

Our systemic change journey

The learnings and reflections from applying a systemic approach in the Tower Hamlets Communities Driving Change programme.



Our approach to systemic change

The [Tower Hamlets Communities Driving Change \(CDC\)](#) programme supports residents to take action for improved health and wellbeing in their communities. This involves hearing about the issues which matter to them, co-designing and developing grassroots solutions, and connecting them with other people, services and organisations to enable real change.

CDC is a new way of supporting communities to thrive, in a borough where health inequalities are rife. It's a new type of relationship between institutions and residents, and a change to who has control over local health and wellbeing priorities. It's about working in an open way and moving away from traditional programme delivery models. We want CDC to genuinely change the way people work - in every part of the 'system'. This is why we have been collaborating with [FutureGov](#) to embed system-thinking within CDC. This involves taking a big picture view, ensuring we are acting at the most effective places and continuously reflecting and learning from what we are doing. It also means connecting communities with the tools they need to effect change. This requires all players of the system - individuals, groups, charities, service providers, local authorities and more - to work together. Communities cannot and should not have to achieve change alone. Our work therefore focuses on the nature and quality of the connections between all those different players - building strong relationships between them and equalising the playing field by working collaboratively.



Our approach to systemic change

This short report shares our journey so far of taking a 'systemic approach' as part of CDC. For more information on the programme and how more recently we have been responding to Covid-19, check out the 'Communities Driving Change' report and 'Communities Driving Change. COVID-19: Response to Recovery'.

Our 'systemic approach' centres on three core tenets which will be explored in this report:

Understand the system

Taking a wider view of the context that sits around the challenges and initiatives we are working with.

Identify where to act

Reimagining how things might work and understanding the best place to intervene.

Plan, learn and adapt

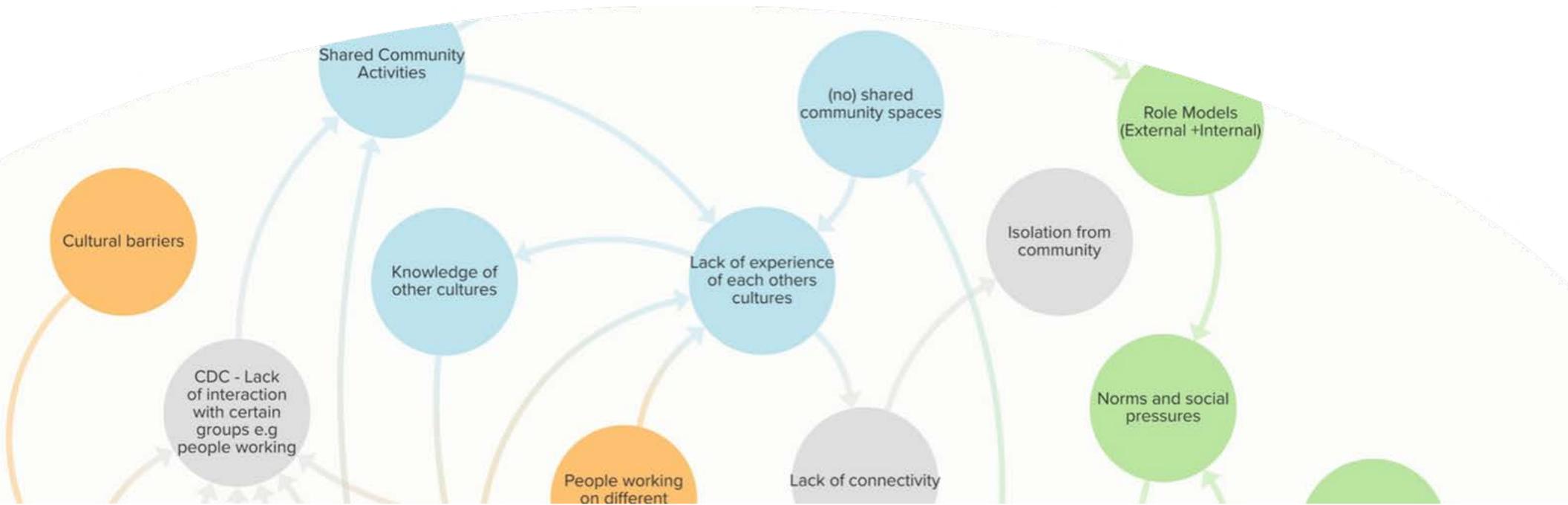
Testing out interventions and building in continuous learning.

