Contents

This practical guide is not designed to be read in any particular order and you don't need to read every chapter. Instead, pick and choose the information that feels relevant to you. To help you apply the learning the guide also includes some worksheets to help you put the information into practice.

To help with navigation the guide has been split into themes:

Process
Identifying some of the common processes that have supported the creation of system change.

- Action experimenting
- Identifying opportunities for system change
- Keeping track of activity
- Capturing activity

Environment
An exploration of the environmental factors which impact change activity; people, spaces, cultures and infrastructures.

- Collaboration
- System change activity in groups
- Creating conditions for change

Person
A consideration of the approaches and perspectives of individuals who are making system change happen; reflecting on the personal experience of being a change agent.

- Doing system change yourself
- Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable
- Being a change agent
- Resilience

Welcome

This practical guide has been developed by Golden Key's Spark team and is based on the learning from people across the Golden Key community who are working to create system change. This is by no means a definitive guide to system change, instead it aims to share some of the common themes we've seen and can act as a starting point for you to explore your own approach to system change.

Golden Key is a partnership of organisations working in Bristol who are committed to making system change happen; improving things for people experiencing multiple disadvantages.

The Spark team work in the Golden Key programme and aim to activate a network of people that are able to think and act systemically. As a team we hold some core beliefs that guide our work:

- Anyone can make change happen
- People have the knowledge, skills and experience to take informed action
- The best people to change the system are the people in the system
- Connectedness can lead to opportunities

In the context of our work we define system change as:

Taking action to improve the way the system works for the people who use it; identifying blocks and addressing what isn't working or understanding what is working well and doing more of it. System change can happen within one or across multiple organisations, services and communities.

We hope that this guide will help make system change seem more achievable, less abstract and something that you can do. If you have any comments on the guide please share your thoughts with us: **spark@goldenkeybristol.org.uk**

Doing system change yourself

🕐 3 - 6 minute read

An introduction

System change can sometimes feel abstract and perhaps a little daunting, but change activity doesn't need to be distinct and separate to our other work. Thinking about how system change can be integrated into daily work is really important. If systemic thinking is embedded into the ways individuals, teams, organisations and partnerships work it is more likely to be sustained.

What does system change mean to you?

Across the community of people involved in system change, different people interpret the term 'system change' in different ways. A positive to this is that common language can help to support a shared purpose. However, people can sometimes have expectations that system change needs to be something big, widespread or strategic; and that smaller change activity is not relevant.

If you are taking an action with the intention of making a positive change to the system, then you're already 'doing' system change. Holding this perspective minimises the risk of something being considered irrelevant or 'too small.' It can also be helpful to remember that starting small doesn't mean you have to stay small. There are numerous examples of people doing something they considered small which, with follow-up and further exploration, have had a much greater impact than initially anticipated.
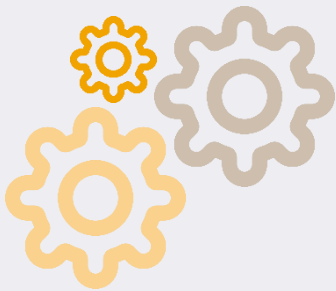
"
System change is not a new approach but rather a label for what I was already intuitively doing.
"

- System change champion

When does system change happen?

If you have previously taken an action in an attempt to improve how the system works, you've taken a system change action. System change isn't something you need to stop and do. In fact, you are probably already doing it.

People often say that looking at things through a system change lens has helped them to reframe their day-to-day work. Although they may have taken action with an identified intention in the past, they haven't always paid attention to the feedback loops or observed what has happened as a result of the changes they've made. Simply put, they usually don't stop to reflect on whether the actions they've taken have achieved their system change aspiration.

Having a system change perspective on the work you're involved in can help to support change happening quicker, better, more effectively and more consistently. It can support the identification of clear aspirations and whether or not progress is being made towards achieving these.

How do I get started?

It can be useful to think of some changes that you would like to see, and then consider how these relate to your current work, existing work structures and your areas of influence.

You might also want to set up some structures that help you keep system change on your radar. The other chapters in this guide can you help you think about Relationships and Structures and Keeping Track of Activity.

...some common questions to consider

Are there areas of your work where you think a system change lens could be easily applied?

Are you making specific changes yourself or mobilising others to make change?

Are you in any groups or networks where you can start a system change conversation?

What will help you keep system change on your agenda?

How will you know if you've done system change?

Worksheet: doing system change yourself

This worksheet is designed to help you:

- Have conversations with other people around system change.
- Clarify your own thoughts and gain the perspectives of others in relation to system change activity.

Personal reflection

It can be really helpful to ask yourself questions and reflect on how you are 'doing' system change from a personal perspective. If you haven't done so already, you can ask yourself some of the questions at the end of the 'doing system change yourself' chapter.

Have a conversation about system change

Try having a reflective conversation with a colleague, client or friend. This can be short or long, formal or informal; it's an opportunity for you to think about how you would describe system change in your own words and to hear someone else's perspective.

Explain a little about what system change is, how you are doing it and why, **then get them to ask you questions.** It's ok if you don't know the answers, just take them away to think about.

Laying the foundations of the conversation

- In no more than two sentences describe what system change is to you
- What do you hope to achieve by using a system change perspective?
- You might want to revisit some of the questions at the end of the 'doing system change yourself' chapter

Reflections after the conversation

What do you plan to do with this learning in regards to future conversations around system change?

What did you learn from having the conversation?

Were they interested, did they have a lot of questions?

What did you notice about yourself in preparing to have the conversation?

What did you notice about yourself in preparing to have the conversation?

What did it feel like to explain system change to someone?

Is there anything that you would do differently next time?

Process
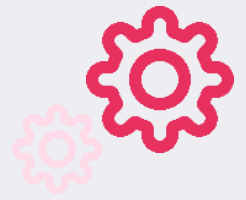
Action Experimenting

🕐 3 - 6 minute read

An introduction

Across the Golden Key partnership people are using an action experiment approach to support system change activity. Although this doesn't mean that everyone is following the same formula, it does provide a consistent structure and shared understanding of how people are approaching their change activity. The action experiment approach is just one possible approach to creating change.

What does it involve?

The action experiment approach focusses on what 'I' can do; harnessing the power and agency of the people who adopt it.

There are a number of clear concepts at the centre of an action experiment approach, these include: placing value in being curious; being clear about what you want to be different; holding things lightly; and taking action without striving for the solution or answer.

So far over 100 people across the Golden Key partnership have participated in Systems Thinking training delivered by the Schumacher Institute. The training provides an introduction to systems theory as well as the action experiment approach.

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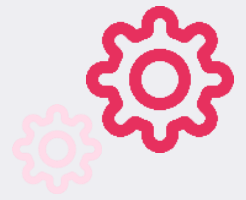
This approach has given me the space and permission to gently challenge any blocks that I come across, both professionally and personally. To ask, why does it have to be that way? Why can't we try another way? "

- System change champion

The Action Experiment cycle

The action experiment cycle below is an adapted version of the model used in the Schumacher Institute training. This has been developed based on our work supporting people within the Golden Key partnership to apply the approach. For some people the cycle is very closely aligned to how they already think or act but provides a language or process for this; for others this might be a newer way of approaching things.

