Health Foundation

Shaping Places for Healthier Lives

Summative learning and research report (2021-24)

December 2024

CordisBright

PPL

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Executive summary

Shaping Places for Healthier Lives

Shaping Places for Healthier Lives (SPHL) was a grant programme for local government in England, funded by the Health Foundation and delivered jointly with the Local Government Association (LGA).

The programme funded five local authority-led projects over three years for up to a total of £300,000. These were:

- Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (Shaping Places for Healthier Lives BNSSG)
- Doncaster (Shaping Stainforth)
- Newham (We Are Food Secure 11-19)
- Northumberland (Heart of Blyth)
- Shropshire (Shaping Places Shropshire)

The programme supported local authorities to take a complex systems approach to public health challenges. This included improving cross-sector partnerships and system leadership to positively impact population health.

Cordis Bright, PPL and COBIC were commissioned to be the independent Learning and Research Partners (LRP). This report presents lessons from the SPHL programme, covering the period from October 2021 to August 2024.

Additional systems education and training support was provided by Design Council.

Learning and research approach

The learning and research activities sought to understand the extent to which SPHL project teams have understood and applied a complex systems response to the wider determinants of health.

Research questions were agreed collaboratively with the Health Foundation and the LGA. The overarching learning and research questions are as follows:

1. What do we mean by complex systems in the context of the wider determinants of health?
2. How do you change these systems to improve the wider determinants of health?
3. What happens to these systems when you make these changes?
4. What can we learn from this process?

The learning and research project has taken a qualitative approach to capturing evidence from the SPHL programme, as summarised in Figure 1. This included annual consultation with three groups of stakeholders:

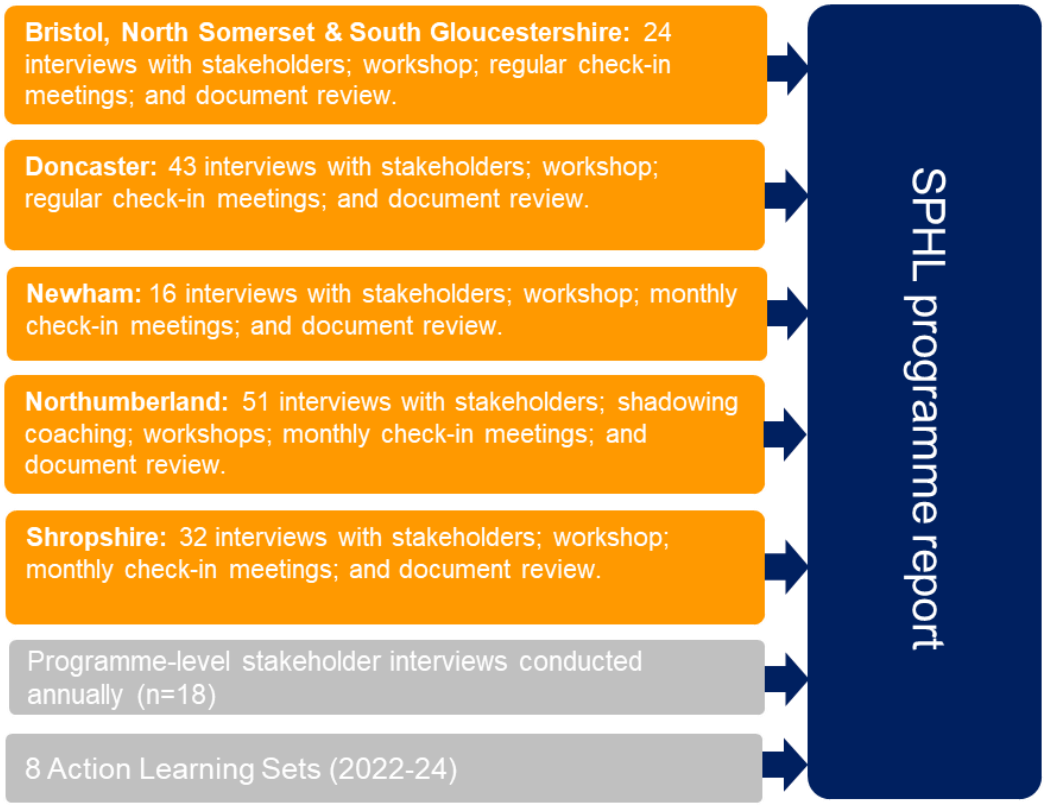
- **SPHL programme stakeholders**, i.e., the Health Foundation, LGA and Design Council.
- **Project stakeholders**, i.e., the teams delivering SPHL projects in each of the five local authority areas.
- **Local stakeholders**, referring to individuals involved in local projects but outside of the SPHL delivery teams (e.g., from a strategic perspective, as a partner, as a volunteer, etc.). Project stakeholders recommended who the LRP consult with each year of the programme, which meant some local stakeholders were interviewed more than once across the programme.

Other fieldwork conducted included:

- Workshops conducted annually with project stakeholders and a sample of local stakeholders proposed by each local authority team. These brought different groups of stakeholders together to explore the changes they were making in their local complex systems.
- In addition, the LRP attended the six-weekly check in meetings with local authority teams led by the LGA throughout the programme. This enabled the LRP to keep abreast of their local activities and approaches.

Throughout this report, we will present findings from stakeholder interviews. Where relevant we will refer to programme, project or local stakeholders to explain the source of evidence. Where we say ‘stakeholders’, there is consistent evidence from multiple sources (i.e. programme, project and local stakeholders agree on a point of view).

Figure 1: Summary of fieldwork and reporting



The learning and research project used a thematic framework developed by the LRP in collaboration with the Health Foundation and LGA which drew on systems change academic literature. The framework was used to analyse the different approaches taken to implementing a complex system approach and the difference this has made to the systems. The framework can be seen in Appendix A: Thematic framework.

Understanding of complex systems and system approaches

Sites took similar approaches to how they learnt about their own local systems, even though the systems they were focused on differed in many ways, including size and how the boundaries were drawn:

- **Defining their systems**. The sites defined their own systems of interest, leading to diverse approaches to bounding their local systems. Four of the sites took a place-based approach to defining their systems using an existing geographic or administrative boundary, but the scale and focus varied significantly. The largest site covered an Integrated Care System footprint, whereas the smallest site focused on a village. One site defined their system based around a specific population accessing a particular service setting. Choices made about how to define the system have shaped the local authorities' approaches to changing the systems.

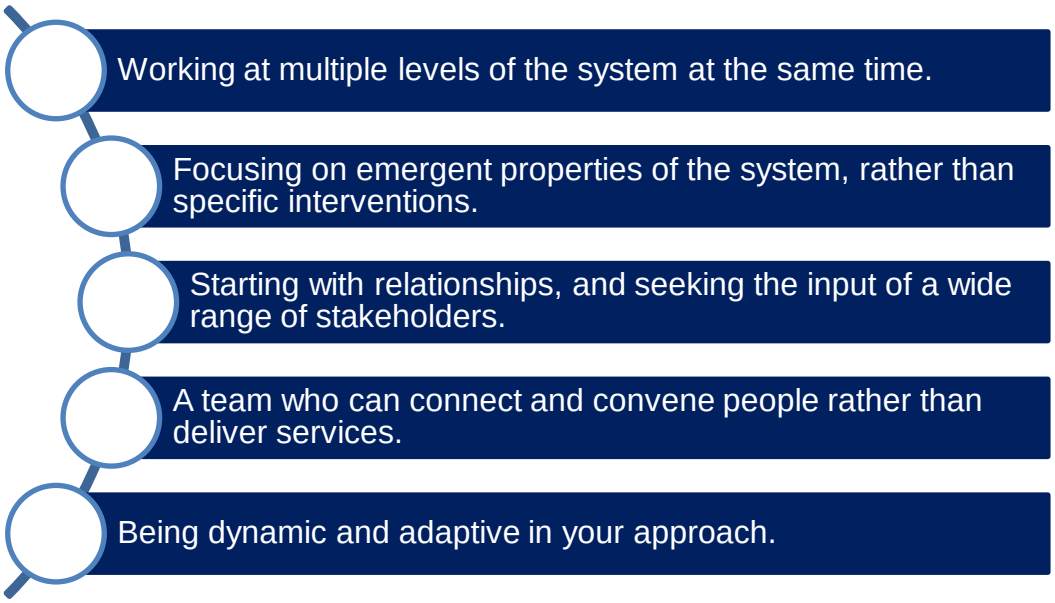
- **Taking a complex system perspective**. There were several concepts that most project stakeholders referenced when asked about how they take a complex system perspective. For example, they highlight that systems include multiple stakeholders, outcomes are driven by multiple factors, and relationships of cause and effect are often non-linear. Overall, most teams (and the other organisations they worked with) throughout the programme found it easier to explain in an accessible and clear way what they meant by a system, than specifically what a complex system perspective to addressing health outcomes involved.

- **Learning about their own local systems.** All sites used system mapping and consultation with key stakeholders as key mechanisms to develop their understanding of their local systems. Teams identified that system mapping helped by bringing stakeholders together to identify key features of systems, and how different parts of the system connected. Consultation helped teams identify specific leverage points in their systems and monitor on an ongoing basis how their system was changing, as well as support improved relationships and partnerships.

Complex system change approaches

There was not one set of actions that described how sites were applying a complex system approach. Stakeholders identified five features of a complex system approach that distinguished it from their usual ways of working on these issues. These include:

Figure 2: Five features of a complex system approach[1]



Effectiveness of implementation

Stakeholders identified a range of enablers and obstacles to implementing a complex system approach. Enablers included:

- **The skills and local connections of team members:** teams benefited from staff with strong local knowledge and connections, enabling effective engagement with both staff and the community. These individuals played a crucial role in bridging divides and fostering collaboration.
- **Alignment with supportive local policy environments:** complementary policy agendas and regeneration initiatives provided opportunities for teams to progress their work, along with encouraging stakeholder buy-in.
- **Backing of strategic system leaders**: project and programme stakeholders noted that gaining key decision-makers' buy-in increased project reach and credibility.
- **The flexibility of the programme design:** the SPHL programme's flexibility in funding and approach allowed teams to adapt and experiment.

[1] Definition: Emergent properties refers to characteristics or behaviours of a system that arise from the interactions between individual elements but are not present or predictable from examining the individual parts alone.

Stakeholders identified the following obstacles as having impeded progress during the programme:

- **Contextual challenges like the Covid-19 pandemic and the Cost of Living crisis:** these created difficult conditions for implementing system change approaches, limiting community engagement and resources.

- **Resource constraints placed demands on teams' already limited capacity and made project scale-up challenging**: the complexity and scale of projects exceeded available resources, making long-term sustainability and strategic reflection challenging.

- **Challenges securing widespread buy-in from key stakeholders and maintain momentum beyond the programme's duration:** resource constraints, high turnover among partners, and difficulty engaging certain system actors all complicated other system actors taking teams' work forward beyond the end of the SPHL programme.

- **Protecting time to keep stepping back and reflecting on the system as a whole:** project stakeholders identified that they have often struggled to create sufficient bandwidth to recognise how the system is changing and reflect on whether their approach needs to adapt in response.

What difference has taking a complex system approach made?

Project stakeholders have observed changes across their systems in all five local authority areas. These changes were not always linear, often requiring simultaneous work across multiple system levels. Each project also started from a different position in respect of local familiarity and buy-in to system approach. This influenced the pace of change in each area.

The learning and research project used the Action Scales Model to identify the different levels of a complex system at which the sites were making a difference. It includes four levels: beliefs, goals, structures, and event (see Appendix A: Thematic framework).

Project stakeholders identified that changes have been often at the structural level. As the SPHL programme has progressed, however, there is increasing evidence of teams having changed key local stakeholders' beliefs and goals. Changes observed include:

- **Beliefs:** by the end of Year 3, project stakeholders increasingly reported having shifted the beliefs and attitudes of citizens, staff who provide services, and strategic leaders in their systems. This includes changing views about the issues being addressed and using a system change approach to doing this. These changes included persuading decision-makers about the merits of a system change approach; reframing public health concerns or promoting their importance; and encouraging greater confidence and agency among community members.

- **Goals:** we observed progress across sites in changing key actors' goals. This included community groups pursuing more ambitious goals independently of the teams, and securing commitments from partners to tackling the health issues projects addressed. Evidence of changes to goals can be seen in policies and strategies produced by local authorities and their partners.

- **Structures:** Project stakeholders in most of the sites have reported that the biggest changes in their systems have been structural. These have included promoting more and stronger relationships across the system; improving the flows of information around the system, and changes to decision-making processes. These structural changes have promoted greater problem-solving properties in the system, without the need for a central body to direct these changes.

- **Events:** System change theory suggests that intervening at the point of events is the least effective means of changing a system, as it is more likely to treat the system than the cause of a problem. While teams tended to prioritise actions aimed at addressing how their systems operated, some teams influenced service delivery through commissioning new services or encouraging services to be delivered differently. These changes often improved access to support and ensured services better met local needs.

Impact on the determinants of health or public health outcomes

Project stakeholders in the SPHL programme have been cautious about attributing direct changes in health determinants to their work due to the short timeframe and challenging socioeconomic contexts – this was always the expectation of the Health Foundation, LGA and sites from the application stage. However, they anticipate that the work carried out as part of SPHL will positively contribute to improved outcomes over time, if changes can be sustained. In particular, the sites were confident that they had already promoted a greater sense of agency amongst many of the people who have participated in their work.

Lessons from SPHL

What do we mean by complex systems in the context of the wider determinants of health?

The idea of a complex system has been used by sites to understand local challenges and identify solutions to the health issues being addressed. Common identified features of their systems included multiple stakeholders, complex interrelationships, and diverse leverage points.

Across the five sites, we have observed that there is no single or definitive interpretation of what a complex system should include, how it should be drawn, or what activities should be taken as part of a complex system approach. It can be applied flexibly to multiple systems of interest and public health challenges.

This is evident by the way that each site defined their system boundaries differently based on local geography, scale, and participant involvement. Some

aligned with geographic or administrative areas, while others focused on specific communities. This highlights the versatility of the approach for local authorities interested in using a system approach, but also the challenge that it is not an easy-to-manualise process that places can simply pick up and replicate.

How do you change these systems to improve the wider determinants of health?

There have been similarities in the approach that sites have each taken and what has been most effective. These include:

1. Working at multiple levels of the system at the same time.
2. Focusing on emergent properties of the system, rather than specific interventions.
3. Starting with relationships, and seeking the input of a wide range of stakeholders.
4. A team who can connect and convene people rather than deliver services.
5. Being dynamic and adaptive in their approach, but not simply reactive or opportunistic.

All sites have sought to make changes at different levels of the system at the same time. This has required them to influence their system at a structural level (relationships, partnerships, information and resource sharing) at the same time as promoting changes in beliefs and goals. This multi-layered approach distinguishes a complex system change approach to other change management approaches.

Sites have focused on making changes that support how effectively their system functions as a whole by connecting different stakeholders and strengthening relationships. Relationship building is at the heart of the work, and it requires a team that is able to play the role of connector and convenor effectively. It also requires teams to be responsive and adaptable as their system changes and new opportunities present themselves, without losing focus on the bigger picture.

Project stakeholders identified a number of important enablers that have helped them to progress. For many, the key factors have been the skills and experience of staff and, in particular, having staff who are capable of bringing together different stakeholders, bridging different organisations, and promoting partnership working. Where teams have been able to capitalise on a supportive policy environment and engaged with strategic leaders, this has also helped.

