

A first venture into systems change

Background

The purpose of this paper is to share the learning from a review of our experience of supporting the Transforming Pathways programme which was co-designed and delivered in partnership with the Centre for Excellence with Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) at the University of Strathclyde.

The Transforming Pathways programme was established to improve the well-being of children and families living on the edges of care in three specific Local Authority areas in Scotland. The intention was to support CELCIS to take an Active Implementation approach to work alongside the public sector to enable them to take more of an early intervention / prevention approach and reinvest resources currently spent on high cost residential options for children in care. The third sector along with young people and families themselves were also to be core partners in this work.

The first 6 months of funding were used by CELCIS with support from the Trust to identify three Local Authority areas that could evidence that they were ready to undertake a change programme of this type and in particular that they would commit to changing how they use their resources to better support early intervention for families on the edge of care. After this an R&D phase was initiated to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders at local level, understand the current system and begin to scope out potential options to move resources to a more preventative approach.

Progress to get beyond the R&D phase was slow and we were unable to identify a clear end point for this phase of the work. In discussion with CELCIS, The Robertson Trust decided to cease financial support for the continuation of the work for the following reasons:

1. This systems change work needed the public sector to be the main driver of change and our role was therefore limited as we were not in a position to fund them directly. We had underestimated the significant amount of workforce development and culture change which was required within the public sector before broader external partnerships could be considered. We couldn't see forward to a stage where there would be a strong role for the third sector and families themselves in identifying and taking forward potential solutions.
2. It proved difficult to integrate the teams delivering the work (at CELCIS, the Trust and in local areas), and the Trust was seen as an arms-length funder rather than a partner.
3. Not enough time was spent ensuring all partners understood and supported the change approach being taken (Active Implementation), which undermined confidence that programme outcomes were going to be significant enough to justify the length of time, and amount of resource, required.

The Approach

This was the first time the Trust had stepped into the space of system change and at the beginning we didn't appreciate just how complex and time consuming it would be. On reflection, we did not take sufficient time to ensure that we understood the approach and our understanding of why particular activities were being undertaken. Ultimately this inhibited our collective ability to align the strengths of the Trust's and CELCIS' teams. It also made it more difficult for the Trust to communicate to others what progress was being made, undermining confidence in the process. Ultimately, we did not undertake enough preparation work on what operating in this space of complex system change, with an external partner, would mean for us as a funder and the role that we would play. Although CELCIS and the Trust understood and shared objectives in relation to the programme, the insufficient preparation meant that conflicting ideas of our respective roles and functions developed.

Lessons Learned

- *We have learnt that systems change work is difficult, time consuming, frustrating and messy. There are no rules to follow and the processes and outcomes are uncertain. It is a difficult space within which to work and a huge degree of patience is required. All partners need to agree what success will look like and believe that the prize at the end is worth the effort of getting there.*
- *It is difficult at the outset of any public sector led systems change work to have clarity on the potential role for the third sector although it should be possible to assess the appetite for their involvement in the process. We need to anticipate that a significant amount of preparatory work will need to be undertaken with the public sector organisations that hold the major levers for change. We may also need to resource third sector organisations, particularly smaller community-based organisations to enable them to engage with the work.*
- *When embarking on systems change work in the future, we will agree the approach to systems change that will be taken with all partners beforehand and articulate how progress will be measured and success recognised.*

Clear roles and accountabilities

This was the first time that the Trust used an intermediary organisation to manage a programme on our behalf. We weren't clear ourselves or with CELCIS what both roles entailed. We knew this partnership was different, but we hadn't articulated what this meant for us and the other partners. We didn't do enough to align understanding of the programme between CELCIS and the Trust and to ensure we were using common language. In hindsight we should have spent more time across all members of both teams agreeing, articulating and signing off the roles and accountabilities. Some of this was implicitly understood at senior management level but the opportunity was not provided for others to debate issues and it was not effectively cascaded down to the teams.

Lessons Learned

- *We will ensure in the future to have clarity on why, when and how we might wish to work with an intermediary delivery partner. We will also understand the roles that are not appropriate for us to take on as a funder and where we would benefit from specific expertise.*
- *We will develop clear roles and responsibilities for both the Trust and any partner(s) in the delivery of a programme. We will ensure that everyone involved with the programme is engaged with the writing of these and understands what they mean for the work, before the programme begins in earnest.*

Conclusion

We will still consider supporting systems change work in the future but now have a much clearer process in place for us to decide whether or not we, as an independent Trust that funds third sector organisations, are best placed to engage with the work. Since the Trust embarked on the Transforming Pathways journey with CELCIS we have developed several new processes to ensure that we have greater clarity of purpose and approach when working in complexity and systems change. We have also increased the knowledge across the team of working in this space and the skills it requires. We have developed a paper which considers the range of funding approaches the Trust can take and clarified the roles for the Trust when considering engagement with complexity and systems change work. We have identified partners that can bring expertise that we don't have to work with prospective projects and have developed criteria to enable us to assess whether a partnership might be appropriate for us to work with. Transforming Pathways has not yet achieved the outcomes we hoped for although activity is still underway in all three of the Local Authority areas supported by CELCIS. Engagement in this work has enabled us to undertake a significant learning journey and as a Trust we are now in a much improved position to engage with similar work in the future.

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