This adapted cycle has been designed to be a user-friendly framework to help guide system change activity. The client experience is at the centre of the approach, with each stage succinctly described. Each stage has a few key questions based on the most common questions that people ask themselves or each other. You may find that you use the cycle once, or you may go round several times before your action experiment is 'complete'.
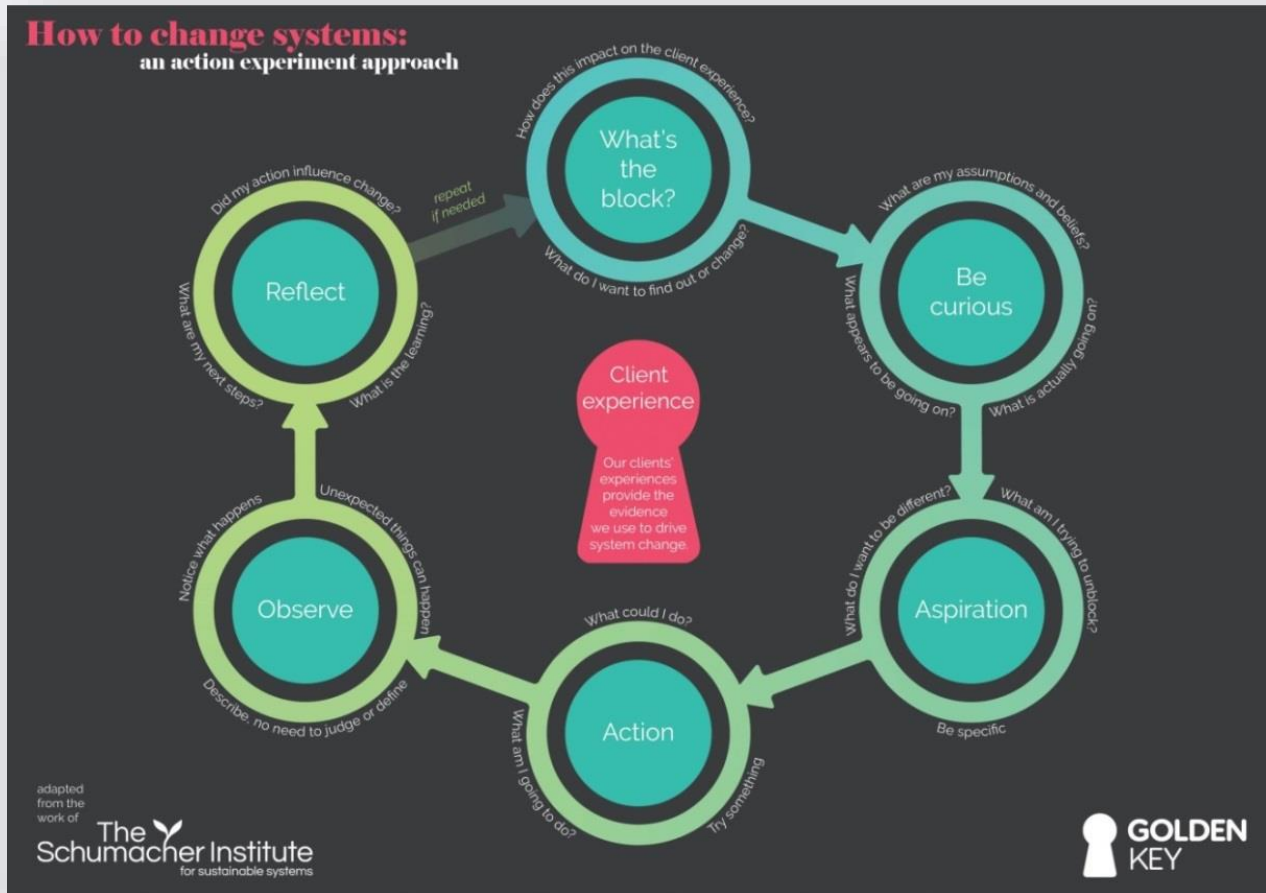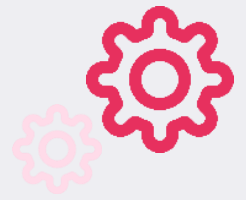
> "The action experiment approach focusses on what 'I' can do; harnessing the power and agency of the people that adopt it.
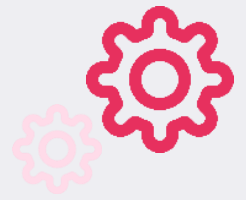
What happens next?

For some, this section may be a very brief introduction to action experimentation. For others it will be a reminder of the Systems Thinking training you attended; or an overview of an approach you are really familiar with.

Whatever the case, this might provide an opportunity to reflect on how you want to engage with action experimenting.

- What does this approach mean to you? Is it something that you've tried? Is it something that you would like to try?

- What are the most meaningful applications of this approach for you?

- Have you integrated this approach with your other work?
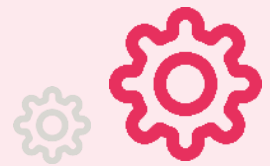
Worksheet: Action experimenting

This worksheet is designed to help you:

- Work through stages the action experiment cycle, journaling some of your thoughts and actions
- Identify potential opportunities for system change
- Develop your curiosity skills and notice what's happening

Blocks and/or good practice

What parts of the system could be working better for the client?

What could be causing the issue? Are these to be expected or are they unintended?

Can you think of an example where things are working well?
(This could be in organisations, services or partnerships that are seemingly unconnected to your work)

How was the block or good practice identified? Was it by you, a client, colleagues etc.?
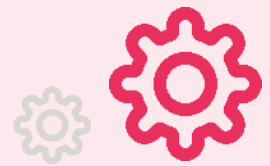
Curiosity

Curiosity is a practice. Asking the right questions can open up interesting conversation and view of other perspectives. This activity is designed to support you to develop and hone your skills in questioning.

Write down some questions you might ask in different situations where you are curious about another person's perspective. If you get the chance to ask any of these questions, make a note of how people respond.
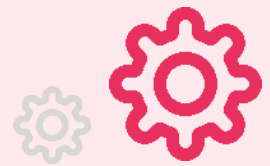
Question	Response observations
i.e Was this experience as you expected? How was it the same/ different?	

Aspiration

Your aspiration may be really focussed or really broad; it may even be a related to a broad theme, but focussed on making a positive difference in a quite a specific area.

Write down your aspiration as you see it now.

Using the following questions and your own thoughts, reflect on your aspiration.

- Do you understand your aspiration?
- Are you able to communicate it effectively?
- Will other people understand your aspiration? How do you know?
- Is this an aspiration and not a solution?

