
Learning about place-based systems change in the Women's Sector

Insights Report 3

Smallwood Trust

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TSIP

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The Women's Sector Resilience Fund Phase 2 – A place-based approach

Smallwood Trust's approach to place-based systems change has developed through testing and funding networks of women's organisations to work collaboratively to tackle the root causes of gendered poverty in their place. This began with funding the Coventry Women's Partnership in 2018 and has now expanded, through the Women's Sector Resilience Fund 2, to support two additional place-based networks: the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network and Women of Wythenshawe (based in Manchester). This programme will contribute to Smallwood Trust's Gendered Poverty Learning Programme and bring about key learning about how a place-based systems change approach can shift gendered poverty. Smallwood Trust view a place-based systems change approach as critical to their mission to enable women to be financially resilient and believe the programme will contribute to wider learning around how a place-lens could support systemic approaches in tackling women's poverty.

The fund aims are to:

1. Take a 'test and learn' approach where Smallwood Trust will learn alongside organisations about what creates change for women
2. Help networks further understand women's poverty in their local area, for different groups of women, and support them to define the change they want to see
3. Stimulate ideas that are designed and delivered by the people closest to the problem, including women with experience of poverty themselves
4. Help networks build strong relationships with a range of different organisations, individuals and decision makers so that after the programme is over these relationships remain
5. Support networks to measure the change they are making

To achieve these aims, Smallwood Trust has funded place-based networks of women's organisations that are aiming to make systems change. Each network is taking a different approach to systems change, developed out of the needs and ambitions of the women they are working with, alongside their local context and the expertise of partners.

Smallwood Trust funded Renaisi-TSIP to work as a learning partner across the programme. This role includes capturing learning for Smallwood Trust, alongside working with each network to support them in developing their approach to systems change and monitoring, learning and evaluation. The Women's Budget Group and NEF are also funded to lend capacity support to the networks around their approach to data collection and influencing.

At the beginning of the programme, Renaisi-TSIP brought together representatives from the three place-based networks with Smallwood Trust staff to collectively work through the programme aims, articulate their ambitions for systems change, and identify

outcomes that would indicate success. From this workshop, we developed a series of questions to learn about how the networks are developing a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty. The questions below capture the fund aims above, articulated in the language that the networks used to describe their ambitions:

1. What is effective in supporting the networks to develop collaborative relationships and processes?
2. What approaches are the networks taking to engage women with lived experience of gendered poverty in directing their work? What is working well? What impact is this having on their work?
3. How are the networks developing impactful and holistic services for women that can shift and respond to experiences of poverty? What makes these effective?
4. What are the networks doing to capture, analyse and embed ongoing learning? What is working well? What impact is this having on their work?
5. What is effective in supporting the networks to influence wider practice, policy and funding?
6. How is Smallwood Trust’s support to the local networks enabling their success? What elements of their support are most impactful? What other support do local networks need to drive place-based systems change in gendered poverty?

This report draws on progress updates and reflections that the three place-based networks in Birmingham, Coventry and Wythenshawe shared with Smallwood Trust and Renaisi-TSIP over August and September 2024, alongside insights collected by Renaisi-TSIP through their ongoing work with the networks. It leans on the learning questions and fund aims listed above to summarise emerging impact and key areas of learning for each across the networks.

A summary of progress to date

How are the three networks achieving their goals?

Goals	Progress
Women of Wythenshawe	
Multiple disadvantaged women have the skills, confidence and relationships of trust required to participate in and benefit from a women-led poverty action network in Wythenshawe.	This goal has been achieved. The confidence and capacity building work that has been facilitated through WoW has benefited the women leaders in the network, who have lived experience of poverty. Women leaders have shared that they have more confidence to speak out in meetings, challenge service providers, decision-makers, representatives, and funded support agencies within the WoW process.
A diverse network of women have identified realisable priorities for action and change on gendered poverty in Wythenshawe.	WoW has achieved this goal. A network of diverse women leaders with lived experience of poverty has come together and formed three action groups around the following goals: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improving statutory responses to domestic abuse. This is being progressed through developing an online training portal on domestic abuse, which centres the lived

	<p>experience of local women, and seeking the commitment of statutory partners to ensure their staff participate in the training. So far Wythenshawe Housing Group, who manages most of the local social housing stock and provide a range of associated services (e.g. financial advice, debt services, tenancy support, employability) has committed to this.</p> <p>2. Improving Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision within schools. This is being actioned through developing a "train the trainer" programme for SEND mothers with the Grange Special Educational School, equipping mothers to deliver inclusive education training in local schools.</p> <p>3. Addressing the shortage of social housing for women and families This has progressed through the establishment of the Wythenshawe Central neighbourhood coalition, which unites community groups, projects, local ward Councillors and residents to have a collective voice on housing and land use decisions, alongside the WoW's participation in development of a city-wide Social Homes for Manchester campaign, which is calling for a policy change to include 30% social rent homes in new developments across Manchester.</p>
<p>Two significant policy or systems change outcomes have been achieved and the network has a clear strategic direction and at least 12 months continuation funding</p>	<p>WoW is close to achieving a significant shift in policy and practice through Wythenshawe Housing Group's commitment to all staff undertaking training on domestic abuse. If this is implemented consistently it could contribute to local systems change, through enabling different attitudes, practices and policies around domestic abuse. While WoW's goals around social housing would bring significant policy change this work is at earlier stages. WoW's work around SEND focuses on support for mothers and improved service provision rather than policy change.</p> <p>WoW's achievement in building women-led advocacy and networks at a local level is their most significant systems change outcome, with this shift in attitudes, relationships and narratives about women in the place having the potential to drive long-term local change.</p> <p>The network currently does not have continuation funding or a clear strategic direction, but is intentionally developing both. Learning from their work to date has pointed towards the need for a strategic shift in the structure and resourcing of their work, as the diversity of approaches and agencies across three action groups has been too resource intensive for one organisation to facilitate. CLASS is facilitating ongoing conversations and reflections with the women leaders and support agencies to determine a strategic direction for WoW going forward and put together a proposal for further funding.</p>

