

Systems Change for Multiple Complex Needs: A practical tool



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Who should use the tool and when?

- This tool is intended to be used by anyone who is developing or running a systems change activity or project for people with multiple complex needs. We encourage you to use the tool to identify practical actions in seven key areas which can improve the likely success of your activity.

How and why was this tool developed?

- [Golden Key](#) trialled different approaches to achieving system change for multiple complex needs in Bristol between 2014 and 2022 in the Fulfilling Lives programme (funded by the National Lottery Community Fund). During this time, the local evaluation team at UWE, Bristol collaborated with Golden Key partners to capture learning about how these approaches worked.
- Insights from Phases 3, 4 and 5 of the local evaluation as well as Golden Key learning products (including the [Approach to change](#) and [Three pillars](#)) have been translated here into a practical tool to support the legacy of Golden Key in Bristol and beyond.
- This tool aims to support you to integrate learning from Golden Key about what has worked to achieve change for multiple complex needs.
- Further learning products, including local evaluation reports, are available at <https://www.goldenkeybristol.org.uk/what-are-we-learning>

What is systems change?

- Systems change is... “An intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions.” *Abercrombie et al., 2015* – [Systems Change: A guide to what it is and how to do it](#)
- It is particularly relevant when working with complexity, where there is a large number of interdependent things happening at the same time, there are multiple perspectives on the issues, a high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity, and an inability to predict what will happen next.

What is ‘multiple complex needs’?

- “People facing multiple complex needs [also referred to as severe and multiple disadvantage] experience a combination of problems including homelessness, substance misuse, contact with the criminal justice system and mental ill health. People with multiple complex needs are likely to live in poverty and experience stigma, discrimination, isolation and loneliness. They fall through the gaps between services and systems, making it harder for them to address their problems and lead fulfilling lives.” *MEAM, 2018* – [About multiple disadvantage](#)

Developed for Golden Key by Richard Bolden, Beth Isaac, Chris Pawson and Roz Gasper - UWE, Bristol, June 2022

With thanks to all who contributed their comments and suggestions!

Person centred services and support

Services which are inclusive, flexible and trauma informed, can understand and respond to individual needs. This improves service user's engagement with services, their experience of services and the service quality, which leads to better service user outcomes.

Questions to shape your approach...

- What information can you gather (evidence, activities, conversations, psychological theories, etc.) to improve your understanding of service users' current experience?
- What do service users think are the most and least important problems to address?
- What is currently limiting flexibility in how services are delivered?
- How can you embed flexibility in your activity/change(s) so it can respond over time to new needs and service users' or staff feedback?
- What can you do to test your ideas about change or what happens when changes are implemented to understand how change affects services users?
- How are decision making powers distributed and who is held accountable for the impact of decisions?

Actions to consider...

- Take time to talk to service users, listen to them to understand their experience, especially what is not working for them, before deciding on solutions.
- Talk to staff and relevant professionals to understand what stops them from being able to provide flexible and responsive support, and to identify any enabling factors that have helped.
- Provide supervision, training and reflective practice to help staff work in trauma/ psychologically informed ways and to understand service users' experiences.
- Collect evidence on how barriers to flexibility affect service users and others, to strengthen a case for change. Use examples/stories from service users and front line workers to build buy-in.
- Put in place a small flexible fund or personal budgets to help remove barriers to service users' engagement or progression.

Collaboration and partnership working

Complex problems require collaborative solutions as no single entity has the oversight or capacity to respond alone. Successful collaborations establish a shared sense of purpose to build commitment. Inclusive engagement must be managed carefully to keep everyone committed and feeling able to have a voice, while acknowledging tensions. Involve people with sufficient expertise and authority to act.

Questions to shape your approach...

- Where are people already working together around this issue; are there any aligned projects/strategies you can connect with?
- What perspectives (beliefs, experiences, practices, etc.) are shared between the different people and organisations around this issue?
- Can you agree a common narrative and find named people who will support this project?
- Are there any areas of tension between key people or organisations? Why?
- Are partners in competition for limited resources and/or recognition? Can you improve how well everyone understands the roles and pressures of different agencies?
- Are you doing enough to ensure that everyone who needs to be involved is kept well informed, has their voice heard, is included in decision making, and has their contribution recognised?
- Can you find any 'quick wins' to help get buy in?
- How can you ensure active rather than passive engagement?

Actions to consider...

