Learning from Children's Communities

Progress towards place-based systems change

Who are we?

Children's Community Network

The Children's Communities Network comprises three Children's Communities: Pembury (London), Smallshaw-Hurst (Greater Manchester) and Wallsend (North Tyneside).

Each Children's Community is a local partnership supported by a core team and Save the Children UK. They take a long-term, place-based approach to improving children and young people's life chances by working across home, school and community in partnership with others, and working to change how the local system supports children to succeed.

www.childrenscommunitynetwork.org.uk

Save the Children

Save the Children exists to help every child reach their full potential. In the UK and around the world, we make sure children stay safe, healthy and keep learning, so they can become who they want to be.

Across the UK, Save the Children works with families and communities to narrow the gap between children living in poverty and their better-off peers. By focusing on early learning, we help children across the UK realise their full potential. We deliver a range of programmes and campaigns, working alongside parents to create positive home environments, uniting parents, children, schools, and communities, and calling on the government to invest in children's futures.

www.savethechildren.org.uk

collaborate for social change

Collaborate CIC is a consultancy that helps public services collaborate to tackle complex social challenges, such as rising inequality, multiple needs, devolution and fairer economic growth, which require collaborative responses.

We create partnerships that get beyond traditional silos to deliver credible change on the ground.

Our clients and partners span local government, NHS, civil society and the private sector. We are values-led, not for profit and driven by a belief in the power of collaborative services as a force for social and economic progress.

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Sheffield Hallam University

As a leading UK policy research centre, the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) seeks to understand the impact of social and economic disadvantage on places and people and assess critically the politics and interventions targeted at these issues.

The Centre for Research & Development in Education (CDaRE) is the Sheffield Institute of Education's research and knowledge exchange centre. It provides curriculum development for schools and colleges, professional development for teachers and evaluations of education interventions.

www.shu.ac.uk

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Executive Summary

The Children's Communities programme emerged from a shared commitment across communities in London, Manchester and North Tyneside, to improve the life chances of children and young people in their areas. Inspired by Harlem Children Zone and in collaboration with Save the Children UK, individuals and organisations came together to explore what a 'collective impact', local systems change approach might look like in the UK, with a view to learn from each other and share learning with the wider sector.

The report seeks to share achievements and learning from the first phase of the programme, and to invite local and national partners, funders and influencers, to help Children's Communities build on the strong foundations they have established, to transform the life chances of children in our communities.

The Children's Communities programme is approaching the end of its first phase. This report builds on hundreds of relationships, projects and insights, supplemented through a set of learning sessions held across communities, to help identify what has helped and hindered Children's Communities in their first three to four years, and how this will inform their future.

It also holds important lessons for the wider sector and those who recognise the importance of place-based systems change approaches for improving children's and young people's lives, particularly where there is a recognition of how complex a challenge this is, and how collaborative the response needs to be.

Three years into the programme, we brought together the Children's Communities and a range of partners, stakeholders and funders, to reflect on progress and learning to date and identify the key areas for development and exploration.
This programme review introduces the Children's Communities and explores five main areas:

- **Achievements:** what has happened as a result of Children's Communities since their establishment in local areas?
- **Key enablers:** what has contributed to Children's Communities realising their achievements?
- **Barriers & challenges:** what has inhibited the progress of the Children's Communities?
- **Learning:** what have we learnt about the key factors that support the early stages of place-based systems change initiatives?
- **Exploration areas:** on the basis of our learning and local strategies in each community what are possible areas for future exploration?

Achievements

The Children's Communities Network launched in 2016, with the Pembury Children's Community in Hackney, London and the Wallsend Children's Community in North Tyneside. The Smallshaw-Hurst Children's Community launched in 2017. Over this period, Children's Communities have achieved significant progress. Their achievements fall into four main categories: creating momentum, increasing learning, delivering impact and shifting the system.

- Children's Communities have generated **momentum** in their areas, drawing together a range of individuals and organisations. They have been able to generate a strong sense of shared purpose and ambition, changing how people feel about the prospect of supporting children and young people across the community. They have also been able to unlock significant support, tapping into people's desire to collaborate, and galvanising a diverse range of people.

- Children's Communities have enabled **learning** in local areas, helping partners and systems to **build their capacity**. This has taken the form of deepening their knowledge and understanding across both individual local issues and the local system as a whole, helping people engage with complexity and its implications for their work and the wider mission.

- Children's Communities have brought about **improvements and impact** for children and young people. This includes improved outcomes through pilot projects and programmes. They have also leveraged resources and time from across the system, making available a wider pool of assets, funding, relationships and energy for the work.

- Children's Communities have started to bring about **changes and shifts** in how the local system works, in four main ways: creating new connections between organisations, deepening collaborations, driving small-scale culture changes, and shifting local priorities.

Key enablers

Children's Communities operate on the basis of a shared approach (see page 20), and by investing additional capacity in the local system in the form of a small core team, supported by a cross-sector governing body and a range of local partners. This approach has enabled the achievements of the Children's Communities in three key ways: **the impact of the core team and its activities**, **the impact of partners, and the role of relationships.**

- The **core team** looks different across the three Children's Communities, but it has in common a small number of full- and part-time individuals who provide additional capacity in a local system. Across all three there is capacity to convene partners and support the development of a shared strategy and activities.
- A range of different **partners** support Children's Communities - including funders, governance board members and local voluntary and community partners.
- **Strong relationships** in Children's Communities have supported the development of a shared understanding of 'what good looks like,' facilitated connections and supported collaboration.

Challenges & Barriers

There have been a number of setbacks, barriers and challenges in the Children's Communities programme. The following should provide helpful insights for similar work and have informed the future focus of Children's Communities' strategies and exploration areas for the programme.

- The **role of local people** has been a different type of challenge across the three communities, ranging from how best to enable meaningful participation to considering more radical co-creation approaches.
- The **absence of capacity and supporting infrastructure** in local systems has inhibited progress. This has included under-resourced partners needing to prioritise organisational activities, and an absence of practical tools for cross-organisation or cross-sector collaboration inhibiting participation, learning and joint working.
- The issue of **capturing and communicating progress** has been a challenge in relation to finding meaningful measures and mechanisms for capturing change across relationships, services and the local system, and what this means for children's and young people's outcomes.
- The balance between '**going wide**' or '**going deep**' in building relationships, partnerships and networks has been an area for exploration and evaluation since the inception of Children's Communities. The disadvantages of 'going wide' for the purpose of representation (as opposed to finding ways to surface diverse perspectives) has in some cases led to inertia or paralysis.
- There have been two areas of challenge around **data** which have slowed progress in Children's Communities. The first is data quality and fragmented approaches to data management and data sharing. The second is differing levels of understanding around data and its role.

Learning

During this first phase of the Children's Communities programme, the achievements, enablers, challenges and barriers have informed learning which will direct the next phase of work, as well as providing food for thought for similar place-based initiatives, and influencers and decision-makers interested in supporting such approaches. They are as follows:

- It is important to be able to **articulate the approach and update partners on progress**, given that place-based systems change efforts are long-term. Both how change happens and what it might look like are uncertain at the outset. This enables people to engage and maintains their involvement and support.
- The act of '**digging channels**' (i.e. connecting and strengthening relationships between others) in an area increases the quantity and quality of connections between people and organisations, resulting in a law of 'increasing returns'. The experience of Children's Communities has been that the more that core teams can make introductions, facilitate connections and convene people, the more happens – both through the initiative itself and beyond.
- **Growing up with data** speaks to developing a more mature relationship with data - from being 'data-driven' to 'evidence-informed', and ultimately developing 'intelligence' about an area.
- Whilst much language around systems change can be abstract and general, it is still **individuals who make change**. This typically happens as a result of leadership expressed through behaviours rather than positions, supported by deep relationships and diverse insights.
- The importance of **small-scale projects and opportunities for participation** cannot be overstated as vehicles for demonstrating change and supporting learning. In addition to highlighting where and how change should happen, they enable experiential learning, which has been central in moving from transactional to collaborative approaches.
- Taking a **stewardship approach to leadership**, helping individuals and organisations across a system to connect and develop a shared purpose and plan, avoiding hoarding relationships or seeking to lead others in traditional ways, and helping solutions to emerge. This includes looking at how priorities are embedded in others' strategies, and vice versa.
- Recognising that **conditions matter**, for instance local culture and context, the availability of funding and capacity, and pre-existing relationships; but that whilst these will affect the development of the work, dedicated **system capacity** (i.e. a core team) can make progress in the context of those conditions.
- At the heart of current systems lies **power**, and so systems change needs to be about **rethinking and shifting power** as well as putting in place new mechanisms and approaches for doing things differently.

Some notable achievements in numbers:

- Over 700 families supported through Children's Community activities
- Over 3,000 children and young people directly supported through community-enabled interventions
- More than 30 professionals trained in oral health
- 56 children took part in Ready for School and Playbox pilots
- 57 families saw improved debt and income outcomes
- 37 organisations and services involved in Children's Community governing bodies
- 141 organisations involved in governance, partnership or support activities across the Network to date
- Around 4,400 Pupil Perception Surveys completed to help 20 schools better support students
- National best practice recognition in academic and policy circles

Exploration areas

Each Children's Community has a local strategy, focused on early years, health and wellbeing, and transitions into adulthood, underpinned by a desire to improve how their local system works for children and young people.

Three key themes have emerged which provide an opportunity for further exploration and research as part of the ongoing work of Children's Communities.

1. Across Children's Communities, the question of **community voice** and the **role of local people** in improving the lives of children and young people is a key theme, as is their involvement in planning and decision-making in the work of Children's Communities themselves. This area seeks to rethink the broader Children's Communities approach with local people as equal partners, following Pembury's example of including community voice in governance, strategy and delivery.

2. The 'end game' of Children's Communities is to improve children's and young people's lives across a community, by enabling local systems and services to change and improve how they work. This action inquiry area seeks to address the question of **hardwiring change**, exploring how to move from individual sets of effective relationships to stronger systems which establish a 'new normal'.

3. The focus on **relationships** is present across many fields: from community development to local systems change. In Children's Communities they're described as 'the currency of a system,' meaning that the stronger the relationships between people in that place, the better the outcomes for children and young people. This area will consider how to apply relationships as an organising principle for improving and redesigning how systems work.

Foreword

Last year, there were 4.2 million children living in poverty in the UK (Department for Work & Pensions, 2020). That's 30 per cent of children growing up in poverty, at a time when work does not provide a guaranteed route out of poverty, and childcare and housing present two of the biggest burdens on family budgets.

The effects of child poverty are well documented. Individuals growing up in poverty typically experience poorer outcomes and worse life chances, educationally, physically, socially and in terms of health and wellbeing (NHS Scotland). For communities, the presence of poverty can rob an area of its potential and undermine social cohesion (CPAG). Nationally, our inability to tackle child poverty represents both an ethical and an economic failure: a waste of the extraordinary creativity and potential of our children and young people (JRF, 2008).

The Children's Communities programme was launched in 2016, inspired by the boldness and vision of Harlem Children's Zone but in a very different context. It has moved from Harlem's vision of *'a pipeline of cradle to career support'* to *'local systems change*,' in recognition that the civic and social infrastructure in England requires a different response. Tackling the effects of child poverty means we need to engage in a complex issue, and therefore one which no single organisation can address.

The development of the Children's Communities programme came about some time before the now ubiquitous language of systems change emerged across the public and voluntary sectors. It was built on the recognition of the neighbourhood as a unit of change (Brooks, 2018), implicitly recognising the limitations of single interventions and superhero organisations, and reaching towards a more collaborative, joined-up and intelligent way of supporting 'our children' in each community. This recognition of 'place' as the guiding frame has been the foundation on which it is built.

Many of the innovations at the heart of Children's Communities were built in at the outset, whilst other benefits of the model have emerged over time. Establishing shared purpose and building relationships and networks have been made possible through the additional capacity and support provided by Children's Community core teams to the local system. Attitudes towards data and evidence have shifted as people are brought together and able to compare and contrast how they see a given challenge within the community. Partnerships have embraced collaboration as they have experienced it through pilot projects. Learning has become the lifeblood of healthy initiatives, deepening understanding.