	<p>WoW is currently exploring how the three action groups could potentially split into separate self-directed networks, and reflecting on the strategic benefit of these groups remaining under the umbrella of WoW. With serious concerns around their ongoing core funding, CLASS is also exploring how they can continue to support women-led action in Wythenshawe more efficiently, without staff time being pulled towards relationship management and coordination of a range of organisations as has been the case in WoW.</p>
<p>Birmingham NRPF Women’s Support Network</p>	
<p>The Network will improve co-ordination of services alongside building capacity to provide trauma-informed, women-led services that prevent NRPF women experiencing DA from falling into destitution and homelessness and demonstrate the need for increased funding over the long-term.</p>	<p>This goal has been achieved. The Network has developed a referral system that ensures NRPF women experiencing DA receive holistic, trauma-informed support to meet their basic needs and access their rights. Through the Network, NRPF women have accessed legal support and migration advice that they would not previously have accessed.</p> <p>The Network’s work creating access to impactful support for highly women who the current mainstream system does not support has demonstrated the need for this work to be funded over the long term, as without the Network in place, many women would not be accessing support.</p>
<p>The Network will increase awareness around how to support women with NRPF to access services and collect evidence that demonstrates the impact of the current system, to advocate for policy change.</p>	<p>The Birmingham NRPF Network has achieved this goal. Partners are working together to use their collective voice to consistently raise a lack of support for those with NRPF as an issue on a range of panels with local public and voluntary sector partners, which was not a dominant focus in partners’ external engagement previously. Partners are using data and case studies from the Network to advocate for change and influence local and national policymaking. This has included the Central England Law Centre successfully making eligibility requirements for a Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC) more inclusive through a strategic litigation case against the Home Office that emerged from their work in the Network.</p>
<p>The Network will work with those with lived experience to understand how to ensure more women can access the services they need</p>	<p>This goal is still in progress. The Network has brought together a group of women with lived experience into an NRPF Advisory Group. It has taken time to embed this group and as it’s role has been directed by the women in it, their initial sessions focused capacity building rather than influencing. However, over time this might shift into a more consultative or nonproductive role, as has begun with the Network engaging the Advisory Group in reviewing and commenting on the draft of the local authority’s new domestic abuse strategy.</p>
<p>Coventry Women’s Partnership</p>	
<p>Explore ways to sustain partnership after current funding ends in Aug 2025</p>	<p>CWP has progressed this goal. The Partnership is in conversations with other funders including the National Lottery Community Fund about long-term funding for its work.</p>

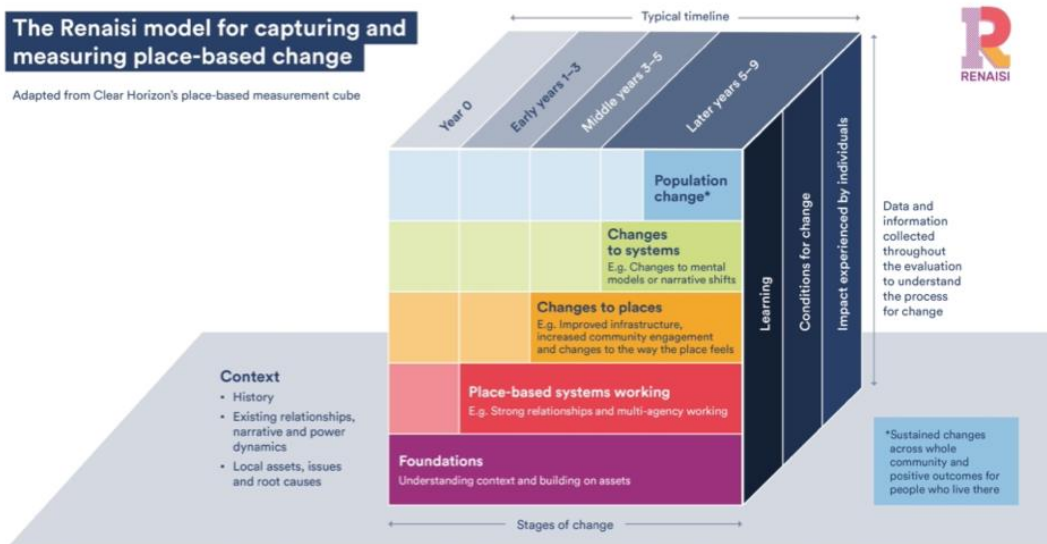
Work with external researcher to undertake deep dive needs analysis to provide an evidence base of current and emerging needs of women in the city, identifying gaps and providing recommendations for use at a strategic level and for future funding.	This goal has been achieved. CWP has worked with Renaisi-TSIP this past year to carry out a needs analysis exploring systemic gaps and failings in provision for women in Coventry.
Continue to offer a seamless referral pathway to vulnerable women in the city so they can access specialist support (legal, domestic abuse, sexual violence, housing, employment) across the partnership, and to other external agencies as appropriate.	CWP has achieved this goal. The Partnership has continued to deliver a highly effective, relational referral pathway that ensures women can access a range of services that they might need without having to navigate multiple systems and repeat their stories.
Develop methods for continued engagement of wider stakeholders and strategic leads across sectors.	This goal is still in progress. CWP is reviewing the effectiveness of its wider steering group, which has been comprised of local voluntary sector stakeholders, as an influencing tool. This has focused on exploring how to engage local authority commissioners and policymakers in this work, but CWP has had limited responses and input so far.
Continue to advocate for women in the city through membership of statutory and voluntary steering groups and working groups, ensuring that the voices of women are heard, and challenging any concerns.	This goal has been achieved. The CWP Partnership Manager consistently attends local steering and working groups to represent the Partnership and advocate for the need for women's services.

