
changing the 'who' and the 'how'

Common ground

Participation

Lankelly Chase

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Who we are

Lankelly Chase is providing resources to support the wisdom and capability of local people as they collaborate to change the 'way things are done' in five places around England so that they are more equitable, inclusive and just.

When we say '**we**' in this paper, we mean the loose community of changemakers involved in this work.

- ① At its core, it's working with and subverting the dynamics of separation, the dynamics of 'them and us', which we believe underlie so many of the harms caused in society.'

– Habiba and Alice, Lankelly Chase

We want to change how people and organisations relate to each other, who gets to make decisions, on what terms and with what evidence.

We use the ‘system behaviours’, co-created by hundreds of people, as a guide to what better, healthier ways of doing things might look like (and to guide our actions in the day to day).

They’re not set in stone but this is what they say about participation and for now, this is what we are aiming at:

Open, trusting relationships enable effective dialogue

People feel safe to ask difficult questions, voice agreements and disagreements and deal with the conflicts and uncomfortable emotions that may surface.

Leadership is collaborative and promoted at every level

There are different styles of leadership which call on a variety of skills and strengths. Everyone has the potential to lead, wherever we are in the system.

Feedback and collective learning inform adaptation

The understanding of a ‘problem’, actions taken to ‘change it’ and what we learn from this interaction continuously inform each other. A culture of experimentation exists where we embrace failure for what it will teach us.



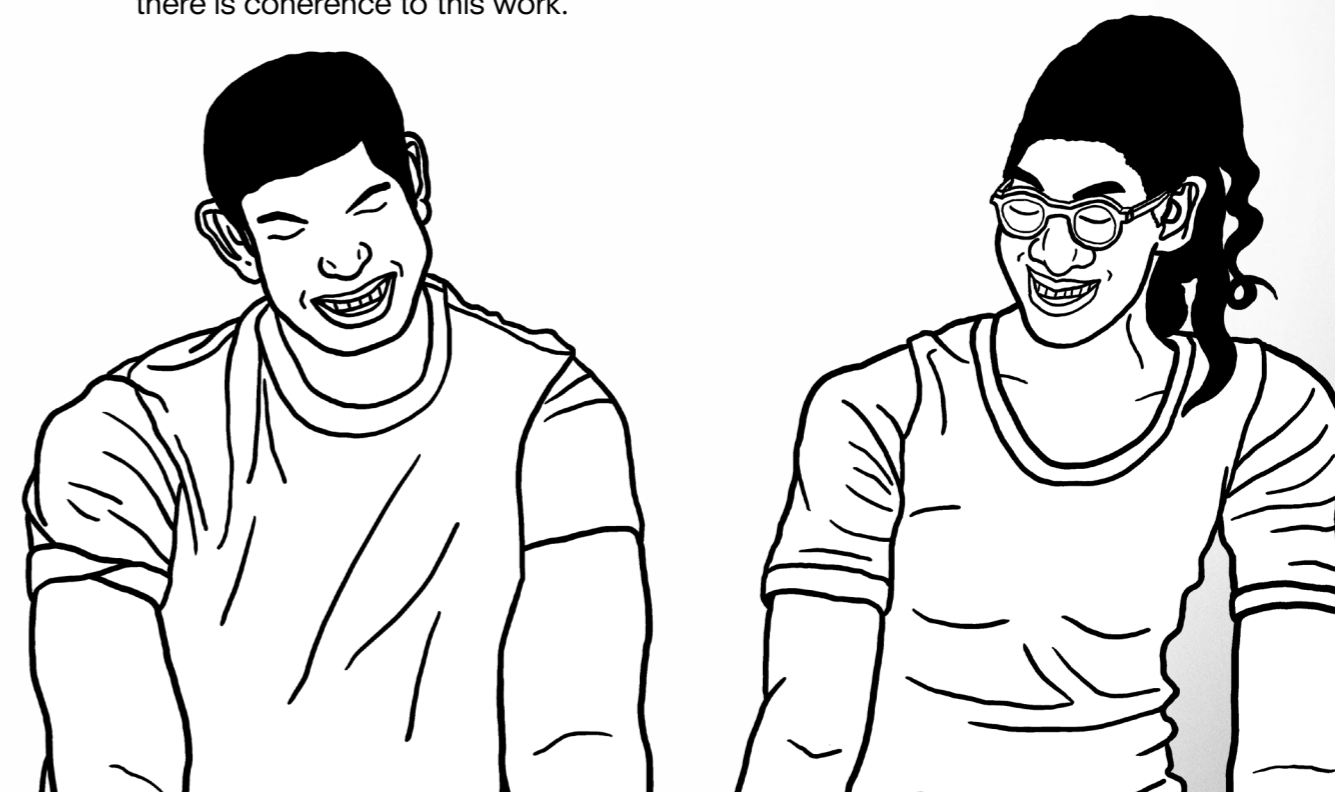
We’re not focused on predetermined outcomes but on changing the conditions in the places - the written and unwritten rules, the prevailing mindsets and the assumptions about what happens and why.’

