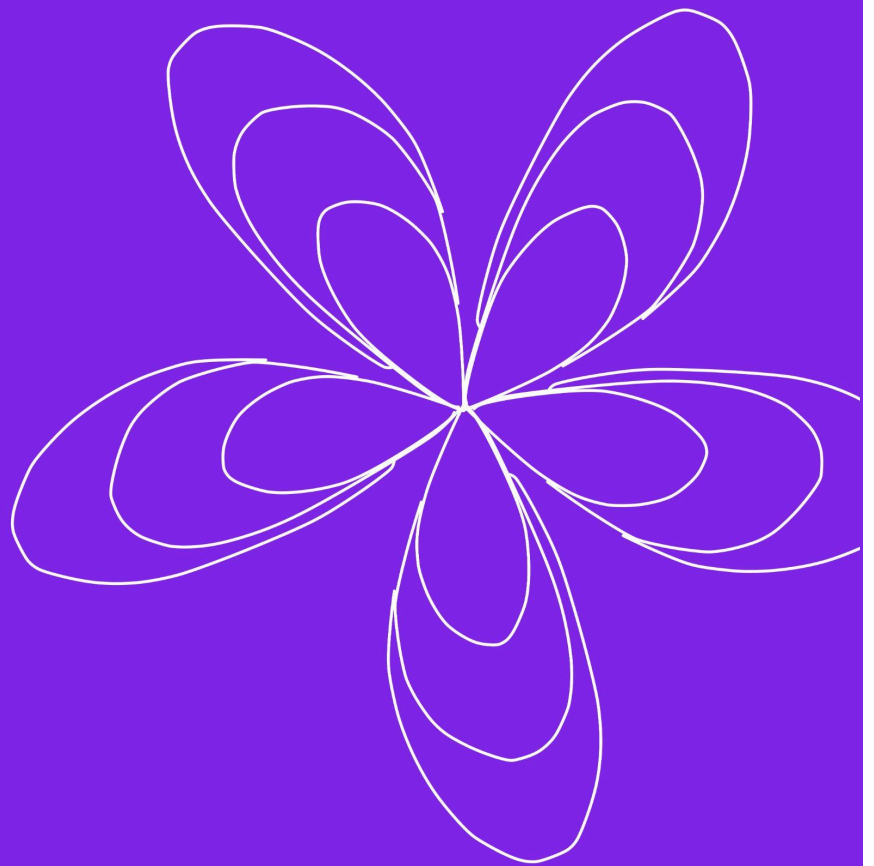


Cornerstone Fund

Final Learning Report: Round 2

Collaborate CIC
September 2024



Summary

This report of learning about the [Cornerstone Fund](#) offers valuable insights about what it takes to undertake systems change propelled by civil society organisations (specifically infrastructure organisations) working together in partnership and centring equity in their work. This report is for readers from funding organisations, civil society, and all others seeking to change systems so that they support people's flourishing, through working collaboratively, gathering stories and influencing, and reflecting and learning.

The Cornerstone Fund is a collaborative systems change funding programme launched in April 2018 by a group of funders in London. Collaborate CIC was learning partner to the fund from 2019. This is our final learning report, sharing insights about Round 2 of the Fund from their first two years of partnership work, from 2021-2023. These insights come from conversations and workshops with partnership representatives as well as partnerships' own documentation of their efforts.

The report illustrates the ripples of change from partnerships' work to grow [Foundations for Systems Change](#), a framework for tracing key conditions for enabling systems change. We also describe partnerships and draw conclusions using the '[Cornerstone Characteristics](#)', which we developed as learning partner during Round 1 for the Fund. These characteristics, which underpin all projects, include: approaches to partnering, strategies for effecting systems change and infrastructure roles as civil society support organisations. Finally, we return to key questions that surfaced in the interim report on Round 2, which we continued to explore with partnerships in the following year.

What we've learned together is the importance of focussing on the 'how' of systems change; the every-day practices and behaviours, and the mindsets underpinning these, which affect the relationships and dynamics of partnership working and ability of civil society organisations to mobilise change in formal and informal systems.

It is clear that there is a role for civil society infrastructure organisations in convening and stewarding systems, with their the ability to bridge different sectors and levels.

The partnerships they have convened have been on a journey, building their understanding of their system and where they sit in relation to it, testing different strategies, understanding their relative power and influence, and learning along the way. Most have made involving and equipping those with direct experience a core

part of their approach and worked with them to build a more robust evidence base and tell stories for influencing.

The partnerships have benefited from the flexible nature of Cornerstone Fund funding, which has encouraged freedom to test ideas, make mistakes, change directions, and ask questions, decentring being an expert in favour of curiosity and experimentation through conditions of great complexity.

In order to embark on this journey of changing systems, they have needed to build a solid basis for collaboration. They have wrestled with the challenge of shifting power externally and increasingly turned their attention to their own relationships, structures and behaviours — recognising that the internal dynamics of the partnership mirror the external system.

Introduction

The Cornerstone Fund is a collaborative funding programme launched in April 2018 by a group of funders in London. The Fund resources partnerships led by civil society support organisations to bring about systemic change, contributing to “a thriving civil society that is adaptable, resilient, collaborative, sustainable and driven by communities, with a focus on tackling deep seated structural inequalities to improve outcomes for Londoners.”

The Fund currently involves three funders: City Bridge Foundation, The National Lottery Community Fund and Trust for London. There are four in-kind supporters: London Councils, London Funders, London Plus and the Greater London Authority. These organisations* came together in 2018 to experiment with a different approach to funding. They appointed a learning partner and supported grantees to take part in learning activities out of a desire to learn about the effectiveness of this experiment.

This report follows on from an interim report, which covered the first/development stage and first few months of the second/delivery stage of Round 2 work (since Spring 2021). We wrote this report at the start of 2024, so it reflects nearly two years of Round 2 work. It draws on notes from conversations and workshops with partnerships and funders as well as partnerships’ progress reports to consider: how are the Cornerstone partnerships going about their work and what is it that they are doing from day to day to strengthen collaboration, address systemic inequalities and effect systems change? (Partnerships and funders honed in on these themes to explore together during the first learning session of Round 2.)

Time and time again in this work we’ve heard projects reflect on how they might recognise the signals that change is happening; both so that they can nurture these seeds of change, and so that they can feel a sense of hope on a journey that is long and difficult. In our final learning event with projects, we asked them to reflect on the ripples of change that they were seeing in their work. We also looked for these ripples in their reports and in individual learning conversations.

We report on these ripples in accordance with our Foundations for Systems Change learning framework, whilst acknowledging that the boundaries between each foundation are fuzzy and it can be difficult to allocate many of the changes to a single foundation. For each foundation we give an example of a partnership whose story exemplifies the foundation, share insights across partnerships, and provide snippets of detail to illustrate these insights.

In the next section, we detail the two learning frameworks developed for the Fund. We then list the partnerships and tell the stories of the partnerships alongside

insights for each foundation area, followed by a conclusion. You will find key questions throughout the main section of the report, which we are revisiting from the interim report. These questions have guided our learning conversations, along with additional questions that partnerships have been grappling with along the way. The final section of the report draws our learning work to a conclusion.

* Round 1 of the Fund also included John Lyon's Charity.

Definitions

We use the terms 'project(s)' and 'partnership(s)' interchangeably in this report in reference to the 12 funded project partnerships that make up the Fund. We refer to the lead organisations for each project as the 'lead partner(s)' and the other partner organisations as the 'project partner(s)'. On its own, the term 'partner(s)' refers both to lead and wider project partners.

We use the terms 'infrastructure' and 'civil society support' interchangeably to characterise an organisation that provides support to strengthen civil society.

We use civil society organisations (CSOs) interchangeably with voluntary and community organisations (VCS), recognising that civil society is broader than the VCS, extending to other social sector organisations and non-public sector organisations.

We use 'lived experience' to describe the knowledge and wisdom that people who have experienced something first-hand have, which in the Fund include experiences of disability, racial discrimination and trauma, barriers to accessing health care, etc. We recognise that different partnerships adopt or reject this term.

Learning frameworks

This report contextualises learning using two frameworks, both developed for the Fund: the Cornerstone Characteristics and the Foundations for Systems Change. The Foundations framework was co-developed with Round 1 partnerships as the core learning framework for the Fund, and then revised based on work with Round 2 partnerships to incorporate a greater focus on equity in line with the emphasis of Round 2. The Cornerstone Characteristics emerged later in the work with Round 1 partnerships to give language to the interrelated characteristics underpinning all Cornerstone projects.

Cornerstone Characteristics

The three interrelated characteristics describe the core features common to each Cornerstone project:

- They are projects led by civil society support organisations whose role is to support and strengthen civil society.
- They are partnership projects, bringing together groups of organisations to collaborate.
- They are systems change projects, seeking to shift the conditions and dynamics of systems to create better outcomes.

They help us understand the ‘what’ of the projects — the different approaches that each partnership has taken in designing their partnership project. In our [Round 1 learning report](#), we looked at how these characteristics were expressed by each of the partnerships. We did the same for the [Round 2 interim report](#). In this report, we identify how each of the projects whose story we tell reflects the characteristics. We also refer to them when we speak about the system change tactics and strategies partnerships are adopting — the ways their partnerships are developing and the roles that are being played.

Infrastructure roles

We identified four main types of support roles that infrastructure organisations are playing to support and strengthen civil society. Usually one role is more dominant, although most partnerships demonstrate more than one of these roles at different times. The role can be shared across more than one partner or sit mostly with the lead partner. These roles are:

- **Convenor:** Brings different stakeholders or system actors together to work more collaboratively.
- **Capacity-Builder:** Enhances the skills and knowledge of civil society to influence and shape systems for better outcomes.
- **Innovator:** Experiments with approaches that are more participative, collaborative, person-centred, and equitable to disrupt the usual way of doing things.
- **Insight-Gatherer:** Gathers evidence, stories and insights from people and groups with first-hand experience of a problem or system, and uses this to influence for change.

