Urban Wellbeing In Policy

Building a relational community-policy-research ecosystem

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RebelKindly

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About this report

In the UK the national research infrastructure has seen several important investments in the past five years which aim to connect community organisations with researchers, policy engagement, science advice, knowledge exchange and impact-oriented research activities. Yet there are fewer examples of efforts to sustain connections between policy makers, community organisations *and* academic researchers.

At the same time, a crisis in public trust in expertise coincides with a booming interest in research and policy co-production and the integration of lived expertise in contemporary practices of knowledge production. This suggests that to sustain these connections successfully requires an attention to the hidden politics of co-produced research and navigating potential conflict over expertise[i].

In this report we report on the Urban Wellbeing in Policy project (2022-2024), which aimed to support the University of Birmingham (UoB) Centre for Urban Wellbeing to develop a place-based ecosystem of policy, research and community involvement by creating spaces for diverse voices to connect and build relationships. Our research focus was on wellbeing inequalities at the level of regional governance.

We respond to calls to establish **"a new culture of working together",** include a more diverse "range of communities to re/define problem framings before they become policy questions" and to focus on "relational activities" [ii]. We therefore draw attention to what happens in the spaces in between knowledge production, knowledge mobilisation and knowledge translation.

We worked in partnership with the West Midlands Combined Authorities (WMCA) Wellbeing and Prevention team, Birmingham Voluntary Services Council (BVSC), Lodestone Communications and academics at the University of Birmingham to co-develop masterclasses , training and concrete engagement opportunities on the topics of:

- workplace wellbeing
- investing in mental health and wellbeing in schools
- digital health technologies
- healthy places and environments

We commissioned experienced leader, strategy & organisation design consultant and change navigator, Susie Drummond from Rebel Kindly to evaluate our ways of working and assess our impacts. We wanted to find out:

- Did the process work to connect researchers, policy makers and community voices – and, if so, for who and why and in what contexts?
- How do the 'connecting and translational' role of practitioners operate?
- What are the barriers and factors influencing effective interactions?

The report makes recommendations for building a relational ecosystem and ways to remove barriers to building connection.

Learning Highlights

Connecting as people and sharing knowledge across disciplines and sectors is at the heart of transformation

Design to Connect

- To build and sustain a relational ecosystem use approaches that support people to connect not just to "get stuff done"

- Community organisations often feel like they are infiltrating research and policy settings, but in this project they felt like true partners

- There is a strong need for cross sector peer mentoring and communities of practice to transform place-based health and wellbeing systems

- Use local voluntary sector infrastructure organisations to help build capacity, include the seldom heard and forge alliances across the region

- Map out who is absent from the work and build real connections with them. Address the practical, personal and systemic barriers to access. Co-produce agendas, not just meetings

An appetite for change?

- There is an urgent need for change across all sectors, linked to the decline in public funding and limited use of existing evidence about what works to cut health inequalities.

- There is frustration that systems seem to stay the same over several decades despite advances in evidence, data and understanding

- Community organisations should search out more opportunities to influence, have confidence in their expertise, and come together to influence. They have great assets, knowledge and power

- Organisations should check that expectations of and rewards for people for don't conflict. The culture of an organisation can get in the way of transformation and risk

Skills and tools

- Researchers benefit from support for how to achieve impact and support transformation, gaining influencing skills and the ability to manage conflict

- Undergraduate and postgraduate students need more training and experiences in community development and community relevant research and practice

- The voluntary sector benefit from training, mentoring and capacity building in how to conduct rigorous community research - to gather evidence and influence policy

- Community organisations should recognise their own expertise to shape agendas and we note the work of BVSC Research, Community Connexions, the Research Better Together project, Local Innovation Policy Partnerships and others on this

- Universities need to be more assertive in advocating change. Submitting evidence to Parliament is not enough. Holistic work is needed across sectors and local, regional and national scales

- The theory of change is seen as a useful tool for others to adopt in similar work

Evidence

- There remains a large gap between evidence and policy, and even where there is clear evidence, this does not always lead to change - key to shaping this gap is the hard work of culture change

- There should be a shift from evaluation to learning - as funders, organisations and auditors become less risk averse and willing to adapt

- Evidence from researchers is still valued more than evidence from communities, although there is often support for using both. Continued support for communities to gather and own their data is needed

- Institution-level commitments to be civic universities need to be better translated into individual research programmes

Key recommendations for building a relational community-policy-research ecosystem

Based on the activities and relationships developed over the course of the Urban Wellbeing in Policy project, we gathered qualitative evidence from participants about their experiences and the impacts of the project.

Reasons why the community-policy-ecosystem is currently underdeveloped and insights for supporting connection were identified. Cross-sector working can sometimes feel transactional, focussed on getting the job done. One of our key aims was to generate a space for new relationships and connections to develop.

Challenges
- actors in the ecosystem with more political power are often able to spend more effort on this work, more autonomy over their time, and hence gain more from it
- all three sectors have different ways of working with communities and different ways of pushing for change
- where organisations have had expectations unmet in the past may find it harder to believe that others understood their challenges, so limiting the trust built
- senior leaders and researchers are more likely than community organisations to be rewarded for building new relationships right across the system - for community, research and policy
- sector and organisational boundaries and tensions are often flashpoints for conflict or disengagement

Connections
- training and mentoring for research voices was valued highly by attendees – both for influencing policy and engaging with communities
- using local umbrella organisations and those with strong local connections to connect with seldom heard groups was an important design feature, bringing equality to the discussions and widening community engagement
- designing the events with connection in mind can be challenging, as we are more used to designing to get work done. However, it enabled rich engaging discussions, new connections being formed and effective transfer of knowledge on a range of wellbeing areas
- understanding where tensions and conflicts may occur and equipping people with the skills to manage is important to consider at each stage of the process

Recommendations

While there already exists a lot of guidance for academics on how to engage policy makers or communities, we wanted to focus on how to involve each distinctive "voice" (research, community and policy makers) so that groups could better communicate, connect and support transformation.

Everyone

- **Enhance** and practice your skills in facilitation, dealing with conflict, holding inclusive spaces for relationship building.

- **Build Momentum:** Capture and share stories from your work about what people valued, what worked and what didn't, any actions taken or changes being made.

- **Design Meetings for Connection**: be aware of your language, make invites and spaces welcoming and inclusive, use community spaces, use movement and activities to connect with people.