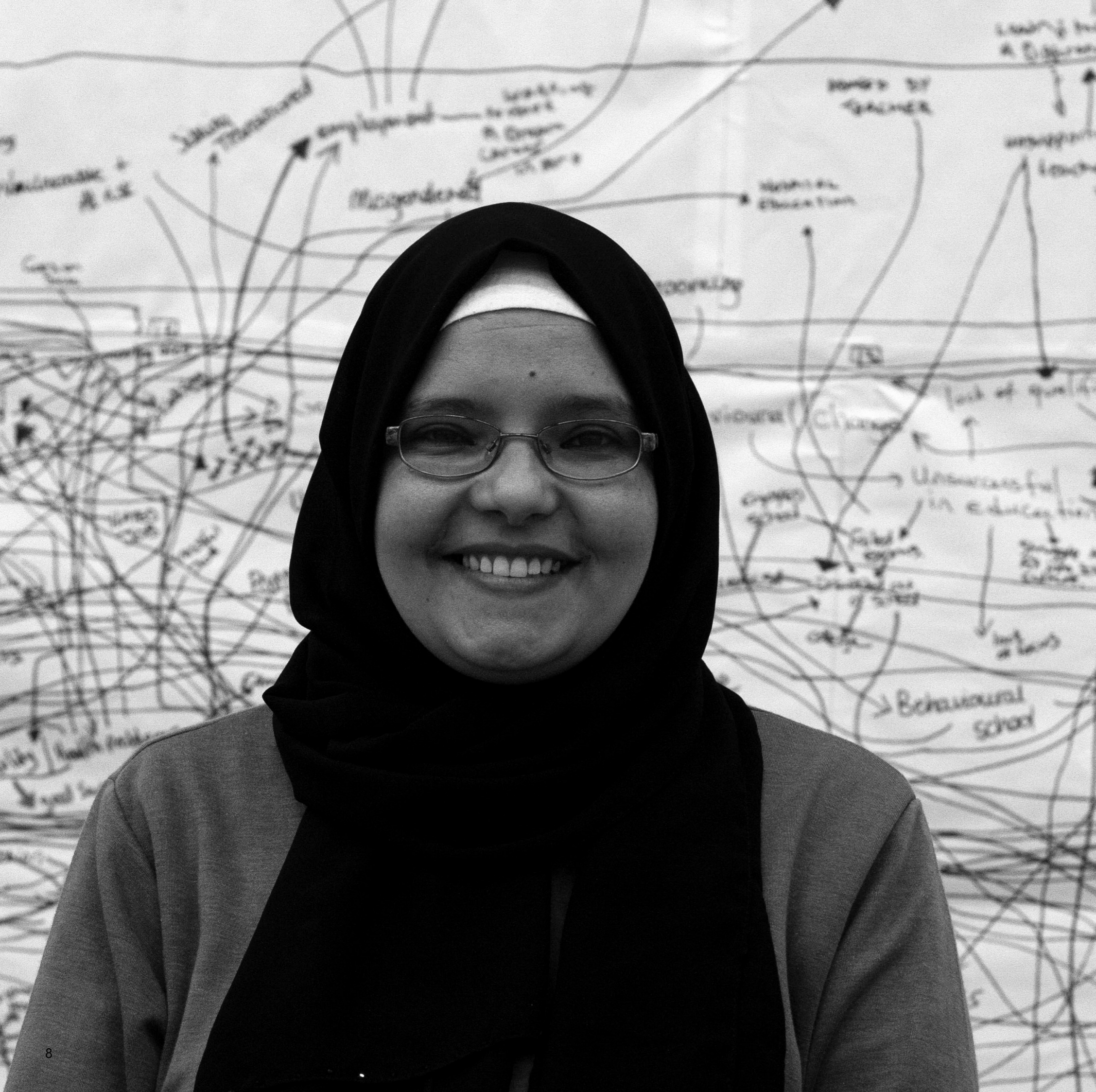
This paper explains more about what participation means to us, what we think needs to change and some stories about how we are approaching that change work in practice. Our academic learning partner, Northumbria University, provides a commentary on what they are seeing, whether positive change is emerging and the implications of different practices and approaches.

Readers should not expect a neat and unified view – we are different people taking different approaches and we have different starting points and perspectives. We see this as a strength. Nevertheless, there is coherence to this work.

We are united by a concern about the harms and pressures being heaped on those already subject to marginalisation. We share a broad vision of thriving places that work for everyone.

We do not have all the answers and our view is inevitably limited and partial. However, we do feel we have important learning to share. More than anything we want to encourage others, resource holders and local people, to try different ways of doing things.





“ We are united by a concern about the harms and pressures being heaped on those already subject to marginalisation. We share a broad vision of thriving places that work for everyone.”

Intro duction

**/ What participation
means to us**

Habiba Nabatu, Lankelly Chase and Alice Evans
– founders of Lankelly’s
place-based programme of work

As collectives of individuals or as organisations, we create terms and phrases that turn up in tender documents, in reports and in grant proposals as the words of the moment. They can mean everything and nothing.

In this introduction, we - Habiba and Alice - talk about a couple of these phrases - ‘place based systems change’ and ‘participation’. We explain the life and meaning they have for us.



Let’s take ‘place based systems change’. For us, it is how you look at the intricacies of what it means to live and belong in an area. It is the change processes you use that recognise and value the ‘I, we and it’. It’s not an end in itself...there is no end destination. It’s something that is live. It is a process of constant negotiation and rebalancing between multiple views and perspectives.

We use the word ‘systems’ to represent complex entanglement - with each other, with history, with the place where we live. It’s physical, relational, emotional, spiritual, it’s human and non-human. It’s the layering of our existence and our experiences both individually, and in places, collectively.

It’s hard for us as a society to sit with all this confusion and messiness, with people with different views, but it is what this work demands. When we do, something special happens in the space between. This the place of borderlines between people, ideas, identities, practices, levels, cultures, sectors and positions. At its core, it’s working with and subverting the dynamics of separation, the dynamics of ‘them and us’, which we believe underlie so many of the harms caused in society.

When we began the place-based work at Lankelly, we wondered if participating in this way across boundaries and experiences would create systemic change.

It is these ideas, that we both share, that drove the work we - Habiba and Alice - did in setting up Lankelly’s approach to place. We recognised our view was only partial, so we started with valuing and being in relationship with people who might have different views, histories and positions. We made a decision early on to start with the voices and experiences of people who have been subject to marginalisation and to then include other voices.



We started with valuing and being in relationship with people who might have different views, histories and positions.

practices we learnt and value are:

Really pausing to make visible the invisible, whether it's assumptions, history or what a word means to different people.

Starting with where everybody is at, and valuing all the complexities of that. People are more than one thing. Working with complexity starts with noticing the contradictions, uncertainties and paradoxes within ourselves and the wider world.

A commitment to bridge across worlds (e.g. co creating with people working in different parts of systems) and going beyond the binaries (e.g. avoiding either/or thinking and embracing both/and).

Recognising the mind trap of 'rightness' that all of us fall into. We all have a partial perspective. There is no final answer. The moment you think you have the answer you realise it's incomplete.

Understanding that change moves at the speed of trust and that predetermined outcomes imposed on people can get in the way of the change we want to see.

Trying out different ways of having conversations and meetings, that move beyond hierarchies of people, knowledge and issues.

Holding space for difficult conversations so that we can notice the patterns that may prevent us from sensing, relating and imagining other ways of being.

Taking time to understand 'our story' (the collective history, injustice, oppression, colonialism, intersectional nature of class, race, gender, sexuality, exclusion).

Including play, creativity and embodied practice so that we embrace different ways of existing and experiencing that are present in all of us.

Being informed about the trauma that exists in everyone because the systems we are part of are violent towards those who marginalised and oppressed by society.

Cultivating stories of our interdependence and interconnectedness.

One thing that has consistently emerged is emotion - which when not acknowledged in ourselves or in a group acts as a barrier to full and generative participation. 'Feelings' can be a dirty word in the world of work. It's not professional to be emotional yet our emotion is what drives us. Without acknowledging that emotions are present, welcomed and worked with, the negative 'shadow side' can win out and there can be hurt, fear, jealousy and resistance. This can limit what it is possible to achieve.

We recognise that embracing new ideas without experiencing them yourself takes bravery and courage. It involves changing your mind, admitting mistakes and apologising. We've noticed that it's difficult for people, ourselves included, to do this. This made us wonder - 'how do you hold on to your identity and the values that make you you without becoming fixed in ideas, approaches or ways of being?'

It takes bravery and courage to change your mind, to admit mistakes and to apologise.'

