Place-Based Systemic Change Community of Practice

Session 1. PBSC and me

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Place-Based Systemic Change

In 2020, Renaisi published a series of papers, bringing together ideas about place-based systemic change (PBSC). That work involved a great range of people and places in a conversation about what it is, how we can codify it, understand it, and encourage more funding and support for it.

Our working definition for PBSC is centred on five fundamental principles:

1. Focus   It is not limited to a single organisation or service but rather about collective and interrelated practice within a geography.

2. Time horizon   It is long-term in ambition and practice, although it may well achieve things in the short term.

3. Approach   It is engaged in building and developing ongoing and evolving relationships between people and organisations, it is flexible and responsive, and it explicitly engages in questions of complexity.

4. Scale   It is focused on geographies that are understood by those who live in them, and to the system challenge.

5. Intentionality It is attempting to unlock structural change, and is conscious of the different roles that need to be taken to achieve this. As a result it builds learning and adaptation into its work.

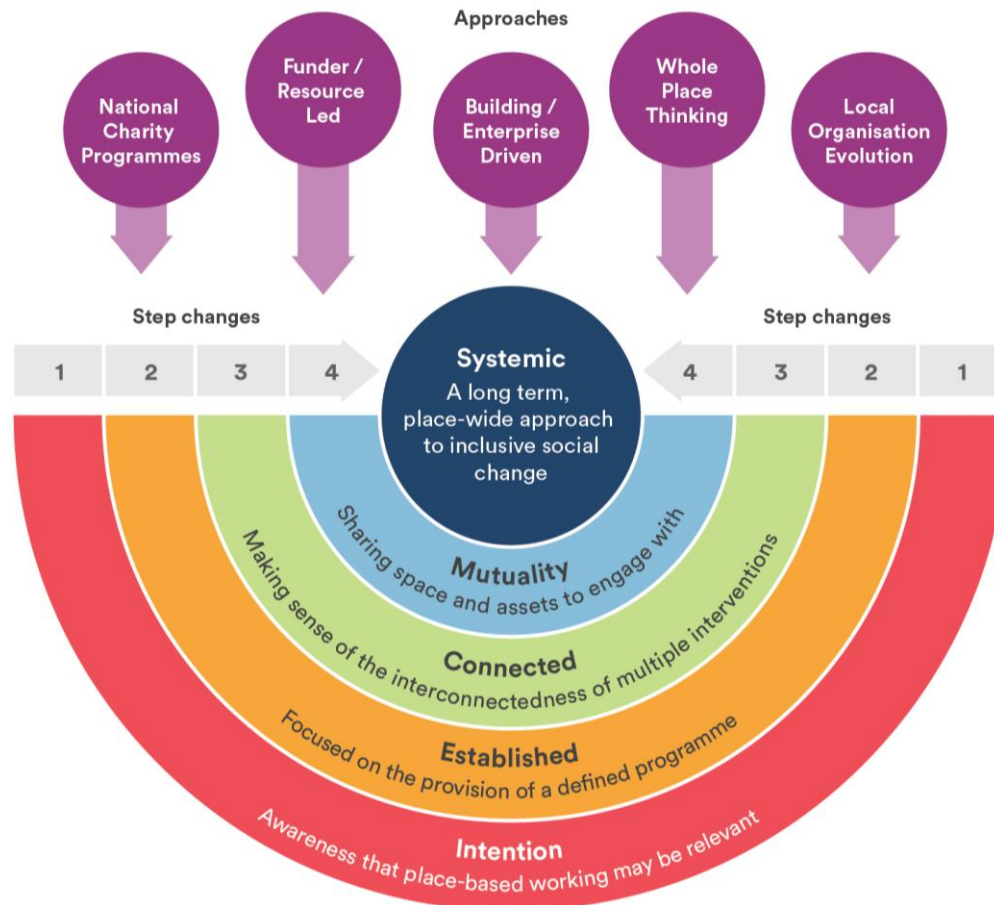RENAISI

Framework for PBSC

That research also produced a framework for understanding place-based systemic change.

Approaches

There are lots of 'ways in' to place-based work.

Step-changes
Transitioning from one level to the next can be tough for organisations or places to resource within existing commissioning, funding and business models.

Levels
There is a broad, not necessarily linear, trajectory towards systemic work.