On the other hand, the approach has enabled core teams to play a connected but independent role in communities, avoiding competition for resources or territory. It has built on the relationships between 'anchor' organisations, enabling a long-term commitment to working with local people and professionals to bring about local systems change. Work around data and evidence has problematised simplistic notions and uses of data, and highlighted how difficult it is to share data meaningfully in a fragmented system. Pilots have done as much to catalyse wider collaboration as to tackle the specific issues they were designed to address.

While systems change approaches can feel cerebral and conceptual, Children's Communities have worked at the interface between ideas and action, asking 'what would a better local system look like here, for children and young people, supported by this work?'. In doing this, they have generated momentum across their communities, deepened the understanding, skills and capacity of people committed to improving children's outcomes, brought about improved outcomes for children and young people, and started to shift priorities and behaviours in their areas.

These achievements have not come about overnight or by chance: they have emerged through individuals and organisations working collaboratively at both a local and national level. At a local level, founding partners and local organisations have invested energy, time, resources and support in identifying how the Children's Community should develop according to its priorities, needs and assets. At a national level, Save the Children, Sheffield Hallam University and the Children's Communities Funders alliance have played an enabling and learning role, providing funding, infrastructure resource, constructive challenge and sharing learning more widely.

The Children's Communities programme is a bold initiative which provides an exciting opportunity for improving children's lives in a period when child poverty is rising and resources in communities are under increasing pressure. The combination of long-term commitment, unrestricted funding, local collaboration and a focus on systems change have established strong foundations on which to build, but the work is far from done.

The unprecedented situation around COVID-19 has shown again the value of the Children's Communities. The teams have worked with partners in the communities to ensure that responses are coordinated and specific to the needs of local people and that responses are adapting as new and varied concerns arise. Children's Community teams co-created hubs for support and information and mobilised funding. The teams, and the Children's Community identity, were one of the first ports of call in a time of crisis, showing again their implicit value to the local system.

The ambition of a Children's Community is not to improve the life chances for a handful of children in each place, but to make each place a great place to grow up in for every child; a place in which a supportive community and effective, joined-up services can enable children to thrive. The next phase will build on the huge progress and learning to date, looking to hardwire in the changes brought about by collaborative working, experimenting and learning since 2016. I hope you will be part of it.

Rachel Parkin
Head of North England,
Save the Children UK

01

Setting the context

Growing up in our Children's Communities

Following the 2011 riots in London, the leaders of Peabody Housing Association and the London Borough of Hackney came together to explore what might be done to improve the life chances of children and young people growing up on the Pembury estate in Hackney.

Pembury was one of three communities to become founding members of the Children's Communities Network. Whilst each area is different, children growing up in Pembury, Smallshaw-Hurst and Wallsend face significant barriers to achieving their full potential.

But in each area too, there was a group of individuals who had a vision for doing things differently. Through developing partnerships between local organisations, Save the Children UK and a small group of founding funders, these Communities have sought to change the odds for local children.

Each Children's Community has profoundly different strengths & weaknesses, and faces different opportunities and challenges. In Smallshaw-Hurst and Wallsend, economic opportunity lies in the nearby cities of Manchester and Newcastle, but how can barriers to accessing them be overcome? In Pembury, there are high levels of child poverty within a borough experiencing rising levels of inequality.

As the learning from the Children's Communities programme is rooted in these particular contexts, we'd like to introduce you to each of them.

Pembury

Pembury is an estate of about 2,400 people located in the London Borough of Hackney.

Despite recent investment in both physical infrastructure and social support over the past ten years, children and young people growing up on the estate still face many more challenges than their peers from less disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Pembury is often viewed negatively by the outside world, a stigma exacerbated by the riots which occurred nearby in 2011.

In many ways Pembury is typical of some of the larger estates in Hackney, with residents feeling a sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood (represented by the estate), but often feeling somewhat excluded from the rapid changes and development taking place more widely in the borough. The estate itself was subject to development with a new block and community centre under way when initial discussions about the Children's Communities were held in 2011. This presented risks to the cohesion of the Pembury community with an influx of new leaseholders and had the potential to reflect a wider sense of alienation. In this way Pembury was reflective of what was happening in Hackney more generally and provided an opportunity to test an approach that had the potential to be used elsewhere in the borough.

Alongside these challenges, there is a recognition that this is a community with many strengths, both internal to the community itself and in terms of wider assets in the immediate locality and more widely. For example, the estate is well served by local schools with some that have a national reputation for excellence. Children's centre provision in the area is of a very high standard, and there is a a thriving youth offer. There is also a strong culture of supporting each other within the community and a real sense of belonging.

- ***800 children and young people and over 500 parents have engaged with the community centre***
- ***56 children went through the Ready for School/ Playbox project***
- ***500 local residents have come through the doors of the community centre per week***
- ***57 families with improved debt and income outcomes***
- ***17 services and organisations are involved in governance***
- ***45 services/ organisations are engaged in the work of the Children's Community***

Source:
Pembury Children's Community, 2019

"There are lots of places to go, I have a back garden and fields that I play in. I have lots of fun with my family, we play lots of games. I won a competition at school and went bowling, I've never been before and I loved it. At school I have funny, crazy friends and I love my teacher."

Fatima, age 8, Smallshaw-Hurst

Smallshaw-Hurst

Smallshaw-Hurst is made up of three deprived neighbourhoods in Tameside, a borough in Greater Manchester.

The challenges faced by children and young people growing up in Smallshaw-Hurst are numerous, if they are to have the same life chances as their more affluent peers.

Areas for further support in Smallshaw-Hurst are around poor behaviour in both primary and secondary schools, with some of the highest fixed term and permanent exclusion rates in England: the main secondary school serving the area has fixed term exclusion rates over twice the local authority average (Department for Education, 2019). Tameside has high child admissions for mental health and youth hospital admissions for self-harm (NHS Digital, 2019). These and related admissions are a leading cause of health-related disabilities in children and young people with adverse and long-lasting effects. Young people also face challenges around risk-taking behaviours such as self-harm, drug and alcohol misuse.

However, there are emerging programmes offering support in the health and social care arena, including using asset-based community development and social prescribing approaches. Whilst these are aimed at the adult population with long-term health conditions, there is a need to invest in tackling similar issues in the younger population. The greatest opportunity for the Children's Community is then to foster collaboration, interrogate and challenge systems, and test innovations to improve children's outcomes. By doing this, the approach can support much-needed improvements in academic, employment, health and relationship outcomes.

"It's rubbish here, there is nowhere to go and nothing to do. We don't have the internet at home, so I can only use my phone where there is Wi-Fi. We used to hang about near McDonalds, but the police drove us off."

Nike, age 16, Smallshaw-Hurst

- ***Half of the population of Smallshaw-Hurst are living within the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in England; at least three of the neighbourhoods are within the most deprived 5%*** *(Multiple Index of Deprivation, 2019)*
- ***32% of adults in Smallshaw-Hurst do not have any formal qualification*** *(Census, 2011)*
- ***67% of residents are happy or very happy with the neighbourhood they live in*** *(Smallshaw-Hurst Children's Community Baseline Survey, 2019)*
- ***Local residents are worried about the absence of services, as well as the impacts of crime, drugs, antisocial behaviour and traffic on children and young people*** *(Smallshaw-Hurst Children's Community Baseline Survey, 2019)*

"When I left school you knew what career you would go into because you followed your parents or older siblings. If your dad worked in the shipyards you went there, if your mother was a seamstress you became one too. There was no question of you not working. Now the kids have to move out of the area to find opportunities because most industries have gone."

Linda, aged 70, Wallsend

Wallsend

Wallsend (NE28), North Tyneside is an area of four wards and home to around 45,000 people, of whom 11,000 are from 0 to 19 years old. Once an industrial, thriving hub of British manufacturing, a series of economic and political shifts in the 1980s saw the destruction of local jobs. While other parts of the country have prospered, the demise of industry in working class communities like Wallsend has had a devastating and enduring impact.

The reconfiguring of the local economy towards low-skilled, low-paid work has created major barriers to children and young people fulfilling their potential, and despite investment Wallsend has suffered over the last twenty years from high levels of child poverty. Many children are not 'school ready' when they start primary school and there are challenges in education, health and youth employment. Of families living locally, 22.7% are classified as 'Families In Need', facing in-work poverty, low wagesand unemployment (Wallsend Health Needs Assessment, May 2017).

Yet Wallsend is an area with a rich history of partnership working, including between the fifteen schools which serve children and young people. There is a desire to do more and reach wider, across community, voluntary, youth and statutory services. The devolution agenda has presented opportunities to rethink the design and funding of interventions. With dedication, passion and collaboration, seemingly intractable issues of the past are starting to be tackled in a systemic way, with long-term commitment and vision.

"I wouldn't want to bring my children up anywhere else, Howdon is a place that builds character and makes you a stronger person for adulthood. The people may be rough around the edges but everyone is there for each other, something that you wouldn't see in many parts of the North East"

Daniel, aged 29, Wallsend

- ***Howdon ward has a disproportionally high percentage of children living in poverty, just over 40% of children*** *(North Tynside Council Tableau, 2020)*
- ***Wallsend (NE28) is approximately 25% of the North Tyneside population yet 34.6% of all 'Children in Need' have an NE28 postcode***
- ***37% of families in NE28 who became statutorily homeless during 2015/16 experienced this as a result of a violent relationship breakdown***
- ***30% of all young victims of crime in North Tyneside in 2017 lived in the Wallsend area***

Source: Wallsend Health Needs Assessment, May 2017 (points 2-4)

"No one organisation or sector has the resources or understanding to solve all of the problems. We can effect better impact on our own issues by working together.'

David Baldwin, Chair of Wallsend Children's Community and Headteacher of Churchill Community College

Timeline for the development of the Children's Communities programme

Pembury discussions begin

Wallsend discussions begin

Smallshaw-Hurst discussions begin

2011

Leaders of Peabody and **London Borough of Hackney (LBH)** meet after riots

2012

Peabody commissions **'Understanding and Tackling Child Poverty on Peabody Estates'** research from University of York

Peabody begins development of a **'Children's Zone'** approach on the Pembury estate with support from SCUK & the University of Manchester

Peabody & SCUK become interested in **'Children's Zones', learning from Harlem Children's Zone, USA**

2013

SCUK commissions **'Developing Children's Zones for England: What's the Evidence?'** from University of Manchester

2014

First board meeting of Pembury Children's Community' (PCC), with representatives from LBH, schools & the voluntary sector

2015

Peabody commissions **'Living on Pembury: Understanding the Experiences of Nine families on the Estate'** from Innovation Unit

10 year vision, theory of change and first annual workplan

Moved into flagship Community Centre on the edge of the estate

Founders of Wallsend Children's Community (WCC) meet with Oak Foundation and SCUK and receive funding to visit Harlem and other initiatives

Visited Harlem Children's Zone and North Carolina Children's Area

Pembury CC Launch

2016

Partnership with SCUK and Children's Communities Network formed

Funders Alliance created

WCC joins Wallsend Schools Partnership and becomes a standing agenda item

PCC publishes its **first annual impact report**

Sheffield Hallam University commissioned to deliver **national Children's Communities evaluation**

Revised theories of change

Introduction of Strengthening Families parenting classes; parents' coffee mornings and activities run by local 'Dad's Zone'

Resident steering group meet for the first time

Wallsend CC Launch

2017

Seedcorn funding to launch 'Ready for School' project with Linden Children's Centre & Mossbourne Parkside primary school

WCC given oversight of Wallsend **Intervention & Transition team** to support the transition from primary to secondary schools

Annual Sheffield Hallam report on PCC

PCC cited as promising practice by the **Early Intervention Foundation**, a Social Mobility Commission Report, and a University of Manchester report

Sheffield Hallam publish their **year 1 evaluation of Children's Communities**

Health Needs Assessement in Wallsend

Theory of Change developed with Sheffield Hallam University

Smallshaw-Hurst CC Launch

2018

First report with Sheffield Hallam University on The Children's Communities Network

