

How to Build Understanding



A learning summary from Comic Relief's
Change Makers Programme



#1 in a series of key takeaways for practitioners & funders
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Introducing Change Makers

Change Makers was a £9.1 million programme run by Comic Relief in the wake of the 2019 Coronavirus disease pandemic. It provided up to five years of targeted funding for 20 different partnerships, totalling 45 individual organisations.

From 2020 onwards, the pandemic shifted the voluntary, community and social enterprise landscape. It has been estimated that charities lost up to £4 billion in income over a few short months at the start of the pandemic, and that a third of charities had decreased access to their volunteers. This direct impact on charities, combined with the general population's restricted ability to access support and need to socially isolate, had a disproportionately negative impact on some of society's more vulnerable populations, whose personal situations had been exacerbated by COVID-19 and their routes to support decreased due to the more unstable charity sector.

Change Makers sought to address some of these challenges and support organisations who work

to tackle some of the serious issues that saw increased strain and demand during the pandemic. This list included racial inequality, homelessness, early childhood development, forced migration, domestic abuse and mental health.

The long-term funding Comic Relief provided, as part of its 2018-2023 strategy, gave stability in an uncertain environment. It enabled individual organisations and partnerships to work at a systems change level, exploring the social and structural changes needed in the aftermath of COVID-19 to best support vulnerable populations who had been overlooked or under resourced at local, regional and national level.

Crucially, each of these grants sought to achieve change which would outlast the funding provided by Comic Relief.

FUNDING THEMES

1 Gender Justice

2 Safe Place to be - Forced Migration

3 Safe Place to be - Homelessness

4 Children Survive and Thrive

5 Global Mental Health

KEY STATISTICS

20 Partnerships funded

5 Years of funding

9.1 Million pound programme

45 Organisations

Working with organisations across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

NPC's role as a learning partner

NPC were engaged at the start of the Change Makers Programme as an evaluation and learning partner. As part of this work, we co-designed 5 learning questions with the Funded Partners, to frame their collective insights and takeaways.

Learning summary series

1. Building understanding

What do we need to understand about our organisation and the context it exists within before we can create meaningful change (e.g. influence policy and structural decisions) for a broad audience?

2. How to collaborate

How can we create and maintain collaborations with individuals, charities, politicians, service providers and other stakeholders that are effective in creating the long-term change we are seeking?

3. How to monitor and evaluate impact and attribute success

What does short and long-term change look like for our grant? How can we measure and present our achievements in robust, interesting and proportionate ways?

4. How to communicate learning responsibly

How do we tell honest stories in accessible language and formats to our stakeholders whilst maintaining privacy and sensitivity? How can we develop a culture of data curiosity and acceptance of outcomes in a resource-stretched environment?

5. How to centre lived experience

How do we develop and maintain positive relationships with all those with lived experience, including with project staff, service users and other stakeholders? How can we enable open communication within these relationships without putting pressure on them in the context of an ever-changing political landscape?

What this learning summary covers

This is the first of five learning summaries in our series, and it focuses on the Funded Partner's **learnings on building understanding**: *"What understanding of their organisations and context do they need, to create meaningful change for a broad audience?"*

To set their partnerships and programmes of work up for success in creating sustainable, systemic change, there were several contextual factors and conditions that the Funded Partners found critical to understand.

Firstly, turning the lens outwards to look beyond their partnership, they needed to understand:

- **The issues and needs** within their target benefitting group
- **The contextual policy/legislative frameworks** around those issues and needs
- **Key stakeholders within their system / sector and their external perceptions** on the issues and context they had identified

Then, they turned the lens inwards, focusing their efforts on understanding the internal workings of themselves and their partnerships:

- **The partnership's internal capacity & capability**: motivations, skills, time/energy, funding

Due to the 3–5-year timeframe of this funding most Funded Partners updated and revisited this understanding as their work progressed and they moved into new spaces and systems. It was important to keep their understanding up to date to allow their work to remain both relevant and sustainable particularly in a world where the issues and needs, and contextual policy environment shifted frequently.

This learning summary presents their learning on the four points of understanding, alongside case studies showcasing how it was used in practical, real-world settings.

1.

Understanding the issues & needs of benefitting groups

Understanding systemic issues requires capturing diverse needs, experiences, and contexts to inform delivery.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Don't constrain research

Keeping research broad enables a fuller understanding of complex, interconnected systems.

