



# **A place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty**

**Evidence from Women of Wythenshawe**

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# 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.

The fund aims are to:

- 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.

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

This report is part of a series of reports reporting on the journey of each place-based network that Smallwood Trust has funded, alongside three learning networks funded through the Gendered Poverty Learning programme. It focuses on the Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) network.

## Methodology

This report has been developed drawing on the following data inputs:

- Online and asynchronous interviews with Women of Wythenshawe staff and partners from carried out across June to August 2025
- Observational data collected by Renaisi throughout our interactions with the network during the course of our learning partnership (2022-2025)
- WoW's monitoring reports to Smallwood Trust
- CLASS's Evaluation Reports from 2024 and 2025

Throughout the report, we set out WoW's perspectives on their achievements and journey in place-based systems change that emerged in the recent interviews, alongside our own analysis and assessment of their progress.

# Part 1: Women of Wythenshawe's Story

## About the network

Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) is a network of women working together to take action on gendered poverty in Wythenshawe. Its approach is focused on building the confidence and skills of women experiencing multiple disadvantage to support them to co-produce, advocate for and take action on their ambitions for systems change in the local area.

The network brings together nine<sup>1</sup> local women's groups:

| WoW members                                                                                                                                                                              | Supported by:                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Women leaders from <b>Better Things</b> : an informal service user/ambassadors group focused on peer support and awareness raising for/with people with learning disabilities and autism | <b>Better Things</b>                       |
| Committee members of <b>Bright Futures Friends</b> : a newly constituted women's group focused on peer support for SEND children and parents                                             | <b>Woodhouse Park Family Centre/WCI</b>    |
| Committee members of <b>Dandelion Savers</b> : a newly constituted women-led Community Savers affiliate focused on peer support and poverty action                                       | <b>The Dandelion Community &amp; CLASS</b> |
| Women leaders & volunteers from <b>Know Africa</b> : an informal women's group focused on peer support, signposting, & cultural awareness                                                | <b>Know Africa</b>                         |
| Women leaders & volunteers from <b>Lifted Carers</b> : an informal group focused on peer support, information, signposting and advocacy for/with Carers                                  | <b>Lifted Carers Centre</b>                |
| Committee members of <b>Mums Mart</b> : a local women's group est. 2014 focused on peer support and poverty action                                                                       | <b>CLASS</b>                               |
| Women leaders from <b>SEND Together</b> : an informal group linked to a weekly drop-in focused on peer support, information and signposting for parents of children with SEND            | <b>Caritas Shrewsbury</b>                  |
| Women leaders from the <b>Well Women</b> project: an informal group linked to a weekly drop-in focused on peer support,                                                                  | <b>Caritas Shrewsbury</b>                  |

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<sup>1</sup> When WoW first came together in 2022, it included two further groups, FreshStart Smart and Olive Pathway. These groups left the WoW network on amicable terms in 2023 due to a lack of capacity to engage with the work.

|                                                                                                                                                          |              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| healthy eating and arts and crafts with/for women<br>refugees/women seeking asylum and their children                                                    |              |
| <b>Wythenshawe Women's Welfare Association:</b> a newly constituted women's group focused on healthy relationships; health & wellbeing; and peer support | <b>CLASS</b> |

WoW is coordinated by Community Led Action and Savings Support (CLASS) whose work focuses on supporting, developing and facilitating women-led community and co-production processes focused on poverty reduction, primarily through its Community Savers network.

## Their journey so far

### Background

Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) was convened by CLASS in 2022 following intensive conversations across women's groups and organisations in the local area. In partnership with Mum's Mart, a Wythenshawe-based women's group that is part of the Community Savers network CLASS supports, and the Wythenshawe Housing Group, CLASS was able to engage with a huge range of women's organisations in the area to understand interest in developing a women-led poverty action network and bring together a group of partner agencies to apply for funding from Smallwood Trust. The network was established to bring together women accessing services and participating in the groups these agencies supported, referred to as WoW Leaders, to develop shared plans to tackle women's poverty in Wythenshawe.