Approaches

| National Charity Programmes | Funder / Resource Led | Building / Enterprise Driven | Whole Place Thinking | Local Organisation Evolution |

Step changes
1 2 3 4 → ← 4 3 2 1

Systemic
A long term, place-wide approach to inclusive social change

Mutuality
Sharing space and assets to engage with

Connected
Making sense of the interconnectedness of multiple interventions

Established
Focused on the provision of a defined programme

Intention
Awareness that place-based working may be relevant

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A community of practice

There were two obvious next steps for our work:

1. To explore more the experiences of funders and how they were practically working with PBSC. This is explored in another project.

2. To provide an opportunity for places to come together for peer support and learning.

The community of practice is open to any organisations working in places, and that identify with the principles of PBSC. It is predominately organisations delivering work, although some engaged funders also attend.

Renaisi leads it while develop an understanding of what people and organisations want and need.

Over time we want to find a sustainable way to house this and ensure the community of practitioners lead it.

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The first meeting

We considered the individual's role in PBSC and what skills or approaches are important to this way of working. We have three hypotheses:

Values

There are specific individuals, teams, or roles credited with being crucial to change in every place we have seen.

While they often resist this focus on them, they seem to have a set of values and approaches that influence the whole.

Balance

Place-based practitioners come from a variety of professional backgrounds (youth work, social work, community development, education, key worker roles, researchers, etc.).

Success in place-based systemic work comes from balancing what they bring and what they need to let go of.

Undefined

Much of the existing research on place-based approaches focuses on concepts like engagement, learning, collaboration and data/evaluation, but much less on the practitioners.

This work attempts to address that.

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Agenda

We asked the group to bring thoughts about:

- their **background** and what brought them to PBSC work

- the **skills** they'd developed in previous work that either helped or hindered this practice

- how **teams** are built that balance skills and experiences.

The key words that came out of all of our conversations was **relationships** and **listening**.

Moving from an operational position to commissioning, I considered myself bilingual… I understand both sides of it. You speak both languages so you get that trust from practitioners – and now being in [a national charity] developing strategic partnerships it is helpful to know how the Local Authority works.

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The people

People talked of frustration, annoyance and disappointment with their previous roles and ways of working that had seen them seek out a different approach. They identified with a desire to challenge and upend the status quo.

This disruptive streak was balanced by a focus on other people; practitioners often came from backgrounds where they had focused on the experiences and lives of others.

They are driven by values and struggle with what feels to them to be wasteful bureaucracy.

Get to a point where so much momentum is built but someone leaves and you go back to square one.

This is my last chance saloon.

People's lives are messy and don't fit structured vertical ways of working… so flexible systems change is more appropriate.

The places

But this individual drive and approach doesn't explain an interest in place.

Participants talked about connections between what they saw in the places they lived and worked, how it shaped them, and how it shaped the lives of people they knew or worked with.

It was my place and I wanted do something about it.

Grew up here. I've seen my whole life a range of investments that have achieved nothing.

I have spent all my career doing place work at the macro level.

Started in regeneration on council estates, I've always being doing it in one way or another.

Need local sensitivity and sensitivity to people without power in the community. There can be an automatic rejection if it's not done well.

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The teams

The group want to work in teams that successfully balance more traditional professional skills with what they'd recognised as place-based and systemic approaches:

1. Diverse representation

2. Power balance

3. Honesty and able to challenge each other

4. A developmental approach: recognition that everyone is still learning

The traditional skills still apply, but they require flexibility"

You need to balance being comfortable with the unknown with making sure people don't get demotivated.

How do you encourage frontline practitioners to take a lead?

A 'values first' person specification

Place-based systemic change practitioners focus on values and approach while also needing the 'usual' professional skills, experience or qualifications.

Active communication

Listening more than broadcasting

Speak multiple 'languages': integrated

Being curious

Eloquent enough to translate the needs of the community: 'mouth piece'

System leadership

Comfortable with ambiguity

Vulnerability as a strength

Strengthening and supporting people

Balancing relationships with achieving goals

Meaningful collaboration

Non-judgmental

Giving something of yourself

Relational

Connected to community

Community organising skills

Other responsibilities

Business skills for trading

Finance and data analysis

Policy and influence

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