Go back to the block or good practice that you've identified: does your aspiration improve or expand on this? Are they clearly linked?

| |
|---|
| **Try revising your aspiration and write it down here.** |

Action

There are a diverse range of actions that people have taken with their action experiments. It can be useful to ask yourself the question: 'What role am I playing in relation to my aspiration?'
Some examples of the roles that people play:

- Activating others - asking a person if they can do something differently
- Advocating – representing the client view, expressing what is or isn't working for them
- Doing – taking ownership and responsibility for trying something different
- Collaborating – facilitating a collective response
- Scope – are you intending to shift something slightly, or radically alter the way the system is currently functioning?
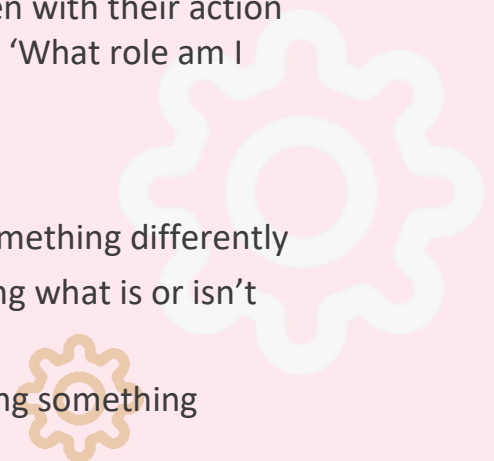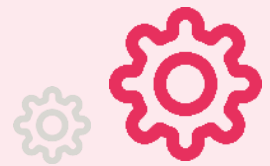
Which role are you playing?

Is there another role you'd like to try?

What roles have you tried before? What was the outcome?

Observation

Write down your observations while taking your identified actions.

- What are you noticing?
- What happened when you took this action?
- How did people respond?
- Did anything change?

Now read back what you've written. Try to notice any times where you have expressed an opinion: this could be an opinion on why something has or hasn't happened, why someone responded in a particular way or even what the effect of the action was ('things got much better/worse').

Try stripping out any positive or negative language and see if you can get to a simple description of *what happened*.

Here are a few phrases to notice which might show when you're expressing an opinion:

- Because of this….
- As a result…
- I believe…
- There has been improvement
- There has not been any improvement
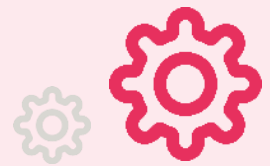
- Is there a difference between your initial observations and what you're left with after taking out these phrases?
- Was there a difference between what you had noticed and what you *believed* was happening?
- Try to notice any patterns that come up.

Reflection

Reflection can be integrated into every phase of an action experiment, it's not something that needs to left to the end. However, there is a real value in the practice of finding time and space to reflect on what you, and anyone else involved, has learnt.

It's this learning that can be used in the future. It may be applicable in a way you have no sight of at the moment or in a situation that you would previously have thought was unrelated. The reflection phase allows you to consider all opportunities.

Here are some questions and ideas to get you started:

- Why not start a mindmap of what kind of reflective practice has been useful for you?
- Do you want to connect with someone involved or impartial?
- Can you give someone a call for a chat or to arrange meet up?
- How do you intend to see things from multiple perspectives?
- Are you interested in group reflection?
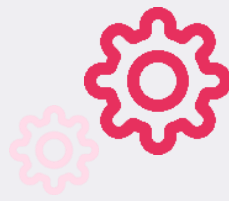
Identifying opportunities for system change

An introduction

In order to generate system change you need to start from somewhere; identifying something that you would like to be different is a critical first step in the system change process. It's important to consider how you can identify system change opportunities. These may be based on where things are working well (sometimes called 'good practice'), or where there could be improvement (otherwise described as 'blocks').

Individuals, teams, groups and networks have identified system change opportunities in different ways. Sometimes it's writing them up, logging and capturing them – on a computer or on a large piece of paper or whiteboard.
Sometimes it's creating spaces where blocks and good practice can be discussed in an honest way, like team meetings.

"

System change is bending, flexing and challenging often rigid ways of working to gain better outcomes.

"

- Ben Mitchell

Good practice

Sharing examples of what is working well can be a really useful way to encourage positive ways of working to be replicated or embedded.

This doesn't necessarily mean replicating a procedure or structure within specialist services; it might be more around how something happens rather than the detail of what is happening. For example, great practice in the way learning is captured and acted upon has the opportunity to be translated into lots of other situations, across sectors and with different client cohorts, perhaps in ways that would have originally seemed unconnected.

If consideration can be given to the potential applications for 'good practice' learning, then you're creating a great environment for system change.

Blocks

People often find it easier to identify issues, rather than the good practice, in the systems they are part of. However, you may be in the position where you need to find out more about the block in order to understand it better – the "what's the block?" phase of the action experiment cycle. This can lead to an open, non-judgemental approach to identifying where there could be improvements. This approach has been shown to help create collaboration in exploring system change opportunities. Identifying your block doesn't need to be complicated, it can be as simple as identifying something that you think could be working better.

It can be easy to focus on the problems, but identifying blocks is actually about beginning to understand the possible actions that can be taken to make a positive difference. This doesn't mean finding the solution; it could also be activating those in an appropriate position to take their own action.
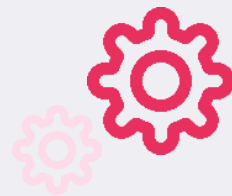
What happens next?

Identifying, discussing and processing blocks and good practice is a great start, but it does not mean that system change will happen directly as a result. What happens next and who owns or takes responsibility for this information is critical in the system change process.

If you need some help in getting started with identifying block and good practice, the questions below are designed to help you think about the process.

- Have you noticed any areas where the system doesn't work well for people?

- Do you have any examples of good practice (from within your organisation or the wider system)?

- How do/ could you share issues or good practice with others in your organisation or partnerships?

- How might you refine a long list of possible opportunities down into a few areas of focus?
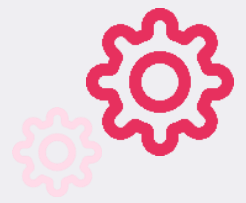
Keeping track of activity

An introduction

Keeping track of system change activity can really help to create visibility of the work that is being held and can provide a snapshot of where that work is up to. This visibility can be useful to both individuals and groups, helping maintain focus on system change activity.

Having visibility of activity also enables people to identify possible connections and supports collaboration on pieces of work where people have relevant knowledge and/or shared system change aspirations. People have identified that having sight of activity can help with creating a sense of accountability and has also inspired them to take system change action of their own.

> "
>
> # Keep it simple. Don't feel that you need to know everything all at the same time – just try to write things down as you go.
>
> "
>
> – System change champion
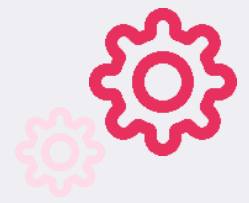
Some learning and practical examples

People across the Golden Key partnership keep track of their activity in lots of different ways, finding the best ways that work for them. However, there are some common points of learning:

- Keeping track of activity may be helpful for keeping things on the radar, but it **shouldn't be onerous**.