In its first year, WoW brought Leaders into conversation with each other through facilitating visits across the network and convening network meetings. This dialogue aimed to foster relationships across the network, build a collective understanding of the issues driving women's poverty and identify shared priorities. As a result of this process, WoW Leaders formed three action groups around housing, domestic abuse and the experiences of mothers with children who have special educational needs or difficulties (SEND). From here, each action group developed its own goals and plans to drive systems change for women in Wythenshawe.

### The network's goals

At its inception, CLASS and partner agencies aimed for WoW to support women experiencing multiple disadvantage to develop skills, confidence and relationships required to participate in and benefit from a women-led poverty action network in Wythenshawe. Beyond this, initial goals were for the network of women to identify realisable priorities for action on gendered poverty in Wythenshawe and achieve two significant policy or systems change outcomes within those priorities.

Following the identification of housing, domestic abuse and the experiences of mothers with children who have special educational needs or difficulties (SEND) as priority issues for WoW Leaders, the Housing, Domestic Abuse and SEND Action Groups were formed. With the support of Renaisi, each Action Group then engaged in a systems mapping workshop to deepen their understanding of the system around their priority issue and identify potential areas where they could intervene to drive change. Over time, the three workstreams became well established, each with its own distinct goals and priorities, while remaining connected under the shared vision of tackling gendered poverty.

The goals for each Action Group evolved and adapted throughout their work in response to emerging opportunities and capacity. A summary of these goals, articulated by a partner agency in September 2025, is detailed below:

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SEND Action Group</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To increase SEND mums' understanding of their own and their children's legal rights within the local government and education system.</li> <li>• To increase understanding among Wythenshawe primary school teaching and senior leadership teams about their own and their children's legal rights within the SEND system and the ways in which schools can improve children's access to provision and support by making use of legal rights and processes</li> <li>• To increase the financial resilience of the SEND team households themselves by training them up to be able to deliver paid training opportunities and outdoor learning/children's holiday clubs for SEND children as part of a new women-led social enterprise.</li> </ul>                                                          |
| <b>Housing Action Group</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To link up community campaigns on increased social housing across the city and use those relationships and those women-led initiatives to catalyse a city-wide campaign</li> <li>• To achieve a higher level of social housing in Wythenshawe and across the city by making it politically unviable for Labour to ignore the voices of women through community reporter documentary making, film screenings, social media, relationship building with 'progressive technical professionals' (academics, independent urban designers and planners, etc) and coalition building</li> <li>• To build a local coalition in Wythenshawe with the diversity and critical mass to push for the priorities of women, families and young people to be put at the heart of the Town Centre redevelopment</li> </ul> |

## Domestic Abuse Action Group

- To improve public sector understanding of different types of abuse beyond physical violence,
- To improve understanding of how abuse operates and is perceived within different cultural and religious systems and how to provide support that is culturally appropriate
- To improve understanding of the psychological and emotional impact of abuse and how any woman of any culture or religion will need to be supported after experiencing it
- To connect to women experiencing abuse with voices and stories of survival, helping them to know there can be light at the end of the tunnel.
- To build a sense of confidence, power, and influence among survivors through working collectively to tell their stories to improve understanding and influence change

## Activities and Achievements

This section describes the major achievements that partners highlighted when reflecting on the progress of Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) over the past three years of delivery, alongside detailing the activities that have driven these achievements.

### Building relationships across local women

As referenced above, WoW dedicated its first year of activity to the development of trusting relationships across WoW Leaders from local women's groups. Five months were spent on relationship-building before the first network meeting, with CLASS and Mum's Mart visiting all the women's groups individually and supporting women leaders to visit each other's groups. This early work created a familiarity and confidence in shared experiences and ambitions, which laid the foundation for open discussions at the first network meeting in March 2023.

