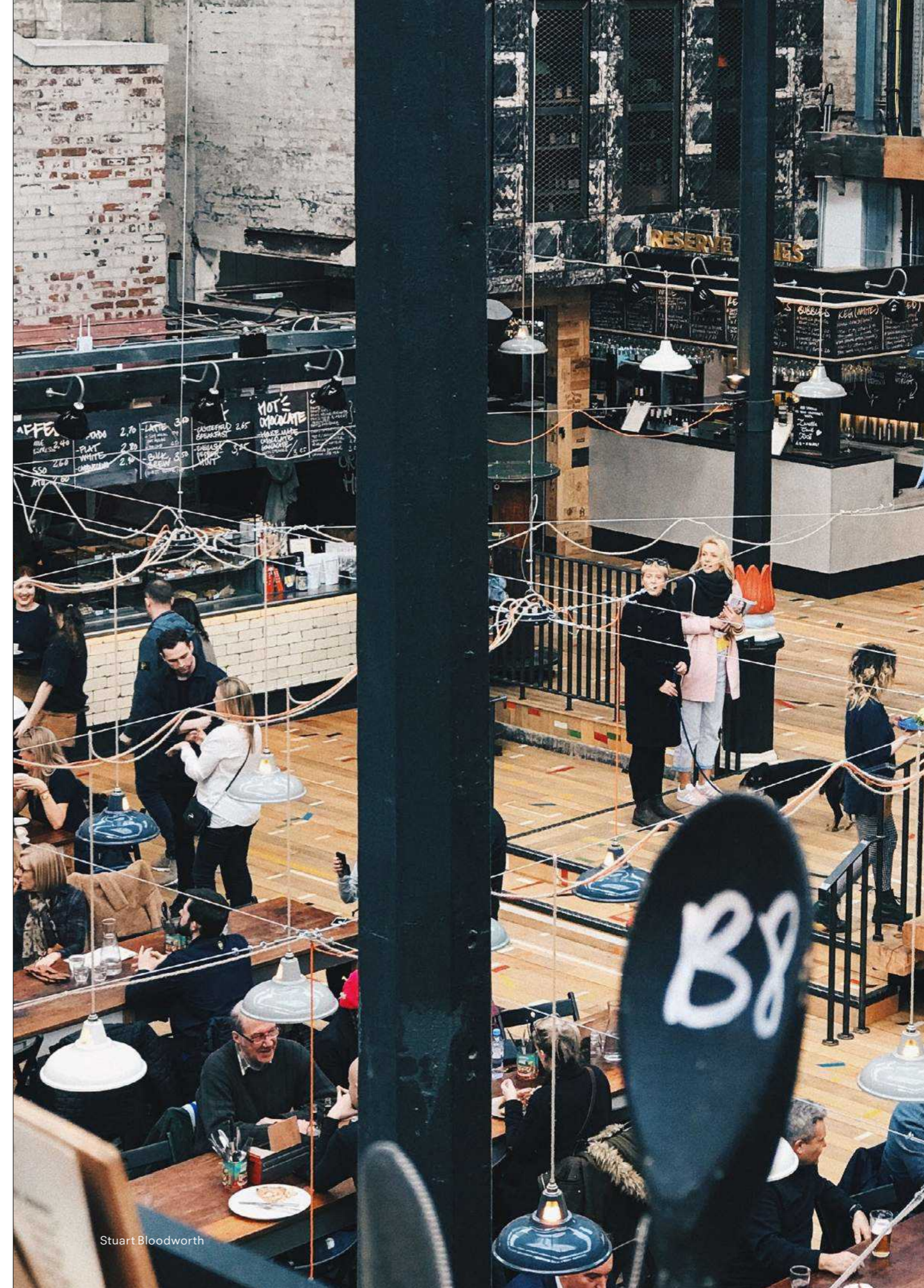
Question 2

What are the skills, methods and processes required to support areas to develop the desired system behaviours?