Where are the three networks on their journey in place-based systems change?

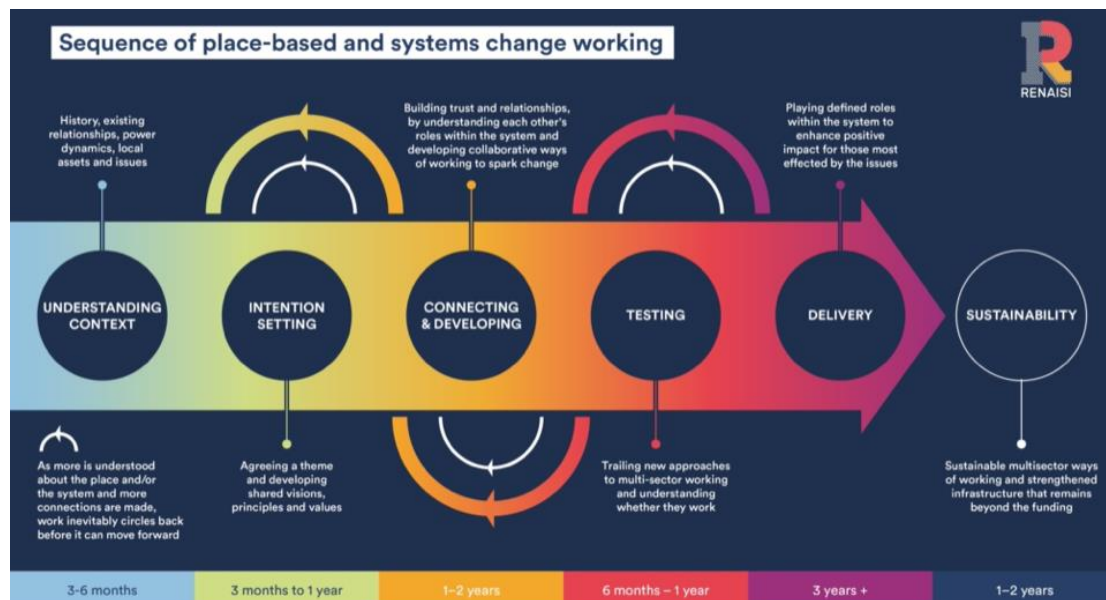
Drawing on over 25 years of experience working with organisations, individuals and partnerships aiming to drive long-term, deep-rooted social change, at Renaisi-TSIP we have developed a number of tools to design, learn about and measure place-based systems change. As the learning partner on this programme, we have brought these tools to the three networks to coproduce a learning approach, which supported the development of the learning questions listed in the first section and the themes that structure each network's story below. Drawing on insights from our role as an embedded learning partner and the tools that we have developed outside of this programme to measure place-based systems change, this section assesses how the

three networks are laying the foundations for systemic change in their place beyond the timeline of their current funding.

The Renaisi-TSIP model for capturing and measuring place-based systems change¹ sets out five key stages of change (on the front of the cube) aligned to the timeframes that initiatives often spend in each stage (along the top), and three cross-cutting process related data points (on the right-hand side). The three networks in Coventry, Birmingham and Wythenshawe all currently sit in stage two of the model, “Place-based and systems working”.



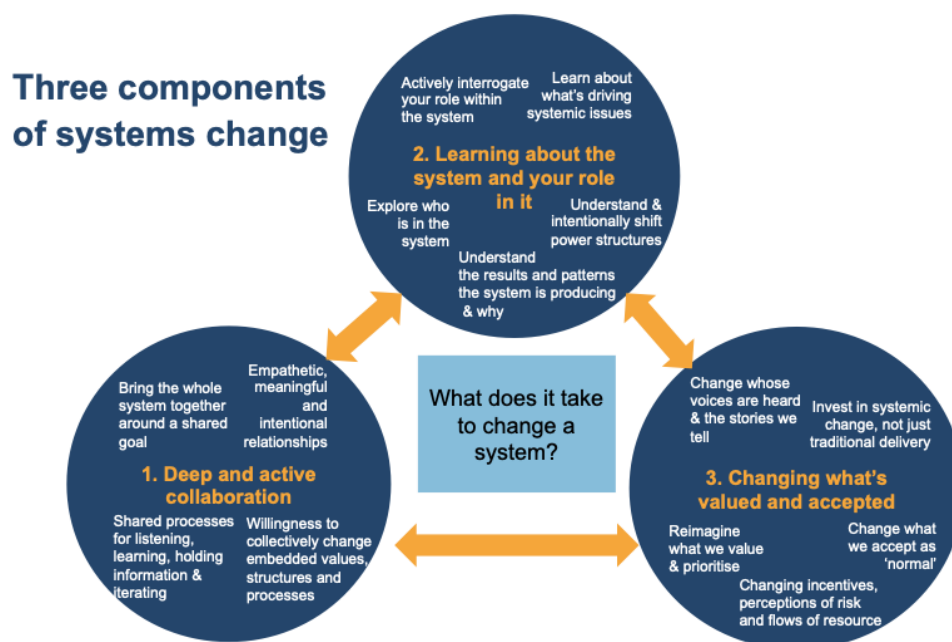
Much of Renaisi-TSIP’s work as a learning partner and developmental evaluator has focused on understanding and measuring how to identify and develop place-based systems working. Diving into this stage, we developed the tool below which sets out the sequence of place-based and systems working that we have encountered in our work.