- **Adapt as you Learn**: don't wait until the work is done before you use what you are learning. Change things as you go even though it may be messier and harder – keep the focus on the outcomes and forge ahead.

- **Imagined Future**: Be aware of historical interactions and also move forward to an imagined future together. Have a shared vision for what wellbeing could be.

Research Voices

- **Ask** for cross-sector mentoring by a policy or community colleague. This will support your learning, get insight into their challenges, and build strong connections with others.

- **Develop** your knowledge in how to achieve impact with your research and ask for mentoring from more experienced colleagues.

- **Adapt**: Practice adapting your research, sharing learning as you work, changing what you do during a project and being aware of the implications.

- **Power**: Find ways to support community voices to share their knowledge and expertise in their own voice rather than translating for them. And find out what they would value from the research and connection.

- **Seek** input from your university public affairs or public engagement team to follow up on the ideas for action identified in the process.

- **Feedforward:** always share the results of the events with participants, ideally involving them in analysis and planning next steps.

Community Voices

- **Ask** for cross-sector mentoring by a policy colleague. This will support your learning, get insight into their challenges, and build strong trusted relationships with others.

- **Learn**: Build your skills in showing the impact of your work, sharing it widely and finding ways to influence those in policy and research.

- **Be Ready** to show the value of your expertise and skills, don't wait to be asked.

- **Power**: be aware that you have power and be willing to use it to challenge how things are done. Others value your expertise and community knowledge – this will help you push for change.

- **Work together** to enhance the power of your voice. Use local voluntary sector infrastructure organisations to help you build capacity, include others and forge alliances across the region.

Policy Voices

- **Ask** for cross sector mentoring by a community colleague. This will support your learning, get insight into their challenges, and build strong trusted relationships with others.

- **Organisational Culture**: check how your people are rewarded for this work. Is it supported by training, mentoring and opportunities? Do senior people model the behaviours needed and the value of connection? Build internal networks to support those working to change things to improve wellbeing.

- **Power**: Be aware that you are seen by others to hold power and influence, even if you don't think so.

- **Shift** from consultation to co-production by allocating time to build relationships, share problems, set agendas and shape actions. This could involve embracing risks and supporting people to cross boundaries. This could be as simple as setting up peer learning groups, invites to meetings, asking for input to decisions and communications, or job shadowing.

- **Map out** who is 'absent from the room', and work hard to build real connections with them and address the practical, personal and systemic barriers to access.

Outcomes

A number of green shoots have been developed that people have attributed to the project, mainly through the ability to make new or deepen existing connections with people. Examples include:

- Development of a national network for Workplace health and wellbeing initiatives that are free at the point of use to workplaces, WHISPAs Network, to provide evidence on their effectiveness, collaboration on publicly funded initiatives, and overcome barriers to public involvement in workplace research
- Progression of work on providing green spaces to all, which has benefited from the connection of strong economic evidence useful to policy makers, from a personal connection at a masterclass
- New connections formed at the events leading to contributions to University of Birmingham Masters in Public Health by WMCA Digital Road Map team
- New work starting with West Midlands health technology innovation accelerator, including evaluation of new health technology, building on the discussions at a masterclass
- Co-innovations with underserved populations currently in formation as part of the Centre for Urban Wellbeing community researcher panel.

One of the other major outcomes of the project was a series of policy recommendations provided directly to our project partners at the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and shared with all project participants:

1. Workplace Health, Good Work and Wellbeing:
   - Interventions to be employee-led and modular approach taken.
   - National and regional networks for providers
   - Data collection and training for leaders and managers

2. Investing in Mental Health and Wellbeing
   - Systematic decision-making process supported by additional research
   - Collaboration and sharing of best practice
   - Progress the Mental Health Commission findings

3. Digital Health Technologies
   - Early consultation and convening across sectors
   - Assess preparedness and integrate existing resources
   - Additional assessment needed of equalities impacts of digital transitions

4. Healthy Environments and Places
   - Cultivate informed decision making with collaboration & discussion across sectors
   - Focus on action and using available evidence in decision making.
   - Use local champions to help mobilise communities
   - National lobbying to encourage incentives to provide green spaces.

Project background and aims

Research-policy-community infrastructure

Recent years have seen increasing investment in national research-policy and research-community infrastructures to support of knowledge production, mobilisation, and exchange.

The British Academy's Understanding Communities Programme (2022-24), the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Community Knowledge Fund, the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Community Engagement Partnerships and the mainstreaming of Public and Patient Involvement groups in health and medical research have paved the way for community involvement.

Meanwhile, the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN), the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), Government Office for Science, government departments' Areas of Research Interest (ARI), Civic University Network, Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) and the Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub demonstrate efforts to connect policy and research sectors.

In this report we provide a case study example and share learning for how regional authorities, university research groups and community organisation can work together effectively to address place-based wellbeing equalities, working across sectors to contribute to system-wide and relational public policy approaches. Relational public administration refers to a focus on the emergent properties of "social networks of interaction, interdependence, and relationships" and their "situated, dynamic and unfolding" nature[iii].

Background on Urban Wellbeing

The West Midlands is a region of the UK dealing with significant urban challenges including stalled levels of productivity, high unemployment, health inequalities and substantial areas of deprivation. Equitable health and wellbeing of communities is of great importance to the people in the region and needs a collaborative approach to tackle urban wellbeing inequalities at a community level.

An urban wellbeing strategy approaches wellbeing as a property of communities and places rather than of individual people. It invests in community infrastructures, community capacity building, community engagement, spaces, and community wealth building. At the same time it must recognise the limitations of an overly localised approach which does not tackle more systemic inequalities[iv].

There are many research, policy and community voices already working to build connections across sectors and drive change for the people of the region. including more work to ensure

community voices are listened to. Regionally, the WMCA have secured support from central Government through the 'Radical Health Prevention Fund' which sets out to address health inequalities at a whole system level and in community-centred ways. This commitment aims to build connections as the basis for cooperative, multi-stakeholder and interdisciplinary approaches. But researchers, policy makers, the third sector and communities still need to find inclusive ways to synthesise knowledge, translate knowledge into action, and evaluate the impact of this action using multi- and transdisciplinary methods.

