

A place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty

End of Programme Report

Smallwood Trust

September 2025



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1. Introduction

Purpose

Smallwood Trust's approach to place-based systems change has developed through funding networks of women's organisations to work collaboratively to test approaches that target the root causes of gendered poverty in their place. By generating insights about how to change the systems that drive and perpetuate gendered poverty, this funding will support Smallwood Trust's mission to enable women to be financially resilient.

This report is part of a series documenting the journeys of the six networks currently funded by Smallwood Trust. It brings together the work of all six networks to summarise impact, analyse learning, surface insights around how a place-based systems change approach can shift gendered poverty, and make recommendations around how Smallwood Trust can effectively support this work going forward.

Background

Smallwood Trust's journey in place-based funding began with funding Coventry Women's Partnership in 2018 to develop a model for place-based, joined-up service delivery. In 2022, this expanded, through the Women's Sector Resilience Fund 2, to support two additional place-based networks to work towards systems change in their places in Birmingham and Wythenshawe, Manchester. The place-based networks that Smallwood Trust funds through the Women's Sector Resilience Fund are:

1. Coventry Women's Partnership (CWP), coordinated by Foleshill Women's Training (FWT)
2. The Birmingham No Resource to Public Funds (NRPF) Women's Support Network, coordinated by Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (BWSA)
3. Women of Wythenshawe (WoW), coordinated by CLASS

Through funding each of the three networks at approximately £500,000 over the past three years, Smallwood Trust aimed that this funding would:

- Enable Smallwood Trust to learn alongside organisations about what creates change for women via a "test and learn" approach
- 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
- Stimulate ideas that are designed and delivered by the people closest to the problem, including women with experience of poverty themselves

- 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
- Support networks to measure the change they are making.

In 2023, Smallwood Trust expanded this work further through the launch of a programme to develop networks that build learning, power and influence within the women's sector. Through this programme, Smallwood Trust has partnered with three additional networks:

1. Transform Leicestershire Women's Network, coordinated by Zinthiya Trust
2. Transforming Together in the North East of England, coordinated by Agenda Alliance,
3. The Compass Project in Brighton and Hove, coordinated by Surviving Economic Abuse.

This programme, which has been supported by funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, aimed to support local partners to coordinate local learning and capacity building activities and influence systemic change. Over the two years of funding, each coordinating partner received up to £63,000 to support their network building efforts.

While work has been at different timelines, scales and ambitions, both programmes contribute to Smallwood Trust's Gendered Poverty Learning Programme through generating learning and evidence around how a systems change approach can shift gendered poverty. This report brings together the learning and evidence that has emerged from the six networks funded by Smallwood Trust.

Methodology

This report has been developed through a meta-analysis of findings from reports on each of the six networks that Smallwood Trust funds. It has leaned on the following data inputs:

- Interviews and focus groups with individuals involved in the networks, including staff at coordinating partners, staff at other partner organisations and individuals with lived experience who are engaged in the work, carried out from June to August 2025
- Data from workshops that Renaissi facilitated with the networks throughout our learning partnership from 2022 to 2025
- Observational data collected by Renaissi throughout our interactions with the networks from 2022 to 2025
- Monitoring reports to Smallwood Trust provided by the networks

- Where available, any research, learning and evaluation reports that the networks produced or commissioned externally

Data was analysed using learning questions that Renaisi co-designed with Smallwood Trust and the networks in Coventry, Birmingham and Wythenshawe in early 2023, alongside Renaisi's models for understanding place-based systems change, detailed in Section 4 of the report.

2. About the networks

The six networks funded by Smallwood Trust are all dedicated to shifting gendered poverty. Working at a neighbourhood, city-wide and regional level, they are connecting local organisations to improve responses to gendered poverty and advocate for the issues faced by vulnerable women. Each network is taking a different approach to change. Their approaches have been shaped by the needs and ambitions of the women they are working with, alongside their local context and the expertise of partners.

An overview of each of the networks' aims, structure, and achievements are detailed below:

Coventry Women's Partnership (CWP)	
Location	Coventry
Focus	To improve service delivery to meet the needs of vulnerable women in Coventry experiencing crises.
Aims	It aims to improve services for vulnerable women in Coventry by providing specialist, holistic support and services. CWP aims to deliver a smooth and effective referral pathway between partners, which will increase the capacity of holistic women-only services and promote a women-centred approach.
Structure	The five delivery partners are Foleshill Women's Training (FWT), the lead partner, Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC), Kairos Women Working Together (Kairos WWT), Coventry Haven Women's Aid (Coventry Haven), and Central England Law Centre (CELC).

Achievements	Since it began as a pilot in 2018, the partnership has created a model for joined-up, holistic service delivery. It established a "warm referral" process where caseworkers directly contact each other to discuss a woman's needs before making a referral, avoiding the need for women to self-refer and repeat their stories. The model successfully led to improvements in women's basic needs, supported women to escape violence, abuse and exploitation, prevented homelessness, improved employability, and increased feelings of empowerment. CWP is recognised nationally as a model of best practice in joined-up service delivery for women.
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Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network	
Location	Birmingham
Focus	To support women experiencing domestic abuse (DA) who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) status.
Aims	Its mission is to ensure women subject to NRPF and DA are protected from destitution and homelessness and achieve economic stability and wellbeing by accessing holistic and trauma-informed support from cohesive services. It aims to maximise resources via inter-agency response and referral pathways and amplify women's voices to create an evidence base for systems change.
Structure	Delivery partners are Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (BSWA), the lead partner, The Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC), Central England Law Centre (CELC), Baobab Women's Project, Roshni, and British Red Cross (BRC).
Achievements	Formally established in the summer of 2022, the network successfully supported 1146 women between August 2022 and

	July 2025. The network established a smooth referral pathway enabling women to access multiple specialist services without having to self-refer or repeat potentially traumatic stories. As a result of legal support provided, 98% of women who accessed the network had an immigration claim lodged, and 84% of those claims were granted, shifting their NRPF designation. The network successfully pursued strategic litigation against the Home Office, expanding eligibility for the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC), which enables those experiencing domestic abuse to access public funds. It also built the expertise of staff across all partner organisations to provide trauma-informed, person-centred support to women experiencing NRPF and DA and has influenced local policy, including Birmingham City Council's Domestic Abuse strategy. The network also developed the NRPF Advisory Group, bringing together women with lived experience of NRPF and DA to coproduce their own approach to engagement.
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Women of Wythenshawe (WoW)

Location	Wythenshawe (a suburb of Manchester City)
Focus	To support women experiencing multiple disadvantages in Wythenshawe to lead action on gendered poverty
Aims	The network aims to support women-led poverty action. It was established to build the skills, capacities and confidence of women with lived experience, referred to as WoW Leaders, to support them to identify and progress priorities for system change. In its first year of activity, WoW Leaders chose to pursue action around housing, domestic abuse, and the experiences of mothers with children who have Special Educational Needs or Difficulties (SEND).

Structure	The network is coordinated by Community Led Action and Savings Support (CLASS). It brings together nine local women's groups that are supported by seven support agencies (including CLASS). Initially, WoW Network meetings, which bring together WoW Leaders from each group, were the main space for decision-making and activity. This has now shifted to decision-making and activity occurring through three action groups focused on housing, domestic abuse, and the experiences of mothers with children who have SEND. There is also a WoW Steering Group, comprised of staff from support agencies alongside WoW Leaders, that oversees budget and support for Leaders.
Achievements	The development of a women-led poverty action network that is working towards change in three distinct areas is a significant achievement. Through this work, WoW Leaders developed skills in areas such as community reporting, public speaking, and financial management, leading to personal achievements like one leader becoming a Green Party Councillor. More specifically, the Housing Action Group contributed to a successful city-wide campaign, Social Homes for Manchester, which led to a policy change in July 2025 to increase social housing targets in Manchester. It also supported the development of Wythenshawe Central Network, a partnership bringing together community actors to influence urban planning and development in Wythenshawe Central. The Domestic Abuse Action Group co-produced training resources for the public sector that highlight a range of experiences of abuse and how to respond to them. Similarly, the SEND Action Group developed a training programme to support schools and mothers to better understand the legal rights of children with SEND and their families.

Transform Leicestershire	
Location	Leicester and Leicestershire
Focus	To bring together grassroots organisations that serve racially minoritised women
Aims	It aims to strengthen organisations' capacity and sustainability and promote partnership working, to ensure that minoritised women can access better support and to influence wider policy, practice and funding.
Structure	The network is coordinated by Zinithiya Trust, who engage with an evolving group of experience-led grassroots women's organisations, primarily through capacity-building activities and joint meetings.
Achievements	The network engaged with a range of community leaders, experience-led voluntary sector organisations, and unconstituted groups to identify gaps in support for racially minoritised women and set shared priorities around health and wellbeing, housing and domestic abuse. Zinithiya Trust provided capacity-building support to these groups on topics including fundraising, bid writing, and governance. Zinithiya Trust also leveraged its reputation to convene roundtables with statutory actors, focusing on issues facing racially minoritised women.

