

# Releasing the capacity within us.

A paper to inform discussion and dialogue about what systems thinking is, why we need it and the actions we can take to create the conditions where we use it more.

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## Executive Summary

Understanding wellbeing and health concerns and making decisions about what to do to improve them is a challenge. The concerns are characterised by interdependencies, complexity, uncertainty, controversy and involve multiple stakeholders with different perspectives and interests.

Concerns like these invite us to use systems thinking which emphasises connections, relationships and the importance of appreciating multiple perspectives.

Systems thinking is a capacity within us, but the 'tools' we routinely turn to help us understand situations and plan action tend to restrict our systems thinking because they emphasise predictability, certainty, linear cause and effect and a single view point. The good news is there are a range of 'tools' and ways of working that can enhance our systems thinking – including systems approaches, techniques like diagramming, and, a number of abstract ideas or concepts. When used by groups of people working together, these 'tools' can help people learn with and from each other – resulting in new understandings and new practices.

A number of factors interact together to determine the degree to which systems thinking is used in our partnership working for wellbeing and health. I refer to these as the determinants of systems thinking. They include:

- ▲ personal practices – adopting an inquiring 'mind'; working on relationship building; and engaging as a full participant
- ▲ systems literacy – knowledge of the approaches, tools and techniques that enable systems thinking
- ▲ organisational practices – leadership style; management of performance; and, management of projects
- ▲ partnership practices – how we conceptualise partnership working; the partnership setting; and, the policy process
- ▲ national practices – how they 'frame' expectations about partnership working
- ▲ intellectual fields – the way we draw on theories to help us understand and change *how* we do what we do

There are a range of actions we could take to create the conditions where systems thinking is more likely to be used.

Taking these actions can help us start working together in new ways as a contribution to achieving the ambitions expressed by Wellbeing for Life Board members. They will help us make a step change in our ability to do what we are all passionate about – improving the wellbeing and health of the people of Newcastle.

If these points covered in summary here resonate with you I invite you to take the time to read this report in its entirety.

## Introduction

In conversations such as those at the Wellbeing for Life Board, people have expressed a desire to work together in new ways - not just changes at the 'front-line' but changing the way in which we work together to form policy, think strategically and make improvements. These types of task involve a wide range of people but the 'job' is essentially knowledge work – its primary activities are thinking and interacting with others to understand, make judgements and take action. This means a new way of working is all about new ways of thinking and new ways of interacting with others – we could hope that this happens as incremental change or we could invest resources, time and energy into creating the conditions where it is more likely to happen. In a climate of tightening resources, the challenge is to do so in ways that are cost efficient and effective.

In this context, the purpose of this paper is to:

- give you the opportunity to consider how to develop new ways of thinking and new ways of interacting as part of personal, organisation and partnership development (WHAT)
- by means of explaining systems thinking, the reason why we need to use it and outlining some ideas on how we can create the conditions where it is more likely to be drawn on (HOW)
- in order to contribute to the wider discussions on building our capacity to be excellent in improving wellbeing and health through working in partnership in Newcastle (WHY)

The content draws on the academic and research work I have undertaken to achieve the newly introduced award of MSc Systems Thinking in Practice from the Open University. The final research project for my MSc was an investigation into systems thinking in partnership working in wellbeing and health practice involving both literature review<sup>1</sup> and primary research<sup>2</sup>. My small scale research involving just eleven people in a single conversation each does not 'prove' the claims in this paper. However, the research and published literature has suggested to me that it is helpful to approach the situation with an assumption of 'capacity to be released', rather than an assumption of 'deficit' or 'gap'. I hope that this framing resonates with you as you read the paper.

Whilst my experience is 'rooted' in my work as Wellbeing for Life Development Lead many of the issues and suggestions raised in this paper would also enhance our capability in:

- other partnerships and collaborations
- policy areas other than wellbeing and health

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1 In order to make this paper as readable as possible, I have limited the amount of academic citations within it. A more 'academically' focussed Summary of my research which includes full referencing is available on request to those who are interested.

2 The primary research involved recording the conversation of a number of senior people as they discussed their best experiences of partnership working and the assets that they, others and our organisations contribute to good quality partnership working. The transcript of the conversation was then analysed to identify the degree to which people drew on systems thinking and the degree to which they appreciated practices that enabled systems thinking. Quotations from those transcripts are used anonymously in this paper with the permission of the relevant individuals.

## A few explanations to get started....

This section

- provides an explanation of systems thinking and related terms (WHAT)
- by means of pre-empting some frequently asked questions (HOW)
- in order to provide a common language and understanding to enhance the readability of the rest of the paper (WHY)

### What is systems thinking?

Systems thinking is a way of thinking that:

- emphasises connectedness and relationships within wholes (referred to as holistic thinking)
- recognises multiple relationships and influences
- appreciates multiple partial perspectives

It therefore contrasts with our currently dominant thinking, which:

- emphasises parts (referred to as reductionist thinking)
- emphasises linear, deterministic cause-effect relationships (if x happens then y will happen)
- emphasises a single 'truth' or perspective (referred to as dogmatic thinking)

Although systems thinking is not our dominant way of thinking, my observations and experience lead me to claim that people have a natural systems thinking capability.

Systems thinking is a helpful way of thinking when situations are complex, dynamic, uncertain, unpredictable, contested and subject to multiple perspectives. Situations like this are often referred to as 'wicked' or a 'mess' or a 'swamp'. They are not 'problems to be solved', but they are problematic situations that we can act purposefully to improve.

### If we have the capability then that's okay, isn't it?

It is better than nothing, of course, but your natural capability can be strengthened and given more rigour if you are aware of and use the concepts, approaches and techniques that help you.