- Visibility of activity (ideas for activity, activity being worked on and activity completed) can support a systemic approach; this can help accountability and **identification of opportunities** for shared learning.

- How system change activity is identified, progressed and captured **doesn't have to be the same for an individual as it is for a group**.

- Different people and groups are likely to take **different approaches** to keeping track of activity; there is no one size fits all.

As mentioned above, there are lots of different ways that people track their activity. Although not an exhaustive list, here are some examples of the methods that people use; you might want to consider if any of these would work for you, or you can design your own.

- Excel: system change activity tracker
- Conversations, coaching or peer support
- Team or group 'check ins'
- Online project management tools i.e. Trello (see the Spotlight on Trello worksheet)
- Written lists or notes to check in on
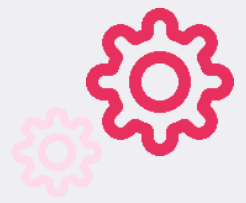
Finding a way that works for you

There is a huge amount of learning from people across the Golden Key partnership who have been tracking either their own activity or the activity of a group. Here are a couple of observations that may help you in developing your own tracking process:

**A tracking tool isn't the solution to system change:**

Even the perfect tracking system is **not** going to get system change done. It might be a useful tool that contributes towards enabling system change to happen…but it's the people in the system that really make positive difference happen.

There are lots of ways to track activity:

Some people use a traditional 'to do' list, some groups use their action log. Other people make sure they create time to catch up with their peers, colleagues or manager. Is there an approach that might suit you or the team or group you are working with?

Take the time to reflect:

People have reported that capturing their system change activity can help them to reflect on their own aspirations, what they've done and how they've done it. But does this work for you? Take the time to reflect on what you are getting out of keeping track of an activity. Does it align with your motivation and power to take action?
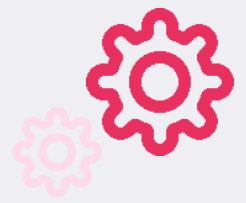
Often there is not a clear beginning, middle and end to an activity, but it can still be helpful to draw faint lines in the sand and recognise where change may have happened. Having a record of what you have already done can help in deciding if an activity is 'complete.' This record can also act as a helpful log of what has already been tried, especially if system change did not occur as a result.

What happens next?

From initiation through to completion; it can be useful to think about what key stages of a system change activity you want to have visibility of individually and/or collectively. It could be useful to have a look at the Tracking Activity worksheet; this might help you to explore your ideas further and develop your own process. Some initial questions to consider:

– How will others know what you're working on?

– How can people know what actions you've taken?

– Who needs to know what?

– How will you know if something has changed?

Worksheet: Keeping Track of Activity

This worksheet is designed to help you:

- Consider why you might want to track your system change activity
- Build a system change tracking system that works for you

Your Motivation

Write down the reasons that you want to keep track of activity.
(These reasons might be useful to inform you about what information you want to capture.)
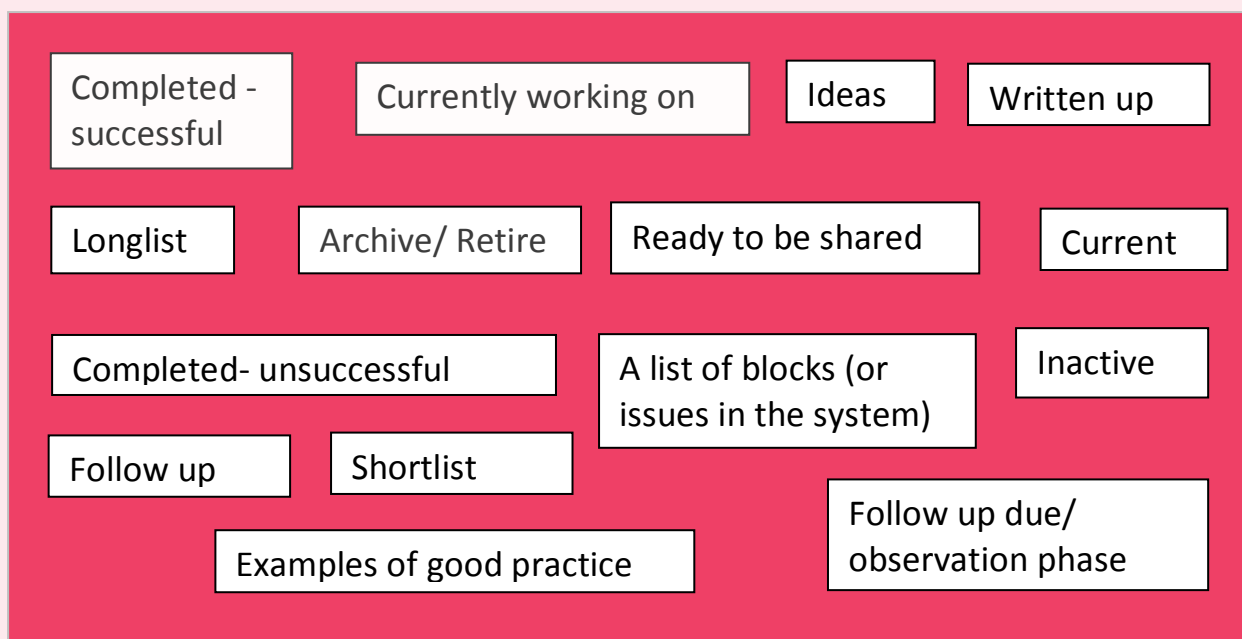
Creating your own tracking system

This exercise is designed to help you think about your system change activity, from initiation through to completion; what are the **key things** that you want to have visibility of?

On a piece of landscape paper write the word 'start' on the left hand side, write the word 'completed' on the right hand side. Draw an arrow between them so it looks something like this:

Start ➡️ **Completed**

Now look at the list of things below. Choose as many things as you want from the list (you don't have to use all of them) and map them on to the timeline you have drawn. This will form the basis of your personal system change tracker.

| Completed - successful | Currently working on | Ideas | Written up |

Longlist Archive/ Retire Ready to be shared Current

Completed- unsuccessful A list of blocks (or issues in the system) Inactive

Follow up Shortlist

Examples of good practice Follow up due/ observation phase

Refining your system change tracker

Now that you have got the skeleton of your tracker there are other things you might want to think about to help you refine it. Take some time to think about these questions.

- Are there distinct phases in your tracker? i.e. a beginning, middle and end?
- What do 'start' and 'end' mean here?
- Are there other things that you would like to have sight of?
- Do you want to be able to capture more detail?
- How will others know what you're working on?
- How can you identify any key learning?
- What is the best format for you to track activity – a spreadsheet, online tool, paper version?
- Who needs to have sight of your activity- just you or will others need to see it too?