¹ Renaisi-TSIP has often drawn on Australian consultancy [Clear Horizon](#)’s place-based measurement cube as a useful template for capturing and charting this data. With their blessing, over the past couple of years we’ve tweaked it to better meet the needs of the UK-based programmes we’re working on. We’ve align it with our new model of evaluation.



Finally, through our work supporting partners to design and plan for systemic change, we have developed and tested the tool below which sets out three components of systems change, and the elements that we have identified as enabling systemic change.



To appraise how the three networks are laying the foundations for systemic change in their place, this section sets out where each network currently is on the sequence of place-based systems working and how their approach to change aligns with the three components of systemic change.

Goals	Progress
Women of Wythenshawe	
Where are they on the journey of place-based systems change?	When WoW was first awarded funding, the network was at the “understanding context” step of place-based systems change working. Over the past two years they have moved through “intention setting” and “connecting and developing” to form the three action groups and begun “testing” the three groups’ approaches to social change.
How are they developing an approach that is intentionally contributing to systemic change?	WoW’s approach to systems change started from changing what is valued and accepted (Component 3). In our experience this is often the component that systems change initiatives struggle with the most, and so we believe that genuinely shifting whose voices are heard, the stories we tell and what is valued and prioritised across a coalition in a place is a solid foundation for system change. Their focus on this work means that their work around Components 1 and 2 has focused on work with the women leaders, building relationships across them and learning about their experiences of the system. However as work has progressed WoW has begun building allies and relationships with organisations outside the network and leaning on these to more deeply interrogate how the system works. While it is at

	early stages, the three components of systems change are showing up in their work.
Coventry Women’s Partnership	
Where are they on the journey of place-based systems change?	While CWP has been operating for six years, as the shift from a focus on service delivery to intentionally exploring place-based systems change is recent, the Partnership is still at early stages in this journey and so also currently sit in place-based systems working. Within the sequence of place-based systems working, CWP has progressed to “sustainability” in a number of areas of work (including joint capacity building and provision of a holistic system of support). However in CWP’s influencing work the Partnership is still at the “connecting and developing” and “testing” phase.
How are they developing an approach that is intentionally contributing to systemic change?	CWP has built deep and active collaboration and a solid understanding of the system through their six years of work. However, given the more narrow scope of CWP’s work this collaboration has been focused on delivery partners, and the Partnership has not intentionally focused on changing what is valued and accepted. Going forward, CWP could work more systemically by engaging more deeply and relationally with wider system stakeholders who could support them to build a coalition around systems change in the area. Exploring how to work with women with lived experience and support them to advocate for themselves locally could also support CWP to shift local attitudes and priorities. CWP has had challenges in engaging with statutory partners so far, which by contrast WoW has made more progress in as statutory partners have struggled to turn away local women advocating for themselves.
The Birmingham NRP Women’s Support Network	
Where are they on the journey of place-based systems change?	The Birmingham NRP Network began with a solid understanding of context, clear shared intentions and pre-existing relationships. The Network has been moving between “connecting and developing” and “testing” in the past two years of funding. Some aspects of their work (e.g. their referral pathway) have progressed to “delivery”, while other elements such as the capacity building and influencing work are still at the “testing” phase.
How are they developing an approach that is intentionally contributing to systemic change?	The Network has made the most progress in learning about the system and their role in it, with all partners having shared that working collaboratively with a clear focus on NRP has deepened their understanding of how the system around NRP works, and how to change it. While this is at earlier stages, the Network has also intentionally progressed in Components 1 and 3, through building close relationships

	<p>across strategic leads, aligning processes to develop smooth referrals and convening a group of women with lived experience. Going forward the Network’s systems work will strengthen through deepening collaborative relationships across organisations that are not held in single individuals, alongside centring the voice of those with lived experience in their advocacy to support shifts in attitudes and narratives about women with NRPF.</p>
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Coventry Women’s Partnership

Impactful services and support for women

Throughout their six years of collaboration, Coventry Women’s Partnership (CWP) has focused on delivering holistic services for women by improving access and creating strong referral pathways across a range of services that a woman in crisis might need. CWP’s referral pathway has made it easier for women to access support without the added stress of navigating multiple systems. This has included supporting women to have safe shelter, access employment and benefits and secure their immigration status, which has significantly improved feelings of empowerment, long-term stability and independence reported by women using their services.

However, more recently CWP is exploring how they might need to further adapt their services in response to an increase in the complexity of issues that women are facing. CWP reports that women are now frequently presenting with multiple high-priority needs, often related to mental health, financial struggles and housing instability. Partners reflected that they are also increasingly being expected to provide support around matters that fall under statutory service duty like housing and social care. CWP has identified that having additional caseworkers that sit across the Partnership and can act as a single point of contact for women with more complex needs to manage their access to a range of services, would support them to adapt to this shift in casework. This approach is one that they have tested through the Partnership Manager, who takes this approach to casework but has limited capacity due to her responsibilities in coordination and external engagement.