Transforming Together	
Location	North East of England
Focus	To improve systems and services for women experiencing multiple and unmet needs, particularly in the public sector.

Aims	It aims to implement codesigned and evidence-based policy recommendations, set out in its 'Dismantling Disadvantage' ¹ report, around how to address the siloed nature of public services and ensure they recognise how interconnected issues like racism, poverty, domestic abuse, and homelessness compound for women.
Structure	The network is coordinated by Agenda Alliance. It includes over 60 members, including women with lived experience, voluntary organisations, statutory bodies, commissioners, and funders. In its first year, two subgroups were created – one on commissioning, funding and power sharing and data and the other on evidence and information – to develop plans for tangible action.
Achievements	The network convened a diverse, cross-sector membership, including representatives from public health, criminal justice, and local authorities alongside those with lived experience, to unpack systemic challenges and set priorities. It has been supported by key regional powerholders, including local Police and Crime Commissioners and the Mayor for the North East. The data subgroup used regional data to highlight gaps in commissioned refuge spaces, particularly for women facing complex mental health needs or NRPF status. The commissioning sub-group is co-designing commissioning principles with statutory commissioners.

The Compass Project (Brighton and Hove)

Location	Brighton and Hove
Focus	To strengthen the local response to economic abuse.

¹ *Dismantling Disadvantage*. July 2023, Agenda Alliance. Available at: https://www.agendaalliance.org/documents/148/Transforming_Services_Final_Report.pdf

Aims	It aims to engage local services and women with lived experience in the design of an economic advocacy model, ensure services can identify and respond effectively to economic abuse and influence commissioning for domestic abuse services.
Structure	The project is led by Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA), a national charity, in partnership with RISE, a local domestic abuse service. SEA engages with an evolving group of local services, including statutory agencies, grassroots organisations, voluntary sector services and financial institutions to deliver training around economic abuse. The project has also created a Steering Group, bringing together key local partners from Brighton & Hove and another Compass Project site in Leicestershire, to oversee activity, and a Brighton and Hove Women's Economic Safety Network that local partners can engage with via a monthly newsletter.
Achievements	Through the project, SEA delivered training on economic abuse to professionals (over 75 participants) across various sectors, including housing, VAWG, mental health, DWP, and financial institutions. It successfully embedded economic abuse awareness in local organisations and influenced local policy, resulting in economic abuse being named a strategic priority in Brighton & Hove's Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy. The project also carried out research locally to develop an economic advocacy model and a practical three-question economic abuse screening tool for frontline use.

3. The impact on individuals

The networks have had significant positive impacts on the individuals involved in the work, including women with lived experience and staff across partner organisations. This impact, which ranges from securing fundamental rights and improving basic needs to building confidence and new skills, has practically improved the lives of women and benefited organisations that exist to tackle gendered poverty.

The impact summarised in this section is not analysed in terms of how it contributes to systemic change, but how it has benefited individuals throughout the programme, contributing to Smallwood Trust's mission to enable women to be financially resilient.

Impact for women experiencing gendered poverty

The networks aim to improve outcomes for women experiencing gendered poverty, domestic abuse and complex needs. Through a combination of service delivery, influencing, capacity building and organising, each network had benefits for women experiencing gendered poverty.

Increasing confidence, agency and well-being

Networks carried out activities that improved the confidence and wellbeing of women experiencing gendered poverty.

Women accessing Coventry Women's Partnership (CWP) services shared that they had gained a sense of control over various facets of their lives, including housing, employment and finances, which empowered them to pursue their own goals. Similarly, women accessing the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network reflected that support reduced the stress they experienced while battling to stabilise their migration status and gave them confidence that they would move past their No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) designation, access their right to work and build their own independence.

"At a time when I felt I was unravelling, and that I would lose all the personal progress I had made, at a time I could feel myself staying home and shutting away, FWT and their connection with the Law Centre gave me my strength back and I remembered who I am and all that I wanted to do for myself and family."

CWP service user ²

In Wythenshawe, Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) Leaders, who are all women with lived experience of multiple disadvantages, gained confidence in public speaking and leadership. Many shared that working collaboratively with other Leaders reduced feelings of isolation and gave them a belief in their own ability to improve their lives and those of their community.

² Drawn from case studies collated by CWP from July 2022 – December 2022

“Before whenever I would have to public speak or talk to someone, like you even, I would be so scared, but working with these women, they give you a chance to talk, they don’t rush you, they actually listen to what you’re saying. I think I have improved so much from working with them .”

WoW Leader, Community Savers and CLASS Impact Report, June 2024

The Compass Project’s workshops with women experiencing economic abuse provided women with the tools to build their own financial resilience. Women shared that having their experiences of economic abuse validated gave them confidence in advocating for themselves and seeking out specialist financial and debt support services.

Furthermore, both Zinthiya Trust and CWP run women’s peer support groups that bring together women with lived experience of marginalisation and poverty to connect, supporting solidarity and tackling isolation.

Ensuring women can meet their basic needs

The services delivered by the Birmingham NRPF Women’s Support Network and Coventry Women’s Partnership (CWP), funded directly by Smallwood Trust, have ensured women can meet their basic needs and access essential services and legal rights.

The Birmingham NRPF Women’s Support Network has provided cash-based destitution assistance and temporary housing provision to prevent women experiencing domestic abuse and NRPF from falling into homelessness and destitution or returning to abusive partners. The network has also helped women stabilise their immigration status, shifting the NRPF designation to enable women to access statutory support, including financial assistance, housing benefits, and health services.

“We were able to look at their needs in a really holistic way, accommodation needs, financial needs, the needs of their children, etc., and then what we needed was also to shift the condition that stopped them from accessing a lot of the opportunities that should be available to them – the NRPF condition...to legalise their stay in the long term.”

Interview with network partner (Birmingham), July 2025

With a broader scope to support all vulnerable women with complex needs, CWP has also supported women to leave abusive environments, stabilise their immigration status and receive legal protection, leading to a reduction in gender-

based violence. CWP also helped women resolve housing insecurity, through negotiating challenges with landlords and identifying housing options, and build financial resilience, through accessing benefits, addressing unmanageable debt and seeking employment.

Building skills and capacity

Those networks that engaged women with lived experience in developing and delivering activities built women's skills and capacities to engage in community action.

This capacity building was central to WoW's approach. WoW built the skills and capacity of women with multiple disadvantage through training in areas including digital skills, community reporting, financial management, and social media. This enabled some women to progress their career goals. For example, the women's Bright Futures Friends has gone on to gain paid work as a commissioned social enterprise, and the WoW Leader, Zoe Marlow, has now become a Green Party Councillor. Collective storytelling and community reporting also supported WoW leaders in developing public speaking and media skills to share their experiences in advocacy and influencing work.

"Women now have all of these skills and expertise and knowledge, now they're in a position to push and continue and try to make change."

Interview with network partner (WoW), August 2025

Similarly, women with lived experience who participated in Transforming Together developed skills in public speaking, policymaking and research. This led to one of the group successfully transitioning into paid employment after an extended period out of work.

In Birmingham, the women in the NRPF Advisory Group also engaged in capacity building through English language classes, digital skills training, legal rights training, and community research training. This has led to three women from the group receiving diplomas in community research.

Impacts on staff across the networks

The networks have also benefited staff working at partner organisations by improving their capacity and confidence in their ability to meet women's needs.

In Birmingham and Coventry, joint training, regular meetings and consistent communication across partners deepened staff understanding of the challenges

women face outside their own specialism and how to respond to them. Staff reflected that the networks built strong working relationships and fostered a culture of empathy and trust. Staff working across CWP reported gaining more confidence in their ability to provide effective support for women experiencing multiple, complex needs. Similarly, in Birmingham, staff shared that the network both built their understanding of the legal frameworks around NRPF and how to respond appropriately to those experiencing domestic abuse, ensuring a consistent quality of support.

*“Training from Women's Aid on support and advice to give women in emergencies to access support and training from CELC on MVDAC have both been really helpful”,
Interview with network partner (Birmingham), June 2025*

The Compass Project and Transform Leicestershire both also focused on building the capacity of local staff and organisations. In Brighton, the Compass Project delivered training that supported frontline staff to improve their service delivery around economic abuse. In Leicestershire, Zinithya Trust worked with staff at member organisations to build their skills in financial management and fundraising, supporting organisational resilience.

For some coordinating partners, particularly Agenda Alliance and SEA, engaging in community-led action also developed staff members' skills in coalition building, equitable facilitation and coproduction.