Putting it into practice

Whether you are already holding some system change activity or are yet to get started you can now map your activity on to your tracker. You may need to make adjustments as time goes on. This doesn't mean that you didn't "do it right" the first time, it just means that you are responding to feedback loops and making informed changes – **well done, systems thinker!**

A Spotlight on Trello

There are lots of ways to track activity but this spotlight focusses on a web-based tool called **Trello** which is used throughout the Golden Key partnership. It could be described as an electronic 'to do' list. It has assisted members and groups across the partnership in their identification, progression, completion and sharing of system change activity

This spotlight is talking about using Trello for a very specific purpose - namely to initiate, progress, and ultimately complete System Change activity.

In addition to the resources that can be found on the Trello help page (including a really useful product demo), some useful hints and tips have been included below that have been gathered from across the Golden Key partnership:

Overview

A Trello board is made up of a number of columns (as many as you want!) with individual cards (again, as many as you want!) sitting within these columns. A card identifies a specific system change activity and moves from left to right as the action around the activity progresses.

Use it… and see if you like it

If you commit to trying Trello, then make sure you're using it proactively and regularly. This will give you a far better understanding of whether it works for you, your team or your organisation.

Board admin

It can help to have a regular review of your Trello board by an individual or group. A clear line of responsibility ensures there is consistency in the way the board is being used.

Check- in

A regular and structured check in on System Change activity, helps to maintain visibility, transparency and (a little!) accountability between individuals and teams. A check-in can be facilitated by asking card owners:

- What have you done?
- What are you planning to do?
- Is there anything stopping you from doing this and do you need any further support?

Change it up

If your Trello board isn't working for you, then change it up! It's an easily adaptable tool that is designed to be able to shift alongside your work (rather than tie you up in a process or procedure), that's why it's being used across the Golden Key partnership for system change activity.

Being a change agent

4 - 6 minute read

An introduction

Agency is an individual's capacity to act independently, make their own plans and carry out actions based on their own choices. Change agency is all these things, specifically in relation to making system change happen.

Although change agency may stem from an internal narrative, it will result in obvious and tangible system change output. Change agents are the people who: actively develop power, confidence and skills; are positively persistent; and are self-motivated so create a positive difference in the system.

> "
>
> **Be bold and brave. Ask questions and don't assume the answers. Often if you challenge people to do something different they will rise to it.**
>
> "
>
> - Ben Mitchell

The information provided within this chapter does not necessarily need to be acted on. It is included with the intention of raising a conscious recognition about something you already possess and which is extremely valuable.
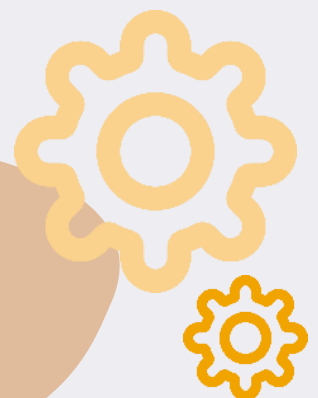
What can you do with change agency?

If you're reading this, then you probably already have the desire to take action. You may want to create, or enable, positive changes to the way in which services and communities support people.

Taking action is a critical aspect of using your change agency. People involved in system change often use their agency to define and take their own actions, turning theory into practice and making system change become real and tangible; this community of people does not wait to be told what to do.

You might not even realise that you have agency until you start to exercise it. Try and recognise where you might have the power to make decisions over the actions you take.

Once you start identifying your agency, you may discover that you have more than you originally thought! The change agency you have is incredibly valuable and you can never have too much of it.

How can you help others?

Identifying and reflecting on your own change agency is a really important place to start but it doesn't have to end there. There is also opportunity to support other to recognise their own change agency. This can be called 'activating change'.

Many people involved in system change are incredibly motivated to take action and make change happen. Some of these people are also amazing at activating others; by encouraging and empowering the people they're connected to, to understand their own agency and take action.
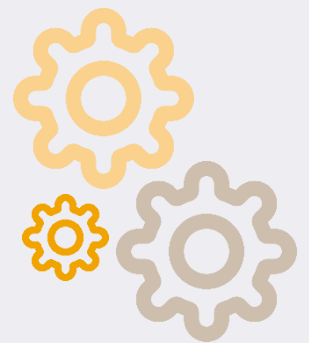
What are others doing?

Well, here are some common themes that they've identified through their enablement of others:

- Supporting people to recognise the unique position they are in to influence change

- Supporting people to try something different and make mistakes safely

- Sharing learning: reflecting on what they've done, how they've done it and asking others to think about how they can apply this learning

- Identifying when they need support and taking appropriate steps to find it

- Understanding and valuing their own motivations and aspirations while taking other perspectives into accounts

- Understanding and valuing the importance of communication, dialogue, relationships and conversations

What happens next?

Being a change agent gives you licence to go out and use the energy you have to try and make a positive difference. This isn't about **wanting** things to be different or better; it's about **taking action** to actually make things different or better.

...some common questions to consider

From your perspective, what are the differences between motivation, empowerment, autonomy and agency?

Next time you decide to try something different, take a moment to reflect on how this is connected to your agency: does this feel different or is it part of your normal practice?

Is agency recognise, supported and nurtured in the teams, organisations, partnerships and networks in which you work?

Environment

Collaboration

An introduction

The dictionary defines collaboration as "working together with others to achieve a shared goal." By its very nature, system change requires people to work together to create change; a single person cannot be a system (although we do have systems within us!).

The starting point for collaboration when trying to create system change is often agreeing a common understanding of what the intention or aspiration is. This can be something quite broad; for example, improving access to services for certain groups of people. While agreeing a shared intention is critical to starting, you don't necessarily need to define or prescribe a specific course of action or outcome (i.e. we will improve access to x by doing y). Generally, people will try something as a first step that moves them towards their aspiration and then observe what happens before deciding next steps.

"

If I didn't understand a person's opinion I would… figure out what I could ask to better understand. Equally curious people will ask more and then we have a conversation about system change.

"

- System change champion

Making collaborative change

Placing collaboration at the centre of the change can lead to really positive results. The first step is often agreeing and acknowledging that something could be better. Talking about personal experiences of the system, particularly clients' experiences, can be a really effective way to frame discussions on what could be improved. This can create a dynamic that allows multiple parties to agree that things could be better without the need for defensiveness or blame. It can be helpful to think of this as a way of looking to create shared solutions to shared issues.

Collaborative working can include a range of people, such as: professionals, service users, carers, service commissioners or people with lived experience, both within and external to your own organisation.

> " It can be helpful to think of collaboration as looking to create shared solutions to shared issues. "

Benefits of working together

A collaborative approach will naturally hold the perspective of multiple individuals; these perspectives are a great asset and an important part of identifying where the opportunities for change lie. The strengths, weaknesses and motivations of the people you're working with are an integral part of how the change activity may progress and evolve. Working collaboratively also means that you are potentially able to have further reach as each person will have a different sphere of influence in which they can affect change.