However, project stakeholders also identified obstacles which have worked against their efforts to change their systems. These have included a challenging national context introducing pressures in local systems; resource constraints which limit project scale-up and challenges securing buy-in from system actors and striking the right balance between a strategic and responsive approach.

What happens to these systems when you make these changes?

The SPHL programme shows that modest resources can drive system changes in a short time. Project stakeholders are cautious about having influenced health outcomes at this stage, but are confident in their impact on creating conditions for

change and were able to point to progression along the path of their Theories of Change. This includes improved relationships and shifts in beliefs about how to address the determinants of health, which is increasingly reflected in policy and strategy.

What can we learn from this process?

The SPHL programme has been an innovative approach to supporting local authorities to develop their own complex system approaches. There are a number of lessons from this programme. These include lessons about the programme design, the need for complex system approaches, how we collectively talk about systems and the difference that it can make.

1. **SPHL programme design has promoted an innovative and experimental approach:** From the outset, it has sought to make a distinct offer to the local government sector. The programme has afforded the five local areas considerable freedom to try new ways of working without specifying how a complex system approach should be applied. Combined with the delivery support, local authorities have praised this approach for the way it has allowed them to experiment and apply a complex system approach to their own contexts.
2. **Participating local authorities are committed to their complex system approaches:** Each site involved remains committed to continuing their system approach in some form. There is evidence across the programme that local authorities can see the benefits of taking a system approach to resolve complex challenges like the determinants of poor health.
3. **A complex system approach can be applied to systems of different shapes and size:** SPHL has demonstrated the applicability of a complex system approach to systems of different sizes and configuration. It does not need to be a system of a particular size (e.g. an ICS or local authority footprint).
4. **Taking a complex system change perspective more closely resembles a particular problem-solving mindset than a model that can be easily manualised and replicated:** It requires consideration of change at all different levels of the system (beliefs, goals, structures and events), but beyond this, the activities undertaken depend considerably on local context and the wider determinant of health being addressed.
5. **Building trust between the team and local stakeholders is an essential component of system change work:** This is especially true where sites take a community-led approach. Project stakeholders recommend investing time in consultation with stakeholders and building meaningful relationships, both at the start and throughout the process.
6. **Communicating a complex system approach is challenging:** In each site, project stakeholders have described the challenges to find the best way of explaining their approach in appropriate and accessible language to different audiences. Some felt the technical language of complex systems is alienating to key audiences, and required alternative approaches; within the SPHL programme, trying to compare and contrast has been challenging too, to apply a single framework across different places. Finding a vocabulary which is precise enough to explain what is distinctive about a complex system approach, but widely accessible, remains a challenge.

7. **Taking a complex system approach can make a difference, even in challenging circumstances and in a relatively short time – it is important to capture strong evidence of this:** Despite the teams being cautious about the time that will be required to change population health outcomes, project stakeholders were confident that they have made a difference through the work of SPHL. This research highlights the importance of capturing evidence of the intermediate changes that happen in a system before the determinants of health can be improved. It also highlights the value of using a Theory of Change, informed by an understanding of systems and complexity, to describe what that journey will look like, and crafting a persuasive narrative for stakeholders that demonstrates where progress is being made.

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

In 2019, the Health Foundation and the Local Government Association (LGA) launched the Shaping Places for Healthier Lives (SPHL) programme. Cordis Bright, PPL and COBIC were commissioned to be the independent Learning and Research Partners (LRP).

The SPHL programme funded five local authority-led projects to take a complex systems approach to tackling a public health problem that affects their area. The participating areas are:

- Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (Shaping Places for Healthier Lives BNSSG)
- Doncaster (Shaping Stainforth)
- Newham (We Are Food Secure 11-19)
- Northumberland (Heart of Blyth)
- Shropshire (Shaping Places Shropshire)

Chapter 2 includes a detailed summary of each local authority-led approach.

This report presents lessons from the SPHL programme, covering the period from October 2021 to August 2024.

1.2 About the learning and research approach

The SPHL learning and research project sought to understand how local authorities could apply a system approach with a complex system perspective to public health challenges.

Four research questions were agreed by the Health Foundation and the LGA during an initial scoping phase. These were:

1. What do we mean by complex systems in the context of the wider determinants of health?
2. How do you change these systems to improve the wider determinants of health?
3. What happens to these systems when you make these changes?
4. What can we learn from this process?

In addition to these four learning and research questions, six additional points for further examination were identified:

1. What is required to understand a local system and its complexity, and to operationalise and sustain a complex systems response to the wider determinants of health that is responsive to the local context?
2. What resources, conditions, mechanisms, relationships and leadership approaches have facilitated this process and how have these been mobilised or leveraged by the project teams?
3. What role has the SPHL programme played in shaping the projects' interventions (including their complex systems approaches) and in supporting them to meet their objectives?
4. Which elements of the projects' approaches are most useful and could be rolled out more widely or adopted by other councils/places/systems?
5. How have the programme partners responded to ongoing feedback and learning, and amended their approach where necessary?
6. What have been the consequences of taking a complex system approach, including intended or unexpected consequences?

This report does not focus on the impact of the SPHL programme on population health outcomes. It was recognised by the Health Foundation, LGA and the participating sites that they were not aiming to change population health outcomes within the timeframe of SPHL.

Instead, in this report, we look at the difference that a complex system approach is making in each area, and consider the contribution of the approach to changes locally. This reflects the complexity of systems, how multiple forces may be acting on it at the same time, and the time required for changes to ultimately influence public health outcomes.

1.2.1 Research methodology

The learning and research project has taken a qualitative approach to capturing evidence from the SPHL programme.

Fieldwork was conducted annually, and included consultation with three groups of stakeholders:

- **SPHL programme stakeholders**, i.e., the Health Foundation, LGA and Design Council.
- **Project stakeholders**, i.e., the teams delivering SPHL projects in each of the five local authority areas.
- **Local stakeholders**, referring to individuals involved in local projects but outside of the SPHL delivery teams (e.g., from a strategic perspective, as a partner, as a volunteer, etc.) Project stakeholders recommended who the LRP consult with each year of the programme, which meant some local stakeholders were interviewed more than once across the programme.

Other fieldwork conducted included:

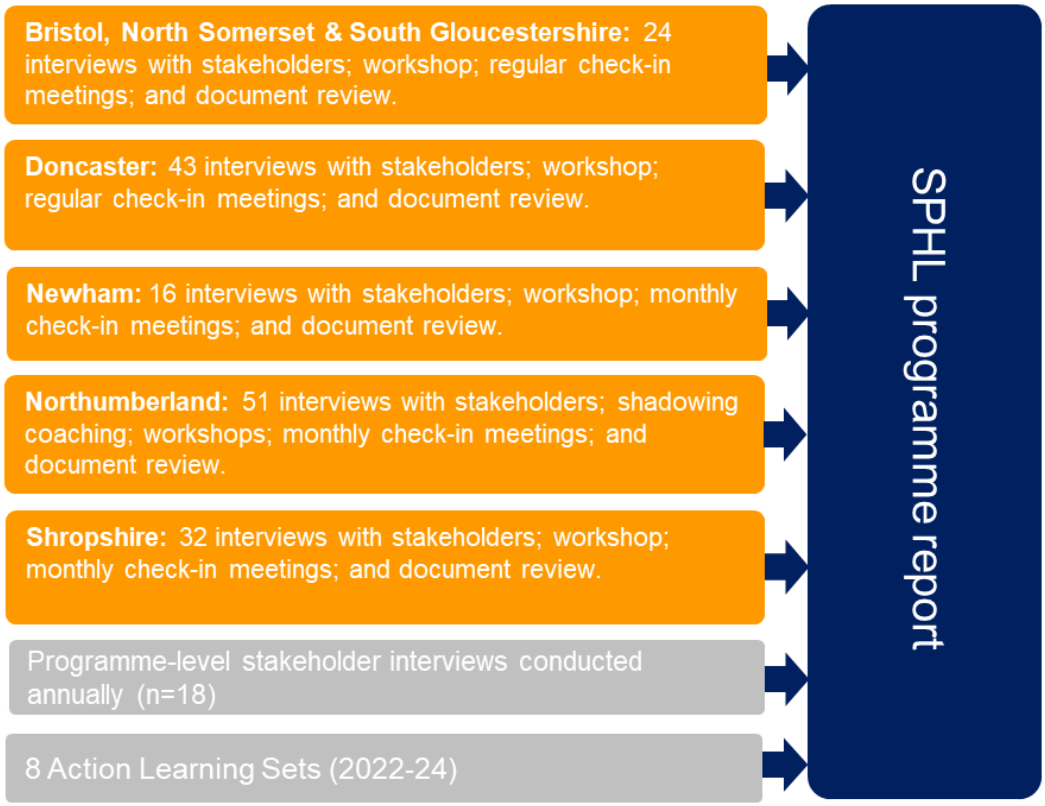
- Workshops conducted annually with project stakeholders and a sample of local stakeholders proposed by each local authority team. These brought

stakeholders together to explore the changes they were making in their local complex systems.

- In addition, the LRP attended the six-weekly check in meetings with local authority teams led by the LGA throughout the programme. This enabled the LRP to keep abreast of their local activities and approaches.

Throughout this report, we will present findings from stakeholder interviews. Where relevant we will refer to programme, project or local stakeholders to explain the source of evidence. Where we say, 'stakeholders' there is consistent evidence from multiple sources (i.e. programme, project and local stakeholders agree on a point of view).

Figure 3: Summary of fieldwork and reporting



1.2.2 Approach to analysis

The learning and research project adopted a thematic approach to analysis. A thematic framework was developed by the LRP in collaboration with the Health Foundation and LGA. It was based on academic literature about:

1. How to change systems to improve the wider determinants of health
2. What happens to a system when you try and make a change

The thematic framework was adopted after Year 1 of the programme. The reason for its addition was to help the learning and research project synthesise learning from across the SPHL programme, when each site was taking its own approach to system change.

In particular, the framework was a useful tool from a learning and research perspective to help ensure that a common language was being used across the programme.

The sites were not required to use the thematic framework to inform their own complex system approaches, although the framework was integrated into the reporting requirements used by the LGA to monitor the sites progress.

Some sites found the framework helpful, and used it to shape their approaches. Some sites highlighted that, if it had been in place from the outset, they may have planned their approach differently (see 3.4).

For the LRP, it helped to provide an explicit lens to observe each sites' approach, even if this may have differed to some extent from the sites' own original interpretation of a complex system approach.

The thematic framework has two parts. Part 1 is the Action Scales Model (ASM). This is a tool *"for policy makers, practitioners and evaluators to conceptualise, identify and appraise actions within complex adaptative systems."*[2] This helps us categorise the different actions teams pursued to change their systems and identify which of the following levels of their system they sought to influence:

- **Beliefs** (i.e., changing the norms, attitudes and values of people or organisations in the system)
- **Goals** (i.e., changing the stated aims, targets or ambitions that the individuals, organisations, or system as a whole are working towards)
- **Structures** (i.e., changing mechanisms such as the flow of information, resources, relationships, and processes that define how different parts of the system interact)
- **Events** (i.e., changing the things that happen in a system, like the behaviours of individuals or how services treat outcomes).

The second part of the framework was based on work by McGill et al. (2020), which examines the different processes that take place when complex systems

[2] Nobles, J. D., Radley, D., Mytton, O. T., & Whole Systems Obesity programme team. (2022). The Action Scales Model: A conceptual tool to identify key points for action within complex adaptive systems. *Perspectives in public health*, *142*(6), 328-337.

change.[3] It was used to help describe how each of the complex systems has changed in response to the actions taken by local authorities. The processes included:

- **Non-linearity:** changes made in one area of the system resulting in other changes elsewhere in the system.
- **Dynamism:** changes happening all the time, but not always in the same way.
- **System trajectory:** changes are sometimes slow and difficult, but sometimes sudden and dramatic
- **Unintended consequences**: changes are sometimes unexpected – which can be positive or negative.
- **Co-evolution:** changes in the system occur with and in response to other systems – which can be positive or negative.
- **Feedback**: changes made resulting in further changes that have helped or slowed down progress.
- **Adaption**: changes made in one place have led different parts of the system to change independently in response.
- **Emergent properties:** changes to parts of the system affect how it functions as a whole.

The thematic framework is used in this report to present how the sites applied their respective complex system approaches, and the difference this has made to their systems. The full framework can be seen in Appendix A: Thematic framework.

1.3 Report structure

This report includes:

- Chapter 2: About SPHL and the local authority projects
- Chapter 3: Understanding complex systems
- Chapter 4: Implementing a complex system change approach
- Chapter 5: Obstacles and enablers

[3] McGill, E., Marks, D., Er, V., Penney, T., Petticrew, M., & Egan, M. (2020). Qualitative process evaluation from a complex systems perspective: a systematic review and framework for public health evaluators. *PLoS medicine*, *17*(11), e1003368.

- Chapter 6: What difference has taking a complex system change made?
- Chapter 7: Discussion

2 Shaping Places for Healthier Lives Programme summary

2.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the SPHL programme. It includes:

- The programme aims and objectives
- A summary of the support provided to the local authorities by the SPHL programme
- Summaries of the different complex system approaches taken by each local authority-led project.

2.2 About Shaping Places for Healthier Lives

Shaping Places for Healthier Lives (SPHL) is a grant programme for local government in England, funded by the Health Foundation and delivered jointly with the Local Government Association (LGA). The programme has funded five projects for three years. Each local authority received up to £300,000.

2.2.1 Aims and objectives

> *"The overarching aim to is to create place-based conditions for healthier lives by enabling authority-led partnerships to take system-informed action on the wider determinants of health."*
>
> SPHL Theory of Change narrative

The SPHL programme aimed to improve health and health inequalities by focusing on the wider determinants of health. The wider determinants of health can include the social, economic, environmental and commercial conditions that shape our everyday lives and health.

In the short term, the programme aimed to:

- Support project teams to take system-informed action on the wider determinants of health.
- Improve project team's understanding of applying systems approaches to tackle the wider determinants of health.
- Gather insights from SPHL that could be applied to other programmes delivered by LGA and the Health Foundation.
- Provide insights and know-how about using systems approaches to other local authorities and other public health stakeholders, based on learning from SPHL.

In the longer term, the programme aspired to:

- Mobilise cross-sector action on the wider determinants of health through sustainable system change at a local level.
- Enable local authorities to facilitate and enable local partnerships for system change on the wider determinants of health.
- Learn how to make changes that impact on the wider determinants of health so that learning can be shared.

These outcomes are captured in the programme Theory of Change (see Appendix B: SPHL programme Theory of

2.2.2 Discovery Phase

Between 2019 and 2021, the programme completed a “discovery” phase. The discovery phase involved the LGA and the Health Foundation working with local authorities – including the five that were selected for the programme – to develop their proposals. This included a period of research and design work to better understand sites’ own local systems and how a complex system approach could be applied to their respective public health challenges.

During this period, each of the five sites developed their Theory of Change and a system map. The discovery phase was extended due to the impact of Covid-19.