Understanding the system

Understanding the 'system' means taking a step back and seeing the bigger picture. Our day to day work relies on getting the details right: managing relationships and supporting residents to design and deliver activities. To ensure we move beyond a classic delivery approach when working with communities, we must also remember to 'zoom out'. We need to understand how our collective efforts fit in the wider change we are supporting residents to create, in the systems we are working within.

To do this, we start by drafting a 'guiding star' - a vision for what an ideal state would look like. We then map out some of the forces we think are stopping this from happening. This is all informed by extensive engagement and co-delivery with communities.

These are 'living tools' and ways that we continuously engage communities around these issues and evolve our understanding.



Understanding the system

What this looks like in practice

In the [appendix](#), there's an example of a 'guiding star' on community connectedness and a multiple cause diagram of some of the forces that sit around this issue.

Tools and methods

Some handy resources [here](#) on how to understand the 'system'.

Think through some of the invisible forces at play by using the [Dark Matter worksheet](#) from [The Point People](#) and [Lankelly Chase](#).

Identify where to act

We spend time continuously understanding the wider context so that we can support communities to create change in the most effective way. We do this in three ways:

Reimagining how things can work. Our work is about shifting paradigms. As well as understanding the complexities of the issues at hand, we also try to help rethink - with residents, stakeholders and services - the mission and purpose of the current system and how it could be radically different.

Amplifying current activities. There is already a lot of community energy involved in running a number of initiatives. We try to understand the barriers and enablers around this work and identify who else we can connect to these activities, to help them to achieve their intended impact, as defined by the community.

Finding where else we need to act. There are still deep-rooted problems that might not be being fully addressed by the communities' activities. Where else might the community want to act, based on their capabilities and passion? Who is else currently working to address these issues that we can build connections with?



Plan, learn and adapt

Our theory of change is just that: a theory. Once we've built our understanding of how we might create change, we act on this in a systemic way. In practice, this means:

Continuously testing and learning. We use prototyping to test ideas out early and understand how they might work in practice. Prototypes are also vehicles to engage partners or build momentum behind activities.

Beyond prototypes, we build *reflective practice* into our work. This means we continuously reflect on if our interventions are having the desired effect and our role in creating change.

Being intentional about relationships. Relationships with residents and local partners are backbone of our work. We continue to reflect on who's involved in activities, who else might need to be and how we might best engage them.

Using story to create change. We ensure we are sharing stories about the work to support change by drawing people in and showing how smaller activities fit into a bigger movement of change.



Plan, learn and adapt

What this looks like in practice

Use this sheet to help [identify assumptions](#)
This one can help with [understanding our ecosystem](#). There's also [additional worksheets](#) on prioritising what to test.

Tools and methods

[Pitfalls of taking a linear approach](#) to applying a theory of change.

Ella Saltmarshe on [using stories to create change](#).

Reflections

What's changed since applying a systemic approach



How are we working differently?

Since embarking on this journey to embed a systemic approach in our work, we've noticed three major changes:

We are looking at the wider context that sits around everything we do. We've been expanding our view, examining the forces which hold back or drive the changes we want to see, then thinking about how we might influence some of these forces. For instance, we can now clearly see how our work on local spaces also taps into other parts of the systems, specifically housing, employment and education.



'Whenever I'm working with residents, I'm thinking about how I can see the bigger picture and join up with what other people are doing. Its drastically changed the way I think about my work.'

- Dhwani, CDC team

How are we working differently?

We are seeing all of our work as a prototype. We are continuously adapting our understanding of the change that needs to happen and our approach to achieving it. Working with residents and local stakeholders, we are testing things out, getting feedback, reflecting on what's working and evolving. We aren't afraid to try things out, fail and try again. Some of the initiatives we've supported haven't continued, but others have grown in ways we could never have anticipated.



'We are constantly learning from the complex places and growing number of diverse people we work with, so have to shift and tailor our approach accordingly. This flexibility is so important, particularly when things don't go as planned'

- Zoë, CDC team

How are we working differently?

We are questioning our role in creating structural change. CDC is about supporting residents to create the change they want to see. We need to ensure that this energy is unlocking genuine, long-term change. We've been rethinking who else we might need to bring in or collaborate with, in order to properly change how things work. We've been able to connect our work with local providers and funders and also expand it to include players working on big issues like physical and mental health at the national level.