Aims

Through the Urban Wellbeing in Policy project we aimed to develop an ecosystem of policy and community involvement by creating spaces for diverse voices to connect and build and sustain relationships. We hosted several events for community, research, and policy voices across the West Midlands, trialling new ways to bring community voices and diverse forms of evidence into the research-policy sphere. Policy masterclasses were held from April to July 2023, with priority topics chosen by the WMCA Health and Prevention team.

Complementing this were a range of impact and engagement training sessions for researchers, community organisation discussion groups, and public affairs mentoring for masterclass presenters. All of these were designed to build new connections across disciplines, work with conflict and hidden politics in a positive way, leading to increased understanding and further collaboration.

Insights from existing research on knowledge exchange and impact

A review of relevant literature on effective and ethical practice shaped the design of the work and the principles we used. Literature focused on impact, influencing, forms of co-working, systems work and enabling behaviours and practices, and place-based working. We explored ideas relating to putting these principles into practice as well as their potential limitations and drawbacks.

The review highlighted a number of ideas which support the project outcome (build connections and trusting relationships), the project design and the need for strong facilitation. Key to the design is the engagement of community organisations. Unequal community engagement can worsen policy outcomes for communities of place, interest and identity. Practical, personal and motivational barriers can cause unequal engagement. We adopted a trans-disciplinary approach which is hoped to enhance the ability to innovate and bring in differing perspectives[v].

Much research recommends thinking about the systems that researchers work within, as this helps to end "blame games" and encourage action. Building relationships helps people recognise their reliance on others, so is fundamental [vi]. A review of interdisciplinary research and knowledge co-production found that "broad interdisciplinarity of the group together with the coproduction of knowledge with policymakers as co-researchers" leads to research with greater impact [vii].

Although community engagement can create social cohesion, trust in political decisions, a sense of well-being for participants, as well as new skillsets, there are also considerable downsides. The common themes of limited budgets and time and perception of being unable to influence decisions often combine to limit community involvement [viii]. "Simply being involved does not necessarily mean that people are empowered" and the evidence shows that joint decision-making can have both beneficial and harmful impacts on communities [ix].

The wide variety of people involved in co-production have "different social and professional worlds with different languages, different needs, different resources and different incentive structures" – often leading to conflict and messiness[x]. If effective support to work is not available, there is likely to be less effective collaboration and reduced opportunity for impact. Key to supporting impact are "navigators" and "boundary workers" - people who can interpret and instigate change across policy and academia [xi].

Many issues need to be negotiated through this boundary work, including: power and control, how experiences are shared appropriately and how different needs and expectations are balanced. Working with (and acknowledging) conflict is a key skill, and much creativity is possible if well-facilitated[xii]. Some design principles adopted were a reflexive and reflective approach, using "ice-breaker introductions, interactive presentations and simulation activities".[xiii]

Our approach

Principles

Two principles underpinned our work:
- Support for people to build skills and confidence for connection and relationships
- We learn and adapt as we go, using process learning to evaluate how things worked rather than what was achieved

Activities

Working within the West Midlands region, we worked with a range of partners. A series of events were designed and delivered – masterclasses, training & mentoring sessions and community discussions. Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC), a Birmingham based umbrella organisation representing the third sector locally) was an essential partner working to involve a range of community organisations across the region. WMCA were the main policy body involved, although a range of other public bodies engaged throughout. The Centre for Urban Wellbeing at University of Birmingham was the main research organisation involved although many others were represented at the events, such as CityREDI, Centre for the Economics of Obesity, and Institute of Applied Health Research.

Learning

Key insights and recommendations from a literature review on knowledge exchange and influencing policy were used to design the events, interview questions and evaluation methods[xiv]. Insight was gathered from observing and interacting with people at the project events (masterclasses, community discussions, training sessions, mentoring sessions) and by reviewing the presentations and exercises shared. A number of participants from the community, research and policy voices were formally interviewed to get deep insight. Training and mentoring sessions supported people in building skills and confidence to engage and make impact. Analysis was done on the qualitative data produced from the interviews and observations - to understand the experiences, perspectives and behaviours of the people involved.

Process learning was used, and learning fed back, throughout the project. If research is solely focussed on the output and outcomes – the "what" - of the work, the rich, and potentially system-changing, learning and insight from the "how" can be overlooked. By gathering and sharing this learning, power is devolved to the individuals rather than held by the "researchers" and there is greater scope for more equitable relationships to be developed across disciplines and sectors [xv]. Learning from the observations was used to enhance design of future masterclasses and training, such as using more inclusive set ups. Research questions were reviewed and tweaked to ensure a focus on the right things – for example, how the key connecting and translating role operated across institutions. We held
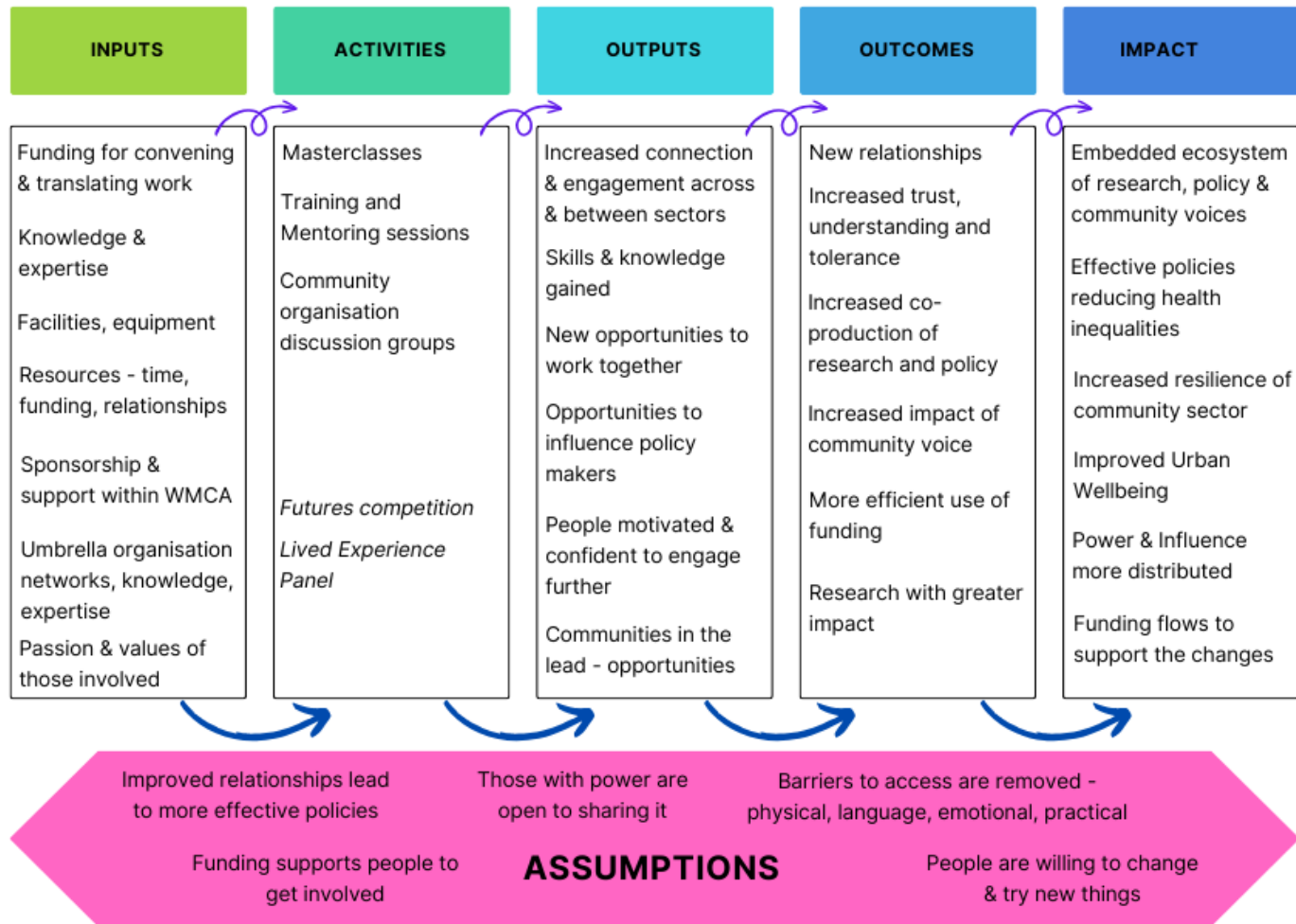
a research feedback event with participants in February 2024 and incorporated their viewpoints in the Learning Highlights section at the start of this report.