2.2.3 Support provided by SPHL to the local authority projects

The SPHL programme has provided the following support to each of the five sites:

- **Programme oversight and management:** The LGA has provided oversight and project management support, including routine support, problem solving and monitoring of progress.
- **Design support:** The Design Council was commissioned by the LGA as the Delivery Support Partner (DSP) on the SPHL programme. The Design Council has supported the sites as systems leaders by providing systems thinking tools, resources and confidence. Over the course of the programme this support has been provided in the following ways:
  - **Coaching**: bespoke 1:1 support provided by a Design Council Expert with specialist systemic design skills, helping the sites zoom out and adding clarity to their complex systems work.
  - **Webinars**: pre-recorded episodes designed to create accessible systems content with practical tools and approaches that the sites could apply directly to their work, as well as share with community partners. Series included Characteristics of Changemakers and Designing for Legacy.
  - **Reflection sessions**: workshops focused on stepping back from day-to-day delivery and seeing the bigger picture, providing a moment to reset and move forward with more intention and renewed motivation.

- **Graphic design support**: an opportunity to work with a graphic designer to create a well-designed presentation that sites could share with stakeholders, influencing their systems with clear narratives and compelling visuals.

- **Learning and research:** Cordis Bright, PPL and COBIC have worked closely with each site to capture key learning on behalf of the sites and the programme.

2.3 About the local authority projects

There were five local authority projects, each of which aimed to tackle a different determinant of health using a systems approach. This section provides an overview of each site's aims, rationale and key activities delivered.

2.3.1 Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (Shaping Places for Healthier Lives BNSSG)

Aim: BNSSG aimed to address food insecurity across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire through systemic change by leveraging community resources at regional, local authority and neighbourhood levels.

Key participants: Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council and South Gloucestershire Council, working in partnership with a network of local voluntary sector organisations

Summary: The rationale for this project was to build on community strengths and resources to develop sustainable solutions to local food insecurity in areas of high need.

The team have provided funding to communities in a way that supports collaboration between groups and a focus on addressing the underlying issues of food insecurity. In addition, the team have worked across their three local authorities to raise the profile of food insecurity and to support the development of system plans and approaches, building on local assets.

Key activities have included mapping local food provision, collaborating with and developing food networks and partnerships, and engaging with community and statutory organisations. Initiatives focused on shifting from crisis mindset (e.g., emergency provision of food) to sustainable solutions, empowering community organisations, and enhancing existing food access.

Stakeholders reported that the project had helped improve access to nutritious food, increased community participation, and a shift towards long-term thinking in addressing food insecurity.

The initiative has led to a systemic shift, encouraging collaboration among community groups and fostering broader social issue discussions. Local stakeholders have observed increased community engagement, enhanced agency and skills, and active participation in decision-making processes. The

project has influenced local councils' approaches to community projects, emphasising resident participation and learning opportunities.

Further details about BNSSG's approach can be seen at: https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/whole-systems-project-improve-food-security-across-bristol-north-somerset-and-south

2.3.2 Doncaster (Shaping Stainforth)

Aim: Shaping Stainforth focused on addressing the wider determinants of poor mental health in the town of Stainforth.

Key participants: Doncaster Council, Stainforth Town Council, Stainforth4All and other local charities.

Summary: Stainforth is a small, former mining town of approximately 6,000 residents. Shaping Stainforth has aimed to build the capabilities of this community and capitalise on local assets to positively influence determinants of poor mental health. These include economic inactivity, limited opportunities for young people, and lack of access to green spaces.

The rationale for this project is that, by focusing on tackling some of these challenges and building on local strengths, the causes of poor mental health might be addressed, rather than solely focusing on service provision to treat the outcomes from poor mental health.

Shaping Stainforth has undertaken a wide variety of different actions and activities across three years, including a mix of one-time and ongoing activities. Shaping Stainforth's work has typically been in one of three areas: 1) relationships and engagement; 2) mental health services and; 3) youth voice and opportunities.

Shaping Stainforth has a number of achievements. These include:

- **Impact on beliefs, especially of individuals engaged directly by the programme**. This is typically the beliefs of local residents, whose views about Stainforth and the role they have in shaping it, have been challenged.

- **Building relationships and networks**. Stakeholders also identified structural changes in terms of relationships and partnerships forming, with promising signs that the connections that have been fostered are generating further connections and actions.

Further details about Shaping Stainforth's approach can be seen at: https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/doncaster-council-giving-young-people-voice-stainforth

2.3.3 Newham (We Are Food Secure 11-19)

Aim: The Newham We Are Food Secure 11-19 project aimed to address food insecurity by supporting community-led solutions, reframing of food insecurity, enabling individuals to maximise income and creating learning structures.

Key participants: Newham Council, The Association for Young People's Health (AYPH), and London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Summary: The project team recognised the systemic nature of food security challenges needed to be explored further to identify gaps and maximise the interconnection between initiatives, particularly for the borough's 11-19 year-olds as they go through secondary school and start to become independent from their families in terms of food choices and habits.

The project team have focused on building relationships across the system by reaching out directly, attending relevant conferences, and hosting workshops designed to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders.

Key activities have included engaging with young people in school and out of school settings to understand their views on food choices and food security. The team have also worked closely with schools to help and encourage them to raise the profile of food in that setting and using the Healthy Schools Framework. Out of school settings have focused on Youth Zones and working with young people and staff to raise awareness of food issues.

Stakeholders noted significant progress in raising the profile of food insecurity in schools, aiming to make them "food havens". Some schools have even submitted their applications for Good Food School Awards with the project team's support and guidance. This demonstrates a new focus on food security, allowing the project team to share best practices with other schools and further their impact.

Further details about Newham's approach can be seen at: https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/london-borough-newham-we-are-food-secure-11-19-project

2.3.4 Northumberland (Heart of Blyth)

Aim: Heart of Blyth aimed to improve Blyth's health and wellbeing – in particular, fear of crime among its residents – by strengthening communities utilising an asset-based approach.

Key participants: Northumberland County Council, Blyth Valley Community and Voluntary Action (BVCVA), Northumbria University, Northumbria Police and other voluntary and community sector organisations.

Summary: The rationale for this approach was that it would build on the communities' existing strengths by engaging Blyth's rich community and voluntary sector assets.

Key activities delivered by the project team can be broadly grouped into the following categories: 1) *connecting and convening* (e.g. collaborating with the regeneration team to support wider regeneration plans in Blyth); 2) *partnership working* (e.g. participating in a multi-agency forum to discuss anti-social and crime issues) and; 3) *capacity building* (e.g. the community-led micro-grant programme which award micro-grants to local groups and causes).

Heart of Blyth has made a difference to its local system in a number of ways, stakeholders reported. Over the course of three years, stakeholders have observed progress at different levels of the system and in different areas of the system, including:

- **Impacting beliefs:** Heart of Blyth has influenced people's views about how to approach health inequalities, including citizens, staff, and strategic decision-makers.

- **Impacting on relationships and partnerships:** Heart of Blyth continues to support the creation and deepening of relationships and partnerships across Blyth, promoting opportunities for problem-solving and collaboration.

- **Building community capacity:** Through the provision of financial resources, training and advice, Heart of Blyth has helped to build the capacity of citizens, volunteers and staff – helping them to deliver more.

Further details about Heart of Blyth approach can be seen at: https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/northumberland-county-council-heart-blyth-placing-communities-heart-systemic-change

2.3.5 Shropshire (Shaping Places Shropshire)

Aim: Shaping Places Shropshire aimed to tackle food insecurity in rural South West Shropshire by addressing underlying causes surrounding the issue and how these impact on health inequalities. This involved a focus on systems change, collaboration, and addressing root causes like income inadequacy.

Key participants: Shropshire Council, Citizen's Advice Shropshire, the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance, Healthwatch Shropshire and other local Voluntary and Community Sector organisations.

Summary: Food insecurity was identified as a concern for South West Shropshire at this project's inception, and it remains so today. Shropshire's local context provides particular challenges which exacerbate the impact of food insecurity, including the interplay of deprivation and rurality which profoundly affect not just food insecurity, but also wider and related issues including poverty and transport.

The local authority has worked in partnership with Citizen's Advice Shropshire to develop a set of training and assets which raises awareness of local issues regarding food insecurity and increases confidence and skills to provide practical solutions and signposting. In addition, the project team have increased the profile of food insecurity with wider stakeholders such as the NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Integrated Care Board and have seen a greater focus on food issues included in the strategies and policies of system partners.

The project team have built on previous successes by distributing information and skills to those in statutory and voluntary organisations, raising the profile of food insecurity among local decision-makers, and embedding the issue in local strategies. The project team worked on reframing food insecurity to reduce

stigma, integrating it into organisational plans, and promoting a "cash first" approach for emergency support.

The team has delivered three types of training all focused on empowering frontline staff and volunteers to support local residents around income maximisation: Advice First Aid (AFA); Cost of Living and Ask, Assist and Act. This training has reached 700 frontline staff and volunteers. The team identified that a call to action around “Ask, Assist, Act” has been central to the project to widen conversations around food insecurity among a wide range of community, statutory and VCSE organisations. Other key achievements include improved frontline worker preparedness, community engagement, and elevation of food issues in local policies.

Further details about Shropshire’s approach can be seen at: https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/shropshire-council-tackling-underlying-causes-food-insecurity-through-training

3 Understanding of complex systems

3.1 Introduction

This section examines:

- **How sites defined their systems:** this includes the different systems of interest that they identified.
- **The sites' interpretation of a complex system perspective:** including how complexity was accounted for in their approach.
- **The approaches taken by sites to better understand their local systems:** including using system maps and consultation to deepen each teams' knowledge and understanding.

No fixed definition of a system or complex system approach was applied by the Health Foundation or LGA to this programme. It was therefore up to each site to interpret what a complex system approach meant to them in the context of their work and their local circumstances. This is examined below.

3.2 How do local authorities define *'complex systems'*?

> *"I think some people use [systems] as shorthand for their local areas - a territorial understanding of a system... I think that's human and a lot of the things I would associate with systems are in their local areas, but not everything. It's geography plus, but not just geography."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

The SPHL programme did not set a specific definition of a complex system for the local authorities. This means that each area identified its own system of interest. Looking across the five areas, we observe that:

- **Local authorities did not share a unified approach to defining their systems of interest:** There was considerable variation between sites' different systems. Sites were not given strict directions by programme stakeholders about how they should define their systems. Subsequently, each area approached this differently. This has been informed by the particular challenge they are focused on, their local geography, and choices made by the team about where to set the boundaries.
- **Most local authorities took a place-based approach, but these places were very varied:** The majority of sites took a place-based approach, where teams set the boundaries of their systems using an existing set of recognised geographic or administrative boundaries (e.g. a local authority footprint).

  The places varied in scale. Shaping Stainforth covered a town of approximately 6,000 people, whereas BNSSG's boundaries mirrored the Integrated Care System footprint, spanning three local authority areas.

Newham We Are Food Secure 11-19 took a different approach, targeting young people at risk of food insecurity and focusing on the food system created around secondary schools and youth zones. While their system did have a geographical dimension (i.e., it was limited to children going to school in Newham), their system of interest was not bounded geographically in the same way.

- **Where teams drew their system boundaries has influenced how they sought to change their systems.** Programme stakeholders and local authority teams observed a relationship between how teams drew their systems' boundaries and the type of activities they included in their system change approach.

Programme stakeholders reflected that defining systems by a geographical area appears to have both strengths and challenges. The strength is that the system is relatively straightforward to understand and clearly bounded. This can be useful when engaging local stakeholders and trying to explain the system approach. Bounded geography can make the processes of identifying partners and setting up suitable governance much faster. On the other hand, it can encourage stakeholders to look inward at the system dynamics affecting the determinants of health, when 'external' factors beyond the geographic area may exert a greater influence on these determinants.

What SPHL has demonstrated is the applicability of a complex system approach to systems of different sizes and configuration. It does not need to be a system of a particular size (e.g. an ICS or local authority footprint). As discussed in this report, sites have applied a complex system perspective to their own different shaped and sized system.

3.3 Interpretation of the "complex system perspective"

Key features of a complex system perspective that were typically identified by local authority teams, included:

- Understanding that health challenges are multi-faceted and the relationships between cause-and-effect are often complicated and non-linear.
- Changes to outcomes can be made through addressing the causes of poor health, rather than simply treating the symptoms.
- Changing a system may require interventions in different places in a system at the same time, as the causes of poor health will be multiple.
- It requires taking a longer-term perspective than typical change management projects, as changes may not be immediate.
- It involves working with a wider range of people from across the system.

When sites discussed complexity, they were often describing the complicated nature of their systems and the problems that they are trying to solve. Fewer sites explicitly referenced ideas such as feedback, adaptation, dynamism or emergent

properties (which feature in the Thematic Framework) and the ways in which complex system processes might shape how their systems change over time.

Project stakeholders from across the different sites typically found it easier to describe what their system was (i.e. the boundaries of the system, who and what is included, the relationships between different parts, etc.) but often found it more difficult to articulate in accessible language what was meant by taking a complex system perspective when talking to a wider audience. Programme stakeholders reflected that, based on SPHL, it is not clear to what extent all participants in a complex system approach need to have a shared understanding of what a complex system approach involves.

Talking about complexity

Even though sites have frequently been engaged in complex system processes throughout SPHL, often they have found it challenging to describe these in a way that is accessible to a wider audience of non-public health professionals. Almost all sites felt that 'complexity' was too often described in academic and "*off-putting"* language that risked creating barriers between people. Different areas took different approaches to tackling the challenge of describing complexity:

- Sites such as BNSSG and Shropshire have sought to make the language they use about complexity more accessible. For example, when they discuss creating cross-sectoral partnerships, the Shropshire team framed this as "*how to bring people together*". We observed this in other sites where stakeholders might say something like '*it was difficult at first, but once they trusted us it became much easier'* or '*we're trying to make something greater than the sum of its parts'.* The BNSSG team discussed framing their work around concepts such as "long-term", "prevention" and "embedding". This demonstrates an understanding of complex system processes like dynamism or emergent properties, even if those terms are not being used.

- In Blyth, they chose to use different language that local stakeholders were already familiar with. They talk about asset-based community development, which shares many familiar concepts with complex system perspectives, but is better understood locally.

- Some sites have consciously avoided using language relating to complexity. It is perceived by some teams that the language requires too much explanation and this is off-putting to some of the local stakeholders that they need to work with. Other sites highlighted that it could detract from a clear call to action. One project stakeholder said:

"Complex systems over-complicates what we are aiming to achieve. You're just trying to change the way that services operate and change outcomes for the future."

Project stakeholder

3.4 How local authorities have better understood their own systems

Each local authority-led project has invested time in better understanding their local system. This work started in the programme discovery phase, and continued throughout. The key mechanism by which sites developed their understanding of their local system were consultation with stakeholders and system mapping.

System mapping

> *"The process of meeting other people who are doing system mapping and making connections is really useful."*
>
> Local stakeholder (2022)

Every site developed a system map and Theory of Change as part of the Discovery Phase of the SPHL programme, and were provided with external support to do so by the Health Foundation.

Project stakeholders reported finding the process of developing system maps useful for bringing stakeholders together and collaboratively uncovering the many interrelated factors which impact the public health issues sites addressed. Project teams reported that developing the map with stakeholders from different backgrounds outside of public health had been useful in identifying influential non-health factors in the system. Involving residents who shared their lived experience also provided valuable insights.

While the mapping sessions were useful, project stakeholders felt that system mapping exercises were hard to organise due to the numbers of stakeholders involved and the output itself was often too complicated to use with a wide range of audiences.

As a result, sites tended to use the maps within the project teams or created simplified versions. Teams used or updated their maps in various ways in the programme:

- Shaping Places Shropshire created a simpler vision of their system map they could use with a community and VCSE audience. They also updated their map as they refined the aims of their programme to focus on 'maximising income' instead of 'adequate income'.
- BNSSG used their systems map with the South Gloucestershire project team to support with understanding the breadth of factors impacting on food insecurity in their area. This local team then developed their own simpler system map to support initiative planning.
- Shaping Places Shropshire and Stainforth reviewed their maps in light of the Cost of Living crisis. This did not involve the same level of consultation as the original mapping exercise. Shropshire produced and updated their map, but Stainforth did not because they did not have the IT software to update their map.

