



# Fixing the hamster wheel of homelessness



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From a piecemeal approach to whole system transformation of services - early experiences of systems change in Nottingham



This case study is aimed at those interested in learning about systems change, especially in the context of support for people with multiple and complex needs. Systems change is a much debated concept with many different complex and often abstract and theoretical definitions being used to describe it. This case study attempts to de-mystify this concept by showing what it means to one of the grantholders of the Big Lottery Fund. Opportunity Nottingham is one of 12 projects funded by the Big Lottery Fund through a strategic investment of the England portfolio, 'Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs'.

Keyword reference: Systems change, multiple and complex needs, Fulfilling Lives

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*John (not his real name) has been an alcoholic most of his adult life. His addiction and related behavioural issues have led to a breakdown in his home and work relationships and he's now unemployed and sleeping rough. He has underlying mental health issues but these have not been formally diagnosed or treated. There's no easy way for him to access the help he unpredictable behaviour. He can't see a GP because the local surgery won't register him without an address. Mental health services won't work with him until his drinking is under control. Drug and alcohol services can't refer him on until his behavioural issues are addressed.*

This kind of life is an example of a reality for an estimated 58,000 people in England<sup>1</sup> (or approx. 0.2% of the adult population) who have been identified as having multiple and complex needs - defined as people with, 'some combination of homelessness, substance misuse, mental health problems, and offending behaviours'.<sup>2</sup> Services have not found effective ways to break this cycle, and people with complex needs face significant barriers to accessing the support they need.

The overall 'system' - the network of statutory and non-statutory services that should be there to improve the lives of people with multiple and complex needs - isn't effectively designed to support complexity. In Nottingham some parts of the 'system' work better than others, and positive improvements in strategy and planning are starting to appear<sup>3</sup> but, as a whole, the system isn't able to tackle the problems and barriers that people face in their daily lives. People report that their experiences of accessing services and professionals' misunderstanding and misperception of their needs and experiences can reinforce feelings of hopelessness and exclusion<sup>4</sup>.

The challenging financial and political context means that Local Authorities, commissioners and service providers are dealing with significant cuts to their budgets and the profound impact this has on frontline service delivery.

# Opportunity Nottingham

[Opportunity Nottingham](#) is one of 12 projects funded by the Big Lottery Fund through a strategic investment of the England portfolio, 'Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs'. It aims to support people with multiple and complex needs and improve the way in which services are planned, designed, commissioned and delivered. Between 2014 and 2022, Opportunity Nottingham will receive £9.8m.

The project is led by [Framework](#), a local charity and housing association, in partnership with a large network of organisations, including Nottingham City Council, Nottingham City Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), and a range of charities.

Over eight years, the project will work with around 470 adults in Nottingham who are experiencing at least three out of four project criteria; homelessness, offending, mental ill-health and substance misuse<sup>5</sup>. While a new way of delivering practical support for beneficiaries is an essential part of the project, it has two further aims:

1. To improve frontline services and make them more effective by listening to what people with complex needs want and need.
2. To deliver systems change at strategic and commissioning level by working with strategic leaders and using the learning, outcomes and impacts of the programme to change how services work in practice.

An Expert Citizens Group of individuals who are current or former beneficiaries has set out a vision for a system of services that would meet their needs as individuals and treat them flexibly. Their vision emphasises a person-centred system that works with people at their pace, with compassion, respect and flexibility, as summarised in figure 1.

“We hope to change the way people experiencing multiple and complex needs are supported. We believe they should be able to easily access appropriate services when they need to, for as long as they need to. We believe their voices should be heard, and they should inform the support available to them”



Figure 1: System of services for people with multiple and complex needs



Source: Based on a number of publications of Opportunity Nottingham, including Systems Change Plan 2015-2018, Year 2 evaluation, operational systems change plan 2016

## The approach: principles and goals

The project team view systems change as, ‘a sustainable transformation in how individuals, services, strategies, commissioning processes and policy combine to support people with multiple and complex needs’. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. So systems change in Nottingham is not about improving individual services, but improving the whole ‘ecosystem’ in a holistic and joined up way.

This requires a shared vision of what the system of services should look like and a focus on ensuring a lasting legacy that will improve future commissioning and delivery of services beyond the life of the project.