Stay flexible

Adapting research methods supports access to 'hard to reach' groups.

Consolidate different opinions

Bringing together different perspectives through both structured and informal dialogue builds alignment, clarity, and collective ownership.



For effective planning of how to work across a system and support disadvantaged communities, it was vital to build a robust understanding of the challenges that existed within that system. Funded Partners typically explored how systemic issues affected the communities they represent, the needs these create and whether similar challenges exist in other geographic areas. They were also interested in understanding what held these challenges in place by examining what barriers faced local authorities and individuals in engaging with their work. Lastly, they examined enabling factors – who engaged with their work and why and what activities would they like to participate in.

When answered collectively, these questions allowed Funded Partners to form a clearer picture of the environment in which they were operating and the challenges their service users faced.

However, researching and understanding the answers to these questions came with challenges for the Funded Partners. We have documented their learning, along with some case studies below.

1.1 Don't constrain research – keep it open

Funded Partners were sometimes tempted to place tight boundaries around their research questions, the kinds of data they would accept, or the types of stakeholders they would engage. This was typically due to restraints on time, scope or access to service users. However, systems are complex by nature and impacted by many factors and conditions, so to develop an understanding of a system, and effectively work within it, Funded Partners needed to consider that complexity as one big picture.

Where Funded Partners resisted the urge to break things down into separate workstreams or research areas, they found they were better able to capture the full spectrum of experiences, issues and needs faced within a benefitting group.

1.2 Stay flexible to engage the right service users and stakeholders

To develop a full understanding of the needs within a system, it was vital to engage diverse stakeholders from across that system. This was not always a straightforward process, and Funded Partners who were adaptable in their approach were better able to get the access they needed.

For some benefitting groups, involvement in specific types of processes is challenging. For example, individuals experiencing homelessness are often 'hard to reach' in statutory consultations – their rights to participate have been eroded over time due to a move towards fast decision-making in policy spaces within the Government. Some Funded Partners overcame this challenge by using National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines on integrated health and social care for people experiencing homelessness as a tool to hold other organisations to account and mandate the engagement of individuals experiencing homelessness. By using those guidelines, they were able to actively encompass the voices of people in a range of homelessness situations and develop a more robust picture of the true homelessness landscape.

For other benefitting groups changes in regional and national context made access more challenging. To best protect against these changes, Funded Partners needed to stay flexible possible regarding when and where insights come from.

Bradford and Craven Autism AIM

Bradford and Craven Autism Aim work to support autistic adults in their locality who receive little to no funded support by other means. The organisation found that COVID-19 disrupted their plans to learn from autistic individuals. At the start of their funding, they had planned to work closely with their NHS partner to consult with autistic people. Due to the high demand on NHS resource during and post COVID-19, their partner was unable to support the work and so they struggled to move forwards.

Staying flexible about where their insight came from allowed them to work around this. By engaging autistic staff, they ensured that the insight and understanding that comes from lived and learned expertise were embedded into the heart of their work.

"We have hired a staff of 4 Neurodiverse professionals and supported their training, development, and delivery; resource creation, and network building. Having a Neurodiverse staff team brings strengths to the project that have helped it progress in a more holistic and practical way."

1.3 Consolidate different stakeholders' opinions

With insights gathered from a broad spectrum of stakeholders across a system, it was natural to find variation in what the main issues and needs were considered to be. Bringing stakeholders together in conversation to develop a collective understanding made a significant difference. The onus of consolidating a range of opinions was not just on the Funded Partners – instead their stakeholders had to talk and process their assumptions, biases and thoughts as a collective. Funded Partners approached this in a range of ways, from informal chats to a structured, regular process.

Easy opportunities for conversation could be found at conferences, networking events and trainings. More formal avenues for conversation looked like hosting convening events around specific themes or co-creating key project documents alongside their stakeholders. In all settings, it was important that the Funded Partners worked to bring the stakeholders towards shared ideas, goals and/or statements. Finding this common ground was supported by ensuring that participants were clear on the boundaries of their discussion, used active listening techniques, and thought about the challenge as a collective ('we') rather than as an individual ('I').