Understanding how change might happen

A theory of change was created (Figure 1) which we used to analyse the contribution of the events and the process to the impact and outcomes hoped for. The events (masterclasses, trainings & discussions) gave opportunities for increased connections leading to new or stronger relationships; skills and knowledge gained by attendees leading to people being motivated and confident to engage further; and opportunities to build trust and increase co-production between the groups. All of these should lead to increased impact of the community voice and greater research impact on policy. This was based on assumptions that those with power and influence were open to sharing it, barriers to access are removed and people are willing to change and try new ways of trusting and working together.

Urban Wellbeing in Policy
Theory of Change

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACT
Funding for convening & translating work

Knowledge & expertise

Facilities, equipment

Resources - time, funding, relationships

Sponsorship & support within WMCA

Umbrella organisation networks, knowledge, expertise

Passion & values of those involved | Masterclasses

Training and Mentoring sessions

Community organisation discussion groups

Futures competition

Lived Experience Panel | Increased connection & engagement across & between sectors

Skills & knowledge gained

New opportunities to work together

Opportunities to influence policy makers

People motivated & confident to engage further

Communities in the lead - opportunities | New relationships

Increased trust, understanding and tolerance

Increased co-production of research and policy

Increased impact of community voice

More efficient use of funding

Research with greater impact | Embedded ecosystem of research, policy & community voices

Effective policies reducing health inequalities

Increased resilience of community sector

Improved Urban Wellbeing

Power & Influence more distributed

Funding flows to support the changes |

Improved relationships lead to more effective policies

Those with power are open to sharing it

Barriers to access are removed – physical, language, emotional, practical

Funding supports people to get involved

ASSUMPTIONS

People are willing to change & try new things

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Research methods

The key methods used to gather data were Qualitative interviews and Participant Observation. Interviews were semi-structured with some questions tailored to the sector of the interviewee. Participant observation involved the researcher participating, observing and taking notes about interactions between people at meetings, webinars and events (online/in person). Data was recorded in the form of researcher written notes or interview transcripts.

We combined three forms of evaluation [xvi]:

1. Contribution Analysis: an approach that tests and refines theoretical links between different elements of a Theory of Change and assumptions about how they lead to outcomes;
2. Thematic Analysis: to identify, analyse and interpret patterns within the qualitative data, informed by themes identified in the literature review and previous experience of change management.
3. Realist Evaluation: to examine what works, for whom, to what extent, and in what contexts.

Since we wanted to dig into what people's statements reveal about their assumptions and their social context, we focussed on understanding subjective meanings produced by different groups of participants and interpreted the data to analyse the contribution of the events and the process to the impact and outcomes hoped for.

Evaluation on the specific question of how best to approach the connecting and translational role of practitioners was done using Realist Evaluation, which enabled a particular focus on understanding how causation works, and why programme outcomes work (or do not work) in different contexts. The findings of this 'context-mechanism-outcome' (CMO) approach are then used to determine which CMO configuration(s) offer the most robust and plausible explanations for the overall outcomes observed.

Ethics

Interviews were conducted once informed consent was secured via a written consent form. Interviews were video recorded & the recordings transcribed verbatim as word documents by a University of Birmingham approved transcription services supplier, with robust confidentiality agreements in place. These were sent by secure file transfer to the transcription company and all recordings were destroyed after transcription. On request of participants, information was pseudonymised. The research was reviewed and approved by the University of Birmingham Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee, ref: ERN_23-0321.

Findings & analysis

In this section we report on why people wanted to participate in the project, what the experience of participants from different sectors was during the masterclasses, training and other activities, and what needs to be done to support people to further collaborate and influence across policy, research and communities.

A review of relevant literature highlighted some themes which were then explored in the interviews and event observations. Building connections and relationships across sectors and the impact of power and influence on interactions came through as a strong theme. Co-production has "critical 'risks' – expectations, power, and value– and 'limits' – validity and pragmatism – in the research process".[xvii]

Having a clear theory of change on how we approached the work and a focus on building relationships are considered helpful in addressing barriers to and opportunities for organisational change.[xviii] The key inputs identified in the theory of change were resources, expertise, strong relationships, support and passion to make it work.
A number of themes were identified through analysis of the interviews and observations of the events. The events themselves opened up access to policy and decision makers.