311 young people regularly attended youth activities with 95% reporting it had made a positive difference to their lives

NE28 Community Survey to gain insights from the community that could inform the assets-based approach of the project

State of Play in Wallsend Review

Peabody provided one-to-one support for 30 Pembury families in the highest level of rent arrears on; reducing arrears, avoiding court orders & evictions and reducing family stress

Winter Wonderland Event with partners, baseline data collected from local families

First Theory of Change workshop with partners

First Theory of Change developed, with three focus work areas

Seedcorn funding enables launch of 'Playbox' early literacy project for 2 - 4 year olds

Early Years Steering Group meet for the first time, including early years, Homestart, commissioners, public health, midwives, nursing and VCS

Sheffield Hallam **completes data dashboard** bringing together data sets for the estate

Staff from Peabody & LBH **invited to Downing Street to share learning** from Pembury as government shapes 'Family Hubs' policy

Governance Review with stakeholders to establish new form of governance

WCC core team developed a WCC Strategy and Communications Strategy

Core Team strengthened with Community Coordinator Role

Seedcorn funding for launching the 'Oral Health Initiative'; a systemic approach to tackling poor oral health

Funding from Ballinger Charitable Trust for **'Story of Place'** on the experience of growing up in Wallsend

Toby Lowe and Northumberia University use WCC as a case study

Resident micro-grants launched for peer-led initiatives

Pupil Perception Survey delivered with schools and Wallsend Action for Youth, to over 2700 pupils

836 children & young people and 499 parents take part in PCC projects since launch

Visit to West London Zone

Evaluated Early Years Transition and shared learning with Early Years network

2019

Partnership with Coram to deliver Parent Champions programme, training parent advocates to reduce school exclusions

Young people secured **£8k of funding for summer residentials**

Sunderland University joins Story of Place as a learning partner

Added **fourth workstream** on community coproduction of services and peer led initiatives

Lotto application submitted for **'Growing well in Tameside'**

Core Team strengthened with Data Evaluation & Impact Adviser

Story of Place Commences with new team members.

Sheffield Hallam Report received

Theory of Change on Oral Health developed

Story so Far produced and used to re-engage wider stakeholder group

Local parents established as a sounding board for the SSHCC

- Schools
- funding
- partnerships
- events
- activities
- outcomes
- reports
- Pembury
- Wallsend
- Smallshaw-Hurst

How we got here
The Children's Communities approach

Each Children's Community is supported by a cross-sector governing body and a core team working to improve population-level outcomes for children and young people in each area, in line with a common set of founding principles:

- **Based on a defined neighbourhood.** Children's Communities are located in disadvantaged places with a history of partnership working for children and a collective commitment to take this to the next level.

- **Driven by a shared area analysis and theory of change**. Local services and wider stakeholders together develop and implement a coordinated plan for helping children thrive, based on a shared vision for children and a shared analysis of children's needs.

- **Creating a local integrated and holistic system of support.** Children's Communities work across the different parts of children's lives, helping them to transition between family, school and community and into, through, and out of, education.

- **Aimed at generational change.** Children's Communities aim to work over the long-term. This presents an opportunity that is distinct from conventional public service targets rooted in short-term goals.

- **Powered by local voices.** Children's Communities are locally led and owned and resolutely focused on local needs, assets and priorities. They aim to surface community assets and strengths, to harness the power of local networks and relationships, to support communities to find their own solutions and to be self-reliant, and to build capacity in local systems.

As this report outlines, the original vision has evolved in response to local communities, the wider UK public and social sector context, a fast-changing policy context and a deepening understanding of the complexity of seeking to tackle the effects of child poverty in a place.

"Poverty is the outcome of a complex system – unless we strive to understand that system better, including how its parts interact at different levels, we're unlikely to find sustainable solutions to the problem."
Chris Goulden, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

From a pipeline of services to systems change

Learning from Harlem Children's Zone

Harlem Children's Zone is an impressive enterprise. Its cradle to college approach, all hands on deck culture, and inspirational leader, Geoffrey Canada, caught the imagination of charities, governments and philanthropists across the globe.

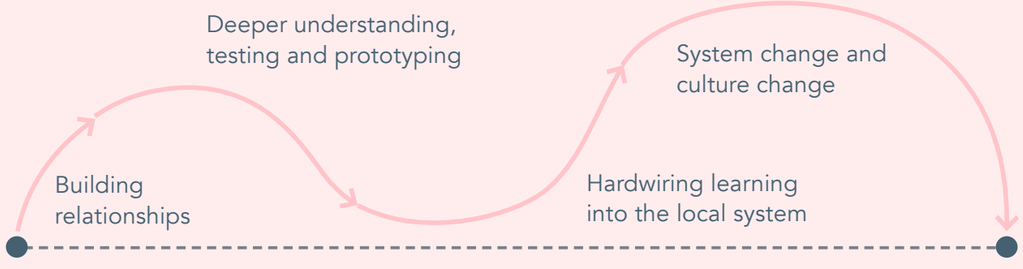
Its transformation from the Rheedlen Centers for Children & Families to the data-driven, impact-led Harlem Children's Zone, has provided optimism and inspiration to public and social sector leaders seeking to tackle the scourge of place-based disadvantage (Bridgespan, 2004). It was this motivation that took the founding partners of the Children's Communities programme to Harlem.

The rise of Harlem Children's Zone was accompanied by the emergence of a series of 'collective impact' initiatives, operating across whole cities or counties, and coordinating tens or even hundreds of organisations to improve population level metrics. Collective impact provided an antidote to the enormity and intensity of Harlem Children's Zone, seeking to make the most of existing community assets and services, rather than replacing or subsuming them.

It was against this backdrop that Children's Communities emerged, committed to a set of principles that have both deepened our understanding of what it might take to improve the prospects of children growing up in a disadvantaged area, and at the same time raised significant and disturbing questions about some of our sector's mantras and ways of working. In the process, we have moved from the language of the data-driven pipeline of support, to that of changing the local system.

This move has been driven primarily by a culture of learning and exploration, a recognition of the complexity present in children's lives and communities, and by starting to let go of the power to define children's and young people's outcomes for them. This has also raising important questions about the role of local people as partners, limitations of conventional service delivery, the status of data and evidence, and the centrality of relationships as a future organising principle.

The result is that whilst we believe that the 'cradle to career pipeline' remains a critical element in supporting children and young people in any given place, this has given way to the recognition that children, young people and families are at the very least equal partners in identifying what good ***looks like for me, in this place***. The best way of achieving that may be less about a pipeline and more about identifying effective leverage points, shifting power or 'hardwiring' changes to the system.



Lenses on a system

What do we mean by place-based systems change? Systems have overtaken services as a focus of change initiatives, and the Children's Communities programme was an early adopter of a systems change approach to improve children and young people's outcomes, alongside others like the Greater Shankill Partnership, North Camden Zone and West London Zone for Children and Young People.

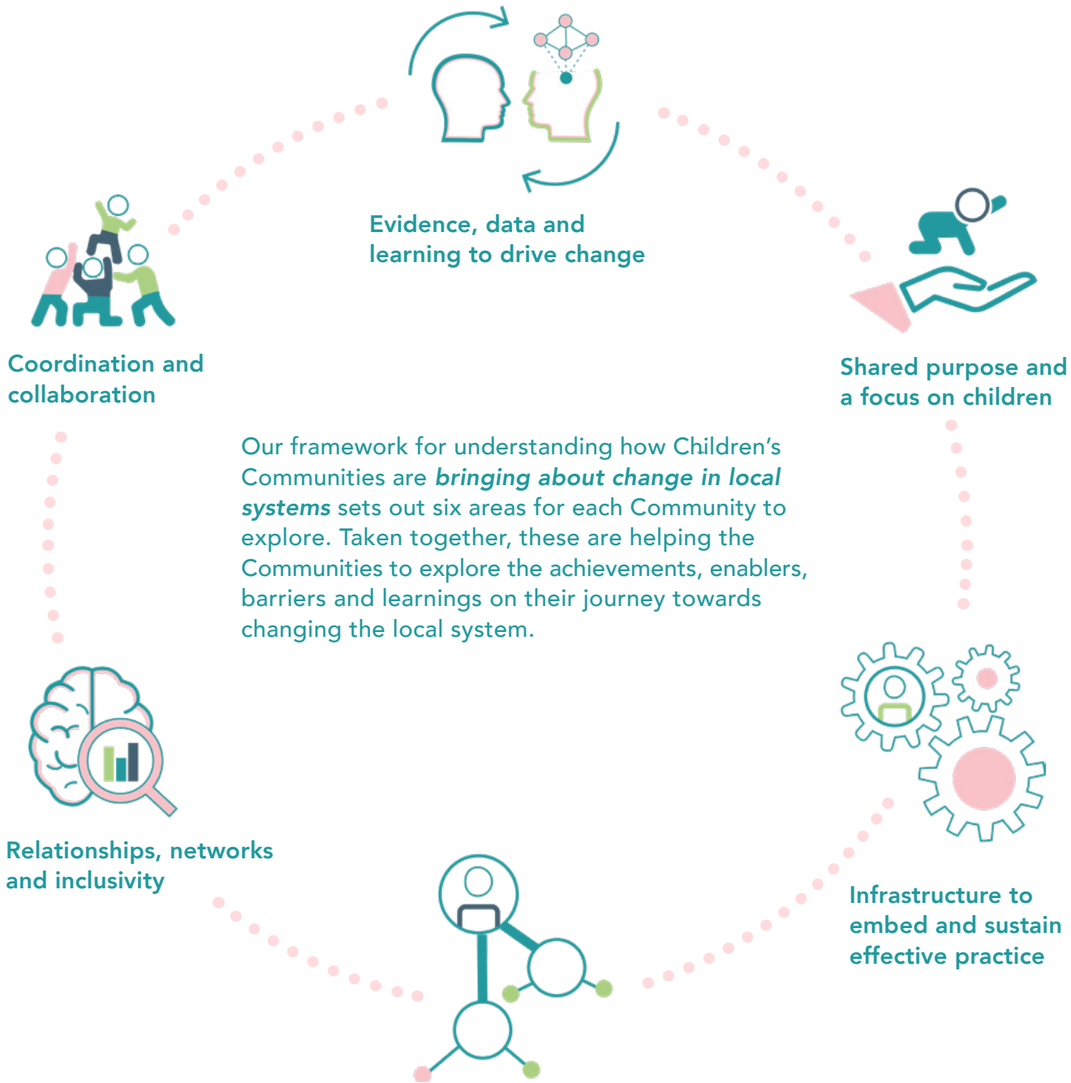
The community in which a child grows up is a complex system: if we consider the number of individuals, opportunities, influences and challenges that a child encounters, and the number of different combinations of these variables, it quickly becomes clear that children's outcomes are affected by a countless number of factors and relationships.

Firstly, we've explored ***who*** in a place has an affect on a child's life: whether a parent or neighbour, Director of Children's Services, teacher, cousin or friend. These people and the ***relationships between them*** affects how well children do. Communities with high performing but uncollaborative schools, or a wealth of community assets but high levels of territorialism may be asset rich, but they are system poor. This has an impact on their ability to improve the life chances of children and young people.

Secondly, we've explored what is happening ***under the surface*** in a community. The values, structures, ways of working and activities that aim to support children differ significantly in different areas, and within areas between organisations, sectors and individuals. Communities with a proliferation of interventions and services are often driven to compete by organisational incentives and wider pressures. These are often hidden under the surface of a community - they're not immediately visible but play a strong role in shaping how a community works.

Thirdly, we've looked at behaviours and traits of healthy systems. Relationships exemplified by curiosity, openness, respect, trust and collaboration enable siloed services to deliver beyond their boundaries. Systems with a shared focus on diversity, learning, robust data and strategic thinking are likely to be better performing than collections of organisations who apply these same approaches independently.