- Ensure that the partnership, as well as associated significant groups, have a clearly defined purpose and meaningful terms of reference that everyone buys into.
- Arrange independent system change facilitation for significant groups to help create the space for meaningful and open discussion and resolve any conflict that may arise between people or organisations.
- Think about levels of trust between agencies and how you can work with others to build trust.
- Enable partners to share perspectives and experiences around particular issues to develop shared understanding and purpose.
- Schedule regular check-ins with partners between formal meetings and reflection time to ensure you take everyone with you.
- Put structures and processes in place which create shared accountability and ownership of risk.
- Invest in dedicated communications support to ensure everyone is kept informed, acknowledge contributions, and celebrate successes!

Diversity of perspectives and experience

Drawing together diverse perspectives supports an inclusive culture that promotes equality and diversity. Including service users' perspectives helps ensure change meets their needs. In complex systems, diversity is essential to help you understand the system, make well-informed decisions, and respond to unintended consequences. NOTE: Diversity here refers to both personal characteristics and life experiences, as well as professional responsibilities.

Questions to shape your approach...

- Which aspects of diversity and different perspectives are particularly relevant to your change activity?
- Are any important voices or identities missing (including those from the communities served) and how can you involve them?
- How can you support and promote people with diverse characteristics and experiences to engage with your change activity?
- How can your decision-making processes reflect commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion?
- Have you embedded Equality Impact Assessments into your work?
- Are operational staff involved with relevant knowledge of processes and service delivery?
- Are strategic staff involved so you can make decisions, allocate resources, and take action?
- How can you ensure any activity related to your project offers safe spaces for everyone?

Actions to consider...

- Develop and support a lived experience community, or service user group to engage with your work, and ensure it is properly resourced.
- Involve service users or people with lived experience in developing your intervention (if not possible, use research or real service user cases).
- Ensure that meeting times, formats and locations do not exclude particular people; explore ways of supporting people from marginalised groups to engage (e.g. funding, transport, extra support...).
- Secure commitment from senior level stakeholders and hold them to account for equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Provide training and support to help partners understand and work positively with people from diverse backgrounds.
- Pay close attention to who it is you are struggling to engage and understand any barriers to their engagement which you can then address.

Relationships

Strong and enduring relationships, founded on trust and respect, enable individuals to improve their understanding of different perspectives in the system, to be open to learning, to collaborate more effectively and effectively support service users. Psychological and systems change theory place special value on relationships as a key mechanism for change in every context. Quality relationships tend not to be simply transactional but reflect genuine care and concern for the lives of others.

Questions to shape your approach...

- Where are existing people/relationships related to your issue? Can you find allies/champions?
- What is the quality of these existing relationships and how are they developing over time?
- Who else needs to be involved and what can you do to establish those new relationships?
- Are people already working together formally or informally on this issue or areas aligned in other projects/strategies?
- How can you support the people engaged to connect beyond a transactional working relationship, to improve relationship quality (e.g. trust, openness and dialogue) between people?
- What shared interests, aspirations and/or identities link you and others?

Actions to consider...

- Complete stakeholder mapping to identify key organisations, groups and individuals and how they relate to your change.
- Create opportunities for people to work on joint projects. Think about how to piggyback onto others' work to maximize your impact.
- Prioritise time for relationship building and creating spaces where people can connect informally (e.g. space in meetings for smaller discussion groups or 1-to-1 conversations outside of a structured agenda, reflection time).
- Invest in staff roles that build and sustain key relationships and keep people updated.
- Establish processes to establish and protect key relationships (e.g. role transitions, staff departures, onboarding, buddying, mentoring, etc.).

Whole system approach

A whole system approach addresses issues holistically, rather than breaking them down into parts and tackling them separately or in siloes. This acknowledges how inter-connected different parts of the system are around multiple complex needs, which means your change could lead to unpredictable knock-on effects elsewhere. It involves focussing on networks rather than hierarchies and facilitating change by connecting different parts of the system, enabling adaptiveness, and mobilising resources to tackle challenges in a 'joined-up' way.

Questions to shape your approach...

- What can you understand about why this issue is happening (i.e. the root causes); who/what needs change in order to address this; what level of change need to take place (e.g. government/ local policy/ or local practice)?
- What can you do to better understand the whole system (all of the factors) that relate to your issue?
- What are the key assumptions that underpin your expectations of how change will occur? What knowledge or evidence underpins these?
- What can you do to actively build your network into new areas to better understand the issue(s) and find new solutions?
- Can you identify any current barriers to cross-boundary collaboration and if so what could be done to address these? Any enablers?
- How are you and colleagues encouraged to work in way that considers the whole system? Can you 'test & learn'? How will you evaluate change?