Following this, the initial two network meetings focused on storytelling, creating space for each group of WoW Leaders to explain the experiences that brought them to their group. These conversations were often personal and emotive, with women opening up about their experiences of issues including poverty, abuse and racial discrimination. Dedicating time to this storytelling deepened all WoW Leaders' understanding of the range of challenges facing women in Wythenshawe. It built relationships of trust, care and solidarity across the group. This was supported by ensuring women could move at their own pace, connect in their own space, and have trusted support workers on hand for SEND and translation needs. The

relationships developed across WoW leaders in this first year of work provided the foundation for effective collaboration within Action Groups.

*“Leaders managed to build amazing relationships of trust, especially when they shared their personal life stories and journeys”*

*Partner, WoW’s Annual report, September 2023*

Relationship building across WoW leaders also supported connections between the services and groups they participate in. This has enabled the services and groups to reach more local women who could benefit from their support and connect women they work with to other groups which align with their experiences.

*“Since we joined WoW, we had the chance to visit each other, hearing what projects each other are running. That made it easier for us to signpost to the people we support and vice versa”*

*Partner, Community Savers and CLASS Impact Report, June 2024*

## **Leadership from local women with lived experience**

WoW’s approach is rooted in building leadership among local women with lived experience of gendered poverty. From the outset, the network was designed to ensure women with lived experience would drive activities, rather than staff at partner agencies. The WoW Network meetings were developed as a space exclusively for women with lived experience, the WoW Leaders. This group has been a critical space for WoW Leaders to build relationships, discuss ideas independently of professionals and coproduce plans for local action against gendered poverty. WoW Leaders have full ownership over the decision-making process in the network, supported by advice, resources and funds that enable their participation.

*“A diverse network of women has identified realisable priorities for action and change on gendered poverty in Wythenshawe.”*

*Partner interview, August 2025*

Alongside this, WoW developed a Steering Group that supports leadership from WoW leaders. As the Steering Group brings together partner agencies that oversee WoW’s funding, there was a risk that this group could undermine the leadership of WoW leaders if decision-making was not fully transparent. To safeguard against this risk, CLASS facilitated the development of a member’s agreement, a set of principles and structure that ensured Steering Group membership included one support worker and one leader from each WoW member group. The member’s agreement established that the Steering Group holds accountability for overseeing finances and ensuring that WoW leaders are adequately supported to participate in

the network, but does not direct WoW's activities. Developing a decision-making structure that caters to both organisational needs for oversight of funding and leadership by those with lived experience has been a significant achievement.

Within each WoW Action Group, Leaders have both developed plans and driven action, ensuring that lived experience is leading change:

|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SEND Action Group</b>           | The Action Group comprises mothers with children who have SEND. These mothers identified gaps in knowledge of legal rights, based on those they battled with, and designed training and myth-busting content to address these gaps. A few mothers from the group also undertook "train the trainer" <b>training</b> on the legal rights of SEND children and families, via an advocacy organisation called SENTAS, which has equipped them to deliver this training to other mothers and schools. |
| <b>Housing Action Group</b>        | Women with lived experience of poverty, many of whom live in social housing, mobilised local people around the shortage of social housing to build campaigns that put pressure on local politicians to support policy change. This included using community reporter storytelling to create videos capturing women's lived experiences of the housing crisis.                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Domestic Abuse Action Group</b> | WoW leaders worked with a local domestic abuse charity called Safe Spots to co-produce training resources to highlight that abuse is not only physical, but also emotional and psychological, rooted in storytelling from their own lived experiences.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

## Building the skills and capacities of local women

In supporting WoW Leaders to develop and progress plans to shift women's poverty, WoW intentionally built the skills and capacities of local women experiencing multiple disadvantage. Through its coordination role, CLASS developed a confidence building programme in the first year of WoW. This included regular training for WoW Leaders in areas including digital skills, community reporting, financial management, food hygiene, and social media. Through WoW, some of the WoW Leaders' groups received coaching sessions from Flourish Together CIC to develop social enterprise ideas, including a training collective for mothers developed in the SEND Action Group.