Fourthly, we've started to explore ***where the power is*** in a community. Our questions have led us to move beyond service and pathway redesign to considering that in order to hardwire changes to 'how the system works', we must recognise that a shift in power is required. What this entails and how this is achieved requires engagement with questions of equity, diversity and privilege.



02

Children's Communities to date: Achievements & Progress

Across Children's Communities, the work undertaken by core teams, the support provided by governing bodies, and collaboration across communities have created significant achievements in each area. These achievements fall into four categories: **momentum, learning, impact and changes.**

Momentum

In terms of **momentum**, Children's Communities have identified ambition, developed a shared purpose and galvanised local partners.

Children's Communities have brought about **momentum** for the children and young people's agenda in their areas, drawing organisations and services into a vision for change and enabling them to participate in shaping and delivering it.

They have helped a wide range of partners to develop a ***shared purpose***, beyond organisations having 'complementary purposes' to articulating a ***collective ambition*** and starting to reflect this in the decisions they make as organisations and the way they collaborate. By building relationships, deepening understanding of the reality of growing up locally and drawing different people together, they have generated energy and galvanised a range of different organisations to come together.

This invitation has also drawn in ***local families and residents***, providing a platform and meaningful role in shaping the priorities of the Children's Community at a strategic level, and starting to tap into the huge opportunity to collaborate with local people as partners.

Building momentum has been particularly evident in Smallshaw-Hurst, where a historical lack of partnership working meant that existing forums or networks to support children holistically were lacking. By engaging, connecting and supporting collaboration between partners, Children's Communities have generated momentum,and with it additional benefits of collaboration, energy and mutual support.

"The Children's Community allows us to make mistakes as you are working with your users, and sometimes that is the outcome but that generates important learnings on what works and doesn't work."

Steve Hobson, Vice Chairman of Ashton United Football Club and board member, Smallshaw-Hurst Children's Community

Case Study: Building momentum in Smallshaw-Hurst

When the core team arrived in Smallshaw-Hurst, there was almost no partnership working, as a result of austerity, changes in agencies and restructure. Identifying partners and trying to get buy-in for the concept of a Children's Community was extremely difficult.

The local academy had been placed in special measures and its housing association sponsor, one of the Community's founding partners, was going through a merger. Ofsted had recently deemed the local authority's children's services as inadequate.

The team worked to understand the local culture and strengths within the area. Spreading their net wide, they met three key people. Firstly, Anton McGrath, the principal of Ashton Sixth Form College, who had been thinking about engaging with parents and services 'before and after' sixth form, but lacked the capacity to do so. Secondly, Steve Hobson – the Vice Chairman of Ashton United Football Club – who was a local asset with an ambition to support the community but not connected to other services, and thirdly, Clover – a retired Early Years professional with a wealth of experience who had great passion but whose experience could have been overlooked.

Bringing this group together created momentum, energy and a sense of purpose, which in turn led to other partners becoming involved and increasing buy-in.

Learning

Children's Communities have generated deeper knowledge and understanding, helped people develop new skills and capabilities, and improved data maturity and insights.

In each place, the Children's Community has **built capacity** and **enabled learning**, equipping local people and professionals with new understanding, skills, capabilities and awareness.

The work has led to a ***deeper understanding*** of the area in which they work - the community, geography and place as a whole - and a recognition that 'the challenge is even greater than anticipated' - and growing. This awareness has led to broader conversations about issues across different sectors and services, for example early years being discussed in higher education colleges or oral health being discussed by primary schools, and a recognition of local need which is multi-dimensional and informed by the lived experience of families alongside public administrative data and service data. People have recognised the implications of working in a system and what it means for them, their service and their interdependencies.

Through this, there have been changes in how people interact with and respond to data. Partners have used data to improve access to services and drive behaviour change within their own organisations, as well as wrestling with the limitations of data. Building connections and supporting collaborations have enabled the sharing of data across local partners, beyond silos.

Professionals and residents have ***developed new skills and capabilities***. These range from systems thinking and data analysis skills, to accessing training, support and new resources around issues specific to their community. Individuals in different positions have increased confidence to challenge the status quo and ask 'why do we do things this way?'.

Case study: Deepening understanding and collective ownership of oral health outcomes

In Wallsend, an oral health pilot project came about through a health needs assessment which highlighted the stark difference between oral health in Wallsend compared to borough- and national-level statistics.

A number of partners came together including health, schools, early years, dentists, pharmacies, Newcastle University and Health Education England. The project included Oral Health Practitioner Training for early years practitioners, 'Brush Up' sessions in reception classes and much more, and a conversation about oral health began in Wallsend.

The initiative has helped people understand oral health in more depth, and the knock on effects that poor oral health has on other areas of life as well as helping people to develop new skills and capabilities.

Aggie Freed, Reception class teacher at Carville Primary had the Brush Up Team visit her class and attended the Oral Health Practitioner training, said:

"The oral health of our children is so important, with potential greater health risks, pain, discomfort, limited eating and barriers to communication and language on the line we have to support our children and parents in preventing poor oral health and hygiene. Having the Brush Up team come in to school provided a great learning opportunity for children, parents and staff, with resources and expertise that were of a high quality. The Oral Health training was informative and eye opening. It gave me a wealth of information to support my own teaching of oral health and hygiene to my Reception class but also key messages for parents and carers and some suggestions of how and when to deliver this."

Case study: Improving school readiness and strengthening relationships in Pembury

The Pembury 'Ready for School' project was developed following feedback from parents and professionals that children living on the estate would benefit from support in their transition to primary school. A joint initiative between Linden Children's Centre, Mossbourne Parkside school, Peabody and local nurseries, the project provides an estate-based teacher and a parent adviser working across home and school, offering group and 1-to-1 teaching and support for parents and children.

Evaluation showed that the first cohort were behind their peers on entry into Reception, but went on to make greater progress on average than their peers, and that those receiving targeted support made most progress. At the end of the year, outcomes for the Ready for School children were comparable with their peers. Crucially, the initiative has also built stronger relationships between the local school, children's centre, nurseries and housing, with more information-sharing and parent engagement.

Elizabeth and Hassan

Elizabeth has been living in Pembury for two years. Her son, Hassan, is five years old and has been participating in the Pembury Ready for School project. Elizabeth was anxious about Hassan's transition to primary school. Elizabeth and Hassan participated in all parts of the project, including workshops and activities in the period before Hassan joined school, in-school activities and home-based support. Elizabeth feels that Hassan has improved his concentration, reading, writing and maths skills as a result. She also feels she has learned new skills which help her to engage Hassan in activities at home and read to him regularly.

Impact and outcomes

Children's Communities have brought about new activities, events and research projects, have leveraged resources and time, and have improved outcomes for children, young people and families.

Children's Communities have had an impact on children and young people, and brought about the delivery of new activities, services and shared resources. They have also generated knowledge and learning which are changing how organisations operate.

There is a tendency to focus less on reporting 'outputs and outcomes' in Children's Communities, for two reasons. The first is that Children's Communities do not always undertake direct service delivery, although this has been a key focus in Pembury. Most efforts are in supporting new pilots and existing services to improve outcomes by working differently. The second is that Children's Communities' primary ambition is to change how local systems work. They are therefore interested in the learning from activities which can improve the whole, and see outcomes as the result of everyone working together.

This said, the presence of Children's Communities has brought about improved outcomes for children and young people across Pembury, Smallshaw-Hurst and Wallsend through direct delivery, facilitation of collaboration between organisations, support to deliver interventions and in numerous other ways. This has led to outcomes ranging from increased access to community support, improved oral health outcomes, increased learning opportunities for young people through volunteering and work experience, and children being school-ready at the start of primary school.

Activities brought about by Children's Communities include education, mental health, oral health, play and school-readiness interventions, community engagement events and collaborations between secondary schools, including undertaking Pupil Perceptions Surveys in Smallshaw-Hurst and Wallsend to help schools better understand and support pupils. Collaborations have increased others' awareness of local assets and led to sharing resources, as well as drawing in additional funds into the areas and drawing many thousands of hours of support from different organisations.

Changes and shifts

Children's Communities have created new connections, deepened and improved the quality of collaboration, and brought about shifts in organisational working, culture and local priorities.

In each place, Children's Communities have brought about significant **changes** in who and how people collaborate, as well as shifting cultural and organisational behaviours. These changes have happened as a result of both activities undertaken by the core team and local partners, with both ***deliberate and unintended consequences.***

Firstly, there has been a significant increase in the number of new connections, partnerships and relationships in each area, and therefore in the quantity of collaborations. Through engaging new people and networking, to forming multi-agency governing bodies, new connections have led to improved relationships between schools, increased dialogue between different sectors and new delivery partnerships.

Secondly, the ***quality of collaboration*** has deepened, with agencies working more closely and openly together, partners feeling more valued and listened to, and an increased desire to collaborate on the basis of a recognition and dovetailing of different agendas. Partners have moved to think, plan and deliver together, and have set up joint governance to support new pieces of work which have happened as a result of the collaboration.

There have been exciting shifts in how organisations and networks are starting to think and act differently. Schools have engaged with the reality of children's lives 'beyond the school gates' and schools supporting 11 to 18 year olds (secondary and sixth form) have reached out to early years settings and primary schools.

Children's Communities have influenced local authorities, host organisations and key partners to strategise, plan, measure progress and collect data in which they recognise the importance of place and a long-term, systemic approach. They have also been able to spotlight the issue of children's outcomes in their areas, and to highlight key local challenges such as school exclusions and mental health.

Case study: The Children's Communities approach influencing further afield

The Pembury Children's Community is hosted by Peabody, who also employ the core team. Peabody is a housing association, with 66,000 homes across London, including 1,250 homes on the Pembury estate. Peabody's experience of developing the Children's Community over the past five years has underlined the value of partnering between residents and local professionals to identify a vision and priority goals for an area, taking the long view of ten years plus and committing a degree of unrestricted funding from the outset to enable innovation and a more organic and responsive approach.

As a result of learning from Pembury, The Peabody Community Foundation, whose annual budget is £7million, adopted a new strategy in 2018, focused on developing 13 area-based programmes across London over the next three years.

"The Children's Community has really shown us the power of harnessing the talents of residents, and how long term partnerships between residents and local professionals in a neighbourhood can improve people's lives, as well as bring about change in the wider system."

Claire Reindorp, Peabody Housing Association

"The most exciting thing about the Children's Communities programme has been seeing the difference we can make to outcomes and opportunities for young people by breaking down barriers and silo working, and sharing data to understand and plan better interventions."

David Baldwin,
Wallsend Children's Community

Enablers

Children's Communities have built momentum across areas, built the capacity of individuals and organisations to deepen understanding and develop skills, improved outcomes for children and young people, and started to shift agendas, priorities and ways of working in their areas. What have been the key enablers of these changes?

Support from the Children's Communities programme and core team

A Children's Community team is an intervention: it invests additional people, with skills and resources, in a local 'system'. This innovation is at the heart of the programme and the achievements of Communities in each area, both in terms of its presence and how it has operated.

Additional capacity has given each Children's Community the time and ability to care about the system as a whole and how it operates. The time, skills and capabilities brought by the core team - typically comprising an Executive Lead, a Community Coordinator and a Data, Impact & Evaluation Advisor - is given to the governance board and wider partnership.

A key benefit of this additional capacity has been to create spaces for meaningful networking and collaboration, which has led to activities and achievements which would not have otherwise happened. It has afforded project management capacity for collaborations between organisations with resource and time constraints, and undertaken data analysis for partners which have changed their attitudes towards data.

However, a two- or three-person team is not a significant amount of additional capacity across a whole system, particularly for example in Wallsend, with its population of 45,000 people. So ***how*** the team operates is central to its effectiveness as an enabler of change.

The role and positioning of the Children's Communities core team emerged from the local partnerships, Save the Children and founding partners. It enables partners to play local support and infrastructure roles in each area, supporting and supported by the core teams.

The additional benefit of this positioning has been to enable the core team and the Children's Community as an entity to be in the system but not part of the system or competing with local partners for funding, opportunities or territory.

This perceived and actual neutrality is critical. As a 'critical friend,' there is a Save the Children UK staff member co-opted onto each governance board, but local priorities and the content of each strategy is locally developed, owned and implemented.