Taking a collaborative approach might take a little longer, especially when working with people outside of your organisation who may have other priorities. However, it creates the opportunity for more robust, systemic responses to issues in the system.
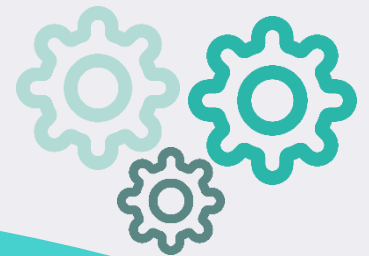
What happens next?

To get started, think about what your aspiration is: can you clearly explain it to other people? It can be useful to ask people what it is they think you are trying to achieve. The act of having to communicate this verbally can help people's understanding and allows you the opportunity to iron out any misunderstandings if someone has misinterpreted or misunderstood your aspiration.

Asking people to explain their understanding of your role can also help to inform your understanding of what you need to explain. This may include setting the parameters of involvement and identification of responsibility and agency.

Remember, an aspiration doesn't have to be a specific 'solution', it can be a broad idea of what you'd like to be better.

How do I get started?

These questions might help you to feel more prepared before speaking to others about collaborating on system change:

- Can you clearly define what your aspiration is in a single sentence?

- What is your role in this activity? Are you trying to create the change yourself or are you trying to mobilise others into taking action?

- Who would it be useful to talk to in order to get multiple perspectives?

- How can you identify people who might be able to influence change in regards to your aspiration?

Individual:
Who am I?
Why me?
What do I know?
How could I help you?
Who else might I know?

Individual:
Who am I?
Why me?
What do I know?
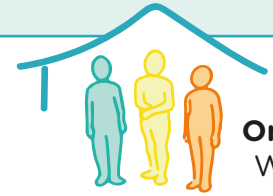How could I help you?
Who else might I know?

Individual:
Who am I?
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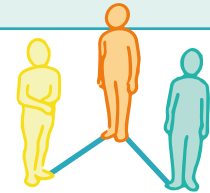How could I help you?
Who else might I know?

What
is my
aspiration?
What is my role
in the change
activity?

Organisation:
Who are we?
Why us?
What do we know?
How could we help you?
Who do I need to speak to?

Network:
Who are we?
Why us?
What do we know?
How could we help you?
Who do I need to speak to?

Community:
Who are we?
Why us?
What do we know?
How could we help you?
Who do I need to speak to?

Person

Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable

🕐 3 - 6 minute read

An introduction

Change can feel uncomfortable in a number of different settings; in your personal or professional life. So, it's not that surprising that system change activity can elicit similar feelings. Many people are also used to working in an organisational hierarchy where they have limited autonomy; discovering your system change agency may feel a bit uncomfortable as you adjust to a new way of thinking, and acting, on things.

"

Failure is ok and to be expected, pay attention to how it made you feel and what you want to do next.

"

- System change champion
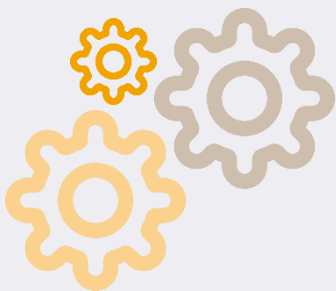
What is discomfort?

By its nature, system change is about doing something different or trying something new. Members of the Golden Key partnership have identified some common themes based on the reality of being comfortable with being uncomfortable:

It can often feel like there is an **external expectation, and often an internal desire, to know the answers to questions**. Not knowing the answers can feel like (and may be perceived by others as) a weakness, but it's actually an opportunity to be curious and empower others.

Questioning what we think we know and encouraging ourselves and others to reflect is a key part of the process. Nevertheless, the admission of not knowing the answer can feel like an uncomfortable one.

This can also extend to other settings where you may be expected to input into a decision, discussion or idea. It can feel uncomfortable if you are not interjecting, making a recommendation or providing a solution.

Unpredictable and unknown responses:

If you're asking someone whether they think anything could be changed to create a better outcome, will this elicit a defensive reaction or one of empowerment? Framing questions so that people understand what you are trying to achieve (and don't feel attacked or blamed) can help to mitigate some of these feelings. But ultimately people's responses are unknowable – that's why we're asking the question in the first place!

Recognising opportunity in discomfort:

Rather than having a pre-defined and well-trodden pathway where you know what steps need to be taken and in which order. To make changes to the system you will need to do something different and, to some degree, this will **be a path into the unknown**.

Making yourself more comfortable

Although feeling uncomfortable is likely an inevitable part of your system change experience, there are some things that you can try that might help to lessen these feelings.

Practice: The more experience that you have of feeling uncomfortable, the more comfortable you being to feel. You will also begin to recognise situations that might elicit uncomfortableness and develop your own ways of mitigating this.

Reflecting and sharing your experiences with others can help with the feeling of sitting with uncomfortableness. Sharing your experiences may even encourage someone else to try something out of their comfort zone.

Use framing to help others understand the approach that you're taking. This can help in a variety of ways, from helping people to recognise opportunities for learning, to preventing people from feeling like they need to be defensive.
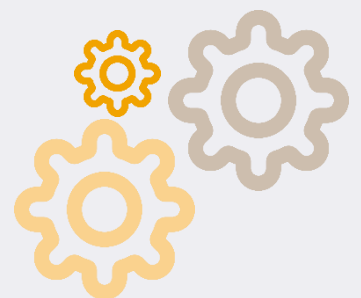
What happens next?

Recognising and using your experience can be extremely valuable when asking others to try something different. After all, this may put them in an uncomfortable position. It can be easy to push something that feels uncomfortable down to the bottom of your 'to do' list.

Why not try shifting it up and getting a bit more familiar with the unknown? You might want to take a few moments to ask yourself some of the following questions:

Do any of the examples experienced by others resonate with you?

Is there anything you've been putting off because it might make you feel uncomfortable?

Do you feel like you always need to have the right answer?

How does it feel to let go of the pressure to always know the answer?

Capturing activity

🕐 3 - 5 minute read
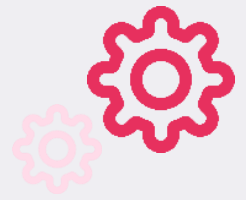
An introduction

Due to the nature of system change, where systems are ever changing it can be difficult to know when something is 'done'. People who are trying to generate systemic changes often find themselves asking questions like: 'How will I know when change has happened?'; 'Where am I in the process – the beginning, middle or end?'; 'What does system change actually look like?... is it ever done?'

Capturing your system change work can help to answer some of these questions.

Don't panic if you're not sure what to capture and share – this is a really common experience.

People often don't know what to capture at the beginning because they're not sure what is going to be useful to them. For some, it might help to start taking notes about what you are doing and why and then refine these as you learn more about what is useful to you. For others, having a conversation with someone else about what you want to record and why is a good starting place.
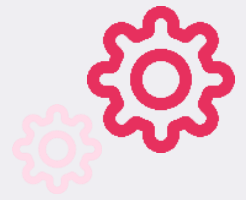
Why capture system change activity?