Partnership forms

Cornerstone Fund resources collaborations and partnerships, but is not prescriptive about the nature of these. Round 2 Partnerships are very diverse in terms of membership, size and purpose. Despite the wide variety of form and function, we have broadly identified three types of partnership in Round 2, whilst acknowledging that many partnerships are a hybrid of more than one form. They are:

- **Research and Knowledge Hub:** Partners come together to gather and share data and insight, perspectives and expertise, to become more effective at influencing their systems.
- **Alliance:** Partners come together to develop collective voice, join up services and build relational power through working together and with people and communities.
- **Social Change Lab:** Partners come together to test and create something new and disrupt traditional ways of doing things, seeking to change power dynamics, narratives, mindsets and cultures.

Systems change strategies

As in Round 1, there seem to be broadly four systems change strategies in Round 2, although most partnerships will likely use more than one approach over the course of their project. By system strategies, we mean the ways in which partnerships are seeking to intervene in systems to mobilise change. The four styles of strategy are:

- **Influencing:** Advocating for change and strengthening the voice of Londoners. This strategy focuses on how existing systems, e.g. the health and care system, or the media, are failing to help people thrive, feel listened to or represented.

- **Cooperation:** Developing collective power and collaborative approaches to change. Cooperation is the work of creating alliances and networks to pursue common work.
- **Connecting:** Creating more networked and joined-up systems of support. Connecting is the work of breaking down silos, building relationships and joining up existing systems and services better for better outcomes.
- **Disruption:** Subverting the status quo and changing underlying cultures, mindsets and behaviours. This strategy seeks deeper social and individual change, focusing on creating new ways of thinking and alternative approaches to the current system, innovating and building the new alongside the old, to show what different can look and feel like.

Overall, we've not found anything in our final phase of learning to significantly add to or change these characteristics or the way they are showing up in Cornerstone, and we'd like to have had more time to explore them with partnerships and to consider whether any of these approaches are being seen as more or less successful.

It seems fair to say that the creative combination of different approaches seems to be creating the most impact: e.g. gathering insights through an alliance that is disrupting usual ways of doing things, or convening an unusual set of partners to learn and experiment together and influence change. As well as referring to them throughout the report, we've reflected in the final conclusion on how different characteristics have expressed themselves and what more we've learnt about them in practice.

Foundations for Systems Change

Voice, agency and equity	Vision, structures and relationships for collaboration	System understanding and behaviours	Learning and co-production	Collective power and influence
We surface and address inequalities in voice, power and access to decision-making.	We develop shared purpose and collaborate to achieve collective impact and change.	We recognise that systems, not individual organisations, create impact for people and that we have a role in nurturing healthy systems.	We learn and adapt with all our stakeholders when working for change in complex systems and ecosystems.	We have a deep understanding of power dynamics and use diverse strategies for influencing change.

Systems change is a long term process, one that will continue long beyond the lifetime of these funded projects. That’s why we have focussed in our learning work on what can be done to build the foundations for longer term change.

The foundations identified in the framework reflect key conditions for enabling systems change, and their presence suggests that desired outcomes are more likely to emerge in the long term. These help us describe the ‘how’ of the projects — the practices, processes and behaviours which help to shift and shape the underlying conditions holding systemic problems in place, and enable partnerships to mobilise change.

Our hypothesis is that new and better systems, structures, cultures and services can be designed, with fairer and more collaborative relationships, power dynamics, governance arrangements and value systems; but these foundations need to be in place first.

Within Cornerstone, we have been learning about what it takes to build these foundations, and looking for the ripples of change that then emerge. In this report, we use the Foundations to describe and explore each of the foundations and the ripples of change, illustrating our learning through partnership stories and snippets.

Partnerships

“So there's a kind of official working together and working within the structures and methodologies, like monitoring and reporting, but there's a more informal learning from each other, supporting each other, peer support — almost like we are building a community of care, and mutual aid and support in a sector which is incredibly, incredibly stressed.”

- Partnership lead

Cornerstone partnerships are led by civil society infrastructure organisations in collaboration with voluntary and community sector (VCS) groups and other social sector stakeholders. They vary in scope and scale, with some working in a neighbourhood and others working in a borough, across multiple boroughs or across London. This report contains stories of partnerships throughout and the conclusion includes snapshots of where partnerships had got to at the time of our final learning conversations in December 2023.

Note: some of the listed partnerships are not covered in the report as we did not have enough contact with them to learn from the development of their work.

List of partnerships (name and lead partner)

Measuring what Matters - AdviceUK

Unheard Voices - Africa Advocacy Foundation (on behalf of One Voice Network)

Health Inequalities: System Change in NW London - BME Health Forum

Givings Together - Bridge Renewal Trust/Haringey Giving

No Wrong Door - Global Black Thrive CIC

Building Young Brixton - High Trees Community Development Trust

Reframing the Disability Narrative - Inclusion London / Inclusion Barnet

Cornerstone Croydon - London Youth

Trans Learning Partnership - Spectra CIC

Datawise London - Superhighways @ Kingston Voluntary Action

Tower Hamlets Equalities Partnership - Tower Hamlets CVS

North Central London Volunteering PLUS Partnership - Volunteer Centre Camden

Changing systems together: the evolving roles of civil society

In the Cornerstone Fund we've observed the tension partnerships are navigating between addressing immediate needs and advancing systemic change. Civil society infrastructure organisations are being pulled closer to frontline service delivery as gaps continue to appear in the frontline provision of statutory and voluntary services; they are seeing and wanting to respond to the many crises they see affecting Londoners such as the cost of living, systemic racism and health inequalities, climate crisis and youth violence.

At the same time, they recognise that without significant and long-term systemic change, these crises, their impacts and the needs which they create will become ever harder to address, creating even bigger gaps between available resources and the ability of the sector to respond — hence their desire to try and mobilise change in a way that focuses on underlying causes rather than only addressing symptoms.

Cornerstone partnerships have grappled throughout the process with bringing their grassroots members or partner organisations with them on their systems change journey, what language to use, and how to build capacity for effecting long-term change in a climate where so many groups and their services are facing significant short-term pressures. Many partnerships designed programmes which they hoped could both meet some immediate need and also create some systemic change.

The Cornerstone Projects responded to the challenge in a few ways from involving those with 'lived experience' including opportunities for building skills and capabilities, creating cultures of care and solidarity, and going deeper rather than broad.

Bringing the experience and knowledge of people with firsthand experiences of the problem has been a crucial response. Deeper systemic change requires a robust diagnosis of the problem, and people closest to the problem are best able to make that diagnosis. Involvement of those with lived experience also builds legitimacy to advocate for change. However, in centring people experiencing the problem, it's important to ensure that they are getting value from their involvement and having some of their immediate needs met.

Another response has been to recognise the enormous pressures that people are facing in balancing the immediate and long-term needs in a context that often feels hopeless, and the extra burdens placed on people trying to change the systems that harm them. Partnerships have made sure they take the time to build solid and lasting peer relationships at organisational and individual level.

A third response has been to recognise the limits to capacity which are so apparent across civil society and public services; leading to a focus on depth rather than breadth. Many partnerships are electing to stay relatively small, and engage flexibly with different system levels and actors, rather than trying to build large, all-encompassing partnerships. Where they focus is informed by their analysis of the system — through gaining a deeper understanding of the nature and boundaries of the system they seek to change they can use their limited resources most effectively.

It's clearer than ever that there is no single route to mobilising systemic change and there are many roles that civil society infrastructure organisations can play, though their effectiveness depends on the nature of their connections, capacity and strategy.

After two rounds of the Fund, we are confident that a focus on building the foundations for long term systems change is a helpful approach to designing and tracking progress on a relatively short-lived project. We have also found the foundations framework that we co-designed at the start of Round 1 still holds true, recognising that we've been able to deepen our understanding of the foundations substantially. We have seen that some of the foundations have felt more pertinent and possible to build than others in Round 2.

In particular, Voice, Agency and Equity has been particularly important for a number of Round 2 projects. By extension, so has Learning and Co-production. For these partnerships, the valuing and centring of lived experience has been essential to the work of systems change and their work has focussed on the ways of working needed to do this.

Creating the Vision, Structures and Relationships for collaboration has been an ongoing theme for all partnerships. Their ability to build this foundation has been impacted by stretched organisational and individual capacity and staff turnover, which at times have hindered the deeper and more meaningful relationships required for difficult conversations about power, equity and purpose. However, all partnerships who took part in the final round of learning with us were clear that their work has strengthened existing relationships and developed new ones as a key impact of the work.

Building System Understanding and Behaviours, and Collective Power and Influence has felt even more challenging for Round 2 projects than for Round 1, given the resource pressures that have contextualised Round 2, in the wake of Covid-19 lockdowns, and the impact of continued austerity and the cost of living crisis. Partnerships have been generally able to better understand the power dynamics of the system, and what they can and cannot influence. Access to decision-makers has been particularly challenging, and several partnerships have concentrated on collecting evidence and making data more accessible and robust,

in hopes of being able to use this to effect policy change in future. Some partnerships have begun to see the pay off of more collaboration across their system to improve outcomes.

In the following sections, we share key questions we've been holding and exploring through our learning conversations with Cornerstone partnerships. We also illustrate each of the foundations through stories and direct quotes from partnerships, and we share some key insights that have surfaced over the past year or longer.

