

An emergent process for activating system change: insights from Golden Key Bristol

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to present insights into the way in which system change can be activated around the provision of services and support for people experiencing multiple disadvantages in an urban setting.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper is informed by a thematic analysis of reflections, reports, learning logs, interviews and experiences of those “activating” system change in the Golden Key partnership in Bristol between 2014 and 2021.*

Findings – *Four themes are identified, including “creating the conditions for change”, “framing your involvement”, “investing in relationships” and “reflective practice and learning”. For each of these, an illustrative vignette is provided.*

Practical implications – *Practical recommendations and reflective questions are provided with suggestions of further considerations for applying this approach in different contexts.*

Originality/value – *This paper describes an original approach of activating and supporting people to do system change to improve the lives of people facing multiple disadvantages.*

Keywords *System change, Severe and multiple disadvantages, Multiple and complex needs, Relationships, Reflective practice, Activating system change, Systems thinking, Action experiment, Complexity*

Paper type *Case study*

Introduction

This paper will explain the evolving journey of Golden Key’s approach to system change and highlight learning themes that have emerged from activating others to create sustainable changes in their own contexts.

Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, Golden Key has run for eight years (2014–2022) as a part of the national Fulfilling Lives programme ([National Lottery Community Fund, 2021](#)). Golden Key is a partnership between statutory services, commissioners, the voluntary sector and people with lived experience from across Bristol (the UK). The work of the partnership includes different strategic and operational activities that collectively work towards improving services and systems for people who face multiple disadvantages, defined in this context as “people who experience two or more of homelessness, a record of current or historical offending, substance misuse, and mental ill health” ([National Lottery Community Fund, 2021](#)).

During its funding period, Golden Key’s activity comprised a range of approaches including the involvement of client-facing practitioners coordinating support for caseloads of people experiencing multiple disadvantages, a group of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages and a strategic partnership board. Several multi-agency partnership groups were developed to focus on aspects of the work, and support was provided to deliver system change activity and track and capture learning.

From the outset, there was an aspiration to create “long term sustainable system change” (Second Step, 2013, p. 4). “System”, in the context of this article, is a collective term referring to Bristol’s complex and interconnecting provision of statutory and voluntary sector services that support people who face multiple disadvantages. Whilst there is not a unified definition of the phrase “system change”, there are common aspects to the way this term is understood (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2015). System change has been defined as “an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions” (Foster-Fishman *et al.*, 2007, p. 197). Within the Fulfilling Lives programme, system changes are viewed as “changes to the people, organisations, policies, processes, cultures, beliefs and environment that make up the system” (National Lottery Community Fund, 2019, p. 4). Golden Key aspired to create such changes across the system defined above: changes which were not dependent on key individuals but which were genuinely systemic, long term and transformational.

This article draws on insights from those directly involved to explore aspects of the “doing” of system change. Particular attention is given to the ways Golden Key sought to create environments where client-facing workers (service coordinators) were empowered to mobilise emergent system change within their own contexts. The paper concludes with observations on the challenges of monitoring and evaluating system change, reflections on the importance of empowering individuals in activating system change and points to consider for those who wish to change systems for individuals experiencing multiple disadvantages in other contexts.

Golden Key’s system change journey

Golden Key was designed with the complexity of both the ecosystem of services and the non-linear client journey in mind. This facilitated a dynamic, adaptive approach to system change which proved well-suited to the shifting landscape of Bristol’s provision for people experiencing multiple disadvantages. The system itself was constantly changing throughout the lifetime of Golden Key, with numerous cycles of commissioning across different sectors and significant structural changes to the way support was accessed and delivered. Within the final two years of the programme, significant disruption was created by the COVID-19 pandemic, which tested the foundations that had been put in place over the previous years.

Programme initiation

The initial phase of Golden Key focused on trying to better understand the complexities of the system by “walk[ing] the journey” (Second Step, 2013, p.5) with people facing multiple disadvantages. This approach involved service coordinators documenting the “blocks and barriers” they experienced when accessing support. This created a large repository of qualitative data: evidence of the types of system problem that were preventing people from accessing services.