- In Year 3, Newham created additional deep dive system maps for schools and youth zones to complement their overall system map. BNSSG also took this approach, working with the University of Bristol to create a series of local food maps for each project area from their original system map.

> *Some teams reflected that their maps would have been more useful to them if they had focused on features like the beliefs and values in the system – what they described as the "soft" features. Instead, the maps were focused on stakeholders in the system or the system's 'hard features' (e.g., transport, economic conditions, built environment, etc.). "With a systems dynamics map – what do we actually mean? A map of all organisations? Sometimes we might focus on that as being the system too much – that's what I think of as hard systems. It's like plumbing or a transport system map, it makes it look too fixed."*
>
> Project stakeholder

This highlights the value of having a variety of different frameworks or tools to help describe a system. We observe, and some project stakeholders also noted, that certain maps, tools or frameworks place different emphasis on different features of a system, which can shape practitioners' thinking about how to seek to change the system.

Consultation with stakeholders

All sites have carried out consultation with their system stakeholders. This included specific events or consultation carried out at the beginning of local authorities' projects, as well as ongoing consultation and information sharing as their work was embedded. All sites agreed that engaging with a range of stakeholders was an important component of understanding their systems.

In the early phases of SPHL, most sites took the opportunity to bring together a large number of stakeholders to gather as many perspectives as possible. Attendees at these events were typically a mix of public sector staff, staff from Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations and citizens, sometimes including systems leaders. The aim was typically to gain a better understanding of the local community, including the views, preferences, assets, relationships of different stakeholders. This was of high priority to local authorities taking a community-led approach.

Sometimes consultation was carried out as part of fun events, where other activities were available to the community. This was a strategy employed by Shaping Stainforth and Heart of Blyth, where teams aimed to combine information gathering with building trust and relationships with their community.

The BNSSG team reported adapting consultation methods for each of their local areas to suit resident need. In some cases, consultation was carried out through surveys; in others, area leads pursued informal conversations with existing community groups.

In Newham, consultation focused on interviews within a narrower target audience. This reflected that Newham Council's food security strategy was already quite well developed to begin with, and the local authority was more familiar with a complex system approach, meaning it was able to home in on a particular point of its system rather than seeking to engage a wider group.

As the teams progressed, they typically carried out fewer consultation events. Instead, they established or participated in different forums where information could be shared by stakeholders from around the system. An example of this was the Blyth Better Together Partnership. Originally, this was a small forum focused on anti-social behaviour in a specific neighbourhood in Blyth. The Heart of Blyth coordinator worked with representatives from the Council and Northumberland Police to bring together a wider range of local partners, including the police, housing providers, youth work charities and more. The Partnership now considers a wider range of challenges relating to antisocial behaviour, and is an effective forum for intelligence sharing and problem solving that can draw on the perspectives of a wide range of public services and voluntary organisations.

There has not been one single "one size fits all" approach to consulting stakeholders among project teams. Teams have adapted their approaches based on the audiences they are seeking to engage with, the quality of their existing relationships, and have modified these over time as relationships and partnerships have grown. For authorities seeking to adopt this approach, the experience of SPHL project teams is that consultation is not a 'one-off' activity, but rather an integral and ongoing part of the work.

4 Implementing a complex system change approach

4.1 Introduction

This section discusses the local authorities' complex system change approaches, including the key activities taken at each level of their systems, including at every level of the Action Scales Model (Beliefs, Goals, Structures and Events).

The analysis is structured by the Action Scales Model to provide a framework for grouping interventions with similar intent. This section draws on an illustrative selection of examples from across all five sites, but does not seek to present all the activities carried out by all sites.

Further details about the effectiveness of implementation are set out in chapter 5 'Enablers and obstacles'. The difference made to each site's complex system is explored in chapter 6 'What difference has taking a complex system approach made?'

4.2 Beliefs

Definition: Beliefs are the norms, attitudes and values of people or organisations in the system.

Teams aimed to influence the beliefs of different stakeholder groups in their systems (strategic leaders, people who deliver services, and residents). This required building their understanding of these stakeholders' perspectives and motivations to identify which messages would resonate and, ultimately, shape their beliefs. The purpose of informing stakeholder beliefs was typically to:

- Raise the profile of an issue or change how stakeholders perceive the issue.
- Promote a complex system approach as a way of working.

Activities aimed at influencing beliefs have typically included a range of training, information sharing, and showcasing of system change working.

In Shropshire and BNSSG, teams sought to influence strategic leaders, including local voluntary sector organisations, to change how they thought about food security. The Shropshire team identified that they pursued this thorough sharing learning about the underlying causes of food insecurity and the lived experience of people needing food support to illustrate the stigma they experience. Project stakeholders identified that their aim was to change beliefs on several levels:

- Reframing food insecurity around lack of income rather than lack of food.
- Arguing that addressing this problem means going beyond providing food and instead supporting people to maximise their income.

- Highlighting the importance of treating individuals coming forward for support with dignity.

- Demonstrating that these leaders can play a role in supporting people who find themselves experiencing food insecurity.

In Blyth, the original focus of their work was on fear about anti-social behaviour in their community. They worked with volunteers, local authority and other public sector staff, and strategic stakeholders to change their attitudes about how anti-social behaviour might connect to their work or interests. They reframed anti-social behaviour in relation to community resilience and inequalities, which were agendas that garnered wider engagement from stakeholders.

Project stakeholders reported that trying to tell persuasive stories was an important activity, whether this was raising the agenda of food insecurity or explaining to local authority leaders the benefits of a complex system approach. Sites were supported by Design Council to develop their storytelling skills, including to help them:

- **Educate** stakeholders about the health issue they were addressing from a complex systems perspective.

- **Describe** how they have worked in a different way to that of a more traditional project and the difference it has made.

- **Compel and empower** their audience to continue the work undertaken so far and encourage ongoing buy-in.

- **Explain** how their team's work can be taken forwards beyond the end of the SPHL programme.

Sites have produced different types of communication products depending on their intended audience. Typically, sites have aimed to convey a specific message in an easily digestible way, such as through a think piece, blog or infographic.

Where this has been most effective, project stakeholders gave examples that include using local insights, whether through data or local people's lived experiences. Project stakeholders reported that this makes messages more compelling and relevant. They highlighted the benefit of strong visuals, using tailored messages for specific audiences that tap into existing agendas, and where possible, promoting positive messages, rather than presenting challenges within the systems as unmanageable or an unresolvable knot of issues. In Shropshire, for instance, the team identified that the "Ask, Assist and Act" call to action format used in their training sessions had been a simple and positive means of encouraging discussion and action among attendees. This demonstrates the value of not just identifying which messages resonate best with different stakeholders, but also tailoring how those messages are disseminated depending on the audience to maximise how well they are received.

4.3 Goals

Definition: Goals. are the stated aims, targets, or ambitions that the individuals, organisations, or the system as a whole are working towards.

Activities to change system goals often involved the teams taking steps to formalise or codify changes that they have made to systems at the level of beliefs or structures. Examples of these included formalising partnership working or making changes to policies and strategies. For example:

- The Heart of Blyth team supported the Blyth Better Together Partnership to review and update its terms of reference, expanding the scope and focus of its work.
- The Heart of Blyth, working with the Blyth Valley VCA, helped a number of informal groups to become incorporated. This formalised their purpose and the responsibilities of volunteers, as well as giving these new voluntary groups the option to apply for different types of funding support.
- The Shaping Places Shropshire team have worked with a range of partners to discuss how they can incorporate food insecurity into their policies and frameworks.
- As a result of the project team strengthening beliefs and structures within the council, the South Gloucestershire Climate, Nature, and Emergency Team incorporated broader food action within the 2024-25 South Gloucestershire Action Plan with the aim of becoming a Sustainable Food Place.
- The Bristol team's work has been embedded into relevant targets in the city's Food Equality Strategy and Action Plan.

Project stakeholders also highlighted that by engaging with strategic leaders in their systems and by acting as examples of good practice, sites have also influenced changes at a policy level. In Stainforth, for instance, the team's approach to community consultation was included in local public health strategies as a model of practice that other areas in Doncaster could replicate.

The teams' experience demonstrates that there are a number of means of influencing system goals, including directly engaging with policy formation, engagement with strategic leaders, and through the force of their example.

Incorporating sustainability into system change approaches

The teams took several steps to future proof their work beyond influencing system goals. These actions were not necessarily part of the planned complex system approach, but instead were a pragmatic response to a time limited programme:

- **Securing continued funding for project work to continue beyond the programme end.** Several sites have applied for additional money, either

externally or from their local authority budget, to continue funding for the roles delivering SPHL.

- **Supporting VCSE organisations to access alternative funding.** VCSE organisations have used their SPHL experience to support and strengthen their applications for alternative funding.

- **Recording learning about taking a complex system approach.** Project stakeholders wanted to explain how taking a complex system approach has worked and what difference it has made. They have created resources that explain the process and provide examples of how it was implemented. The sites have produced slide decks which can be easily shared, some with support from the Design Council. The LRP have also provided annual learning reports.

4.4 Structures

Definition: Structures are the flows of information, resources, relationships and processes that define how the parts of a system interact.

The greatest amount of work has been carried out by sites at the structural level of their systems. Forging stronger relationships, improving information sharing, and challenging decision-making structures has been a priority in most sites.

The activities carried out by sites in relation to system structures have varied enormously. This reflects both the diversity of their systems of interest and the differences between the stakeholders and organisations that teams are engaged with. Nevertheless, activities tend to fall within the following categories:

- **Building relationships and partnerships between stakeholders across the system.** The critical aim of relationship and partnership building that was stressed by each area was that it was important to network with stakeholders, rather than create a network with SPHL at its centre. To build relationships, teams took actions such as establishing forums, facilitating introductions between possible partners, creating events where people could meet, and supporting partnership working in many different forms. This included a range of residents, VCSE sector partners and public sector staff, and other stakeholders.

  SPHL teams have often played the role of connectors or convenors of different stakeholders, often spanning different sectors.

  At the early stages of SPHL, some sites focused on establishing as many new connections as possible, especially when trying to understand what assets were present in their communities. Typically, over time, they have focused increasingly on formalising relationships into a smaller number of more sustainable partnerships. This has included, for example, formally agreeing the terms of partnership and ways of working that will allow the partnerships to progress based on agreed rules, rather than being reliant on interpersonal relationships.

- **Improving the consistency and quality of information sharing.** This occurred naturally through the process of improving relationships and creating new forums, but project stakeholders also took steps such as creating social media pages, producing newsletters, creating directories and other similar activities designed to improve intelligence sharing across the system.

- **Changing decision-making structures within local systems.** In some sites, like Blyth, BNSSG, Stainforth or Shropshire, teams have taken steps to promote citizen or VCSE-led decision making in certain areas. For example, in Blyth, a resident panel was established and tasked with allocating grants, while in BNSSG, lead organisations were tasked with selecting which local initiatives would be funded. In other areas, local residents were supported to set up their own committees to take responsibility for local initiatives. Local citizens, young people and VCSE voices were all encouraged to participate in different decision making forums, both at the local authority level and in forums set up within the community.

4.5 Events

Definition: Events are the things that happen in a system, like the behaviours of individuals or how services treat outcomes.

System change theory suggests that intervening at the point of events is the least effective means of changing a system.[4] In the Action Scales Model, actions at the event-level are understood as reactive actions to visible issues which are unlikely to leverage systems change. In line with this, most sites have avoided investing significant energy on activities that treat outcomes in their system, and instead worked with partners to address root causes.

Some sites did make interventions that could be classified as events. For example, in Stainforth and Blyth, the teams provided events that were specifically designed to promote opportunities for fun. However, typically these events intentionally had an additional wider purpose – such as helping to build trust with the community or provide an opportunity to gather intelligence about what the community wants. In this respect, these were not purely interventions at the level of events.

Where activities at the level of events have continued, they have tended to involve the introduction of new services or changes to existing services. There is less commonality in these across sites as they are heavily led by the project focus. However, some action which has occurred in multiple sites include:

[4] This is discussed further on page 331 of Nobles, J. D., Radley, D., Mytton, O. T., & Whole Systems Obesity programme team. (2022). The Action Scales Model: A conceptual tool to identify key points for action within complex adaptive systems. *Perspectives in public health*, *142*(6), 328-337 and in Brinkley, A. J., Cusimano, K. M., Freeman, P., Southall-Edwards, R., & Gladwell, V. F. (2024). 'It's About Collaboration': A Whole-Systems Approach to Understanding and Promoting Movement in Suffolk.

- Offering short-term or one-off cultural or other activities. For example, in Stainforth, the team arranged for a group of residents to travel to the Durham Miners Gala.

- Commissioning voluntary sector providers to deliver new services to local people, or deliver them differently. In Shropshire, delivery of AFA (Advice First Aid) training across the area focused on supporting community organisations to provide specific advice and signposting around food insecurity.

- Arranging for transport to help people access cheaper food in different locations.

4.6 Five features of complex system change approaches

This research has aimed to understand what is meant by a complex system approach in the context of the wider determinants of health, and how this might differ to traditional public health responses or what might be understood as "reductionist approaches to health research".[5]

Teams from across the five SPHL sites identified a number of features of their complex system approach, which they considered distinctive from their usual ways of working on these issues. The five features of a complex system approach, according to stakeholders, were that it:

1. Works at multiple levels of the system at the same time.
2. Focuses on emergent properties of the system, rather than specific interventions.
3. Starts with relationships, and requires the input of a wide range of stakeholders.
4. Requires a team who can connect and convene people rather than deliver services.
5. Is dynamic and adaptive.

They also acknowledged that there is overlap with other known approaches such as Asset Based Community Development or Whole System Approaches.[6]

While these five features were often apparent in each site, there was nevertheless enormous variety between each site in terms of the specific activities that they delivered. This highlights that taking a complex system change perspective is not a model that can be easily described in a set of steps that can

[5] See McGill et al. (2020).

[6] More information on these two approaches to community development is available in Haines, A. (2014). Asset-based community development. In *An introduction to community development* (pp. 67-78). Routledge and in Bagnall, A. M., Radley, D., Jones, R., Gately, P., Nobles, J., Van Dijk, M., ... & Sahota, P. (2019). Whole systems approaches to obesity and other complex public health challenges: a systematic review. *BMC public health*, *19*, 1-14.

be repeated in a new context. Instead, it more closely resembles a particular problem-solving mindset that can be applied in different scenarios.

4.6.1 Working at multiple levels of the system

In every SPHL site, the teams have sought to influence their systems at multiple points of leverage and at multiple levels (belief, goals, structures, events) of their system – often simultaneously. This reflects the sites' understanding of the challenge of poor health outcomes as having multiple determinants. It also reflects their understanding of systems as complicated structures or places with many different stakeholders and organisations included.

As discussed in 5.3.4, some stakeholders questioned whether the activities that were delivered by the project teams really amounted to a coherent whole 'complex system change approach'. They suggested that it might be that the teams were working across the system, but that this did not amount to a unified complex system approach, where different actions were aiming to build upon and reinforce one another to achieve an overall difference. Nevertheless, it is clear that sites understood taking a complex system approach to mean working widely across their system.