Collaborative relationships and processes

Collaboration in CWP has been supported by the Partnership Manager, a role created for the partnership who serves as the primary point of contact, coordinates meetings and training sessions, and supports complex referrals. Alongside this, CWP has created a number of spaces and processes to ensure that each organisation has a deep understanding of the other partners’ services and a relationship with a named individual in each organisation. This has included regular meetings for frontline staff and senior leads in each partner organisation, joint capacity building sessions, and the referral process itself. This all enables what partners term a "warm referral" process, whereby they informally check in with one another when they believe a women could benefit for another service. Partners shared that the “warm referral” process has both

improved women's experience of the referral alongside saving staff time, which has increased their capacity and ability to engage in outreach activities.

CWP's work has demonstrated how investing in collaborative service delivery can improve support for vulnerable women with complex needs and avoid crises from worsening more effectively. Partners have found that many women are unaware of the full range of support available within the partnership. Through internal referrals they are able to connect women with services they might not have accessed otherwise.

Influencing local decision-makers

CWP has built strong cross-sector relationships to advocate for women's issues across Coventry. The Partnership engages in various steering groups to connect with statutory partners, advocate for women's needs and promote more joined-up service delivery. This includes the Marmot Steering Group, Healthwatch Steering Group, Modern Slavery Task and Finish Group, Domestic Abuse Strategy and Ops Group, and Coventry Food Network among others. Partners are seeing the impact of this work through being increasingly called upon for evidence, training and workshops by external organisations, which enables them to advocate for women's needs and support more local organisations to adopt the trauma-informed, gender-sensitive practice that is championed by the Partnership. Alongside this, CWP engages politically through regular meetings with the three MPs in Coventry to communicate evidence about emerging needs for women and has recently been calling for a dedicated Cabinet Member for Women in Coventry.

CWP has struggled to consistently engage local authority commissioners and decision-makers around their work, which they believe is critical to influence shifts towards commissioning of women's services. This has been worsened recently by financial pressures facing the local authority which are leading to funding cuts across the partnership, such as the decommissioning of the counselling services provided by a CWP partner this past year. While CWP has brought together a Steering Group of voluntary and statutory partners aimed at local influencing, the Partnership has found that gaining input from key statutory services like housing, public health, and social care has been challenging. As a result of this CWP is reviewing the role and purpose of their Steering Group, alongside seeking to build relationships with national philanthropic funders to ensure that their service provision can continue.

Coproduction and devolved power

Rather than engaging in coproduction, CWP focuses on taking an approach to service provision and support that is woman-centred and holistic, with frontline staff being equipped through training, advice and referral pathways to adapt their approach to suit the needs and ambitions of the individual woman that they are working with. The Partnership works to ensure women's experiences and needs continuously shape decision-making through creating spaces for ongoing dialogue between front-line colleagues and strategic partners. Alongside this, CWP has also supported service users to engage in research carried out by the Women's Budget Group that led to a series of policy briefings and more recently with a local needs analysis carried out by

Renaissi-TSIP, to ensure that service users' voices are centred in the evidence base that CWP uses to influence externally. However, beyond this CWP has a cautious approach to coproduction driven by external agencies, with partners having found that many external agencies aiming to engage with their service users have lacked the training in trauma-informed practice needed to ensure emotional safety for those in the midst of ongoing crisis.

Capacity building to create resilient networks

CWP also has a focus on upskilling staff, with each partner providing training in their areas of expertise to enhance the overall capacity to support service users effectively. This training ensures that staff understand the diverse issues faced by vulnerable women, including immigration, housing, legal rights, and domestic abuse, thereby improving the overall quality of support provided.

The approach to capacity building has supported the Partnership's ability to provide impactful services for women in a number of ways. The training supports staff to develop relationships among partner organisations and deepen their understanding of each other's services. This in turn facilitates more targeted and "warm" referrals as staff are able to both identify more accurately where a referral is appropriate and check-in with colleagues in partner organisations before making a referral if they are unsure. Additionally, training across partners has enhanced individual skills and knowledge in staff, building the ability of all partners to respond with care and support to a range of needs. It has empowered partners to offer advice and support outside their specialism and to work more holistically.

Test and learn to tackle gendered poverty

CWP has found that a focus on evidence gathering has strengthened their influence when lobbying for policy changes. In the first five years of CWP's work, they collaborated with Women's Budget Group, who collected evidence from their work to develop a series of papers illustrating the impact of policies on women from multiple perspectives. Partners shared that this work increased their profile nationally and has given their local advocacy more weight.

Each partner within CWP has their own process and methods for capturing feedback from women using their services, which is complemented by collectively tracking milestones, outcomes, and added value to report to Smallwood Trust and working with Renaissi-TSIP to capture, understand and share learning. In 2023, CWP utilised Renaissi-TSIP's support to deliver a learning report for the partnership, which provided insights into the model, impact and influence, along with recommendations for future project development. Currently, CWP is working with Renaissi-TSIP to develop a needs analysis report which will uncover how the local system responds to women's needs and where the gaps are. Additionally, CWP has participated in learning workshops facilitated by Renaissi-TSIP, sharing their learning to support the newer place-based networks in Wythenshawe and Birmingham.

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network

Impactful services and support for women

Similarly to the approach described in Coventry previously, the Birmingham No Resource to Public Funds (NRPF) Network has created a system where women can engage with a single organisation to access a full range of services, reducing the risk of re-traumatising or losing contact with vulnerable women who have NRPF and are, experiencing, or at risk of, domestic violence. They have strengthened the rights of women with NRPF by offering quick access to advice and support challenge Home Office and local authority decisions, improving their safety from domestic abuse and sexual violence and ensuring support for basic needs around housing, subsistence and wellbeing.