“It's created this mind set of connectedness. Now, in everything we do, we think about how it can be linked up with other things that are going on. It's about activating new and different systems, bringing in the right stakeholders or services who can get involved and make things operate on a number of different levels”

- Laura, CDC team

Challenges of a taking systemic approach

As part of this journey, we've also noticed three major challenges to be mindful of in our work:

Not becoming overwhelmed by the system. Realising the ways in which systemic issues intersect when creating [systems maps](#) for each resident-led intervention, can paint a depressing picture. To overcome this, it's been important to focus on where we can have the most impact. From a system-approach, this means creating targeted interventions which don't forget the big vision (i.e. asking 'what are we working towards?').

Recognising our role within the system. It might seem tempting to understand how the system works - in ways characterised by inequality - then sweep in and deliver to people. It's the way things have been done for a long time. This may feel quicker and easier to do, but it will not lead to sustainable and real change. We must recognise that as practitioners, we are also actors within the system. We must ensure we are always doing 'with' and not 'to' people. We must not embed our own ideas within a given community. We must recognise that this will take longer than less direct routes. It is our role to work alongside communities, exploring how issues intersect and creating spaces and opportunities to share power to enable real change.

Valuing smaller, more immediate results. The pressure to change the system and tackle structural inequalities such as inadequate housing or employment opportunities, can feel heavy. We address this by tracking change at the individual, community and system levels. We're already seeing changes in the lives of those involved in CDC, from gaining employment to increased levels of confidence, and how communities are coming together and services are being more responsive. We must remain ambitious yet realistic about when and how we expect to see wider change. Taking a developmental evaluation approach allows us to value the journey itself and appreciate that impact doesn't happen overnight. See our sister report to hear more about early signals of change.

Early signals of change

The approach in practice

By taking time to understand the context and systems at play, and working with people to test, learn and refine what we are doing, we are already seeing changes happening as a result.

For instance, at the beginning of CDC, adults suggested employment, training and recreational activities as a solution for the lack of opportunities for young people in the area. Instead of going ahead to develop the programme, we went out and tested this concept with young people. They didn't trust authorities, and didn't want to engage with something unless it would actually lead to real work opportunities. There was a risk that this type of initiative wouldn't be popular, or worse still - could destroy trust by over-promising.

Through prototyping, this idea evolved to focus on football, as prioritised by the young people - weaving in aspiration-building rather than employability workshops - based on their feedback.

We worked with local young people and other local stakeholders to design a youth-led football project called 'Get Fit Feel Inspired', which went on to secure independent funding from Sports England. This initiative has changed the way local businesses interact with young people in the community. Shoreditch [Power League](#), for example, have offered use of a professional pitch for free. To date, the group have, collaborated with 12 organisations, including Prostate Cancer UK and StreetGames; employed four young people from the local community; and reached 38 young people during their 12 week programme. They are now working other local providers to share and roll out the model across Tower Hamlets. We believe initiatives such as this, show the power and potential of grassroots approaches to improving health and wellbeing, which connect different players from across the system.



Early signals of change

Reflections from our CDC programme partners

“CDC is a different way of engaging with people...and not only empowering people with words and things, but also actually giving them resources to go out and do stuff for themselves...the community events they’ve organised have had a really big impact with people in those areas. It’s giving people a bit of space, and a bit of power as well, and the knowledge that actually they can start doing things that make a big change in the small estates and small localities”.

- Cllr. Tarik Khan

“...we felt by tapping into other community initiatives in this immediate area would hopefully get us involved more in the local community, which is what has happened with CDC... I think that it has longevity.”

- Geraldine Bone, Brady Arts Centre



For more information on our approach,
visit www.youngfoundation.org or
contact isabel.young@youngfoundation.org

Also check out our sister report:
'Communities Driving Change'



[@the_young_fdn](https://twitter.com/the_young_fdn)

With special thanks to everyone who is part of CDC
and to Sylvia Hines for the photography featured in this report.

Appendix

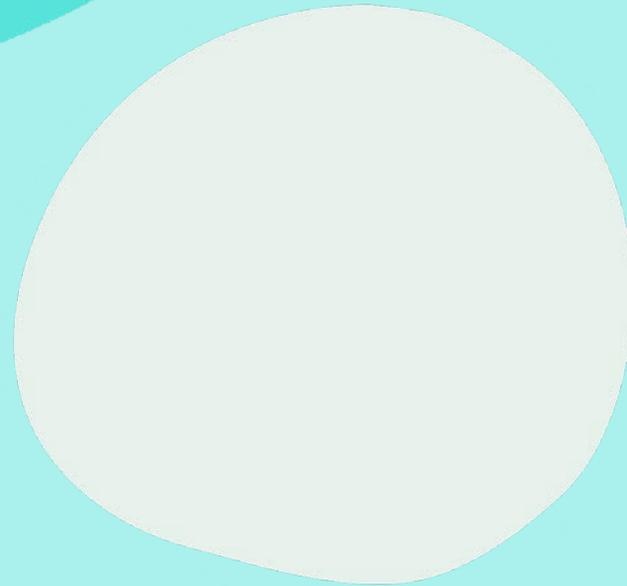
Collection of the methods and work referenced in the report.