Housing Justice

Housing Justice works towards preventing and alleviating homelessness, and as part of this mission they consistently bring together communities to find solutions to homelessness. In the early stages of their Change Makers funding, and faced with the wide-reaching ambition of their work, they chose to co-design a theory of change with their partners to ensure that there was a shared vision and mission outlining the systemic change they were aiming to achieve for People Seeking Sanctuary and those with No Recourse to Public Funds in Wales. To build it, Housing Justice consulted with a wide

range of organisations, agencies and forums who worked across the sector – partly to inform their theory of change, and partly as a vehicle for forming a cohesive sector.

"We recognised the need for those involved in the delivery of this project to be clear on and agree any assumptions, barriers and enablers, to give the project the best chance of cohesion between the different work streams and roles... the theory of change was developed in partnership between the core organisations [Housing Justice, Tai Pawb and The Welsh Refugee Council]."

2.

Understanding the policy & legislative framework within a system

Policy is a critical lever in systems change, requiring an understanding of an evolving political and legislative landscape.

Talk to everyone

Engaging diverse perspectives builds a richer, context-sensitive understanding, supported by both formal and informal insight and tailored to local contexts.

Remain independent

Maintaining organisational independence sustains trust and helps navigate shifting political environments.

Build the right skills

Policy influence relies on specialist expertise, strengthened through targeted hiring, training, and forming strategic partnerships.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

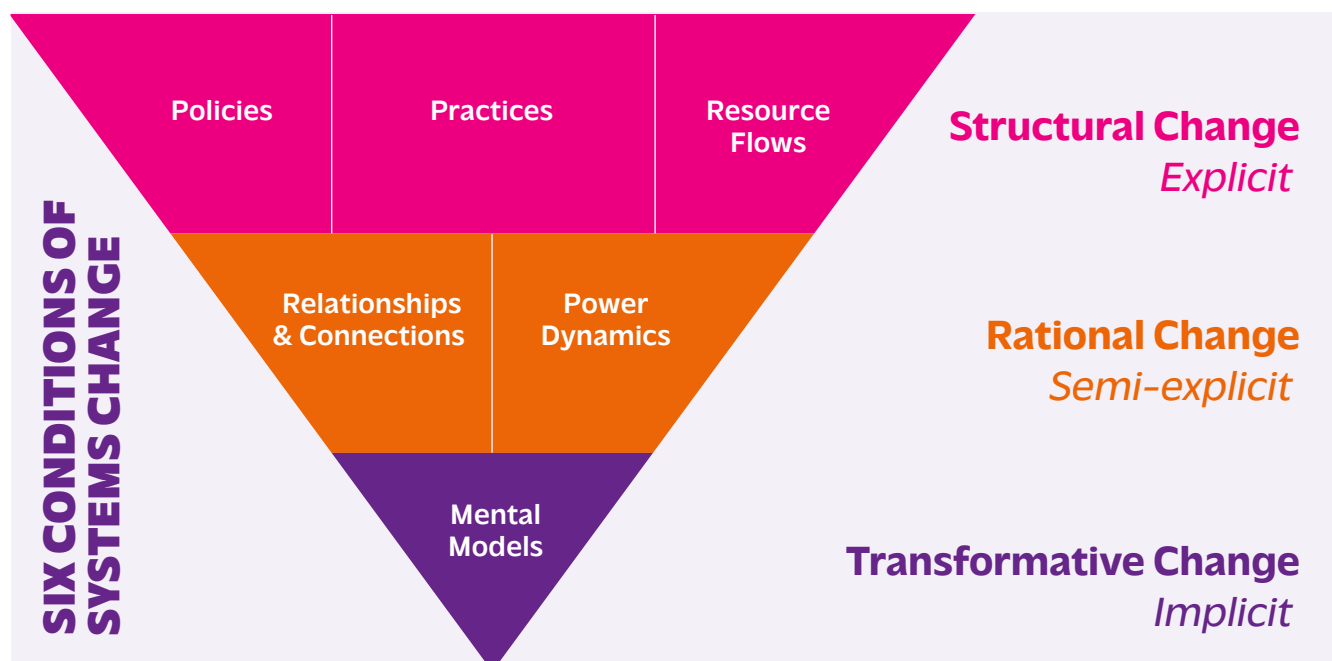


Figure 1 – The six conditions of systems change. Source: *The Waters of Systems Change*

Armed with a clear understanding of the issues and needs among their benefitting groups, it was important for Funded Partners to understand the surrounding policy landscape. The Six Conditions of Systems Change (pictured above) highlights the aspects of a system which hold it in place.