In this first phase, there was a strong sense of commitment towards Golden Key’s system change objectives but a lack of clarity about how this would be achieved or what it would look like in practice (Gulati *et al.*, 2016; Isaac *et al.*, 2017). Early efforts took a structured approach, identifying and responding to blocks and barriers observed by practitioners, and if they could not be resolved at that level, then escalating them up through hierarchical system structures until a satisfactory conclusion was reached. This process was time-consuming, not always effective and depended on someone else in the system doing something to instigate or sustain change.

Having developed a network of operational and strategic groups and given the need to disperse and embed this function widely across the partnership, a decision was made 18 months into the project to allocate additional resources to system change work. This included: the provision of “systems thinking” training across the partnership; bringing in external consultants to review the “blocks and barriers” approach; and creating new roles to build capacity for supporting system change activity.

a. *Systems thinking training*. An *Introduction to Systems Thinking* course, delivered by Martin Sandbrook of the Schumacher Institute, was offered to members of the Golden Key partnership, including the project team, people with lived experience and strategic and operational staff from organisations across the partnership. The course was run 13 times for a total of 152 participants (2016–2021) and introduced concepts such as systems thinking (Meadows, 2008; Capra and Luisi, 2014), complexity (Boulton *et al.*, 2015), appreciative inquiry (Marshall, 1999) and action learning (Revans, 1982, 1998) that have remained central to Golden Key's work ever since (see <http://systemslearning.org/on-line-course/> for an online version of course materials; The Schumacher Institute, 2021).

The ideas introduced through this course facilitated a shift in perspective that encouraged the Golden Key team and partners to embrace a more emergent approach to system change, based on reflection and enquiry, as summarised in the following quote from the course facilitator:

For me, 'systems thinking' [...] is an attitude of openness, of inquiry, of looking from many perspectives, inner and outer, of holding, or trying to hold, an awareness of my own beliefs and assumptions, of noticing my reaction to things [...] It means being prepared to let go of the need to be right, or the fear of uncertainty or the illusion of control (Sandbrook, 2018).

The course also proposed an “action experiment” approach to activating emergent system change. The “action experiment cycle” (Golden Key Bristol, 2019) involved the following steps:

- *What is the block?* (How does this impact on the client experience? What do I want to find out or change?).
- *Be curious* (What are my assumptions and beliefs? What appears to be going on? What is actually going on?).
- *Aspiration* (What do I want to be different? What am I trying to unblock?).
- *Action* (What could I do? What am I going to do? Try something).
- *Observe* (Notice what happens. Unexpected things can happen. Describe, no need to judge or define).
- *Reflect* (Did my actions influence change? What are my next steps? What is the learning?).
- *Repeat if needed* (Return to asking: what is the block?).

Attendees were encouraged to choose issues that felt “edgy” and to use the action experiment cycle to explore ways to address them.

The shared learning experience of the training was a significant catalyst in supporting a more purposeful approach to addressing system problems. Internal perceptions of system change became less abstract and moved from being something that could only be actioned by those in senior/strategic roles to something that people at all levels could actively contribute towards. After the training, one attendee reported:

I used the action experiment between day 1 and 2 [of the training] and genuinely loved it [...]. I feel more prepared and ready after I have used it, so I know I will continue to do so.

b. *Bringing in external perspectives*. Despite the renewed energy and ownership fuelled by the training and implementation of the action experiment approach, the quantity of data already collected was overwhelming, with over 600 detailed examples of how problems within the system had impaired progress or prevented access to support. An external consultant, brought in at this stage, advised halting data collection and beginning a process of sense-making to categorise the data.

Rather than dealing with each issue separately, three workshops were facilitated, where participants grouped data into themes by looking for recurring patterns across different contexts. This produced a list of around 50 items and service coordinators were then encouraged to identify issues that resonated for them and use the action experiment cycle to begin creating change.