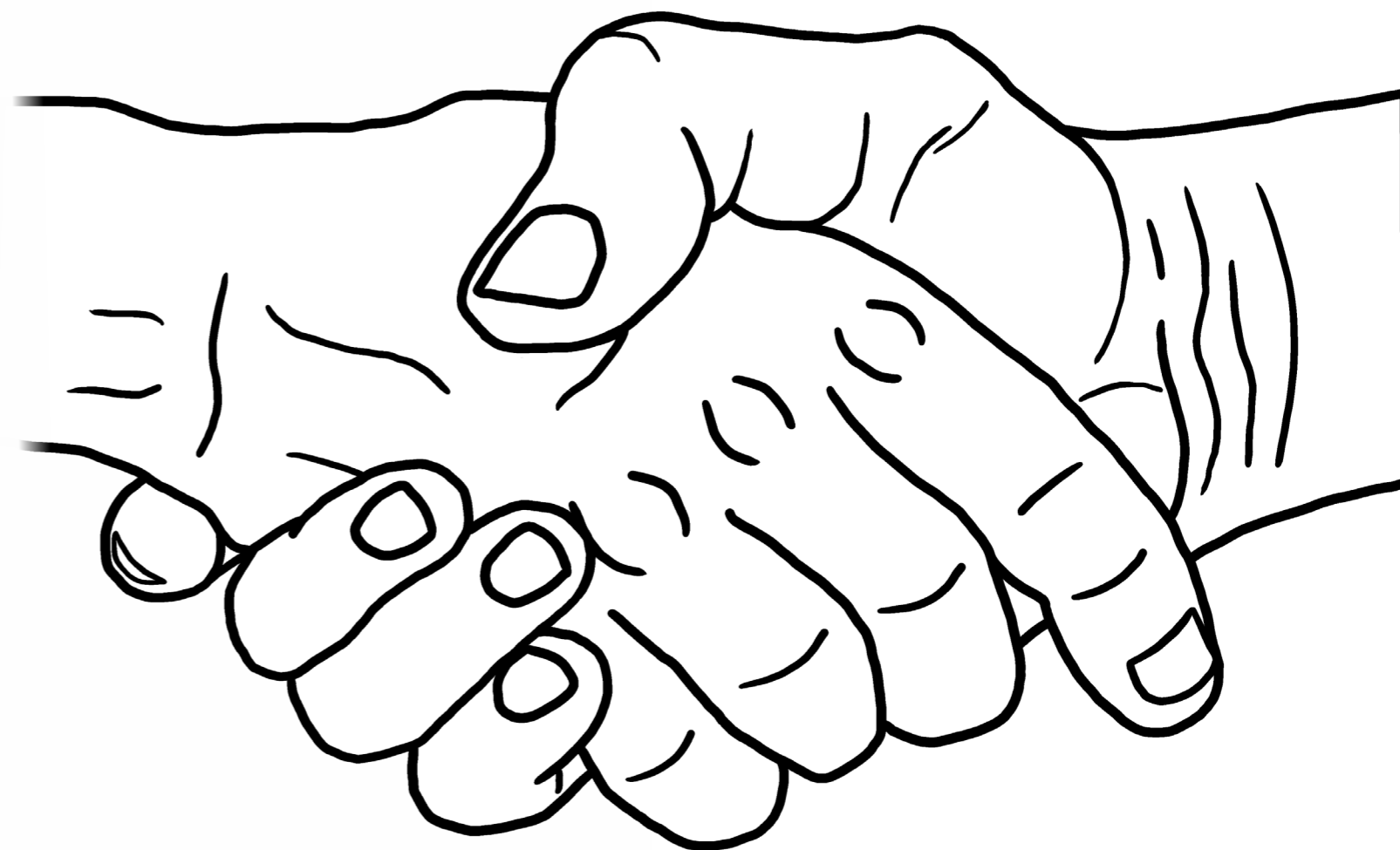
The value and emphasis placed on quick fixes, or answers, our desire for action without sitting in the mess and taking time to hear multiple perspectives limits what's possible.

The number of times we've heard dismissive comments about 'talking shops', or 'when will we get to action?' Yet if we don't take time to reflect and sit in the mess often the solutions we arrive at don't get at the fundamentals - the unwritten rules and assumptions that shape 'business as usual'.

Amidst the despair, the questioning and pain that people are experiencing on a daily basis, there are many things that give us hope. From tiny moments where we see meetings being facilitated differently, or where people from different walks of life come together and understand each other. Almost everyone we met doing the place work gave us hope, regardless of their position. Some of the examples that follow highlight this.

We also take hope from the questioning of the status quo that has emerged from the Black Lives Matter movement, or from the stark divisions in society amplified by the pandemic. From these cracks light can emerge.

Maybe, if we are wise enough together, we might become wise elders and good will emerge.



Stories from our work



If you are considering how to approach work to change the way things are done in your area or context, you might find these stories and insights from members of our community useful. They are each part of wider networks of interconnected local action.

Developing a Community First Mindset – a programme for policy makers

Paul Connery, Lankelly Chase associate



Where:

Greater Manchester



What:

a space for decision makers in the system to explore different ways of approaching dialogue and decision-making with communities.



Who:

Facilitators Matt Kidd, Viv Slack, Claire Haigh and Paul Connery, graphic harvester Selva Mustafa and 8 programme participants.



The work

The Greater Manchester Spaces Fund supported spaces led by and for women and/or young people subject to marginalisation. As part of this, we wanted the people involved to feel confident in inviting ‘policy makers’ (people in decision making positions within the system) into their space to discuss topics that were important to them, and to begin dialogue about ways to resolve the issues they faced.



We felt it was important to turn this dynamic on its head.’



For many of the people in these spaces, if they get invited to discuss these issues with policy makers at all, it is usually at a time, place and in a format that is set by policy makers and can feel excluding, tokenistic and frustrating. This often leads to people feeling there is little point in engaging in these ‘consultations’ as nothing changes. They end up feeling excluded and their views remain unheard.

We felt it was important to turn this dynamic on its head and support the Spaces groups to invite policy makers into their spaces, on their terms, to talk directly about their issues and to begin to build relationships and explore different ways of making decisions and sharing power. For this to be fruitful, preparation on both sides was required. This led us to test out a way of working with policy makers in a project called ‘Developing a Community First Mindset’. The aim was to provide a space for people working in the system to explore their fears and limitations when trying to share power, as well as different ways of holding conversations and making decisions with communities.

We put a call out to people working in public services including commissioning and procurement as well as senior people within the voluntary sector. We ran a co-design session to share our approach and to listen to what they needed. We ran four further sessions with the group, each building on the last. It started with participants looking at themselves and what limited and frustrated them in their work. It moved on to blockages within the system and then practising different tools and approaches to support a different way of working with communities.

How does this relate to participation?

Our aim with this work was to support the building of relationships which could then enable communities and policy makers to have honest conversations with each other so they could work together in a shared space to make decisions and resolve issues. By stepping into these spaces with a different mindset, policy makers could begin to develop a new way of working that included sharing power. The work fitted with the system behaviours around participation because it started with building trusting relationships and developed from there. Whilst of course there are still hierarchical structures across the system, in these spaces everyone has something valuable to offer and could take on the role of leader at any given moment.