“ability to take complex situations, complex data to whatever it is, synthesise it, simplify it and therefore make it easier to see where the solutions might lie. [...]. There's some risks around that because sometimes I do that intuitively, I don't do it analytically so of course your intuition can let you down.”

There are a range of 'tools' for systems thinking which you could use on your own or with others. They have been used to strengthen the quality of thinking, the quality of conversations, the process of developing shared understanding and the resulting judgements about what

action to take.

We use 'tools' all the time – for example, the equation, the spreadsheet, the calculator, the pie-chart are all 'tools' that strengthen and give rigour to our financial and statistical thinking as well as help us communicate about money and data. Similarly, the GANTT chart is a 'tool' that strengthens our thinking and communication about scheduling. And, of course, there are lots of 'tools' used in strategic thinking, such as the SWOT analysis.

All 'tools' have their advantages and disadvantages – they have assumptions built into them about how the world works. Many existing ways of doing policy, strategy and making improvements assume predictability, certainty, linear cause-effect and a single perspective. This means that in using those 'tools' we are less likely to draw on our systems thinking capability - exactly the type of thinking we need in our work to improve wellbeing and health.

### **Can you give some examples of these 'tools' for systems thinking?**

To start with, there are systems **approaches** – a sequence of practical activities developed, and refined through use, to help you get from a place of puzzlement and confusion to one where you have more insights and understanding and are more likely to know what to do. Although systems approaches can be used by someone on their own, their true value comes when a group of people use them to develop a shared understanding of a problematic situation drawing on multiple partial perspectives. Different systems approaches are useful for different purposes – in fact there is no one size fits all and many people mix and match what they do according to the situation they are working with(in) and seeking to improve. Examples are System Dynamics; Soft System Methodology; Viable System Model; Strategic Options Development and Analysis; Critical System Heuristic; Systemic Inquiry; LEAN; and, Vanguard.

Other 'tools' are more simple **techniques** (or heuristics) many of which are derived from their use in a systems approach. These are more everyday 'aids to thinking' that can be used alone or with one or more others. For example, there are techniques for defining purpose, such as the WHY/WHAT/HOW that I have used to explain what my intention is at points in this paper.

Many of these everyday techniques are **diagrams**. Diagrams are a great way of representing and sharing our understanding of a situation. In the same way that statistics uses different graphs with different conventions (rules) to communicate different insights into quantitative data - systems thinking uses different diagram types with different conventions to communicate different insights into situations. Much of the benefit of a diagram comes from the process of diagramming as it helps those involved draw out and have conversations about the way they understand a situation. Examples are rich pictures; mind map; causal loop diagrams; influence diagrams; system maps; force field analysis; conceptual model.

And finally, there are the abstract ideas or **concepts** – words or phrases used in particular ways to convey particular ideas. People not familiar with systems thinking will experience this as jargon, in the same way that people not familiar with financial management will experience words such as balance sheet or profit and loss as jargon. Concepts you may have heard include system, boundary, environment, emergence, tradition, feedback, mess, purpose, systematic, systemic, tradition, transformation, or worldview.

## What else does systems thinking emphasise?

Systems thinking isn't just about a set of tools and techniques, it is also about a particular attitude or way of working.

Systems thinking also emphasises:

- Praxis – awareness that practice (what you do) is informed by theory (your ideas about how the world works). It is important to be aware of the theory underpinning your practice and make responsible choices for what you are using to guide what you do. This requires an emphasis on reflective practice, rather than purely technical expertise and the following of procedures.
- Social learning – if a situation involves people then change (in understanding and/or behaviour) involves people learning with and from each other. Social learning arises from good quality conversations involving dialogue, deliberation and discussion – rather than debate, conflict or simply information exchange.
- An emotion of inquiry – to learn we have to be open to new experiences and ideas and adopt a small 'r' research attitude at all times.
- Ethical awareness – systems thinking emphasises the need to make judgements and take actions with awareness of the implications they may have. It emphasises the need to act in a way that opens up, rather than closes down opportunities for others.

## I am sure I have come across some of these ideas before. Is it really new?

It wouldn't be surprising if the ideas are familiar.

Systems ideas started emerging in the 1930s<sup>3</sup> and many ideas (such as complexity, cybernetics, double loop learning; complex adaptive systems) have informed work in other intellectual and practical fields including action research; climate change; ecology; education and learning; family therapy; leadership; management; organisational studies; policy/governance; psychology; public health; and, regeneration.

The 'unique' offer of systems thinking is its emphasis on practice and on purposefully using the ideas, and the 'tools' based on them, to understand and act to improve complex, uncertain, dynamic, contested problematic situations.

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<sup>3</sup> The originators of the different traditions of systems thinking include Ackoff, Agyris, Ashby, Bateson, Beer, Checkland, Churchman, Forrester, Kauffman, Lewin, Maturana, Mead, Schon, Senge, Ulrich, and Vickers.

## The 'case' for systems thinking in partnership working for wellbeing and health

This section

- provides the 'case' for systems thinking in partnership working for wellbeing and health (WHAT)
- by means of describing the nature of wellbeing and health; the nature of partnership working; and, the nature of the work we do (HOW)
- in order to invite you to consider and have discussions about the importance of taking action to enhance our systems thinking capabilities (WHY)

### The nature of wellbeing and health

There are now many reports that emphasise that an individual's wellbeing and health is the result of a dynamic interaction of a range of variables that affect that individual either positively or negatively over time. The less access an individual has to money, power and resources then the more likely they will experience constraints to good health and positive wellbeing – resulting in the well documented social gradient in health.