Summary: Individuals' experiences across the networks

- Networks delivering joint services have supported women to avoid destitution, homelessness, exploitation and abuse alongside expanding their access to rights and essential services.
- Through service delivery, coproduction and collective action, networks have reduced isolation and supported women's confidence, agency and wellbeing.
- Networks have supported women with lived experience to learn new skills and build leadership capacities, often supporting their career ambitions.
- Joint service delivery, inter-agency communication and training have built the confidence of staff to respond effectively to a wider range of needs.
- Network building itself has also developed new skills for some coordinating partners.

4. Understanding systems change

Before analysing how the networks have been progressing through system change, this section outlines the theoretical frameworks and learning questions that guide this analysis. Learning on a combination of Renaissi's tools for measuring place-based systems change and the networks' perspectives on a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty, this section frames the approach to understanding systems change that guides the remainder of the analysis.

A place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty

As a learning partner, for the past three years, Renaissi has worked with Smallwood Trust and the funded networks to support the development of their approaches to place-based systems change and capture ongoing learning about their impact.

In January 2023, Renaissi brought the Coventry, Birmingham and Wythenshawe networks together to coproduce an articulation of the “ingredients” for a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty. These ingredients were:

1. Collaborative relationships and processes
2. Engaging women with lived experience of gendered poverty in directing work
3. Holistic services for women with multiple and complex needs
4. Capturing evidence and learning
5. Influencing wider practice, policy and funding

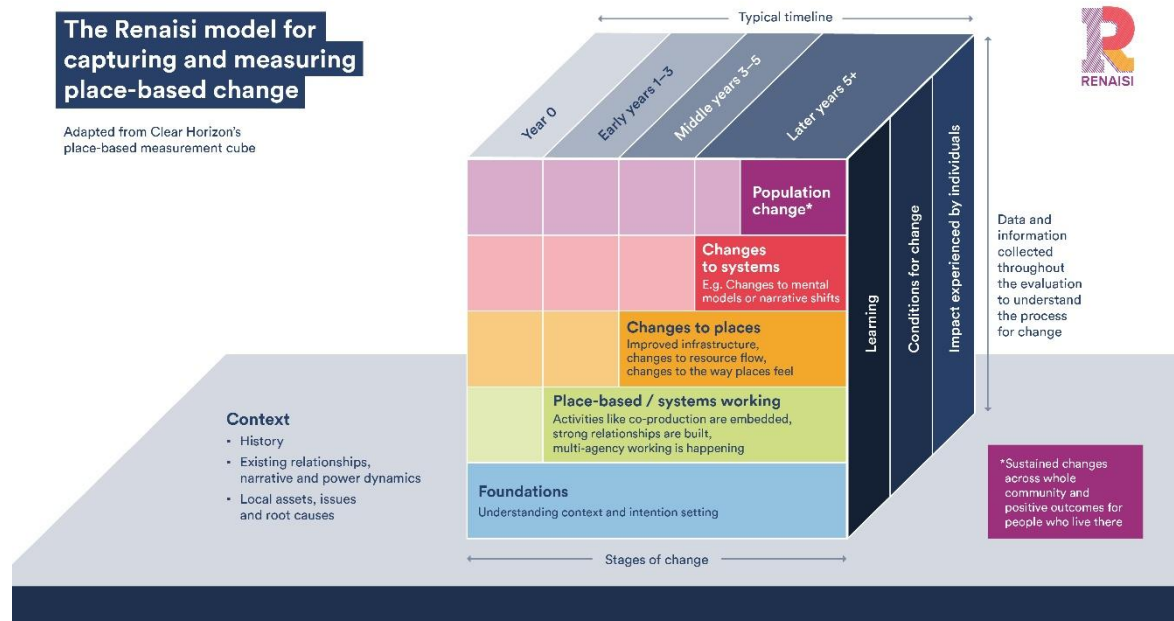
Throughout the programme, Renaissi captured evidence and learning around how networks developed these ingredients for a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty, which has been a key data input for the report.

Tools to understand and measure 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 Renaissi, we have developed tools to design, learn about and measure place-based systems

change. Our model for capturing and measuring place-based systems change³ (below) sets out five key stages of change (on the front of the cube) aligned with 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).

As will be explained in the following sections of this report, the networks currently sit in stages one and two of the model: “Foundations” and “Place-based and systems working”.

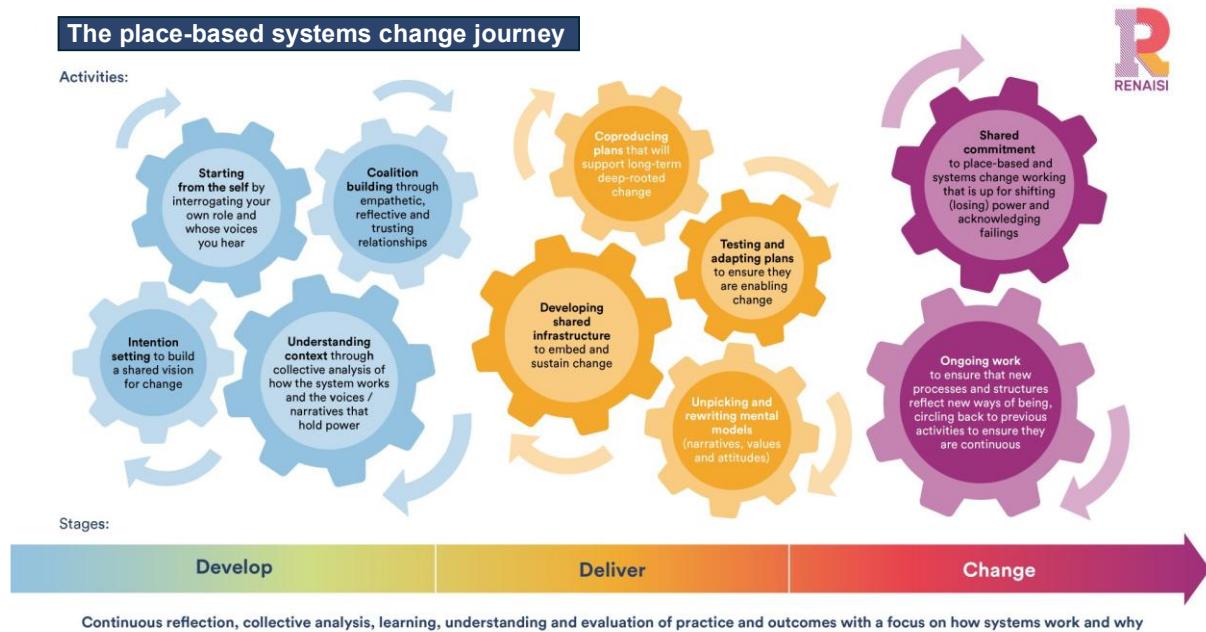


Much of Renaisi’s work in programme design, learning and evaluation has focused on understanding how to identify and develop place-based systems working. Interrogating this stage more deeply through analysis of the place-based and/or systems change projects that Renaisi has historically worked on, we developed the model below, which describes the typical place-based systems change journey for an organisation or collective. The model sets out the activities that support place and systems working. The activities and sequencing in this model were also informed by a year-long inquiry exploring “what it takes to change a system”⁴ that culminated in our Guide to Systems Change⁵.

³ Renaisi has often drawn on Australian consultancy [Clear Horizon](https://clearhorizon.com.au/)’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 and to align it with our new model of evaluation. Read more about our model here <https://Renaisi.com/2023/11/01/solution-place-based-systems-change-evaluation/>

⁴ What does it take to change a system? Renaisi. <https://Renaisi.com/what-does-it-take-to-change-a-system/>

⁵ Launching our guide to systems change. Renaisi <https://Renaisi.com/2024/05/21/systems-change-guide/>



Combining activities in this tool with the “ingredients” developed by the networks, we developed a set of indicators for systemic practice. These indicators guided the analysis of how the networks are laying the foundations for systemic change beyond the timeline of their current funding.

Indicators for systemic practice

- Deep understanding of the system and the local context
- Adaptable plans and activities that target the root causes of issues, while using learning to pivot towards interventions that can bring lasting change
- Shifts in the voices, perspectives and evidence that shape decision-making
- Collaboration across the system that is underpinned by strong relationships and shared ambitions for change
- Infrastructure and policy that can support new and shared ways of working
- Shifts in the attitudes, practices and narratives that were driving harm

A systemic approach to gendered poverty would aim to develop all these indicators, but we would not expect to see activities to neatly match with each indicator. Systemic practice will target many of these indicators simultaneously – for example, by building collaborative work that deepens a collective understanding of the system while also shifting the voices that shape decision-making. Because of this, the following section on systemic practice does not report on each indicator separately, but uses the set of indicators as a framework to assess how the networks practically developed systemic approaches to gendered poverty.

5. Systemic practice across the networks

While only some of the networks have been funded explicitly to drive systems change, each of them is pursuing activities that build a foundation for systems change, and many of them are actively practising place and systems working.

