

Learning from the Creative Solutions Board 26th February 2024

1. Purpose of report

To capture and summarise for the Changing Futures Programme board the headline learning collated from the Creative Solutions Board (CSB) approach, having brought the CSB to an end in December 2023.

2. Background

The Creative Solutions Board (CSB) was set up in September 2019 as part of the Golden Key programme with 2 main functions:

- To discuss individuals at risk where current responses were not working and action a different solution with the person at the centre
- To use the learning from the individual to inform how the whole system might need to change and flex to deliver better outcomes for all

The work of the board was evaluated by UWE as a Systems Change Case Study, as part of the Golden Key Local Evaluation. This evaluation indicated that the CSB had impacted positively on multi-agency working, with interviewees expressing a firm belief that the CSB was having a direct effect on outcomes.

The CSB approach was therefore a key plank in Bristol's successful bid for Changing Futures (CF) resources. The Terms of Reference were changed to reflect the new CF programme, with the CSB focusing on individuals experiencing systemic issues who were part of the three identified cohorts.

3. How did it work?

The multi-agency CSB met at 6 weekly intervals, with an independent Chair, to look at particular system issues reflected through an individual client lens. Having considered creative ways to support the individual, we then spent time looking at the lessons for the system and how we might collectively support the delivery of system change.

Between March 22 and May 23 we discussed 11 individuals who were part of the 3 cohorts and whilst we were able to deliver some change and movement for those individuals our impact on system change was limited. However, we were able to contribute to prioritising where the system needed to put its energy going forward and had good links into the Programme Board with the Independent Chair being a member of that group.

4. If it's so good why stop it?

The standing down of the CSB is a measure of the successful impact of Changing Futures, alongside improvement in collaborative working across agencies in embedding a different way of working with people who experience multiple disadvantage. As the My Team

Around Me approach has grown across the city, it became noticeable that there was less call to bring individuals to the board. Further exploration demonstrated that there were other groups now looking at individual issues and resolving these creatively at a local level. The CSB therefore changed its focus to look at more strategic issues, whilst still trying to do that through a client lens, but that impacted on the seniority of the attendees at the board, who no longer were directly using their organisational power to deliver an immediate change for the individual in the room. Longer term, this resulted in us losing our consistency of membership which had been a key strength of the CSB. This changed the groups dynamics and led us to consider that if the system could not identify issues it wanted to bring to the board, then maybe CF should focus on supporting those newly embedded groups rather than resource the CSB. We reviewed and tested out this working hypothesis and brought the board to a close in December 2023.

5. What have we learnt?

In this section we set out some of the headline learning from the CSB process which will hopefully be useful in the roll out of MTAM and an ongoing joined up approach to working with people who experience multiple disadvantage, both in Bristol and in other areas of the country looking to adopt a more creative approach to these issues.

a. Right service, Right time

All of the people the CSB looked at had multiple agencies working with them. What made things work most effectively for the individual was when services worked in a cohesive seamless way and were ready to provide the right service at the time the individual was ready. This was key in supporting people to make key changes at important times. If this didn't happen then momentum slowed down and the opportunity for change was lost.

b. Partnership working is all

The relationships that professionals make across services is absolutely key to encouraging flexible service changes that deliver better outcomes. Time needs to be given to building those trusting relationships and should be seen as important work. The impact of Covid on in person meetings has been significant alongside wider system pressures and capacity to look beyond individual organisations. The system needs to create opportunities going forward for people to come together and work collectively on problem solving, at both an individual and system level.

c. Involve the experts

The CSB, from its inception, has had strong lived experience support and committed input to the board meetings. This has been absolutely invaluable in thinking about working creatively and getting individuals to think outside of their service box and ensure the individual is at the centre of our planning. This way of working needs to be an integral part of what we do embedding the CF approach with appropriate resources allocated across the system.

d. Do sweat the small stuff

Where individuals are facing multiple disadvantage, the list of things they may want to change in their lives may be long and complex. Starting where the individual is, to

support small changes, may lead to a series of small steps that start people on a change journey. This may be difficult and time consuming, especially when professionals have a different view about what is important, but it is more successful if we can work with what is important to the individual. This also echoes one of the core thinkings of complex adaptive systems (a methodology that the CSB wanted to adopt from its inception) that change often happens at a micro level that creates larger change over time as it impacts the wider system.

e. One size doesn't fit all

Often resources and services are organised to enable access to a wide population, governed by thresholds. For people facing multiple disadvantage, often they do not meet these thresholds for an individual issue and so we need to consider people collectively in the round to identify services to help support individual change. This relies on services being open to working and supporting this approach and to flex their thresholds for the benefit of the system.

f. Sharing the pain and the glory

This work is difficult and painstaking requiring workers with resilience and tenacity. Organisations need to share the collective pain when things are not going well, including managing risk, recognising that people who experience multiple disadvantage often cycle in and out of stability. In addition it also important to spend time celebrating the collective glory when an individual is enabled to make significant gains as a result of the system working more flexibly. Managing the tension between the 'pain and glory' requires an organisationally mature approach across the system at all levels. To do this successfully this we need to invest time in relationship building across the system and create the opportunities for this to happen.

g. At the sharp end

Workers need support and recognition for the difficult work that they do. The system needs to continue to create the spaces for workers to be supported, not just within their own organisations but across the system too. One of the unexpected byproducts of the CSB was workers, who presented, feeding back that the opportunity to share their work with an senior interested group of multi-agency managers made their voices feel heard and supported and recognised for the difficult work they were doing. Participants have found allies, built networks and identified 'go to' people across the system.

Some of the early learning for the CSB was the recognition that empowering front line workers to create solutions in partnership with service users, and then draw on more senior staff to support the enactment of these solutions was more productive than a traditional model where system problems were highlighted and then left for senior staff to resolve. This approach allowed the expertise of people at different levels of the system to work more collaboratively.

h. Does this approach save money?

All of the individuals the CSB considered had a raft of professionals and services involved in their support, often over many years. Experience of serious trauma was also a common factor, indicating that service support was likely to be needed for a longer period of time. We were unable to cost that input or put a price tag on the potential savings to organisations if services worked together to deliver better outcomes. Some work has been completed in other parts of the country eg Greater Manchester and it would seem there is a piece of health economics work to be undertaken to demonstrate what this approach can deliver financially, not forgetting there is a cost in bringing professionals together. If cost effectiveness can be demonstrated, this would be a real lever to embedding this approach across the city at a time when all services are strapped for cash.

Conclusion

The CSB model of working has been a useful addition to the CF programme and has helped to spawn a more creative approach across the system, now embedded in specific working groups linked to our 3 cohorts. These groups, and the relationships which have been made, will continue a life beyond the programme which will support their sustainability. However, whilst we continue to improve individual outcomes, the challenge to drive system change remains and will need the collective energy of the programme board to be clear about what is deliverable and how, over the remaining life of the programme.

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Creative Solutions Board*