Overall, the team is working to achieve change at four levels<sup>6</sup>:

“Systems change should involve everyone involved in planning, designing, commissioning, managing, delivering and receiving these services”

**Beneficiary level:** the end goal is to improve outcomes for beneficiaries - enabling services to help people to take control and improve their lives. Change at this level also places responsibility on beneficiaries to recognise and begin to change negative and unhelpful behaviours, with the right kind of help and support.

**Operational (or service) level:** change at this level is not just about how services are configured and delivered, but also the culture change that is needed to enable this. This means changes from rule or process-driven services (for example, penalising beneficiaries for missing appointments or set-backs in their recovery) to more person-centred and values-based approaches.

**Strategic and commissioning level:** the change here involves positioning people with multiple support needs as a priority in local strategic planning and commissioning. This includes better integration so that people with complex needs aren’t expected to navigate through a web of different services all of which have different rules and speak a different ‘language’.

**National (policy and funding) level:** the project is also seeking to influence policy-making around multiple and complex needs; the project team sees their work and the wider Fulfilling Lives programme as an opportunity to test how far better-integrated policy, planning and commissioning of services delivers cost-benefit and wider benefits to the community.

**Example:** The City Council Housing Strategy Team asked for help to review their support for homeless people in Nottingham. The project delivered a presentation including an Expert Citizen’s view of “the hamster wheel of homelessness.” Nottingham City Council have now publicly committed to using Opportunity Nottingham learning and best practice throughout their forthcoming design and tendering of supported housing and homelessness services.

# Key elements of systems change in Nottingham

## Bringing the voice of lived experience to the forefront

The project will ensure that commissioners, politicians and other decision-makers hear directly from people with multiple and complex needs:

- )] Expert Citizens: a panel of people with lived experience who feel ready and able to get involved and have their say<sup>7</sup> have made suggestions about policy and practice change, worked with local and national agencies on service developments, shared their experiences at events, developed training and taken part in the recruitment process for new Opportunity Nottingham staff.
- )] Beneficiary Ambassadors: four people with lived experience, who are paid, have provided knowledge and input to local and national meetings (strategy, commissioning and general awareness-raising) and delivered presentations at strategy meetings and events (including Westminster).

## Piloting new ways of working

Up to July 2017, the project has engaged and supported 305 people and is following the progress and journey of each individual to assess outcomes.

The project has established a tenancy support service for people with multiple complex needs who are living in their own tenancy (such as private rented or local authority accommodation). The service differs from many of the traditional delivery models in that it provides intensive, regular and non-time limited support. Tenants can therefore often be seen for two to three hours per day if needed. Despite working with some of the most challenging and complex individuals in the City, many of whom have a long previous history of rough sleeping, the service has a 100% success rate in ensuring that everyone it is supporting has been able to maintain their accommodation so far.

An information sharing pilot has been established with the Nottinghamshire Healthcare Trust Primary Care Mental Health Service (PCMHS) giving them read-only access to beneficiary records (with their consent). These include a risk assessment, demographic information and case notes, enabling staff to have more information on each individual's needs and with the benefit of reducing the number of times people have to tell their story; a key element of the system change plan.

## Influencing strategy, commissioning and policy

Project staff are raising awareness and working to influence policy and practice for people with complex needs, with a focus on how more coordinated and compassionate approaches to support could benefit providers as well as the individual and wider society.

Following Nottingham City Council's consultation on homelessness services<sup>8</sup>, the new draft proposals on how such services are commissioned and provided in the future now reflect the learning provided by Opportunity Nottingham. For example, it highlights:

- )] The need for longer contracts for providers of homeless and supported housing services to promote stability and to encourage providers to invest in the development of services (three-year contracts are too short)
- )] Non time limited housing and mental health support for the homeless with mental ill health (artificial deadlines for recovery don't work)



- J The need for supported accommodation providers for people with complex needs to work to principles that promote positive experiences for service users (non holistic focus doesn't work).

The Opportunity Nottingham model is increasingly cited as an example of good practice on multiple and complex needs. Most recently, the local Joint Strategic Needs Assessment detailed and named the approaches taken both by Opportunity Nottingham and the national Fulfilling Lives programme as examples of good practice.

There is also increasing interest from a range of agencies in Nottingham city and beyond. For example, the Nottingham County Council have asked for their help to inform supported housing plans and their work on integrating services for complex needs.

