Thinking 'Systems': routes to better outcomes?

Key points

- Part of the rationale for LSPs and LAAs lies in dealing with 'wicked issues', the challenges for local partners which lie beyond the scope of individual partners and do not offer easy solutions
- Effective responses demand 'whole system' approaches, involving all those with a key part to play in agreeing the nature of the issue (or opportunity), and considering how each can support the other in making a difference – in ways not confined to service or sector silos
- Whole system approaches can be seen as a set of principles for effective partnership working and improving service delivery - emerging in part from the development of 'systems thinking' concepts. These have had widespread influences on policy, most evidently in health, adult care and children's services
- Key implications include:
  - acknowledging the futility of trying to control complex systems, where the impact of activities are subject to many factors
  - seeking answers by 'moving up a level', focusing on connections between systems
  - exercising 'leadership at all levels', with influencing skills and understanding of partners and of interlocking systems *crucial*
  - understanding how far decisions at a 'macro' level can have a major impact on whether improvements in micro systems (at team/ project level) take root and spread
  - the significance of 'feedback' in systems – anticipating unintended consequences of policies and ensuring that there are good communication flows between the front-line and strategic decision-makers
  - harnessing *all* available resources in pursuit of shared goals, mainstream as well as project budgets
- Examples of 'whole systems' approaches from three LSPs (Salford, Stoke-on-Trent and Wolverhampton) illustrate practical applications and potential gains
  - the 'SPOTlight' process in Salford has involved short and sharp action planning exercises, each dealing with a priority issue in a priority neighbourhood
  - 'Flight of the Flamingos' programmes in Wolverhampton have developed cross-cutting understanding and skills amongst service managers, initially focusing on seamless services for older people
  - Stoke-on-Trent where three 'whole systems interventions' were central to the first LAA and have helped to reduce worklessness and improve services for vulnerable families
- Benefits of these initiatives have included:
  - stronger and more diverse stakeholder engagement (eg, GPs, RSLs)
  - understanding 'client journeys' better, leading to services better tailored to needs
  - fresh solutions, moving away from silo working and the repetition of past practices which had little impact
  - steps towards genuine transformation of services

Introduction

Everyone involved in Local Strategic Partnerships knows that bringing about change and improvement is not a rational, controlled and orderly process. The very nature of the many 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber 1972) that partners confront are not easily resolved, and beyond the scope of individual partners – and provide a strong rationale for LSPs and LAAs.

Keys to tackling many of these issues – such as high levels of worklessness, rates of teenage pregnancies, and reducing health inequalities – lie in:

- understanding how the variety of 'systems' operate and interlink: both 'micro' (such as families, neighbourhood and village communities, and work teams) and 'macro' (such as large organisations, politics and the economy)
- using tools and approaches which foster 'whole systems' working, where planning, research and evaluation seek to engage the full range of stakeholders including services users, communities, front-line staff, councillors, middle and senior managers

> *"A system is a set of elements connected together which form a whole, thereby possessing properties of the whole rather than of its component parts."* (Checkland, 1981)

The interplay of different types of system influence the likelihood of success. For example, decisions made by out-of-work individuals to seek a job can depend on their awareness of job opportunities, their expectations of earnings and job security relative to current benefits and other income, their family commitments, and peer group attitudes towards employment and types of work. Whether they are successful can depend on the level of demand in the economy and how effectively local service providers work together to ensure that jobseekers are aware of available jobs, have the skills needed, and are enabled to deal with other barriers to employment they may face, relating eg, to their health conditions or family responsibilities.

Relevance of 'systems thinking'

The practice of 'systems thinking' is useful for investigating complex situations ('messes' in the jargon![1]) where there is typically little agreement about what is wrong, or even acceptance that there is a problem. This contrasts with 'difficulties' where problems are tractable and people are resolved about their nature and how to tackle them. In the latter circumstances, the approach to problem solving lies in breaking the problem down into smaller parts which can then be analysed. This concentrates on linear connections but may lead to blinkered thinking about cause and effect and possible solutions.