Alongside formal training, the process of engaging in WoW required WoW Leaders to engage in dialogue with a diverse range of women, analyse their local system, develop realistic plans for change, communicate these to professionals and input on learning and evaluation processes. Being part of WoW built the confidence of all WoW Leaders, with many sharing in interviews that they feel more confident in

public speaking and leadership and have developed skills they believe will support them in future career goals.

*“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.”*

*Partner interview, August 2025*

*“I would like to say a massive thanks to WoW for giving us the opportunity to learn new skills that will help us grow and help us believe that we can make a difference, and to empower us to encourage and inspire others to do the same.”*

*Partner, Community Savers and Class Impact Report, June 2024*

In addition to the skills and confidence building that occurred at the network level, activities progressed in Action Groups built the capacity of WoW Leaders engaged:

|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
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| <b>SEND Action Group</b>           | <p>WoW Leaders developed skills and knowledge through SEND Law training, with many progressing to establish Bright Futures Friends, a women-led social enterprise that has now been commissioned three times by Manchester City Council to deliver holiday provision</p> <p>The Action Group has also developed a series of mythbusting and “how-to” videos for mothers with children who have SEND that inform them about their rights and those of their children and how to navigate critical points in the SEND process. These videos have the potential to build the capacity of other local women to advocate for themselves and their children.</p> |
| <b>Housing Action Group</b>        | <p>WoW Leaders gained campaigning skills and negotiation skills to engage directly with the council, developers, and housing associations. They also took on more public leadership roles, with one, Zoe Marlow, becoming a Green Party Councillor in 2025.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Domestic Abuse Action Group</b> | <p>WoW Leaders built confidence and influence through collective storytelling and filmmaking, supported by Safespots. They developed public speaking and media skills, equipping them to share experiences safely and influence services.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

## Influencing policy, practice and attitudes

WoW’s model for women-led action against poverty has created a shift in the attitudes and practices of local women in Wythenshawe. While some of the WoW

leaders have more experience participating in community action, for most, this has been a new practice that has grown their confidence and appetite to engage in community action. WoW Leaders have reflected that the network has supported them to believe in the power of collective action to drive change.

The internal shifts in practice and attitudes seen across WoW leaders are having ripple effects across Wythenshawe. Senior decision-makers at local public and voluntary sector agencies are now engaging with local women who are confidently advocating for changes in their policy and practice. Partners believe that engaging with WoW Leaders is driving these agencies to recognise the need to engage more with residents and those accessing services, alongside causing some discomfort with the shift in power away from professional expertise that WoW is modelling.

WoW's work to ensure that those with lived experience are shaping policy has had national as well as local reach. For example, in February 2024, WoW Leaders spoke at the APPG on Universal Credit and Gender to share evidence on how Universal Credit is shaping women's lives in their communities with MPs, national charities, funders and other grassroots leaders. This exchange allowed them to influence discussions on national policy-making, while also helping to build awareness of the potential for ways of working that shift power to those with lived experience in communities.

Alongside driving change in how local women and agencies perceive and engage with community action, WoW is driving practical changes in policy and practice through the three Action Groups. These changes are detailed below:

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
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| <b>SEND Action Group</b>    | The WoW Leaders have developed a training programme to teach local schools about the rights of parents and children within the SEND system and how schools can leverage these to improve children's access to support. While engagement was slowed due to the limited capacity of the coordinating partner for this group (Caritas), WoW Leaders have now begun engaging with schools. This has created new opportunities for workshops with teaching staff that have the potential to shift practice and attitudes.                                                           |
| <b>Housing Action Group</b> | The Housing Action Group supported the development of a city-wide Social Homes for Manchester campaign, calling for a policy change to include 30% social housing in new developments across Manchester. The work of this campaign has led to real policy change, seen in July 2025, as a motion was passed to increase affordable housing targets in the city to 30% of all new housing, of which 70% must be for social rent. While this is not the 30% social housing that the campaign called for, it equates to 21% social housing in any new developments of 10 homes or |