In public health, these variables are referred to as the social determinants of health. Conceptual models such as Barton and Grant's "determinants of wellbeing and health in our cities"<sup>4</sup> are a way of demonstrating these variables.

The nature of wellbeing and health means we experience it as complex, full of interdependencies, uncertain, controversial and with multiple 'stakes' or interests involved. That is exactly the sort of situation that invites us to use systems thinking.

The value of systems thinking to wellbeing and health concerns was emphasised in a recent report prepared for WHO on 'Governance for Health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. As a Designated City in the WHO European Healthy City Movement, we have committed to being at the forefront of putting new ideas such as these into practice.

### The nature of partnership working

One of the consequences of the nature of wellbeing and health is that we need partnership working – any one organisation or professional group alone cannot improve it. And, crucially improving wellbeing and health also needs to involve local people themselves as part of understanding situations, making judgements and taking action.

The establishment of partnership arrangements is one manifestation of systems thinking – the realisation that we need to involve a wide range of stakeholders is often referred to as a 'whole

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4 Barton, H. & Grant, M., 2006. A health map for the local human habitat. *The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 126(6), pp.252–253.

system approach'.

Partnership working involves many people from different organisational, professional and personal backgrounds – each of them holding a unique – but partial – perspective on the nature of wellbeing and health. The need to learn with, and from others, is one of the greatest challenges of partnership working.

The WHO Governance for Health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century paper emphasised that the co-production of wellbeing and health requires the co-production of knowledge, especially with individual citizens. Systems thinking's emphasis on social learning through the process of working together can provide a foundation for taking this forward.

## **The nature of the work we need to do**

In Newcastle, we have identified three types of task we need to do well in order to improve wellbeing and health<sup>5</sup>.

- Providing high quality services – as 'interventions' made to individuals/families/households. Concerns include referral routes and access; patient journeys; seamless care; effectiveness and efficiency; and, governance of service systems across different providers. NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement highlights the value of systems thinking as part of service design, especially when the service user journeys across boundaries.
- Addressing the social determinants of health – as 'interventions' made to whole populations, such as regulation, urban planning, economic development. Concerns include the ever-changing nature of the environment; the multiplicity of actors with different interests; the unpredictability of impact; and, the potential unfair impact on different communities. The key to working with(in) this complexity and uncertainty is through approaches that encourage continuous learning, flexibility and adaptability.
- Developing communities – as 'interventions' made to communities (collectives of people) to identify, utilise and build collective assets for wellbeing and health, especially releasing the power people in communities have to take control of their lives. It is important to create the conditions for such empowerment and social change – systems thinking's emphasis on critical thinking and ethical action alongside action research approaches sit well with the asset based approaches that are gaining momentum in this field.

These three types of task all invite the use of systems thinking but it is worth noting that each task potentially invites the use of different 'tools' for systems thinking. We cannot engage with each of the different tasks with a one size fits all approach to understanding the situation, making judgements, taking action, and understanding the changes that arise.

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5 These were informed in part by Department of Health's guide to Systematically Addressing Health Inequalities as well as developmental work in Newcastle. In addition however – and this is a confession(!) - they were also informed by my use of a system 'technique' derived from the Viable System Model. The 'technique' helps to unpack complexity, layer by layer using one of four complexity drivers – time; geography; customer group; or, technology (types of task to be done). Full explanation available on request.

## The capacity within us

Papers that describe the need for systems thinking in wellbeing and health tend to imply that the reason it is not currently being used more routinely is due to it being an 'absent competence', particularly amongst people in leadership roles. My experiences and the research I carried out for my MSc lead me to claim that even if they themselves do not recognise it as such, people do have natural systems thinking capabilities.

This section

- explains why I claim that we already have systems thinking capabilities (WHAT)
- by means of providing further explanation of the nature of systems thinking and illustrative quotes from research participants (HOW)
- in order to help you understand my perspective of the existing situation that I am proposing we should act to improve (WHY)

### Holistic thinking

Holistic thinking is concerned with thinking about wholes in their context rather than just parts. It has a number of dimensions.

- Recognition that multiple, interacting variables contribute to an issue of concern.

“quite complex, multi-factorial problems if that’s not too jargonised way of describing it”.

“its all about the determinants of ill-health that we are all very aware of. So you know, you could say, well if the NHS was really interested in reducing, I don’t know breathing problems, respiratory diseases, if you put money into housing, home improvements, now will they do that?”

“until we have specific examples that clearly aren’t being solved because of, I don’t know, professional boundaries, organisational boundaries, lack of resources you know the list is long”.

- A focus on relationships and connectivity, and the quality or nature of those relationships.

“it’s about having a proper, what I would call professional, mutually supportive, and challenging relationships in a partnership”

- Recognition that the context can affect the behaviour of individuals, organisations or partnerships, and that understanding the context can help re-frame a problem.

“there’s always, always a bigger picture. So always looking for what is the bigger frame of reference because the bigger frame of reference will often help you to see how you might solve things that appear to be intractable”

- Recognition of emergent properties (i.e. a property (like performance) arises from the interaction of different parts and therefore cannot be attributed to any of the individual component parts).

“so you need that recognition of everybody’s contribution and that the sum of the parts is greater, it has got to be that collective”

“I don’t want to sort of say it was fate in a way but I do think there are occasions where a combination of a number of people being in the right place, at the right time, and they are kind of coming together and a synergy that, it’s almost like everything happens and it, the obstacles that are there, are somehow now surmountable so you get a sense of, oh this is going to happen”

“Oh yes, as I say, there was a kind of, the best way I can describe it, is a visual picture, there was an alignment of the planets, it was ... everything coming at the right time”

## Appreciating multiple perspectives

Systems thinking attaches importance to other partial views and perspectives. An individual's history of experiences in personal and professional lives will give them a unique – but partial – perspective on a situation.