Systems thinking originated in the 1920s within several disciplines, notably biology and engineering, when researchers observed hierarchies in levels of organisation, each more complex than the one below it, with properties that emerged only at that level and did not exist or have any meaning at lower levels. Later distinctions were drawn between 'closed' and 'open' systems (*closed systems* are

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[1] Ackoff (1974) introduced the term 'mess' into management studies, to describe a dynamic system of problems, suggesting that much of management is about dealing with messes.

completely autonomous and independent of what is going on around them, while *open systems* are not). The significance of '*feedback*' was also highlighted, where activity within a system is the result of the influence of one element on another and may be 'stabilising' or 'destabilising' (in the latter case forming vicious or virtuous circles).

Systems thinking also developed in parallel in disciplines such as economics and ecology and in wider practice such as urban renewal, where an early contribution was that of Jay Forrester in 'Urban Dynamics' in the late 1960s. This highlighted *unintended consequences* of policy in affecting different aspects of the 'urban system', notably where the construction of low cost housing in the inner city increased concentrations of out of work residents and promoted urban decay and disinvestment.

Writers such as Checkland (1981) contrasted 'human activity' systems from natural and physical systems: the latter can be described objectively, whereas human activity *systems are understood differently by the people involved, who attribute different meanings to what they perceive.* As long as each perception is logically consistent it is valid for the person making it and is, therefore, neither right nor wrong. Checkland's work also highlighted inherent difficulties in bringing about localised improvements where factors in higher level systems work in other directions.

Systems thinking was popularised within management circles in the 1990s by writers such as Argyris and Senge, notably as a key to creating 'learning organisations'. Senge (1990) in 'The Fifth Discipline' stressed that *the essence of systems thinking then lies in seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-and-effect chains and in seeing processes of change rather than single snapshots* – as well as cautioning against the likely efficacy of short-term fixes. Effecting 'whole systems' change subsequently became a major preoccupation in the field of organisational development, and featured the emergence of 'large scale intervention' facilitation techniques[2]. These have widened approaches to 'whole systems' beyond the 'experts' to participants in particular systems who have the ability, collectively, to bring about change.

Useful concepts

Systems thinking offers a set of useful concepts and techniques which have the potential to be more widely applied in an LAA context, eg, in:

- stepping up a level in the abstract, concentrating on the linkages/ interactions
- understanding dynamics of change in urban and rural areas, and the impact of programmes and strategies on these (for example, in neighbourhood renewal, where the common lack of data on population churn undermines efforts to assess policy impact)
- 'systems modelling': considering flows and bottlenecks; exploring causal, dynamic links between activities/ outputs and outcomes; and using research and evaluation to plug gaps in knowledge
- strengthening feedback loops (eg, in drawing on user experiences and knowledge of frontline staff in strategic decision-making)

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[2] Such as Future Search and Open Space Technology – see Resources section below

- recognising that small things can have big impacts and large things can have little impact – so it helps to understand what is most likely to lever changes on a larger scale

Systems thinking can provide keys to bringing about 'transformation', getting beyond approaches which involve the same players tinkering with change in their particular silos.

Influences over policy and practice

There has been a growing fashion for 'whole systems' approaches in public policy, especially amongst researchers, consultants, planners and practitioners in the health sector. These have been promoted by, eg, the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in its approach to public service reform, and the NHS – where it has lain behind, eg, 'Our Health, Our Care, Our Say', the 2006 White Paper aiming for more personalised health services which fit better with people's lives[3] and 'New Ways of Working for Everyone' in reforming the delivery of mental health services[4] . The Audit Commission and IDeA have actively promoted whole systems in relation to social care[5], and systems thinking was piloted in neighbourhood renewal by the Manchester Partnership, sponsored by the then ODPM[6].

Aspects of systems thinking are implicit in many current reforms stemming from the Local Government White Paper, such as:

- the focus on outcomes, to drive delivery behind shared goals
- the reduction in the number of targets
- local devolution, with central government trying to give up degrees of control over the 'complex system' that is local government and partnership working
- reforms to inspection regimes, with reduced burdens, and emphases on assessing outcomes and managing critical risks to improved community well-being

It also lies behind initiatives to improve *service* performance, eg, in much of the work of the National Health Institute for Innovation and Improvement and in social housing. The CLG report, 'Systems thinking for performance improvement'[7], for example, explored the use of 'lean systems' thinking in social housing, concentrating on rent collection, voids and re-housing, and repairs. Pilots demonstrated benefits to tenants (eg, major improvements in repair times) and efficiency gains, and pointed to wider potential applications across a range of community services. Lean systems are central to the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership's Business Process Improvement programme, promoting service-level transformation[8].