At the structural level, the first condition is policy. For Funded Partners, creating change at regional and national policy level was therefore a key ambition and achieving that required the Funded Partners to have knowledge of the current system.

Funded Partners found there were two core aspects to this understanding:

- 1. What the policy landscape, including laws and processes, looks like**
- 2. How best to influence within regional and national policy spaces.**

The answer to these statements was never fixed. Changes in Government, individual MPs or members of the local council, public opinion, and the wider context, all played a role in shaping what the landscape looked like at any given time and what the best routes to influence were.

Across the duration of Change Makers, there was frequent and significant political change.

A succession of four Prime Ministers, two political parties and over a hundred ministerial changes created an unstable backdrop to the work of Funded Partners.

For organisations who were working across themes such as Homelessness, Forced Migration

and Mental Health, this instability was exacerbated by national and international events. The UK-Rwanda asylum Partnership Scheme placed stress on migration services. The Ukraine war shifted public opinions and priorities, as well as resulting in sudden process changes in the migration space and adding further pressure on accommodation and resources. Mental health struggles were exacerbated by the UK's cost of living crisis, despite which the UK Government scrapped plans to publish its cross-departmental 10-year strategy to tackle mental health in 2023.

Maintaining a clear understanding of the landscape as well as forming routes to influence it was an ongoing challenge for the Funded Partners. Their key takeaways are shared below.

2.1 Talk to everyone

Funded Partners found that when the context, priorities and processes changed from month to month, staying tapped into a network of collective understanding is important. They sought to establish a clear picture of the nuanced policy landscape by engaging with as many people as possible. Lived experience leaders, organisations working in the same space, staff within local authorities, relevant MPs and ministers were all excellent starting points. Each of these groups had direct connections to the issues and needs in question brought diverse information into the conversation. Other resources, such as newsletters, podcasts and less formal networks of professionals added insight and nuance to understanding.

Centre for Knowledge Equity

As an organisation, Centre for Knowledge Equity exist to create the wisdom necessary to resolve the social, economic and environmental challenges of our time. In the context of their Change Makers work they worked with lived experience leaders from across the migrant and refugee sector to address the issues faced by the communities these individuals represented. Having a clear understanding of the policy environment was critical because it changed so frequently.

"We will develop a deep understanding of community needs and the migrant and refugee policy environment (which evolves rapidly, often on a daily basis) through ongoing engagement with migrant and refugee lived experience leaders who are connected directly to their communities. We will do so through our existing network of 142 migrant and refugee lived experience leaders working across the public, private and non-profit sectors, as well as through a smaller dedicated lived experience M&R design team for Scaling Deep. We will also draw on learning from programme participants and from [our] other migrant and refugee focused programmes."

2.2 Remain independent

Remaining an island in the storm of political change was a theme which emerged over the five years of Change Makers. One Funded Partner noted that:

"The consistently shifting political landscape, especially concerning policy and legal regulations stipulated by revolving Home Office officials impacts the social sector in interconnected ways. This requires us to remain steadfast in maintaining our focus while keeping an eye on the need to be structured yet flexible."

The ability to be agile with regard to partnerships, routes to impact and who to engage with allowed Funded Partners to continue creating positive systemic change in an unstable political context. For Justice & Care, this meant clearly distancing themselves from the policy changes taking place around them to ensure they could maintain trusting relationships with their service users.

Justice & Care

For Justice & Care, in their work to fight modern slavery and human trafficking, the political environment and regulations that form the backdrop to their work are incredibly influential on what they can do, and how they can do it.

“Working within immigration, there have been many changes over the past [few] years. It looked completely different to what it looks like now. Keeping up with the changing in policies, immigration laws affect the way the key stakeholders can work and what they’re capable of doing.”

They found that the introduction of the new Nationality and Borders Bill created a more hostile environment for their service users, particularly those who had entered the UK via irregular channels. This made it difficult to retain contact with migrants who were fearful of immigration enforcement. Justice & Care mitigated this by making their independence as clear as possible to migrants and reassuring them of the support they were able to provide.



The provision of that support was impacted by policy changes too, and Justice & Care found they had to go through a frequently changing process and work with the Home Office in order to implement new tools or improve training.