“There’s always, always another perspective”

“people will see a problem from their own perspective, in my school this, or in my organisation that, or in my service this is what it’s like”

“we all come from a different perspective”

Systems thinking recognises that our sensory and cognitive processes are such that any one perspective is 'partial'. It is a unique view that can be enhanced by considering the situation from different perspectives but what we 'know' about complex, uncertain, contested situations will always be incomplete. We can have a better picture, a shared picture – we can never have a complete picture.

“we are the organisation who is best placed to have an overview of what the city looks like. Umm what the opportunities and challenges to the city are. All other organisations only see a partial take on that. Now, our overview has some weaknesses so for example we definitely have an overview which includes a perception about health, what we probably don't bring is the more detailed understanding of that and what some of the solutions might be”

In our partnership working, we often refer to the importance of different 'inputs', either by individuals or by organisations. However, we don't always talk about this in terms of perspectives per se – words used by the research participants included experience, skills, styles, roles, interests, knowledge, expertise, backgrounds, histories and the System concept traditions.

“I think what I bring personally is that I think I'm genuinely respectful of other people's traditions and histories and recognise that you can't ignore that”

## Systematic and systemic thinking and action

Systems thinking has two different historical 'roots' – the systematic (aka hard systems) and the systemic (aka soft systems). They are the yin and yang of systems thinking – both are needed but they are useful for different types of situation. Different 'tools' for systems thinking tend to enhance one or the other.

Systematic thinking and action emphasises goal seeking, problems, solutions, and use of analysis. It refers to systems as entities that can be 'engineered' or 'designed'.

"The other asset and the strongest asset is knowing that you've got a problem and finding a solution. So clearly defined problems, with very good indicators of success"

"if we can have the shared analysis of what the problem might be, we can start to try and find a way to tackle those things"

Systemic thinking and action is more oriented to learning or the human content of the situation. It emphasises that systems are devices (or 'tools') that we use to explore and understand a messy, confusing world, rather than being entities that exist in the 'real' world.

"And you know it is fascinating watching when they first come together, they come from different intellectual disciplines as well as different ways of behaving"

“actually there was a different history, different tradition. They were leveraged in but actually there was no kind of caring or nurturing of, of kind of each other's history.”

The more uncertain, the more confusing, the more contested a situation it is, the more

appropriate it is to use systemic thinking. However, we have a tendency to 'default' to the language of systematic thinking because we are currently more familiar it – even if our intention is to emphasise the learning and human content.

"But it's the sort of shared understanding of what the challenge or the issue or the area that you are looking at is, you can call that a needs analysis, or whatever you want to call it, it doesn't really matter, but it's that shared understanding of what the issue is and where it has come from and all the rest of it. And then as a result of that shared understanding, for me good partnership is about agreeing or establishing amongst yourselves, what therefore the key priorities are, what the key challenges are going to be"

## **Releasing this capacity within us: towards a framework for action**

This section:

- provides a framework for action to increase the use of systems thinking in our partnership working for wellbeing and health (WHAT)
- by means of explaining the understanding I have developed in relation to the 'determinants of systems thinking in our partnership working for wellbeing and health' and using it to suggest some desirable and potentially feasible actions (HOW)
- in order to help you consider the degree to which we can put resources, time and energy into creating the conditions where we are more likely to use our systems thinking capabilities (WHY)

It is worth emphasising that my MSc research gave me a strong sense that people already value the practices that enable systems thinking, because they are almost synonymous with practices that are 'good' for effective partnership working. In addition, people are already aware of the practices that constrain systems thinking, because they are almost synonymous with practices that are 'bad' for effective partnership working. I have provided quotations below to illustrate this point.

### **Determinants of systems thinking in partnership working for wellbeing and health**

There are a number of variables that are likely to impact positively or negatively on the use of systems thinking in our partnership working for wellbeing and health practice.