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[3] Latest guidance is given in DH (2008) 'Transforming Social Care' Local Authority Circular LAC (DH) (2008) www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Lettersandcircular/LocalAuthorityCirculars/DH_081934
[4] www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_074490
[5] Audit Commission (2002) Integrated services for older people: Building a whole system approach in England www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/NATIONAL-REPORT.asp?CategoryID=&ProdID=0CDFF060-E76E-11d6-B1E3-0060085F8572 IDeA (2007) 'Working as a whole system: improving the quality of life for older people' www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=5973824
[6] This focused on 'youth nuisance' and helped develop understanding of how different organisations approach the problem. Learning gained form the project has informed the approach in the new LAA to promoting a 'culture of innovation' in tackling seven significant 'entrenched problems', including resident wages, 'guns and gangs' and 'Green City'
[7] www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/systematicapproach. Another example of is the Care Service Improvement Partnership guide (2006), 'Out and About: Wheelchairs as part of a whole-systems approach to independence' www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4139932
[8] www.wmcoe.gov.uk/index.php?page=331

Systems thinking and targets

Some critics of target setting have used systems thinking to argue against the use of targets altogether, on the grounds that targets promote gaming behaviour and unintended consequences (where achievement of the target becomes more important than the purpose behind the strategy). An oft-quoted example has been effect of shorter waiting lists as a target leading to patients on trolleys in hospital corridors and more generally, poorer standards of health care). Advocates of systems thinking, however, tend to stress the importance of using performance measures, and focusing on *variations* in performance as a guide to what's working and what's not. This approach leads to concentrating improvement efforts where performance lies outside a range of what might be defined as 'normal', given characteristics of the area, organisation and service concerned in comparison with others[9].

Without other effective mechanisms, it can be argued that the pursuit of targets remains apt, as a device to focus partner minds and help strengthen commitment to common goals, provided that the performance management systems of partner organisations pull in the same direction. Hence the government's intention to ensure that Whitehall departments are fully behind the indicators in the National Indicator (NI) Set. The existence of the NI Set, however, can still be expected to lead to risks of unintended consequences, eg, where the process of fitting priority improvement targets to what's in the National Set (and what can be measured with confidence) does not necessarily mean that local priorities will be adequately captured[10].

Systems thinking and cross-cutting policy: Think Family

A systems approach is also embodied in 'Think Family' principles set out in the recent policy document from the Social Exclusion Task Force[11].
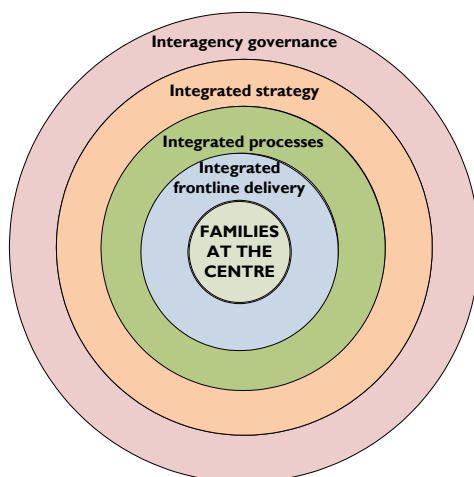
Integrated frontline delivery	Empowered and assertive practitioners provide tailored and joined-up support around the whole family. They identify needs early and proactively engage families
Integrated processes	Shared assessments and information across agencies give a full picture of a family's needs and help ensure support is fully co-ordinated
Integrated strategy	Joined-up planning and commissioning drive a focus on families at risk across all agencies
Inter-agency governance	Accountability for family outcomes is clear, with strong leadership at the top and protocols setting out agreed responsibilities between agencies

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[9] This approach is central to 'lean systems thinking' applied in engineering and quality management. Tools such as Statistical Process Control are well developed and can be applied more widely in an LAA context.