“So if we want to implement a tool or improve training or do things like that, it’s not sort of a ‘yes, you can do that straight away’. There’s lots of processes you have to go through. One of the challenges has been that quick pace changing landscape and keeping up with those rules and sort of seeing where we can make an impact.”

2.3 Bring the right skills into your team

Lastly, to most effectively understand the political landscape in which they were operating, Funded Partners needed the right skills to navigate political changes and develop their understanding.

Navigating the UK’s political system for influencing, advocacy or information purposes requires a specific skillset, which can be tough to recruit for or develop ‘in-house’ – particularly for organisation who are small in size, or largely focused on delivery work, which requires different skills and knowledge. For Funded Partners whose staff may not already have this expertise or experience, working with organisations or individuals who have those skills can be a robust method to building capacity without recruiting for new roles.



Southall Black Sisters SBS

Southall Black Sisters exists to help Black, minoritised and migrant women live free from all forms of violence and abuse by providing holistic advocacy services. Their No Recourse? No Safety project, in partnership with Latin American Women's Rights Service, Ubuntu Women Shelter, The Angelou Centre and Safety4Sisters, campaigned to remove the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition, which acts as a significant barrier preventing migrant women from safely escaping domestic abuse and forced marriage. The partnership reflected on the importance of drawing on each organisation's expertise and experience to achieve the project's aims.

"No Recourse? No Safety project partners' decades of campaigning and policy-making experience, bolstered the project... Having a finely honed policy skill-set embedded in the partnership gave the organisations the reputation and credibility to influence decision-makers, foment innovative policy-making and secure local pathways for migrant women with statutory agencies."

This is not something that can be formed overnight and may take several years to develop. However, hiring individuals who already possess skills and contacts, or sending existing staff to relevant training can help to speed this process up

Image credit: Southall Black Sisters (SBS)

3. Understanding the stakeholders within a system & their external perceptions

Systems change depends on both top-down and bottom-up approaches, tailored for different stakeholder groups.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Use multiple methods to talk to stakeholder

Combining approaches (e.g. events, surveys) increases inclusivity, deepens insight, and supports collective learning.

Capitalise on context

Political and social shifts create opportunities for influence, while timing can increase impact and visibility.

Keep it simple

Reducing barriers, ensuring clarity, and starting with engaged audiences helps build participation and expand reach over time.



Systemic change does not just happen in a top-down way (i.e. via policy changes). Bottom-up change led by service-users and members of the community focused on the needs and/or issues identified earlier is crucial. To best enable sustainable change, there is a need to identify

who the stakeholders in a system are and why engaging them will be useful.

In the early stages of their work, Funded Partners determined that there were four key groups of stakeholders they wanted to engage for four primary reasons as outlined in table 1.

	Why Funded Partners engage them			
	To understand the change they want to see	To understand and influence their attitudes towards an issue	To understand how to engage them in your work	To promote & develop your network
Decision makers				
Local				
National				
People delivering activities				
Staff & trustees				
Practitioner, academics & subject matter experts				
Other organisations working in the space				
People benefitting				
Current & potential service users				
Broader stakeholders				
The general public				

Table 1 – Key stakeholders to engage in building understanding

To do this effectively, there are several key approaches.

3.1 Use multiple methods to talk to your stakeholders

Bringing diverse views together gives groups the opportunity to learn from each other, explore multiple angles of the problem at the same time, and create paths forwards that centre lived experience. This approach worked very effectively for one Funded Partner:

“[The project aims] to influence the views and behaviour of a wide range of stakeholders. These range from senior leads in mainstream organisations serving the migrant and refugee sector, to researchers and academic institutions, to policy-makers and the public. By bringing leaders together we will build a collective understanding of what the systemic issues are, and take a research-driven approach to impactful policy influencing and innovation-building.”

The format for bringing people together can be tailored to the context and situation. For example:

- 1. Attending events, conferences and networking opportunities.** This can simultaneously increase skills and knowledge whilst providing networking opportunities with others across the system, allowing collaborations and networks to form.
- 2. Running specific workshops.** Some Funded Partners undertook collaborative systems mapping exercises, for example a geo-map of homelessness systems across the UK. Systems maps can incorporate lots of perspectives, which can be brought in over time as they are designed to be live documents. This allowed Funded Partners to identify gaps within the system, which they could then work to address.