The following section describes how the networks have progressed along Renaisi's model for place-based systems change. Findings are categorised to group common workstreams that the six networks practically engaged in throughout their work, which were: fostering collaboration, engaging with lived experience, building evidence and influencing wider policy and practice. In each of the workstreams, we identify where we see the indicators for systemic practice in their work and how they are building a foundation for systems change.

Deep and active collaboration

The networks' approaches to building deep and active collaboration reflect systemic practice through their creation of shared infrastructure, aligned values and ambitions, and deep relationships.

Establishing shared processes and infrastructure

The networks are developing shared processes and infrastructure for collaboration through a combination of formal agreements, referral processes, joint spaces and clear coordination and governance. This infrastructure is particularly vital for those networks integrating service delivery, but has also brought transparency, confidence and connection across networks.

Both the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network and Coventry Women's Partnership (CWP) have established infrastructure for integrated service delivery. This has included developing a partnership memorandum of understanding, shared referral forms, monitoring processes, joint digital platforms, a data sharing protocol and regular learning, planning and governance meetings. CWP also utilises co-location through a multi-agency drop-in hosted by Kairos, which allows women to access a wide range of support in one location.

While in the interest of capacity building rather than integrated service delivery, Transform Leicestershire similarly established a physical hub that members can access for 1-to-1 advice, computer access, and workspace. Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) also established a clear network structure through working groups, WoW Network meetings and a Steering Group guided by a member's

agreement that ensures financial transparency and equal representation of WoW Leaders and staff from support agencies.

Most of the networks have also benefited from dedicated resource for coordination. In Transforming Together, Transform Leicestershire, the Compass Project, WoW and CWP, there has been a dedicated staff member taking on a coordination role in the lead organisation. Across networks, this role has enabled the establishment of shared processes, built relationships and ensured regular and clear communication.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: Establishing shared infrastructure and processes has supported collaborative working across the networks. This collaborative work has practically enabled many of the other elements of systemic practice detailed in this section. However, for most of the networks, collaborative work is upheld by dedicated coordination capacity, which will require ongoing funding to be sustainable. Those networks whose collaborative work has included joint service delivery, in Coventry and Birmingham, have built the strongest foundation for long-term collaboration through creating processes and infrastructure that support new ways of working, which will also outlast funded coordination.

Building deep relationships

By dedicating time to develop interpersonal connections and establish a non-hierarchical, open and mutually supportive culture, networks have built deep, trusting relationships across partners.

In both Coventry and Birmingham, partners felt that the development of trusting and empathetic relationships was the foundation for their success. These were built through regular meetings for frontline staff and strategic leads at each organisation that supported partners to share learning, seek advice and raise concerns. In both partnerships, this work enabled a relational referral process that improved targeting of referrals and ensured women moved smoothly between services. Staff in both networks reflected that they had built a mutually supportive team dynamic at the frontline and strategic levels that withstood staff turnover.

WoW dedicated its first year to supporting the relationship development across WoW Leaders. This process involved supporting WoW Leaders to visit each other's groups and facilitated network meetings focused on storytelling, which both built trust, care, and solidarity across the group.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: The development of strong interpersonal and interorganisational relationships enabled the development of new models for service delivery in Coventry and Birmingham and women-led action in Wythenshawe, which each then where critical vehicles for systemic practice. However, as these relationships were significantly deeper and stronger in the three networks that were funded to deliver together than the others, there is a risk that without sustained funding for joint delivery, relationships would become distant or fractured with staff turnover.

Aligning values and ambitions

Networks used collective planning and prioritisation processes to define shared ambitions and values, which have been developed further through joint service delivery and capacity building.

Partners in the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network shared that clarity on the network's goals and how they would be progressed has been critical to their collaboration. They noted the importance of devoting significant time to collectively developing these goals through Systems Mapping and Theory of Change development, which ensured that all partners' views were reflected in them.

Similarly, WoW, Transforming Together and Transform Leicestershire all undertook network-wide discussions to identify subgroups or thematic priorities for their work. Developing these focus areas has built deeper collaboration, enabling aligned actors to coalesce around areas where they can most effectively drive change

The Coventry and Birmingham networks have both used inter-agency training on topics including domestic violence, immigration and honour-based violence to ensure staff developed a consistent values-driven approach to working with women. This joint capacity building ensures that all services are gender-sensitive, holistic, and trauma-informed, supporting joined-up service delivery and strengthening trust between partners. Shifting whose voices are heard and valued

Many of the networks have designed structures and processes that integrate the perspectives of those with lived experience into decision-making, advocacy, service design, and policy change. Bringing women with direct experience of gendered poverty and systemic harm into these efforts to respond to gendered poverty alongside professional policymakers and frontline staff has created a major shift in whose voices are heard and valued in these efforts.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: Building alignment in values and ambitions across the networks has supported them to collaborate on the range of joint activities detailed throughout this section. The alignment in values and ambitions developed through this work has given partners confidence in each other's motivations for and approach to tackling gendered poverty, which also provides a foundation for long-term collaboration beyond the networks.

Creating structures for lived experience to guide activities

The networks have created dedicated, formalised groups to ensure lived experience is structurally embedded into their work and guides activities.

WoW's approach is rooted in building leadership among local women with lived experience of gendered poverty, referred to as WoW Leaders. Plans and priorities have been developed by WoW Leaders in WoW Network meetings or the Housing, Domestic Abuse, SEND Action Groups. Leaders are not only developing plans but are actively engaged in delivery and intentionally leveraging their lived experience as a critical source of insight, evidence and wisdom on how to improve service delivery. In the Domestic Abuse and SEND Action Group, WoW Leaders used their experiences to develop training programmes that can shift public sector practice. The Housing Action Group has also platformed stories from those with lived experience to mobilise local people around the shortage of social housing and pressure politicians to support calls for policy change.

While the extent to which WoW has built a women-led approach to action against gendered poverty is unmatched across the networks, others have also developed structures to support women with lived experience to influence activities.

Transforming Together includes women with lived experience who actively participate in network meetings and subgroups. The network has used careful facilitation to ensure these women have power and voice in the network, encouraging statutory powerholders and commissioned services to reflect on their positionality and allow others to speak first, ensuring that inherent power dynamics across the diverse group did not undermine the potential for genuine coproduction.

In Birmingham, the network established the NRPF Advisory Group to bring together women with lived experience of NRPF and domestic abuse. This group contributed to a consultation on Birmingham City Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy, ensuring that the network could advocate for the inclusion of considerations around support for women with NRPF that were rooted in lived experience.

Both the Compass Project and Transform Leicestershire work closely with women with lived experience of gendered poverty through working with grassroots experience-led organisations, whose staff bring their own lived experience alongside supporting the networks to engage with women accessing their support.

Furthermore, all networks are combining quantitative public data with relational insights and lived experience to generate and platform evidence about how to tackle gendered poverty. This challenges a systemic deference to quantitative datasets, often only accessible to statutory agencies and “expert” research organisations, as the only forms of evidence that should to shape policymaking.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: The structures that networks have created to engage those with lived experience in the design and delivery of activities are systemic through creating a shift in whose voices guide decision-making. WoW and Transforming Together’s work has led statutory and voluntary sector stakeholders in Manchester and the North East of England, respectively, to recognise the importance of shifting power to those with lived experience to build an accurate picture of experiences of harm. These shifts in perceptions of the role of lived experience in decision-making could lead to lasting changes that outlast the current funding, creating a foundation for systems change. The inputs of women with lived experience have also supported the lasting changes to policy and practice detailed later in this report. However, networks have also devoted significant coordination capacity to this work, which means that its sustainability will require ongoing funding.

Supporting those with lived experience to lead change

The networks have actively invested in developing the skills and confidence of women with lived experience, supporting them to take on roles in leadership, advocacy and service delivery.

Again, WoW has taken the most intensive approach to this, developing a confidence-building programme that included training in digital skills, community reporting, financial management, and social media. Participating in WoW also built the confidence and leadership skills of all WoW Leaders, with many reporting increased confidence to speak up, share their views and challenge service providers and decision-makers. As described in Section 3 of this report, this capacity building has empowered Leaders outside of their engagement in the network, with a group of WoW Leaders establishing a now twice-commissioned social enterprise and one becoming a Green Party Councillor.

Transform Leicestershire also uses training and capacity building to support women with lived experience to lead change. All member organisations are led by racially minoritised women, many of whom have lived experience of the issues their service addresses. Transform Leicestershire focuses on building the capacity of these experience-led organisations through supporting them to develop their financial resilience and service delivery.

In Birmingham, the NRPF Advisory Group was designed to allow women to engage according to their own capacity and ambitions, prioritising a co-productive approach over any of the organisational partners' pre-conceived aims for the group. As a result of this, women in the Advisory Group chose to prioritise building their capacity before engaging in influencing. They were supported to engage in English language, digital skills, legal rights and community research courses. Women in the Advisory Group reflected that their participation supported them to improve their understanding of their rights and build skills that would support future employment.