Building the Foundations for Systems Change

Voice, agency and equity

This foundation is about surfacing and addressing inequalities in voice, power and access to decision-making.



“My first learning would be if we are talking about the opportunities, these opportunities need to be properly resourced, both in terms of money, time, and capacity. Secondly,...because of this complexity, it takes a very long time. And it takes a specific set of skills within people who are handling these relationships, to actually manage this and facilitate it.”

- Partnership lead

Health Inequalities: Systemic Change in NW London

STORY

Addressing inequalities in the NHS through appropriate and effective health advocacy

“We are conscious that systems change comes from structural and cultural changes at a variety of levels and although these are small steps that we are seeing, we think it is encouraging.”

- BME Health Forum

Health Inequalities: Systemic Change in NW London project is led by BME Health Forum and delivered in partnership with six BAME organisations: Al Hasaniya, Ethiopian Women's Empowerment Group, FAWA (French African Welfare Association), Iranian Association, Marylebone Bangladeshi Society and Midaye Somali Development Network. The aim is to reduce barriers and discrimination faced by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities within the health system in North West London.

The partnership has recruited and trained a bilingual health advocate at each of the partner organisations who can provide effective and appropriate advocacy support for people in the languages spoken in their communities, and report back on the barriers, issues and experiences of their clients.

Health advocates have themselves faced difficulties accessing NHS services and have personal experiences of discrimination and racism despite the fact they face fewer barriers in light of their fluency in English and understanding of the system. They are drawing on these experiences to think through how the service can best meet needs and how the system needs to be changed.

One of the most promising developments reported by health advocates has been that frontline health staff have been much more receptive to patients after they have identified themselves as being health advocates and that their status/role seems to help legitimise a patient's concerns. The partnership has responded by providing advocates with badges at their request to formalise this status. Advocates are getting more confident about the role they are playing and the quality of their support is improving.

Monthly meetings bring health advocates together to discuss cases, offer support with complaints and talk about how this work can lead to systemic

change in the NHS. Advocates are not expected to do the added work of influencing services, but their stories are critical for enabling that work and the partnership leads have explored when and how to have conversations with advocates about wider systems change.

- Role: Insight-Gatherer
- Partnership: Research and Knowledge Hub
- Systems Change Strategy: Influencing

No Wrong Door

STORY

Addressing inequalities in a system through reflecting on the qualities of the system that the partnership embodies

“Uniting partners along lines of equitable practices remains a constant challenge. While understanding may be expressed, practice often does not reflect the theory, which has led to moments of discomfort, tension, and conflict. Incidents of tension or conflict continue to identify the need for an investment in practices within the partnership, before widening systemic interventions.”

- Black Thrive

No Wrong Door is a cross-sector collaboration between Black Thrive, Renaisi, Disability Advice Service Lambeth, Lambeth Vocational Services and First Step Trust. Though there are many organisations providing employment support in Lambeth, no coherent system exists for employment support for Black and Disabled residents. No Wrong Door seeks to increase coordination for systems change. After observing a lack of clarity about what systems change is, as well as the boundaries of the system the partnership seeks to change, the partnership made a concerted effort to establish understanding.

General systems understanding has improved through workshops and co-learning spaces within the partnership. This includes greater recognition that Black people have disproportionately negative experiences of employment and acknowledgement of the systemic reasons behind this and

greater awareness of the material struggles of Disabled people. There has also been research into the social service system in Lambeth.

In addition, System Conditions research has taken place at Black Thrive, Disability Advice Service Lambeth and Vocation Matters to highlight how structural power dynamics are reflected in interpersonal dynamics. This research explores the ways in which institutional working norms impact different partners' engagement, beginning from a recognition that we all embody the systems that we move through. The research aims to highlight trends when it comes to barriers to the provision of collaborative, person-centred support.

All partners have reported a deepening of their understanding of race and disability equity regardless of their starting point. Phase 1 brought race equity, social model of disability, and co-production deep-dives. Phase 2 has focussed more on the practical implementation of equitable practices e.g. diffusion of power, transparency, collective ownership and accountability.

“Partners have welcomed the inclusion of trauma-informed, somatic practices into partnership meetings. This feeling is an intangible measure of success within our working dynamic.”

- Black Thrive

- Role: Convenor
- Partnership: Social Change Lab
- Systems Change Strategy: Collaboration (Connecting) *and* Innovation

Key Questions

How do partnerships further centre grassroots groups and people with experiences of marginalisation experiences in the work and deepen the conversations and practices for equity?

How do partnerships have better conversations about lived experience, inequity and intersectional identities as we reshape systems and services to make them more responsive to diverse experiences and lives?

Key Insights

1. People with experiences of the systems at hand are well placed to lead on aspects of the work. Bringing the voice of those with 'lived experience' into the work makes it stronger. Language matters as sometimes words can be disempowering or render people one-dimensional. As such, the words used to describe people's experiences vary across partnerships. Preparation is also critical, laying the foundations for good involvement.
 - BME Health Forum health advocates are from the communities they work within, have similar life experiences to many of the people they work with and speak the same community language(s). Health advocates' own experiences are informing and enhancing the work. At the start of the partnership, senior leaders represented their organisations, but now the health advocates more so come together as a peer group. The quality of discussions with health advocates has benefitted from their organisations' faith in them to have the conversations without the presence of managers. Read the Health Inequalities: Systemic Change in NW London story on page 16.
 - At the heart of the Trans Learning Partnership (TLP), which collects and improves data on trans experiences to improve services and policymaking, sits a community participatory structure and peer-engagement mechanism described as the 'community framework', enacted through various peer groups. One of these is a Trans Person of Colour (TPoC) Advisory Group. Before any participatory research work began, it was important for TPoC communities to see how much structural inclusion mattered to the partnership. Carried out during 2022, this work helped to develop a higher level of trust with members of TPoC communities, including through the research process. Read the Trans Learning Partnership story on page 37.

2. Upskilling is a critical part of long-term systems change work so that those who are bringing their lived experience can exercise their voice over time rather than as a one-off event. Partnerships are considering how to provide the right support and development opportunities.
 - AdviceUK ('Measuring what Matters') are identifying new ways for member advice-giving organisations to hear, record and amplify the voice of the communities they advise, to support more grounded measuring of advice service performance. One partner is looking to train up young people who themselves have experience of advice-related issues and journeys to gather feedback from other young people who are using advice services at the moment. Another is looking at how they can work with women who receive advice to develop their skills and volunteer with the organisation in a variety of roles, potentially to be involved in monitoring and evaluation, offering a joined-up pathway from receiving advice to supporting others. Read the Measuring What Matters story on page 29.
 - Lived Experience Leads' (LEL) skills, expertise and energy has been critical to the No Wrong Door partnership's work to improve Black and Disabled community members' experiences with employment support through a coordinated support system. Deepened involvement of user voice (LELs and wider community members) has assisted partners in widening their understanding of different disabilities. All LELs from No Wrong Door have co-designed Development Plans outlining their desires for personal and professional development. (Their development is a metric of success). Read the No Wrong Door story on page 17.
3. Putting people with lived experience in the lead and valuing the different forms of experience people bring comes with challenges and considerations. Staff and volunteers face a range of potential triggers and there is a high need for support, reflective practice and clinical supervision.
 - BME Health Forum has put in place more emotional support for the health advocates in the form of regular (online and face-to-face) supervision meetings with an NHS specialist from the IAPT service (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies).
 - Trans Learning Partnership's trans staff have experienced high levels of trauma and stress due to the challenges of the hostile external environment and the stories and data that they engage with on a daily basis. When working in the sector, there is no escape from transphobia, and so trans staff can be re-traumatised daily. The result

has been a cycle of short employment periods and burnout, which is replicated across the sector with organisations who carry out work with trans communities and other highly stigmatised communities. They have a wellbeing budget, and are considering how to build in coverage of needs of staff with lived experience of issues relevant to the partnership financially and capacity-wise.

- Cornerstone Croydon, which enables the youth sector to offer community-based, culturally competent interventions to improve young people's mental health, has seen how youth workers bring their lived experiences of the issues they are dealing with and how this impacts on their work. They are witnessing a culture of suppressing trauma and are trying to create space for surfacing and recognising triggers that can impact on the way the youth workers respond to young people. A key aim of the supervision they receive is increasing reflexivity, empathy, emotional connection and processing — but not all organisations are well set up to take advantage of it and some youth workers, particularly men, have not necessarily seen the need for it. Read the Cornerstone Croydon story on page 23.

“The key learning is in terms of the relationship between the professionals and the representatives from the communities. I hesitate to use people with lived experience, because if you're looking at the issues around identity, this whole lived experience almost comes from a position of power, and those in positions of power and influence are mainly white middle class males, so the term comes from these frames of reference. So everyone else becomes a person with lived experience, and it threatens to stick that person to a one-dimensional identity, when in reality people are not one dimensional.”

- Partnership lead

Vision, structures and relationships for collaboration

This foundation is about developing shared purpose and collaborating to achieve collective impact and change.



“One of the things we always underestimated at the beginning was what it will take to embed...a way of working within each of the organisations and see it as a way of working rather than a project...It's become a normalised way of working for organisations, which has taken a long time to get it there. That's a massive system change, because it means that organisations, rather than being quite siloed in terms of how they work, just think of themselves as part of a network, as part of a system that they work within, and how young people access services.”

- Partnership lead

Working collaboratively with youth workers across a place to address young people's mental health

“A really big learning across all of us has been moving from service delivery to partners collaborating together. I see it's a reflection of the system that charities operate in, the funding dynamics, that really it takes an organisational mind shift to move away — from our point of view — from ‘I am the lead’. And from the opposite side, I'm not a service delivery provider, where I've got a contract that says deliver training; but actually, both sides being really invested on an equal level. I think that's happened alongside the steering group. I think there's similar growth, that the more that you put in, the more you begin to get out.”