Further reading

External resources and articles



Understanding the system

Lankelly Chase & The Point People:
Systems Changers -

Multiple causes and effects tools:

This is a nice straightforward document with some tips and methods for doing systems mapping.

Omidyar group - Systems Practice work book: This is a great resource and talks in detail about a practicals of applying a systems change approach. It covers the whole process of systems practice, but is particularly detailed at systems mapping.

And on **Medium**: Tools for Systems Thinkers

Identifying where to act

Systems Change - Big or Small?: This article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review makes the case for small, targeted interventions that can have a systemic impact (useful for not getting overwhelmed by the scale of some problems!).

Donella Meadows - Places to intervene in a system: Donella Meadows is one of the original thought leaders in systems thinking. Here she talks about different strategies for intervening in a system, ranging from measurements to paradigm shifts.

Sam Rye - Towards Targeted Systems Change: Here Same Rye proposes a method for moving from 'systems sight', to a portfolio of prototypes which make up a systems change initiative.

Plan, learn and adapt

NPC and Lankelly Chase and NPC - How to use theory of change for systems change. Pages 4-8 give a great summary of the main points.

The chapter Prototyping: A Creative Way to Solve City Problems from The Creative City report. It shows why prototyping is valuable and includes some nice examples of how it can my done in practice.

Using Story to Change Systems by Ella Saltmarshe is amazing, with lots of practical examples.

Other

Place based systems change:
The Winch and Dark Matter Labs:
Building impact movements

“ Be ruthlessly committed to "why" you are building your idea, but be very flexible with "what" your idea actually is. If you are running tests with the intention of learning – not just with the intention of validating – your idea will likely change many times. ”

- Ella Saltmarshe

Tools in practice

Some of the tools and approaches we have used



Understanding the things preventing local connectivity

This is a multiple cause diagram (a type of systems map) created by the CDC team to understand some of the main causes of the lack of local connectivity on the Chicksand estate, Bethnal Green..

It's based on working on social connectivity projects with residents, and reflects our current understanding. It will continue to be refined with residents and stakeholders. These maps can be created in paper form and digitalised for free using [Kumu](https://www.kumu.io/).

The 'guiding star' below describes the local vision and ambition for Chicksand, and frames the map.