**Example:** The project submitted comments to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) consultation on coexisting severe mental illness and substance misuse and a number of their recommendations informed new clinical guidance. These include:

- J Ensuring that secondary care mental health services, physical health, social care, housing or other support services do not exclude people with severe mental illness because of their substance misuse.
- J Ensuring that agencies and staff communicate with each other so the person is not automatically discharged from their care plan because they missed an appointment.
- J Involving people with coexisting severe mental illness and substance misuse, their family or carers in improving the design and delivery of existing services
- J Raise staff awareness of the needs of people with coexisting severe mental illness and substance misuse, including the fact that they may be traumatised.

*Source: Coexisting severe mental illness and substance misuse: community health and social care services. NICE guideline [NG58] November 2016*

### Improving frontline delivery

As well as making improvements at strategic and commissioning level, Opportunity Nottingham are working to influence attitudes, values and practices on the frontline, through training, peer support, reflective practice and service 'standards' co-produced with service users (the Pledge).

The project is setting up a cross-sector Practice Development Unit to bring together practitioners and managers from different services to share and reflect on their experiences in supporting people with multiple and complex needs. The Unit will operate as a Community of Practice where each participant is both a learner and a teacher. It will target staff from large statutory services and seek to achieve change 'from within' by influencing their individual and collective

**Example:** The Pledge was developed by beneficiaries and staff as a 'standard' for service delivery and interaction that everyone should work towards. It is being trialled with frontline services with a goal of embedding it in commissioning and contract management. So far it has been received positively, with new services outside the city including East Midlands Ambulance Service which is keen to adopt it in their work.

practice.

Training for all staff in frontline services of Opportunity Nottingham has been developed and is on offer to be delivered by the Beneficiary Ambassadors and Expert Citizens. The training is based on the Pledge and can help all providers working with this target group to look at how they might adopt and implement the Pledge within their own organisation.

## Key challenges to date

### **Financial and political uncertainty**

Programme delivery is taking place in a challenging and dynamic political and economic context. Most services have faced cuts in funding and/or reduced access to grants and other revenue streams, often in the context of rising demand<sup>9</sup>. Whilst there is some consensus that supporting people with complex needs is the right thing to do, it isn't always easy to convince services to prioritise this, especially if the financial benefits of the investment are not visible in their part of the system.

For example, it is not always easy to convince mental health services to invest in support if the most immediate benefits and savings are felt in policing or ambulance services. The question, 'how much money can you save from my department's budget?' is posed frequently by Heads of Departments and the answer is not straightforward.

### **Dealing with the complexity of the system**

Bringing about change within a complex system that supports people with multiple needs is a huge challenge in itself. Funding for this target group involves a highly complex web of authorities, commissioners, delivery organisations and charities and it is not unreasonable to anticipate further changes and reorganisations in these organisations<sup>10</sup>. Equipping frontline staff with skills to navigate through all these services is demanding too. This is correct to say this. In terms of our staff, what works is that they have become experienced at getting to know services and understanding how they work, negotiating with them in order to help them deliver a service that can meet the needs of complex people and in guiding beneficiaries through the complexity, supporting them to stay engaged when they might otherwise have dropped out.

It's worth noting that finding a shared vision for the future is taking time because 'the system' looks different for each stakeholder.

### **Working with the 'new kid on the block'**

Budget and staff cuts have hit some organisations hard so a well-resourced project like Opportunity Nottingham isn't always met with open arms. When existing services are struggling to deliver to a higher number of people with fewer resources, the capacity and willingness to innovate and change at the same time is tested.

There have been examples of statutory services wanting to 'offload' people onto projects, rather than engage in the process of whole system transformation. It has taken time to build relationships and trust within the system, but working together on projects, plans and frontline delivery has helped build trust, open doors and change organisational culture.

### **Fixing the future vs. saving lives today**

Communicating the importance of work around systems change and the need for recording and monitoring hasn't been easy. Systems change can be hard to explain and



may feel less pressing when working directly with people for whom life and death issues occur regularly.

Opportunity Nottingham have found that explaining that ‘systems change is almost like taking part in one big important research assignment’ - and demonstrating that collecting evidence is critical if the project is to influence and improve mainstream practice has helped get buy-in to carry out surveys and complete monitoring forms. Equally important are face to face staff briefings rather than sending emails. Regular updates on developments around systems change are also of value.

## Key learning and enabling factors

### **Grab every opportunity**

When opportunities to influence the system come your way, it's important to seize them immediately rather than waiting or sticking to a previously planned timetable.

