

SYSTEM CONVENING

What you told us



System Conveners are an emerging group of changemakers whose roles are designed to bring people together across sector, organisational and community boundaries, enabling people to share learning across those boundaries and to create positive change in how systems like public services operate. Rather than concentrating on individual services or organisations, the focus is on changing systems, building connections, and being led by people who use services, as well as those who are currently let down or excluded from them.

The New System Alliance, working with Hackney Borough Council and NHS England/the Health Foundation's Q Community, surveyed people to find out if the Systems Conveners we are aware of are part of an emerging field. We had over 80 responses, the overwhelming majority identifying themselves as Systems Conveners in some way. This briefing summarises what they said about the role, their learning and what they need to do their jobs well. We will hold a **free online gathering on Tuesday the 31st of October from 11am-12.30pm** to enable Systems Conveners to continue this conversation.

Sectors mentioned included health, social care, housing education including Higher Education.

Respondents appeared mainly from the UK and US, though other responses also came from countries including Mexico, Australia, Italy, Denmark and France.

Many said 'Systems Convener' is part of their role but not what they are resourced or necessarily expected to focus on:

"Systems convening isn't a formally recognised part of my role and so not well supported. It's how the work needs to happen."

What Systems Conveners say enables and hampers success

Systems Conveners identified four success themes, outlined in more detail in the following pages:

- Bringing people together to create change they can't achieve alone
- Coordination, resourcing and governance
- Practice and skills
- Learning, communicating and influencing

BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER TO CREATE CHANGE THEY CAN'T ACHIEVE ALONE

The Art of Invitation is the starting point. Hospitality – tea and cake – is vital.

Relationships: networking, building relationships and trust are core Systems Convening functions. Systems Conveners need relationships at all levels, including patient 'sponsorship' from senior leaders, and relationships with communities.

It's important to bring a range of perspectives on an issue together in a room to have an open and equal dialogue. Meetings should be regular (e.g. fortnightly), and combine getting to know each other, with structured discussions.

Barriers that get in the way include "suspicion, vested interests and unclear purpose". Relationships have to be authentic enough to survive crises.

COORDINATION, RESOURCING AND GOVERNANCE

Purpose, planning, delivery and governance must all be shared and networked: people from different parts of the system coming together is at the heart of creating change. The voluntary sector's involvement and leadership is crucial, and not always prioritised in statutory and NHS systems.

Some chose first to work on "problems where the urgency is most visible to most participants". After the initial enthusiasm, keeping momentum and engagement can be a challenge.

Small-scale experiments can be a contained way to demonstrate what is possible, and if they are within a small geographical area that enables all the parts of the system in that place to come together. A barrier to success can be "trying to do too much" as a small project or as an individual (being reluctant to draw on a network), or funders' desire for "quick wins": "It is easy to wear yourself out and achieve nothing." One respondent found working in a mature devolved region (Greater Manchester) provided a good fit with devolution's integration aims.



Systems Convening works “because we are removed from budget and line management responsibilities”. Being seen as an outsider can be useful but accountability is vital. Groups set up for learning or change-making need to be able to tap into clear structures in stakeholder agencies. The complexity of council operating systems, and assumptions about permissions being needed can prevent action. “The social periphery, not the social stars, are where companies and campaigns can grow from obscurity into household names.” (Damon Centola, www.damoncentola.com)

What gets in the way can be “locked funding/commissioning”, “siloe funding”, “cost shunting” and organisations wanting to keep “command and control” power. It was felt that few funders fully understand this work and its outcomes and KPIs can “stop things from emerging”. Another barrier is “turbulence” and sudden changes in leadership and priorities. It’s often difficult or risky for people to step outside of their roles and prioritise system health work above their organisational priorities.

PRACTICE AND SKILLS

Key values and behaviours include:

- Humility and curiosity to learn from others
- But also boldness, courage and the confidence to speak truth to power
- imagination, and a growth mindset
- Patience, persistence, calmness: move slowly “at the speed of trust”, and expect change to be “messy”

Skills needed for the role include:

- facilitation skills
- spotting patterns and making connections: “My ADHD may help with that”

There are times to be led by where a group and conversation go, but it can also be important to keep people focused on what they have the power to change through working together.