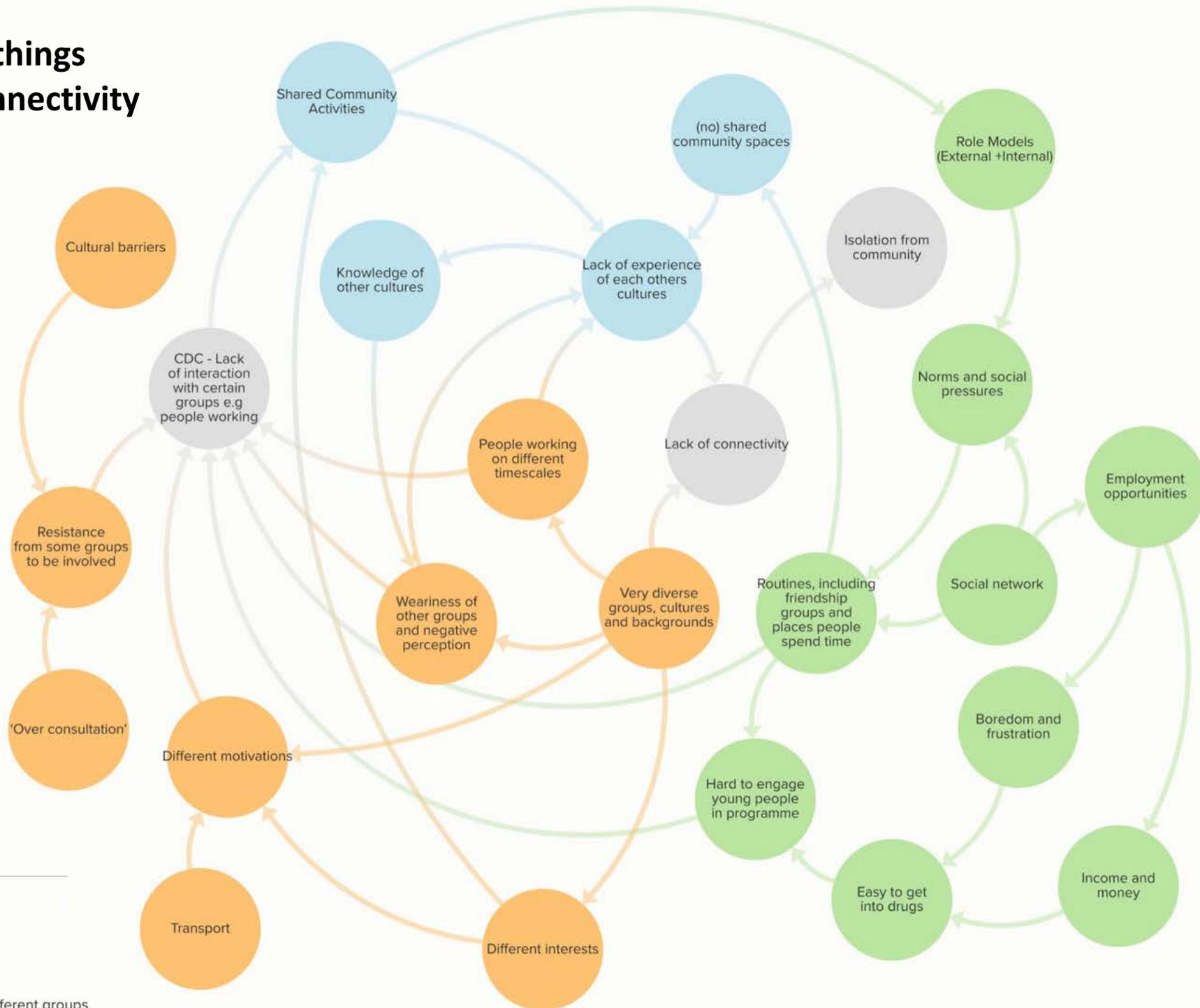
Chicksand guiding star

Communities in Chicksand feel connected to each other and connected to their place.

Chicksand feels like a vibrant community where everyone belongs.

Legend

- Opposite
- Young people
- Engaging diverse audiences
- Creating connectivity between different groups
- Negative outcomes



Theory of change

This theory of change template helps to think through the community and partner activities which might need to happen in order to achieve positive impact, and potential collaborators.

Community activities

Root causes

Activities

Intermediate impact

Outcomes

Core activities



Activities to unblock/amplify

Other things that you need to make sure these activities can succeed. (TBC)

Wider action

Partner activity (existing)

Partner activity (needed)

The things that we need other partners to do, but don't currently exist. (TBC)

Activities to support partner activity

Other things that you need to do to support these partner activities and link them in with your work, (TBC)

Guiding star

Other effects

Wider ecosystem

Core community partners

Other people who might be interested in your work

People you need to be involved

Identifying your assumptions

This theory of change template helps think through the main assumptions that are being made about an idea or questions to answer, so that they can be tested, reflected upon and improved.

	Desirability Who will benefit and why will they find it appealing? Who do you need to convince?	Viability What outcomes is the idea aiming to achieve and how likely is it to do so? What would stop it?	Feasibility How will the idea be delivered, by whom and with what resources? What skills are needed to deliver it?
What you know	-	-	-
What you don't know or are unsure of			

Top assumptions to test

Questions/ assumptions **A, B, C** and **D**

Defining your ecosystem

Needs/ challenges

Strengths and assets

How might you engage them?

Core
community
partners

Other people
who might be
interested

People who
need to be
involved

Prioritising what ideas to test or show (systems)



What is a quick win?

What is an iconic idea that tells a bigger story of your guiding star?

What is something that is emblematic of a new principle?

What would be helpful to build new relationships?

Where is there current pent up energy for change?

Remember a prototype is the smallest thing you can create to test these!

Understanding barriers & enablers



Barrier	How to unblock

The idea



Enabler	How to harness

Ways of intervening & creating change



Making a connection	Setting new rules
Campaigning & lobbying	Changing behaviour
Upskilling & capacity building	Change the power dynamics
Changing existing services	Creating a new space
Creating new services	Collecting & sharing data
Changing narratives	Telling stories
Building community and networks	Setting collective targets