For the service coordinators, this marked the beginning of a new phase, and some perceived it as the moment from which meaningful system change began to occur. Identification of so many blocks and barriers had caused a degree of paralysis and indecision about how to proceed. The process of theming caused a shift in mindset from observation to action: individuals became less concerned about doing the “right” thing and realised they could just start by trying something.

c. Supporting system change activity. To support the increase in system change work, Golden Key created two new roles which eventually became known as the “Spark” team. The team supported individuals and groups involved in system change and identified the need to focus on activating change in different parts of the system. To further build capacity, Spark recruited “change agents” (people who were motivated to do system change) from partner organisations and provided support and coaching, including: systems thinking training (as outlined above); supporting people to identify useful methods for recording and reflecting on system change activity; and collating and sharing learning resources (Golden Key Bristol, 2021).

Spark’s early work with groups centred on supporting members to return to actions which aligned with the group’s purpose. They observed that structure and agendas in group settings helped embed a shared understanding, and engagement also improved where a group or network put a clear timeframe around their activity. When each group member invested time and energy into thinking about how the group functioned, groups worked more collaboratively.

A key observation in this phase was that successful outcomes largely arose from the actions of empowered individuals rather than the group as a whole (see also Isaac *et al.*, 2019 and Bolden *et al.*, 2021). Where people could draw on their own work history, knowledge, organisational culture, personal mindset and self-belief, they were able to support system change tailored to local needs. These unique perspectives meant that individuals understood what was needed, with those working most closely with clients often best placed to identify creative and workable solutions – to quote Myron’s Maxim’s: “those who do the work do the change” (Rodgers, 2015, p. 23).

Activating system change: key themes

The notion of “activating” people within the system to initiate system change underpinned much of Golden Key’s work going forward. This section highlights key learning from where this approach has been used, along with illustrative examples.

1. Creating the conditions for change

From Golden Key’s perspective, creating conditions for change involved supporting those in the system to identify what they thought was important and explore how they could take action within their context. Prescribing a particular set of conditions for system change was not helpful and “leverage points” (Meadows, 1999) were most likely to be identified by the people immersed in the local context. As a Spark team member said:

We never had any power over any of the people we worked with [...] we don’t tell them what the conditions [for change] are because we don’t know. We have an evidence base of conditions we’ve seen work – but other conditions could work too.

Coaching and facilitation were provided to help individuals and groups think through key issues. When people engaged with this support, they developed ownership of their change activity, became invested in finding solutions and encouraged the involvement of others. One change agent in a partnership organisation said:

We have created our own working group now and I think that's important. It's about enabling and empowering individuals to take on some responsibility and just share it. I had an amazing conversation with Mike [Spark team] today just about the power of sharing information and learning from each other and Golden Key has done that very well.

Motivating factors varied, and it was useful for individuals to examine their motivations to do system change work. This also helped to clarify aspirations and avoid becoming fixed on solutions too soon.

People who self-selected to be change agents were more likely to take ownership of their change activity than when it was delegated from someone in a senior position. An application process was trialled in response to this learning: people were invited to apply to receive training and support to become change agents within their own organisations. This created clarity of the offer of support to "activate" change, so applicant organisations arrived with a collaborative understanding of the offer and an investment in the process.

When change agents felt ownership and agency and used their contextual knowledge, the type of change that could occur was divergent, creative and sometimes unexpected. One change agent commented:

I've had a shift in thinking: in terms of influence not control; a move away from success/failure to experimentation. There used to be a right way and a wrong way – now I'm able to sit with uncertainty.

Change developed as a non-linear process, and this enabled a wider variety of solutions or change activity to emerge, as illustrated in Case Vignette A.

Case Vignette A: Improving experiences of police contact for LGBTQ+ and neurodivergent individuals

A Golden Key client experienced both positive and negative interactions with the police whilst in crisis. The client felt these experiences were related to them being neurodivergent and identifying as transgender, and after reflecting on this with their service coordinator, they decided they wanted to share their experiences with the police. Their aspiration was to improve police contact for others.

The service coordinator supported the client to create written accounts of their various experiences and contacted the police to find out who they could talk to. Together, they met with the British Transport Police Head of Inclusion and Diversity.

Following this meeting, the police:

- produced a document with key learning points from the client's experiences and disseminated guidance to all British Transport Police employees across England, Scotland and Wales as part of their internal "lessons learned" process;
- disseminated guidance to the National LGBT Police Network, requesting onward dissemination to all 43 regional police forces across England, Wales and Scotland; and
- liaised with contacts in Avon and Somerset Police to ensure the summary was shared with the National Police Autism Association.

