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# Changing systems for people with multiple needs: Learning from the literature. Summary report

## Introduction

This is the summary of a selective review of literature relating to systems change. Its purpose is to be of practical use to the people involved in the Fulfilling Lives project in Newcastle and Gateshead.

Fulfilling Lives<sup>1</sup> is an eight-year programme funded by the Big Lottery aimed at people with multiple needs - individuals who are likely to experience at least three of the following: homelessness, reoffending, problematic substance misuse and mental ill health. The programme aims to bring different organisations and services together to offer people one co-ordinated support service that meets all their needs. One of the intentions of the project is to change systems for people with multiple needs.

## Systems thinking

Systems thinking is a way of understanding problems and how they can be solved. A system is made up of, for example, people, things and relationships, as well as perspectives, values and purposes.

*'A system is a configuration of interacting, interdependent parts that are connected through a web of relationships, forming a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts (Holland 1998).'<sup>2</sup>*

The system someone with multiple needs interacts with is a complex web of services including housing, criminal justice, substance misuse and mental health services. Within this broader system are sub-systems that might include (for example) hostels, support workers, families and individuals.

Systems thinking says that:

- The systems that people interact with can cause problems, even when they are designed to help people.
- We can solve problems by seeking to change these systems.

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For example, some systemic problems facing people with multiple and complex needs might include: being discharged from hospital or prison onto the streets<sup>3</sup>; being expected, on leaving detox or rehab, to return to a hostel where many residents are using drugs or alcohol<sup>4</sup>; or being repeatedly evicted from hostels.<sup>5</sup>

Systems thinking also says that we can better understand problems as a complex, messy whole, rather than by splitting them into discrete chunks to be addressed alone. For example, many people with multiple needs find their problems are addressed through separate services that are separately commissioned. This can lead to systemic problems, such as when people self-medicate for a mental health problem using drugs or alcohol, but mental health professionals are not able to assess them while they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

### Systems change

Systems change requires radical change in our thinking, assumptions and ways of working. Systems change is not simply about implementing new projects; it is about doing things differently, and is a process rather than a project. It requires new facilitative forms of leadership and extensive collaboration. Systems change involves an ongoing process of innovation, reflection and learning.

### Mapping systems

System mapping can provide an understanding of how the system currently works. The process of mapping systems collaboratively with as many stakeholders as possible is an important precursor of change because it enables an accurate identification of system problems and potential areas for change from all perspectives. It also ensures that stakeholders gain an experiential understanding of the need for change by hearing others' perspectives and participating in discussions.

### Some learning and questions to collaboratively explore

Some key learning from the literature is outlined below, along with a number of questions that it may be useful for the Fulfilling Lives project in Newcastle and Gateshead to consider.

#### *What is the purpose of the system?*

All systems have 'purposes'. Sub-systems (in this case, individuals, services, commissioners etc.) also have purposes, which might complement each other or be at odds with each other or with the overall system purpose. Different purposes can lead to system failure and need to be understood. For example a street-drinker's immediate purpose might be to avoid stopping drinking because they are afraid they cannot cope with traumatic memories sober; a mental health professional's purpose might be to make an accurate diagnosis, which requires someone to be substance-free.

*Q: What is the purpose of the system that works with people with multiple and complex needs? What is the purpose of sub-systems – for example, the individuals within the system, a commissioner, a mental health professional, an outreach worker, a hostel keyworker, a police officer, etc? Where do sub-systems have conflicting purposes?*

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#### *What are our taken for granted assumptions?*

All systems are underpinned by implicit values and assumptions, which can be obstacles to systems change. For example, for a long time in the homelessness system it was assumed that people needed support with issues such as substance misuse before they would be able to maintain a tenancy. This could mean people spending years in the hostel system – or rejecting this system altogether and staying on the streets. The new Housing First approach radically questioned this assumption, by supporting people to move straight from the streets into accommodation; and early indications are that this approach has proved successful for many.<sup>6</sup>

*Q: What are the assumptions that underpin our idea of what's normal? Can we question any of these?*

#### *What are my own, and others', vested interests?*

Power and vested interests can be obstacles to change. These can be held both by others and by ourselves.