There are a number of benefits to capturing activity, however the true value can only be determined by the people involved. **Here are some reflections from people across the Golden Key partnership on their experiences of capturing activity:**

Capturing what is being done can help system change feel more tangible and less 'fluffy.' Taking notes, logging information or recording observations, helps to create an understanding of what system change actually looks like.

Logging learning can help people identify they are in the system change process. Having a process that works for you can help provide structure to thinking about your system change work and can also make it easier for conversations to be had with others. This can support people to reflect on what they've done, what has happened and what they might do next.

Capturing activity encourages reflection on the approach taken. Reflection can provide valuable insights into the process, including supporting people to understand their own motivations and values that surround change activity; this can include how things were done as well as what was done.

The act of recording can generate opportunities for reflection and celebration. It's important to recognise the wins along the way, especially as large scale system change can take a long time and the issue that you're looking to improve may never be fully fixed.

It's ok to be pragmatic. Although the process of capturing activity (as opposed to just reporting the output) has largely been a valuable one, sometimes it might feel more important just to get something done rather than worrying about capturing it.
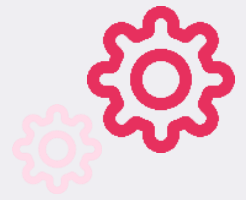
> **Finding the right way to capture your system change activity is important, it will allow you to weave and embed an approach into your work.**

What happens next?

Some people have found it helpful to capture their system change activity in a standardised template. Others make their own lists or notes and some assign the detail to memory.

Find the most appropriate way (or ways) for you to capture your system change activity is important – it will allow you to weave and embed an approach into your work. You might need to do this collaboratively within teams, networks and partnerships.

A couple of questions to get you started:

– Why do you want to capture activity?

– What kind of information do you want to record?

– Do you want to capture information just for you or do you want to share it with others?

There are a number of templates that people and groups across the Golden Key partnership are using to capture system change activity. These are resources to be shared with anyone who wants them – feel free to modify or adapt them to suit your own needs.
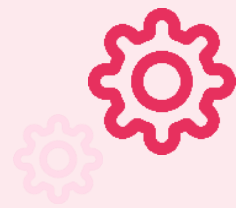
Worksheet: capturing activity

This worksheet is designed to help you:

- Support your thinking about your own motivation and purpose for capturing activity that you are involved with.

Why?	What?	How?
...do you want to capture activity?	**...is it that you want to capture?**	**...are you going to go about capturing what you want?**
Reporting; personal development; to share; to learn	*Are there any common themes?; Stories/anecdotes; statistics; client feedback*	*Reflection; notes; conversation; supervision; deliberate or unintentional*

Please contact spark@goldenkeybristol.org.uk directly if you would like any of the template documentation that we have seen used to capture activity; we're more than happy to share any resources that we have access to.

Environment

Creating conditions for change

An introduction

Creating the right kinds of conditions can really support in the development and progression of system change activity by individuals, teams and organisations. This is not just about the physical environment, but may also include culture, values and infrastructure.

Teams and individuals have different needs, so there isn't a perfect set of conditions that support system change activity. However, conditions that encourage discussion, support, accountability and reflection help support system change activity.

What does it involve?

Across the Golden Key partnership there are some common conditions which have been effectively created to support system change action. These are some of the ways in which the partnership have tried to create enabling environments.

> " This is not just about the physical environment, but may also include culture, values and infrastructure. "

Encouraging discussion

Creating spaces talk about and support system change. These spaces can exist in a variety of settings, for example: existing supervision structures, dedicated one-to-one catch ups, coaching sessions or reflective space. Some have adapted existing meeting structures, for example by adding a 'system change' agenda item, while others have developed new platforms to support discussion.

Supporting people to check in on what they perceive to be systemic good practice or challenges has also enabled people to recognise opportunities for change.

Support and reflection

Taking time to reflect on what's worked well and celebrate can be really motivating: encouraging people to reflect on successes (big and small) can also help people consider what actions they might take next in order to build on their success.

Accountability

Adopting processes that support people to report back on their activity helps to create a sense of shared accountability across teams, partnerships and networks. Using tools to keep track of activity also creates visibility of the work that is taking place, which can help with both accountability and motivation.

Supporting a culture of shared learning where everyone involved has a contribution to make, rather than this being seen as the responsibility of one person or group. This collaboration and shared responsibility has been reported as a significant factor in the progression of system change activity.

Allowing people to have agency

Clear communication and action which recognise and respect agency are key conditional factors in supporting system change action. Investing in people who are trying to generate change, by providing training or allowing time or resources, can be a practical demonstration of support.

Developing structures that people can engage with pro-actively encourages action, agency and autonomy. The creation of this type of structure has been seen to support individuals involved in a system change activity. Working groups who hold their own collective system change aspirations and define their own actions can also help maintain focus and harness energy around system change activity.

Get out of the office

It can be helpful to get out of the normal working environment, so step away from your desk and try a new location. Regular work environments can make it harder for people to put their 'system change hat' on, as they are immersed in their day-to-day work and its demands.
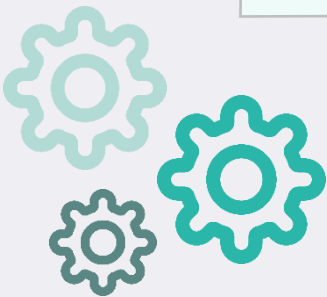
What happens next?

Take some time to think about what kind of conditions might support you to focus on system change. Are there some elements mentioned above that really resonate with you? It might also be useful to think about whether you are looking to create conditions that support your own system change work or support contribution or the actions of others.

Some questions to consider:

- How will you know whether the environments that you are creating are proving to be successful?

- How can you facilitate a collaborative approach to creating suitable environments for system change?

- How can you share the environmental factors that are proving to be valuable for you?

Person

Resilience

An introduction

Life is full of twists and turns, some expected while others appear out of the blue; we are constantly dealing with change in our lives. Complex systems are no different, people are consistently having to adapt to the shifting landscapes around them. The ability to deal with these changes and the challenges that might arise as a result can be described as resilience or, as some put it, 'bounce-back-ability'.

Change agents who are trying to make change happen commonly demonstrate this ability to bounce back, which can be critical when trying to make change happen can take time (and persistence!) Resilience isn't limited to individuals, it can also be evident within teams, organisations and across partnerships.

> "
> **Enjoy the journey of learning just as much as the process. It's not a race and you will take a few tumbles along the way, in fact those times are when you do the best system change thinking.**
> "
>
> – System change champion
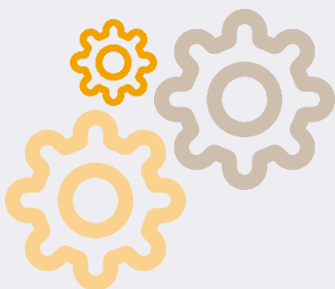
What does resilience have to do with system change?

As mentioned above, trying to generate system change can take time and energy. It will often require you to be tenacious and therefore resilience certainly helps. These are a number of situations in which people have demonstrated their resilience:

Taking alternative action when initial plans haven't generated the desired change they were hoping to achieve. Not getting the responses that you expect or desire can be tough, it requires resilience to reflect on the situation and consider what other actions you could take to try and make change happen.