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|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                    | <p>above, which is a major shift from the previous target of 5% affordable housing.</p> <p>Alongside driving policy change, Social Homes for Manchester has shifted attitudes around social housing through using a combination of lived experience and quantitative data to highlight the scale of the housing shortage in Manchester and the impact it has on local people. This work, which included film screenings across Manchester City that showed a documentary featuring a WoW Leader's story about housing, has engaged local people to call for policy change and made it impossible for politicians to ignore.</p> <p>WoW leaders in the Housing Action Group also formed Wythenshawe Central Network (WCN) in July 2024 to bring together local people and organisations to influence planning and housing development in Wythenshawe Central. Within nine months of its constitution, WCN had developed a membership of 100 local residents and 20 local community and faith organisations.</p> <p>With the support of progressive urban design consultant and Churches Together Wythenshawe, WCN have been meeting with Manchester City Council to platform the local community's demands for local planning. The developer leading on the redevelopment of Wythenshawe Central's Civic Centre and Wythenshawe Community Housing Group have agreed to work with WCN to explore a new Community Land Trust model to be included as part of the housing developments within the redevelopment process.</p> |
| <b>Domestic Abuse Action Group</b> | <p>The new online training portal developed by the Action Group has now been launched, which features resources developed by survivors, has the potential to raise awareness among public sector staff of the full spectrum of abuse and its impacts.</p> <p>Wythenshawe Housing Group, which manages all the housing stock in Wythenshawe and delivers a range of associated services that support residents' livelihoods (e.g. debt, employability and benefits advice services), have committed to all staff undertaking training on domestic abuse. This has the potential to lead to a significant shift in attitudes and practice across one of the most prominent providers of public services in Wythenshawe.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

## Achievements: Summary

- **Building relationships across local women:** Strong, trusting relationships were built among WoW Leaders through dedicating the first year of activity to connection, mutual learning and storytelling.
- **Leadership from local women with lived experience:** The network was intentionally designed so that WoW Leaders would drive all activities and decision-making. Leaders developed and led action across three thematic groups, focused on domestic abuse, housing and support for mothers with SEND children, resulting in locally driven initiatives that reflect women's priorities and leadership.
- **Building the skills and capacities of local women:** CLASS implemented a confidence-building programme during the first year, offering regular training in areas such as community reporting, digital skills, and financial management.. Engaging in the network significantly boosted the confidence and expertise of WoW Leaders, leading to achievements such as the establishment of the women-led social enterprise and one leader becoming a Green Party Councillor.
- **Influencing policy, practice and attitudes:** Women's collective action has influenced local policy and changed how public agencies, politicians, and communities engage with women-led activism. The Housing Action Group helped secure a major policy change in July 2025 when Manchester City Council passed a motion to increase social housing targets in new developments.

## Learning about gendered poverty

The development and progress of Women of Wythenshawe has provided insights into how to support women with lived experience of poverty to come together for collective action and take on leadership and advocacy roles that enable them to influence local change. It has also generated learning about the role that community-led action can have in shifting the root causes of gendered poverty.

## **Bringing visibility as a foundation for change**

WoW has demonstrated the importance of ensuring that women experiencing poverty have access to the information needed to advocate for themselves. Improving women's understanding of the systems they are battling against, their rights and key decision-makers has supported WoW Leaders to advocate for themselves and for other women experiencing multiple disadvantages. For example, in the SEND Action Group, WoW Leaders have shared that many women with children who have SEND are trapped in poverty because they do not understand their rights to support and how to access them. By focusing on building parents' knowledge of rights and processes, the group aimed to create more visibility of the existing levers for change.