- London Youth

The Cornerstone Croydon Programme is a two-year collaboration between partner organisations London Youth, The Brandon Centre, and Power the Fight. It aims to address post-pandemic mental health challenges among young people in Croydon. Cornerstone Croydon is testing a new model for providing support to youth workers which helps them with the challenges of responding to the complex mental health issues they are meeting in their youth work. The three partners are providing a joined-up, complimentary provision which has been tested when there has been a serious incidence of youth violence, and they have had to really work together to hold the participants well.

Alongside providing clinical supervision to youth workers, the project is developing a broader system convening role in Croydon which goes well beyond the core partnership.

The steering group of 34 members was originally envisaged as a way to oversee and advise the project, but has become something more fruitful. The setup of the steering group was time consuming and intensive, and sometimes felt like dragging people along. Now, members are working well. There is shared learning and buy-in. Rather than focussing on KPI's and outputs, it is developing relationships between practitioners from different sectors, and building a better understanding of what is happening in the system. It is surfacing gaps in support, such as around the transition from

youth to adult mental health services. For some youth organisations, involvement has also offered development opportunities for staff who are interested in working systemically.

The more that the steering group has started to work on projects collaboratively, the more people are feeding in and getting something back from it. Members are meeting up to work on smaller projects together.

One ongoing challenge has been to involve CAMHS, who are extremely stretched. Their absence creates a vacuum in which assumptions about why they aren't in the room circulate. Overall, the mental health system is enormously stretched, with little space for change — so how can they work in this context to try to create a shift? The partnership's focus remains on creating more understanding and empathy about the current situation rather than trying to change it directly.

- Role: Convenor
- Partnership: Social Change Lab
- Systems Change Strategy: Collaboration (Connecting)

Key Questions

How can partnerships understand the roles that are needed for the work and what these look like?

*How are partnerships viewing the idea of system leadership — who are the leaders in this work and how are they practising their leadership?
What other concepts are helpful (e.g. activism, stewardship)?*

Key Insights

1. Funding a partnership instead of individual organisations can be effective and resource-efficient on a number of levels, from concentrating and lessening the burden of administration (especially securing funding and reporting on the use of funds) to sharing specialist skills. It is also clear that the form needs to be flexible enough to meet a variety of needs and should follow function.
 - BME Health Forum handles the administration associated with the Cornerstone Fund grant on behalf of their partnership, and also has

evaluation systems in place to support the project. Other partners add value with their deep knowledge of their specific communities.

- Trans Learning Partnership sees the benefits of partnership for the four partners, where specialist skills like fundraising can be shared across the group. TLP has enabled data sharing between partners, enabling them to get a better picture of the needs of their communities.
 - After two years of exploration, Building Young Brixton, a consortium of eight Lambeth-based partners dedicated to improving outcomes for Lambeth's young people, decided to remain as a partnership hosted by High Trees Development Trust, rather than setting up as an independent entity- recognising the value that a lead organisation can bring in terms of funding opportunities and stability. Read the Building Young Brixton story on page 45.
 - Datawise London, a partnership programme at Kingston Voluntary Action led by Superhighways, supports London's small charities and community organisations to better use data to shape services and influence change. A less formal partnership than they initially had is meeting their needs best, enabling them to draw on different expertise as and when needed. The strong relationships they've built since Round 1 of the Fund help them identify the best route or organisation to connect with for particular work and they spot gaps more easily now. Read the full Datawise London story on page 44.
2. The capacity to build and sustain relationships is a prerequisite for systems change, but trust takes time to build and everyone (funders, partnerships) tends to undervalue relationship-building time. Changes of partners and staff can be challenging and slows down the pace of work. It's important to recognise challenges for partners, stay open to different approaches and notice energy ebbs and flows.
- The Givings Together partnership of place-based giving schemes working to address structural discrimination and access to support and funding for diverse communities has become a community of care, a place of mutual aid and support in a sector which is incredibly stressed. Read the Givings Together story on page 39.
 - In No Wrong Door, the partners took a step back to build trusted relationships after early delivery-focussed work lent itself to a siloed and competitive culture. This work shifted the culture significantly towards more collaborative working, though there are still concerns

that work will become siloed again as capacity constraints force a focus on delivery over relationships.

- The Measuring What Matters partnership has seen six of eleven partners go through significant changes due to sickness, retirement, and challenges with recruitment. This amounts to a significant ongoing challenge of continuity in the partnership, especially when working with small organisations.
 - Cornerstone Croydon has seen changes in key contacts at each partnership organisation, which they've fortunately been able to weather due to a strong set up and the key role of the programme manager. The programme's setup was time-intensive, requiring significant relationship building with local youth practitioners. They've reflected that future programmes should consider allocating more time for this relationship-building phase.
 - Inclusion London has been impacted by the additional time and resource needed to facilitate an inclusive partnership which requires accessible communications and ways of working.
3. Buy-in at senior level doesn't always translate to change in practice or behaviours at delivery level, and vice versa. Discussions had at one level don't always filter down to effective working relationships at another. It's important to involve staff at different levels of the organisation, especially practitioners, and give them the opportunity to meet and work with peers.
- For Building Young Brixton, stronger relationships between practitioners have led to increased referrals of young people across BYB partners and an increase in peer-support and peer-learning, seeing themselves as part of a network and system.
 - For Cornerstone Croydon, establishing this programme necessitated substantial relationship building with youth organisations and youth workers. Although there was organisational buy-in, the uptake of clinical supervision was initially slow, as youth workers did not necessarily see the benefit at first. This has improved over time due to the effort partners invested in engaging with participants.
4. Developing collaborative relationships for systems change requires partners to reckon with power — how they hold it, how they share it, and how power dynamics are embedded in charity structures. Partnerships have found it important to interrogate the sources and uses of their power and how they ask others to recognise their power.

- In No Wrong Door, partners took a step back to build trust and shared understanding after tensions emerged, surfacing different orientations to the work. One tension was to do with project delivery and systems change. Some partners approached the partnership from more of a delivery perspective, being less focussed on "theory" and focussing energy more on "practical" outputs. Other partners found the emphasis on delivery at the expense of fundamental principles (i.e. race and disability equity) concerning as systemic issues were apparent in partners' ways of working. The orientation toward delivery also lent itself to a siloed and competitive culture in the partnership. Partners have taken steps to shift the culture towards more collaborative working in line with shared principles, though there are still concerns that work will become siloed again amidst capacity constraints.
- Givings Together partners have explored how participatory grantmaking can remove barriers that prevent certain communities from accessing grants and support. They took their time in the first phase of work to take a step back from agreeing a specific model to test, instead getting on the same page about language and purpose. This has laid the groundwork for discussions of power and how participation can be a tool within grantmaking to tackle different power imbalances. There is a desire to be honest about what sharing power and involvement means and the burden it can put on people with structural barriers to accessing resources and services, when they are already struggling with accessing basic needs and self-care.
- Building Young Brixton has made intentional efforts to ensure that young people are meaningfully involved in leading the partnership's work. This has included the Young Leaders programme, a paid opportunity for young people in Lambeth to ensure that youth voice is centred in the partnership and to create more accountability around how young people are involved in decision-making. Young Leaders facilitate listening events to understand what is important to young people and make recommendations on how services can respond.

“[The partnership is] more like an ecosystem, it just moves and shifts a little bit more, and then relationships spin off and become other projects, and then they come back in again and become part of [the partnership] more. There's a fluidity to it which is much more natural in some ways, I think.”

- Partnership lead

System understanding and behaviours

This foundation is about recognising that systems, not individual organisations, create impact for people and that we all have a role in nurturing healthy systems.



“We are seeing systems change not as external intervention, but modelling change inside the partnership; we are a system that also can be changed.”

- Partnership lead

Measuring What Matters

STORY

Building better system understanding to improve the funding of advice and guidance services

“We think that there is certainly openness from funders to having conversations. We found that particularly from those who are directly involved in grant management and support, there's already a significant understanding of the sorts of issues that people face. There is, we feel, probably a gap between the people who are running funding organisations, commissioning services day to day, and then those who are involved in governance and or due diligence type work. How do they understand how a service will operate or what a service can deliver?”

- AdviceUK

AdviceUK's partnership project, *Measuring what Matters*, aims to challenge funders on the ways in which the current monitoring and evaluation of advice services are limiting their effectiveness. Their work is beginning to help funders gain a new understanding of the advice and guidance field, and a perspective of their role as funders in shaping the way services monitor and evaluate their work. They are helping funders to understand what's actually happening on the ground, bringing funders to the organisations.

The partnership has discovered in their work with funders that they are using the information reported to them, but are not widely accustomed to communicating how they are using it. More fundamentally, they are surfacing discrepancies between written reports that a funder might get, on which they might be basing their decisions, versus that experience of the system, the journey that people take through the system from their point of view.

AdviceUK supports partners to map individual client journeys in a way that puts lived experience at the centre of monitoring and evaluation efforts, both in terms of helping funders to understand and value more complex types of support (e.g. casework that may take many months to resolve), and also in support of advice services to better design their services for those they are advising.

They are surfacing a tension between the sorts of outputs that funders are wanting to have which they use to make a political case for a service, and the

data that the service providers and wider system actually need to improve, to have more impact. They are seeing that there is still a focus on the big numbers: income generated, numbers of people seen, numbers of enquiries. Politicians want to be able to say, we have helped 10,000 people. Rather than being able to say, this service has made a real lasting difference and changed the lives of a hundred families. A big number doesn't necessarily reflect a big change, if all that's happened is that lots of people have only partially completed a journey.