4.6.2 Focusing on the emergent properties of a system

The majority of the work undertaken by teams has been focused on trying to make their system work more effectively through effective partnership working, rather than establishing new services or adding to their system. The sites' work can be characterised as focusing on the emergent properties of their systems – although few would use this term to describe it. They would be more likely to use an analogy such as the system becoming greater than the sum of its parts, or creating the right conditions for successful collaboration. Effectively though, in a number of different ways, they are talking about the emergent properties of the system.

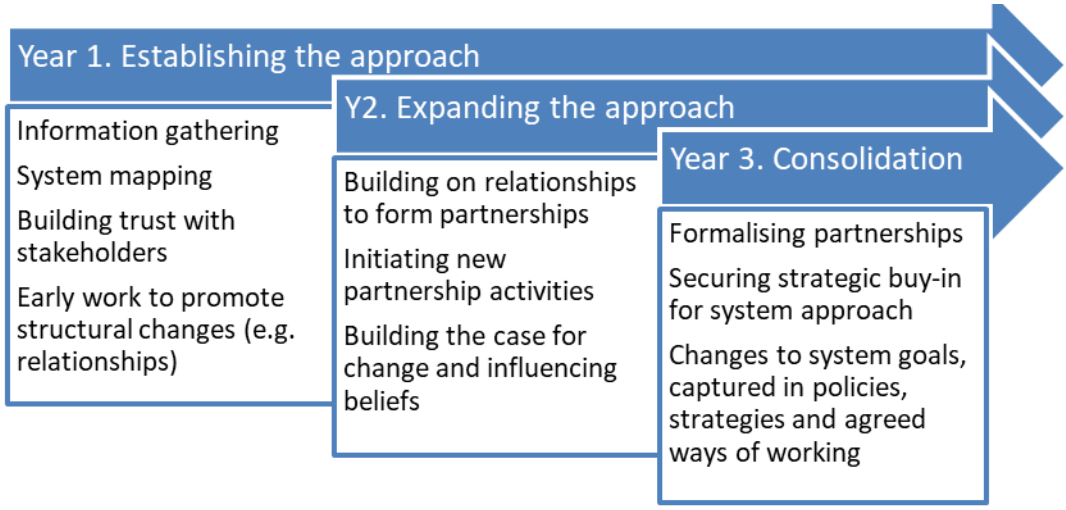
In BNSSG, for instance, the team invested significant energy on introducing a new way of working. This was evident through their collaborative, rather than competitive, funding mechanism, as well as considerable effort invested in building partnerships with local colleagues and partners. This saw the team nourish relationships with existing partners at the same time as building new relationships, for instance, by inviting local organisations not already working on the issue of concern to project meetings. The team pursued partnership as an explicit project aim, always with a view to maximising the impact and reach of their shared mission.

4.6.3 Focus on relationships

For the majority of sites, a focus on relationships was a central feature of their work and the foundation for being able to make further changes to the local systems that they were focused on.

Typically, building relationships, trust and connections was the first priority of sites, before progressing to work focused on other levels, as summarised in Figure 4:

Figure 4: Progression of SPHL programme



It has required taking a holistic view of the system and the ways that different stakeholders relate to one another. Teams noted that a systems approach requires attention to relationships between these different actors, which makes it distinct from more top-down approaches to change, which might seek to organise stakeholders around an integrated strategy.

While this looked different in each area, it was common across most sites to see them begin with work focused on relationship building, which became more formalised over time. It was followed by more focused work on influencing stakeholder beliefs and system goals (although some of this work did start from earlier on).

Building trust between the team and local stakeholders was often an important part of the work initially. At the time, sites did not necessarily perceive this as part of the system change work itself; it was seen as important in some places as a pre-condition that needed to be met before other system change work could happen. Stakeholders ultimately agreed that this was an essential component of the system change work. This was particularly the case in areas like Stainforth, BNSSG and Blyth which aimed to take a community-led approach.

> *"The point is around putting in the groundwork; learning about your system; understanding it; engaging with as many different actors within the system as possible. It feels slow and like you're not making progress, but it's really key I think."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

Newham did not follow the same trajectory during this process, but this was a reflection that locally there was already greater familiarity with systems approaches and strategic buy-in from the local executive and political leadership around the subject of food security. Nevertheless, there was still a need to work hard to continue fostering new and existing relationships throughout their work, especially as they focused more deeply on areas of their system.

4.6.4 Staff must be connectors and convenors

The role of the team has been distinctive in SPHL. The key requirements have often been to be effective connectors and convenors of stakeholders from around the system. As discussed in 5.2.1, teams with local connections or detailed knowledge of the system were often effective at this. It has often required staff to work out in the community to make those connections as well.

In line with the adaptive and dynamic approach that the teams have taken, it requires staff who can be attentive to the opportunities that are presented by a changing system, and have the skills to navigate complex interactions between different groups.

More often, teams have supported others in their work, rather than being the author of a central, integrated strategy that they are seeking to fit others into.

4.6.5 Taking a complex system approach has required local authorities to be adaptive

The project teams have needed to adapt and iterate their approaches as their systems have changed. Sometimes this was in response to changes triggered by the project team's own work, but also sometimes by changes that happened elsewhere in the system. This might differ from other system approaches where there might be a more fixed overarching strategy.

A complex systems approach has required them to recognise adaptation and to be adaptive in their approach. There are numerous examples of teams adapting their approaches and priorities at various stages during the SPHL programme in response to their systems adapting to changing circumstances. Examples included:

- The Blyth team has changed the emphasis of their project to focus on tackling inequalities rather than addressing anti-social behaviour to reflect local strategic priorities.
- Stainforth focused on how they could promote community voices in regeneration plans.
- The Shropshire team adapted to the Cost of Living crisis, using it as a positive opportunity to raise the profile of food insecurity in a wider range of forums and partnerships and to develop their training for frontline workers to better support residents experiencing hardship.

This is not to say that teams were being simply reactive and opportunistic. For all sites taking part in SPHL, they recognised that the approach required them to be able to respond to changing circumstances and pivot their focus to make the greatest difference in their systems.

5 Enablers and obstacles

5.1 Introduction

This section examines the enablers and obstacles to implementing a complex system change approach. These included:

Figure 5: Summary of enablers and obstacles

Enablers	Obstacles
• The team's skills, knowledge and local connections. • Leveraging favourable policy landscapes in local systems. • Supportive strategic leaders. • The flexibility of the Shaping Places for Healthier Lives programme design.	• Challenging economic and broader national context. • Limited resources. • Securing long-term ownership of projects beyond project teams. • Balancing strategic and responsive approaches.

5.2 Enablers

5.2.1 The composition of teams and their skills have helped drive project success

Throughout the SPHL programme, stakeholders have consistently stressed the importance of certain skills which team members have needed to deliver a system approach.

These teams often included individuals from across a partnership of different organisations, and were not limited only to local authority employees. For example, Shropshire's team was a partnership between the local authority and Citizens Advice Shropshire and the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance – something that allowed them to draw on a range of skills, expertise and different perspectives.

Key skills they identified included connecting different people, effective storytelling, creative problem solving, negotiation and persuasion. Stakeholders reflected that "*soft skills*" relating to communication and managing people had played a prominent role in the success of many sites' work:

> *"I think two or three years ago, I don't think I had these soft skills in mind as being as important as they are. I've noticed it's really made a difference."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

Stakeholders identified the following factors as bringing value:

- **Team members who can connect with professionals and the community:** Several teams reported that they benefited from individuals with extensive understanding of their local system. This often included colleagues with strong connections within the local authority and wider community. These teams were able to connect effectively with senior strategic leaders, other professionals and the community. Stakeholders described these staff as "*boundary spanners*" because they could not only engage with different groups separately, but they also had the skills and credibility to bring those groups together across different divides. This helped them to bring together different groups to problem-solve, share information and insights, and work together in partnership in ways that would have been difficult without someone who could bring groups together in this way.

- **Local knowledge and understanding of the system:** Several teams included colleagues from the community they were working in. Those staff members' strong local connections have been especially valuable for projects taking a community-led approach, such as in Blyth, Stainforth and BNSSG. They bring knowledge of historically difficult dynamics among community organisations, and between community partners and the local authority.

  Stakeholders highlighted that, where they have been successful, the team has been free to work in the community, rather than remain office-based. Having a visible physical presence in the community has helped staff to build authentic relationships. This helped to generate buy-in for their projects. It also created chances for unplanned interactions, which often led to useful insights or new opportunities to present themselves.

  > *"If you're from the community in the local authority doing this work, it's a huge bonus—it makes a massive difference to trust and influencing relationships both up and down."*
  >
  > SPHL programme stakeholder

- **Promoting the achievements of the community:** Stakeholders agreed that it is important to foreground the achievements of people outside the SPHL teams. While the teams recognised the important contributions that their staff have made, they also agreed that it was important to avoid a "*heroic leadership role*" as system change is not likely to be driven by a small number of people. In BNSSG, the team highlighted that residents' involvement in co-production of initiatives and participatory decision-making strongly influenced place-based action. Project stakeholders highlighted the importance of staff who had the skills to encourage, upskill, and support others to take leading roles in the community – but also community members supporting the team in turn.

- **Knowledge of complex system theory:** In Newham, their team particularly benefitted from the addition of academic input with expertise in complex system theory. This helped them with activities such as system mapping. The BNSSG team also benefited from the input of University of Bristol academics in developing and refining their systems map, as well as producing a resource on systems thinking for project partners. All sites developed their expertise in this area over the course of the programme, but it was recognised by

programme stakeholders that drawing on academic expertise benefited these teams.

5.2.2 Supportive local policy environments have encouraged buy-in to projects and provided teams with opportunities

Alignment between the teams' work and the wider policy agenda locally has made it easier for sites to progress their work. Examples of this included:

- **Complementary policy agendas:** both the Blyth and Newham teams have benefited from key strategic players in their systems already approaching their work in a similar way, or having pre-existing interest in the health issue of concern. For instance, the Blyth team has successfully capitalised on Northumberland Council's focus on health inequalities and 'whole-system approaches' in the Health and Wellbeing Board. This has provided an opportunity for the team to reframe their work to align with these partners' strategic objectives and, in turn, demonstrate overlapping goals.

  In Newham, the team benefited from a pre-existing "*groundswell of interest*" in food security, and in particular a focus on young people's access to food. Project stakeholders have described being able to "*push at an open door*" to start conversations about this issue with strategic leaders in their system. Being able to invoke this political commitment has, in turn, made the team's approaches to prospective partners more successful.

- **Economic regeneration**: both the Blyth and Stainforth teams have benefited from the opportunity to align their work with other economic investment and regeneration initiatives taking place in their areas which support their work. These have represented opportunities to link in with key decision-makers and represent local people's views to them. For example, the Blyth and Stainforth teams have connected with regeneration professionals in their respective councils to advocate for working in ways aligned with their project goals, such as more emphasis on incorporating community views.

> *"In Blyth, the work that DLUHC are doing, the regeneration that's taking place over there, the Levelling Up agenda, that really complements what Heart of Blyth are doing. They're being asked to contribute and share their experiences of the ways they've been working to influence that side of things. That's been a big external thing aside from the programme."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

5.2.3 Engagement with system leaders at a strategic level

Project stakeholders identified the importance of gaining the support of strategic stakeholders in their system. This often was focused on leaders in the local authority, but also included other actors, such as the VCSE. They highlighted the benefits of using existing relationships to help them connect with those decision makers in the local authority and in the community.

Project stakeholders have noted that the backing of decision-makers in their systems helps increase project credibility and reach. This observation was echoed by programme stakeholders.

> *"Though there's power in community voice, ultimately if you want to bake changes into a structure, you need that senior leadership buy in…"*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

In Newham, where there was already good buy-in prior to SPHL, stakeholders highlighted that the team were able to identify opportunities to capitalise on the pre-existing political agenda and momentum surrounding food insecurity in the borough. Project stakeholders reflected that connections to senior system leaders within the council allows for a strategic approach and marshalling of resources in a way which would otherwise be more challenging without endorsement from system leaders.

In some other areas, sites did not start with the same level of strategic awareness or buy-in to their work from system leaders. Where this has been the case, teams have often used existing relationships with specific local authority leaders or elected members to connect with relevant strategic leaders. This has helped them to accelerate the relationship building process.

Not all sites placed equal emphasis on the importance of strategic level buy-in. For example, it was not identified as a high-priority aim in Shaping Stainforth, relative to their activities focused directly on the population itself. However, across all sites there was some acknowledgement of the benefits of aligning their work with strategic leaders' priorities and organisational ambitions.

5.2.4 The design of the SPHL programme has supported teams

Stakeholders across the teams reported that the design and support offered by the SPHL programme has been beneficial. They identified that it has provided scope to experiment and also helping them build useful skills, from producing system maps to learning the "characteristics of changemakers", spanning systems thinking, connecting and convening, designing and making and effective leadership and storytelling.[7]

Flexible grant model

Stakeholders across all sites praised the flexibility built into the SPHL programme design. They agreed that this helped in the following ways:

- Not having to work to specific outcomes meant that teams reported feeling able to take a 'test and learn' approach. Several project stakeholders identified

[7] These core skills are explained in detail in the Design Council's "Characteristics of Changemakers" video series, which can be found here: https://vimeo.com/showcase/10326979.

that this has enabled them to work in a much more adaptive, fluid way than usual and where the community has identified need. This has included taking advantage of chance encounters and opportunities and working to the specific, pressing needs identified by system players as they emerge.

- Teams appreciated having a significant amount of freedom in how they used their funding, which has allowed them to direct resource into whatever was felt to be most useful. In addition, it has supported initiatives to let community members make decisions about how funding was used.

This flexible approach was not without challenges. For example, for the learning and research component of the programme, the breadth of approaches included were difficult to compare and synthesis learning from. By not establishing a common language about complex system approaches, some sites also found it difficult to explain their work in relation to a complex system perspective.

Nevertheless, on balance, most project stakeholders felt that the trade-offs between a flexible model and a more prescriptive programme design had been positive.

Delivery support

Sites have consistently agreed that support provided by the LGA, Design Council and the LRP helped sites progress with complex system approaches.

Many project stakeholders highlighted Design Council's support as having been particularly helpful. Project stakeholders reported their tools, methods and language around the use of complex system approaches providing a helpful steer which increased their confidence in their approaches. Receiving personalised coaching around how to tell the story of their projects was identified as especially useful. There are numerous instances of sites alluding to taking forwards the advice they received from the coaching.

> *"I think and hope it has got them thinking around those knotty issues that you can't resolve practically and have to think through. I hope it's given them the conceptual tools - I think it's helped because I can see how they're talking about things differently and having more fruitful discussions compared to Year 1."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

Project stakeholders also noted benefiting from being brought together at in-person events and quarterly Action Learning Sets. These provided opportunities to learn how others had approached similar issues, seek advice and share resources. One example is the Blyth team sharing its resident micro-grant application form with the BNSSG team at a celebration event hosted by the LGA.

The regular check-ins, led by LGA and attended by the Design Council and learning partners, provided an opportunity for support and regular healthy challenge to think and work in a different way.

> *"I think that the positive influence of the programme has been providing a rhythm for the sites; natural checkpoints built in which encourage the sites to see progress which they wouldn't have if they were going alone."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

The teams did identify that there were things that could have been improved further. Firstly, some stakeholders felt that aspects of the delivery support, in particular the well-received 'Designing for Legacy' webinars, may have been more helpful if delivered earlier in the programme.