Challenges

- **Getting the 'right' people to attend:** Often the people involved in the Spaces Fund weren't sure who in the system they wanted to connect with. For those who did know, we weren't always able to recruit the identified people.
- **Time:** People who came on to the programme often didn't have the time to fully commit to it because they were pulled in many different directions in their work. Any future programme will need to look at different ways of running sessions so that more people can be involved. We recorded some parts of the sessions and worked with a graphic facilitator so that people who couldn't attend were able to access the learning. However, relationships and connections in the group were still affected.
- **Preparation:** Spending more time preparing to bring people from communities and policy makers together would have helped them to put what they had learnt in the sessions into practice in a more planned way.
- **Going back to the day job:** Participants talked about their frustrations at having met with community groups and jointly come up with new ideas with them only to go back to their work and be told they couldn't implement them. This left them feeling that they couldn't commit to anything in the future so that they didn't let people down. It was safer for people to not commit to anything.
- **Agency:** People talked about feeling like a very small cog in a system where the bigger cogs controlled everything. They felt that even if they tried something new, it often got stopped.

This piece of work highlighted that many people working within the system are frustrated. Although they want to explore change, the current system stifles their creativity and ideas. It's the processes, practices and priorities of the current system (which are all set without communities' involvement) that are the major blockers for meaningful change.

Our advice...

- Be focussed about who you want to recruit. People in decision making and/or influential positions are most useful in terms of bringing about real change. Work with communities to see who they want to influence and be guided by that.
- Spend time creating opportunities for policy makers to connect with communities during the programme. The reality is that many are too busy to do this once the programme has finished. Recognise that they are often dragged back into their old ways of working.
- If you are a senior manager working within the system, support your staff members to have space and time to explore different ways of working with communities. Encourage them and make sure they know they don't always have to get things right or achieve certain outcomes. Start dialogue and see where it goes.

Hopes for the future

There are a number of new pieces of work developing in Greater Manchester where a version of this programme would be useful, and we are exploring ways to adapt it to suit. People who came on the programme found the space outside of their day-to-day work, where they could talk openly about their frustrations, to be a really useful experience. We think more space like this should be provided, and people who want to try something different with communities should be connected.

pjconnery@hotmail.com

Deciding Together Funding for the people, by the people.

Ali Spaul, Two Ridings
Community Foundation

Where:
York

What:
Participatory grant-
making to support
systems change

Who:
Coordinated by
Ali Spaul at Two
Ridings Community
Foundation, supported
by Art of Hosting



We moved from
monitoring for
the funder to
learning for the
collective, from end
of grant report to
ongoing and lasting
relationships..’

The work

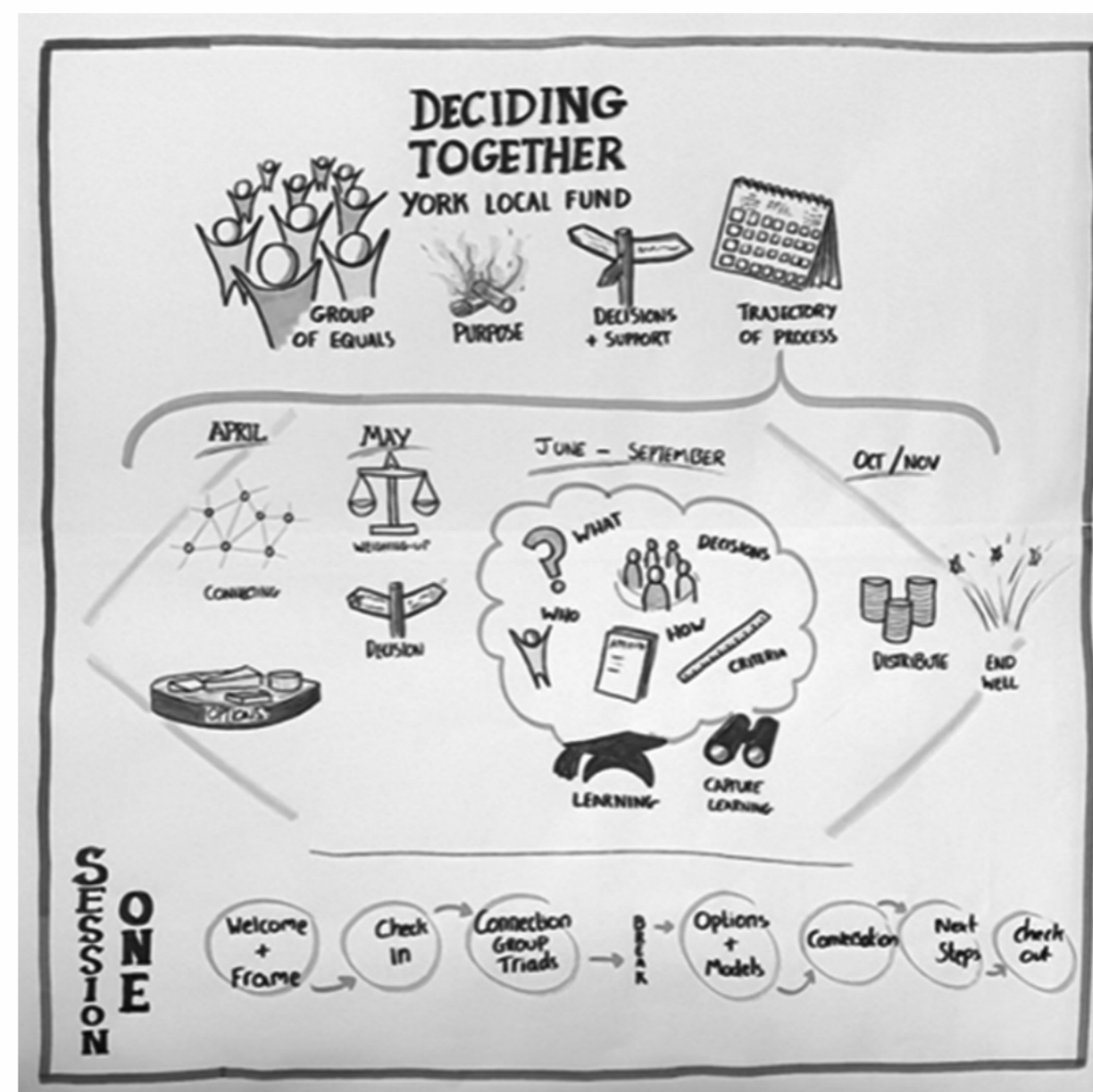
During 2021 York MCN (a cross-place network of people working to change local systems) collaborated with Two Ridings Community Foundation to distribute £250,000 of funding to enable a city-wide participatory grant-making process to take place.

We wanted to tackle systems which create or perpetuate disadvantage for people who are subject to marginalisation including experiences of homelessness, addiction and recovery, mental ill-health, poverty and offending. We aimed to devolve decision making to the people closest to the change in York.