[10] For further treatment of targets and systems, see Blackman (2002) Targets or Tracers? The Role of Numbers in Public Policy www.radstats.org.uk/no079/blackman.htm

[11] www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/families_at_risk.aspx

'Think Family' stresses action to:

- improve identification and engagement of children and families at risk
- build on family strengths by helping family members support one another in times of difficulty
- encourage services to take a 'whole family ' approach, working with clients as part of a family and not simply as individuals
- improve the level of funding available for intensive, tailored services

LSPs adopting 'whole systems' approaches: examples

Stoke on Trent

Stoke-on-Trent LSP chose to feature three 'whole system interventions' as a cross-cutting device running through its first LAA:

> "The whole systems approach is crucial to understanding the complex issues and possible solutions to maximise improvements. Essential to this approach is the recognition that our citizens live in varied social, cultural, political, spiritual, economic and environmental contexts (settings) and tackling specific issues requires these factors to be addressed in a holistic (whole person) and whole systems way. The whole system engages all stakeholders, incorporates an evidenced-based approach and promotes all of our enabling priorities."

The themes were: reducing poverty through employment and enterprise; smoke-free city; and vulnerable families.

A key to the approach was to invest time and effort in Floor Target Action Planning[12], taking an inclusive approach to involving stakeholders in developing plans on reducing worklessness, the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), and teenage conceptions rates. This was especially successful in engaging mainly managers and front-line staff (including from the voluntary sector) across a wide range of organisations and interests – many of whom had not, or scarcely, been 'at the table' previously.

> "We sought to get anyone remotely interested and connected involved…You shouldn't exclude anyone with a possible answer."

The LSP reckons that the process added value in generating consensus, commitment and better solutions, with close attention paid to *client journeys* – life experiences of individuals and families and how they engage with public services. Once these journeys were better understood, partner organisations could understand better how they relate to each other in providing services (and weren't in competition for the same clients), and became readier to share information. The process also helped participants recognise that what was needed was largely not about spending more money, but rather making better use of existing resources. Actions taken are considered to have had a major impact in reducing the numbers of Incapacity Benefit claimants in the city.

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[12] The experience of Floor Target Action Planning forms a basis for 'Five Steps to Better Outcomes' developed as a tool for the Learning to Deliver programme, available on the L2D Basecamp site. If you are involved in LAAs in the West Midlands and are not already registered for access to the site, please contact learningtodeliver@wmlga.gov.uk

On NEET, the process led to better understanding of where the challenges really lay, primarily with 17 year olds dropping out of college courses, either on the wrong course and leaving at Christmas, or generally disillusioned. The college then agreed to offer additional courses starting in January, funded to maintain regular weekly contact with target students, leading to improved retention rates and the college deciding to maintain the new year starts and mainstream the follow-up contacts. Action planning is reckoned to have contributed to a 25% reduction in NEET.

The Vulnerable Families intervention was implemented at neighbourhood level in Meir (and served as a precursor to national Think Families initiative mentioned above). It involved a collaborative approach (involving social services, police, etc) in identifying families living chaotic/ disruptive lives and providing a targeted outreach. Contracts were negotiated with each family, including rewards and sanctions. The programme uncovered the extent to which these families had multiple dealings with a range of public services (30 in the past six months was not uncommon). Staff involved were surprised by the positive responses by almost all the families concerned – and by the level of interest in the taking up the service shown by other local families.

In developing the new LAA, the LSP has sought to build on these experiences, adopting the central premise that,

> *"…paid employment, achieved through gaining appropriate skills/ educational attainment*
> *is in the medium to long term the best/ quickest/ only sustainable route out of deprivation*
> *for the majority of citizens in the city"*

…and recognising that success will depend on attracting business investment, entailing priority for investments in skills and the built environment. In addition to physical regeneration and economic development , the focus is where there is the greatest scope for cross-cutting impact, on groups of vulnerable people (children and families, 16-25, adults, old people, workless households). Each of the delivery themes is being subdivided to allow five neighbourhood agreements to be developed covering delivery arrangements in each neighbourhood. The approach will involve the *"most challenging localities and most intractable problems"* and require a tighter focus on who falls into each target group, how they access services, and how inequalities will be dealt with. Partners are also expected to identify who is likely to remain poor and vulnerable beyond the horizon of the action plan, and set out longer term actions to address the needs of these people.