Taking a **stewarding approach** has been an important aspect of building alliances rooted in mutual benefit, rather than traditional leadership or coordination. Children's Communities have neither a carrot nor a stick to motivate partners with, and recognise that their role is to support the emergence of more effective ways of working.

In practice, this has meant that teams need to strike a balance between articulating a vision and direction of travel, and building this on the shared purpose and objectives of wider stakeholders. It has benefited from ***distributing*** the priorities of the Children's Communities, so that they appear on other agendas, forums and strategies.

Practical opportunities for participation have been crucial for a number of reasons. Projects such as the oral health pilot build the legitimacy of Children's Communities by providing tangible examples of how the initiative is contributing to children's outcomes. This can be risky, as the aim is neither to displace existing service provider roles nor to rush to action instead of holding space.

Partners have talked about the ***experience of collaboration*** as moving them away from more transactional attitudes to partnership working, to more empowered and invested attitudes to working with others. Projects which have meaningfully involved partners in a co-design process and which have allowed them to test ideas and to learn, have changed how people see the initiative and the role they have to play within it.

It follows that projects which model different ways of tackling issues and which empower partners to participate, design and lead activities are effective ways of ***generating rich learning***. This learning both motivates participants and generates energy, insight and momentum in the wider partnership. An example of this is Pembury's Ready for School pilot leading to greater engagement from schools and wider partners (see case study on page 27).

Although they have played a more minor role, **systems change tools and stories** have been helpful in articulating the approach of Children's Communities to partners, and in enabling partners to contribute to strategic planning and support.

Specifically, tools such as the Riverbank (see page 32) and the Local Systems Change iceberg have been particularly useful, in understanding local systems change, systems stewardship, and collaborative planning.

Support from partners

Children's Communities started with a focus on drawing together strategic and organisational leaders across their areas, either as part of initial relationship-building or to come onto their governance boards. However, it has been the presence of individuals who exhibit the behaviours and capabilities outlined to the right who have energised partnerships and taken the work forward, regardless of their position within organisations.

This has felt an important point because in broader reflections about achievements and enablers of change, it has been easy to overlook that changes are the result of individuals choosing to act in different ways.

The focus on individuals raises important questions about how to surface individual and sometimes minority insights, and what combination of individual perspectives helps to illuminate challenges and solutions.

Historical context has been an enabler in Children's Communities in very different ways. In Pembury, the relationship between Chief Executives of two organisations was central to driving forward a vision for what became the Children's Community. In Wallsend, the long-standing schools partnership and strong sense of local identity meant that relationships and networks were strong and activities aligned. In Smallshaw-Hurst, the absence of previous partnership working across the area enabled people to come together in a new way and to engage at face value.

Context matters, but not in the way we might expect. What is clear is that different contexts enable different speeds of progress and have different advantages and disadvantages. What this means is explored further in the 'learnings' section.

The **availability of long-term funding** and the philosophy of members of the Children's Communities Funders Alliance has been a major enabler of the Children's Communities programme, not only in terms of financing staff teams, central support and local activities, but in taking an atypical approach to funding.

Through work like A Whole New World (Collaborate CIC & Newcastle University, 2017) and Exploring the New World (Collaborate CIC & Northumbria University, 2019), Dr Toby Lowe and Collaborate have highlighted the limitations of new public management approaches to funding and commissioning, and proposed a 'human, learning, systems' approach to financing social change initiatives.

In Children's Communities, most members of the Funders Alliance committed to the project for up to five years, seeing this as the first phase of a long-term initiative, and trusted communities to develop an approach, identify the outcomes and share their progress. The evolution from a cradle to career pipeline to changing local systems has been a partnership effort, in which funders as well as evaluators and Save the Children have played a support and challenge role.

Resourcing long-term approaches, not pre-determining outcomes, bringing together local people and local services, and focusing on changing systems have been key to enabling the achievements of the Children's Communities and their ambition of place-based systems change.

Partners comprise a range of individuals and organisations: for example Oak Foundation and Ballinger Charitable Foundation, who have funded the programme from its inception; the respective chairs of each governance board, who all came to the role in very different ways; the school or youth club which has signed up to support the initiative and a wide range of statutory, voluntary and community partners.

A **set of behaviours** has emerged across partners in different Children's Communities who have enabled the work to progress. These behaviours include:

Appetite for learning

People acting beyond their core roles and responsibilities, often doing small things which would otherwise require permission or not be expected of them, which creates the space for reciprocity and the conditions for doing things differently

Boundary-pushing and risk-taking

People seeking to explore beyond their current position or discipline, developing a personal curiosity about particular challenges and helping to create a culture of learning in which mistakes are seen as sources of learning

Openness

People moving beyond asking questions to embracing different approaches and letting go of disciplinary identities and conventions, instead giving rise to more multi-disciplinary perspectives and a culture of experimentation of safety

Seeing the whole/being holistic

People recognising their interconnectedness and their 'enlightened self-interest' in investing in relationships and supporting agendas which may not appear immediately beneficial but increase collective understanding

Self-awareness and systems thinking

People understanding their place in the local system, as well as how they behave and are perceived, and the ways in which these awarenesses can support collaborative working and navigate traditional barriers such as ego or organisational agendas

Case study: exploring the Riverbank to understand a local system

The Riverbank analogy has become a useful tool which has been used with a wide variety of people when talking about the work of Wallsend Children's Community. It initially emerged from a reflective blog, and has helped a wide range of people engage with the idea of 'local systems change', gaining an understanding of what it means and why it is important. Using the Riverbank has allowed the team to communicate a complex concept in a simple and personal way and has produced really rich and deep conversations. It has also helped people to see themselves as part of a system, see how interconnected everything is, question what 'working together really looks like' and understanding the role of the core team.

Relationships

We see relationships as the currency of a system: where relationships are strong, plentiful and deep, it has been easier to connect, more straightforward to develop a shared understanding of what good looks like, and simpler to make collaboration happen. If change happens at the speed of trust, relationships are vital.

Good relationships have also been supportive of the honesty and openness which have enabled partnerships to become learning-focused and move beyond gaming and blaming behaviours. They create psychological and reputational safety, and enable partners to move beyond directive or organisational perspectives.

In Children's Communities, there are two questions we have grappled with in delving further into what the role of relationships has been in making progress.

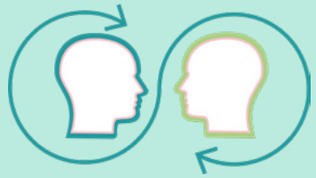
The first is to identify: what constitutes a good relationship?

The second question explores relationships as interventions or organising principles which can improve children and young people's outcomes. The growth in the quantity and quality of relationships has deepened the capacity of Children's Communities' knowledge, momentum and support for children, even where these relationships have not been in pursuit of delivering a particular programme or activity.

"Just having a conversation with people I wouldn't ordinarily be in the same room with has brought massive benefits to my students; they are now engaged in volunteer activities with local primary schools and the smoking cessation activity has been really positive."

Anton McGrath, Principal of Ashton Sixth Form College and Chair of Smallshaw-Hurst Children's Community

Four key elements of a good relationship:



Reciprocity: the experience of mutual aid and mutual benefit. This can appear transactional but actually embodies a spirit of generosity rather than the counting of actions and reactions of others.

Empathy: the ability of individuals to connect with, understand and recognise the experiences of others, and to see an issue or the wider system from their perspective. Empathy has been supported by self-awareness, systems thinking and compassion.

Equity: the behaviour of individuals to recognise and respond to power dynamics, whether in bilateral partnership working, governance board arrangements or interpersonal power dynamics. This has been important where people perceive others to be working to address power imbalances, or beyond their own organisational or personal interests.

Trust: the importance of presence and reliability in building trust has been crucial, particularly over time. Wandsworth Community Empowerment Network talks about relationship-building happening through maintaining an ongoing presence at key events and activities whilst others come and go. This availability and dependability builds trust, which enables individuals to take risks and engage in different ways.

Challenges & Barriers

Through the Children's Communities programme, there have been failures as well as successes, and questions about why further progress has not been made in certain areas. This section identifies the key challenges and barriers which Children's Communities have experienced, why these have undermined progress and how they into future learning.

1. The role of local people

Each Children's Community has engaged local people not solely as beneficiaries of the work but in various ways to inform and support the development of the Children's Communities' approach and to play a role in responding to the challenges faced by children and young people.

In Smallshaw-Hurst there are members of the local community on the governance board, and in Wallsend the 'Story of Place' project is helping the core team and governance board members to understand the area from a community perspective. Local people have also developed and led activities in the areas. In Pembury, local people have been engaged both on an ad hoc and long-term basis across multiple areas of work, including strategic and day to day decision-making, relationship-building, project design, delivery and evaluation.

However, this is a skilful and resource intensive endeavour, that requires professionals to be humble, truly listen, reflect and learn from children, young people and families, and to partner with them.

As such, there have been challenges in moving this area of work forward. Mechanisms for engaging local people as co-creators in the work require a new approach, moving beyond the management committee-style approach to participation, which often happens on professionals' terms, and reconsidering the nature and shape of governance.

This has raised questions about how to build accountability mechanisms not from local partners to governance boards, but from governance boards to children and young people. We need to work to address where there is an accountability deficit.

Beyond this, the partners have wrestled with what asset-based working means for moving away from an approach where professionals are seen as experts whose decisions need to be validated by local people, to a recognition of local people as equal collaborators. Initiatives such as 'Dad's Zone' in Pembury have been crucial in highlighting this.

2. Absence of system capacity and infrastructure

A Children's Communities funder trustee suggested that the word 'jumble' was more apt than 'system' for the mishmash of organisations, services, individuals and agendas who seek to support children and young people in a different place. A 'jumble' is chaotic, disorderly and accidental; a system can be complex but intentional and well-ordered.

Whilst our learning has been that even collaborative, joined-up approaches to improving support for children are complex, this insight has clearly illustrated the ***absence of both capacity and infrastructure*** to support partners across Children's Communities to effectively participate and collaborate.

In Children's Communities, the capacity challenge has been the ability of individuals and organisations to come together to think, plan and act as a collective in the interests of children and young people. It has been undermined by a range of issues, including limited resources and time against a backdrop of growing need, the drivers and incentives which require organisations to act in their own interests, and the absence of a common language and understanding of systems change.

The infrastructure challenge has been the absence of tools and supports for simplifying collaboration across organisations and services, a poor data ecosystem - both in terms of available data and fragmented data systems - and the absence of incentives which drive collaboration and collective organising.

Whilst the goal of Children's Communities is to build and strengthen the capacity and infrastructure of places in the long-term, the fact that the public and social sectors are in many ways structurally designed to compete has in some cases inhibited both the will to collaborate, and the available tools to support this.

3. Capturing and communicating progress

The first communications challenge has been in articulating the approach, its rationale and what it looks like in practical and participatory terms. Children's Communities have achieved this to different degrees in different ways, for example by introducing systems thinking, mapping other place-based initiatives onto a service delivery to systems change spectrum, developing analogies and telling stories. It has been possible to illustrate what is meant by a system and to communicate the intention of improving it to achieve better outcomes.

However, in some cases it has been more difficult for individuals and organisations not directly involved in new pilots or working very closely with core teams to understand what this means for their organisations, whether there is a specific ask on them and how to take the learning and objectives of Children's Communities into their own organisations and strategies.

In addition to articulating the approach, a further challenge has been in communicating progress. This has been in part due to the absence of clear measures for capturing progress in a complex initiative, and the need to strike a balance between being open to the opportunities and priorities that emerge, and having clarity of purpose and an understanding of progress. It has also been the result of limited capacity and a focus on 'doing' the work over communicating it.

Yet whilst local partners have been ready to invest time and energy in Children's Communities early on with relatively little knowledge of their end goal, this is not sustainable. It has become clear that these communications challenges undermine ***maintaining relationships and momentum***, and the absence of accessible language and clear measures further inhibit this.