Two Ridings and York MCN worked closely with a facilitation team from the Art of Hosting community to create a good foundation of mutual understanding and strong relationships. From that, the participants started to make decisions about how the fund was designed, administered and allocated. Decisions about almost all aspects of the entire process were made by the Deciding Together group (including the name) – not just who received the funding.

The fund sought to involve people from across York. Time was spent seeking to interest and involve a diversity of people, including those with direct experience of the issues (personally or professionally), people representing the diversity of York’s communities and adults of all ages. Whilst a rich variety of people from various ages, professional and experiential backgrounds took part, and there were efforts to engage with people from many cultural backgrounds in the city, there still existed a lack of ethnic diversity within the final cohort.

The image below outlines the overall process.



Participation takes time, but that is no bad thing, it builds strong and lasting relationships.

On the infrequent occasions where decisions were made outside the group it was done in a transparent way, and participants were clear why this was the case.

Transparency and being able to understand motivations behind actions builds trust. Knowledge is a power structure so if people feel like they don't have knowledge about something whilst someone else does they feel exposed to a power dynamic, and this impacts negatively on trust.

We modelled trust in many ways, including agreements that said;

“Your best is always good enough. If your best today is not as good as yesterday or tomorrow, it is still good enough”.

Trust took time to develop between participants and it was important that the process paid attention to this. It had a positive impact at the panel stage, where ‘who to fund’ was decided. High levels of commitment, personal integrity and group accountability were demonstrated.

Radical trust was discussed and referred to throughout the work and became a fundamental value that lives on. The applications were reviewed and awarded with radical trust. Ongoing work to learn from the funded activity will continue through network development. Monitoring requirements look different, with the relationships built from inception and throughout. We moved from monitoring for the funder to learning for the collective, from end of grant report to ongoing and lasting relationships.

Challenges

- There were challenges throughout the process. In the middle months, the growth (groan) zone was not always comfortable and everyone didn't always agree. Working with an emergent process meant at times it felt like there was a lack of clarity for participants and others on the periphery - requiring people to ‘take a leap of faith’.

- Who is in a position to make a leap of faith when working in chaotic or emergent spaces is something that has a power dynamic in itself. Not everybody has what they need in terms of resources and freedom to keep the faith during times of uncertainty.
- We didn't get everything right, though we are working on not getting it wrong (in the same way) again.
- We did not engage a culturally representative group. There is a clear and pressing need for better relationships across communities in the network and funding ecology in York.
- We did not arrange adequate payment for involvement for the participation group. We had the right intention but not enough consideration was given to this at the start and we didn't realise how difficult it would be. This was not good enough and resulted in at least one person having to step away. Work is ongoing across our network in York as well as at organisational level to make payment for involvement equitable.

Other challenges included:

- Balancing time commitments and achieving timely activity
- Maintaining relationships across the work and with wider partners
- Balancing radical trust and inspiration with legislation, good governance and operational capacity
- Challenging conditioning and people’s mental models.

Wider Impact?

It has been a short time since the final session and the wider impact is not yet fully discovered, but here are a few examples:

- 20 individuals have experienced and learned participatory methods. They continue to support each other and are involved in developing wider participatory methods and governance practice across the city, including lived experience coalitions.
- Funded activity increased space and time across York to step back, see things differently, connect with others and change the way people facing homelessness, addiction, poverty and poor mental health are supported.

- New participatory practices are being adapted across York and beyond. The principles in the diagram opposite are being used locally. You can adapt them for your use if you would like.
- We are working with other funders in Yorkshire, the UK Community Foundations network, and the global participatory grant-making community to normalise participatory practice across funding programmes.

Good participation practice grows and strengthens communities, beyond project plans, common interest and geography.

Miles, one of the Deciding Together Panel members said:

‘I love that local people are making local decisions on how a pot of money can benefit local communities. Together we are shifting the power of how community money is distributed. It is all about connection – the right people, doing the right things, to get the right support and it’s often the smallest things that make the biggest difference. I am a more enriched person being involved in this, my engagement with the network gives a real sense of purpose and achievement.’



Written by the Deciding Together core group

Thinking about your own participation work? Our advice...



- Not every organisation has the flexibility to become fully participatory overnight. Being honest about that and doing what you can, really well, is a great start.
- Participation work must be trauma informed. Trauma exists in the entire system, as well as within individuals within processes. The facilitation team for Deciding Together had expertise in responding when people exhibited behaviors which were a result of adaptations to extreme experiences they may have had during their lives. This understanding enabled a more inclusive environment to be created. A trauma aware environment can make all the difference to a person remaining involved in a process rather than exiting it.
- Participation takes time, but that is no bad thing, it builds strong and lasting relationships.
- Participation results in better practice, honest decision making and a healthier system overall.
- Participation can seem like an enormous mountain to climb. Learning from what has come before, building on what's strong, carefully reframing and using failure as learning, and embedding an absolute principle of trust through participation can be transformational.

If Participation was the norm. . .

If genuine participation was the widespread norm, we wouldn't call it participation anymore.