We think that this question seeks to dig into the detail of a more fundamental question: What is it that those seeking to create systems change actually do?

What do those who seek to facilitate systems change do?

We have a greater understanding about what those who are actively working to promote systems change do. They:

- **Make sense of the system** - helping those within the system to see what that system is: who the actors are, what the quality of relationships between those people/organisations are, how the system functions (or not).

- **Nurture the health of the system** – helping to create a shared sense of purpose, and building trust between actors. This involves making or deepening connections between actors, developing new narratives and mediating to improve poor or non-existent relationships.

- **Shape behaviours within the system** – helping to promote desired system behaviours by modelling them – for example by actively promoting equality of voice within the system, or championing 'whole-system' approaches.

What seems to be working?

We have learnt something about the activities that seem to be making a positive difference within each of these categories. It is important to note however that this difference is sometimes temporary, and may lead to other challenges and complications.

<u>Making sense of the system</u>

Amplifying the voices and sharing the authentic experience of people whom systems are supposed to be serving, seems to be a powerful mechanism for creating an impetus for change.

Revealing the perspectives of people from different parts of the system, and enabling those perspectives to create dialogue between different actors helps to create a sense of an interconnected whole.
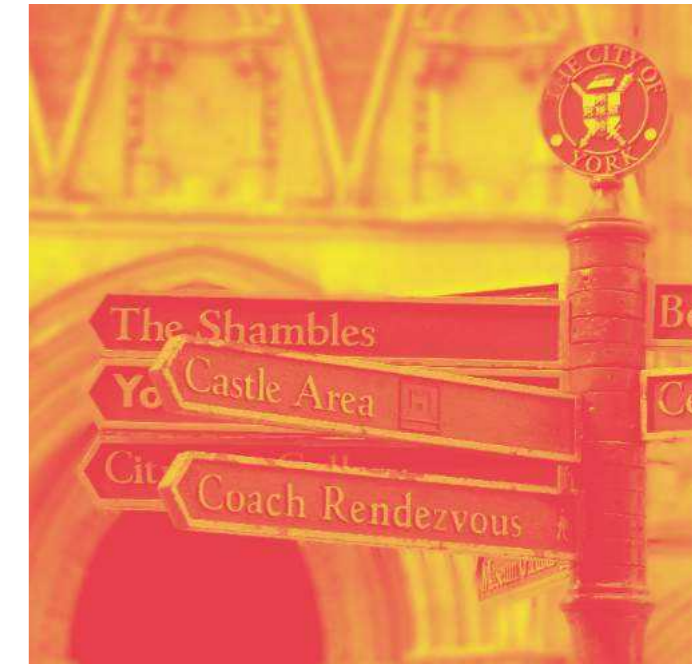

<u>Nurturing the health of the system</u>

Creating shared purpose enables those from different parts of the system to begin to co-ordinate more effectively, and develop a common vision. To get to this point requires the creation of connections, through shared spaces for dialogue. Where relationships are currently absent or lack trust, the role of an external, independent facilitator can be crucial in creating spaces which can mediate these relationships. However, to be effective over a period of time, these shared spaces for dialogue need to be collectively owned by actors in place.

Key questions that associates use to reflect on their practice

We know some of the challenges and questions that those seeking to facilitate systems change face in this practice.