The choice of focus on monitoring and evaluation seems to have been a useful one, in terms of a point of intervention in the wider system. The approach of trying to offer opportunities for direct observation of the current system has been effective. It seems to have been really important for funders to see things with their own eyes. There is hope that these visits will feed into work that's been done to design new funding programs, and help to bring about change. More recently, the use of visual client journey maps has also made these journeys visible in a new way, showing the ripple effects of investing in interventions using a 'whole person, whole community' approach.

- Role: Capacity-Builder
- Partnership: Social Change Lab
- Systems Change Strategy: Influencing

North Central London Volunteering PLUS Partnership

STORY

Growing system understanding and behaviours through navigating a complex system to build trusting relationships

“It's been really good, the flexibility of the programme... that's something that has been really critical for us. If we had very strict, specific outcomes, we could have forced the NHS to do some of that, just to tick the boxes of the funding. But the NHS wouldn't have wanted that and we would have not achieved our bigger objectives of being more integrated more, collaborative. We would have just annoyed them basically, rather than actually being there to adapt to what is needed. So that flexibility has been really helpful.”

- Volunteer Centre Camden

The North Central London Volunteering PLUS Partnership, led by Volunteer Centre Camden, consists of the lead volunteer infrastructure organisations for each of the four North Central London boroughs: Community Barnet, Enfield Voluntary Action, Bridge Renewal Trust (Haringey) and Voluntary Action Islington. It's the first time these volunteering infrastructure organisations have worked together, and what has brought them together is the opportunity to influence the NHS in North Central London, working through and with the new Integrated Care System. They all want to develop a better, more sustained relationship with the NHS. Their aim is to strategically develop health volunteering across North Central London and to embed volunteering in NHS workstreams and priorities.

The project is building on some of the practice developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, although conversations began even prior to the pandemic, with a general recognition that NHS doesn't have a strategic approach to volunteering even though it values the work of volunteers, and it doesn't have good consistent engagement with community and voluntary organisations. The pandemic enabled them to take some very practical steps, including setting up a central hub for vaccine volunteers and 'made the value of volunteering more visible in the NHS'. Some money then became available for the ICS to explore volunteering and Camden Volunteer Centre was commissioned to look at how volunteering might strategically be developed. A partnership of all the Volunteer Centres across the NCL area was

established and began meeting. Now their struggle is to make more systemic change.

They see volunteering as a way to develop stronger relationships between the NHS and local communities. People can volunteer to gain skills but also to be part of their local community and get a first hand understanding of how the NHS works. This makes them more likely to engage in consultations and get involved in providing feedback, and this can help to make the NHS more responsive to different communities. It can also help to make communities more responsible for health, not seeing it as just a job for professionals.

Trying to make progress whilst the new ICS is setting up has been slow and frustrating. They are focussing on building a long term relationship, whilst looking for opportunities to support specific projects and offer their expertise. They recently have found a new champion within the North Central London ICS to work with and have been invited to be part of several priority pieces of work.

Overall, they very much see themselves as slowly trying to become an integral part of the system they want to influence, and at the same time open up that system and make it more porous to communities.

“We're still the peasants on the donkeys who've been lucky to be let in, to kind of have a look around the lovely citadel and do a bit of work. So we're still at that sort of stage, whereas one day we'll have a legitimate place and home, there, with the keys.”

- Volunteer Centre Camden

- Role: Convenor
- Partnership: Alliance
- Systems Change Strategy: Influencing

Key Questions

How can partnerships further explore and articulate what the system is, where they sit in relation to the system, and the desired impact on system conditions they want to have?

How do partnerships view their relationships to the systems they want to change — are they part of or separate from those systems?

Key Insights

1. Organisations and individuals have to work together to change a system, and effective partnering requires that each actor understands the role they can best play. Some partnerships go as far as to focus on illuminating specific roles needed, for example that of funders.
 - Givings Together is clear that they can do their bit, but that other parts of the sector have to take steps with them in order to address structural discrimination in access to funding and shift decision-making power over how money is spent to communities.
 - AdviceUK ('Measuring what Matters') is seeking to bring together funders with organisations to observe what is happening in the system in which they work, giving decision makers an accurate view of what's happening in organisations they fund and exposing the realities of the system. This is providing funders a more realistic picture of the services they are funding than what they would understand through reading reports alone.
 - Datawise London are challenging the problem that data about the voluntary sector in London isn't accessible in one place. A multitude of siloed directories and databases exist. A lack of data standards and external publication means it's difficult to collate and compare data at a regional level. There is huge duplication of effort, with sector organisations being required to add their data in multiple locations. Changing this will require a coordinated effort.
2. Building a shared understanding of the system the partnership is trying to change is important for having a coherent and realistic set of objectives and being able to track and communicate progress. As indicated in the interim report on Round 2, some partnerships see the system they are targeting as a formal, often statutory system, involving commissioned and organised services and programmes for care, support or health prevention. For others, the way they see the system is much broader and encompasses also the

intangible aspects of wider systems: culture, relationships, power dynamics, mindsets and beliefs.

- No Wrong Door looks to have more data and voice on community experiences and barriers to deepen understanding of issues Black disabled people face across the partnership.
 - Building Young Brixton is interested in changing the small system they're in and to take stock of and value the small changes that happen. They understand that they are the system; they see themselves within a system of support for young people, embedding a different way of working within partner organisations.
 - Cornerstone Croydon partners have recognised the need for more boundaries and a set of proportionate and realistic objectives for systems change, so that progress in this area can be better understood and communicated. Partners have seen how the mental health system is tied into many other systems and therefore clear system boundaries support the scoping of their work.
3. Those involved in systems change work benefit from adopting a systems mindset (an ability to see the complexity of wholes, relationships and patterns rather than simply parts) in order to learn and adapt. This includes being able to recognise when structural barriers are not within the partnership's realm of influence and when to develop new relationships outside of partnerships to extend their influence. It also includes the importance of recognising how the partnership is a microcosm of the wider system, and change begins with modelling new behaviours and ways of working within the partnership itself.
- BME Health Forum has found that making formal complaints is perhaps not an effective route to systemic change as the process is bureaucratic and challenging for many patients. They instead see the potential for change through the relationships between health advocates and health professionals.
 - The Trans Learning Partnership team has determined that the current political environment is not conducive to influencing change due, for example, to the level of scrutiny on trans projects and transphobia in the media, so they are focussing for now on improving the evidence base for influencing in the areas of employment and housing.
 - Building Young Brixton Steering Group members have recognised the importance of developing shared understanding of the impact of structural inequalities and racial injustice and how it directly affects

their ability to support young people, the majority of whom are Black and from minoritised communities, both in terms of their own cultural competency as well as how services respond to racial injustice and broader issues of structural inequality.

4. The language of systems change can itself be a barrier to the work of systems change. If the goal is to enable the people who are at the sharp end of the problem to lead the change, we need to find a language which does not feel remote from their everyday experiences.

- No Wrong Door have grappled with how to make systems change an accessible concept and see the language we use as being itself a barrier — many metaphors are not inclusive, or accessible to people with visual impairments, for example.
- Measuring what Matters have experienced how talk of systems change can feel quite 'dry and boring'. They try to incorporate ideas of systems change into the work, reframing systems change as 'whole person, whole community' advice. They understand advice-giving as part of a wider journey of systems change, aware that advice alone does not necessarily bring about systems change — advice is a way of understanding what's going wrong, which can help to identify where upstream change is needed.
- In the Health Inequalities: Systemic Change in NW London project, how they talk about systems change with health advocates is mostly through talking about systemic and institutional racism and patterns of behaviour in the NHS; not about changing structures or policies.

“We are probably closer towards the systems change we wanted to see than what we even maybe might have imagined in the beginning; those relationships are actually developing. We're actually getting to the point where we can share some of this, but it's actually changing the physical nature of some of those systems as well.”

- Partnership lead

Learning and co-production

This foundation is about learning and adapting with all stakeholders when working for change in complex environments.



“A common theme across the four work strands has been creating and facilitating peer learning spaces – stepping away from us e.g. being trainers or participants and instead convening spaces where people can share and learn from each other.”

- Partnership lead

Trans Learning Partnership

STORY

Learning and co-production through participatory research and sense-making with trans people

“Community consultations run by the TLP often carry a sense of hopelessness from participants due to barriers faced because of intersections of race/ethnicity, mental health, disability, neurodivergence, and immigration status, as well as the sentiment that our communities can only look to our own for help. There is also ambivalence towards how trans communities’ capacity for self-sufficiency is perceived by allies as a means of self-care in light of current resilience discourse. This is all a huge weight for trans staff to address and bear, both in the personal and professional sense.”

- Spectra

The Trans Learning Partnership consists of four trans service delivery organisations, trans community representatives, and academics, coming together to share & pool data on the health, resilience, and social and economic participation of trans people in order to improve services and advocate for policy improvements. The partnership is peer-led and delivered using a community framework.

TLP recognises the necessity of robust data for informing and influencing policy and improving services for trans people in the face of a poor evidence base regarding trans communities’ experiences and a rise in anti-trans policy. However, they also recognise the high levels of institutional distrust in the trans community, resulting in a need to approach research in a deeply engaged and participatory way.

Internal to the partnership, Data Officers based at partner organisations have embarked on a data mapping project to identify gaps and best practices in how data on the experiences of trans people is collected in each of their organisations in order to understand the needs of those organisations. Comparisons across the partnership have already driven the development of a Monitoring, Verification and Evaluation (MVE) platform.