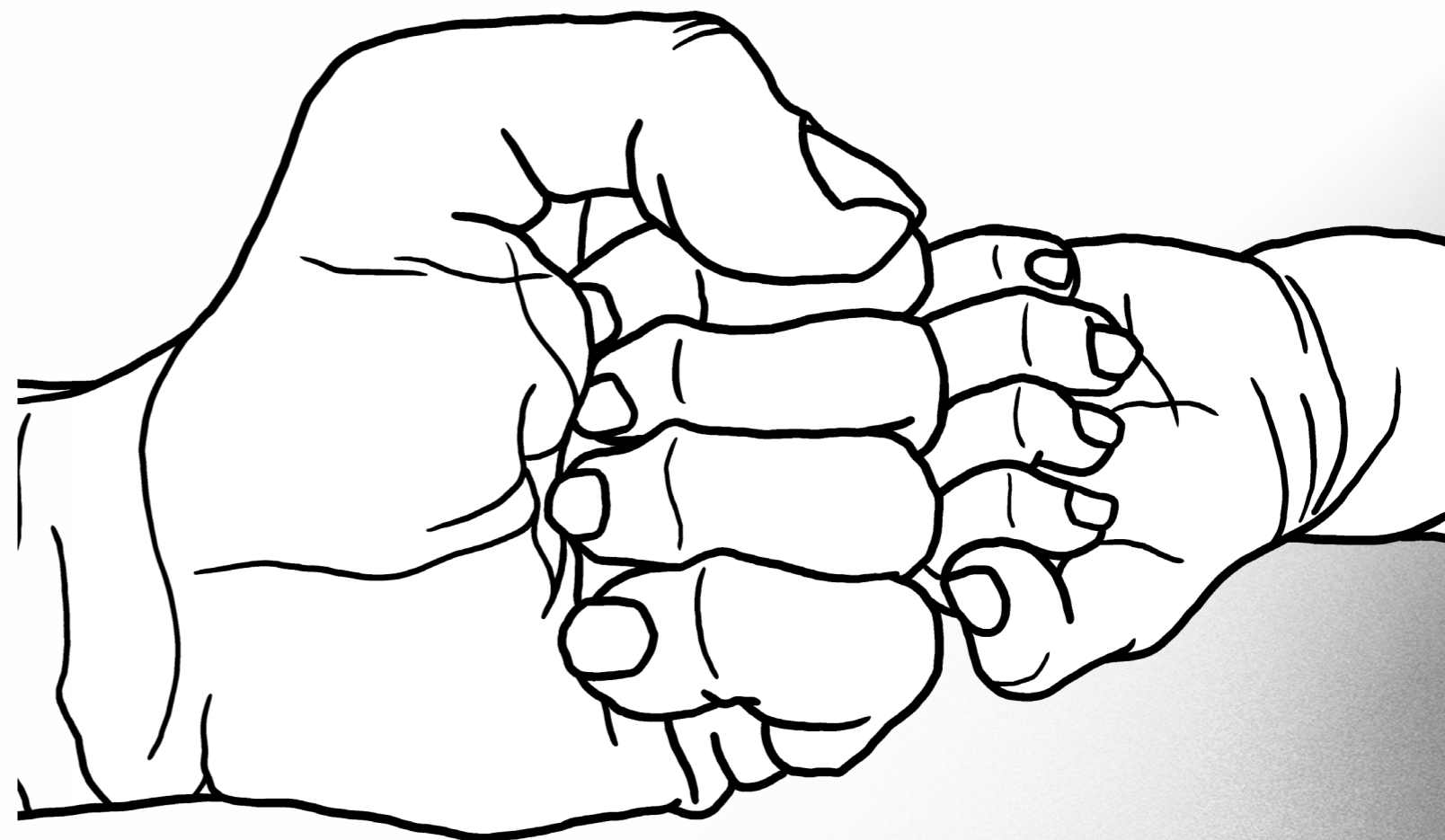
We would have wall-less organisations, and a team beyond geography and structure who would collaborate to support each other in the pursuit of widespread health and joy

Get in touch if you want to have a chat or find out more -

Ali Spaul
aspaul@tworidingscf.org.uk

To learn more about the Art of Hosting see:

artofhosting.org
yorkmcn.org



Gateshead Systemic Action Inquiry

Rich Gibbons, Transmit Enterprise and Jo Howard, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

Where:
Based out of the Bensham neighbourhood of Gateshead

What:
A collaborative 18-month process of community-led data collection, analysis and experimental action.

Who:
Rich Gibbons at Transmit Enterprise, link workers at Jigsaw Recovery Project, The Comfrey Project, NE Young Dads and Lads, Young Women's Outreach Project, ReCoCo, 3 Steps and St. Chad's Community Project, facilitated by Jo Howard at the Institute of Development Studies.

Participatory approaches such as this create the space for new ideas and relationships to blossom through shared learning and experience, and this process is powerfully transformative.'

The work

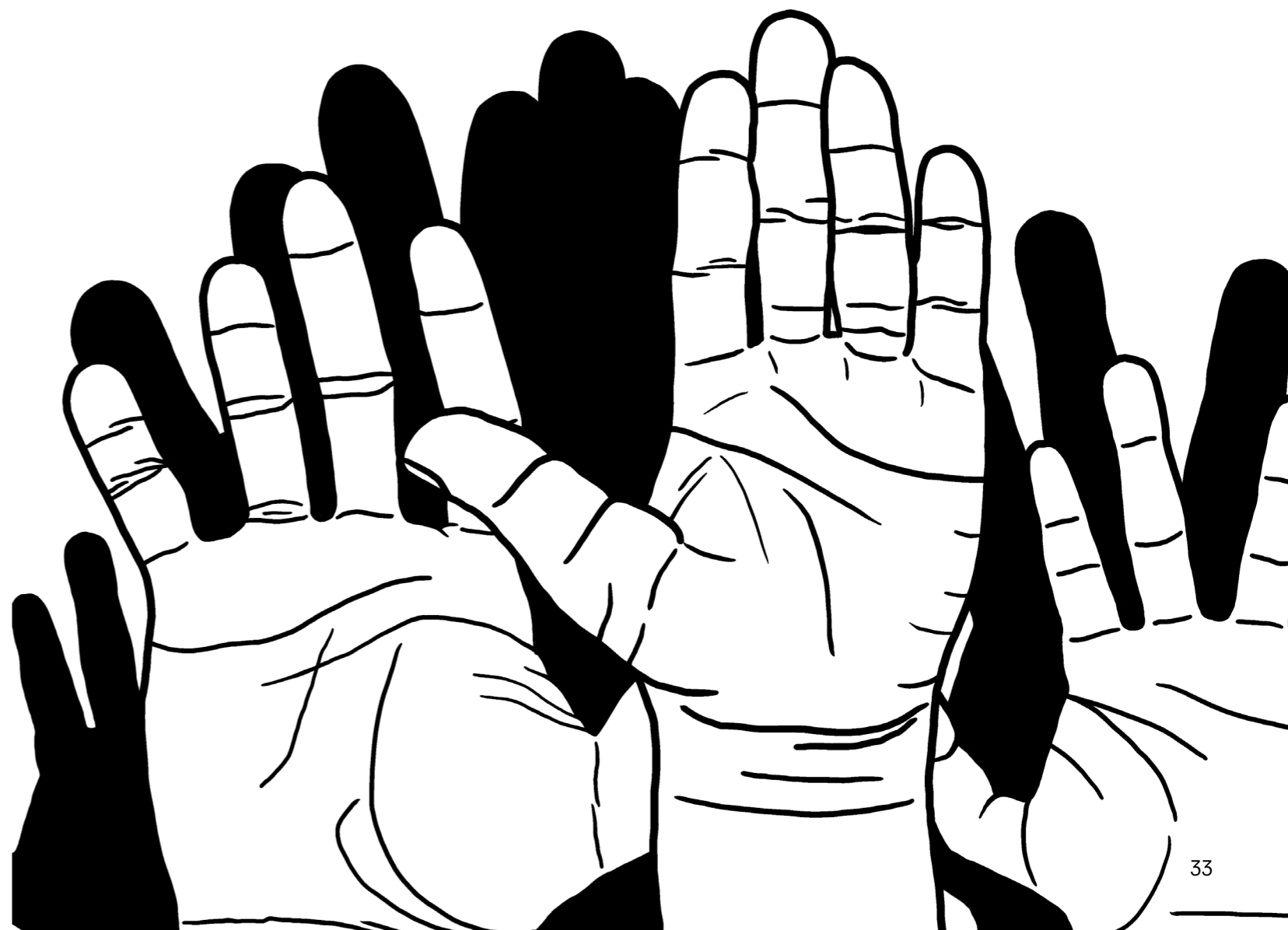
We believe that the injustices and exclusions created by the systems that we are part of cannot be addressed without the participation of those who experience these injustices. So, we start with them, with their knowledge, their stories, their perspectives, and we facilitate a process which creates space for them to analyse these stories, identify the drivers of the problems and generate ideas for actions.