They reflected on the challenge of avoiding a 'saviour' mentality when seeking to create systems change, and the temptation of moving from a facilitating role to a rescuing one.
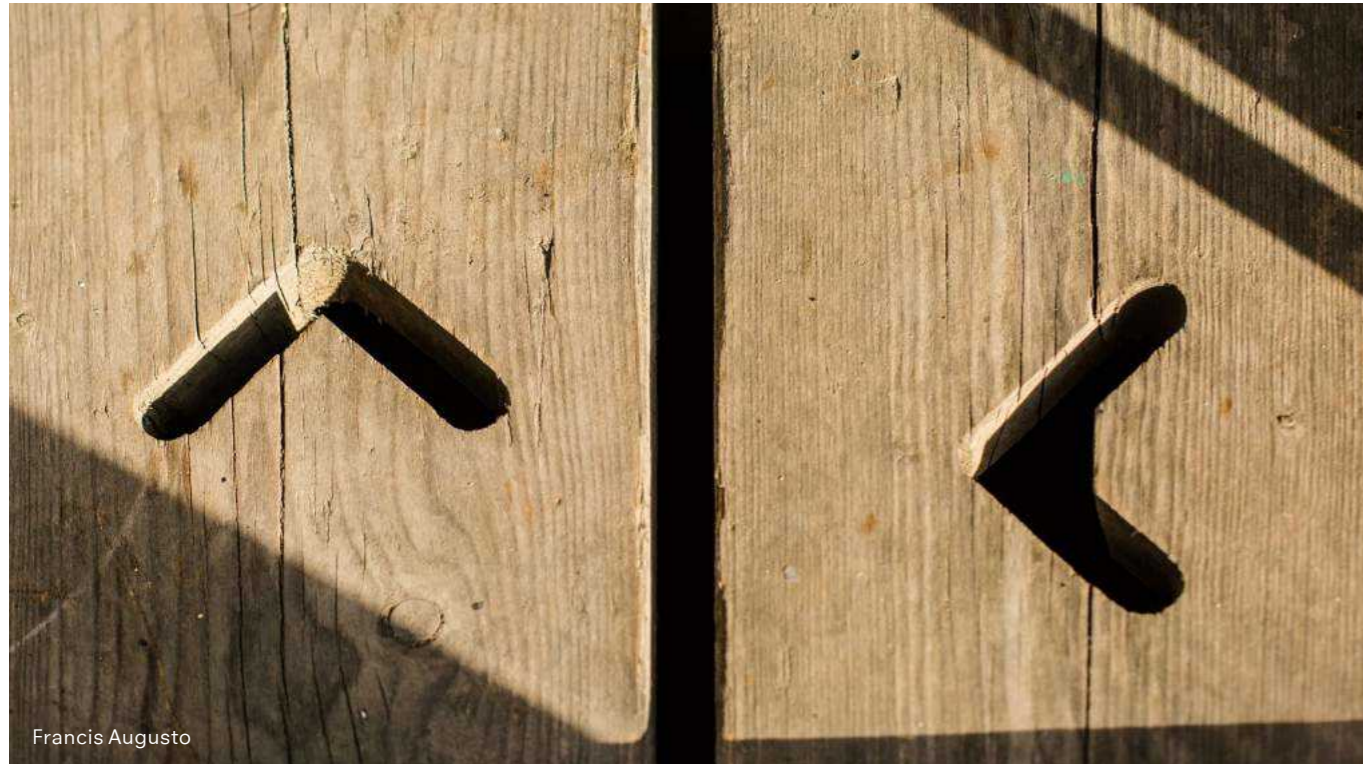
Francis Augusto

Making sense of the system

When seeking to help people see and make sense of the system, it is difficult to keep up with the dynamic, constantly changing nature of the system. In particular, those tasked with seeing and understanding the system need to be able to understand how each of the system behaviours currently manifests in each place, on an ongoing basis.

A particularly interesting challenge concerned the capacity of those seeking to support systems change to recognise and work with system leaders at all levels, not just those in 'traditional' leadership roles.

In order to help actors within it to see and make sense of the system from the perspective of all the relevant parts, recognising that leadership exists at all levels seems to help. There is not a single system leader, but many.

Nurturing the health of the system

Building trust between actors is hard, particularly when the cast keeps changing. It is particularly hard to build the trust between those who previously have had least voice, and those with greater voice. Specific

effort - including investing in ongoing infrastructure for marginalised voices – helps with this.

The role of external facilitation is helpful for creating effective spaces for dialogue across the system, but at some point these spaces must become owned collectively by actors in the system.