### **Be the change you want to see**

Be proactive, tenacious, positive and 'loud'! The project has reflected that knocking on doors, turning up at meetings, regularly communicating through presentations and events, inviting visitors to see work in action, proactively and openly sharing data & findings, whilst being honest and reflective are enabling them to progress their work. *‘You need to be ever-the-optimist and keep on hammering the message’.*

The ‘you should do this’ approach does not work to influence policy or practice. Instead, delivering services in line with your vision, studying the impact of this new way of delivering and sharing the learning, any evidence you’ve been able to gather and how this is affecting your beneficiary’s lives seems to help bring about changes.

Working alongside staff from statutory services and showing them in practical ways through 'case' work with individual beneficiaries, also really helps to build trust and develop relationships.

### **Work reflectively**

Seek out and act on feedback and critique. Be prepared to review and change your own practice on a regular basis and adapt and learn from your own mistakes and breakthroughs.

### **Put service users front and centre**

Increasing focus on commissioning outcomes-driven services, combined with joint commissioning for involvement of people with lived experience in commissioning & funding panels and consideration of how service providers should treat their service users are important for Opportunity Nottingham.

Integrating the voice of lived experience in all aspects of the project has paid dividends, ‘people and organisations want to listen to them. Their voice and involvement differentiate you from other projects and organisations.’

### **Think about the journey, as well as the destination**

Systems change is a process, not a one-off activity, so it is normal have to iterate and adapt your plans regularly. The initial systems change plan was designed for three years, and the partnership is now revising this to take account of the learning and findings from the delivery to date. Partners have a much better understanding of the blockages and strengths in the current system and how to adapt and work with and around them.

### **Flex your resources**

Increasingly the Project Manager's time is spent on enabling systems change rather than frontline delivery.

Recruiting a Communications Officer, even to a part time role, has helped with sharing messages about ambitions and evidence in a more professional and convincing manner.

Being able to capitalise on support from a 'strategic friend', someone who can help to spot opportunities to influence policy and commissioning, is helpful.

The ability to use project funding to commission small services to fill system holes and demonstrate how these are effective ensures that bigger players take the project seriously. Supportive funding environment also has a role: the flexibility to adapt, deploy resources differently and to take risks is important.

Finally, it's essential to have a good Chair: someone who is well-connected and understands the local decision-making, commissioning and political environment. Opportunity Nottingham has been able to secure the former Chief Executive of Nottingham City Council as their Chair and this has helped the project tremendously.

### **Look after your staff**

Ensure you have resources to look after your frontline staff. Working with some of the most disfranchised members of the community isn't easy and can take its toll. Staff have experienced bouts of sickness and stress, and well-being can suffer when dealing with a situation where, '*there are no easy cases*'. This calls for supportive management and a strong peer support system for employees.

### **Monitor and evaluate wisely and share your knowledge**

Systems change is difficult to measure and attribute, but robust evidence and on-going learning and evaluation help to build credibility. Even the most committed project partners need, '*realistic, convincing numbers*' to back up their arguments, but data only tells part of the story. Value and utilise different kinds of learning and evidence, including beneficiary stories.

Make all data, learning and evidence freely available to anyone who is interested.

### **Look up and out**

Get the right partners on board and review the composition of the partnership on an on-going basis. The road to systems change is much harder, if not impossible, if the project doesn't have the buy-in of key strategic partners in the city (Local Authority, Clinical Commissioning Group).

Above all find partners who value the vision for the improved system over their ambitions for their individual organisation.

## Sources

This case study builds on interviews with the project manager and evaluation lead of Opportunity Nottingham and reports, plans, evaluations, website (<http://www.opportunitynottingham.co.uk/>) and summaries prepared by the project staff, including:

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  2. Ibid.
  3. Opportunity Nottingham (2015) Systems Change Plan 2015-2018. [unpublished]
  4. Opportunity Nottingham (2014) Fulfilling Lives for People with Multiple and Complex Needs in Nottingham. Business Plan 2014-2022.
  5. At application stage, national research and a local Needs Audit identified 350 people in Nottingham who fit the criteria
  6. Opportunity Nottingham (2015) Op. cit.
  7. There is no official commitment, and Expert Citizens can do as little or as much as they want to.
  8. Social Inclusion (Homelessness) Strategic Commissioning Review 2017/18 < <http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/business-information-and-support/commissioning-contracting-and-procurement/commissioning-of-adult-children-and-family-services/> accessed: 27/09/17>  
Accessed: 27/09/17>
  9. Opportunity Nottingham (2015) Op. cit.
  10. Ibid.



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