In this example, the service coordinator and client shared an aspiration to change an aspect of the system but did not have a fixed idea of what this might look like. More widely, service coordinators had time built into their roles to explore, support and activate system change activity but were not told specifically what that activity should be. This open-ended approach encouraged people to take initiative and use the expertise of those inside the system to move things forward.

2. Framing your involvement

With a fixed funding period, Golden Key was aware that system change work could not be dependent on Golden Key staff or resources long term. This was a core driver of the focus on activating others within the system. The aspiration was to create sustainable and self-organising functions/cultures within systems that could continue creating change beyond the lifetime of Golden Key. The Spark team manager said:

When we clearly framed the support on offer, including what people can expect from us and what we are expecting from them, we have seen more positive engagement and people taking ownership of system change activity.

No one at Golden Key had power over people they worked with in other parts of the system and limited ability to influence organisations or people other than through inspiring and supporting them to lead system change.

The use of an emergent, collaborative approach was frustrating for some and created uncertainty and confusion for others. People initially believed Golden Key had been funded to “do” the system change, and so the “activating” approach did not conform to expectations. This often required a significant shift in thinking, so it was important to explicitly communicate Golden Key’s role and the support available.

This support aimed to help people articulate their own system change aspirations. Proposing or initiating system change “solutions” could be distracting and unintentionally shift responsibility and ownership of work. Instead, when the support focussed on activating change agents to do change activity, individuals drew on their own system knowledge to clarify their potential for action.

Throughout Golden Key, service coordinators supported clients navigating different parts of the system. Their role was not to provide a “service” themselves but to learn about client experiences and to strengthen links and support between partners/providers. Case Vignette B provides an illustration of how supporting an organisation to meet a need in the short term activated them to take a different approach.

Case Vignette B: Strengthening services for refugees and asylum seekers

As part of his client work, Abdi (service coordinator) worked alongside Bristol Refugee Rights, a specialist service providing support for asylum seekers and refugees. Bristol Refugee Rights’ small team of staff and volunteers worked with people who had no recourse to public funds and who were excluded and forced into destitution. Caseworkers often dealt with complex and time-consuming legal processes.

There were no internal processes to identify clients experiencing additional and complex needs and staff ended up spending a large amount of time supporting a small group of people. The consequences were a much-reduced capacity for providing specialist support to their wider caseload and a negative impact on staff well-being.

Abdi worked with people with challenging combinations of issues that Bristol Refugee Rights’ casework team was not equipped to manage. This work and the collaborative conversations around it activated the service provider to set up new processes.

They subsequently put significant effort into securing funding to appoint a specialist complex needs caseworker.

The new role freed up staff to focus on their main group of clients alongside providing specialist support for people with additional complex needs, without becoming dependent on Golden Key funding or support for long term.

This example illustrates the way local interventions, with small numbers of clients, can evolve into system change which benefits service users more widely. In this case, Abdi was fortunate (through his experience with Golden Key clients) to have the capacity to try something alongside Bristol Refugee Rights. It was important both parties framed expectations about their involvement, and this meant the service provider was able to take ownership for progressing change. At that point, it moved from being a collaborative “flex” in the system ([National Lottery Community Fund, 2019](#)) to a piece of system change activity created and held by Bristol Refugee Rights.

3. Investing in relationships

Learning from across Golden Key and in each phase of the local evaluation has consistently shown that the quality of relationships has been an important factor in creating positive change with clients, partnership agencies and services ([Isaac et al., 2017, 2019](#), [Bolden et al., 2021](#)). Siloed system architecture makes it difficult for relationships to form naturally outside of specific teams, organisations or sectors, so it was important to invest time and energy in forming relationships across traditional system boundaries. One Golden Key practitioner noted:

If you cut us through like a stick of rock it says: “it’s all about the relationships”.

Relationships developed through conversation and reflection: they were given time to evolve so that support could flex and adapt to the needs of individuals. Several notable examples illustrated that relationships which developed between people at similar levels (or in similar roles) in different organisations were more effective in progressing system change work. This contrasted with less successful examples where there was a perceived power imbalance in the relationship, or the work was delegated by someone in a more senior role ([Bolden et al., 2021](#)).