The team has also developed community participatory action research projects to understand trans people’s experiences of employment and housing and their other social and material assets, as well as a survey about

these experiences and the type and quality of support networks and services available. The TLP has plans to produce a resource hub as a repository for this kind of information for the sector.

Despite being a small and emerging partnership, TLP have already shown the potential and capacity to advocate at international levels, taking advantage of a rare opportunity for the realities of trans lives to be 'seen' by international officials, presenting evidence to the UN's Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity about the impact of rising anti-trans hate in the UK. Gaining allies from policy stakeholders at all system-change levels is critical in advocating for systems change.

The TLP team itself is made up of trans people and the research has been co-produced with other trans people. This is essential to building trust in their research, but comes at a particular cost, since the experiences that are the subject of the work are ones that people involved in the work will likely share and/or be emotionally impacted by, reinforcing the need to adjust expectations and ways of working in order to avoid burnout and unacceptably high stress levels.

“We have learnt through our community consultations and research events that the populations we serve believe mutual aid and knowledge-sharing continue to be the main viable avenue for systems change for our communities.”

- Spectra

- Role: Insight-Gatherer
- Partnership: Research and Knowledge Hub
- Systems Change Strategy: Influencing

Learning and co-production through iterating models of participatory grant giving

“Some of the main learning points have been regarding the time it takes to establish and maintain local connections and develop trusting relationships with local groups, to, in turn, inform and shape participatory grant-making. The need for tailored approaches in relation to responding to community needs at a hyper local level and avoiding the one-size-fits-all principle, has been another learning point.”

- Bridge Renewal Trust

Givings Together is a partnership of place-based giving schemes, wanting to address structural discrimination in access to funding across diverse communities in London, testing participatory practices which shift power and decision-making in funding down to communities. The ambition of Givings Together is to shift the dial in funding practices towards fair and equitable grant giving. It is very important to them that they are not just applying a new standardised model; within the partnership they are being very flexible, tailoring and experimenting to develop approaches that work in specific contexts.

There is learning going on at a number of levels. Locally, where each partner has considered the specifics of their local area and started to prioritise groups for engagement and the development of participatory grant-making pilots. Up to 12 pilots will be delivered across the partners, working with some of their most excluded community groups. A learning log is being used to capture all the different issues that partners are grappling with.

Within the partnership they are reflecting on what it takes to do equitable, participatory grant-giving well, and how they can each develop an approach that works for their own context (not a standardised model). They are also considering deeply what it means to work side by side with professionals and community representatives all bringing both their lived experience and their professional skills, to avoid pigeon-holing people and to recognise what it takes for people to make the time to contribute.

In the wider place-based giving movement they are contributing to debates about the shift to participatory grant-making: the models, the motivations, the benefits, the cultural shift that's needed. They are also reflecting about their role in the funding landscape overall. The funds they manage are a drop in the wider funding landscape, so their impact on systemic inequalities feels tiny. Change needs to happen in the mainstream funding world which manages so much more money. What can they do to shift the dial there?

- Role: Innovator
- Partnership: Social Change Lab
- Systems Change Strategy: Innovation

Key Questions

What kinds of learning practices and processes are helping to involve the people who the work is about and for?

How can partnerships widen the circle of people that are involved in making sense of data and insight to understanding the system, and in testing how best to use this in mobilising change?

Key Insights

1. Co-producing systems change with people affected by those systems creates opportunities for their experiences to inform and enhance the work, however, to do co-production ethically, partners must take care that it is equitable and of mutual benefit.
 - Trans Learning Partnership has involved trans people in community participatory action research and upskilled them in research methods so they could bring their experiences to co-develop the research questions. TLP compensated them to ask those questions of each other. The team has worked hard to produce their community participatory action research in ways that are non-extractive by recruiting, upskilling and compensating trans people as researchers themselves. They co-wrote the research questions and asked them of each other, increasing their comfort with answering questions and building their research resume in the process.

- TLP's Trans people of colour events have been specifically focused on building trust, instead of starting straight away with research, starting with a structural inclusion review of partner organisations, and organising the research differently to address specific needs of those communities.
 - Building Young Brixton partnership is training and supporting young leaders to listen to other young people across the partnership to find out what challenges they face and to facilitate discussions on how local providers can respond, with the understanding that they will be able to relate better to their peers and can learn from having ownership of the research. This is intentional, resourced work to make sure that young people are meaningfully involved in shaping and leading BYB.
2. Creating opportunities for peer learning — especially peer learning on the frontline and amongst those with lived experience — is key for support and development. In this way, partnerships facilitate and themselves learn from the insights of those closest to a problem.
- BME Health Forum's initial engagement was with directors of partner organisations but once the service started, they've taken a back seat and conversations have taken place with the health advocates in the peer support meetings. The quality of these discussions has benefitted from their organisations' faith in them to have conversations without the presence of managers. The role of health advocate is enriched by the variety of experiences and approaches that they bring and share. This is especially true for organisations with fewer (or just one) staff.
 - In Datawise London, people have found it helpful to have a forum to ask questions of their peers rather than having to seek out expert advice. The partnership's User groups motivate and inspire participants as groups share what they are actively working on. They also provide a safe space to ask questions. Some systems are so impenetrable, like NHS data, that it really helps for groups facing similar problems to be connected and learn from each other.
3. Systems change requires continually learning what works and adapting one's approach. This includes maintaining an openness to the direction of travel changing and being flexible in response.
- Givings Together is not merely applying a model for participatory grantmaking; they recognise that there must be tailored approaches for responding to community needs at a local level and avoiding 'one

size fits all' approach. This is exacerbated by the fact that place-based giving schemes are particularly vulnerable to changes in the local context in terms of funding and income generation. A learning log has started to capture issues the partners have come across.

- Reframing the Disability Narrative partners could see first hand how different cohorts of the general public viewed disability and disabled people through the focus groups they ran. These insights are feeding into strategic communication decisions.
 - Datawise London's data journeys research — a documentation of charity data journeys, focusing on where they get stuck and what helps them move forward — has helped the partnership to understand data maturity in the fields they work in. They have discovered that organisations at each stage of maturity have a set of shared characteristics or commonalities that can help infrastructure and funders better understand their needs, and are factoring that into other pieces of work.
4. Partnerships with dedicated internal learning and evaluation infrastructure have found it can guide and increase accountability to learning as a practice. This learning crosses practice shifts as well as culture shifts.
- Collaboration is improving within Building Young Brixton, influencing the quality of services as practitioners are able to learn from each other and share best practice. They have improved mechanisms to share learning and facilitate peer support across the partnership for both senior managers and operational staff.
 - Cornerstone Croydon has a developmental evaluation team that gathers feedback and facilitates learning conversations, and seeks to put in place a community of practice, while No Wrong Door has been doing a developmental evaluation of practices that involves partners keeping learning logs and the internal learning lead conducting 1:1 conversations with partners.
 - The No Wrong Door partnership's anti-racist learning is informing culture and strategy shifts in its partner organisations, for example through EDI policy reviews and efforts to collect intersectional demography data.

“It's very important to us that we are not just applying a model; we are being flexible, tailoring, experimenting. This is key.”

- Partnership lead

Collective power and influence

This foundation is about deeply understanding power dynamics and using diverse strategies for influencing change.



“A lot of our strengths are through individual relationships with allies, but one or two have disappeared and it takes time to build new relationships. We can also see their frustration at working within the system.”

- Partnership lead

Growing collective power and influence through developing relationships at different levels for better data literacy and use

“Datawise London funding is also funding the ability to be able to have those [influencing] conversations. It’s really helpful to be informed from the funder perspective so when we’re talking to the little charities, we can be saying to them, You really need to be getting this and this and this in order because you’re going to be asked for it at some point. And as to the management of those funding bids, if you’re doing lots of things like that repetitively, how can you streamline that work? It’s informing both ways.”

- Superhighways

The Datawise London partnership, led by Superhighways (a project based at Kingston Voluntary Action) has focussed on data literacy and digital skills of small charities and community organisations as well as the better use of data and evidence to shape services and influence decision-makers, leading to Londoners being better supported. Partners include other VCS infrastructure and specialist digital and data consultants.

Their research into charity data journeys to understand organisations’ relationships to data as well as possibilities for collaboration with public bodies for shared outcomes has revealed that small charities increasingly see the potential of data to shape services, influence change and shift power, but find making sense of data hard and time consuming. The partnership have discovered that organisations at each stage on their data journey have a set of shared characteristics that can help infrastructure and funders better understand needs, and have seen how charities can be better supported.

They have found that specific enablers and opportunities can help organisations — some of these being within organisations’ control or grasp, others underpinned by the knowledge and resources of funders and trustees, support providers and infrastructure organisations, data networks, tech companies, etc. They are keen to share findings with funders who are interested in data needs and help wider infrastructure bodies in London be more responsive to the data needs of small organisations they work with.

The partnership has also worked to address the fact that data about the sector in London isn't accessible in one place and a lack of data standards and external publication limits collating data at a regional level. This also means there is duplication, as sector organisations are adding their data in multiple locations. They've brought together CVSs and other specialist pan London infrastructure organisations to talk about data in the sector. This started with understanding CVS State of the Sector reports and supporting them to integrate open data. They plan to launch a community of practice, connecting stakeholders like London Plus, the GLA and London Funders.

- Role: Capacity-Builder
- Partnership: Research and Knowledge Hub
- Systems Change Strategy: Influencing

Building Young Brixton

STORY

Building collective power and influence for the benefit of young people through strengthening grassroots collaboration

“Everyone wants to pretend they're changing massive systems, which is near enough impossible (of organisations our size)... We're really interested in changing a smaller system, because actually, we know that will create practical change...that you've got conviction in knowing what you're trying to do, and that it will be evident in time.