Similarly, in Transforming Together, women with lived experience have been supported to engage in the network via training, wellbeing activities and confidence building. This support has helped one woman transition into paid employment after an extended time out of work.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: This element of the networks' work is deeply systemic. It is building the power of those often marginalised from decision-making, who also have the deepest understanding of how the system causes harm. Through supporting women with lived experience of systemic marginalisation and poverty to take on active roles in driving change, the networks are building the practice and capacity to support long-term shifts in power, which have the potential to grow beyond the duration of their funded work.

Building a deeper understanding of the system

Systemic practice requires a deep understanding of how and why the system is failing. The networks are engaging in this through actively developing evidence around systemic issues and designing interventions which target the root causes of these issues.

Developing evidence of systemic issues

All networks have developed richer evidence around how systems fail to meet the needs of vulnerable women. They have leveraged data from service delivery, frontline insights and lived experiences to reveal systemic issues and how these can be shifted.

Both CWP and the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network use frontline evidence to highlight how statutory services fail vulnerable women in local forums and call for changes in policy and practice. CWP's commitment to collecting evidence on women's experiences and the partnership's impact (through reports from the Women's Budget Group, Just Economics, and Renaisi) has built the case for holistic, women-centred services and highlighted the gendered impact of policy.

As described above, WoW Leaders in all three action groups have intentionally used their lived experiences of housing insecurity, domestic abuse and caring for children with SEND to develop evidence-based interventions that can change these systems. Alongside this, the training videos produced by the Domestic Abuse Action Group and the campaign documentary developed by Social Homes for Manchester are both lasting resources that evidence how women experience the system.

Building on the research in its Dismantling Disadvantage report, Transforming Together has continued to develop evidence on the systemic barriers facing women with multiple and unmet needs in the North East. Through its data sharing and evidence subgroup, the network has made accessible quantitative data on commissioned refuge bed spaces to highlight significant gaps in bed spaces for women with multiple disadvantages. This data was then triangulated with qualitative insights from women with lived experience, frontline staff, and commissioners in the network to illuminate the impact of a lack of refuge spaces on women and build a case for increased commissioning of women-only spaces.

Similarly, the Compass Project conducted research with frontline practitioners, service managers, commissioners, and women with lived experience to understand current responses to economic abuse. This led to the development of an evidence-based economic advocacy model and an economic abuse screening tool, both of which are now improving how support systems identify and respond to economic abuse nationally.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: The networks' development of evidence about the systems that perpetuate gendered poverty, which centres the experiences of those for whom the system is failing, is laying the foundations for systems change through enabling them to develop interventions that target the root causes of systemic issues. It has also led to the development of tools and resources which can support others beyond the networks to progress systems change.

Targeting root causes

Through building a deeper understanding of the system, the networks are developing interventions that target the root causes of gendered poverty.

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network and WoW both used participatory systems mapping to identify interventions that could target root causes. This supported both networks to bring together a range of perspectives to deepen their understanding of the systems they aim to change and identify where they were best placed to intervene.

In Wythenshawe, this has led the WoW Action Groups to develop campaigns and actions that will create lasting change. WoW Leaders identified that a lack of investment in new social housing drove women's experiences of housing insecurity and extended time in temporary accommodation, which both had severe impacts on women's mental health, employment and relationships. In response to this, WoW supported the development of the Social Homes for Manchester Campaign, advocating for city-wide policy change. The other Action Groups similarly realised that a root cause of gendered poverty for women experiencing domestic abuse and women caring for SEND children was a lack of appropriate and caring responses from public services. Both Action Groups developed training programmes to build the capacity of these services to respond differently.

Taking a root-cause approach rooted in systems mapping enabled the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network to target its influencing work towards where it can practically influence lasting change. This has included strategic litigation to expand access to the legal avenues that enable women with NRPF who experience domestic abuse to shift their NRPF designation. The network has also focused on advocacy to ensure statutory policy reflects an understanding of services' obligations to women with NRPF and how those should be met. Both of these interventions target the root causes of the destitution, homelessness and exploitation faced by many women experiencing NRPF and domestic abuse by ensuring that they can access support to meet their basic needs. While partners also recognise that an unjust immigration system that designates some dependent partners as having NRPF is a root cause of the vulnerability experienced by the women they work with, systems mapping supported them to identify how they can meaningfully change this system without being overwhelmed by the scale of influence required for abolition of the NRPF designation.

The Compass Project is also tackling the root causes of economic abuse by ensuring that support systems can prevent it, identify it and respond to it appropriately. Understanding that ineffective responses to economic abuse were

rooted in a lack of recognition of it as abuse, the Compass Project worked to shift the narrative around economic abuse. Through engaging local services in training, platforming evidence around economic abuse and ensuring it is explicitly referenced in policy, the project has created visibility around economic abuse that is supporting it to become mainstreamed in responses to domestic abuse.

For Transform Leicestershire, the network recognises that the marginalisation experienced by racially minoritised women is driven by racism that also leads to partner organisations' marginalisation from access to funding and policy-making. The network's response to this is to build local support systems for racially minoritised women that mean they no longer have to rely on systems that fail them, such as plans to develop a women-led housing project.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: Devoting themselves to developing interventions that tackle the root causes of issues is one of the main ways that networks are working systemically. It has ensured that WoW, the Birmingham NRPF Network, Transform Leicester and the Compass Project have focused on activities that will bring lasting change. This has supported the networks to progress changes in policy and practice detailed below.

Influencing policy and practice

As part of their work identifying and targeting the root causes of gendered poverty, the networks have worked to influence wider policy and practice. Shifts in policy and practice can also be systemic through creating lasting infrastructure for new ways of working and shifting attitudes and narratives that cause harm.

Influencing policy and commissioning

Networks are actively working to change local, regional, and national policies that perpetuate or overlook gendered poverty.

At a national level, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has driven a change in policy that expanded eligibility for the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC)⁶. Working with a case that emerged in the network, the Central England Law Centre (CELC) used strategic litigation to bring a case against the Home Office, which led to an amendment to immigration rules in March 2024 to

⁶ An MVDAC or Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession enables certain people whose migration status is dependent on their partner to access to public funds if they are experiencing domestic abuse from that partner. More information on those who are eligible for an MVDAC is available [here](#).

include victims whose partners have pre-settled status in the MVDAC scheme. The network plans to continue pursuing strategic litigation to broaden access to the MVDAC, aiming to ensure it is accessible to all with NRPF.

Locally, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has also influenced statutory policy. Through engagement with MP Jess Phillips, ongoing presentations at local domestic abuse forums and participation in consultations, the network drove the inclusion of considerations around NRPF in Birmingham City Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy. The networks' growing influence has also resulted in NRPF being identified as a priority issue in Birmingham City Council's recent vulnerable adults contract tender.

Similarly, the Compass Project's engagement with statutory agencies has resulted in Brighton and Hove City Council naming economic abuse as a strategic priority within their VAWG strategy, which has the potential to lead to considerations around economic abuse being incorporated in the commissioning of domestic abuse services. Brighton and Hove City Council has also committed to monitoring economic abuse and supporting frontline practitioners to respond to it.

Transforming Together is influencing policy change through engaging those who control commissioning and policy directly in the network. The commissioning subgroup has brought together voluntary sector agencies, women with lived experience, local authority domestic abuse commissioners and local Police and Crime Commissioners to co-design commissioning principles that can deliver effective services for women experiencing multiple and unmet needs. This approach ensures ownership and buy-in from those who can embed new commissioning principles across the system. The network has also secured endorsement from North East Mayor Kim McGuinness for a dedicated task force focused on women facing multiple and unmet needs, positioning itself in the room with those necessary to influence regional policy.

In Wythenshawe, the Housing Action Group contributed to the city-wide Social Homes for Manchester campaign. This campaign has driven major policy change, with Manchester City Council passing a motion in July 2025 that has increased affordable housing targets in the city to 30% of all new housing, of which 70% must be for social rent, relative to the previous target of 5% affordable housing. WoW Leaders also established the Wythenshawe Central Network (WCN) to influence planning and housing development in Wythenshawe Central. With the support of local Councillors, WCN has successfully pushed the developer and lead housing association to explore a new Community Land Trust model as part of the redevelopment process.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: Shifts in policy and commissioning are powerful ways to create the infrastructure that can sustain different ways of working across the system. Through intentionally targeting public policy and commissioning, networks are supporting changes that will impact the practice of agencies beyond their work and embed different practice over time.

Shifting frontline practice

Networks also aim to shift frontline practice in statutory and public services, leveraging evidence of how frontline services are failing to meet their duties to advocate for change.