Evolving your system change practice in response to what you're seeing. System change doesn't have a tidy structure where there is a clear beginning, middle and end. This can feel frustrating at times. It can take resilience to recognise and accept that the first iteration of a change activity you're involved in is simply that, the first iteration. In the pursuit of change, you may need to make several adaptations based on your observations and feedback loops.

Sitting with uncertainty when others want clear answers. There are multiple ways in which change can come about, therefore part of your system change work might mean holding uncertainty about the outcomes of the actions or the 'best' way in which to achieve your desired result.

Facilitating networks and groups in a way that gives them agency. Working collaboratively across systems can be an excellent approach to effecting meaningful system change. However, often people are used to being told what to work on, rather than being given ownership of their decisions and actions. It might require resilience to sit with this feeling of uncomfortableness, especially for those not used to feeling like they have agency.

What happens next?

Developing or improving your sense of resilience will really help support your system change practice. In order for system change to become an ongoing part of your work, you need to be able to handle the challenges that go with it. Don't worry if you feel like your resilience fluctuates – that's normal. Sometimes we have more capacity to deal with difficulties than others.

Other people can really help in building up your resistance, tap into your networks and think about who you can share your experiences with.

...some common questions to consider

- Who might you be able to talk to for support?

- Are there other people who may share similar experiences?

- What has helped you 'bounce back' in the past?

- It can be easy to focus on the challenges. Don't forget to ask: What has gone well? What have I learned?

Further resources:

If you're interested in finding out more about resilience in relation to system change, the NHS Horizons team have an excellent resource. Just search 'School for Change Agents – resilience is an act of defiance' on YouTube

Environment

System change activity in groups

An introduction

Doing system change as a collective brings its own opportunities and challenges. Groups can create environments in which people can make useful connections and also provide the opportunity to think more holistically, taking multiple perspectives into account rather than people thinking and acting in silos. However, groups can add complexity, there might be mixed motivation, understanding or confidence around doing system activity among group members.

Some of the key aspects to consider when working with or establishing groups that seek to generate system change include: **having a clear purpose, involving effective group members, creating accountability and celebrating success**.

> "
>
> # Groups take multiple perspectives into account, rather than thinking and acting in silos.
>
> "

Involve the right people...

It's really important that you include the right people in the group This doesn't necessarily mean that you need to have a certain number of people or specify exactly which organisations need to be represented. While you do want to ensure you have multiple perspectives and people involved who can affect the change you're looking to make, it's equally **important to have people who are motivated and understand what they can do in terms of making system change happen**. Think about the roles that people play in groups, this might change over time but **you will likely want a mix of doers and thinkers**.

Take time to also consider hoe you are going to involve people with lived experience. They can bring valuable, and often unique, insight into your group. Some people with lived experience might not want to be part of a formal meeting structure, so think about other ways in which they can meaningfully contribute to the work.

...and keep them engaged

You want to give people the best possible chance of succeeding, so most group members will likely need some level of support. At the very least this should be ensuring that people know what is being asked of them as a group members but might also include: **an induction for new members, role descriptions, terms of reference, a buddy system, time with the chair, dedicated time to prep or debrief**. Creating an environment in which members feel able to take action in line with the purpose of the group is critical. No-one wants to attend a meeting that doesn't seem to have any value or impact.
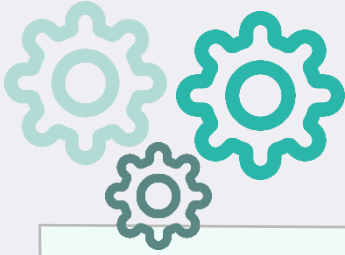
Create accountability and then celebrate your success

It can be helpful to think about who feels ownership of the group and its activity: is the group co-owned by its members or is responsibility for ownership placed on the chair? **Having a sense of shared ownership and accountability can really galvanise people into taking action**.

It's also important that people are able to know if their involvement is having a positive impact in line with the group's purpose. Creating a space where there is an expectation that people will update on the system change activity that they've done can benefit groups in two way: by creating accountability but also by providing inspiration to other group members. Conversely, optional 'drop in' spaces where there is no expectation of accountability can lead to a drop in engagement and over time attendance in these spaces tends to peter out.

We know that it can take time to see the impact of changes made to the system. **Celebrating small successes can help maintain motivation among members**. In some groups, linking back to the impact that the work of the group has had on specific clients has made the work feels more tangible and real.
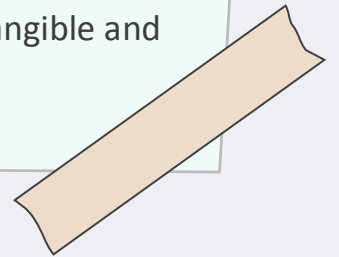
What happens next?

These are some of the key elements that groups with a system change focus often have in common. However, each group is different so you will need to consider what might work in your own context. The following questions might be useful to consider if you want to establish a new group, or could serve as review prompts:

- Do you know what your group is trying to achieve?

- Who is engaged? Does anyone else need to be involved?

- What kind of behaviour would you like to see from group members?

- What does a good job look like for the group? How will members know when this has been achieved?

Worksheet: System change activity in group settings

This worksheet is designed to help you:

- Consider whether a group is the best way to achieve your aspiration/purpose/goal
- Think about you want to involve and what behaviours you need from an effective group member in this context

Is a group what I need?

Why am I starting this group? In no more than 3 sentences outline what you are trying to achieve

Is a group the best way to try and achieve my aspiration? List your reasons for wanting to set up a group focussed on system change, and the benefits of a group setting

Could my purpose be achieved without setting up a group? Note down as many alternative ways you can think of that could also help you achieve your purpose

Is a group the right option for me? Look back over your answers above. If yes, think about what this might look like, will it be a formal group, an informal network, or something else?

Who do I need to involve and why?

Who to involve? On a piece of paper or post it notes write down as many different roles or perspectives as you can think of i.e. *service user, commissioner, client facing staff.* Then spend some time marking which of these you'd like to involve in the group.

What are the three most important behaviours/ values you want group members to display?

1.

2.

3.

Why are these most important to you? Do all group members need to have all of these?

What else do I need to consider? Note down all the other factors that might be important when selecting group members *i.e. job role, a spread of organisations, power to make decisions*

Get in Touch

This practical guide has been developed by Golden Key's Spark team with aspiring change agents in mind. We want this to be a useful resource for people who are looking to create system change, or would like to support others to do so. Our hope is that this has been a useful starting point for you to explore your own approach to system change.

We want to make this resource as useful as possible so if you have found it helpful (or if you didn't) we would love to hear your feedback: Spark@goldenkeybristol.org.uk.

If you'd like to know more about Golden Key and the work of the Spark team why not visit our website? www.goldenkeybristol.org or join our system change conversation over on Twitter @SparkChangeTeam.