> *"The pre-recorded webinar series…we've been told 'I wish we'd had this in Year 1'… some of those activities could have been thought through with the long-term in mind."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

Some project stakeholders also felt that the time required to participate in programme reporting, delivery support and learning and research activities was difficult to accommodate for small teams. Some teams also found support more relevant to them than others, which reflected differences in their starting points. The programme team did reflect throughout the programme about the best ways to ensure programme activities were relevant and proportionate for the sites.

5.3 Obstacles

5.3.1 Challenging national economic and wider context

Across all sites, the Covid-19 pandemic and Cost of Living crisis were challenges that worked against what the teams were trying to achieve. Project stakeholders identified that the after-effects of the pandemic had made setting up their projects much slower. Meanwhile, the Cost of Living crisis has introduced new, urgent pressures making it harder for project teams to secure a long-term approach in some of the sites.

In some sites, these challenges have been felt in less engagement with activities or participation as volunteers among community members. In Year 1, the pandemic limited resident participation with in-person engagement events. In Years 2 and 3, the Cost of Living crisis placed constraints on community members' capacity to participate in activities, according to stakeholders in some sites, with travel or other costs cited as concerns.

The Cost of Living crisis also impacted the ability of VCSE partners and community organisations to support teams' efforts. The higher demand for their core services (for example, immediate need for emergency food packages) has meant they have limited capacity to support anything beyond delivery of core services.

Stakeholders also reported that the challenging financial position of many local authorities has meant that there are many demands on limited resources. Some stakeholders reflected that this context has highlighted the value of a complex

systems change approach which identifies where in the system sites can make a difference and maximise resources.

> *"Ten years of austerity and the impact this has had on local councils and their abilities to fund services, maintain workforce. It's been a really testing time. Probably a great time to try a complex system approach because if you don't have much money, what can you do with that money? It's never been about chucking money at a problem for me, it's about how you think about it. Be smart with your money; be smart with your time."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

In addition to Covid-19, the Cost of Living crisis, and financial challenges for local authorities and partners which have affected all sites, some projects have also been navigating system-specific or issue-specific challenges.

In Blyth, the team have had to navigate local anxiety about regeneration efforts and some historical negative perceptions of the local authority's ability to deliver in this area. The Shropshire team have reported factors as diverse as the Russia-Ukraine war and the national dialogue around people who receive financial welfare all affecting buy-in from different stakeholders. Clashing messages can make receptiveness to the projects' messaging and goals more challenging.

5.3.2 Resource challenges

As projects have grown in complexity over the SPHL programme, with more strands of work and a growing network of partners, this has placed increasing demands on teams' limited capacity. The scale of the challenge that teams are seeking to influence is much larger than the resources available to the teams, even if they can effectively mobilise other partners.

Teams have been involved in delivering a wide range of actions as part of their complex system change approaches. Some sites in particular have worked with large numbers of partners on a diverse range of projects. Each team highlighted the importance of seeking to leverage change at many points of the system. However, in small teams, the focus on delivery can detract from the team's capacity to step back and consider what are the most promising points of leverage in their systems that they can affect.

> *"I think sometimes progress can be massively blocked by typical mindsets around delivery approaches and delivery timelines. An enabler of systems change is building in time to reflect, which enables penny-drop moments. If you're time-poor…then they just rattle through and tick things off their to do list. This requires a radical approach – [that's a] work in progress."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

Project stakeholders also recognised that some parts of their system would require more resources to change than what was available to them. For example, some projects included aspirations to improve the physical environment in their areas as part of their system change approach. However, most found that they

could only make relatively modest changes to the environment themselves due to the high capital costs of more substantial changes. Where sites have had greater success, they have sought to influence other stakeholders, such as the team leading on urban regeneration in Blyth, to affect how that programme progresses.

Teams have also had to navigate resource constraints among their partners (see 5.3.3). In Newham, for instance, project stakeholders noted that high turnover and limited capacity in schools is an ongoing issue for consolidating and extending its work. When staff engaged with the project leave, this requires building of relationships from scratch with individuals who may not prioritise the issue or approach as highly. The BNSSG team identified similar issues in staff moving on from roles and organisations impacting on reach in some areas.

Project stakeholders also noted that some parts of the system had been harder to reach within the timeframe of the programme. For example:

- In Blyth, the team has found it hard to know how to connect with mid-level managers and staff, who could help secure system changes. The hope will be that work done with strategic leaders in the system will ultimately influence these groups.

- In Newham, stakeholders reported that businesses and commercial interests play a key role in the availability of food in schools and youth zones. However, the team has struggled to engage these groups, given the minimal incentive for them to support their efforts. They expect that work with schools and other groups will ultimately lead to demand for better food, which will challenge the commercial incentives of food providers. However, in the short-term, they could not bring direct pressure to bear on this part of the system.

5.3.3 Challenges securing long-term ownership of projects

Project stakeholders recognised a number of obstacles to translating changes in system actors' beliefs and goals into long-term ownership of project missions beyond the end of the SPHL programme. This includes time required to build relationships, develop the skills to work in a complex system approach, and capacity – especially of volunteers and the VCSE.

At the outset, some teams found that getting started was difficult and slow at times. The process was not always straightforward, and sometimes included persuading stakeholders that are not necessarily familiar with the potential merits of a complex system approach. This was especially tricky in some of the larger sites, where this work needed to take place across a larger number of institutions.

Additionally, effort has been required to turn relationships into stronger partnerships, which can be sustained in the long-term. Some sites were able to progress further in terms of agreeing the responsibilities and expectations for future partnership working, and encouraging other partners to step into leadership roles. For instance, in BNSSG, the team developed its local projects into food forums in several areas, expanding their focus and empowering local organisations to take on a leadership role. However, in some other areas, members of the SPHL teams have continued to feel quite integral to the coordination of partnership working.

The capacity of partner organisations and volunteers has also been a challenge in some sites. Among VCSE organisations, they were often doing additional work on top of their existing support to individuals within communities. For those organisations, they were often trying to balance between short term imperatives and creating the bandwidth required to also engage in SPHL.

This challenge was particularly acute where sites were relying on the contributions of volunteers. These contributions have relied on the goodwill and capacity of a small pool of people to take the work forwards. Often a small number of people would be involved intensely or in multiple activities, but they risked burning out over time. An ongoing challenge for sites has been encouraging and training new community leaders and volunteers to grow this pool, in particular from parts of the system who are not typically engaged in voluntary activities.

5.3.4 Balancing strategic and responsive approaches

Project and SPHL programme stakeholders identified that it was often difficult for sites to create the time required to keep stepping back and considering their systems as a whole. As a result, some teams found that they were responding to opportunities, without having a chance to consider how best to leverage change in the system.

Sites have taken different steps to ensure that they remain focused on pursuing the most advantageous opportunities to achieve their system change goals. For example, in Shropshire, the team use an online whiteboard app to post their reflections every month, broken down into “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats”.

Other sites have steering groups and occasionally return to their system map or Theory of Change, but less frequently. SPHL programme stakeholders suggested that this can lead sites to focus disproportionately on delivery rather than the big picture:

> *“I’m not sure they are all doing all of what a complex system approach could include…They've done stuff to understand their system, identify where they might act, but often it’s a series of interventions in a system rather than the package as a whole.”*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

Teams that have taken a community-led approach highlighted that building in time for reflection has been especially challenging. They highlighted that they often were working with a broad range of people and groups that were not necessarily connected to each other. This approach could be quite time consuming, and not leave time to think about how these different activities could build towards a greater change.

> *“I think in some instances the nature of making relationships and building those has taken over from the planning around actually influencing outcomes. I think that's partly due to time.”*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

Programme stakeholders identified that this can also lead to an opportunistic approach to building relationships, which may not be strategic. This can mean that time is spent building connections across the system, without building the critical mass required to leverage system change in specific target areas.

> *"In this programme, it's easy to lose sight of the end outcomes because you get caught up in influencing and building relationships, which can get you distracted from your original vision."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

Most sites narrowed the range of activities they undertook during the course of the programme, reflecting the need to focus on the most impactful areas, and to avoid starting new initiatives that would not have time to embed.

6 What difference has taking a complex system approach made?

6.1 Introduction

The following section explores what difference taking a complex system approach has made across the project teams' local systems.

The SPHL programme shows that modest resources can drive system changes in a short time. Stakeholders highlighted diverse areas of change across the different levels in their local systems. As the programme has progressed, there has continued to be impact across structures in local systems. However, there is increasing evidence too of shifts in key stakeholders' beliefs and goals.

This section also outlines the difference which stakeholders feel their projects have made to public health outcomes. Project stakeholders expressed reservations about their work having made a measurable impact on the outcomes themselves, given the project timeframe and the challenging national context sites have worked in. However, project stakeholders were cautiously confident about having created conditions locally for the determinants of health to be addressed more effectively moving forwards.

6.2 Changes in the context of a complex system

Change has often been characterised by complex system processes. Sites did not necessarily use the terms that were included in the thematic framework, but nevertheless, examples of complexity can be seen throughout, and several examples of how these processes occurred are included here.

- **Emergent properties:** Examples of emergence can be seen in multiple SPHL projects, where partnership working has brought together different stakeholders and increased the problem-solving capacity of teams through the pooling of ideas, sharing of skills and resources, and the alignment of work. Examples of partnerships created or bolstered can be seen in Blyth, Stainforth, BNSSG and South-West Shropshire. There are also examples of groups self-organising, such as the recipients of micro-grants going on to further grow and expand their work.

- **Feedback loops:** Positive feedback loops can be observed in multiple places. Examples, such as in Blyth and BNSSG, where community groups or volunteers were provided with micro-grants, subsequently went on to apply for larger grants and expanded their activities, building on the skills and confidence gained working with the team. In BNSSG, there is evidence of new initiatives emulating micro-grant initiatives. A project funded by BNSSG providing fruit and vegetables on prescription in inner city Bristol gained significant funding, leading a GP in South Bristol to set up a similar pilot project at their GP surgery. Finally, in Newham, the team has established their reputation as a leader in local government on food innovation. Since people are proud of this achievement, they continue to want to push the agenda

further, which has helped the team maintain momentum and drive continued success.

> *"We can now say, 'we are doing great things, so we will continue doing good things'."*
>
> Project stakeholder

- **Adaptation and co-evolution:** As described in 5.2.2, the SPHL programme has often been one of a number of programmes seeking to make changes in a local system. Sites such as Blyth and Stainforth have navigated and adapted to the presence of economic regeneration schemes, working with and alongside those programmes. We also observe other examples of co-evolution, such as in Doncaster, where other places around Stainforth have learnt from their work and begun to adopt some of their practices – for example, the project team's approach to public consultation. This also positively reinforces the work in Stainforth.

- **Dynamism and non-linear changes:** Project teams identified that changes were often neither straightforward nor easily predictable. They were sometimes characterised by sudden changes triggered by cumulative smaller changes. This was often the case with sites when building relationships with a community or neighbourhood, where building trust has taken a long time to achieve. But once it had reached a certain threshold, there was quite suddenly an opportunity for much greater engagement and partnership. This was the case in Blyth, where work with a neighbourhood association took place. After consistent work to demonstrate that the team could support the community of that neighbourhood, the relationship between the community and the local authority improved and citizens were much more willing to work with council staff and other public services.

- **System trajectory:** teams have sometimes alluded to the speed and direction of changes within their system, though rarely using the term "system trajectory". Teams described interventions they or other stakeholders made which prompted changes to the system or elements within it. Across a number of sites, teams identified that progress towards changing system goals was slow in the first half of the programme, but that change gathered momentum in the second half of the programme. Project stakeholders attributed this to having achieved a threshold of trust among partners and structural changes they had formalised which left the way open for beliefs to be codified in policies and strategies.

- **Unintended consequences:** There were a number of good examples of unintended consequences throughout the work that sites undertook. Typical examples include some of the serendipitous connections that teams were able to make with local people or voluntary organisations that they had not been aware of previously, which opened opportunities for collaboration in areas that were not expected.

Examples of changes at each level of the Action Scales Model are included in 6.3 to 6.6.

6.3 Beliefs

Definition: Beliefs are the norms, attitudes and values of people or organisations in the system.

> *"Shifting individual mindsets is what shifts a system, but it's a big tanker to shift."*
>
> Project stakeholder

As the SPHL programme has progressed, project stakeholders report with increasing confidence that they have changed the beliefs and attitudes of key groups in their systems. These groups have included citizens, people who deliver services and strategic leaders and decision-makers.

6.3.1 Influencing strategic leaders' mindsets

In several sites, project stakeholders identified instances where they had successfully influenced leaders in strategic decision-making roles, mostly in local authorities.

Where sites have made progress, they have achieved this by successfully reframing a challenge so that it has greater resonance or links with an existing agenda. They have often used examples of good practice to persuade local stakeholders of the merits of taking a system change approach, rather than a traditional service-led response, for example.

Project stakeholders recognised that some strategic leaders could not connect to their messages, which meant they needed to reframe their messages and narratives to be more relevant and compelling, as well as connecting to an existing agenda. The Shaping Places Shropshire and Heart of Blyth teams have had success in taking this approach.

- **Shaping Places Shropshire:** Shaping Places Shropshire has been working on reframing food insecurity. By using storytelling techniques and sharing lived experiences, they have created a deeper understanding of those experiencing food insecurity. They have also found it useful to present both the underlying causes of poverty and hardship alongside the potential solutions in their call to action. With inadequate incomes being a key driver of food insecurity, the team has emphasised the importance of maximising incomes, and have worked with stakeholders to increase confidence around talking about money.

- **Heart of Blyth:** given a growing focus in Northumberland County Council on inequality in the context of public health policy, the team has responded by framing their work within this context. Project stakeholders reported that linking to an existing agenda has attracted support from system architects who can shape the goals and practices of the system, which in turn ensures sustainability.

> *"We're thinking about which doors can open up and we're trying to be ready for those opportunities. For example, if it gets brought up in a council meeting, then we need to be ready for it."*
>
> Project stakeholder

Where sites have been successful at influencing strategic leaders, it has often been through demonstrating the benefits that taking a complex system approach has had and has required teams to be able to tell a persuasive story about how they are changing their systems.

In Stainforth, the team has been able to do this: they have promoted the value of a community-led approach to system change by demonstrating the positive outcomes and feedback that the team has received from the community.

> *"Stainforth has been used as a trial to learn how we can test these theories out".*
>
> Local stakeholder

Stakeholders reflected that some individuals or groups have been more open to a different approach than others. Among public health professionals, there is typically already some awareness of system thinking and complex system perspectives, making them more comfortable with working in this particular way. However, with other council colleagues, the project teams needed to do more to promote system change approaches, including how they could be applied and their benefits. For local authorities experiencing immediate financial pressures, making the case for investing for the long-term is more difficult, as greater value is often given to more immediate solutions.

6.3.2 Changing attitudes of people involved in delivering services

Stakeholders in several sites identified changes in the beliefs of people involved in delivering services. They identified two changes in particular:

- **A change in beliefs about how they can affect health outcomes:** project stakeholders reported that they have had success at helping people to identify their connection to determinants of health which might not be central to their core business. Examples include landlords' role in anti-social behaviour or schools' role in food insecurity.

- **A change in norms about how they can use system change thinking and approaches in their work:** teams have also helped change people's thinking about addressing health outcomes by changing systems rather than through specific service interventions.

Project stakeholders reported that carrying out exercises like system mapping, or bringing groups of staff together in new forums, created opportunities to demonstrate (a) how their work was interrelated and (b) that their work has an impact on public health, even if that is not the primary focus of their job or organisation.