4. 'Going wide' (rather than 'going deep')

A key question in Children's Communities has been whether partnerships should focus on breadth - for example, strong representation from each formal sector relevant to a child's life, or depth - going where the energy is with like-minded individuals who share an approach - or both. Core teams have been successful in drawing people together in each place.

However, a focus on breadth over depth has generated challenges; or more specifically, challenges have resulted where there is not a clear shared approach, which has typically happened in larger forums. For example, the smaller group of governance board members in Smallshaw-Hurst has been able to agree a strategy and start to collaborate in practical ways.

This has raised questions about governance boards and their role beyond oversight of and accountability for the core team, in particular their role as disrupters of the existing system or enshrining of current power dynamics. With this tension comes a navigation challenge around how to best maximise the presence of established leaders and gatekeepers, whilst avoiding the Children's Community becoming simply another network or a talking shop.

There is nothing to say that smaller is better than larger per se, but breadth as an organising principle for governance boards and wider partnerships has been a limiting factor. Progress has generally depended on starting with a coalition of the willing who have similar *ambitions and approach,* rather than assembling strategic and operational groups with lots of bodies.

5. Poor data and poor relationships with data

Children's Communities have sought to place data at the heart of their strategies.

However, the quality of data and attitudes towards data have been barriers in achieving change.

Firstly, data sets held by public services have been either difficult to access, incomplete, or not relevant or providing valuable insights. Lack of expertise across the system has created challenges in bringing together meaningful datasets to inform prioritisation, evaluation and decision-making.

Secondly, attitudes towards and expectations of data have differed significantly within Communities. Data has often been seen in administrative or reporting terms and sometimes as a source of insight, but rarely in the context of exploring alignments with other data or using these insights to plan and learn. At the other end of the scale, in some cases partners have seized on clear data sets where they exist, failing to explore their context or relationship with other datasets and types of evidence.

Beyond these headline challenges and barriers which emerged across Children's Communities, others exist: previous experiences of similar initiatives which came and went, the inevitable staff turnover across a community, the perceived and actual duplication of networks and networking events themselves.

These challenges set a context which help with understanding the achievements Children's Communities have made, and the conditions and barriers they are sometimes working with. However, they also highlight areas which need to be reconsidered and addressed afresh.

03

Key learnings from Children's Communities

The achievements of Children's Communities, and their enablers and inhibitors, have generated a set of eight headline learnings building on the insights of similar initiatives taking place-based and long-term systems change approaches.

1. Articulate the approach and communicate progress

Systems change approaches have emerged out of a recognition that the complex issue of improving children and young people's life chances cannot be addressed through silver bullet solutions, or individual organisations and services.

Whilst people intuitively recognise this truth, for traditional service delivery organisations to engage in this kind of complexity can be daunting, confusing and frustrating. This means it is incumbent on core teams and advocates to articulate the approach in accessible language, and to be able to point to what a better system might achieve and might look like.

This also means that the early momentum generated by the core team is not self-sustaining, and people need to feel that the work is achieving and progressing. This requires the development of measures of milestones which are loyal to the approach, as well as promoting and amplifying small- scale examples of change from across the community.

2. Dig channels: a law of increasing returns

Relationships are central to the work of Children's Communities, but their purpose is not solely to lead to specific collaborations.

'Digging channels' is about increasing new connections between different individuals and organisations in the community, as well as deepening existing connections and enabling people to move from connection to collaboration. It moves away from gate-keeping or hoarding relationships, and creates influence and activity beyond the efforts of the core team. Relationship-building in an intentional, generous and supportive way then becomes an intervention in and of itself.

3. Harness energy and diversity

There is no doubt that seniority and representation across governance boards has been a major benefit to core teams, and has opened doors and provided feedback throughout.

However, it has been ***deeper relationships rather than wider*** networks which have allowed early work to progress more quickly. At the same time, a diversity of views have played a number of critical roles.

Firstly, the perspectives of senior leaders from different disciplines have not always proved to be as diverse as those of people who sit in fundamentally different parts of the system. For example a mental health service lead and youth offending service lead might have different areas of expertise, but may experience the system in broadly similar ways. On the other hand, a senior lead, frontline worker, young person and local volunteer might sit within the same service, but have very different experiences. The bringing together of people from different disciplines or services ***as well as*** different levels or with different relationships, has enabled a more diverse set of experiences to be shared.

Secondly, diverse perspectives without effective relationships have had limited impact. Empathy, equity, reciprocity and trust create an environment in which diverse perspectives are recognised as legitimate and valuable in a context where no one individual can have 'the answer', leading to deeper understanding and better decision-making.

4. Projects matter: opportunities to experience, demonstrate and learn

The focus on changing local systems has meant that Children's Communities have spent time inquiring and understanding, exploring leverage points and drawing together partners from across their areas. Supporting increased understanding of the system, has required avoiding a rush to action.

However, tangible opportunities and projects which demonstrate change and give partners experiences of working in different ways remain a powerful, if not the most powerful, way in which people understand, participate in and champion the work. They also provide moments of celebration and success, which provide crucial fuel to maintain momentum.

As such, projects such as Ready for School in Pembury and the oral health project in Wallsend are a vital feature of Children's Communities. However, these should be identified strategically, aligning with local priorities, drawing together different partners to experience collaboration, demonstrating new ways of working, and generating learning for the system.

It is still important that projects are not seen to be the core work of the Children's Communities approach, and that such activities are recognised as interventions aiming to deepen understanding and collaboration, and identify the ways in which systems change can be 'hardwired', as well as improving outcomes for children and young people directly.

5. From data, towards intelligence

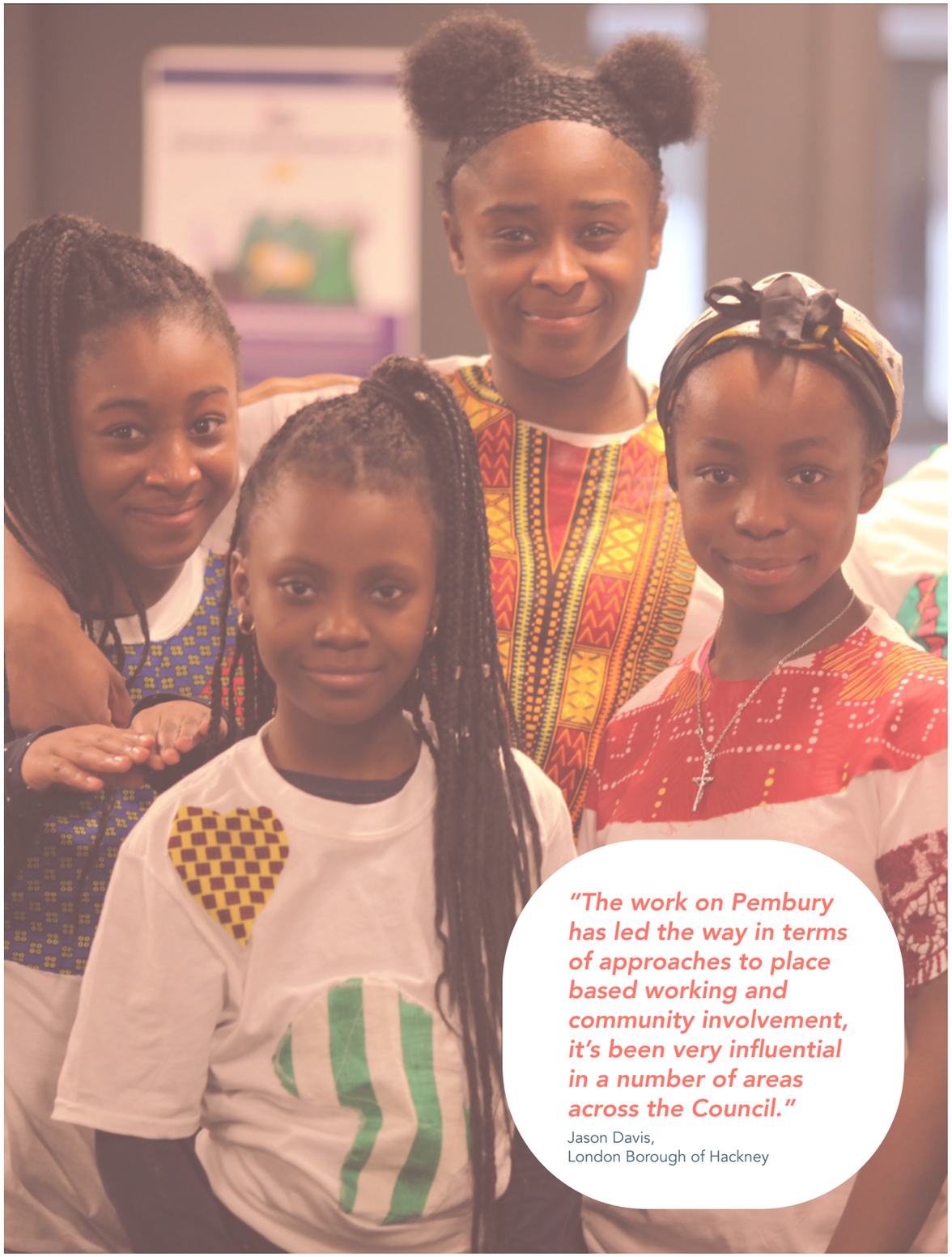
Children's Communities' relationship with data has evolved since the programme started.

Children's Communities started by developing data dashboards, or data visualisations of the local area built from publicly available administrative data. This enabled them to identify metrics in which they were under-performing against other areas, or failing to meet the ambitions they had for local children and young people.

Partners started to think differently about the legitimacy of this type of data, and its validity for 'driving' change. They began to recognise the difference between correlation and causation, gained a broader understanding of what 'local data' means, and developed an an approach which better understood the role of public administrative data, service and system data, knowledge from professionals, alongside insights from children, young people and families with lived experience of the area and local services.

This has led partners to question that idea that an initiative can be objectively 'data-driven', and that the use of established metrics alone is an effective way of identifying what is best for children and young people. This is because as using solely administrative data silences other voices, and because seeing such metrics as achievements in and of themselves can lead to a misdirected focus or gaming behaviour to demonstrate results.

As a result, the approach has moved from the language of being 'data-driven', to considering how different types of evidence and data ***inform*** responses, to seeking to deepen the collective intelligence of the system. This still relies on traditional types of data and the need for measurement, but builds the capacity of local partners and people to have more informed, honest and accurate discussions about data.



> *"The work on Pembury has led the way in terms of approaches to place based working and community involvement, it's been very influential in a number of areas across the Council."*
>
> Jason Davis,
> London Borough of Hackney

6. The role of the system steward

The Riverbank exercise (see page 33) in Wallsend has helped to illustrate the role of the 'system steward' (Collaborate CIC & Northumbria University, 2019): helping the community to step back and see how it is operating and what it is doing, going 'upstream' to explore the root causes of the issues it is seeking to tackle, creating and holding space to respond to the challenges it is facing.

Leadership in Children's Communities has been about connecting people, seeding conversations, sharing the desire to improve children and young people's lives and creating space for shared purpose to emerge. It is a role that requires patience, the ability to build relationships, trust and support.

This has led to embedding the objectives of the Children's Communities in other forums, networks and strategies. This openness to how the work is taken forward is crucial, embedding objectives across the system rather than solely expecting partners to sign up to the Children's Community itself.

7. Conditions matter, but dedicated capacity still drives progress

Much work has been done exploring the 'right conditions' for systems change, and much of this work rightly focuses on creating these conditions.

However, in each area it has been clear that organisations and services are facing a number of deeply challenging conditions: in every place this includes rising demand, declining resources and increased competition. Culture and context, pre-existing relationships and wider challenges vary in each place, sometimes helping and sometimes hindering the work.

Yet regardless of the pressures faced in areas, Children's Communities have succeeded in bringing people together and making significant progress, both improving children and young people's outcomes and laying the foundations for systems change. This is both a tribute to the commitment of local partners, and to the benefit of having people focused on the whole system.