> *"In the spirit of CAA [Comprehensive Area Assessment], we're prepared to take major*
> *measured risks for measured impacts. We're aiming to ensure that the right people are*
> *leading, facilitating and providing support to make the right things happen at the right time.*
> *And we'll do everything possible to avoid silo thinking – mixed groups will prove the most*
> *useful – and everyone is expected to contribute."*

The new LAA no longer refers to 'whole systems': much of the thinking has been embedded and the term can act as a barrier to communication, eg, amongst councillors and other interests unfamiliar with the jargon.

Salford

The Salford LSP, 'Partners IN Salford' has sought to weave the thread of 'Connecting people to opportunities' through all its work, that of. It is pursuing a series of locality pilots which aim to 'narrow the gap' for small areas of the city: 'SPOTlights' (Shared Priority Outcome Targets), focusing on what are seen as "major drivers of deprivation requiring a whole system approach", taking a big issue and getting into depth on the topic at neighbourhood level.

The SPOTlight process[13] involves for each topic a six week period of intense stakeholder engagement, analysis and action planning, with four stages, relating to a commissioning cycle:

- problem analysis: considering the evidence – the extent, cause and consequences of the 'problem' including clarifying who is responsible for dealing with it
- delivery chain analysis: seeking detailed understanding of how the issue is currently tackled, "from end to end" (systems, structures, incentives)
- SPOTlight report: setting out issues and a clear action plan on what can/ should change in the short, medium and long term outcomes (including issues to be taken up through strategic planning and commissioning)
- SPOTlight delivery and stock takes: A partnership commitment to deliver on the action plan, including delivery and system issues. Regular, bi-monthly high tempo stocktakes with project teams reporting to a high level panel from the LSP, including the LSP Chair, Council Chief Executive, other members of the LSP Executive and local councillors, intended to maintain momentum and focus and generate learning.

To date, each project has been driven forward by a group three council staff (a 'Transform trio'), all of whom having undertaken the 'Transform IN Salford' leadership development programme, with a further trio charged with looking at issues that cut across *all* the SPOTlights. Each trio has one full-time and two part-time members, sponsored by a member of the council's management team. The trios are *not* subject experts, and as such are expected to provide external challenge to service providers and policy staff.

The first reports (presented in December 2007) were on worklessness, NEET, and 'cleaner, greener, safer', each focusing on a particular locality[14]. A fourth, on worklessness and lone parents, started in January 2008. So far, partners have been impressed with the speed and vitality of the process, and there are early results from the process. These include:

- increased take-up of pre-recruitment training by lone parents (with the Council and other employers)
- a *"different conversation"* between the Council, Jobcentre Plus and Manchester Work Solutions (job shop provider)

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[13] Based on the Priority Review model developed by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit
[14] Copies of SPOTlight presentations: http://www.partnersinsalford.org/local-area-agreement/spotlight/taking-the-spotlights-forward.htm

- the signing up of GP 'cluster leads' to brokering employment and learning advice from their surgeries
- a 'social prescriptions' tender in NDC area (ie, involving holistic assessments and referring people with long term health conditions to exercise, volunteering. stress-reduction counselling, etc)
- proposals for strategic commissioning of new 'wrap around services', broadening of provider base and a capacity building programme for front line advice workers
- a new Financial Capability post to help address financial exclusion

The partnership reckons that other benefits gained from the process include:

- highlighting critical gaps in knowledge and understanding at local level
- involvement of stakeholders not previously engaged, eg, GP practices and Registered Social Landlords
- appreciation of the value of community-based research organisations in gathering evidence for 'SPOTlighting'
- understanding where public services delivery lack effective incentives to deliver on what really matters to local people (eg, in Jobcentre Plus not promoting services in the toughest areas, and a mismatch between a police priority for reducing motor vehicle theft and local resident concerns over anti-social behaviour for local residents)

More broadly, senior managers have been encouraged to support whole systems thinking at all levels, and there are proposals to extend the 'Transform IN Salford' training programme from the local authority to other partners. A three-day whole system event is being planned for May 2008 (using Future Search techniques) using 'Connecting People to Opportunities' as the theme. This is seen as an opportunity for wider debate at city level involving key stakeholders: what *could* public service delivery look like in the future given the will for improvement? Thinking 'systems' has brought about consideration of how to make better use of 'enabling resources' across silos/ partner organisations (IT; communications; research and performance management).