Through sharing evidence in statutory forums, networks are demonstrating how services are failing to meet their obligations to vulnerable women and influencing change. For example, the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has used frontline evidence to highlight misapplications of policy in public service delivery, including Children's Services neglecting their duties to safeguard children in need, homelessness providers overlooking the need to assess women with NRPF who experience domestic abuse and the Job Centre's misapplication of the Habitual Residency Test⁷ to women with an MVDAC. Using frontline evidence on statutory forums to highlight where statutory services are failing to meet their duties has led to commitments to shifts in practice and supported some of the policy changes described above.

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has found that taking a frontline advocacy approach is the most effective way to ensure that women with NRPF receive the support they are entitled to from statutory services, which often have a limited understanding of their obligations to women with NRPF experiencing domestic abuse. This work involves caseworkers going alongside a woman with NRPF to advocate for her right to access statutory services. It also involves legal advocacy, through writing letters, gathering evidence, and providing legal representation in court.

Similarly, at CWP staff frequently engage in direct advocacy on behalf of individual women to compel statutory services to fulfil their duties. This includes accompanying women in meetings with the DWP, police, and children's services.

⁷ This aims to ensure that anyone claiming benefits is habitually resident in the UK. Those with an MVDAC are exempt from the Habitual Residency Test. See more here <https://www.housing-rights.info/habitual-residence-test.php>

Partners report that this work holds statutory services to account for the services they have a duty to provide, leading to tangible improvements in women's experiences.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: The networks' advocacy work is practically improving women's experiences of the system and supporting shifts in policy and attitudes that enable lasting change. However, where this advocacy remains solely at a frontline level without driving policy change it is unlikely to support systemic change, but be a continuation of what partners describe as an ongoing battle with statutory services to ensure they are meeting their obligations.

Shifting attitudes and narratives

Through education, awareness raising and campaigning the networks are intentionally shifting attitudes and narratives locally. This shift is a crucial step in unravelling the mental models that uphold harmful systems, addressing the root causes of gendered poverty and enabling systemic change.

WoW's approach to women-led action is shifting the erasure of the voices and experiences of women experiencing multiple disadvantage by showing local power-holders that they have to listen to them. Through documentary making and direct presentations WoW leaders are sharing their experiences with local politicians. Framing demands for change as requests from their constituents, alongside pursuing grassroots mobilisation to build that group of active constituents, have made it impossible for politicians to ignore women's voices.

Similarly, through cross-sector engagement, buy-in from political leaders and compelling evidence that centres stories of lived experience, Transforming Together has been able to build a regional narrative around the need to ensure services better support of women with multiple and unmet needs.

In Birmingham, partners reflected that bringing a group of respected organisations together to speak with a collective voice has raised awareness around the experiences of women experiencing domestic abuse and NRPF, and made statutory services more receptive to their input. This represents a shift from previous experiences where partners shared that it was "impossible to find an audience" for conversations relating to NRPF. This mirrors some of Transform Leicestershire's experiences, which have been shaped by a realisation that statutory services are not interested in long-term meaningful engagement with the experiences of racially minoritised women, which include NRPF. Despite low

expectations, Zinithiya Trust similarly continues to attend statutory forums to speak up about the experiences of racially minoritised women, recognising that continually bringing this to the agenda can support attitude change.

The Compass Project has intentionally worked to shift narratives and framing around economic abuse as a means to drive changes in attitudes, practice and policy. Despite economic abuse being legally recognised in the Domestic Abuse Act since 2021, SEA's research found that neither the language nor practice had filtered into local services. In response, the Compass Project both mainstreamed this language through its training and engagement in local domestic abuse forums and shared tools to support services to identify and respond to economic abuse. Its work has supported local services to identify how they are already working around economic abuse and recognise their roles in intentionally tackling it.

How is this laying the foundations for systemic change: The networks' efforts to shift attitudes and narratives are a critical element of their systemic practice. These shifts both make the system more receptive to policy change and drive changes in practice where there is a lag between the rights women have access to on paper are how they are granted in practice. While lasting infrastructure (including policy, capacity and funding) are needed to sustain shifts in attitudes, without these shifts, new infrastructure is unlikely to bring systemic change.

Building capacity to shift practice

The networks have used capacity building as part of their systemic practice to raise awareness, change attitudes and embed values, alongside developing practical skills.

Through the Compass Project, training on economic abuse was delivered to a wide range of local agencies across the voluntary, statutory, and private sectors, including the DWP, Brighton Housing Trust, multiple teams in Brighton and Hove City Council, public health staff, and local financial bodies. This training led to improvements in services' responses, such as the Hove Job Centre embedding domestic abuse champions and increasing staff awareness of economic abuse and RISE increasing its ability to identify and address economic abuse systematically through adopting the economic abuse screening tool. It also integrated local financial institutions, including banks, credit unions, and insurers, into the local coordinated community response (CCR) to domestic abuse, by ensuring statutory and voluntary services understand how to work with these institutions to tackle economic abuse.

Partners in Coventry and Birmingham also deliver training sessions to external stakeholders, including the frontline staff at the police, DWP, and Children's Services, as a mechanism to influence improvements in their practice. This has included training on trauma-informed practice, culturally-sensitive responses to domestic abuse and immigration routes. Partners have shared that while responses within training sessions are positive, attendance is often low and the impact on practice is often short-lived in the absence of senior-level commitment.

How is this laying the foundations for systems change: Delivering training and capacity building has enabled some networks to shift attitudes, narratives and practices. This has been particularly impactful in the Compass Project, where capacity building has led to a shift in narrative and connected services across the system, resulting in local policy change. However, mixed experiences with this approach indicate that it must be combined with senior-level influencing to lead to the changes in policies and narratives that will sustain changes in practice.

6. Pathways to systems change

Working towards systems change is a non-linear process, with the pace and direction of change being shaped by external shifts in narratives, infrastructure policy and funding as much as they are driven by the efforts of any actor leading systems change. These external shifts can be driven by national or global forces that make them challenging for local organisations to resist. For example, while networks have been working towards systems change over the past three years, we have also seen the emergence of the cost-of-living crisis and an increasingly hostile national narrative around migration, which have both pushed against the direction of change many networks are aiming towards.

Focusing primarily on place-based systems change, at Renaisi we have generally found that it can take 3-5 years of systemic practice to begin to see significant evidence of local systems change⁸. With that context, our assessment of the networks' progress in systems change has primarily focused on identifying how they have built the foundations for systemic change and begun to practice systemic working, rather than looking for evidence of systems change itself.

⁸ This is set out in Renaisi's model for place-based systems change evaluation, visualised earlier in the report. Please read more about this here <https://Renaisi.com/2023/11/01/solution-place-based-systems-change-evaluation/>

Different pathways to systems change

Assessing the progress that each network has made in developing systemic practice, it is clear that each network is taking a different pathway to systemic change. The table below sets out the distinct pathways taken by each network and where it is on its journey

The network	Assessment of progress	Main impacts on the system
Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network	The network has used a combination of integrated service delivery, local influencing and national advocacy to build a better system for women with NRPF who experience domestic abuse while also working to shift the wider system it operates in. The network has progressed through place and systems working, with its work reflecting intentional efforts around all the indicators for systemic practice. It has led to policy changes that will sustain impact beyond its work. However, given the importance of service delivery to its model and its focus on NRPF, significant ongoing philanthropic funding will be critical to enable this to continue to drive systems change. Strengthening efforts to embed the voices of those with lived experience in their influencing work will deepen systemic practice, with this element of their work currently at an early stage. Alongside shifting power and building a deeper understanding of how women with NRPF experience the system, this work could support the networks' shift attitudes and narratives around migration.	The network has achieved notable policy change through strategic litigation against the Home Office. This resulted in an amendment to immigration rules in March 2024, expanding eligibility for the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Commission (MVDAC) scheme to include partners with pre-settled status. The network is also influencing local policy development through putting NRPF on the agenda in local forums and ensuring considerations around NRPF are identified in commissioning and policy around domestic abuse. This is bringing a previously overlooked and ignored issue into mainstream conversation, shifting statutory services' perception that considerations around NRPF were not their purview.