Similarly, WoW has demonstrated that frontline services often lack an understanding of how to appropriately support women. The Domestic Abuse Action Group identified that women experiencing domestic abuse are not supported by public agencies as those agencies often fail to recognise abuse for what it is and do not know how to respond to women in a trauma-informed, culturally appropriate way. The SEND Action Group also identified that women often have to battle schools to ensure their children with SEND can access support, because schools are not aware of the rights that a child with SEND has to additional support. In both these cases WoW has found that a lack of understanding of women's issues and experiences, particularly those that are seen as marginal or minoritised, such as those of migrant women and mothers with SEND, drives practice that fails to support these women.

The consistent lack of understanding of women's experiences identified across services points to an overlooking of the distinct experiences and rights of women. WoW has demonstrated the importance of bringing these to the fore and creating visibility that allows women to advocate for themselves and forces public agencies to reckon with why they are not providing adequate and appropriate support.

## **Influencing through lived experience and voice**

WoW has demonstrated the power of action that is led by those with lived experience. In a social sector shaped by professionals who are more removed from the issues they are working on, WoW's approach to building leadership across women with lived experience made their demands difficult for local power-holders to ignore. For political leaders, campaigning led by constituents speaking about their own experiences meant they felt a sense of duty to respond to it. Similarly with public services, advocacy from service users has been more challenging to brush off than it would have been if channelled through a charity.

*“It feels like we are the bridge between the developers and the community.”*

*Partner, Community Savers and CLASS Impact Report, June 2024*

Another key learning is that women’s lived experience offers essential insight into the nature of gendered poverty and how it can be addressed. For example, women in the domestic abuse group used filmmaking to share their stories with service providers. This not only created powerful testimony to influence professionals which can both practically inform them about different experiences of abuse and build an empathy that will support more caring service delivery.

## **The impact of solidarity and participation**

Another critical insight from WoW is that building connection, solidarity and participation in community action across women experiencing multiple disadvantages can tangibly improve their lives. WoW leaders shared that being in the network had improved their confidence in themselves and their ability to advocate for themselves, alongside developing skills around public speaking, planning and problem solving. This feedback came at the end of the first year of WoW and throughout its activity, highlighting that the network building itself, alongside the action that came out of it, built the confidence and skills of women engaged. This has changed the lives of many women in WoW, such as those in Bright Futures Friends who now have paid work as a commissioned service, and Zoe Marlow, who became a Green Party Councillor this year. This work has demonstrated that bringing women experiencing multiple disadvantage together to build solidarity and engage in community action can shift gendered poverty both through influencing change and through impacting the women involved.

*“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*

Partners and WoW Leaders shared that this work has been particularly impactful in the context of communities’ experience of Wythenshawe. They highlighted that the loss of social support networks in the area due to families being unable to afford to live near each other across generations has driven a sense of isolation and reliance on the state for social welfare. Alongside this, a top-down approach to public services and urban planning has driven a sense among people in Wythenshawe that they will always be “done to” rather than involved in the process of developing

and delivering plans that will improve the infrastructure, housing and services in their area. In this context, the community-led poverty action approach has had a significant impact on how local people relate to their environment and their role in driving local change. It has rebuilt trust across community members, local services and politicians alongside igniting a belief that things can and will get better in their place.

## **Connecting to powerholders across the system**

Furthermore, WoW has demonstrated the importance of connecting to people across a system to activate their power and bring them into a shared mission for change. The approach has intentionally engaged with people and organisations that bring a range of different forms of power and influence in the system. This is most clear in the Social Homes for Manchester Campaign, where WoW has engaged with actors including:

- Community members, who can leverage their experiences of the housing crisis to highlight how it impacts people, alongside using their relationships with and understanding of their local community to engage more local people in the campaign
- Voluntary sector housing charities, who have leveraged their expertise, data and relationships with both policymakers and community members to engage them in the campaign
- Universities, who have brought data to demonstrate the scale of the housing crisis and lent credibility to the wider evidence used by the campaign
- Faith leaders, who used their community relationships and spaces to engage more people in the campaign and host local campaign activity, such as the videos
- Political leaders at all levels of Greater Manchester, including local ward councillors, MPs, the leader of Greater Manchester Council Bev Craig and the Mayor Andy Burnham, to develop supportive insiders who could champion the campaign's demands

Seeing how power is held in these different groups, and intentionally bringing them into the work as partners, has built a campaign that genuinely sits across the system, combining grassroots mobilisation with technical expertise to make evidence-based demands which politicians cannot ignore. The impact of this approach has evidenced the importance of working across the system to shift gendered poverty.