The Children's Communities approach has invested in dedicated capacity to galvanise a wide range of individuals and organisations. This capacity, combined with a neutral role, long-term support, effective leadership and collaboration from others, has brought about a range of changes in communities with a huge number of stakeholders. How this is built on, and how changes become permanent and part of how communities work is the focus of the next five years.

8. Engaging with power: what lies beneath

Early systems change efforts in Children's Communities focused on what we now might call service change or service redesign: considering how different services might collaborate in better ways so as to avoid children and young people 'falling through the gaps'.

As Children's Communities have sought to understand the system as a whole, it has become increasingly clear that collaboration between individual services is an important piece of the puzzle, but is only one element of systems change. How children and young people are (or are not) supported is the result of a many factors that are not visible: how services are funded, what the role of local people is, where accountability sits, and so on. This is what upholds the status quo.

In short, we cannot think meaningfully about changing systems without shifting power. Whilst we have started to focus on the types of changes that might be required to improve how children and young people are supported, it is clear that for these to be sustainable there will need to be changes in where power is held. This speaks to how place-based initiatives like Children's Communities become accountable to local people, and the role they play in their design, delivery and development. Exploring and addressing power dynamics - between individuals, within partnerships and across a community - is crucial to sustaining change.

These learnings from Children's Communities build on the external evaluations conducted by Sheffield Hallam University and learning exchanges across the areas and with other initiatives. They serve two purposes. Firstly, they are the basis for the exploration areas outlined in the next section, which will provide the basis for our activity and learning over the next five years. Secondly, they seek to add to research from across the sector on what decision-makers, influencers and wider stakeholders need to consider if they seek to enable place-based systems change.

04 Children's Communities going forward

Each Children's Community has a local strategy and set of priorities, working across early years, health and wellbeing, transitions into adulthood, community capacity-building and collaboration.

Through the review process, a number of key themes emerged which provide an opportunity for further exploration and research. These are not 'priorities' or 'workstreams' but areas which have emerged as central to progressing the work. The three themes are a) people as partners; b) hardwiring change; and c) relationships as an intervention.

Exploration area 1

Local people as partners

Across Children's Communities, the question of **community voice** and the **role of local people** was raised again and again, as was their involvement in the planning and decision-making of Children's Communities themselves. The key challenge is how to move from ***meaningful participation to radical co-creation.***

In the sector, communities have often been seen to have a central role in informing, shaping and validating the work of 'professional' organisations and initiatives, but Children's Communities seek to explore how their whole approach might be authentically co-created and delivered with local people as equal partners. This includes building on learning to date and deepening the implications of this to include strategy and planning, decision-making and delivery, accountability, evaluation and sustainability.

Recent research by Dartington Service Design Lab, reviewing their work with local authorities over the past decade, found not only that services frequently fail to reach their intended beneficiaries, but that the majority of children and young people rely most effectively on informal support networks. Whilst there is work to do to avoid misalignment between the focus and reach of services, and a need to ensure that the most marginalised receive appropriate support (Dartington Service Design Lab, 2019), conceptions of care and support need to be redesigned to recognise that communities should play foundational rather than consultative roles in helping children achieve their potential.

Who do we see as local people? We might think about children, young people and families, alongside residents and professionals. A challenge for the sector has been the conflation of community organisations with members of the community, which has led to issues of power, representation and accountability.

What might a participatory design and decision-making approach look like? What are the resources and infrastructure required to enable it? There are examples which have shed light on these questions, such as the Pembury Pathways project, which trained residents as researchers to explore priorities for local parents and identify barriers for professionals to address.

Resource and infrastructure questions need to consider the balance between compensating local people for their time and expertise, whilst recognising that the success of these approaches often relies on unlocking existing capital rather than monetising participation.

What else needs to change to enable such civic partnerships to succeed, and how does this relate to 'enabling organisations' and conditions? Adam Lent and Simon Parker have outlined what a 'Community Power Act' might look like from a policy perspective, and the types of activities it would support, which provide food for thought.

Rethinking both accountability towards the community, and where the community is a key partner raises questions of risk and conflicts of interest. These are important areas to explore, especially alongside funding bodies and local authorities who may take comfort from clear structures and limited liability. Some of these questions are being explored in Pembury's mini grants and initiatives, for example 'Street to Scale.'

The ***local people as partners*** exploration area raises questions of how to move beyond co-design ***on our terms and in our times*** and outside of service delivery or programme design contexts. Recognising communities and local people are collaborators at a strategic, delivery and evaluation level provides an opportunity to address the accountability deficit, develop alignment around what success looks like and build on the assets, ideas and energy that already provide the foundations for children and young people.

Exploration area 2

Hardwiring change

The 'end game' of Children's Communities is to improve children's and young people's lives across a community, by enabling local systems and services to change and improve how they work. This question of hardwiring change is at the heart of this work, exploring how to move from individual sets of effective relationships to stronger systems which establish a 'new normal'.

A number of areas have emerged as being important in Children's Communities:

- **Budgeting:** how are budgets, in the broadest sense, made visible and available for strategic use; where and why is this not possible, and what would enable ***participatory budgeting for a children's commons***?
- **Funding and commissioning:** how are decisions made about the allocation of financial resources, and how can both the process and the outcome be designed in a more participatory, informed way to support improved children's outcomes?
- **Governance:** what is the infrastructure that enables diversity of opinion, equality of voice and effective relationships to inform strategy, and how can this address power dynamics and equity in a place?
- **Learning:** how can learning become embedded and supported across a place, developing a meaningful relationship with data and evidence, and a more informed understanding of complexity and change?

These areas require significant exploration, and relate closely to questions of culture and mindset change, and to the process and politics for making change happen. It raises questions of power and personality, and of finding tipping points and mechanisms for enabling partners to embrace the premise of change, as well as practically embedding it.

Exploration area 3

Relationships as an intervention

Talk of relationships is ubiquitous across many fields; from community development to local systems change. In Children's Communities they're described as 'the currency of a system': the stronger the relationships between people in that place, the better the outcomes for children and young people.

The role of relationships, and more specifically types of relationship, raise important questions for change. Are relationships the grease that oils the wheels of change, or are they as effective at halting change and strengthening the status quo? What do we mean by building effective relationships for change, and how might we build on the key components of empathy, equity, reciprocity and trust?

Typically relationships are viewed instrumentally for their value in enabling us to achieve or deliver specific activities. As wider thinking is suggesting, we are interested in ***looking at relationships as an intervention*** within a purposeful context. This suggests that 'digging channels' and deepening trust between partners who care about improving children's lives leads to unplanned benefits, including through mindful decisions, generosity and a deeper understanding of what is likely to help rather than hinder.

Another perspective is that of relationships as an organising principle as articulated by David Robinson (The Relationships Project).

The relationships question therefore underpins questions of both community voice and hardwiring change, and looks to explore how to better design relationships into our work, and better supporting relational ways of working.

Supporting Activities

Across these areas, there are two cross-cutting themes which the Children's Communities' core teams will undertake to support development, learning and embedding the approach:

Communicating & connecting

The work of Children's Communities requires constant communication and clear articulation, of the approach, strategy and ambition.

- **Articulating:** helping people to understand, participate in and shape the work by providing clarity around the approach, direction and successes, telling stories and capturing change.
- **Updating:** ensuring people know what is happening and why, and have the opportunity to participate and shape it accordingly, through a communication approach that fits the local context and uses local networks and stakeholders.
- **Sharing:** creating opportunities for learning and hearing about the progress, achievements and impacts of the work through events, shared spaces and reflection pieces.

Supporting & stewarding

As Children's Communities work towards improving local systems, there will need to be ongoing capacity and support to enable participation and map out how to proceed.

- **A system lens:** drawing together data, experiences and evidence to reflect what is happening across the area, to deepen collective understanding and learning, and improve decision-making.
- **Research & design:** engaging with exploration areas and identifying best practice from elsewhere.
- **Seeding relationships:** through the Children's Community and beyond, to explore shared ideas and join the dots between areas of work.

05
Next Steps

Over the next five years, Children's Communities will strengthen relationships, test and prototype new solutions, look to hardwire changes to the local system, and improve how the system works for children and young people. This will require careful planning and the support of the full range of partners and people in each community, to work towards place-based change.

This will be achieved by the Children's Communities each working on their priority workstreams, bringing together partners around early years, health and wellbeing, and transitions to adulthood. Through this work, partnering with local people, developing approaches to hardwiring change, and strengthening the role of relationships, will be important themes.

Core teams will maintain communication with partners and local people, ensuring that they are connected and understand progress being made. They will also work to enable participation in the work, providing additional capacity, expertise and advice, and playing a stewarding role in guiding and implementing strategy.

This plan provides a headline indication of the types of activity and how they might relate to each other, as highlighted the Children's Communities' respective strategies. It will also provide the basis for the learning that is shared with the wider sector and to support national influencing, so that more areas can adopt the approach and learning from Children's Communities to improve children's and young people's outcomes in their places.

Local people as partners

participation action research
participatory decision making

power mapping
poverty truth
commissions

participatory budgeting

equity

Hardwiring change

desk based research
learning

funding for system change
prototyping infrastructure

budgeting
funding &
commissioning

system change

articulating

relationship
experiments

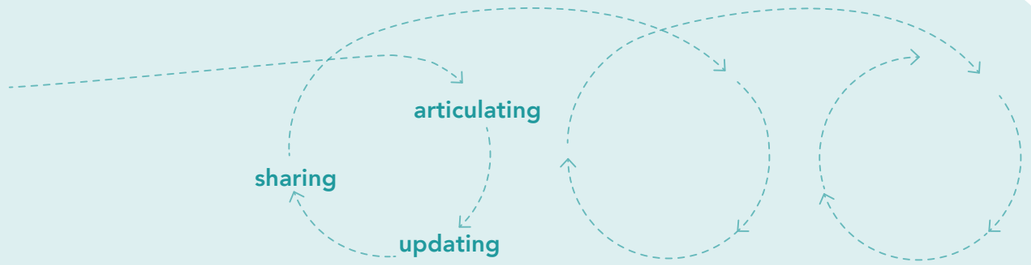
government
learning

culture change

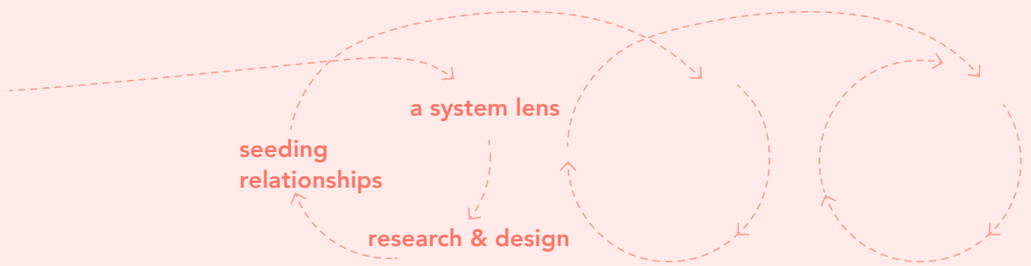
Relationships as interventions

open enquiry
network mapping

Communicating & connecting



Supporting & stewarding



Reflection

The Children's Communities programme has laid strong foundations and started to effect significant change across Pembury, Smallshaw-Hurst and Wallsend Children's Communities. As a result of this work, organisations and local people are collaborating in new ways, there is a broader understanding and awareness of what is needed to achieve change, and there have been shifts in both the approach and content of local agendas and organisations.

All of this is in service of improving children's and young people's lives: these developments are not inherent goods, but enablers for making sure that children growing up in poverty are not left behind, and have the opportunities and support they need to achieve their potential. A whole systems approach which blurs the lines between civil society and local services to create a new civic approach is in the making. This work is complex and long-term, but in Children's Communities we have an initiative which shows promise, and can support others.

Over the next five years, Children's Communities will work in Pembury, Smallshaw-Hurst and Wallsend on early years, health and wellbeing and transitions to adulthood workstreams. Through this, they will work to identify where the system is not working, and how and where to hardwire changes into it. This will be supported across the Children's Community Network through the exploration areas: local people as partners, hardwiring change and relationships as an organising principle.