There hasn't been a golden moment like ‘Aha! This all makes sense. And aren't we all doing things differently?’ It's really slow, and I think you have to take stock of the small changes that happen. And in order to recognize the progress you're making and to not undervalue those.”

- High Trees Development Trust

Building Young Brixton (BYB) is a partnership of Lambeth grassroots youth groups that has been nurtured and supported by lead partner, High Trees Development Trust. One of the focuses of their Cornerstone project was to move BYB towards independence from High Trees, as a route for greater

community ownership. However, over the course of the last two years, the partnership, working with an external facilitator, and looking at different governance models, decided that their work was best served by remaining under the umbrella of the development trust. Partners felt that a strong operating structure was already in place under current governance, which allowed BYB to have its own identity, operating processes and accountability, but had the benefit of being able to adopt wider organisation processes and structures of High Trees.

In going through the process, partners were able to reflect on their own and each other's vision for the partnership and reach a refreshed collective identity, feeling as if the partnership is much stronger and better defined through going through the process. They have a new governance and membership handbook, defining different levels of membership, and a well defined role for High Trees.

They have strong support for the new structure, and they have undertaken a self assessment with all the core partners. Everyone reviewed their contribution and involvement over the last year, what they felt they had got from the process, and what they contributed. They have now developed a Collaboration Guide & Toolkit drawing directly on their shared learning, to help others through the process and are already applying this model and resource to other new emerging partnerships in Lambeth, including Propel and Lambeth Community Research Network.

Partnership collaboration has led to more opportunities for continued professional development of practitioners; staff can swap with a colleague at another partner to observe their practice. Youth workers have also received training in areas of collective need identified across the partnership. Collaboration is improving the quality of services as practitioners are able to learn from each other. Stronger relationships between practitioners have also led to increased referrals of young people across BYB partners.

BYB members are developing a stronger understanding of themselves within a system of support for young people, working together better, and hoping this means they are perceived differently by commissioners. They are already seeing the results of closer working in new funding, and being able to demonstrate their collective impact. As a result, they see the Council really starting to realise the strength within the sector and the power that the sector and communities hold informing and contributing towards system change.

Youth voice has been strengthened through the Young Leaders programme and the development of Lambeth Peer Action Collective, enabling young people to take a leading role in informing the direction of BYB, the services delivers and driving forwards change through youth-led commissioning and social action.

- Role: Convenor
- Partnership: Alliance
- Systems Change Strategy: Collaboration (Cooperation)

Key Questions

How do project partners develop collaborative relationships beyond the partnership, particularly with decision-makers and power-holders that they want to influence?

How can partnerships find new ways to get the attention of stakeholders they want to influence and to genuinely capture their interest and commitment to a change process?

What is more powerful in affecting change, factual data and evidence or stories and emotional connection? How best can they be used alongside each other?

Key Insights

1. Partnerships use their reach and convening capacity to build collective power through mapping connections, developing networks and moving beyond sector boundaries.
 - Learning from Building Young Brixton has enabled partners to develop new partnerships, create a 'network of networks' to continue to strengthen the VCS and broaden the scope of collaboration, working with statutory services.
 - Cornerstone Croydon partners are exploring ways to transfer power and ownership to stakeholders at the end of the project. This includes establishing a clearer set of objectives for systems change.

- The Trans Learning Partnership policy officer has worked to map areas of power and connection in the current policy landscape and develop a network of stakeholders in key organisations who can amplify and/or support the TLP's objectives.
 - The Office for National Statistics approached Datawise London to input into consultations about how to make Census data more accessible, and Datawise London invited some grassroots groups to join that conversation. They now have a relationship with the ONS Community Engagement lead and have been hosting and delivering sessions to enable smaller organisations to explore Census data themselves using new interactive tools.
 - BME Health Forum is building a relationship with the local GP Primary Care Network, and has plans to talk about the health advocates and how they can work more closely with other roles including social prescribers and community health workers. BME Health Forum staff have already attended the race steering group set up by the Integrated Care Board.
2. Different strategies for influencing are effective in different contexts, but in general, building a body of evidence and making existing data more accessible is a key factor in influencing.
- Research conducted by No Wrong Door has had a positive impact in raising the visibility of the partnership's work amongst key decision-makers in Lambeth. For instance, the partnership submitted a response to the Institute of Employment Studies' call for evidence on the Future of Employment Support, and Black Thrive contribute to Lambeth Council's Skills & Employment Board and EDI subgroup to shape policy across the borough.
 - While collection of new data — especially in sensitive and participatory ways — is itself significant, the Trans Learning Partnership has also built collective power for change through drawing on this evidence base to influence policy, collecting and deploying all forms of data — quantitative and qualitative. Is it the combination that has been powerful for them? Policy wins so far have been local, national and international, from influencing a specific clinician's practice; to making recommendations and effecting changes to an NHS consultation on children and young people's gender-affirming care; to meeting with the UN Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity during their UK visit such that they were able to provide an accurate representation of the transphobic environment.

Further, the TLP's Policy Officer has been engaged in co-creating a cross-sector policy hub for long-term planning around countering misinformation and increasing access to gender-affirming healthcare for children and young people.

3. There can be tensions between the data needed for mobilising resources and the insights needed for genuine learning and improvement.
 - AdviceUK ('Measuring what Matters') has found there's quite a tension between on one hand the sorts of outputs that commissioners are wanting to have to demonstrate to convince to make a political case and on the other hand documenting the outcomes that can demonstrate real impact. There's still a focus on big numbers to unlock funding. The partnership values approaches to monitoring and evaluation that can contribute to generating and sustaining work beyond the lifetime of a particular project. Measuring What Matters partners also value embedding an approach to monitoring and evaluation of advice services that is directly valuable to those getting advice. This means asking, Does the way we monitor and evaluate our advice-giving make sense to the person we are advising, and does it recognise and encourage them to be part of a wider change process? This is key to community-based advice.
 - Givings Together are building a body of case studies and evidence that schemes can 'use as a calling card' for influencing funders. But they are also very open to experimentation, and to learning from what isn't working well, alongside key stakeholders. This type of working in the open is risky but can be very helpful in influencing practice.
4. The collection and deployment of quantitative data is rarely the only way to influence change. Stories and human connection are just as powerful a vehicle for this, and can help build the relationships needed for influencing change.
 - AdviceUK are focussing on bringing funders to see and listen for themselves and finding this is an important way to build relationships and change perceptions of all parties — grantees as well as funders.
 - Peer research work undertaken by the Lambeth Peer Action Collective supported by BYB has led to three campaigns on housing, opportunities and education and work is underway to engage with policymakers and practitioners in these areas. More than 400 young people were able to give their views on violence affecting young

people in Lambeth and co-design a manifesto to articulate the change they felt was needed to make Lambeth safer for young people.

- BME Health Forum has collected a powerful bank of stories. Despite initially having few NHS allies and feeling restricted by pressures within the NHS and the slow pace of decision making, they have formed a positive relationship with NHS Imperial Healthcare Trust, who run five local hospitals. In a meeting with the Trust and health advocates, the Trust recorded stories and experiences told to them by the health advocates to use as learning tools. As a result of conversations, they interviewed one of BME Health Forum's partners (Midaye) to go deeper into patient experiences. This proved so useful that they are now holding listening events with patients to find out about experiences of racism within the NHS. Further, the issues BME Health Forum raised with the Trust around inadequate language interpretation services have now led to a part-time staff member leading a project on improving these services — and BME Health Forum are members of this steering group.

“Patience and tenacity are key for working with the NHS. Even when you have a champion, things move at a slow pace, but you keep pushing and keep pushing and keep pushing some more and that door opening gets wider.”

- Partnership lead

Conclusion

“[Cornerstone Fund offers] funding time to get started on things before there's any actual work, and allow that exploration to happen. I think we've built the credibility to have conversations with people, we've been more visible. I think the whole system change focus has taken us out of the pure delivery organisation where we run training and provide support. It gave us the space to think about other things and think about our place as being not just delivery; that we could connect people, we could collaborate, bring new ideas and thinking.”

- Partnership lead

With a great deal of effort, Round 2 Cornerstone Fund partnerships have made progress in building foundations for systems change by using their collective strengths to enact diverse roles and strategies. They have reckoned with how to define their system and situate themselves within it, and translate the goals of systems change into language and ideas that are meaningful and motivating to people that want immediate change.

Partnerships have faced immediate crises — of funding, of staffing and of community need — and grappled with how to meet those immediate crises whilst keeping a focus on longer-term change. Involving people with experiences close to the issues at hand and cultivating relationships of care, partnerships have experimented, learnt and adapted, and begun to mobilise their learning for influence.

Here is a snapshot of where partnerships had got to at the time of our final learning conversations in December 2023 (excluding those that were not able to engage with us during the final learning phase):

BME Health Forum designed its project (including the health advocate role) around the immediate needs of BME health service users, knowing how long it can take to change NHS practices, and in so doing makes a difference to people's lives now. At the same time, they collect evidence of the need for broader change, and are experimenting with the best way to share and use this evidence to effect change at a structural or systemic level.

Building Young Brixton have also focussed on what it takes to build a strong and equitable partnership, with consideration of depth as well as breadth across the local youth sector., in terms of not just which organisations participate, but participation at all levels of those organisations. They have seen the results of this in how workers are collaborating to better serve

young people, and how young people are coming together to influence change.

Cornerstone Croydon attends to the immediate therapeutic needs of young people and youth workers whilst creating spaces where system partners can come together and reflect on what is being learnt through the work and how they can respond as a system supporting young people. This learning across place, between different parts of the system, has become stronger as trust and relationships have grown.