## **The root causes of gendered poverty**

Over its past three years of activity, WoW has both revealed insights about the root causes of gendered poverty and, in doing so, demonstrated the importance of taking an approach that targets these root causes. Through engaging with each other's stories and experiences, alongside participatory systems mapping, WoW leaders identified the root causes of poverty and developed interventions that

responded to them. The insights around the root causes of gendered poverty surfaced by each action group are summarised below:

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SEND Action Group</b>    | <p>WoW Leaders surfaced that the lack of support for SEND children is an overlooked driver of gendered poverty, leading to mothers having to give up work and experience isolation, poverty and mental health crisis as they take on the full-time work of caring for a SEND child while battling a system that fails to provide them with the support they are entitled to.</p> <p>This is driven by the chronic underfunding of SEND provision, which leads to a lack of sufficient specialist provision to meet demand.</p> <p>Leaders also identified that a critical element of the battle mothers fight is the one with schools, which is often driven by a lack of understanding from teachers about how to respond appropriately to a child with SEND and work with the mother to ensure the right support is in place.</p> <p>As a result, the Action Group plans to intervene in the education system to build its capacity to support children with SEND, ensuring mothers do not need to fight this battle, freeing up time and emotional energy to engage in paid employment.</p> |
| <b>Housing Action Group</b> | <p>Similarly, WoW Leaders revealed the connection between the housing crisis and gendered poverty. A lack of social housing leads families experiencing homelessness to remain stuck in temporary accommodation, where they often struggle to build social connections and maintain employment. Alongside this, experiencing housing insecurity, homelessness and overcrowding has significant mental health impacts that make it challenging for women to build their livelihoods.</p> <p>For women experiencing a crisis that places them at risk of destitution, such as escaping domestic abuse, accumulating unmanageable debt, or falling sick, stabilising their housing situation is a critical foundation to rebuild from this crisis.</p> <p>The Action Group has thrown their energy into the development of wider coalitions that can collectively drive policy change around this huge issue, recognising that tackling the root causes of the housing crisis requires them to look at influencing powerholders at a regional level.</p>                                          |

|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Domestic Abuse Action Group</b> | <p>Similarly to the SEND Action Group, WoW Leaders identified that women's experience of domestic abuse is worsened due to the inappropriate and harmful responses of many of the services they expect to be of help, such as the police, children's services and housing teams. Where women experience gaslighting, judgment and a lack of care from public services in response to their disclosures of abuse, this can trap them in abusive relationships and lead them to give up on efforts to access the support they need to gain financial independence.</p> <p>The Domestic Abuse Action Group has been responding to this by aiming to shift attitudes across public services and build their capacity to respond appropriately to women experiencing domestic abuse, ensuring they receive adequate support to escape and recover from abuse.</p> |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Work across these Action Groups has also revealed an important mental model that maintains gendered poverty: the distinct experiences of women, particularly women experiencing multiple disadvantage and those who are minoritised, are not viewed as important, and so are not catered for in mainstream service provision. Action Groups revealed that gendered poverty is driven by public services not being sufficiently aware of how to respond to SEND and domestic abuse. This indicates that building this awareness has not been prioritised within public services, which should cater to a diverse range of needs and experiences. Inappropriate responses to the impacts of SEND and domestic abuse on women reveal that these experiences have fundamentally been overlooked in public services.

WoW has demonstrated the importance of taking an approach to gendered poverty that delves deeper than responding to immediate needs to explore why the system is failing to meet women's needs and shift the attitudes driving these failures.