Actions to consider...

- Complete a root cause or problem tree analysis, systems mapping exercise and/or [theory of change](#).
- Run systems thinking /leadership training, with coaching for people actively engaged.
- Establish your change activity so it can adapt as you learn and things change (do reviews, trials, pilots & manage expectations of change).
- Have a communications plan to facilitate exchange between individuals, groups and organisations; including those outside your current sphere; be clear about everyone's role in communicating.
- Access and link data/information across the system to help you understand the issue.
- Fund change initiatives at systems level (i.e. getting commissioners to work together, projects crossing service or sector boundaries).
- Check in with your original aspirations to see whether you are on track to tackle the problem? Ask big questions!

People support and empowerment

Systems change requires passionate and committed individuals to take action, enabled by an empowering and supportive environment. Change projects do not run on magic, they require resources, so allow dedicated time to ensure plans are achievable. Individuals who role model desired values and ways of working can inspire and share learning with others they encounter. Support networks can help to share learning, sustain commitment, and build energy for system change.

Questions to shape your approach...

- Are there individuals who are highly passionate and committed to tackling the issue that could be further empowered?
- What structures and support are in place to empower staff who directly support service users to drive system change?
- Are staff currently being given sufficient support to cope with the emotional impact of working with multiple complex needs?
- Where are the 'safe spaces' for confidential staff supervision, support and reflective practice?
- Are there any indicators that staff are not being supported well? (e.g. high staff turnover, sickness, emotional detachment, underperformance, low morale, etc.)
- Are there any specific issues for staff with protected characteristics?

Actions to consider...

- Consider opportunities to share decision making authority and accountability with people who are directly working with services users.
- Use an [action experiment](#) approach to foster creativity and innovation.
- Build time into staff workloads for system change work, with regular reviews to allow flexibility for the work to adapt over time.
- Champion the work of frontline staff, celebrating and sharing success as widely as possible with incentives and rewards for staff and volunteers who go the extra mile.
- Support staff to connect with how their role contributes to greater meaning and purpose.
- Establish groups and networks to share learning, support each other and tackle issues together.

Learning and reflection

Openness to learning and curiosity help to recognise unhelpful assumptions and facilitate continuous improvement. Being open and honest (especially about what isn't working) is important to facilitate learning. A complex changing system needs to be continuously learning, observing, and reflecting to respond to change. Effective monitoring and evaluation support learning. Reflecting on and sharing learning is critical to facilitate greater development and performance.

Questions to shape your approach...

- Are there safe supportive spaces for learning and reflection for individuals and groups embedded in everyday practice?
- How do people deal with it when things don't work as expected?
- Are people encouraged to learn from 'failure'?
- Do you have a formal evaluation or other tools and information that will support understanding whether change activity causes the results you expect for service users and others?
- How will learning be consolidated and shared?
- How does learning and evaluation feedback into your practice to maximise improvement?
- Are there forums to share learning formally and informally with all relevant stakeholders at all levels?
- What can you do to support stakeholders to disseminate learning and insights within their own organisations and networks?

Actions to consider...

- Plan regular space for reflective practice into the day-to-day work of staff and protect this time.
- Use experienced reflective practice facilitators or train staff to develop expertise.
- Actively engage partners in learning and development activities throughout the initiative.
- Ensure the essentials are in place in good time (before you start substantial activity) to collect and allow access to the information you need to understand how your activity is working (e.g. data sharing, consent).
- Have a system change facilitator in projects and in governance structures to coach, support learning and building capacity.
- Review progress closely and capture and embed learning.
- Allocate time on meeting agendas for reflection and substantial periodic review points.

Golden Key System Change Practices

Over the past eight years Golden Key has trialled a wide range of initiatives to support system change. In no order of importance here are six that the local evaluation has identified as particularly significant, and which may be worth considering in your system change intervention.

1.

Independent facilitation of multi-stakeholder groups and forums

2.

Using an **action experiment approach** to enable frontline workers (and those elsewhere in the system) to trial new ideas/interventions

3.

Building in **time for reflection** (and psychological supervision where needed) for staff in all roles and at all levels

4.

Developing and resourcing an **experts by experience group** to put the voice of lived experience at the heart of decision making

5.

Providing **system change training** to help develop a common language for people in all roles and positions across the partnership

6.

Identifying key influencers to act as **system change champions** and build connections across the sector/city

For further details on these and other learning from the Golden Key Partnership please visit <https://www.goldenkeybristol.org.uk/what-are-we-learning>