The Birmingham NRPF Network has seen the footfall at their drop-in services increase and require more intensive support. This complexity is worsening capacity issues across the network and indicating a need to seek long-term increases in capacity to keep up with demand, continue to provide high quality support and ensure staff are not overburdened.

Collaborative relationships and processes

The Birmingham NRPF Network has created a range of spaces to support collaboration across partners. Regular "Practitioner's Forum" meetings have been providing a platform for frontline staff to share resources and address challenges. Alongside this, the "Network Meetings" bring together strategic leads across organisations to assess progress towards goals, review external engagement opportunities, plan joint capacity building, and ensure that that referral pathway is working well. Practically, the Network has also established data-sharing protocols and confidentiality agreements to support secure and efficient sharing of client data. This has all contributed to the development of an effective referral pathway and enables the Network to provide women with NRPF who are experiencing or at risk of domestic violence with holistic support.

The Birmingham NRPF Network has seen how investing in collaborative service delivery can improve support for vulnerable women with complex needs and avoid crises from worsening more effectively. Strong communication among partners has allowed for quick responses to urgent issues, such as challenging decisions from local authorities and the Home Office, making their challenges more successful. Additionally, the Birmingham NRPF Network Practitioner's Forum has allowed professionals to identify systemic barriers and develop practical solutions, leading to ongoing improvements in service delivery. Partners have shared that being part of the Network has deepened their understanding of how different specialisms complement each other to provide holistic support, which has in turn built confidence in their expertise and the impact of their work

As the Birmingham NRPF Network develops its approach to collaboration, which is still only in its second year, it has identified areas where this work could be developed to further improve women's experiences of services. For example, the Network is still

developing and working through the right approach to information sharing, having found that that internal differences in data privacy and due diligence processes can lead to delays in the transfer of information and the need for women to retell their stories.

Influencing local decision-makers

Partners in the Birmingham NRPF Network have been engaging in wider network meetings, consultations and events to advocate for change in policy and practice around NRPF. This has included presenting at the Birmingham Migration Forum, West Midlands Network Rights, National NRPF Network and the West Midlands Combined Authority Task Group on Homelessness & NRPF. For example, at a local Domestic Abuse forum partners raised that women with a Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC) were being wrongly subjected to the Habitual Residency Test despite being exempt. This led the JobCentre to commit to addressing the issue. The Network is also actively involved in consultations related to the review of a housing allocation policy and have received a positive response to concerns raised about women with NRPF accessing statutory homelessness accommodation. As a result, the housing provider leading the domestic abuse response has committed to assess all women experiencing homelessness, domestic abuse, and NRPF. The Birmingham NRPF Network has also been working with Birmingham City Council to develop their Domestic Abuse Strategy through sitting on the steering group and was able to ensure that support for those with NRPF is included. Based on learning from their work together to date, the Network is shifting towards presenting a unified voice when engaging with local public services, having found that speaking collectively often makes it more likely for public sector bodies such as the Job Centre, Home Office and Birmingham Children's Trust to take their demands seriously.

The Birmingham NRPF Network believes that the lobbying and external engagement that they have done around NRPF since the Network was formed is contributing to policy changes and greater recognition of the importance to support those with NRPF. While partners report that it is particularly challenging to attract the attention of public bodies when it comes to support for those with NRPF relative to other women's issues, this is starting to shift. Changes that they have seen include a broadening the categories of domestic violence victims eligible for support and the inclusion of NRPF as an issue in Birmingham City Council's recent tender for their Vulnerable Adults contract. The Birmingham NRPF Network has also been able to peruse strategic litigation processes against the Home Office to successfully improve rights for women with NRPF. For example, in March 2024 the Home Office amended the immigration rules to include partners with pre-settled status within the new scheme of support for migrant victims of domestic abuse.

However, despite this progress, network partners have faced funding cuts to their mainstream services provision this past year as a result of Birmingham City Council (BCC) having declared bankruptcy. While there is increased recognition of the needs of women with NRPF by statutory agencies partners in the Birmingham NRPF Network feels there is little scope to call for increased funding from their main commissioner for

this work, particularly when they are struggling to maintain funding for more generalist, mainstream provision.

Coproduction and devolved power

The Birmingham NRPF Network has brought together a group of women with lived experience into a “NRPF Advisory Group”, convened and facilitated by the network member Baobab. Baobab’s work with the NRPF Advisory Group has focused on building the capacity of this group of women to define how they want to engage in the Network, which has included wellbeing sessions, legal training and a recent policy-focused session around the domestic abuse strategy, where participants analysed parts of the policy and provided feedback on service provision. Some of the women in the group are now being trained in community research with Birmingham University and are learning the skills to carry out research with other women with lived experience, identify key issues and present findings to local decision-makers.

Their experience developing the Advisory Group has demonstrated to the Birmingham NRPF Network the need to be flexible around plans and timelines to ensure that women with lived experience can guide the terms of their involvement in coproduction. Initially, they envisaged developing a “Community Champions” group of advocates with lived experience, but as many women did not feel comfortable with this, they have pivoted towards community research training. The Birmingham NRPF Network has become comfortable with the Advisory Group exploring and defining their role as the capacity and interests of the women in it develops and shifts and see this work at its early stages currently.

Capacity building to create resilient networks

The Birmingham NRPF Network conducts regular joint training sessions for staff across partner organizations to build shared capacity and expertise. Over ten sessions have been delivered, covering topics such as immigration law, domestic violence, advocacy, the journey of asylum seekers, and honour-based violence. These training sessions have been designed to use each partner’s specialism to improve the quality of provision across the overall support system for women and allow staff to respond more holistically and provide support beyond their specific areas of expertise. Alongside this, partners believe that joint training has the potential to develop closer relationships across staff and deeper understanding of each partner organisation’s work, enabling more long term collaboration and referrals beyond the NRPF work. However, since launching their programme of training sessions in November 2023, strategic leads have struggled to ensure engagement from staff beyond those working directly on NRPF, which means that the potential impact of this work is not being fully realised. Going forward they are examining how to build more commitment from managers across the organisation to create capacity for staff to attend and exploring how to adapt the regularity and format of training sessions to align with staff capacity.