Datawise London continues with its second tranche of Cornerstone funding (having also received funding in Round 1) — using the learning from the first to develop strands of work that are helping to strengthen the ways in which civil society organisations in London collect, analyse and use data to improve services and mobilise change. They have seen huge value in peer learning communities for building data confidence and literacy, as well as in the relationships they have built with funders to explore a more joined-up approach to collecting and using data for funding decisions. They continue to collaborate with several other Cornerstone projects.

Through experimentation and peer learning, *Givings Together* is enabling local giving schemes to develop their own, tailored approach to participatory grant-making. In doing so they are reflecting deeply on what it takes for marginalised communities to really be in control of decision-making about resources.

Inclusion London's project is using a new methodology to gain understanding of systemic attitudes and beliefs towards disabled people and their capabilities which shape the policy and funding environment for Disabled People's Organisations. They will be using this information to reshape the ways in which they influence funders and donors to support their work.

Measuring What Matters has focussed on intervening in how monitoring and evaluation works in advice services by centring a 'whole person, whole community' approach, supporting funders to make site visits and partners to map individual client journeys. They are using the outputs of this work to initiate conversations with a range of grant funders and commissioners toward improvements in the wider system.

The No Wrong Door partnership, in efforts to steward a better local system for supporting Black Disabled people into employment, have discovered how much internal work on understanding structural and systemic racism (and how it shows up in the partnership) is needed to ensure their own alignment with what they want to see in the wider system. Black Thrive continue to

contribute to Lambeth Council's Skills & Employment Board and EDI subgroup to shape policy across the borough.

Trans Learning Partnership is demonstrating how prioritising building trust with transgender community members as both research subjects and researchers can yield powerful insights that can influence policy and services. In its structure and ways of working, the TLP exemplifies the profound impact of trans people leading and supporting work which is about their lives.

Volunteer Centre Camden is exploring with partners how to embed volunteering into the NHS, building on the shifts that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. They persist with forming a partnership with the NHS, in the face of extreme capacity issues and constant change in structures and people. The partnership has been invited to be part of several priority pieces of work, at a strategic level, to utilise their expertise on volunteering to enable good practice and maximum impact for the NHS.

What have we learnt?

Building system understanding has been an important part of the journey that partnerships have embarked on — in particular, [the approach they take and who they build understanding with is impacted by how partnerships understand the system and their part in it so that they might change it](#). Some partnerships have worked to build this understanding with those who are most impacted or harmed by the system whereas in others have reached across boundaries to bring various system actors together who don't usually spend time understanding each other's perspectives.

These collaborative systems change projects have demonstrated that [there is a role for civil society infrastructure organisations in convening and stewarding systems](#). Convening is a role that's been played well by some partnerships, albeit they can be constrained in playing it, particularly by the statutory sector. It's difficult to influence the NHS and grassroots organisations don't have the capacity to navigate its complex structures. Nonetheless, playing this bridging role and trying to feed back/up learning is important. [Involving and equipping those with direct experience](#) to be able to play a part in that influencing, though not to underestimate what it takes, has been key.

Inherent in convening is having solid relationships as [you cannot effect change without a solid basis for collaboration](#): a strong partnership with strong relationships. Without trusted relationships, a partnership won't withstand the inevitable pressure from hard decisions and potential trade-offs that come with pushing for change.

Unequal and implicit power dynamics will ultimately interfere with and undermine the work of the partnership.

Cornerstone partnerships have demonstrated that if you are trying to shift power externally and haven't dealt with power dynamics internally, you can't expect to be successful as the internal work mirrors the external work. There is also a danger of external pressures shaping the internal to the detriment of the partnership unless the partnership is strong enough to resist it, for example, a bias towards a single spokesperson or lead organisation, rather than collective or distributed leadership.

The flexible nature of Cornerstone funding has encouraged freedom to experiment, make mistakes, change direction, and ask questions. Many partnerships were formed as what we are calling Social Change Labs, surfacing questions rather than answers. Traditionally, civil society infrastructure organisations would be the experts, in funding and volunteering, for example, acting as hubs of knowledge and resources. In Cornerstone, they are stepping into the unknown, testing out different social change approaches to see what works.

Sector bodies are not often working directly at grassroots level (though some, particularly those focussed on inequalities, might be). There's something distinctive about how close Cornerstone-funded infrastructure organisations are to the direct experiences of issues through working with member organisations and partners, and working with lived experience experts.

Partnerships are doing more collecting and curating of insight and experience than is typical for infrastructure organisations traditionally. They are thinking deeply about how and why they are gathering and sharing insight and equipping groups and individuals to use that insight more effectively. Data can help to shape a narrative, to tell a new story about why change is needed. Many partnerships have an influencing strategy and as such they have been involved in building and mobilising an evidence base. The process of creating the evidence base is part of systemic change, as it means being in direct communication with those who have lived experiences, and making better use of the data they already have.

Partnerships are thinking hard about how to use the data (and processes for gathering it) effectively. A key barrier to leveraging evidence is lacking the relationships and channels that get it to the right places. We've seen that a key tactic to address this gap is to build stronger alliances within their sector or field, which can help them to get heard.

This data is not only coming from formal research but from reflective learning conversations. Creating space for and designing learning opportunities that work for the particular context and capacities/members is key. It's about purposeful learning. Learning in this context isn't just skill-building or capacity building; it's about making

sense of experiences to influence change. Creating spaces for open and honest conversations about what is really happening in their systems has been a feature of many Cornerstone projects — and it is in these conversational spaces that change can begin.

The Cornerstone partnerships have contributed to our understanding of how civil society organisations have the potential to be drivers and facilitators of systems change. These are some of the things we have learnt from them about what to bear in mind in a systems change initiative, organisationally and personally. We shared some of these at the end of Round 1, and have updated these to include learning from Round 2. These insights are aimed at those that want to lead systems change work as well as those seeking to fund it.

People

From Round 1

- **Prioritise relationships and learning** above deliverables, structures and agreements
- Have **honest conversations** with partners, with independent facilitation where needed and be conscious of the way language, culture and communication can distort perceptions and undermine trust
- Make **time and space to reflect** with partners and challenge yourselves regularly
- Try as far as is practical to ensure **continuity of roles and relationships** - and to ensure that relationships are held and passed on by both individuals and organisations
- **Take your stakeholders on the journey** with you — don't wait until the end to try to influence them
- **Nurture your allies** within and outside the system and understand what they need
- **Hold the tension** between **collaboration and challenge** and use your system understanding to know when to push and when to hold back

From Round 2

- **Nurture empathy** — between different system actors and organisations. Good relationships come from deeper understanding
- **Design solutions with the people that they are meant to help**
- People are not simply sources of data on their experiences, they are potential system change agents. Recognise and resource the **potential for people to turn their experiences into positive change**.
- Recognise the **burden placed on people trying to change the very systems that harm them** — whether as paid staff or unpaid activists. Make space for care and allocate resources for respite.
- Keep noticing and adjusting **how power and resources are held and used** as you push for change. Each part of the system is a microcosm of the whole; you have to behave within your organisation and partnership as you want the system to behave. You can't preach what you don't practise.

- Collaboration takes constant work and care; **recognise the roles, behaviours and practices that are needed** through the different stages of your collaboration and think about how to resource these.
- Funder collaborations are just as hard to sustain as any other kind; **funders can and should learn from funded partnerships** what it takes to sustain a collaboration as personnel and priorities change.

Purpose

From Round 1

- **Balance short- and long-term benefit** to the people you are working to help
- Don't be afraid to change course while holding firmly to **core principles and values**
- Be prepared to **defend the value of your work** — it may be seen as risky or unfocused, and lacking in outputs and tangible deliverables
- Be clear about the **different accountabilities** in the project — and don't be afraid to prioritise the needs of your community and collaborators above funders
- Be **transparent and fair** with the use of project resources and **honest** with funders; don't spend money just for the sake of it
- Don't take shortcuts when it comes to **centring the involvement and empowerment of people with lived experience**
- Have some sort of 'theory of change' but **use it in a flexible way**

From Round 2

- Keep returning to the purpose of your work and **ask whether the system change strategy you have adopted is still the right one**; if it isn't, be prepared to change course.
- **Have honest conversations with your funder**; don't get boxed in to delivering outputs or activities just because they are in your funding application; make sure your funder understands why you might need to change direction.
- The language of systems change can be off-putting. Find ways to **articulate your purpose in ways which speak to your people**, especially those most invested in the change you want to make.
- **Recognise that systems change is not 'out there' but 'in here'**. Things like upskilling people with lived experience *are* the work of systems change.
- **Funders can play many roles in systems change**. Trust-based funding doesn't mean being at a distance; be close to the work and think about how to help advance it, mobilising their knowledge and networks as well as money.

Mindset

From Round 1

- Hold an open mind about the problem you're addressing, and don't make hasty assumptions about where the solution might lie
- Be self-aware and thoughtful about personal and organisational power
- Expect to make mistakes, and learn, again and again
- Be realistic and patient about the timeline for change in complex systems, but if it's not working, be prepared to change course
- Be kind to yourself. This is hard, complex work, and it doesn't often go as planned. Seek support from peers and take time to notice and celebrate progress and small successes

From Round 2

- Develop a systems thinking mindset; pay attention to relationships, power dynamics, system boundaries, and opportunities to leverage change.
- Recognise the extent of your power to mobilise the change you want and where you need to build more power before you try to influence others.
- Be able to hold the possibility that there are several routes to systems change — and that you will need to pursue more than one approach simultaneously.
- Funding systems change is not like funding projects. Funders can fund in ways that help or hinder systems change, for example in the application and monitoring processes they put in place, but most important is to continue to grapple with their understanding of what systems change is and to learn alongside practitioners about systems change in practice.

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