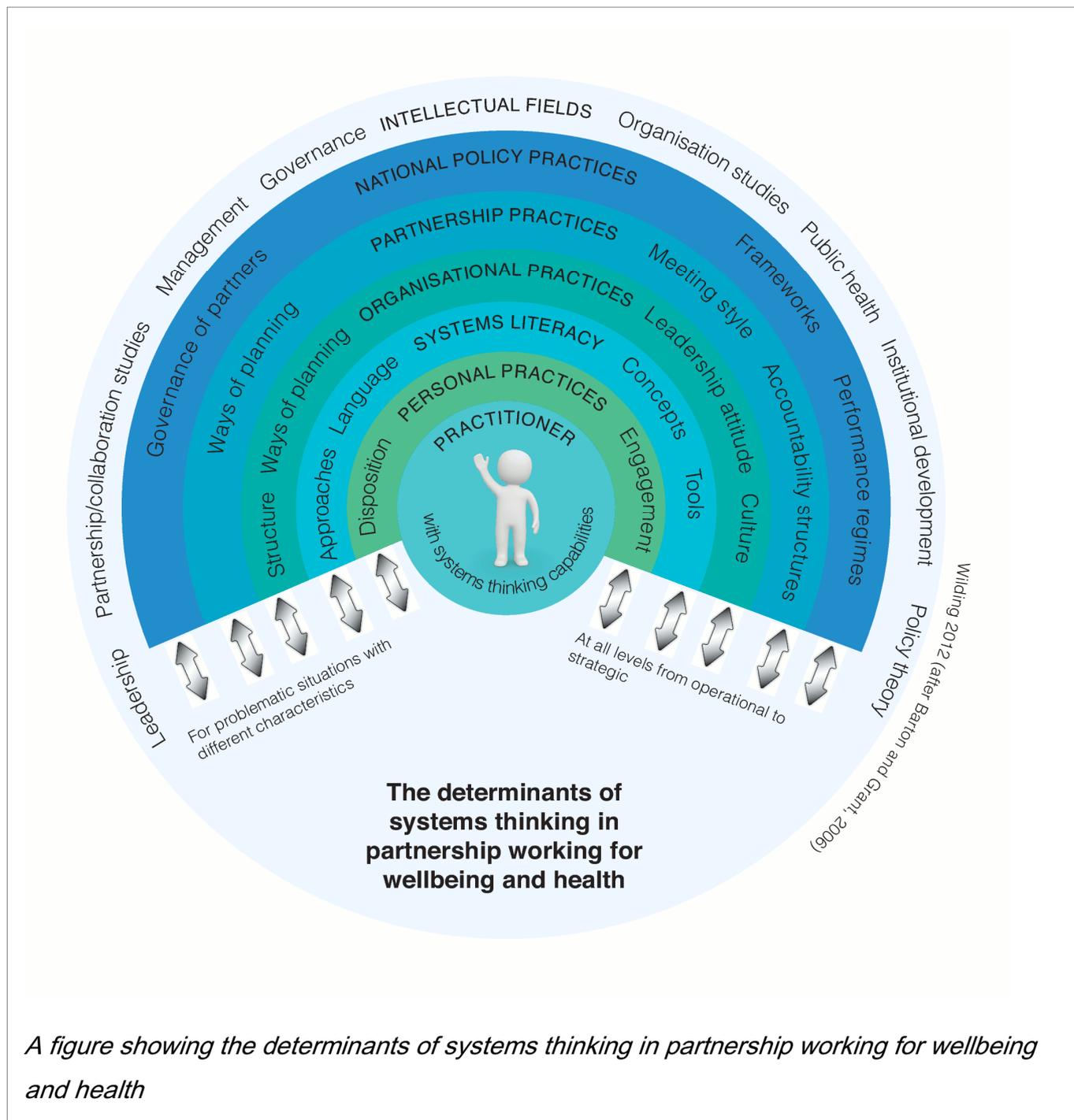
I refer to these as the determinants of systems thinking in partnership working for wellbeing and health and have drawn on the familiar Barton and Grant representation of the social determinants of health<sup>6</sup> to create the conceptual model shown on the next page.

For convenience of explanation, I will go through this framework layer by layer. However, as

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<sup>6</sup> Barton, H. & Grant, M., 2006. A health map for the local human habitat. *The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 126(6), pp.252–253.

this is a systems perspective, it is worth emphasising that the degree of systems thinking use in our partnership working for wellbeing and health practice arises from the interaction of all the variables outlined, rather than being attributable to any single variable.



*A figure showing the determinants of systems thinking in partnership working for wellbeing and health*

### Personal practices

Systems thinking is helped when we adopt an inquiring 'mind'; work on relationship building; and are motivated to be a full participant.

"I don't have all the answers, I am open to learning, I'm receptive to new ideas and new ways of learning so I don't bring a closed mindset, you know, that's there is only one way to do it and its my way"

"I think there was, there was a willingness to work and there wasn't a sense of well this belongs to us, there wasn't a sense of I talk about negative ownership rather than positive ownership."

"I think we have worked hard to build the relationships and other people have met us half way and we've sustained those relationships and we now are in a position where we have some trust and we have some safety and we can just get on and identify what things we all need to do together and make some progress on them so, it's a good position to be in"

To some extent this is a personal choice but the extent of that choice is impacted on by the nature of the setting we work in.

Suggestions for action:

- As individuals – recognise that the disposition or attitude we adopt will impact on the degree to which we use our systems thinking capabilities. Choosing to engage and adopt an inquiring mind is a no cost action!
- As organisations – support individuals through mentoring, coaching and personal development to more readily choose to engage and adopt an inquiring mind.

## Systems Literacy

Systems literacy is used here to refer to conscious knowledge of the 'tools' of systems thinking and their history, including the concepts, approaches, techniques and diagrams mentioned earlier.

### Connecting systems practitioners

We do not currently have an understanding of the extent of systems literacy in our organisations and in the community. Those with knowledge of the 'tools' of systems thinking often cannot use it with colleagues, because it comes over as "jargon" or "strange". However, my experiences of making occasional connections have led me to believe it is perhaps more widespread than we think and helping people 'come out of the woodwork' would allow them to express and use interests they have developed outside work.

Suggestions for action – all relatively low cost:

- use our organisational communication mechanisms to highlight that we'd like to hear from people with an interest in systems thinking;
- convene a meeting (or a series of regular meetings) so these people can come together and build connections around this common area of interest;
- perhaps use a networking platform to give interested people an opportunity to interact

with each other on an ongoing basis.

## **Learning opportunities**

There are a number of learning opportunities available that can enhance people's awareness of systems thinking, its language and tools and its underlying theory. The uptake of learning opportunities would need to be part of our organisational mechanisms for appraisal and personal development. It would also need to take into consideration the diversity of learning styles.