Everyone thinks that others have the real power in the room[xix] – where are the conversations held and decisions made, and whether they are "front stage" (visible) or "backstage" (unseen)[xx]. Many issues need to be negotiated including: power and control, how experiences are shared appropriately and how different needs and expectations are balanced. Working with (and acknowledging) conflict is a key skill, and much creativity is possible if well-facilitated.[xxi]

More opportunities to connect research, community and policy voices will help to shift the ability and confidence to influence and hold power in a more equitable way - "citizens making meaningful contributions to agenda-setting and the formation of research questions, not merely being 'involved' once these important decisions have been made" [xxii]. Building understanding and tolerance for the views of others will ultimately support continued collaboration.[xxiii] Finding a way to form "coalitions of allies" will help reduce uncertainty and improve the supply of evidence to policy makers[xxiv].

Connections & Relationships

As the overarching aim of the project, underpinning the design of the events, it is unsurprising that one of the strong themes emerging from the interviews and observations is that of the value of connection and relationships. Existing literature strongly supports this - "Relationships are key to impact" especially in collaboration and coproduction work [xxv]. The data shows are two broad attitudes, one that values the process of building connections in itself and one more focused on what may come of the connections: *"So it's not so much about the relationship. It's about the things that come as a result of that relationship. So just having a coffee isn't going to cut it" (Researcher)*.

There doesn't seem to be a particular correlation between the group and the attitude held – for example, research & community voices were roughly split between the attitudes. There is most likely an expectation that the community organisations will have a greater relational focus, as those who work in the third sector often have a strong focus on serving others, leading to a relational style of engaging. They often have a practical "existential" need to influence those with power and funding to ensure their organisation thrives.

However, the interviews and observation indicated that there was still a blend of both attitudes with this group – some were very focused on building new connections for influence or funding, and others the inherent value in any human connection.

> *"getting to know each other, rubbing alongside each other, understanding each other's world's pressures, motivations before you then start thinking, okay, how do we work together"(Researcher)*

> *"all the community engagement type work, engaging with people and building trust bridges takes a lot of time. And so, it's a valuable resource for me. I get, as I said, a lot of support when putting in bids to work with communities, to work with local schools or work with local communities, local charities, for example. I really value it" (Researcher)*

> *"It might go somewhere, it might go nowhere, and in a way it's almost not that, it's not that destination, without turning into too much of a hippie, it's that journey to sort of… to follow that and just to make sure that you have explored it" (Researcher)*

There was some correlation between research career stage and attitude – those more advanced in their career had often spent lots of time on connecting and considered they had enough good relationships to be getting on with so this was a less valuable opportunity to them. Those at early stages of research careers were generally positive and willing to grab opportunities, either influenced by their values or by the reward system within the research environment (research with impact).

Policy voices were an interesting blend. Those who were more 'boundary crossers' willing to inhabit different spheres and change the systems were more likely to talk about the value of the connections and relationships themselves rather than the things that can be achieved through them. It is most likely that this is due to the type of person in the role and the kind of skills you need to use when you have influence though not necessarily power.

Place based working often requires using a facilitative rather than directive style and building informal relationships is a key part of this. These relationships can help to build trust, deal with complexity and uncertainty and "help to break deadlocks in policy areas resistant to change" [xxvi].

Having dedicated time and space to connect together was fundamental – places of productive tension. It gave people a place to be together as people, rather than as roles or positions or sources of funding, and to understand the different pressures we all have. Design of the physical space and format of the events evolved as we learned what worked and what could be better. Many people asked for more time spent in relational work rather than listening to presentations – showing a wish for connection and appetite for change (we adapted the events as we got feedback).

In terms of the hoped-for project impacts, more time will be needed to see if these are achieved and what contribution the project made to them. In terms of the project outcomes, there is a variety of evidence to show that two of the outcomes have been achieved and the project has made a contribution to these. The outcome 'new relationships' was directly influenced by the project itself, realistically more than continuing with existing work and relationships would have done.

By increasing the connection and engagement of people across sectors and organisations, and providing opportunities to work together, many people were motivated and confident to engage further outside the events themselves. The observation and interview data strongly shows this. A number of inputs (funding & facilities, knowledge & expertise, strong support within a policy partner, use of existing networks and the passion of those involved in the project) in combination with the designed mix of project activities were all key to achieving the outputs.

As a supplementary approach, we used a Realist Evaluation approach to reflect on how the connecting and translational role of practitioners operates across institutions, alongside how and why this influences activities and reported outcomes. The reported outcomes are "new relationships" and "increased trust, understanding and tolerance" along with the possible outcome of disengagement from the work.

Exploring the connecting and translational role across institutions has revealed some interesting insights into how to use this role in similar work. The role of practitioners varies across institutions, and the effect it has on the outcomes is dependent on the interplay of context with internal reactions and reasoning.

We explored our theory that organisations having resources and support (the context) supports a shared understanding of challenges across the system (the mechanism), leading to increased trust and tolerance (likely outcome). The funding enabling the events and training and the strong partnership working between the research, community and policy partners was the key support here, with the events themselves being the mechanism. Many organisations do not have resources or support, to enable them to participate in this type of connecting and translational work.

For example, smaller community organisations may need to prioritise operational work such as bidding for funding or serving their communities, rather than doing this unpaid connecting work. Support in this context can also mean having a positive relationship locally rather than being seen a 'thorn in the side' to others.

Building trust across these barriers of existing negative perceptions would bring value to all. By not being able to participate, they will have limited ability to impact or be impacted by the work on building relationship and trust, leading to demotivation and disengagement.

The data we gathered from participants shows that by working toward a shared understanding of the challenges, the connection and translational role had a positive impact on those who were able to undertake it. This showed increased tolerance especially towards policy makers – the ones perceived to have the greatest power.

There was an understanding that all three spheres want to make things better for communities, even though they may have different ways of doing it and different ways of pushing for change. Those who have had negative historical interactions are wary about the ability to solve the challenges, so where organisations have had expectations unmet before may find it harder to believe that others understood their challenges, so limiting the trust built.