Shaping behaviours

Shaping behaviours in the system requires that associates have a meaningful relationship with actors across the system, so that they can both offer challenge, and model behaviour in a way which others recognise and accept as legitimate. Maintaining this relationship, whilst offering challenge and critique requires difficult judgments. This demonstrates that there is no clear 'right' way to undertake the role.

Shaping behaviours within the system sometimes requires pushing back against external forces, such as those that come from national funding or regulation. These can feel like insurmountable problems, and further exploration of this is required in order to build effective coalitions which can challenge such forces.

System entry points

The particular context and history of each place, and the relationship that LC had to it, created different entry points for the associates:

The strategic level – working with senior leaders – people recognised as having power, authority or influence within the local system.

The operational level - working with particular projects and interventions seeking to achieve change in one or more aspects of the system.

At the grassroots level - working with community activists and mission-led individuals.

Each of these entry points has its own advantages and challenges:

Francis Augusto

Entry point	Advantages	Potential Challenges
Strategic	Senior-level support and buy-in Build systems change into place strategy Helps to see place as system	How to connect strategic conversations with grassroots activity Moving beyond conversations with "traditional" system leaders How to translate strategic conversations into action Getting permission/buy in from all the relevant parts of the system
Operational	Tangible results and (initially) straightforward goals Can quickly improves services and outcomes for people on the ground	'Systems change' intervention can become another silo – one amongst many isolated (and potentially overlapping) interventions Wider system remains dysfunctional
Grassroots	Rooted in practice and lived experience – a keen sense of what's actually happening and what needs to change Can be a source of energy where the system does not want to change	Little formal power and access to traditional levers of change Can be agonistic and divisive, damaging trust and relationships Can lead to burnout of key actors

Francis Augusto

LC methods and processes

Trust-based approach to funding

The trust-based approach to providing resources to support place-based systems change, in which resources are allocated without a specific programme of work, trusting the different roles to use resources wisely, has been broadly welcomed. This approach has been necessary to cope with the dynamic complexity of the challenges encountered in each place: it would be impossible to specify particular objectives or key performance indicators without them becoming out of date before they could serve their purpose.

Combined with an approach which seeks to 'cross the river by testing for stones', this has created significant autonomy for all the roles within the action inquiry. Again, this is a necessary response to the complexity of both the challenges and the work that is required. However, the degree of autonomy, and lack of prior experience of analogous work to draw on (in many cases) has also resulted in feelings of uncertainty for those playing roles in the system – "what is it that I/we should be doing?" everyone in the action inquiry often asked of themselves.

Learning partner methods and processes

Being a learning partner on this action inquiry has both felt like a privilege, and very scary. We as learning partners have felt significant uncertainty about the boundaries of our role, and what our practice should be.

We have sought to create reflective spaces for different roles. These have been welcomed, but could be more frequent. Overall, we could have made information gathering more frequent, and feedback more rapid.

Luke Porter

Question 3

Are the system behaviours the most useful ones, and what would it take for them to flourish?

We think that this question seeks to dig into the detail of these fundamental questions: What does a healthy system look like? How would we know if we've got one?

How are the system behaviours being used in the action inquiry?

We have found that the system behaviours were used in the action inquiry in three different ways:

- As principles for action to unite the various roles involved in the action inquiry around a common cause and a shared course of action.

- As an analytical framework by Learning Partners to understand and express the functioning of the action inquiry.

- As sense-making and diagnostic aids by LC staff and the Learning Partners to begin to understand, benchmark and make sense of progress.

Surprisingly, the system behaviours were not (for the most part) explicitly used by associates to reflect with actors in place about how those places were working as systems.

Which system behaviours did associates work to promote?

By using the system behaviours as an analytical tool, we were able to see that even though they were not being explicitly used as a focus for discussion in place, the activities undertaken by associates did support the development of particular system behaviours.