The development of effective relationships was also important in Golden Key’s role of supporting others to do system change. Where supportive coaching relationships developed, different roles emerged: people who were doing system change, individuals who held an understanding of the complexity of the system and people who coached others in doing system change. One-to-one support sessions provided opportunities for individuals to share learning about, discuss and consider all these elements.

In Case Vignette C, a service coordinator invested time in developing relationships with people in the community. He found out what issues were concerning people and how those in the system thought things might be able to change.

Case Vignette C: Creating safe and inclusive spaces

Stephen (Golden Key service coordinator) was part of a working group seeking to tackle anti-social behaviour in a public space in central Bristol. The space included local businesses and was used by groups of people street drinking, many of whom faced multiple disadvantages.

Through developing relationships and building trust with people, Stephen noticed a feedback loop between the street drinking community’s behaviour and businesses’

reactions to this, which further exacerbated tension. Traders' responses were driven by a lack of understanding about the life experiences of those experiencing multiple disadvantages (e.g. trauma and adversity) and, therefore, no means to understand behaviour that others found challenging. Lack of understanding and these tensions created negative attitudes towards each other and verbal and physical altercations.

Stephen worked with other Golden Key staff to:

- develop a psychologically informed approach to managing anti-social behaviour in public spaces; and
- develop and deliver a package of support (training, one-to-one management consultations) at community venues and businesses.

As a result of the relationships Stephen had developed, this support was welcomed by local businesses. It gave staff the knowledge and skills to interact differently with people who face multiple disadvantages and to understand the wider context and experiences underpinning their behaviour. Businesses commented:

Learning from the training helped inform our thinking when drawing up anti-social behaviour guidelines [...] as well as the support in place to maintain wellbeing in the team.

We used to see ourselves as the eyes and ears of the police, now we see ourselves as the eyes and ears of support services.

As seen in this example, Golden Key staff (as activators and supporters of change) invested time in building relationships with community members. These relationships led to the identification of issues and made space for solutions to emerge. Supportive conversations provided opportunity for people within the system to reflect on their practice and enabled wider system change to happen.

4. Reflective practice and learning

People were able to engage with and develop system change activity more effectively when they had opportunities for reflective discussions to help identify learning. One systems thinking trainee said:

I have already benefited from using some of the reflective tools to be more understanding towards workers from other agencies and be more aware of my own assumptions.

Change agents explored changes in how they approached their work, what action they had taken and how they felt about it. Reflective spaces helped people gain a deeper understanding of potential applications of the systems thinking training and provided opportunity for feelings of uncertainty about their change activity to be expressed. As the Spark team manager said:

We coach people. We don't offer any solutions – and we tell them this, because we don't know the details of the work. People almost always have the answers, they just want a sounding board.

Reflective spaces were provided via one-to-one coaching support and open drop-in sessions. Opportunities also arose when Golden Key staff met people to track and capture their system change work. Providing an impartial voice allowed issues to be explored differently – it helped people clarify purpose and make sense of their learning. This approach evolved into a more established coaching model that had a positive effect on system change activity and output.

Case Vignette D shows how Golden Key drew on the expertise of a partner organisation to promote reflective practice and relationship building more widely across the system.

Case Vignette D: Activating a network of reflective practitioners

Practitioners who work with people facing multiple disadvantages can experience different effects on their well-being which can impact their work. Staff who are given structured opportunities to reflect on their work report having higher levels of morale, feel closer to their colleagues, have lower levels of absence and their clients have better outcomes.

1625 Independent People (a Golden Key partner organisation) provides regular reflective spaces and runs training sessions for their staff to become reflective practice facilitators. Golden Key's service coordinator team began holding reflective practice sessions, and staff in both organisations discussed that services across Bristol had limited access to trained reflective practice facilitators. The two organisations collaborated to develop facilitator training, with the goal of activating a network of reflective practitioners across the city.

During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, this training was redesigned to be delivered remotely, and an additional package of online training for managers was created. Both were designed to offer people ideas and considerations for embedding or expanding reflective practice in their own contexts.