Power & Influence

> *"I wouldn't like to have the decision of, we've only got so much money, so much resources, who do we not treat? And in a sense being removed from the human side of it makes that easier and makes it more strategic"* (Community participant)

> *"I think suits are armour, aren't they"* (Community participant)

> *"I think someone like the combined authority maybe has to take some leadership there. Because it's not going to come from the community sector, that 'what next?' It's navigating the landscape, the policy landscape to ensure that they take responsibility for hearing these voices, listening"* (Researcher)

> *"I'm interested in getting the messages from our project out there and connecting with real-world decision-makers"* (Community participant)

A strong impression coming through from the interviews, discussions and training sessions is that most people think that others have power and influence - not themselves. It seems power is a concept that makes people nervous, that the consequences can be powerful.

Making decisions can be scary and the impacts far-reaching and uncertain. An example from a masterclass was a team thinking they didn't have control over something, whereas the commissioner was saying, *"Well, I think we need to go back and look at what influence we can have, because that will be a massive impact" (Policy participant)* on the patient experience.

Those who did accept they had some power were clear that they believe everyone has an ability to influence those who make decisions. This ties in closely with the concern that many had about "who will open the door for me" – about how do you access those with influence. This included the whole gamut – wanting access to communities, funders, decision makers, policy makers and researchers as the people with power you want to get hold of – highlighting again that the perception of 'power-holder' differs depending on where you stand. One interviewee said, *"I would see communities as mopping up the mess of policy in a lot of ways, where they come and fill the gaps where policy has failed. And so, in my mind, community organisations would be as, if not more, important"* *(Researcher).*

Flowing from this, the old adage 'power corrupts' underlies some of the assumptions people make about others. By no means all, but a significant minority of people voiced assumptions about the kind of person who would want to hold power or make decisions. A comment about suits being armour made by a community organisation member is rich in metaphor. It raises some fascinating questions - are those 'in power' protecting themselves from harm or possibly readying themselves to attack others, and is there a real person hiding within the armour? It shows both the limiting assumptions that can be made, reducing the likelihood of connection and relationship, as well as the empathy that is held for the person in a role and the hardships they might suffer.

Untangling some of the more complex issues around power is needed to solve some practical considerations. Power and influence is entangled with many things and raises barriers that are impermeable to some and invisible to others: *"the environment hadn't been created for them, it was created for people who were used to working in that way"* *(Researcher).* For example, the spaces we use to hold events can be places that are hard to access for communities – through limited transport options, barriers to accessibility, or from a very officious or unwelcoming front door.

One of the things that we changed through the project was designing the rooms used for the masterclasses to be more welcoming – round tables so people can connect, minimal time spent listening to the top table, fewer slides, more interactive sessions and having food to share. Mitigating these issues is easy to do, as long as we are aware of them! Breaking out of the formal meeting formats which may be taken for granted in particular sectors is much needed in this kind of work.

The words we use can also be welcoming or create barriers. Research and policy-making environments generally use formal language, which is carefully crafted to be specific and inclusive for all but which can be off-putting for those with more lived experience. For example, an exercise was introduced as an activity that is undertaken with master's students and a couple of people said that they were not sure they'd therefore have the skills needed to participate*.* Designing for connection and making those presenting at events aware of the audience and some of the hidden barriers like language or clothing helped to mitigate these issues.

Policy makers may wear their power lightly, but they need to wield it well – and how can they do this in a way that brings others in and takes themselves away from the centre. Areas like agenda setting and network-shaping can have a huge influence on what is done and with who – for example, the broad themes for the project were set by the policy maker although the direction of the discussions was much informed by everyone present at the events. This project has helped to widen the sphere of who can influence networks and agendas. And what support and structural change will make this more likely?

Those who invested their time and energy in the project are all hoping for change. One aspect of successful systems leadership is the ability to let go of your ego and power for the greater system good, rather than the model of the heroic leader. Being able to share the power that you have in the system for the collective good, helps to build relationships and trust, create opportunities for change and find ways to learn and innovate.

There is clear evidence that a second outcome from the Theory of Change - increased trust, understanding and tolerance – was also strongly influenced by the project. The design of the project providing support and training for those with less formal power – community organisations and research voices – enabled people to gain skills and knowledge, build connections and have the confidence to engage in new opportunities.

Without the project events, training and support of the project, there would have been much less opportunity for the community, research and policy communities to get together and build those relationships and trust, as the day to day work would have continued without time being carved out to connect, and the outcomes being further out of reach.

It is likely that the outcomes and impact of the project will continue to be felt as changes made are felt throughout "the system" and further evaluation and support would be invaluable to support the delivery of these impacts. Without the two outcomes mentioned above being in place, the likelihood of achieving the desired impacts is low.

Boundaries & Tensions

"hardly any remit, which I found brilliant. I mean I love working in that way. I think we're too controlled… and… people's concerns are allowed to… they're given oxygen. Whereas if you go in with specific questions, you really limit down people's brain space to think" (Researcher)

"[from funder to community organisation] "bearing in mind that we did fund you…" so there's all these politics going on, if you like" (Community participant)

"part of the job of the research community is taking information from the community and synthesising it into ideas and pithy messages about what's important and valuable. That's the skill and raison d'être of being an academic or researcher" (Researcher)

Boundaries and tensions are often related to power and influence. Some love boundaries. They can help to contain your work, so you don't get overwhelmed and it's easier to manage your workload. They can keep other things out of your way so you can avoid work that's not helping you. Some dislike boundaries or love to cross them, to embrace the messiness of a space without boundaries, the real world: *"if you go in with specific questions, you really limit down people's brain space to think" (Community participant).*

This tension is expected and can be productive – change takes place in the midst of conflict, inefficiency, learning and failing as opinions and realities collide[xxvii]. In the community discussions, there were great examples of community voices working on the boundaries and being able to modify their language and approach depending on their audience and its preferences.

Systems thinkers pay significant attention to the boundaries that are often established within organisations, between agencies and across sectors, and to engage in methods of "boundary critique" to provide innovative approaches to understanding problems and identify viable systems solutions[xxviii]. There is also the question of what the boundaries of the place are and what impact do they have.[xxix] The West Midlands as a whole was not represented fully at the sessions, which is something to keep in mind for future work, as we seek out those who weren't heard.