At the initial stage of the action inquiry (roughly six to twelve months) associates seemed to focus on activities which promoted:

- People seeing themselves as part of an inter-connected whole

- Power is shared and equality of voice is actively promoted

Activities which were designed to devolve decision making, pursue mutual accountability and build trust were less common at this initial stage.

As the work progressed, a greater emphasis was placed on activity which nurtured trust between actors in the system, promoting the Behaviour "open trusting relationships enable effective dialogue".

Is there a natural sequencing of behaviours?

From the reflections by associates we have a hint that there may a natural sequencing of the work which addresses and promotes different system behaviours. Initial work seemed to focus on the enabling people to see themselves as part of an inter-connected whole, and to see power imbalances in the system. Later work seemed to focus on trust-building between actors in the system.

The emerging sequencing idea seems to fit naturally with the progression along the typology of activities identified in the report 2. However, a similar caveat applies to the idea of sequencing and progression as that identified in the previous report: this does not imply a simple linear progression of system behaviours.

Anthony Winter

Fabien Ecard

Factors which hamper the adoption of system behaviours in local systems

We have seen that funding, performance management and the behaviour of regulators can hamper efforts to enable people to see themselves as part of an interconnected whole. They demand attention to concerns relating to targets and performance indicators which focus on single organisations.

Trust between actors in systems, and the open dialogue created, can be hampered by organisations 'going it alone' and by the system flux – the rapid turnover of people and roles within a system.

Difference between Action Inquiry methods

Some of the challenges experienced by the action inquiry concerning system behaviours many be explained by the different approaches that different questions within the action inquiry suggest.

- What are the skills, methodologies and processes required to support areas to develop the desired system behaviours?

- Are the system behaviours the right ones and what would it take for them to flourish?

The first of these questions suggests an exploratory, grounded-theory approach to action inquiry, in which a range of activity is promoted and the results observed and analysed to find patterns and stories to explain and make sense of what was observed. As a result, this aspect of the action inquiry has promoted an exploration of a variety of activities and interventions in systems, conducted by a diverse set of associates. Associates have been given significant freedom to explore different methods, appropriate to local context.

The second of these questions suggests a hypothesis-testing approach to action inquiry. Such an approach would seem to require that the system behaviours
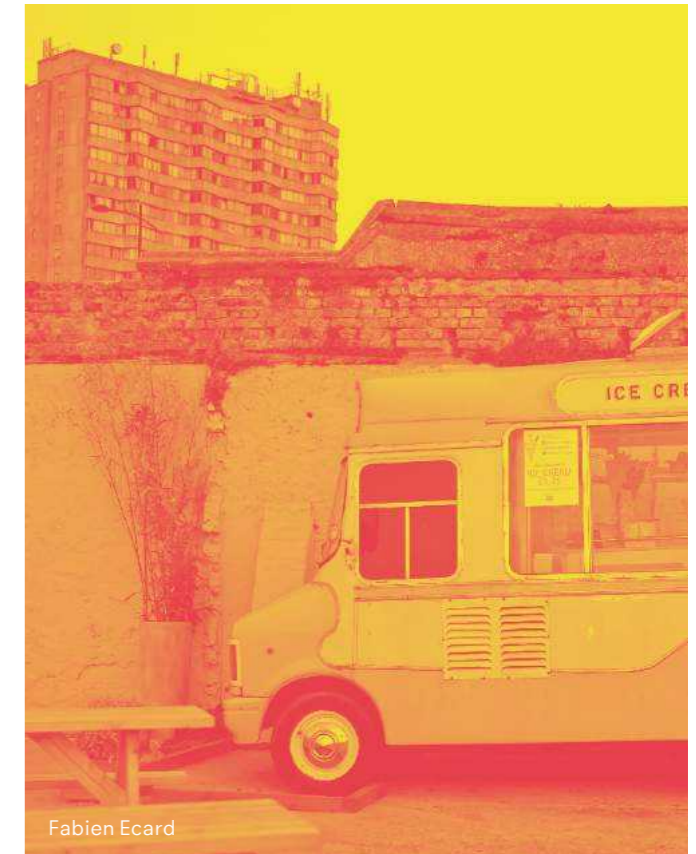
are explicitly discussed at a local level and stress-tested by practice. This would seem to require a much more directive approach to framing the activities and interventions which occur at a local level in order to promote testing of the hypothesis that these system behaviours are valuable.