Women of Wythenshawe (WoW)	WoW has developed women-led action to catalyse campaigns, advocacy and training collectives that will improve local services for women. Its approach reflects intentional efforts towards all the indicators of systemic practice, demonstrating that it has progressed through much of place and systems working. However, WoW's systemic practice has been largely driven through the efforts of the Housing Action Group, which has proven its capacity to drive changes in policy, relationships and attitudes. As activity progresses in the SEND and Domestic Abuse Action Groups, these plans should be continually tested and adapted to ensure they are enabling change. While WoW has built the capacity of Leaders to drive and sustain activities, at this stage, it will still require ongoing coordination capacity to progress activities and connect WoW leaders to local services and policymakers. As Leaders' capacity and relationships grow, this model could become a self-sustaining force for systems change.	WoW has fundamentally changed local decision-making by building a woman-led poverty action network that is influencing local policy and practice. This has built a belief in potential for community leadership to drive change that has been reflected by local women, organisations and political leaders. It is also shifting local services and political leaders' understanding of the issues experienced by women caring for children with SEND, women experiencing domestic abuse, and women facing housing insecurity. WoW's Housing Action Group, through the city-wide Social Homes for Manchester campaign, contributed to a major policy shift in Manchester. In July 2025, a motion was passed to increase affordable housing targets in new developments to 30%, with 70% of that being for social rent, equating to 21% social housing in new developments of 10 homes or more. This represents a significant shift from the previous target of 5% affordable housing. The network's role in building the Wythenshawe Central Network (WCN), which unites local people and organisations to influence planning and housing development, has ensured that community leadership in the area continues to grow.
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The Compass Project	The project is using capacity building and reframing to embed responses to economic abuse into existing domestic abuse support systems. The project has taken a focused approach to improving support systems, which has reflected most of the indicators for systemic practice. However, it has not built systemic collaboration and has not engaged deeply in shifting the voices that shape decision-making. This does not reflect a fault in their approach but the nature of their ambitions. The project is working systemically to embed improvements across the system, which are significantly improving the lives of women experiencing economic abuse in Brighton and Hove, and will have a lasting impact. It has not aimed at developing a coalition that can shift power, unravel current systems and rebuild them. To deepen its approach the project could engage more deeply with the coordinated community response to domestic abuse, building partnerships that engage the private sector more deeply in a collective duty to prevent abuse.	The Compass Project is shifting the narrative around economic abuse by integrating it into mainstream policy and practice around domestic abuse. Through delivering training, it has improved the capacity across statutory, voluntary, and private sectors to identify and respond to economic abuse. The project has influenced local policy, leading to the recognition of economic abuse as a strategic priority in Brighton & Hove's Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy. This opens the way for economic abuse considerations to be incorporated into the commissioning of domestic abuse services.
Transforming Together	Transforming Together is using network building and co-production to influence improvements in public service delivery that more effectively support women with multiple and unmet needs. This approach has been systemic in its focus on shifting policy, funding,	The network has built a collective recognition of the need to transform services to improve support for women with multiple and unmet needs, which sits across voluntary sector services, statutory services, commissioners and political leaders. It is

	infrastructure and narratives. Through its engagement with key regional power-holders, it has the potential to lead to sustained change in these areas that will improve regional service delivery. However, the network has yet to drive lasting shifts in decision-making that will respond to the root causes of vulnerable women's experiences being overlooked in policymaking and service design.	challenging the traditional hierarchies in policy-making by bringing policy-makers and commissioners together with grassroots organisations, women with lived experience, to develop plans for change. The network has co-produced a new set of commissioning principles to deliver services that effectively support women with multiple and unmet needs.
Coventry Women's Partnership (CWP)	CWP has developed an established model for integrated service delivery that provides a better system of support for vulnerable women in Coventry. The partnership has not explicitly aimed at systems change throughout its work to date. However, it has developed systemic practice through developing a deep understanding of the system and deep-rooted, relational collaboration. Going forward, the partnership plans to leverage these strengths while developing its influencing and coproduction approaches to shift towards an intentional focus on system change. CWP's systems change work will aim to ensure vulnerable women can access housing that supports them to thrive.	CWP's model accounts for a significant part of the local support system and represents a systemic improvement in service delivery for hundreds of women. It has worked continually to raise awareness about the gendered impact of policy and advocate for specialist women-only services through training and presentations on statutory forums. Its efforts have led to improvements in how frontline services respond to women, reflecting a deeper understanding of intersecting vulnerabilities.
Transform Leicestershire	The network's approach has focused on capacity building to strengthen grassroots organisations led by racially minoritised women and tackle racial inequity. Its approach reflects intentional work towards all the indicators of	Transform Leicestershire is building the capacity and resilience of grassroots organisations led by racially minoritised women to create stronger systems of support that do not have to rely on

	systemic practice. Leaning on lived experience and a deep understanding of the system, the network has developed plans that target the root causes of systemic issues. However, these plans are at early stages, so the network will need to continue to test and adapt work to ensure it can drive the creation of the shared infrastructure that will sustain systems of support for racially minoritised women. Despite efforts, the network has struggled with a lack of meaningful engagement from local stakeholders, including the police and the Local Authority. This reflects systemic racism that the network was established to target, but equally puts the network's sustainability at risk without continued investment from philanthropic partners.	mainstream systems that marginalise their needs. It is actively working to develop shared infrastructure and assets that will support a sustainable, joined-up collective of grassroots organisations to provide coordinated support.
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While not all of the networks have aimed at systems change, all networks are pursuing work that engages in systemic practice. This includes a range of approaches that combine influencing policy change, reframing narratives, mobilising communities and shifting practice to create better systems of support for women.

As a result of this work, some networks have created lasting changes in policy, attitudes and capacity that will sustain their impact. However, for many, sustaining impact will require continued funding to progress delivery and continue influencing the shifts in infrastructure, narratives and policy that will embed lasting change.

7. Learning about funding practice

This programme aimed to not only support networks to learn about how to target the root causes of gendered poverty, but also to support Smallwood Trust to learn about how to effectively support network building and systemic approaches to gendered poverty. The following section summarises network partners' reflections

on the support that they accessed through this programme, gained via interviews with Renaisi from June 2025 to August 2025.

Providing funding

All network partners valued the funding received through the programme, sharing that it enabled them to progress new work that otherwise would not have taken place. Partners also highlighted valuing Smallwood Trust's flexibility in allowing them to pivot the project budget to account for changes in where capacity was needed, emerging opportunities and decisions that emerged through coproduction. For example, this flexibility allowed the Birmingham NRFP Women's Support Network and WoW to develop approaches to compensation and training for women with lived experience in line with the preferences of women, rather than being restricted to preset plans. It also allowed some networks to increase their budget for coordination, where this required more staff capacity than initially anticipated.

*"I always appreciate that we had the flexibility to explore and respond to the community what they asked of us."
Interview with network partner, June 2025*

However, alongside this, a partner flagged that while Smallwood Trust had been accommodating to changes in budget throughout the work, the initial application felt prescriptive around budget. This partner highlighted that its design of the network had been influenced by a need to hit a £500,000 budget for funding, which led it to bring on more partners than needed.

Supportive and engaged relationships

Partners feel overwhelmingly positive about the relationship they have developed with Smallwood, which for many has been shaped by an ongoing relationship that predates this funding. They shared that the relationship had felt supportive, open, respectful and kind. Reporting requirements and processes felt proportionate, with reasonable targets that were set collaboratively.

*"I find them small enough that you can talk to them. It's like they're real people. So once you make that connection, they're a really nice funder"
Interview with network partner, June 2025*

Network partners also valued Smallwood Trust's active interest in their work and the expertise it brings as a funder specialising in gendered poverty. Multiple partners shared that they benefited from the advice of programme managers that bring expertise in gendered poverty. Others also highlighted that they appreciated

Smallwood's interest in going on a learning process with them and being involved in supporting their influencing work, as a partner alongside a funder.

"They've come to network meetings, and they want to be part of learning. They want to engage - you don't often see that from people they are part of the process of making this change"
Interview with network partner, June 2025

Approaching systems change

Throughout the work, Smallwood Trust has been open about its interest in a systems change approach to gendered poverty. However, only the networks in Birmingham and Wythenshawe were funded to take a systems change approach. Across all the networks, there are a range of perspectives on how Smallwood Trust has approached systems change in its funding.

A number of partners raised a concern around how an increasing focus on systems might be at the expense of funding for critical frontline services. Partners noted that continuing to fund frontline services will be important to both meet immediate needs and to connect to those with lived experience.

If you don't have the frontline input..., then you're not getting the voices of survivors. and that's what should be at the centre of any sort of work with survivors.
Interview with network partner, July 2025

Partners also had a mixed experience with the process of reapplying for funding, which revealed different perspectives on Smallwood Trust's approach to funding systems change. While some felt that they were not given enough information on the timelines and processes for applying for further funding to be able to sufficiently plan for it, others shared that it felt supportive, collaborative and transparent.

They've been very supportive, supportive around the bid writing process – very open to offering support and advice. Feedback is always really concise, they're very transparent in what they want from us as a network and how we need to achieve that"
Interview with network partner, July 2025

Some partners shared that they only felt clear on Smallwood Trust's ambitions for systems change when receiving feedback on their funding application. They felt this should have been communicated earlier to enable them to proactively develop plans for this, rather than having to adapt them in response to feedback.

Ultimately, despite this, partners reflected positively on Smallwood Trust's role in supporting them to approach system change. Through providing challenge, critique

and advice, Smallwood Trust had supported them to refine their approaches and build a strategic focus on systemic goals.

Capacity and learning support

Alongside funding, Smallwood Trust offered funded networks in Wythenshawe, Birmingham and Coventry capacity building and learning support through workshops with the New Economics Foundation (NEF), the Women's Budget Group (WBG) and an ongoing learning partnership with Renaisi. The NEF and WBG offers were only taken up by the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network, who did not reflect on these in interviews, potentially because they were delivered at early stages of work. As such, reflections pertain to Renaisi's learning partner role.