The tension between building connections and moving to action was one that came across strongly from all the data. Those with more power often have more time available and are rewarded for building connections – often those in senior positions and in policy making roles: *"sometimes if you're sort of bucking the trend, it's quite hard to keep going, so it was really nice to feel that other people felt like that" (Community participant).*

Whereas those with less power are likely to have less time for developing relationships or need to narrow the focus to those with direct power or funding to support short term goals for their organisations. And there is the tension of only being able to do what you've always done – boundaries keeping you safe and limiting opportunity: *"if you're going for certain funding because you know it's the one that's easy to get to and stuff, but then you're meeting their requirements, their conditions of grant, then if you're only doing that work, that's the only stuff you can report back on. So then you're only doing that sort of work and then you can only feed that back to policymakers" (Community participant).*

The differing rewards for failure and for success can lead to a lack of frankness from those with less (perceived) power towards those with more, so people don't share what didn't work as they believe they'll be rewarded more for success. One community organisation noted *"actually if you had met and learnt from those failures, then that should stand you in better stead for getting funding, but it just doesn't seem to be the way" (Community participant)*. It's often easier to get funding for research that is easy to evaluate or has tangible benefits, such as feeding into policy, rather than more exploratory and connection-building research.

There is a tension between trying to change a system and becoming part of that system. There were some great examples of community members becoming 'professional patients' and learning how to speak the language of the system and work within it rather than changing it, as they got to know the system too well. This is in opposition to the belief that valuing voices equally will support the system to change.

One of the choices made was to involve community organisations rather than individuals. The organisations were overwhelmingly positive about the events and opportunities and had the skills and experience in working in the system to make change for communities – the tension here is that the voices of individuals were blended into a common voice, losing some of the nuance and power of opinions. And by working with research and policy partners more closely, the organisations can be (or perceived to be) shaped into changing how they act to get more for their communities.

A striking tension coming through is the pull to use community data and learning balanced with the push to use more formal (peer reviewed, national, statistical) data in developing justifications for policy decisions and strategies. Many expressed the need to have the community voice embedded in policy making, as well as the need to translate that voice so that it is seen as valuable.

From the research perspective there was a belief that *"part of the job of the researcher is taking information from the community and synthesising it into ideas and pithy messages about what's important and valuable. That's the skill and raison d'être of being an academic or researcher" (Researcher).* This again shows the impact of language and power on who is heard and how impact is made.

To perform a Realist Evaluation we explored the premise that when an individual is a senior leader in their organisation (the context) and they have the motivation to and are rewarded for being involved in the project events (the mechanism), new relationships were built across the system and at different levels (outcome).

The evidence indicates that this was true for senior leaders of different types of organisations (community, research and policy). There are a number of factors to explain this. Senior leaders are more likely to have power and influence and able to direct their time as they deem fit, being less task driven. They are less likely to be rewarded for delivering tasks and more likely to have a reward framework which has relationship building and influencing stakeholders at its heart.

Senior leaders often have large networks and have the experience and insight to understand the value of new relationships and how they can benefit their institution and the community. Historically, being a senior leader in the public or third sector often brings a long history of working in partnership, and experience of the rewards it brings and how to overcome the challenges.

Observation at the events and data from follow up and interviews showed that a number of new relationships were built by senior leaders. Where the person was not a senior leader, the evidence indicates that fewer new relationships were built. This is likely related to social and economic contexts – where the senior leader was in the research or community field, there was always an underlying pressure to be finding funding for current or future work and this impacts decisions around involvement in the project events.

For example, people not wanting to share too much or be too honest about their challenges in case a potential funder was put off. The connecting and translating role was influenced by the historical interactions between people – those with political power are often able to spend more effort on this and hence gain more from it, so there is positive reinforcement of the behaviour.

Working with and negotiating conflict are key skills that are needed when working across a system to build connection and affect change. Boundaries and tensions are often flashpoints for conflict or disengagement so understanding where these maybe and equipping ourselves with the skills to manage these will be tremendously helpful.

Values, Emotions and Motivations

> *"I went through a bit of an emotional journey alongside it….. (Laughter) I think that maybe was because it was a little bit of an unusually organised… I think that's a good thing" (Researcher)*

> *"I don't think many people go into research thinking that they just want to do really abstract things and not to have any sort of practical impact.…. particularly if you're working in health and wellbeing space, because it's central to everyone's lives, that if what you're doing can be translated into practical impact, it can be quite fulfilling" (Researcher)*

> *"what [lived experience voices] lend to the conversation is so incredible; it makes such a difference. And actually, feeling those emotions when you're making those decisions is really important" (Policy participant)*

As the whole ethos of the project was building connections, it's unsurprising that a lot of the data highlighted the emotions and values and people's motivations for getting involved in the project. There's evidence that policy makers use beliefs and emotions to understand issues and reduce ambiguity when working out which evidence to use. Observation of the events and from the interviews highlights that emotions were often underlying the reasons for attending for policy, research and community voices. Some examples of these: 'Bravery, Fear, Laughter, Warmth, Contribution, Fulfilling, Humility'.

Those attending saw the project as an opportunity to improve things for those they serve and got involved as it was in line with their personal values. Many of the community organisations and the early career researchers saw it as an opportunity to have an impact and to enhance their career. *"I tend to be very careful and values-based in terms of how I prioritise my time, and this is something that's aligned with my values" (Researcher).*

One of the key human aspects coming through was the real empathy of those involved for others – across different organisations, in different roles, with different challenges. There was a real appreciation of the struggles of others and the ability to step into another's shoes, even when those others have more perceived power or money: *"[as a] member of the community, sometimes it feels it's like your one chance to get everything off your chest. And I suppose that can seem quite attacking" (Community participant).*

Many people weren't expecting to be challenged by being involved, and many of those in senior positions were: *"I went through a bit of an emotional journey alongside it….. (Laughter) I think that maybe was because it was a little bit of an unusually organised… I think that's a good thing" (Researcher).* The fact that the project was designed to stretch people's ideas and build trust and tolerance, made it a certainty that emotions would come up and they would drive behaviours and perceptions.

Some were motivated to come along as they thought that the system and some of the players in it need disrupting. Community organisations were seen by many to be better at disruption than others. This could be based on the perceptions that they had "less to lose" than others (a positive motivation), although there could often be "backlash" resulting in cutting funding (a negative motivation). It could also be down to self-selection, in that people choose to work in community organisations due to their values or experience and are more likely to want to change systems.