Test and learn to tackle gendered poverty

The Birmingham NRPF Network has also focused on collectively improving its data collection methods, enabling the identification of the volume of women accessing services within the partnership. This development allows for partners to access data about common intersections of women's support needs, which they are able to use in external discussions about prevalence of No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and domestic abuse, as well as for bids and consultations.

The Network is continuing to learn and develop in its approach to MEL and is particularly exploring how to create space for learning and adaptation, alongside data collection. Currently partners share data which is collated and analysed by a lead staff member at Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid, but it has been suggested that in the future the Network dedicate time in meetings to review the data, highlight its implications, and facilitate discussions on realigning projections and addressing strategic gaps. The Network is also working with Renaisi-TSIP to embed ongoing learning into their work, by drawing on their support to facilitate workshops where partners reflect on learning, collectively set goals and develop strategies to deliver them.

Women of Wythenshawe

Collaborative relationships and processes

Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) is convened by CLASS, who facilitated a year of relationship development and confidence building across women leaders to create the foundations for collaboration. This has included devoting time for women leaders to visit each other's groups, tell stories about their experiences and collectively prioritise the main issues that they want to focus on. From this process three action groups have developed around three focal issues: improving statutory responses to domestic abuse, improving Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision within schools, and addressing the shortage of social housing for women and families. The development of these action groups has provided a space for women leaders with shared ambitions and experiences to seek peer support and collaborate to advocate for change, with the support of agencies that bring lived and professional understanding of the systems they are trying to change.

Alongside this, CLASS brings together support agencies with women leaders at quarterly Steering Group meetings to update on progress, review financial spending, identify opportunities to support each other's advocacy goals, and collectively direct future plans and strategy. This central coordination has ensured transparency and upheld WoW's approach to women-led systems change.

However, CLASS has reflected that the capacity needed to coordinate and support self-driven action across women's groups with many diverging interest was much higher than they initially anticipated. This has slowed progress at times, as CLASS has not had the staff capacity to facilitate and support all the actions that WoW leaders have

proposed alongside navigating and mediating relational changes and challenges across network. It has also driven CLASS to devote staff time to WoW significantly beyond that which they have been funded for. Alongside the different priorities across the WoW Network, the range of methods that the three working groups are employing, which has included social enterprise development, training provision, online resources, community reporting and advocacy, has required a huge range of expertise and investment. In this context CLASS is now encouraging partners to reflect on the strategic direction of WoW and consider lessons learned about the optimal structure and shape of the network to meet leaders' ambitions, to ensure that they can adapt based on what is not working, alongside progressing with the success of women-led advocacy and co-production that they have developed.

Impactful services and support for women

The three WoW action groups around Domestic Abuse, Housing and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are working to make change to improve the services and support women receive. So far, WoW is working to improve SEND support in schools through offering "train the trainer" programmes for SEND mothers, equipping them to deliver inclusive education training in local schools and producing "how-to" videos to guide SEND mothers through the complex process of securing support for their children. In addition, WoW has partnered with domestic abuse charity Safespots to co-create an online training portal for statutory workers, improving their understanding of ten different kinds of abuse. In the Housing Action Group, WoW leaders are also calling for an increase the proportion of housing for social rent and centre women and families' needs.

While WoW is working to improve services and support for women, they have found that progressing plans to action has taken longer and been more resource intensive than anticipated given the diversity in priorities across the network summarised in the previous section. CLASS had initially envisaged developing two focus areas for WoW's advocacy work, but in sticking to the principles of women-led action has worked with the women leaders at their own pace in line with their priorities.

Influencing local decision-makers

The action groups in WoW have focused on building relationships with key local decision-makers around SEND provision in schools, housing development and statutory responses to domestic abuse. With regards to housing, WoW leaders have established the Wythenshawe Central neighbourhood coalition, which unites community groups, projects, local ward Councillors and residents to have a collective voice on housing and land use decisions, alongside supporting the development of a city-wide Social Homes for Manchester campaign, which is calling for a policy change to include 30% social rent homes in new developments across Manchester. Through their engagement in Social Homes for Manchester, WoW leaders have met with local Councillors to make representations about the impacts of the housing crisis on women and families including women fleeing domestic abuse, and are due to meet with the local MP Mike Kane. With support from the Executive Director for Communities at Wythenshawe Housing Group (WHG), WoW leaders have also engaged with local

schools to begin delivering training around SEND to teachers and had a commitment from WHG to enrol staff in their training on domestic abuse.

The WoW leaders have also used community reporting as a tool to raise awareness about women's experiences of domestic abuse and housing insecurity in Wythenshawe. They have gathered stories about how the housing crisis is impacting local women and families to use in their advocacy work and have recorded 15 local women's stories about domestic abuse to inform a training portal for statutory workers.

WoW's experience to date has demonstrated the importance of having advocates that are locally connected and influential, such as the Executive Director of Wythenshawe Housing Group (WHG), to connect women leaders with decision-makers and experts that can support them to develop plans and advocate for change. WoW has also benefited from being convened by CLASS, which supports the Community Savers network across Manchester. This has enabled them to take their local calls for social housing into a city-wide campaign. However, as with other elements of WoW's work, advocacy and influencing has been limited by the gap between CLASS's capacity and the resource required to progress the three action groups' separate calls for policy and practice change, which have required engaging with a wide and diverse range of stakeholders.