Respondents identified a wide range of practices they draw on including psychotherapy, social work, communities of practice, Human Learning Systems, Values-based Leadership, systems leadership, complex adaptive systems and complexity theory, inter-disciplinary learning (as practised by the Wellcome Trust), Peter Block's thinking around community.



THE REAL WORLD

Useful tools identified included:

- Online forums, Miro boards “for mapping both the system and the building narrative.
- Blogs and newsletters: “We run a Daily Alternative blog and weekly newsletter in which we join up dots between the personal, social and global.”
- PechaKucha events which bring in speakers from across disciplines
- Time currencies to value shared activities

What gets in the way can be people making assumptions about community capabilities versus professional capabilities. “Racism can be a barrier.” Approaches set up to be positive community engagement can end up being “extractive and even abusive”. Fear of failure and ego can get in the way.

LEARNING, COMMUNICATING AND INFLUENCING

Messages about working differently need to come from the network and allies, not one individual. “We need common language and concepts.”

Successes are hard to track, but consistency and delivering information in different formats helps.

“When we have been able to give individuals an emotional experience of how impactful and meaningful this relational / system-wide and cross-boundary work can be, they can then think differently and influence others to do the same.”

What gets in the way can be either overly simplified language or overly-academic concepts: “we need to get the balance right”.



EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL SYSTEMS CONVENING FROM THE SURVEY

The Other Place opened following a major grant application to the Government's Community Renewal Fund that went through the Council. A cross sector team including council members participated in Wicked Lab's Ecosystem Transition Programme. The demonstrable success of a complex systems-informed approach to community-led experimentation brought more attention, and The Other Place is increasingly known as a place where diverse groups meet and work together - including many still being labelled as 'hard to reach'.

"I worked with GPs to develop a 'community partnership' model within Mental Health and Well-being to develop a system-wide commitment to early help, prevention, and fair access to more complex services when they are needed."

"Turning our library into an integrated learning commons, to integrate services within the building, and across the institution. We will support students to be effective participants and stewards of their own communities of practice."

"We are part of the national (US) Communities of Excellence based on Baldrige Framework. Focused on Equity through Literacy, have formed the Delaware Literacy Alliance, work is in progress!"

"I work with Q [health foundation] and I'm a peer learning facilitator or host with Huddlecraft and a convener with The Alternative Global."

"I helped to define a vision for Active Environments in Norfolk and for two years I have supported England's 42 Active Partnerships to build capacity to implement Active Environments in their place and worked with many partners to increase the prominence of healthy placemaking in policy."



BE A
CHANGE
MAKER

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

Respondents said they would want a community of practice to have these outcomes:

- Belonging, peer support, networking and support for new Systems Conveners: “To find my tribe!”
- A shared definition of the problems in systems and the role of Systems Conveners
- Learning from each other and sharing examples of practices, tools and processes that work. A sounding board and reflective practice (in small groups)
- Building the evidence base and understanding how people are measuring the impact or success of this work. Understanding the theory behind Systems Convener including systems thinking and models for creating change in complex systems
- Understanding coproduction practice and “how the knowledge and experience of people in the community can be brought into play when making policy decisions and plans, and designing services and infrastructure. A focus on tackling inequalities
- Some wanted a community which was “action-orientated” rather than learning-orientated: “Building a movement nationally and internationally”
- Sharing sources of funding and convening with funders and commissioners to influence them

If you didn't fill out the survey but would still like to join our 'Systems Convening' community of practice please e-mail: alex.fox@maydaytrust.org.uk

Further Reading

A free-to-download book, Systems Convening, by Etienne and Beverley Wenger-Trayner published by the Social Learning Lab with support from Lankelly Chase, RSA and Centre for Public Impact, gathers stories and practices from System Conveners in different fields and continents.

The Systems Steward role is part of the Human Learning Systems model of system change. Stewards lead the attempt to learn and create new connections, conversations and change across service boundaries, re-orientating services from unrealistic target-chasing, to being part of a healthy, responsive system that can keep people and their reality at its heart through deep listening.