By exposing people to the reality that their work impacts on, for example, mental health and wellbeing, even if that is not their core purpose or focus, project stakeholders report that they have encouraged partners to become more actively involved in efforts to improve outcomes and engage with citizens on a wider range of topics that go beyond their core day-to-day business.

Bringing different teams together was often a very positive experience for staff and volunteers. Project and local stakeholders noted that it was often a dynamic and exciting opportunity to share ideas. As a result, stakeholders felt that staff and volunteers were more amenable to the ideas of a system change approach, and could see how it would help them.

> *"The difference they're all making is [supporting] shared understanding with people from different parts of a system, building better understanding and collaboration potential. This has happened across all of the projects. Enabling themselves and close partners to understand and believe that you need different people in the system to do different things in order to have an impact."*
>
> Programme stakeholder

This positive shift in mindset was reinforced with training in some areas, like in Blyth, where they offered asset-based community development training. By sharing these ideas widely across diverse groups, such as libraries and the council's customer service department, an asset-based approach was reinforced across the system.

Similarly, the Shropshire team reported that delivering training across their local system has challenged biases and stigma around food insecurity and encouraged frontline staff and volunteers to take up their call to action to Ask, Assist and Act to support residents with their financial problems. This has reportedly led to effective debunking of myths and improved understanding of the challenges local people face.

6.3.3 Citizens have greater belief in the role that they can play in changing their area

Project and local stakeholders reported that in several sites, there is evidence that citizens' beliefs about themselves, their level of agency and what they can influence are being positively challenged.

As a local authority stakeholder described, this as a process that has involved overcoming people's preconceptions about what influence they can really have:

> *"[There is] a lot of work to do about belief and perception about these issues. Taking agency can be a scary thing for some people […] People don't see that they can influence certain things."*
>
> Project stakeholder

In both Blyth and Stainforth, where there has been a concerted focus on asset-based community development, project stakeholders report local people feeling more positive about their town. By acting as a link between local regeneration efforts and the community, teams have made local people more aware of

opportunities these will present. Project stakeholders report that, as a result, many local people feel more optimistic about economic prospects in their areas, which is also leading to local people viewing the local authority more positively.

Project and local stakeholders also identified that providing opportunities and support for local residents to address issues affecting their communities has increased their confidence in their skills and built their capacity to run local initiatives. There is also evidence across several sites of increased ambition in existing community groups. This includes expanding the scope of their work and, increasingly, feeling confident enough to identify funding sources and submit funding applications independently of the project teams to support their ambitions.

In turn, this is encouraging more community involvement, as evidenced by increased take-up in community groups' activities and more individuals setting up their own community groups. This is especially the case where residents led decision-making on funding that affects their communities. For instance, in Blyth, there has been a concurrent growth in applications for its micro-grant scheme. This reflects a growing number of local people feeling able to identify what is needed in their local areas and empowered to address this need.

Project stakeholders were cautious about not overstating the scale of the difference that they are making, however. They felt most confident about the impact they were having on people with whom they have directly come into contact with or supported – but were less certain about how changes in beliefs might have been transmitted more widely among local residents.

6.4 Goals

Definition: Goals are the stated aims, targets, or ambitions that the individuals, organisations, or the system as a whole are working towards.

There are several examples of ways in which system goals were reshaped by the teams. System goals were not commonly discussed as part of the team's approaches, which were more likely to focus on relationships or beliefs and values. However, as teams aimed to codify and secure their changes to the system, they often took steps which made changes to system goals.

Changes have included:

- **Reframing the focus of existing programmes:** There were a number of examples where teams achieved changes in the goals of existing programmes or policies. For example, in Newham, there was already a well-established local agenda about food insecurity. Their work shone a light on an under-examined element of it: access to good quality food for children aged 11-19. They did not need to persuade strategic stakeholders about the value of focusing on food security (a change to values or beliefs), but they have been able to drive a change in the target group of that work, by highlighting an unmet need.

- **Community groups pursuing more ambitious goals:** Teams have helped raise the aspirations of volunteers and VCSE groups about the differences their work can make. With a mix of encouragement, training and advice, and connecting people with wider networks of likeminded people, individuals and groups have taken on greater responsibility in their systems. This was widely seen as a positive, although, as discussed in 5.3.2, had been balanced with the need to not rely too heavily on the limited time and resources of volunteers to prevent a burnout.

  An example is Blyth's micro-grant scheme for local groups. Part of the requirements of the grant process was that applicants had to demonstrate how they would broaden their work to connect with wider audiences. This encouraged different groups to reach out to parts of the community they would not otherwise have focused on, with the potential that more people benefit from the social connections and other benefits of taking part in community actions. Some groups who accessed grants used their experience to then apply for additional funding from other sources. This positive feedback loop suggested that there was potential that the micro-grant scheme would have wider impact on the goals of community groups over time.

  BNSSG also ran a micro-grant scheme directed at local residents, with support from community partners and/or local participatory funding processes. This has led to both residents and local groups securing further funding from other sources beyond the BNSSG project.

- **Codified changes of beliefs in strategy and policy documentation:** Several teams identified that they have influenced strategy or policy decisions in their local area, including the strategies of local authorities and other partners. For example, the Stainforth, Shropshire and Blyth teams gave examples of their practice being incorporated into strategies, policies and guidance including in other parts of their respective local authorities.

  In BNSSG, food insecurity has been embedded into the South Gloucestershire five-year Climate and Nature Emergency Action Plan, which names sustainability and food poverty as key issues to address. In Doncaster, public health teams have adopted Stainforth's approach to public engagement. Project stakeholders suggested that the SPHL programme will have made a contribution to outcomes such as these.

- **Formalised partnerships, agreeing that collaborative approaches will be the intended way of working that the system aims:** Project stakeholders identified multiple examples in different sites where relationships and partnership working have been formalised, as different partners seek to make collaborative action a part of their business as usual. This has included agreeing terms of references, formalising responsibilities between partnerships, and making more formal commitments to adopting system working practices.

Where sites report that they have made less progress than they might have liked, they often identified factors such as the *Cost of Living crisis*, and how it has created a '*crisis mode*' mentality. Project stakeholders identified that it is difficult to engage key local partners on adjusting their goals or targets in terms of longer

term thinking while they are focused on immediate service responses. As one local community partner reported:

> *"Long-term change requires a bit more deep-diving in; I would like to be more intentional in doing what we do."*
>
> Local stakeholder

6.5 Structures

Definition: Structures are the flows of information, resources, relationships and processes that define how the parts of a system interact.

Project and local stakeholders in most of the sites have reported that the biggest changes in their systems have been structural. These have included:

- Promoting more and stronger relationships across the system.
- Improving the flows of information around the system.
- Changes to decision-making processes.

These structural changes promote greater problem-solving properties in the system without the need for a central body to direct these changes. Emergent behaviours of the system include different partners or actors in the system working together in new ways to address the determinants of poor health.

More and improved relationships throughout the system

Teams have forged new relationships between individuals and organisations within their local systems and deepened existing connections. This has improved connectivity between third sector organisations, local authority departments and other public sector stakeholders, such as schools and the police. Stakeholders commonly identified that:

- There is greater connectivity between different individuals and organisations within the system who were not previously involved in discussions with each other. This includes more routine interactions and discussions, as well as one-off engagement.
- The level of trust between VCSE groups, community members and local authorities has improved as they have worked together more frequently and with a shared purpose.
- Teams have worked to amplify the voices of different groups in the community, so their needs and priorities are listened to and promoted in settings where they are not usually heard.

In the early stages of their work, stakeholders observed greater connectivity and trust between individuals and organisations within the system. Over time, and

with continued reinforcement, local stakeholders reported that they observe a more collaborative culture emerging locally, both between VCSE groups and between VCSE, council and community members.

> *"I've never seen anything like it, [the SPHL team] have made such a contribution to changing [the] mindsets of organisations – made us aware of different opportunities […] bringing us closer together with the council and small community groups."*
>
> Local stakeholder

Stakeholders reported that, not only have teams promoted more relationships across their systems, the strength of those relationships are also greater. Over the course of SPHL, teams reported that they have converted informal relationships into more structured partnerships. Stakeholders felt that not only were these partnerships more likely to be sustained over a longer period, but they also provide opportunities for problem-solving and information sharing on a routine, rather than ad hoc basis, strengthening the system as a whole.

As outlined in 6.3, the experience of bringing partners together has often been a positive one, and led to organisations seeking further opportunities for collaboration, sometimes without SPHL input to support. For instance, Stainforth supported a group of local citizens to put on a community event in the village. The group found the experience positive and, with some support, established a committee to organise future community events independently.

Improved information sharing

Stakeholders across the sites also report that intelligence is being both gathered and shared more effectively across the system. This is a feature of the stronger relationships and partnerships forged by the teams, resulting in more information being shared, more frequently. This is taking place between services but also with the community.

- **Improved information sharing between public services:** In almost all sites, there has been some improvement reported in the quality and frequency of information sharing between public services, including VCSE organisations. This is a feature of the effective work done by teams to better network their systems.

- **Greater voice for citizens:** In several sites, they were also able to promote the greater inclusion of community voices, providing local decision makers more opportunities to hear from the community more directly. This has included, for example, Stainforth's use of youth panels and apprentices in their work to connect directly with young people.

The benefits of this information sharing have included supporting decision makers to better reflect community priorities. For public services, it has also made them more aware of possible gaps or duplication of work, and opportunities for partnership working where there are shared aims.

Decision-making, resource flows and power dynamics

A number of interventions have made specific impacts on the ways that decisions are taken and how resources are allocated within systems, often giving greater power and control to citizens or voluntary sector organisations. These changes have often been relatively small scale, and stakeholders were mindful not to overstate the extent of the impact they have had. However, they have demonstrated that such changes can be made, which may create further opportunities in the future.

For instance, the micro-grant schemes in both Blyth and BNSSG are good examples of teams placing more decision-making responsibility in the hands of citizens, and making resources available to support those decisions. This is a change in the traditional power dynamics that have existed, but also in many public services generally. The Blyth team identified how they have proactively stepped back now that the residents' advisory group is up and running, to allow them to lead instead.

Other examples of changes to power dynamics include innovative approaches to partnership funding, such as in BNSSG, where arrangements were made to fund a consortium of organisations, with each receiving equal funds rather than a single organisation taking the majority. This aims to give each partner equal opportunity.

> *"There's one key organisation that is always given the funding and the work, and rather than having one key organisation leading all the initiatives, they've changed it to a few organisations. They've changed through this programme the structure and pushed back on the norms. It's been really challenging - simply by taking this approach, they've come up against even more challenges - but their hope is the benefits outweigh the negatives."*
>
> SPHL programme stakeholder

Project stakeholders noted that previously partners in their local areas were more used to competing for scarce resources than collaborating. Changes in how funding is allocated in sites including Blyth and BNSSG reduced the need for this competitiveness. It has translated into a more integrated and supportive network of community groups. In BNSSG, project stakeholders highlighted that strategically joining up community groups has avoided duplication and competition, as well as growing awareness around work underway in the local area and clarity about gaps in the system.

Several sites have also established steering groups or forums which have allowed community members to have direct input into decision-making. Stakeholders reported that decision-makers in turn increasingly recognise the value of proactively engaging community members.

6.6 Events

Definition: Events are the things that happen in a system, like the behaviours of individuals or how services treat outcomes.

Across each of the sites, stakeholders reported changes that have been made to particular services or ways of working. At this stage, in most sites, these changes have often been at a relatively small scale, such as:

- Arranging travel for residents to reach cheaper supermarkets.
- Setting up peer support groups.
- Commissioning additional support by voluntary sector providers.

There has typically been less focus on changes at the level of events in teams' local systems. This has been due to a concerted focus on targeting efforts at other levels of the system.

In terms of the impact of this work, stakeholders identified that it has expanded the availability of support and, in some cases, ensured that support was better tailored to local needs. For example, in BNSSG, stakeholders identified that local services are now more involved in food-related work.

Newham has taken a more concerted effort to change events because part of its focus is on identifying new interventions that would support their target group. This reflects that, through taking a complex system perspective, they have identified that there may be a specific gap that needs to be addressed.

6.7 Impact on the determinants of health or public health outcomes

Project stakeholders have been cautious throughout the SPHL programme about attributing changes in determinants of health directly to their work in local systems. This is informed by the relatively short timeframe within which they could expect appreciable impacts. As discussed in 5.3.1, the challenging national socioeconomic contexts that the teams have been working within may also mask the small improvements achieved. However, the teams expressed cautious confidence in having contributed to creating conditions for positive changes in health outcomes.

Across several sites, there is evidence that the impact observed corresponds with the expected changes in each site's Theory of Change. This gave project stakeholders confidence about their overall direction of travel. Typically, these changes were not related to specific determinants of health or public health outcomes. Instead, they were more focused on system-level changes, which project stakeholders report will lay the foundations for determinants of health to be addressed more effectively moving forwards:

- More positive community cohesion improving how people relate to each other.

- More individuals and groups feeling more motivated to support change efforts.
- Organisations being better connected and informed.
- A greater focus on the determinant of health in a variety of settings.
- Project activities, principles and goals being embedded in the agendas for councils and partners.

Some sites were able to identify that direct work to address the issue may generate more tangible impact on health outcomes. However, this is likely to be more short-term in focus:

- More support provision and resource for people who were not being supported before.
- Notable improvements in food options and quality in schools and, in particular, community settings compared to when the project started.
- Greater number of frontline workers trained to provide residents with better signposting to local resources.
- Improved community understanding of healthy eating and cooking and ability and confidence to put this into practice on a budget.

Project and programme stakeholders recognised that there is pressure on local authorities and other stakeholders to deliver short-term results as well as reforms in the longer term. One possibility could be that sites make greater use of their Theory of Change, so that they can demonstrate how they are progressing towards making an impact on population outcomes.

It also highlights the importance of seeking to measure the difference that a complex system approach makes in order to build those examples and case studies that demonstrate progress in lieu of population health outcomes improvements.

6.7.1 Impact on community sense of autonomy

An area where there may have been improvements in the determinants of health outcomes is the greater sense of ‘autonomy’ developed by communities and individuals who were engaged by the SHPL programme.

While an increased sense of personal autonomy was not necessarily a specific stated aim of each site, through the course of Action Learning Sets, the sites recognised that they each observed instances where groups or individuals felt they had greater control of their lives (see 6.3.3). In one Action Learning Set, the BNSSG team highlighted local agency and collaboration as having been crucial to their approach, describing their role as having been to “make links, provide resources and support – and then stand back”. The team identified changes in mindset among residents who got involved in local projects “that they can each contribute”.

A sense of agency is highlighted by the Marmot Review (2010) which recommends promoting all people to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives. Stakeholders were confident that, through the process of taking a complex system approach, this objective has been achieved by engaging residents and professionals as partners, in a way that may not have been achieved through the usual ways of working or service delivery.

7 Discussion and lessons

7.1 Overview

This chapter presents key themes and lessons from the Shaping Places for Healthier Lives programme. It seeks to address the central research questions:

- What do we mean by complex systems in the context of the wider determinants of health?
- How do you change these systems to improve the wider determinants of health?
- What happens to these systems when you make these changes?
- What have we learnt from this process?

7.2 What do we mean by complex systems in the context of the wider determinants of health?

Across the five sites, we have observed that there is no single or definitive interpretation of what a complex system should include, how it should be drawn, or what activities should be undertaken as part of a complex system approach.