Partners across both WoW and the Birmingham NRFP Women's Support Network highlighted the value of systems mapping activities and learning and evaluation support. For WoW, systems mapping workshops were referenced as supporting WoW Leaders to understand systems change, develop actions and priorities. In Birmingham, the systems mapping, Theory of Change development and regular learning workshops facilitated by Renaisi were highlighted as having a critical role in building alignment around shared goals for system change, maintaining focus on these goals and building a practice of open reflection and learning.

Partners in Transforming Together and the Compass Project, who had a significantly reduced learning partner offer, highlighted that it had been valuable to lean on Renaisi's expertise in network building at the early stages of their work.

*"We were given consultancy advice very early on from Renaisi about how to work in an equitable way with by-and-for-organisations and they suggested remuneration."
Interview with network partner, July 2025*

However, there were a range of experiences with the learning partner offer, which were shaped by the extent to which there was ongoing regular engagement. A partner reflected that the value of the learning partner offer was conditional on having a dedicated individual who was able to go alongside the network in activities, building relationships and a deep understanding of its work. They reflected that ongoing engagement from one individual had enabled the learning partnership to be more useful than anticipated, but highlighted that dedicating more of the learning partner's time to join regular network activities, rather than solely delivering activities, would have made the offer more valuable. Another partner suggested that greater clarity about Renaisi's offer and how they should engage with it at the beginning of the work would have supported it to be more impactful.

“I think what Renaissi was offering has been really helpful but I feel like maybe we could have made better use of that somehow... there was this open door sort of offer, but it might have been helpful know a bit more like what is that and where does it come and what's the expectation, how does it feed into our learning reports and so on”

Interview with network partner, August 2025

Cross-network learning

Throughout the programme, Renaissi and Smallwood Trust facilitated bi-yearly Learning Network events to bring together partners from across the six funded networks. These events were reflected on very positively by partners in the more recently established networks, who shared that events supported them to understand that there are many ways of approaching systems change and to learn from what works in other places. These partners shared that they would have liked more opportunities to learn from other networks through creating spaces for one-to-one conversations and sharing reporting.

“Bringing us all together was dead helpful because I made connections with a few people and we were able to share best practice – like that was brilliant and I would love to see more ”

Interview with network partner, August 2025

However, for the networks in Birmingham, Coventry and Wythenshawe, highlighted that while Learning Network events were valuable at early stages of the work, these became less useful as networks developed distinct approaches to change

Summary: Learning about funding practice

- Continue to encourage flexible use of budgets that responds to changing needs and encourage applicants to build this assumption into their application rather than being guided by the amount available.
- Engage in ongoing dialogue to build alignment in understanding of system change and ensure clarity around requirements for future funding.
- Ensure learning partners have the capacity to devote significant time at early stages of work to developing an embeddedness in the network and communicate a clear, tailored offer.
- Going forward, if Smallwood Trust funds a new cohort of networks it will be valuable for those networks to have facilitated bi-lateral meetings with more established networks to learn from their practice. This must recognise that the more established partner is likely to gain less from this interaction and potentially explore compensation,

8. Conclusion

Recommendations: A place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty

Analysis of the journeys of the six place-based systems change networks funded by Smallwood Trust surfaces insights for how to build a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty. The following recommendations summarise the key learning from across the networks:

Improving support for women experiencing gendered poverty

- **Multi-agency, integrated service delivery:** Develop models that provide specialist, holistic support that addresses women's intersecting needs through the creation of referral pathways and data sharing protocols. Co-location of services can also allow women to access a wide range of support in one location.
- **Reduce isolation:** Develop peer support groups and community based activities to support women with lived experience of marginalisation and poverty to connect with others in their community, reducing isolation and supporting wellbeing.
- **Equip services to provide holistic and trauma-informed support:** Train staff in critical issues that intersect with gendered poverty, including immigration law, trauma-informed practice, domestic violence, and economic abuse.
- **Provide specialist legal and advocacy support:** Caseworkers should actively advocate for women's rights and entitlements by accompanying them in meetings with statutory services to ensure services meet their duties. This should include ensuring women can access specialist legal advocacy where needed.
- **Centre lived experience in service design:** Create dedicated structures to ensure where women with lived experience of poverty and systemic harm can input on service delivery, development, and improvement.
- **Build the financial resilience and agency of women:** Provide women with practical tools and support to build their financial resilience, address debt, and stabilise their housing and employment. Support should increase women's sense of control over their lives, empowering them to pursue their own goals.

Building networks to tackle gendered poverty

- **Establishing shared processes and infrastructure:** Establish shared infrastructure, including written agreements, regular meetings and referral processes, to formalise collaboration across partners. Dedicated coordination capacity and shared processes that support new ways of working support the sustainability of collaboration.

- **Building deep relationships:** Dedicate time to building deep, trusting, and empathetic relationships among staff across partner organisations. These relationships, built through regular meetings and shared learning, are the foundation for successful, relational referral processes.
- **Aligning values and ambitions:** Use collective planning processes (such as Systems Mapping or Theory of Change development) to define shared values, goals, and thematic priorities for change. Joint inter-agency training can strengthen alignment through ensuring all staff adopt a consistent, gender-sensitive, holistic, and trauma-informed approach when working with women.

Collaborating with women with lived experience of poverty

- **Creating structures for lived experience to guide activities:** Implement dedicated, formalised structures to ensure women with direct experience of gendered poverty and systemic harm are structurally embedded in the work. These structures should be empowered to direct network plans, set priorities, and contribute to service design and policy advocacy.
- **Supporting those with lived experience to lead change:** Actively invest in the skills, capacity, and confidence of women with lived experience through training (e.g., community reporting, digital skills, legal rights, financial management) to prepare them for leadership, advocacy, and service delivery roles. This capacity building can enable long-term power shifts.

Building a deeper understanding of the system

- **Developing evidence of systemic issues:** Generate rich evidence about system failures by deliberately leveraging frontline insights and the perspectives of those with lived experience alongside quantitative data. This evidence can be used to build a robust case for women-centred services and policy change.
- **Targeting root causes:** Collectively identify key intervention points that target the root causes of gendered poverty rather than just addressing symptoms. This approach, which is supported by participatory systems mapping, ensures activities are strategically focused on creating lasting change.

Influencing wider policy and practice

- **Influencing policy and commissioning:** Advocate for the inclusion of specific considerations relating to gendered poverty, such as support for women experiencing economic abuse, NRPF or homelessness, to influence statutory policy documents and commissioning guidance, which can shift local policy and practice. Strategic litigation is another effective tool to expand access to rights in national policy.
- **Shifting frontline practice:** Use evidence of how statutory services are failing to meet their obligations to vulnerable women to compel shifts in frontline practice.

This is achieved through direct frontline advocacy and consistently sharing evidence of policy misapplication in public forums.

- **Shifting attitudes and narratives:** Intentionally challenge and shift the attitudes and narratives that perpetuate harmful systems and marginalisation. This can be achieved by platforming women's lived experiences, to ensure their voices cannot be ignored, and engaging coalition of organisations to collectively mainstream new narratives into local policy dialogue.
- **Building capacity to shift practice:** Deliver targeted training and capacity building across voluntary, statutory, and private sectors to raise awareness of specific issues, shift narratives and embed values-driven ways of working (e.g. gender and cultural sensitivity, trauma-informed practice etc.) and practical skills.

Next steps

Smallwood Trust initiated this programme by funding six distinct networks working across different neighbourhoods, cities and regions in England, to collaboratively test and generate evidence on how to tackle the root causes of gendered poverty. The six funded networks are operating at different scales and have distinct approaches, shaped by variations in funding, local needs and partner expertise.

The networks have delivered significant positive impacts for the individuals involved. Joint services have helped women avoid destitution, homelessness, exploitation, and abuse, while expanding access to essential rights and services. Through service delivery, collective action, and co-production, women have reported increased confidence, agency, and wellbeing, and gained new skills and leadership capacities that support their career ambitions. Furthermore, staff at partner organisations have benefited from joint service delivery, inter-agency communication, and training, leading to greater confidence in responding effectively to a wider range of women's complex needs.

All networks are actively engaging in systemic practice by progressing through the stages of place and systems working set out in Renaisi's model for the place-based systems change journey. They are building collaborative infrastructure, shifting power to women with lived experience, developing evidence to target the root causes of issues, and influencing policy, commissioning, and harmful attitudes. While this systemic practice is having significant impacts, continued investment is needed to embed new ways of working and mental models, and to build sustainability that will ensure impact lasts beyond current funding timelines.



Get in touch

Find out more at renaisi.com

Follow us on LinkedIn and get in touch at info@renaisi.com