When we feel powerless, we don't feel that we will be listened to, and maybe we've given up trying. The process therefore starts by bringing people together to share their experiences and build relationships; to listen, reflect, and analyse together. In this process, they are building their self-confidence ('power within') and their relationships with each other ('power with'), which are essential for us to take action together.

In the Gateshead Systemic Inquiry, we have spent time building this confidence and these relationships for some time, often via zoom meetings as we couldn't meet in person.

The Link Workers have learned skills in communication, qualitative data analysis, story gathering as a research endeavour, and use of the online tool Miro to work collaboratively.

During our system mapping workshops, the Link Workers came together with some participants and the facilitation team to create a huge system map which showed the causal links between all the factors in all the stories that had been collected.





Here, we saw an important shift of power, from the academic facilitators to the Link Workers and participants. They took the lead, in collaboration with each other, adding factors to the map, checking with each other, collaborating, discussing, analysing and deciding themselves what was important. This energy continued as we stepped back from the map and prioritised the issues to work on. Groups then formed quickly around the five or six themes that emerged most prominently from the mapping process.

This process is itself a journey. One we share with one another and which is a story all of its own. Link Workers, participants, and facilitators alike have highlighted how old mindsets have shifted and changed, because the process fosters opportunities for this to happen.

Participatory approaches such as this create the space for new ideas and relationships to blossom through shared learning and experience, and this process is powerfully transformative.

Next, this power shift needs to spread across the system. We can do this by extending the network, building relationships with others who also want to make a change – in other local organisations, and in the local authority. However, keeping this group of people with direct experience of injustice and exclusion at the heart of the work and staying accountable to them and to each other is critical.

Challenges

- The challenge of connecting with the work of others, as we are each invested in a certain way of working.
- The challenge of building relationships with others also funded by Lankelly – can we get past the custom of looking to the funder to tell us how to relate to each other?
- The challenge of working with sometimes deeply distressing stories that affect us and can trigger.
- The challenge of working within short cycles of funding, that can cause uncertainty and anxiety.



Impact on the wider system? How do we know... the butterfly effect...

When we see people who have had really challenging experiences growing in confidence, speaking in front of others and building stronger links with each other and across organisations we are observing shifts in power. But it needs to be supported and nurtured. This phase is about building up more understanding of the prioritised issues, and testing out actions for change. In this process, we will be engaging with more powerful actors who will need to be open to collaborating with us, with honesty and respect.

The work we are doing is already starting to get noticed and garner interest from other actors in the Gateshead area. We are beginning to find points of collaboration within the wider activities funded by Lankelly Chase, but also beyond this. For example, we have shared some of our stories with people working to support inclusion in Healthwatch Gateshead, which is a key mechanism for local residents to help to shape social care. Those stories have already provided useful insight for their work, and we are now in dialogue about how to collaborate further, to try and ensure our combined efforts can lead to positive change in social care settings.



We will be engaging with more powerful actors who will need to be open to collaborating with us, with honesty and respect’.

Our advice:

- Take it slow. Let it grow.
- Don't underestimate what people can do (we almost always do). People with lived experience of issues can often do a much better job of analysing stories than traditional researchers. Their leadership in our collective efforts is therefore not just symbolically important, it is essential, and the bedrock upon which community- focused change can emerge and thrive.
- Trust in the process – there are moments when you think it's not going to work. When the Link Workers felt that they didn't understand how to do the story analysis. When the facilitator wondered if anyone was going to want to join an action group after the mapping was done. But the motivation to take action comes out of being a participant in the process, through analysing the stories and identifying the drivers and enablers, and building relationships and accountability with each other.

The storytelling and system mapping, a deeply participatory process, has created the spark for action. The first action inquiry groups are forming, each with their own questions, energy and direction.

We hope that these sparks will grow and spread and motivate more people to get involved and work together to find lasting ways to address injustice.

Participatory Grantmaking

Lisa Clarke, Practical Governance, Cameron Bray, Barking and Dagenham Giving, Ruth Robertson, Kingsley Hall



Where:

Barking and Dagenham



What:

Various forms of participatory decision making about resources



Who:

Representatives attending from over 12 groups. These include Kingsley Hall, Dynamos of Dagenham, Barking and Dagenham Giving, Community Resources, Kingsley Clan, Barking and Dagenham Young Carers, Future M.O.L.D.S & Communities All Stars, DABD Golden Years, We Rise, Moms on a Mission, Make your Mark, Company Drinks and Books by Miles - a mix of un/constituted community groups.



We've been asking whether these methods build the conditions for mutual accountability, allow power to be shared and enable communities to take up collective agency in change processes...



The work

Communities who are impacted by funding decisions should have the power to make and influence those decisions.

When a community needs to bring in help to address an issue or create change, it is the community that should set the terms of that support.

Locally there have been deep conversations on how to tackle paternalistic approaches to community engagement. A key element in our community-led change work has been the exploration of participatory grantmaking and other participatory methods. We've been asking whether these methods build the conditions for mutual accountability, allow power to be shared and enable communities to take up collective agency in change processes...

We are now in our second year of the participatory grantmaking experimental work supported by Lankelly Chase.

Smaller resident (community) led groups have decision making power over relatively small pots (£5,000-£15,000) of grant money, having designed their own red lines and decision-making processes. Barking and Dagenham Giving has invited community members in to facilitate the design and decision-making processes over larger pots (£30,000 to £100,000 of funding).

We have a local working group where we share learning and resources.

Things that give us hope:

We have seen:

Relationships and trust in others being built - group members have also increased their ability to notice tensions and share how they feel beyond the groups.

An increase in the range of perspectives in conversations, including people with direct experience of the issues being discussed.

The voice of those with lived experience beginning to be present and informing the emerging work of Barking and Dagenham Giving and the third sector.

An increased appetite for residents to be involved in decision making more generally. Barking and Dagenham Giving say 'there's clearly a growing appetite in the borough for accessing decision-making opportunities - every time we've gone out, we've received more applications to take part from new people, who are mostly finding out through word of mouth'.

An increase in the use of participatory methods both in the voluntary and public sectors to shift power and widen the range of perspectives in decision making.

Challenges


Individuals involved in participatory grantmaking have felt a sense of power and ownership over the funds they are managing, and we are confident that power has shifted on a micro local level. However this hasn't necessarily translated into power truly being shared on a wider scale. Structural restrictions and inequalities, both within individual organisations and also the wider system, limit progress and impact on trust.

Bringing different people into the room to be part of decision making requires support. This might involve building skills and confidence. Likewise, those with power are also on a journey to recognise the power structures in the room, change their perspectives and leave their ego behind. At times they need support to do so.