Wolverhampton

The 'Flight of the Flamingos' is a training and development programme in Wolverhampton intended to help middle managers bring about change and strengthen partnership working, leading to improved delivery[15]. It was piloted by the LSP's Health and Well-Being Partnership between October 2006 and January 2007, and has since been run on worklessness and private rented housing[16].

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[15] The phrase comes from one of a number of scenarios posed for the transition of South Africa in 1991 shortly after the release of Nelson Mandela: *"…then there was one bright vision of a future to work towards: Flight of the Flamingos, in which the transition is successful because all the key building blocks are put in place, with everyone in the society rising slowly together"* (p23). This contrasted with scenarios to avoid: the *Ostrich*, where the white government sticks its head in the sand; *Lame Duck*, a prolonged transition which satisfies no one; and *Icarus*, where a black government embarks on an unsustainable spending programme and crashes the economy

[16] Two more are planned, under the auspices of the Children and Young People's and the Community Safety Partnerships).

The programme sought to develop participants' understanding the service delivery system and their ability to influence within it, with expectations that it would lead to actions in pursuit of LAA targets and service improvements, especially in making 'seamless services' a reality. Knowledge of systems thinking was built into programme design, eg, in:

- making imaginative use of group facilitation techniques to help address some of the common obstacles to effective partnership working, in particular the use of the 'World Café'

- ensuring the commitment from senior members of the Health and Well Being Partnership, in promoting and engaging with the programme, underlining its importance as 'champions'/ mentors for individual participants and involving, eg, the Council Leader, PCT Chief Executive and LSP Director in open exchange sessions during the programme

Techniques and approaches used in 'Flight of the Flamingos'
Seeing Systems - tools to help people see organisational systems, constituent inter-related parts, and the distinctive pressures and perspectives of each (attaching evocative terms such as 'Burdened tops', 'Torn middles', 'Oppressed or vulnerable bottoms' and 'Done-to customers' to generate reaction and reflection)[17]
World Café - a structured conversational process, following principles intended to bring out everyone's knowledge in confronting difficult challenges[18] - principles include: clarity of purpose; creating a hospitable space; exploring questions that matter; connecting diverse perspectives; and encouraging everyone's contributions - ideally involving the 'whole system' in the room, with results emerging from small group discussions as people move from table to table
Double loop learning - involving other stakeholders in the programme, through conversations with users, managers and colleagues managers, partnership representatives at different stages of the programme. Purpose: to strengthen common understanding and challenge thinking - 'single loop learning' takes place where people modify their actions in response to the difference between expected outcomes and what actually occurs. In 'double loop learning', they *question* the thinking, assumptions and values behind their actions, leading to more fundamental changes. If there are weak 'feedback loops' between users, service deliverers and policy-makers, it can be difficult for double-loop learning to take place[19]

Benefits from the pilot included:

- a challenge to thinking about how services will need to be delivered in future
- new contacts, stronger relationships and greater mutual understanding
- better dialogue between organisations

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[17] Oshry (1995) *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the mysteries of organizational life*
[18] Brown (2005) The World Café: Shaping our futures through conversations that matter
www.theworldcafe.com/twc.htm
[19] Argyris & Schön (1978) *Organizational Learning: A theory of action perspective.* Other influences on programme content and approach included Senge and others (2005) *Presence: Exploring profound change in people, organizations and society*, Wheatley (1999) *A Simpler Way*, and Shaw (2002) *Changing Conversations in Organisations: A complexity approach to change*

- opportunities for voluntary organisations and the Library Service to be more central to service development
- application of new techniques to improve partnership processes and service planning
- reassurance for participants about their own strengths, skills and approach

Importantly, the programme has led to participants pursuing joint projects and bids, involving new configurations of partner involvement, such as in developing new primary care and community health facilities.