Suggestions for action – from low up to higher cost:

- Promote the 'free' on-line learning provided by the Open University on their OpenLearn platform. There are a number of free modules based on the teaching materials the OU use in their formal courses.
- Provide a way for those accessing this on-line learning to come together, share and build on their learning experiences.
- Consider whether any individuals/post-holders would benefit from more advanced training such as the Postgraduate Certificate, Diploma or MSc in Systems Thinking in Practice with the Open University. Some posts (e.g. Lead practitioners; specialists; coordinators; policy officers) may benefit more from this personal development opportunity than 'traditional' Postgraduate Management training.

## **Organisational practices**

Organisational practices matter to partnership working because people bring with them their organisational culture and practices to the 'partnership table'. The nature of the 'home' organisation also affects an individual's possibilities to take forward actions they have agreed with partners.

## **Leadership style**

The more 'domineering' a perspective (whether that of an individual, a profession or an organisation), the less likelihood that multiple, partial perspectives will be drawn on to understand and improve a situation of concern. And, in contexts where perspectives and understandings are not valued, people are less likely to be motivated to engage, to inquire and to be part of collective action to improve. In addition, a managerial 'command and control' mentality reduces the possibilities for systems thinking.

This requires leadership, whether enacted by individuals or organisations, to be focussed on a facilitative, enabling style.

"But that clear sense of having a responsibility for community leadership. The negative side of that is that it can translate into the council saying we are in charge. But at it's best, it is about we're the organisation more than anybody else in the city who has an interest in, and a responsibility to promote, collaborative working...to solve the problems that the city is facing."

"I've seen councils that are very top down in their operation, and governments of course they are top down and very centralised in their decision making. I've always believed that it works best if it's the other way round. That councils, councillors, politicians generally are facilitators"

"being willing to, I was going to say give up power, but not always be in the driving seat, not always being the overpowering partner, dominant partner and I think the language is beginning to sort of change around that"

"the culture of our two respective organisations was not particularly conducive. Um they were both very controlling"

#### Suggestions for action:

- Leadership style is already part of managerial development programmes – this argument adds weight to the importance of that existing work and adds to it the need to consider styles that are helpful for 'integrative' leadership (leadership where you cannot assume a leader-follower relationship).
- As Newcastle City Council more frequently (though not exclusively) has a lead role in partnership and community leadership, it is important it pays attention to developing that facilitative ethos by examining its own practices in terms of how much they open up, rather than close down, options for others. This ties in with the Cooperative Council agenda.

### **The management of performance**

Partnership working for wellbeing and health involves the management of performance in a number of ways. For example:

- The management of performance within a single partner organisation, for example within an organisation's internal management arrangements.
- The management of performance by one organisation in relation to a different organisation, for example in the case of a purchaser-provider relationship
- The management of performance by national government of the partnership itself and/or its partner organisations

A target mentality can constrain systems practice. One insightful study<sup>7</sup> demonstrated that a strong performance regime affects not only the decisions and actions of those with a role in

7 Blackman, T. et al., 2011. Framing health inequalities for local intervention: comparative case studies. *Sociology of health and illness*, Online advanced access. Available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2011.01362.x/full> [Accessed November 27, 2011].

improving health inequalities but the way in which they frame the issue in their discourse. There is a tendency for it to lead to a focus on early detection and secondary prevention focussed at individuals, rather than broader level policy changes where there is less certainty and predictability in terms of outcomes.

Outcomes are emergent – they arise as the result of the interaction of a number of variables. However performance management frameworks, such as Outcome Based Accountability, lead us to assume a linear cause-effect (that intervention x determines outcome y), whether at an individual or population level. Attributing change to a single intervention is not appropriate in situations where there are many interdependent and dynamic variables. Measurement of outcomes – the practice of assigning quantitative information to outcomes – also has the tendency to make people focus on what is measured, rather than what matters.

Suggestions for action:

- Create opportunities to discuss and increase awareness of the 'unintended consequences' of existing practices associated with the management of performance.
- Engage relevant stakeholders in an ongoing inquiry into strengths and limitations of different practices.
- Explore possibilities for use of systems approaches as part of evaluation.

## Management of projects

Projects and conventional project management tools create the conditions for an “over-reliance on systematic, rather than systemic thinking”<sup>8</sup>.

Recently project management researchers have begun exploring the inappropriateness of existing approaches to projects in contexts that are complex, uncertain, and involve multiple stakeholders with different perspectives. One of the academics involved in this field of research has drawn on his prior experience of systems thinking to propose some new ways of thinking about and doing projects (which is 'redefined' as temporary purposeful action). The emphasis is on using a variety of different images and ideas of projects that need to be contextualised to the individual piece of work<sup>9</sup>.

These ideas have already been discussed and shared amongst members of the Wellbeing for Life Team and Project Managers in Adult and Culture Services Directorate. Colleagues found the ideas, frameworks and tools provided new insights to help understand the complexity of working with stakeholders to make changes. However, it has been difficult to expand the use of these ideas in a context where they are not more widely known and valued.

Suggestions for action:

- We develop a project(!!) - i.e. temporary purposeful action – to involve people in project

8 Ison, R., 2010. *Systems Practice: how to act in a climate-change world*, Milton Keynes/London: The Open University/Springer Publications, p.227

9 Winter, Mark & Szczepanek, Tony, 2009. *Images of Projects*, Farnham: Gower Publishing Ltd. Overview and introductory material available at: [http://www.ashgatepublishing.com/default.aspx?page=641&pageSubject=2063&calcTitle=1&title\\_id=6854&editon\\_id=9341](http://www.ashgatepublishing.com/default.aspx?page=641&pageSubject=2063&calcTitle=1&title_id=6854&editon_id=9341) [Accessed September 10, 2011].

management or other roles that involve doing projects – to think about new ways of understanding and doing their work.