Coproduction and devolved power

WoW's approach to systems change is fundamentally rooted in coproduction and leadership from women with lived experience of gendered poverty. With coordination from CLASS and support from partner agencies, women leaders have taken a leadership role from the outset, setting the agenda, prioritising issues, and planning collective action for systems change. WoW Network meetings are exclusively for leaders, creating a space for them to discuss ideas independently of professionals, which has enabled them to coproduce the direction and pace of the network solely based on their own experiences and ambitions. In WoW Steering Group meetings, each paired partner has representation from both a support agency and a WoW leader, ensuring professional expertise is integrated into the process while maintaining transparency, and accountability to women with lived experience. Women leaders in WoW have full ownership over the decision-making process, supported by advice, resources and funds that enable their participation.

Through this process WoW has surfaced learning about the need to effectively resource careful and adaptive facilitation of coproduction. As the convenor, CLASS has continually held support agencies to account in providing the support women leaders need to effectively engage in the network, alongside intervening to maintain a balance of staff and leaders in the Steering Group and create meetings where women leaders can direct activity without support agency staff in the room. CLASS has also had to mediate with support agencies when women leaders' were not given access to financial information and project costs or where a group of leaders chose to switch the support agency they were associated with, which has again required more resource from CLASS than initially anticipated.

Alongside this, the progress of WoW has demonstrated how to build effective community leadership. Women leaders who are new to community action have shared that they have developed new skills, trust in collective action, and confidence in their ability to bring about change. This personal development is helping them engage more confidently in advocacy and community leadership. Women are now taking their priorities directly to senior staff at statutory agencies and political representatives, who are engaging with well-prepared and confident women making the case for change based on their own experiences and knowledge of their community.

Capacity building to create resilient networks

As part of the coordination of WoW, CLASS developed a confidence-building programme that supported women leaders from diverse backgrounds to connect, articulate their priorities, and gain the confidence to engage in discussions with service providers and decision-makers. This has included regular skills development training in areas prioritised by the women leaders, including digital skills, community reporting, financial management, food hygiene, and social media, among others. Additionally, some of the WoW leaders' groups are receiving coaching sessions from Flourish Together CIC to develop their social enterprise ideas, including catering businesses and a training collective for mothers.

Women leaders have shared that engaging in WoW has supported their personal development, employability and confidence. This has the potential to lead to improved financial stability, personal well-being, and better outcomes for their families, ultimately contributing to the network's strength. However, alongside this, as they have developed their understanding of financial management, leaders have identified how little support there is locally for the type of unincorporated community associations and small charities that are in WoW, which often need substantial financial management, fundraising and accountancy support. CLASS' experience in WoW has shown that groups would benefit more from ongoing coaching to develop these skills rather than the one-off training sessions that are on offer locally.

Test and learn to tackle gendered poverty

WoW has a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework that has guided the structure of their learning process, which was co-created with WoW leaders and Renaisi-TSIP in autumn 2023. To ensure robust data collection about the process of change and ongoing learning and adaptation, CLASS ensures that all reflections and strategic discussions are documented through workshop minutes and photographs and facilitates reviews of progress and next steps during Network and Steering Group meetings. In early 2024, CLASS carried out an interim evaluation of WoW with support from Renaisi-TSIP to understand achievements and lessons learned. The findings from this report were discussed in a feedback workshop convened at the WoW steering group meeting in Spring 2024 to enable leaders to use learning to inform decision-making.

The focus on learning and data collection in WoW has supported women leaders to feel empowered to voice their opinions and lead decision-making processes. Creating

spaces for the leaders to both direct and engage with M&E processes has developed a practice of learning from past experiences and integrating these insights into their planning. This has supported leaders to feel confident in their decisions and engage with the strategic direction of the network.

Conclusion

All three networks have impacted the system that women experiencing poverty encounter in their local area, through improving the services and support on offer, driving collaboration, influencing shifts in practice and thinking about women's needs, facilitating coproduction, building capacity and developing methods to test and learn about their work.

With less than a year left in this round of funding, the three networks are focused on planning for the future, taking the learning, relationships and capacities that have been built through this programme to work for long-term systems change. For all three networks, long-term resourcing to continue their work is a primary concern, with dynamics around this being shaped by their learning to date:

- The Birmingham NRP Network recognises that the nature of their focus means that public sector funding is highly unlikely at this stage. In this context they are focusing their efforts on collaborative influencing to open more space for support for women with NRP and lay the groundwork for statutory partners to see their work as important.
- Women of Wythenshawe has learnt about women-led action can shift local perspectives, agencies' ways of working and the confidence of women, alongside learning about how much resource it requires. Having now developed three action groups, CLASS recognises that continuing to coordinate and support all three is unsustainable and will hold back the potential impact of the groups. As a result of this WoW is currently exploring how the three action groups could potentially split into separate self-directed networks and reflecting on the strategic benefit of these groups remaining under the umbrella of WoW. With serious concerns around their ongoing core funding, CLASS is also exploring how they can continue to support women-led action in Wythenshawe more efficiently, without staff time being pulled towards relationship management and coordination of a range of organisations as has been the case in WoW.
- For Coventry Women's Partnership, the longevity of their work in the area, and the ongoing lack of recognition of this as a critical service by the local authority is driving them to seek philanthropic partners that can fund their work over the long term. Their focus on gathering evidence around the systemic need for their service this past year has been driven by that.

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