Both of these approaches have been valuable in different contexts. The freedom to explore systems change in relation to local context has enabled associates to respond and adapt to local needs and drivers. Treating system behaviours as hypotheses to be tested has also been valuable to the action inquiry, in that it is the mechanism which gives the action inquiry an overall coherence and sense of shared purpose.

How to resolve the tensions between these different aspects of the action inquiry therefore requires further consideration.

A greater role for system behaviours in place?

In the next phase of the action inquiry, system behaviours could play a more significant and intentional role in local systems of place than they have previously done.

Question 4

How are the narratives of places changing?

It is important to say at the outset that this is a more difficult question for us to provide a rounded answer to than we might have expected. As described previously, we as the learning partner have (mostly) not had a direct relationship with actors in place (see Report 1). As a consequence, one of the challenges we have experienced with the action inquiry has been capturing a rounded picture of how the narrative of each place is changing, particularly in reference to how and whether the places are exhibiting different system behaviours.

However, by using information from a variety of sources, we think we can still say something meaningful concerning how each place is changing.

Francis Augusto

Learning Points

The following are themes we have drawn out from seeing change across the places.

The shift from a project to a system-focus

One of the emerging themes from reflecting on how the stories of change in a place have developed concerns a trend of moving away from a concern with initiatives and projects, and toward a focus on engagement with a broader system of supports and services and networks available to people across the locality. For example, in both York and Barrow, associates' involvement with an initial 'operational' entry point (see Report 2) evolved into a broader engagement with a range of other actors.

Futhermore, even across places which began with a 'strategic' entry point, associates have sought to broaden the focus and attention of actors in place towards an "ecosystem" perspective. They have become involved in a broader attempt to shift the narrative of place.

Conflict is a normal part of the story of change

Conflict has been a nearly universal feature of the stories of change across the places with which the action inquiry has worked so far. Actors in place have been in conflict with one another. Different roles within the action inquiry have been in conflict with one another.

Three potential learning points emerge from this. Firstly, that conflict is normal and to be expected. This is important for enabling people who may be uncomfortable with the prospect of conflict not to be discouraged when it occurs within systems change processes. Secondly, that tools and techniques to manage conflict are useful. The action inquiry's use of Deep Democracy and 'Co-Resolve' techniques seems important in this respect.

The two initial points lead us to the view that conflict is itself a tool within systems change. By definition, it stirs things up and creates opportunities for change. However, conflict is also corrosive to relationships and trust. Are there elements of conflict that are preventable?

Creating spaces for local action

How does narrative change in place happen? An emerging hypothesis from material so far is that narrative changes seemed to emerge from associates creating spaces for local dialogue and action which facilitated dialogue across a range of actors. When associates were seen by actors in place as embedded within a particular initiative or project, other actors saw no reason to change their own assumptions and working patterns (or their organisation's).

Associates set about creating new platforms for discussion – for instance working groups in LBBD, co-production spaces in Manchester, or the complex needs network in York – as an attempt to prompt more significant and lasting change. By convening new collaborative forums, associates could better create the conditions for discussion, shared ambition, and joint exploration of cross-boundary issues like severe and multiple disadvantage.

The role of associates in supporting narrative change in place

The Associate role has an interesting balancing act to undertake in supporting narrative change. In order to build relationships with actors in places, associates became highly entangled with places, seeking to do whatever was both useful and necessary to achieve change. They appeared to take on a sense of responsibility for local narratives and drivers, and brought those into the action inquiry. This seems an important role to play, as it answers the question: how does the action inquiry hear the vital concerns of those in place and negotiate between the drivers coming from the place, and the drivers, particularly the system behaviours, of the action inquiry?