Each site has drawn its own system, and while they share some common features, the boundaries, size and character of each system has varied. This reflects choices made by the teams when establishing their complex system approach. It also reflects differences in local geography, scale and who has been involved in the programme.

Some sites drew the edge of their boundaries to follow a pre-existing geographical or administrative boundary (e.g. Stainforth, Blyth, and BNSSG) or created a new system constructed around a particular community of interest or concern (e.g. Newham and Shropshire). SPHL has demonstrated the applicability of a complex system approach to systems of different sizes and configurations. It does not need to be a system of a particular size (e.g. an ICS or local authority footprint).

There is no single method for determining what a complex system is or should include in relation to the determinants of health. Stakeholders have recognised that there are trade-offs depending on how the system is defined:

- A narrowly defined system is often more easily understood and can help channel stakeholders towards a more focused set of activities. It may exclude some possible levers that are perceived as outside the system of interest or influence.
- A more broadly defined system can be valuable for drawing in a wider range of stakeholders and resources, potentially growing the problem solving capacity of the system approach. However, it may also result in resources

being spread too thinly, and changing a system at scale may become more challenging.

A complex system approach has served as a tool which helps sites understand and resolve challenging problems. They have applied it differently to varied contexts. Key features of a complex system perspective, identified by project teams, included:

- Understanding that health challenges are multi-faceted and the relationships between cause-and-effect are often complicated and non-linear.
- Changes to outcomes can be made through addressing the causes of poor health, rather than simply treating the symptoms.
- Changing a system may require interventions in different places in a system at the same time, as the causes of poor health will be multiple.
- It requires taking a longer-term perspective than typical change management projects, as changes may not be immediate.
- It involves working with a wider range of people from across the system.

In conclusion, sites are using the idea of a complex system as a tool to help understand challenges and identify solutions to challenging public health problems. This can be applied flexibly to fit different circumstances. Local authorities and partners seeking to apply a complex system approach should be mindful of how they draw their systems, as it will likely frame the types of solutions that emerge.

7.3 How do you change these systems to improve the wider determinants of health?

There have been similarities in the approach that they have each taken and what has been most effective. These include:

1. Working at multiple levels of the system at the same time.
2. Focusing on emergent properties of the system, rather than specific interventions.
3. Starts with relationships, and seeking the input of a wide range of stakeholders.
4. A team who can connect and convene people rather than deliver services.
5. Being dynamic and adaptive in your approach, but not simply reactive or opportunistic.

All sites have sought to make changes at different levels of the system at the same time. This has required them to influence their system at a structural level (relationships, partnerships, information and resource sharing) at the same time as promoting changes in beliefs and goals. This multi-layered approach distinguishes a complex system change approach from other change management approaches.

Sites have focused on making changes that support how effectively their system functions as a whole by connecting different stakeholders and strengthening relationships. Relationship building is at the heart of the work, and it requires a team that is able to play the role of connector and convenor effectively. It also requires teams to be responsive and adaptable as their system changes and new opportunities present themselves, without losing focus on the bigger picture.

Project stakeholders identified a number of important enablers that have helped them to progress. For many, the key factors have been the skills and experience of staff and, in particular, having staff who are capable of bringing together different stakeholders, bridging different organisations, and promoting partnership working. Where teams have been able to capitalise on a supportive policy environment and engaged with strategic leaders, this has also helped.

However, project stakeholders also identified obstacles which have worked against their efforts to change their systems. These have included a challenging national context introducing pressures in local systems; resource constraints which limit project scale-up; challenges securing buy-in from system actors and striking the right balance between a strategic and responsive approach.

7.4 What happens to these systems when you make these changes?

The SPHL programme has demonstrated that, even with relatively modest resources, teams can make changes to their systems within a relatively short period of time. These changes are often structural, but can also be deeper changes to beliefs and goals.

As was anticipated by sites and programme stakeholders prior to the programme, making changes to population health outcomes has been difficult to effect within the timeframe of the programme. This highlights the importance of having a strong Theory of Change that can be used to explain how changes achieved now might lead to better outcomes further down the line.

From the outset, stakeholders from across the programme have been cautious about the likelihood that the teams would make measurable improvements to population health outcomes. As the SPHL programme concludes, project stakeholders remain cautious about the influence on health outcomes. However, in each site, project stakeholders are confident that their projects have made a difference at different levels of their systems. This is despite the challenging backdrop of Covid-19 and the Cost of Living crisis.

The most visible progress has been made at a structural level, in particular the improved relationships teams have built with stakeholders across the system. This has been a complex process – some relationships were forged quickly, whereas others have required significant ongoing attention. As relationships have improved, this has often triggered positive feedback loops, as stakeholders begin to work together on a wider range of topics.

There is also evidence of changes to key system stakeholders' beliefs and goals. This has required reframing the area of focus and obtaining recognition among system actors that their input adds value. Building from a platform of stronger relationships, project stakeholders reported that they had been able to influence

key stakeholders' thinking about the determinants of health. Increasingly, project stakeholders identified these beliefs being applied in policy documents and strategies.

The difference made by taking a complex system approach is often small and incremental, which highlights the importance of capturing changes and achievements to evidence progress and build a strong narrative. Some sites, like Shropshire, have been effective at using visual summaries to present their achievements; this work is necessary to demonstrate progress.

Stakeholders recognise that there is often an imperative to achieve change quickly, but that a complex system approach takes time. Many sites could potentially make greater use of their Theory of Change and system maps as tools for explaining where a system is on the journey towards improved outcomes for the population.

7.5 What have we learnt from this process?

The SPHL programme has been an innovative approach to supporting local authorities to develop their own complex system approaches. There are a number of lessons from this programme. These include lessons about the programme design, the need for complex system approaches, how we collectively talk about systems and the difference that it can make.

1. **SPHL programme design has promoted an innovative and experimental approach:** From the outset, it has sought to make a distinct offer to the local government sector. The programme has afforded the five local areas considerable freedom to try new ways of working without specifying how a complex system approach should be applied. Combined with the delivery support, local authorities have praised this approach for the way it has allowed them to experiment and apply a complex system approach to their own context.
2. **Participating local authorities are committed to their complex system approaches**: Each site involved remains committed to continuing their system approach in some form. There is evidence across the programme that local authorities can see the benefits of taking a system approach to resolve complex challenges like the determinants of poor health.
3. **A complex system approach can be applied to systems of different shapes and size**: SPHL has demonstrated the applicability of a complex system approach to systems of different sizes and configurations. It does not need to be a system of a particular size (e.g. an ICS or local authority footprint).
4. **Taking a complex system change perspective more closely resembles a particular problem-solving mindset than a model that can be easily manualised and replicated.** It requires consideration of change at all different levels of the system (beliefs, goals, structures and events), but beyond this, the activities undertaken depend considerably on local context and the wider determinant of health being addressed.
5. **Building trust between the team and local stakeholders is an essential component of system change work.** This is especially true where sites take a community-led approach. Project stakeholders recommend investing time in

consultation with stakeholders and building meaningful relationships, both at the start and throughout the process.

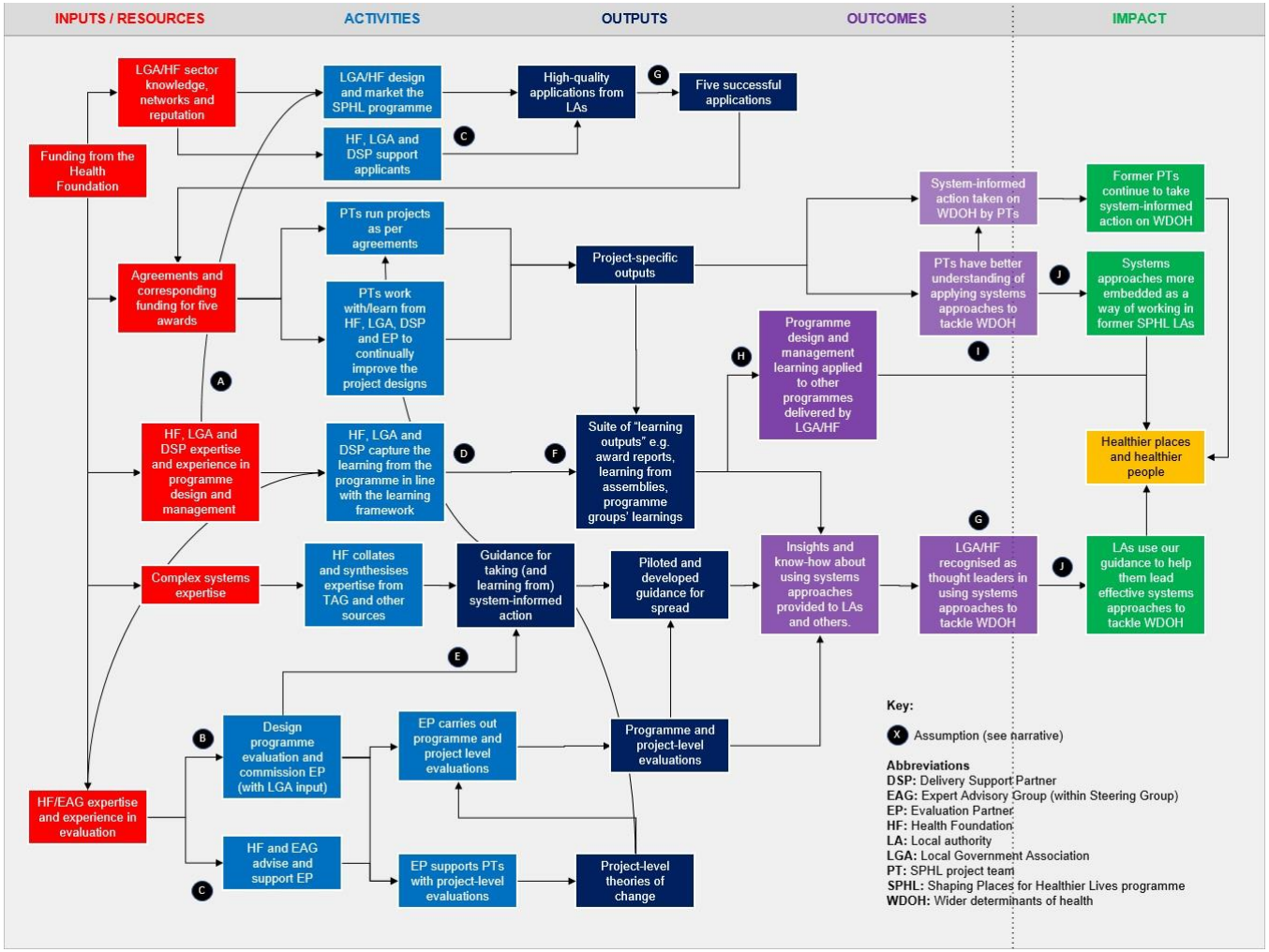
6. **Communicating a complex system approach is challenging:** In each site, project stakeholders have described the challenges to find the best way of explaining their approach in appropriate and accessible language to different audiences. Some felt the technical language of complex systems is alienating to key audiences, and required alternative approaches; within the SPHL programme, trying to compare and contrast has been challenging too, to apply a single framework across different places. Finding a vocabulary which is precise enough to explain what is distinctive about a complex system approach, but widely accessible, remains a challenge.
7. **Taking a complex system approach can make a difference, even in challenging circumstances and in a relatively short time – it is important to capture strong evidence of this**: Despite the teams being cautious about the time that will be required to change population health outcomes, project stakeholders were confident that they have made a difference through the work of SPHL. This research highlights the importance of capturing evidence of the intermediate changes that happen in a system before the determinants of health can be improved. It also highlights the value of using a Theory of Change, informed by an understanding of systems and complexity, to describe what that journey will look like, and crafting a persuasive narrative for stakeholders that demonstrates where progress is being made.

Appendix A: Thematic framework

How do you change these systems to improve the wider determinants of health?
Beliefs. We will aim to change the norms, attitudes and values of people or organisations that are operating in the system.
Goals. We will aim to change the stated aims, targets or ambitions that the individuals, organisations, or the system as a whole are working towards.
Structures. We will aim to change mechanisms such as the flows of information, resources, relationships, and processes that define how different parts of the system interact.
Events. We will aim to change the things that happen in our system, like the behaviours of individuals or how services treat outcomes.

What happens to these systems when you make these changes?
Non-linear. The changes we've made in one area have resulted in other changes elsewhere. There is not a straight line between cause and affect.
Feedback loops. The changes we've made have resulted in further changes that have helped or slowed down progress.
Adaption. As we've made changes in one place, different parts of our system have changed independently in response.
Dynamism. Change in our system is happening all the time, but not always in the same way.
Co-evolution. Our system is changing with and in response to other systems. e.g. changes that are happening at international, national or even in neighbour systems affect our system too. This can be positive or negative.
Unintended consequences. The way our system changes is sometimes unexpected. This can be positive or negative.
Emergent properties. Our system isn't the equal to the sum of its parts. Changes to parts of the system affect how it functions as a whole.
System trajectory. Sometimes change is slow and difficult, but sometimes it can happen suddenly and dramatically.

Appendix B: SPHL programme Theory of Change



SPHL Theory of Change narrative

Programme aims

The overarching aim is to create place-based conditions for healthier lives by enabling local authority led partnerships to take system-informed action on the wider determinants of health.

The objectives of the programme are:

- To mobilise cross-sector action on the wider determinants of health through sustainable system change at a local level;
- To enable local authorities to facilitate and enable local partnerships for system change on the wider determinants of health;
- To learn how to make changes that impact on the wider determinants of health so that learning can be shared.

The desired outcomes for the programme include:

- System-informed action being taken by the SPHL project teams on the wider determinants of health.
- The SPHL project teams having a better understanding of applying systems approaches to tackle the wider determinants of health.
- Programme design and management learning being applied to other programmes delivered by the LGA and the Health Foundation.
- Insights and know-how about using systems approaches being provided to other local authorities and other public health stakeholders.

Ultimately, we want this programme to help us achieve our long-term ambition of healthier places and healthier people. In pursuing this ambition, we hope to achieve lasting impact in three other ways:

- The project “alumni” continuing to take system-informed action on the wider determinants of health.
- Systems approaches being more embedded as a way of working in the alumni local authorities.
- Local authorities in general using our guidance to help them lead effective systems approaches to tackle the wider determinants of health in their local areas.

Assumptions

The Theory of Change is underpinned by several assumptions. Each assumption below relates to a specific part of the Theory of Change diagram. This list is not exhaustive but is meant to identify the main assumptions.

A. The Health Foundation and the LGA develop an effective partnership, including good ways of working together, leading to a well-designed programme.
B. The programme-level Theory of Change is sufficiently fit for purpose to enable the programme evaluation to be designed and commissioned.
C. The roles, responsibilities and interrelationships of the different programme groups are clear.
D. Learning is meaningfully discussed and learning logs are updated throughout the programme.
E. In addition to programme-based learning, we will be drawing on wider literature and evidence to inform the framework and guidance.
F. The SPHL project teams will engage fully and openly with the wider learning system.
G. We will have a clear and consistent understanding of the quality expected of applications at each stage.
H. We will have a good/better understanding of programme design and management before the end of the programme.
I. The SPHL project teams will have captured their own learning as part of the process.
J. Local authorities recognise the value of the systems approach that we promote.

CordisBright Limited

23/24 Smithfield Street, London EC1A 9LF

Telephone 020 7330 9170
Email info@cordisbright.co.uk
Internet www.cordisbright.co.uk