Call to action

We hope you will partner with us in this crucial work. Neighbourhoods are the unit of social change that speak to the reality of children's lived experience, recognise the many complex and interrelated factors that affect their success, and provide levers for change which individual services cannot reach, and which central government is learning need to be locally informed and accountable.

As the Children's Communities programme enters its second phase, we invite local and national partners, decision-makers and influencers, supporters and funders, to help Children's Communities build on a successful first phase.

"The most exciting part of the Children's Communities programme has been getting involved in something large-scale backed with an evidence base from the US and the UK, that also draws on research we have done over the years...as well as its cross-cutting nature, its focus on people and the relationships that they have with each other in a community and how people can be empowered to contribute to the improvement of prospects and places."

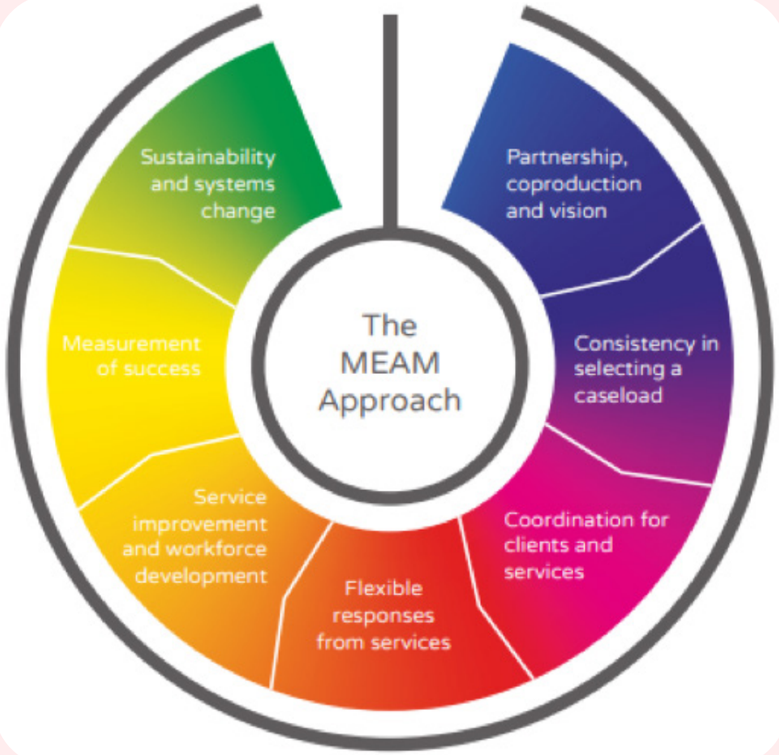
Chris Goulden, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Systems change case study
Making Every Adult Matter

Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) is a coalition comprised of the national charities Clinks, Homeless Link, and Mind, as well as an associate member: Collective Voice. The coalition developed the MEAM Approach, a framework that supports local areas to design, adapt and deliver joined up services for people facing multiple disadvantage.

Multiple disadvantage is defined as people experiencing complex and often interconnected challenges at the same time. These might include mental ill health, homelessness, contact with the criminal justice system and substance misuse. Services in local areas are often designed to support with one critical issue at a time, and often fail to meet the needs of individuals facing complex challenges. Due to this, people facing multiple disadvantage can often experience constant referrals between services or relying on emergency services as a result of reaching crisis. This is not only a costly and resource intensive way to provide services to people, but also often fails to improve people's lives.

MEAM approaches this challenge with **evidence that shows that joined up and coordinated services across professional boundaries not only provide better support and meet the needs of people experiencing multiple disadvantage, but also decrease the burden on emergency and crisis services**. MEAM works alongside cross-sector partnerships in 26 local areas across England to support collaborative ways of working, improved services, and create systemic change.



Sources:
- The MEAM approach website
- The MEAM Approach Wheel
- Cordis Bright
- MEAM Approach evaluation: year 2 report, 2019

MEAM's **seven core principles** support local areas to develop localised approaches, challenge the status quo and embark on a change journey in collaboration across sector and professional boundaries. While MEAM supports in a critical friend capacity to local areas free of charge, there is no funding available for local areas to embark on the MEAM approach – instead, a local partnership must emerge that is able to both fund their work and test and deliver it.

Evidence from the initial evaluation of MEAM has seen emerging learning from local initiatives that point towards longer term, sustainable and systemic change, for example local areas delivering more coordinated interventions and services, evidence of reduction of unplanned service use, and individuals experiencing better accommodation situations and reductions in rough sleeping.

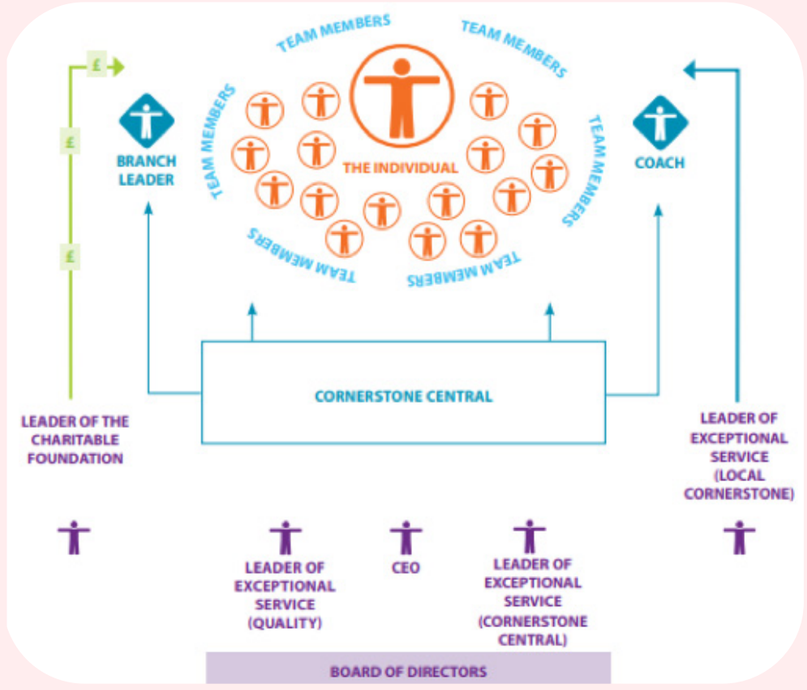
However, systems take time to shift, and the challenges that MEAM has experienced include localised interventions improving joined-up services but being difficult to scale as they come up against an inflexible system. Similarly, while local areas are increasingly inclusive of people with lived experience taking part in local decision making and initiatives, more work needs to be done in local areas around moving towards co-production, rather than engaging on a consultative basis. These are challenges and learning that have been seen across the sector and provide much scope for further learning and impact.

Systems change case study

Cornerstone

The social care sector in Scotland has faced significant changes and challenges in recent years, and Cornerstone, a social care provider in Scotland, has developed an ambitious response to these challenges called Local Cornerstone. With an overall **aim to transform social care across the UK**, the Local Cornerstone approach emerged from visits that the Cornerstone team made to organisations such as Buurtzorg, to explore alternative models of social care that might meet the needs and challenges in the Scottish context, as well as extensive stakeholder and customer interviews in Scotland.

The Local Cornerstone model takes a systemic approach, seeking to **provide highly individualised, context specific, and person-centred care, as well as working collaboratively across the social care system**. Cornerstone worked from early on in this process with partners in commissioning, Scottish Government, and Scottish Social Services and Healthcare Improvement. This element is central – the work is not just to improve Cornerstone's capacity and impact, but to initiate a change across the social care sector.



Local Cornerstone is a person-centred model that puts **decision making power in the hands of frontline workers.** Guiding Principles, comprised of purpose, values, strategic decision-making pillars and four key objectives are the core component of the Local Cornerstone approach and used as navigation for local teams to carry out place based social care.

Many social care organisations seek to improve their care to better meet the needs of individual circumstances but have policies and practices that inhibit this behaviour.

Local Cornerstone has removed policies that restrict the autonomy of frontline workers, and put in place local, self-organising teams that decide how best to use the Local Cornerstone model in their areas, how to recruit locally and how to best support each other as a local team.

Intriguingly, **teams do not have hierarchies,** and are encouraged to use each team members' strengths and judgement in their local work strategies. What is remarkable about this shift is the trust and accountability required of teams – and the challenge it provides. Across society, many people are used to policies and practice guides to follow in their work, rather than placing the emphasis and trust on themselves and team members to think and respond in context simply using their skills, experience and judgements to make decisions. At first, this new way of working may feel destabilising. Cornerstone recognises this, and has provided extensive tools and support for teams, including behaviour guidelines, training, coaching, and integrated data and technology.

There are 48 Local Cornerstone teams so far, and the organisation is still rolling out the changes that will enable the Local Cornerstone strategy including the empowerment and training of teams and considering the opportunities emerging from the learning of the approach so far.

For example, it will be very interesting to see Cornerstone taking a lead in scaling learning and starting conversations across the sector, as they are an early adopter in the UK of self-organised and values led teams in social care – how might this approach translate to other parts of the UK?

Cornerstone may also have significant influencing capacity for wider systemic change, supporting a movement within social care to catalyse new ways of working across the sector. Already the organisation has seen **initially sceptical organisations start to visit them to hear more about their model and approach, including commissioners**.
The potential for the learning from Local Cornerstone to support commissioners to move away from short termism and provide flexible and long-term funding for self-organised teams is particularly exciting.

In terms of organisational change and development, there would be significant value in learning from the approach in terms of their **training and coaching culture, and how this has enabled the success of self-organised and empowered teams**, and what responsibility organisational leadership has in continuing to shape this culture and provide on-going support to frontline teams.

Sources:

- Local Cornerstone Strategic Plan, 2019.
- Local Cornerstone. Year Two Report, 2019.
- Lowe, T. Plimmer, D. Exploring the new world: Practical insights for funding, commissioning and managing in complexity, 2019.

Systems change case study
All Children Thrive

All Children Thrive (ACT) is an organisation based in the United States, seeking to tackle the systemic issues impacting child wellbeing, including inequalities, healthcare, and academic achievement.

ACT recognises that many services and programmes in place for young people and children focus on crisis, medical conditions or employ a single intervention strategy, rather than addressing root causes and considering the wider system of social, economic, biological and environmental factors that contribute to child wellbeing and development. ACT believes that the United States is failing to address inequality across the country and provide all young people with the developmental support they need to flourish in times of such unprecedented, rapid change.

The organisation is **building movements across the country**, by supporting places that are working in their local areas to transform children's health and wellbeing systems in a holistic way. **ACT connects these "sites" together and provides adaptive learning and strategic support in order to catalyse innovative solutions and collaboration to achieve whole systems change.** Their purpose is to employ a collective impact strategy in the local areas, building energy, innovation and learning across the sites, connecting local expertise with evidence and learning from similar work across the world, and creating capacity for systemic change by connecting professionals from across local systems to drive change together and create improved child wellbeing systems.

Each area works with the ACT approach on a context specific basis – but all sites aim towards same overall ACT outcomes, and are guided by the ACT themes of innovation, collaboration, and learning, catalysing existing assets in communities to improve systems for children's wellbeing.

- ACT is an innovation movement for wholesale systems transformation (not a demonstration project)
- ACT communities recognize that it will take an "all-in"strategy for all children to thrive
- ACT involved parents and community members in co-design and co-creation
- ACT communities will engage and mobilize traditional children's health care providers, but also their schools, community centers, city government, local businesses, and everyone else
- ACT innovations and improvements will spread and catalyze other improvements in child health and wellbeing
- ACT communities are testing innovative public and private financing strategies to produce value, incentivize outcomes, and achieve long-term results

A key element of ACT's work is their focus on **promotion of learning** between sites, and the support they provide in creating and maintaining a national learning network and connecting places across the country. There is significant value in providing local places with opportunities to learn from each other, participate in organised learning and in – person events, build relationships and work together to try different methods, tools and approaches to transform systems – **it represents a shift from improving local systems within a place, to connecting those local systems to a whole-nation movement.**

Sources: All Children Thrive website

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