Engaging all stakeholders at events can be tricky, so take opportunities to learn from them in multiple ways. One Funded Partner worked with Ipsos MORI UK to track the UK's opinion on homelessness via a survey, which allowed them to identify assumptions to test and better understand whether their activities were working towards achieving their vision.

3.2 Capitalise on the opportunities of changing political and social contexts

Kinship UK found that the political turbulence caused by the general election in 2024 provided a key opportunity for them to engage directly with cross-party parliamentary prospective candidates to build awareness among new MPs. For Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, changes in leadership within the Conservative government, and the resulting new cabinet created the potential for revitalised interest in migration. Further, the war in Ukraine resulted in increased public interest in refugee and migrant issues, visible in the considerable public support for refugees fleeing the war. This opened new opportunities for Centre for Knowledge Equity to undertake research and innovative partnerships that engaged the public.

3.3 Remove barriers for your stakeholders

Lastly, make it as simple as possible for stakeholders to engage. The higher the barrier to entry, the less likely they will want to add in their views, undertake practical actions or support delivery.

Go into conversations prepared

This is especially helpful for engaging stakeholders who are influential but time poor, such as local and national decision makers. Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group were offered an opportunity to present to the Home Affairs Select Committee, following a meeting at the Labour Conference with Diana Johnson. They made sure to walk into the room as prepared as possible:

“The preparation for the session we gave was intense to show the Select Committee the respect of thorough preparation and responses that gave sufficient statistical evidence and that drew on the key knowledge bases of other NGOs in the sector. Our existing relationships with AVID and Medical Justice were beneficial and showed that co-operation in the sector is crucial.”

Focus initial attention on people who are interested and engaged within your system

Centre for Homelessness Impact found that a continual challenge of their work was translating engagement into measurable action:

“It is relatively easy to convince people working in the homelessness sector to attend evidence-focussed events. It is much more difficult to get people to embed what they have learned.”

Start where that conversion is most likely to take place, and grow activities and influence outwards, to connect with currently unengaged volunteers, organisations and decision makers.

Respect that the needs of stakeholders and their capacities to engage will change

For Funded Partners, the pandemic particularly influenced the needs of their service users and volunteers. Groundswell UK found that exacerbated health needs meant they had to switch their opportunities to be hybrid and offer flexible means of communication.

4. Understanding the partnership's internal capacity & capability

Delivering systems change requires a clear understanding of internal strengths, gaps, and resources, with ongoing adaptation as partnerships evolve.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Managing the partnership

Clear communication and decision-making, combined with regular touchpoints, support alignment and responsiveness.

People and skills

Teams diverse in experience and expertise strengthen impact, while flexibility and development opportunities support retention of individuals.

Funding

Long-term, stable funding is critical, while short-term models risk undermining stability and sustained collaboration.



The final component that the Funded Partners sought to understand was the capacity and capability of the partnerships they formed. This required turning the lens inwards, and taking time to map out what they had available. Often this took the form of a SWOT analysis, looking at internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats, to really understand:

- What skills and knowledge were present within partnership staff
- What tangible resources were available to them – physical workspaces, funding, items needed to conduct their work
- What links within the system (e.g. academics, service users, volunteers, other organisations) and influence (e.g. local / national decision makers) each organisation held
- What processes already existed for coordinating a partnership focused on systems change
- What the current opportunities and threats (funding, contextual, political) to the planned programme of work were.

With this outlined upfront, Funded Partners could design their work to line up with the skills of their partnership, and mitigate any threats identified. Across the five years of Change Makers, Funded Partners noticed three continual risks that posed a significant threat to partnerships.

4.1 Managing the partnership

Doing this successfully can make or break the potential impact of a project. In a systems change context, where partnerships often require 3–4 core organisations working across multiple systems, this is complex. Funded Partners recommended three foundational practices to do this well:

1. Scaling up operational functions as the partnership grows

Across long-term initiatives, partnerships can fluctuate and change shape to incorporate new organisations, move towards a different opportunity, or adapt to funding changes. Often, they grow. In response, operational functions such as performance management, monitoring and evaluation, communications, hiring and onboarding and financial management need to scale up accordingly.

Funded Partners found that bi-annual or annual check-ins on partnership health helped keep an eye on the suitability of their processes and provided a regular opportunity to review and update.