In the subsequent theme of 'reducing worklessness', the programme drew in different partners and gave momentum to joint action planning and commitment to local implementation of the 'City Strategy' on worklessness covering the city region. The 'Flamingos' on housing took advantage of a recently completed affordable housing needs study and identified a range of productive ways forward including a policy change on council tax relief on vacant property. Removal of relief will encourage landlords to ensure properties are occupied – and increase revenue for the Council. Experience from Flamingos is being built into the Partnership's approach to delivery plans for the new LAA.

Implications

Adopting principles of a systems approach has wide-ranging ramifications for organisation and practices within LSPs and partner organisations. Many aspects have already become conventional wisdom in partnership working, such as the importance of shared vision and objectives, stakeholder engagement and pursuit of cross-cutting connections, but there can be less awareness and understanding of other crucial dimensions, or only lip service paid. These further points include:

for evidence, intelligence, interpretation, evaluation

- seeking to understand causal links, system flows, bottlenecks and feedback loops (eg, in investigating the nature of worklessness problems, looking at reasons why people move onto Incapacity Benefit as well as why they stay)
- testing theories about interconnections, eg, about how preventative services in one field may lead to improved outcomes in others
- acknowledging the validity of different perspectives on a given situation
- in planning, modelling how systems work when estimating the likely impact of interventions and considering possible unintended consequences (positive or negative)
- being prepared for counter-intuitive findings
- adopting 'mixed methods' approaches to research and evaluation (qualitative and quantitative), with an emphasis on stakeholder engagement
- 'nesting' evaluations, assessing strategies alongside component programmes and projects

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for leadership and improvement

- promoting a culture of performance improvement
  - engaging in genuine dialogue to develop shared understanding and commitment
  - supporting innovation and risk-taking, not apportioning blame
  - appreciating factors lying behind 'under-performance', where these have little to do with local capacity and capabilities (ie, being cautious in interpreting performance 'traffic lights'!)
- accepting the limits to what you can control directly
- recognising the interdependencies across the LSP
- harnessing all available resources in pursuit of shared goals, not just project budgets
- encouraging leadership at all levels, cross-silo working and understanding
- removing barriers and providing incentives for 'systems' to work more effectively in harness – acting, eg, to:
  - align partner plans and performance management
  - enable data sharing
  - bring together scarce research, analysis and communications resources across the partnership
- looking at, and seeking to understand systems-wide issues, and how they can be influenced
  - doing more to learn about each other – and the 'systems' in which everyone operates, the pressures they are under
  - seeking evidence on and understanding the system factors behind performance on key indicators
- actively seeking out services users, staff and intermediaries – linking the front line and strategic decision making
- 'facing the right way in the delivery chain': seeking to ensure that what is provided is what service users need and want, not what suits the commissioners and providers
- adopting inclusive approaches to finding ways forward on wicked issues
  - acknowledging that 'no one knows the best way'
  - recognising the value of facilitation processes which 'bring the whole system into the room'
- supporting learning and development amongst front-line staff and service managers, and in the voluntary and community sector, especially in their skills in influencing 'from within the system'

Resources

Ackoff, R L (1974) Redesigning the Future: A Systems Approach to Societal Problems (Wiley)

Argyris & Schön (1978) Organizational Learning: A theory of action perspective (Addison Wesley Longman Publishing Co)

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Delivery Council (Cabinet Office) Customer Insight www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/public_service_reform/delivery_council/workplan.aspx

Forrester, J W (1969) Urban Dynamics (Waltham, Mass.: Pegasus Communications Inc)

IDeA (2007) 'Working as a whole system: improving the quality of life for older people' www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=5973824

Integrated Care Network (2006) Whole Systems Working - An ICN Guide and Discussion Paper www.integratedcarenetwork.gov.uk/icn/index.cfm?pid=10&catalogueContentID=828

Learning to Deliver 'Performance Improvement' and 'Skills and Tools' resources on Basecamp

NHS Institute for Improvement and Innovation www.institute.nhs.uk/

NHS SDO (2002) Managing Change in the NHS www.sdo.lshtm.ac.uk/managingchange.html

Open University – Openlearn courses on systems (http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/) – eg,

 * Managing complexity: a systems approach – introduction

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