In Report 1, we described the dangers of this entanglement – that associates themselves may take on responsibility for the 'steward of place' role. So where do the appropriate boundaries of the Associate role lie?
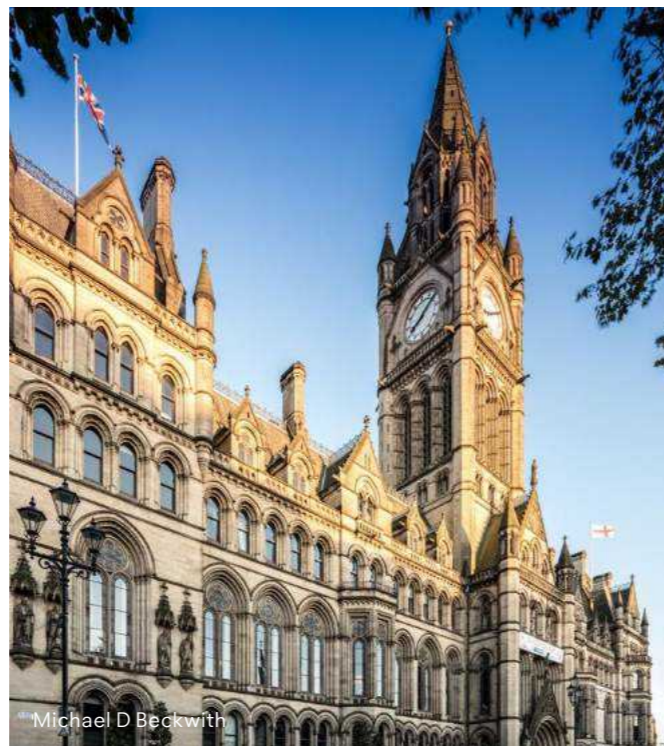
Michael D Beckwith

Is there an immune response from places to change?

The analysis has focused on the key changes in structure, actions and relationships in places. This presents a dynamic picture of changes – however it is also important to consider how overall patterns within systems are resistant to change, and how complex systems can produce an 'immune response' which resists change - creating similar patterns over time, even when elements of the systems change. Places, as 'Complex Adaptive Systems' are notoriously resilient to change attempts. In this action inquiry, we have frequently heard cultural, institutional and legal barriers cited as impediments to change.

This analysis highlights associates' lack of control of the local institutional environment and local relationships – they do not control working practices or power relationships locally. Consequently, some promising developments came to nothing, while key issues saw little progress for lengthy periods of time. Understanding progress and the rate of change locally is challenging, since it is difficult to ascertain a baseline in a changing and uncertain system, and it is not clear how much change could reasonably be expected.

As the action inquiry progresses, we may be able to identify the critical periods when change is possible. When is there no point pursuing change, as the system has been locked down? When are significant moments of opportunity?

Kirsten Drew

Concluding thoughts

Reflecting on the LC Place Action Inquiry to this point has been an important learning experience. The process of reflection itself has enabled us to see points about the structure of the action inquiry that we had not previously seen, and given us new insights into the roles and methods of the Inquiry.

We have learnt significant amounts about how the roles in the action inquiry work (including our own), and how they relate to one another. We have been able to identify what people seeking systems change in local places do, and the questions they ask about their own practice.

This report serves two purposes. Taking the learning approach of the inquiry, we offer this as a set of partially concluded reflections out into the world – as third person action learning – which brings others into the conversation and reflection of the inquiry. It also serves as a tool for second person learning – as a mechanism for reflection amongst the group of people conducting the inquiry.

We look forward to having those further reflective conversations!

*Further reading

The system behaviours can be found here:
https://lankellychase.org.uk/our-approach/system-behaviours/

We have reflected on each question in much more detail and these reflections can be found on the Lankelly Chase website here:
https://lankellychase.org.uk/our-work/place/learning/

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