A significant number of research voices were also motivated by the power to change things: *"I don't think many people go into research thinking that they just want to do really abstract things and not to have any sort of practical impact.….. particularly if you're working in health and wellbeing space, because it's central to everyone's lives, that if what you're doing can be translated into practical impact, it can be quite fulfilling" (Researcher).* People, mainly in research and to some extent community organisations, felt that being part of this type of work *"is very much valued on a personal level and also in my institution, definitely, without doubt" (Researcher)*, a combination of emotion and logic rewards.

Bravery and fear were some of the deep emotions that came up for people. An interesting comment highlighted some of the fears around losing power and what comes with it: "the fear then comes that, if power is devolved from national to combined authority, that local power will be sucked upwards to it as well". There were many thoughts on decision-making and emotions. Should people ensure they use emotions when making decisions rather than just logic? The data valued by some policymakers was quantitative, peer-reviewed and logic based whereas others questioned why more qualitative and human data wasn't used. In this case the lack of emotion seems to be prized almost as highly as the use of logic.

A number of assumptions were made in creating the Theory of Change for the project. Overall, the assumption that those in power are open to sharing and that people are willing to change, was seen to be true, though the proof will be in the pudding as the work continues!

The project removed a number of barriers to participation and learned more about these throughout – these are covered in the recommendations but the key thing is always to question what are we doing to hear those who aren't there. Funding supported the design of events and got main partners involved; interestingly, there were strong views on both sides about whether being paid to attend events would have got more or different people involved.

The final and potentially the most important assumption about whether improved relationships lead to more effective policies is one that we need to keep in mind and gather more evidence about as the outcomes and impacts of the work ripple through.

Expectations

> *"once you understand how engagement needs to be, and once your funder understands that, you can create projects that I think potentially could have greater impact because they're being delivered for the real world"* (Community participant)

> *"people's performance is measured against certain things. So actually what do they really want out of this? Why are they involved? And what do they need to report back to their managers and board around why they're doing this and what they're achieving from being part of this"* (Researcher)

> *"in terms of impact and engagement, it's quite tricky to measure and evidence, so I think there's a lot of work that needs to be done in terms of evidencing these types of engagement activities. But, nevertheless, it is very much valued on a personal level and also in my institution, definitely, without doubt"* (Researcher)

Some expectations were voiced by those attending and some were implicit in their comments or behaviour. The biggest expectation was that there would be someone there who could benefit their work or organisation or even personally. Many community and research voices hoped that they could learn something about what policy makers wanted or ways they could get work funded. Some expected to hear lots of learning about things that didn't work – the sticking points – so that others could avoid making the same mistakes.

Research and policy voices expected to have vocal and engaged community organisations ready to show "real world" issues: ***"But that needs to be business as usual for us. Because they have the real localised intelligence that we need" (Policy participant)***.

There was some expectation by policymakers that the engagement of community organisations should be funded, in order to give it priority and to show the value of their time: ***"some people who are really happy and able to give up some of their time without asking for payment. So I don't think that was a problem. But it's just being conscious that people had given up their time to come along to the masterclass, to come along to the discussion group and they really needed to see the value in that" (Community participant)***.

Not everyone in the community or research arenas had this expectation – either through the belief that other value was delivered to the organisations or that paying for time might change the relationship and who attended. An interesting divergence of opinion!

In the main, there was expectation of wanting to disrupt the status quo and real practical work around getting to know people and their concerns. Many expressed after the events that the conversations and connections made were not what they had expected: ***"The debate in the room actually with the community side made it a lot different than I thought it would be, a lot different but very positive" (Policy participant).*** People weren't expecting to meet the 'unusual suspects' or have proper open discussions in an informal human context.

Those who are used to less formal ways of working were hoping to have more relational exercises at the masterclasses, since the main focus was to build connections. There was discussion that the value of the project would be proven over time – would connections bring the benefits expected over time or would expectations that it's all just talking show that it brought limited value?

Data gathered from community organisations highlighted that those not attending the masterclasses had expectations too. Examples cited were the spaces themselves were hard to get to, or too formal and unwelcoming or the cost of attending wasn't covered and their time was valued more elsewhere. There was some expectation, based on historical interactions, that it would be the usual suspects and the usual excuses and so there could be limited value for those attending.

Those attending the training and discussion sessions had expectations that they would gain valuable skills and possibly connections – much more practical expectations, around careers and day to day work. The feedback from these was overwhelmingly positive and follow up on the impact would be beneficial.

There was some nervousness expressed – for example, some thought that policymakers and academics working together might cause "pollution" making the work of less value or greater risk to one or both parties. Some researchers believed that a kay part of their role was to translate the voice of the community for others – an interesting perspective which may change as the power and influence of the community is perceived to shift.

Around the masterclasses specifically, which were the most formal project events, there was an expectation that it would be structured, lots of being talked at and sitting still. Possibly the definition of a talking shop? The events were adapted as we got feedback and they were designed to be informal, get people mixing and sharing food together and spending time talking with others more than they were listening: *"I didn't feel there was much of a steer towards relational. If the point is to change the way people do things to be relational, I'd love to see a small series of exercises at the beginning that, sort of, lead to relation" (Policy participant)*.

People from all spheres were generally curious, open to exploration of new ways of doing things, and how others might see things differently: *"It's not to point fingers or blame anybody, but just to say well, let's open this up and see what's in the can" (Community participant)*. This flowed into the events themselves, where with good facilitation, these principles led the way people worked together and build connections and trust. For example, one of the people sharing evidence from community researchers said: *"But it was perfectly set up with… the other chap that was on the panel. Just how his project was about how not talking to people about introducing support had resulted in massive failure" (Community participant)*. This curiosity and honesty led to really powerful conversations and many new connections.

Conclusion

System change is hard, often intangible and ever-changing. There was a huge amount of positive energy, goodwill and connection generated by the project and the people involved in it. If we can capture and share the tendrils of system change, we can help people see that there are tangible outcomes from the work – things they can connect into, do something about, or share. The outcomes and next steps recommended are a good place to start, and how people can keep in touch with what happens next. Momentum once lost is gone forever – so even imperfect next steps would be good to share, shout about, ask for help with. And doing this during the project rather than waiting until the end is even better – we did do this and next time, we should plan to do imperfectly too.

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