Participatory methods are time consuming and there is a tension between spaces for genuine participation and the need for decision making and 'action'. For some of us the value of participatory methods is in the process of building trust and relationships and bringing different perspectives into wider change work. For others the value is in the action - doing something with the grant that makes a difference to their neighbours.

Digital inclusion was a challenge created by lockdown. It continues to limit access for many people. However much support is provided, the lack of interest or trust in technology prevails.

There is a lot going on in Barking and Dagenham and there is confusion as to who is doing what for what purpose. There is also mistrust of funders. There has been push back from some people that some forums have felt extractive as the results and the learning are not immediately visible.

 Those with power are also on a journey to recognise the power structures in the room, change their perspectives and leave their ego behind. At times they need support to do so.



Our advice:

- It takes lots of time and energy to build relationships and trust both within and across groups. It's important to have enough resources.
- Leaders will emerge from the work, which is great. It's important that if they are involved in wider change conversations that they are rewarded in similar ways to professionals either through payment or support for training or living expenses as they see fit.
- Have a few tools up your sleeve that support people to have difficult conversations and enable different perspectives to be heard.
- The work can be painful, and attention needs to be paid to this and how people might want to be supported through the journey – it can also be an opportunity for healing.

We have learnt that groups need to have enough time to form their own identity, establish their shared purpose and build trust prior to connecting with other groups. We are beginning to see a desire for inter-group working. We are looking for continued opportunities over the next year to support collective power being formed and to see it being applied in the wider system to influence wider change processes.

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A Commentary

are we seeing
the change we
want to see?

Max French and Amy Wheatman,
Northumbria University (learning
partners to Lankelly's place-based work)

Challenges

A shift in the level of participation in decision making has been noticed across the five places. This has taken many forms for example, codesigning grantmaking processes with local people and also the movement towards financial decisions being devolved from Lankelly Chase to locality-based teams with a minority Lankelly Chase staff representation.

An ongoing theme in supporting greater participation has been the importance of developing open, trusting relationships. Reflecting on research carried out in 2020, it was acknowledged that building relationships could take time and this seems to have been a learning point which has been embedded in current practice. For example, relationship building appears to be a crucial foundation when developing locality-based decision-making teams to allow honest communication between members.

As well as relationships developing informally, structures have been tested that have supported an environment of equality of voice within various decision-making groupings such as locally-based coordination teams or participatory grantmaking groups. Activities such as participatory agenda building, Deep Democracy practices and rotating chairs for meetings are being explored to bring in different perspectives and allow constructive challenge. In particular, there have been recent examples of deepening relationships with and between place actors such as residents, local authorities and Lankelly Chase staff to support collaboration.

Developing a shared language has also been important in supporting participation. Questioning the meaning of key concepts such as ‘systems’ and ‘devolved decision making’ seems important in supporting conversations to flourish. When developing participatory methods for grant making, various approaches have been explored to engage with local people. It has been recognised that traditional methods such as a formal application process can lead to alienation. Therefore, adapting language and using more relational methods can challenge existing power dynamics and create a sense of shared purpose.

Lankelly’s place-based work has also challenged the traditional role of funder, and this has been developed further through the process of devolving decision making to locality-based teams more recently.



...I have legitimacy because of my relationship with the council that they would hear me and actually the rest of the social sector at the moment, they would hear me on that.’



‘...the relationships within the team are good, but not deep enough yet not secure enough yet, because a couple of people in the team have observed that people are still trying to be nice to each other’ (Interview 2021).

The potential for everyone to be a leader, has at times created tensions around role boundaries. For example, uncertainty around roles and responsibilities have been described as well as the difficulty in remaining neutral in conversations.

Self-awareness and transparency are tools which individuals draw upon to overcome this and to build mutual trust. Given there is often a level of mistrust present in systems, this process feels important to counteract legacies of tokenistic experiences of collaboration and participation.

The development of learning communities at place and cross-place levels have also provided an opportunity for criticality and exposure to new ways of working. A supportive environment for open and honest communication has been created to enable reflection on uncertainties and voicing anxieties. This approach has also been explored with recipients of funding, which has provided a greater sense of freedom and enhanced the networks of like-minded people in the places.

Greater participation has not only strengthened relationships but created freedom to test different approaches leading to journeys that would not have been anticipated had traditional funding approaches been used. Decisions have been described as 'being much closer to what is needed' in that they are representative of the specific needs of that community.

Legitimacy for locality-based teams to make decisions was often centred around representativeness, for example, co-designing practices with people with lived experience, setting up structures to hear the voices of local people or using networks to bring in diverse perspectives. Although there were clear benefits in the end results of increased participation, it was the process itself that was viewed as most valuable.



Greater participation has not only strengthened relationships but created freedom to test different approaches leading to journeys that would not have been anticipated had traditional funding approaches been used.'



Thoughts to end with

We can see that when ideas around complexity and participation are normalised, work like the systemic inquiry in Gateshead emerges. That work is not a project with predetermined outcomes, it is a process that starts by bringing people together to share their experiences and build relationships; to listen, reflect, and to make sense of the world together. The work starts with those who have direct experience of injustice and then extends the invitation to others in the system who also want to make change.

The examples in this paper model something - that a culture of people taking part in decisions about their own lives and taking an active interest in the wellbeing and care of others in their community on more equitable terms is possible. The twenty people who have been part of Deciding Together in York continue to support each other and are involved in developing wider participatory methods and governance practice across the city. When invited and supported, people show up.



‘When invited and supported, people show up.’

If these practices of deep mutual understanding were normalised, it might mean that we would better understand the complex nature of the world, so that when those in positions of formal power suggest simplistic solutions we reject them. We could be kinder, supporting less punitive actions against the ‘other’ who is normally poorer, seeking refuge or excluded by society based on discrimination.

If these practices were normalised, we might be ready to ask questions together about corporations that keep the financial rewards but distribute the environmental harms or how poverty is created and maintained. It might mean we are mature enough to have difficult conversations about colonialism, masculinity, violence, climate breakdown and white supremacy. It might mean we grow up.

As a funder, Lankelly redefined what we understood as outcomes, which freed us up to try different ways of doing things. It wasn’t easy - and created uncertainty for ourselves and others. However, we felt strongly that in an entangled and complex world, a funder, commissioner or delivery organisation cannot claim attribution for x impact. It’s a lie we are collectively perpetuating. Outcomes are the result of interconnected complex systems. We can free ourselves from this lie and be brave.

So, don’t wait for others to come to you or for you to be ready to do things differently. Identify the people within the systems who are directly facing injustice, exclusion and violence and reach out to them. Then, build meaningful relationships with them, and amongst different people. Have hard conversations and expect setbacks to be part of the process. Work towards outcomes as defined by those who experience the most harm. If you’re thinking that all of this is risky, and uncertain, with no evidence base – take a moment to ask yourself if the current system is really working. We see that it isn’t, especially for those who are most marginalised. Therefore, trying something else that is co-created by those who have experienced injustice is unlikely to be more harmful than the current system.

Habiba and Alice

Lankelly Chase

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