- We use the learning and ideas of these people to re-frame project and programme governance [including related paperwork] if required.

## Partnership practices

### Shifting from 'partnership as structure' to 'partnership as process'

Partnerships have traditionally been conceived as a hierarchical organisational structure where different multi-agency committees make up the nodes in a hierarchy with vertical accountability relationships between them.

Published research suggests the need to re-conceptualise the way we do partnerships, to make the way of working more appropriate for working with uncertain, contested, complex situations, like wellbeing and health. We need to shift away from the notion of partnerships as over-engineered structures to a more process view that enables relationship building and dialogue. Where we do have structures they need to be more flexible and easy to adapt as we learn and circumstances change.

"I think we can get caught up in then over complicated governance structures where we have groups and boards, that I think then over complicate what we are actually there to do"

"I've kind of got over my bit about, it's got to be a structural relationship, because it isn't, it's people who make partnerships not organisations."

Suggestions for action:

- Continue to reduce the number of formal standing meetings.
- Establish groups on a flexible basis as required to pursue "temporary collective purposeful action" together.
- Promote an understanding that relationships between groups or individuals need to be ones of sharing, learning and working together, rather than focus only on hierarchical accountability.

### The settings of partnership working

The focus on relationship building and dialogue as a vehicle for social learning needs to be taken into consideration when we create the settings where people from different organisations and professions work together. Sometimes that can be created through the way we allocate and share office spaces.

"Now I know that's a bit of a twee story, but it's a true story and it would never have happened if they actually hadn't been sharing the same office space"

However, for the most part the 'essence' of partnership life takes place in various forms of 'meeting' – whether ad hoc, workshops, task and finish groups, or standing committee.

Whilst useful for formal decision making and accountability, traditional 'committee' style meetings are more likely to provide a setting for debate, conflict and potentially disengagement.

"I was aware at the meetings that there were quite a lot of people who never spoke. They were almost there to take notes and check up you know and feed back to other people and actually it doesn't work if that's how people, so that's why just getting everything out on the table, being very clear what you were about and what part everybody can play in it, is really important. And not letting people, use it as a bit of a easy ride, you know, to make that commitment, recognise where they come from and recognise that they've all got something to bring to the table even if that might not be cash"

To foster social learning, meetings need to provide an environment for thinking and dialogue – the quality of the conversation matters. This requires meetings to become more 'workshop'-like and to be designed to create a process through which people build relationships and develop understandings, drawing on systems approaches or other well-developed methodologies.

"it's about the people sitting down with each other, sharing the analysis of the problem, agreeing how they are going to work together, rolling their sleeves up, getting on with stuff, trusting each other, challenging each other, supporting each other"

Events or large group meetings are already a familiar occurrence in Newcastle. In the late 1990s, the former Newcastle Health Partnership participated in a King's Fund action research project around 'whole systems working' which drew on the metaphor of a living system to understand organisations. The work included a number of large group events designed using approaches such as open space; future search; and, real-time strategic change – all approaches that promote dialogue and social learning. As partnership working for wellbeing and health involves large numbers of individuals working on different issues, events such as these trigger new social connections and relationships to develop. The principle of large group meetings has followed through, for example, into the Wellbeing and Health Summit 2011, however the event designs have not explicitly drawn on tried and tested approaches.

#### Suggestions for action:

- Introduce greater flexibility into the way meetings are run – be clear whether we need a committee (with a chair, agenda, paper, minutes) or a form of workshop (with a facilitator, programme and structured activities). Meetings needs to be individually designed and convened in a way that helps them meet their purpose.
- Create opportunities for those involved in running meetings to learn with and from each other about different meeting 'technologies', their purpose and how to design/plan them.
- Provide development opportunities in terms of facilitation skills (e.g. handling group dynamics) for those who are involved in convening workshop style meetings (it is a different skill set to being an officer for a committee or running a focus group).
- Introduce use of systems approaches and techniques into our work to enhance the

process and the learning. This could perhaps initially be done by using external expertise to facilitate us through some particular real-life problems, whilst providing training and learning for relevant people to be able to lead such work in the future (a form of combined real-life work and Master Class). By selecting carefully, we could create opportunities for learning through the experience of using a few different systems approaches to progress current challenges.

## The policy process

A social process view of policy sees it as emerging from the interaction of stakeholders over time – interactions that take place in formal and informal meetings, workshops, events, chance conversations and electronic communication.

In this view, policy is not a 'linear' process to be scheduled but a continuous dialogue amongst a variety of stakeholders concerning questions such as:

- what do we understand is going on here?
- what are our judgements about what we should do?
- what are the potential impacts of what we intend to do?

Actions arising from this dialogue are purposeful and directed, rather than 'planned' in the traditional sense.

Recent published work<sup>10</sup> about policy has placed an emphasis to move away from an 'evidence based' instrumental rationality to 'intelligent' policy making emphasising dialogue and learning. It needs to be adaptive, integrative and forward looking.

From this perspective, the notion of 'assessment' is also reinterpreted, as illustrated by this excerpt from a recent Lancet Commission report:

"A different kind of assessment is needed [...]. In line with ideas of social learning, such assessment should be based on dialogue, deliberation, and discussion between key stakeholders rather than a technical exercise [...]. It would also call on a wide range of sources of knowledge, combining statistical data with the insights of tacit and experiential knowledge held by practitioners and the lay knowledge and experience of communities"<sup>11</sup>

The recently agreed proposals for the Newcastle Future Needs Assessment are consistent with this approach. The challenge is to make them real – using the building blocks of Profile documents; Let's Talk; ThinkAbouts; workshops; committee meetings – to create a coherent whole that develops through time, rather than each 'occasion' being designed in isolation.