*'I have to start by reflecting on and changing myself. I have to understand myself, because the person who will be the hardest for me to lead through change is me.'*<sup>7</sup>

*Q: Where is the power and what are the vested interests in the system? What are my own vested interests? Which parts of the system do I wish to see change in, which do I not, and why? How much power do I feel comfortable relinquishing?*

#### *How are we encouraging innovation?*

Innovation is central to systems change, but innovators can sometimes be seen as 'troublemakers' or not taken seriously:

*'Many times in my career in improvement, I have felt isolated, vulnerable and misunderstood. People have treated me like some kind of oddball when I have craved to be taken seriously and appreciated for my efforts as a leader of change.'*<sup>8</sup>

*Q: How will the project guard against people who are suggesting innovative change being seen as/treated as 'oddballs'? What are our unspoken assumptions about what makes a good idea and what doesn't, what is a problem we can address through this project and what is a problem we can't? Is there any scope for questioning these assumptions?*

#### *What evidence do we need?*

Learning, reflection and evaluation are essential elements of systems change. However, too stringent requirements for evidence can prevent system change, by causing us to focus on indicators rather than real life changes experienced by individuals.

*"Outcomes are both complex [...] and subjective or intangible [...] There are often risks in measuring proxies such that we start to believe the target is what we want to achieve, rather than the real human outcome."*<sup>9</sup>

The need for evidence can also be a barrier to systems change if it prevents innovation, which often requires risk-taking.

*Q: What processes are in place for reflection and capturing everyday learning? What evidence is needed in order to make small- or large-scale system changes? How can we get that evidence? What risks are we willing to take?*

*How is the project enabling collaboration and dialogue within and between groups?*

People's perspectives and behaviours can be changed through collaboration and dialogue. This requires that as many people as possible are directly involved in discussions about the system, how it works, and how it could change.

*Q: How far is Fulfilling Lives enabling collaboration and dialogue between groups? Who is able to participate in this discourse, and who is not? What forums for discussion are there beyond the three reference groups, and how can the three reference groups themselves directly collaborate? Who is not around the table?*

### Conclusion

With its focus on collaboration, innovation and learning, holistic perspectives and systemic solutions, systems change theory can inform a radical new way of working to support people with multiple and complex needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Big Lottery Fund (n.d.) *Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs*. [http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog\\_complex\\_needs](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog_complex_needs) Accessed on 01.09.2014

<sup>2</sup> Hargreaves, M. B. (2010) *Evaluating systems change: a planning guide*, Mathematica Policy Research Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Homeless Link and St Mungo's (2012) *Improving hospital admission and discharge for people who are homeless*.

<sup>4</sup> Hough, J. and Rice, B. (2011) *Voices of experience: How people who drink on the streets can make positive changes in their lives*. Broadway.

<sup>5</sup> Homeless Link (2010) *Staying in: Understanding evictions and abandonments from London's hostels*.

<sup>6</sup> Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. (2013) *Camden Housing First: A Housing First experiment in London*. Centre for Housing Policy, University of York.

<sup>7</sup> Bevan, H. (n.d.) *Helen Bevan on the Challenge of System Reform*. NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement. [http://www.institute.nhs.uk/quality\\_and\\_value/introduction/article\\_13.html](http://www.institute.nhs.uk/quality_and_value/introduction/article_13.html). Accessed on 01.09.2014.

<sup>8</sup> Bevan, H. (2013) *A call to action: Helen Bevan's blog*. BMJ blogs.

<http://blogs.bmj.com/quality/2013/07/29/a-call-to-action-helen-bevans-blog/>

<sup>9</sup> Selwyn, R. (2012) *Outcomes and efficiency: Leadership handbook*. PIPC Cognizant Program Management.

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