Attendees have used the training to set up or run reflective practice sessions in their organisations. Attendees have met independently to share learning and have reported plans to develop or enhance delivery of reflective practice in their own organisational contexts.

In this example, staff in Golden Key and 1625 Independent People made similar observations about the benefits of reflective practice and collaborated to clarify their aspirations. This system change activity, which arose from a reflective, open approach and a commitment to partnership working, has increased capacity and expertise across the system for reflective approaches.

Discussion

As discussed in the introduction, Golden Key's activating approach developed from an awareness that systemic interconnections are multiple and complex, and the journeys of people facing multiple disadvantages (and the ways in which they engage with the system) are non-linear. People within Golden Key realised that, because the programme was finite, they needed to avoid "doing" system change in an unsustainable way.

A consequence of the approach has been the emergence of challenges around monitoring and evaluating system change work. The "activating" approach works because it centres on the empowerment of others to take responsibility and ownership. This was an effective way of embedding system change but made it difficult for Golden Key to evidence outcomes. Anyone wishing to apply the activator approach in different contexts should consider: how will you recognise and celebrate your own successes as a system change activator (without taking undue credit for change agent activity)?

Acknowledging the difference between "activating" and "doing" system change has been key learning. Sometimes activating one person to do change led to them activating others, and sometimes, these roles were inhabited by the same person at different stages of the process. An individual might start by taking action as a change agent, as Abdi did in Case Vignette B, then, as the work develops, start activating others around them who take responsibility and action themselves.

At some points, it was useful when the activator was external to the relevant part of the system. This was demonstrated by Spark's role of providing a neutral reflective space for change agents to discuss system change activity. This approach was deliberately not context-specific: in their coaching role with others, Spark team members drew on their understanding of systems thinking and action experimenting and supported change agents to apply this to their situation. Speaking of their one-to-one monthly coaching sessions with Spark, one change agent stated:

I really believe everyone's got their blind spots and it's so important to have that voice and have that sounding board.

For many change agents, these coaching conversations made a practical difference in helping system change feel less abstract and more achievable. People were supported to identify small extra steps that would transform a successful work activity into a piece of sustainable system change:

You start small and then eventually things just start happening' – change agent, Golden Key partnership organisation.

Golden Key created ways to celebrate good system change work across Bristol ([Golden Key Bristol, 2021](#)), although this will not continue past the end of the programme. It is worth considering ways in which good system change work can be recognised and celebrated. In an environment where there is frequent tension between the need to collaborate and the need to compete ([Schad, 2016](#)), this issue presents an ongoing challenge to the system.

Whilst the learning presented here is specific to Golden Key's context, the approach of activating others to do system change could serve as a starting point for people or projects with similar aspirations.

Conclusions

The shift in perspective required to engage in system change work meant individuals needed to clarify ownership of their change aspirations – to consider the questions: What do you want to change? Why do you want the system to be different? Taking responsibility became the role of each individual and was no longer held only by strategic leads. Across the system, there was a significant shift in thinking as people became empowered to start experimenting.

Individuals who self-selected to be involved, who felt empowered and who had time and energy were more able to progress system change activity. Others were unable to engage, which raises a question around wider strategic responsibility. How can the system better support people to be involved in system change? How can services and the wider system ensure a continuity of change which is not dependent on key individuals: which can survive when someone leaves a role? Commissioning processes can be designed to create capacity in job roles and encourage partnership working. Additional ways in which strategic leaders can create conditions for people to get involved is a subject worth further enquiry.

As discussed in the introduction, the aspiration at the start of Golden Key was that system change would be systemic, sustainable and not dependent on key individuals. However, it is evident that the activation of individuals across the system and the relationships built between people were essential catalysts for system change. Whether people worked alone, as part of an organisation, or collaboratively across organisations, individual decisions, choices and ownership over system change activity proved pivotal in activating transformational change. Once activated, it is important that the system can sustain and evolve system change independently of key individuals.

The learning observed in Golden Key creates a strong case for how an activating approach to system change can work effectively within a complex system. The evidence from this work could provide a starting point for others looking to create system change in their own contexts.

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