Suggestions for action (in addition to the existing ones in relation to the NFNA):

- Create opportunities for those in the policy process as stakeholders and facilitators to discuss the changing view of policy and how it can impact on changing roles, knowledge,

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10 See for example Sanderson, I., 2009. Intelligent Policy Making for a Complex World: Pragmatism, Evidence and Learning. *Political Studies*, 57(4), pp.699–719.

11 Rydin et al, 2012. Shaping cities for health: complexity and the planning of urban environments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *The Lancet*, Vol. 379, Issue 9831, Pages 2079-2108. Available at <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanonc/article/PIIS0140-6736%2812%2960435-8/fulltext> [accessed 30 June 2012]

skills and expectations.

- Introduce systems approaches to conceptualise how the work progresses through time and remains purposeful – rather than just a series of conversations.

## National practices

Our local partnership practices are influenced by national policy practices and the governance and frameworks established at a national level, for example through the management of performance as discussed earlier.

Often, the key discussions about what 'a' partnership is, who should be 'on it', and what 'it' should do are held nationally resulting in a statutory or guidance framework for actors at a local level. This frames the thinking of those at a local level, reduces their flexibilities and crucially may distract from those involved being motivated by their own purpose and from continually examining what they are doing and why (reflective practice).

"I think the sad reflection I have of all these structures is that most of them are put in place because we've been asked to put them in place. So the creation of local strategic partnerships, the creation of the wellbeing and health partnership and then now more recently the Health and Wellbeing Board in preparation for the statutory introduction of health and wellbeing boards as part of the NHS reforms. Having said that, when instructed to do so we often get together and think of work as partnership, but in terms of ownership a better starting point would be to recognise and meet a need to establish partnerships to then allow ownership amongst the whole partnership of the agenda that they set themselves to do over the coming years. So I don't think that it is a negative but certainly being told that you ought to set something up might not be as good as if you thought that was the need in your locality in the first place".

Suggested actions:

- Remain aware of the impact of national practice and requirements and how they enable or constrain the use of systems thinking. If necessary lobby for change, perhaps joining with partner cities in the UK Healthy Cities Network or Core Cities to do so.

## Intellectual fields

In wellbeing and health, there is a lot of emphasis on 'evidence based' practice in terms of the content of *what* we do. There is less emphasis on connecting with theories that can help us consider *how* we do when we do what we do. Ideas from Systems now inform contemporary writing in a number of intellectual fields relevant to partnership working for wellbeing and health – organisation studies; management; leadership; policy studies; public health to name but a few.

In our practice we tend to turn to official guidance, conferences and other partnerships to help us consider *how* we should do. One study indicated<sup>12</sup> that nationally available advice on how to work in partnership is rarely based on any theory so this tendency in our practice could limit our possibilities.

Creating a culture where we learn from contemporary theory about *how* we do is important. Being more willing to use conceptual models and concepts developed through research is a helpful way of giving us new perspectives on what we do. It can help us gain new insights into our existing practices, uncover the assumptions within them and be ready to learn new ways of working.

Suggested actions:

- I have suggested elsewhere the opportunity to use theory to help us re-think the way we undertake practices such as management of performance; management of projects; and, policy making. We need to remain alert to other practices that could benefit from 're-thinking' in the same way.

## And a final suggestion...

On the theme of keeping financial outlay low and valuing our local assets, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that Newcastle City Council employs one of around ten people in the country who have so far been awarded the newly introduced MSc Systems Thinking in Practice by the Open University. My connections with other students/graduates, academics and consultants makes me well-placed to bring new ideas to the city and play a key role in this innovation.

Workload and other priorities permitting, it could be possible to draw on my time to:

- Design and deliver training sessions
- Provide 'mentoring/coaching' support to people who are participating in other personal development opportunities
- Convene, design and facilitate sessions for those wanting to come together to learn with and from others to develop their interest in systems
- Convene, design and facilitate the practice changes as outlined in the sections above, including arranging the appropriate use of external expertise as required.

Suggested action:

- Given that the 'case' for systems thinking in partnership working for wellbeing and health is so strong, consider the pros and cons of releasing my time to help take this organisational and partnership development agenda forward.

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12 Powell, M. & Dowling, B., 2006. New Labour's Partnerships: comparing conceptual models with existing forms. *Social Policy and Society*, 5(2), pp.205–314.

## Conclusion

As one research participant said, “it’s people that make partnerships, not organisations”.

People are the biggest asset in our partnership working – as citizens, as volunteers, as employees - we bring with us a wealth of experience, expertise and talent to a situation we are all passionate about improving – the wellbeing and health of local people.

Creating the conditions where people can think and work together in new ways is important. Valuing and using systems thinking as part of that 'new way' holds the potential for us to be better able to work together and work in a world of dynamic change with all its uncertainty and unpredictability.

As the quote, attributed to Anthony Robbins goes: “if you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten”. If we continue thinking and acting the way we have always thought and acted, we are less likely to be able to embrace the challenges facing us.

## Circulation of this paper

Initial circulation is for those who were involved with the research work for their consideration and comment.

We will use this paper in Newcastle to inform discussions about personal, organisational and partnership development work in Newcastle as part of the existing transformation agenda prompted by the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

We also share this paper to generate discussion with, and comment from:

- colleagues in UK Healthy City Network
- colleagues with an interest in systems thinking and the public sector

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the research participants and the people who had the conversations with them for allowing me to record and analyse what they said. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to listen to such honest insights into your working experiences. I hope that this paper makes you feel that your participation has been worthwhile.

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