2. Clearly setting out decision-making processes

One process that is particularly relevant in complex partnerships is the one used to make decisions. Key to retaining motivation and allowing a partnership to benefit from the full expertise of staff within it, is empowering staff to suggest ideas and be a part of decisions which affect them and their work. Funded Partners supported their team members to understand the decision-making process and worked to create a culture which promoted the sharing of ideas.

3. Running regular touchpoints

Lastly, it was found helpful to run regular (often monthly or quarterly) touch points, bringing key voices from the partnership together. By frequently engaging multiple stakeholders, which would usually include a lived experience perspective, the partnership could ensure their direction of travel reflected the current needs of their community, and there was a consistent understanding of the change that needed to take place across their partnership and core audience.

4.2 Hiring and retaining staff with key skills

Consistently, Funded Partners reported that their biggest asset to their work were skilled, enthusiastic staff members working as part of a multi-disciplinary team.

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland WAFNI

WAFNI work with vulnerable women and children at risk of domestic abuse, so for them, finding the right person to work as their See Hear Act Regional Champion, who held cross-sectional skills and existing networks made a substantial difference to their work.



"Hire the right people! Another strength of the project within the initial year was the recruitment of the See Hear Act Regional Champion. The successful candidate's previous experience within local Women's Aid services, along with existing relationships with external organisations and a strong knowledge base in trauma informed practice allowed the project to 'hit the ground running'. Their knowledge of local WA children's services allowed us to predict some of the barriers."

Finding team members with the right skills to work across a system, which may require having expertise in multiple fields, can be tricky. Funded Partners found the following practices helpful in engaging and retaining their best staff members.

1. Enabling people to work towards personal goals

For some Funded Partners, staff and volunteer recruitment and retention was a real threat to their work. A solution that worked for them was providing as much flexibility as possible within roles. They provided ongoing support to their team to meet personal progression goals, providing training to meet these where needed.

2. Incorporating lived experience into the team

Centring lived and learned experience within a team has two main benefits. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, it allows the lived experience viewpoint to be present in all organisational activities, rather than just engaging with experts by experience in segmented consultation moments. Secondly, it can form teams where there is a stronger sense of purpose with greater authenticity and trust. For Funded Partners who employed individuals with lived experience relative to their system and service users, they found the culture within their own organisation benefited – becoming more empathetic and open. This in turn can support increased staff retention.

3. Providing staff with flexibility

In environments made unstable by political and funding shifts it can be beneficial to keep job roles fluid to enable team members to adapt as needed. Staff should be provided the autonomy to make changes as they see fit, to ensure they can keep pace with their systems context.

4.3 Securing funding

The challenge of securing long-term funding to support collective working was one repeated by multiple Funded Partners across the duration of their Change Makers work. One Funded Partner reflected that

"...everyone wants you to work collaboratively but no one funds you to work collaboratively."

For them, the need to bring in multiple, smaller pots of funding in a 'patchwork' meant that it was challenging for them to keep up their skill base. As a voluntary organisation they would invest significant time and financial resource in upskilling their workforce, only for that team member to move on to a job with better stability, resulting in a need to rehire and retrain.

The Funded Partners couldn't report a solution to this challenge. They simply reiterated a desire for more long-term funding which supports collaboration and sustainability to be made available.

CONCLUSION

For the Funded Partners, developing a deep understanding of both organisational capacity and wider system context was foundational to achieving sustainable systems change.

This understanding could not be static: it had to be built broadly, revisited and remain responsive to changing social, political and organisational contexts. Where Funded Partners looked both outwards (engaging benefitting groups, stakeholders and policy environments) and turned the lens inwards (assessing partnerships, skills and resources), they were most effective.

To develop a robust understanding of context and capability, there were three key practices. Firstly, put time and effort into bringing people together. Not only does this support the goal to engage diverse voices but it will allow richer and more complete understandings to form, and it engages both current and potentially new stakeholders too. Secondly, each group of stakeholders brings different perspectives and skills, but they will also need different approaches to most meaningfully share their understanding. Being able to provide a range of approaches and communication styles will pay dividends. Lastly, remain flexible, as systems and sectors shift quickly and the ability to adapt partnerships and plans is critical to sustaining relevance and impact.

Together, these learnings underline that developing understanding into context and systems is not a one-off phase, but an ongoing practice. It enables organisations not only to respond to complexity, but to shape sustainable change that extends beyond the Change Makers programme.



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