*“For the SEND team, their systems change analysis took up an entire wall. The system is so incredibly complex”*

*Partner interview, September 2025*

## Learning about gendered poverty

- **Bringing visibility as a foundation for change:** Providing women experiencing poverty with access to information about their rights and the systems they battle against is crucial for enabling self-advocacy, especially because public agencies consistently overlook the distinct experiences of women.
- **Influencing through lived experience and voice:** Action led by women with lived experience generates demands that are difficult for power-holders, including political leaders and public services, to ignore and provides essential insights into the nature of gendered poverty that can drive better practice.
- **The impact of solidarity and participation:** Building connection, solidarity, and participation across women experiencing multiple disadvantages tangibly improved their confidence and skills, while simultaneously rebuilding trust and igniting a crucial belief among local people that they can drive change in a community often marked by isolation and a top-down approach.
- **Connecting to powerholders across the system:** Effective campaigning requires intentionally engaging with a diverse range of actors that influence different parts of the system, including local communities, voluntary sector experts, academics, and political figures.
- **The root causes of gendered poverty:** Gendered poverty is maintained by an underlying mental model where the distinct needs of women experiencing multiple disadvantages are overlooked and not prioritised in mainstream service provision. This is compounded chronic issues like the lack of social housing and the underfunding of specialist SEND provision.

# Evolving the WoW model

Throughout its first three years of delivery, the Birmingham No Recourse to Public Coming to the end of three years of delivery, partners have identified lessons learned to support adaptation and shape how WoW will evolve in the future. This section sets out these lessons and how they will be embedded going forward.

## Resourcing the facilitation of community-led action

Early on in WoW's development, it became clear that the community-led approach required more facilitation capacity than CLASS had accounted for. This has been an ongoing challenge throughout the work, which has at times slowed progress.

*“A genuinely bottom-up community-led process required a huge amount of facilitation support...It was important that women were able to coalesce around the issues that were most important to them and they wanted to put their energy behind and this required working on several issues.”*

*Partner interview, September 2025*

Taking a community-led approach led to the development of three Action Groups with distinct goals and methodologies, each of which required coordination capacity to progress their plans. Realising that it had neither the staff capacity nor the budget to support all three groups, CLASS nominated two other support agencies, Safe Spots and Caritas, to facilitate the Domestic Violence and SEND Action Groups, respectively. While this shared the burden more evenly, it impacted the pace of progress for the groups as these two organisations were unable to devote sufficient capacity to coordination. As a result, while the Action Groups progressed at a similar pace in the first 18 months of WoW, after CLASS stepped back from facilitating all three Action Groups, the Housing Group pulled ahead. The distinct progress made by the Housing Group was supported by CLASS's expertise in building coalitions and campaigns, which enabled them to connect to other work happening city-wide and locally, and CLASS's commitment to maintaining pace even when it stretched the team beyond its capacity. By contrast, the SEND Action Group's delivery of training to schools was delayed as Caritas was not able to devote capacity to engagement with schools. In response, the Leaders in the SEND Action Group have now taken coordination into their own hands, primarily through the leadership of women in Bright Futures Friends.

*“With so many partners and a large group of women involved, things did move forward positively, but it could sometimes be challenging to coordinate and keep roles clearly defined.”*

*Partner interview, August 2025.*

CLASS recognises that the progress of WoW has absorbed more resources than anticipated and often progressed at the expense of staff working overtime. Going forward, it has proposed a different funding model for WoW that ensures its time is properly compensated. Partners also recognised that while the work of support agencies at early stages of WoW's formation was valuable in ensuring that WoW leaders felt supported in their roles, three years into the work, their role is less needed. In the future, funding will no longer be split between support agencies, but will be targeted towards the required capacity and expertise. This will include funding for a Community Action Lead and Community Action Facilitator, both housed in CLASS, alongside funding for time from agencies that play an active role in supporting plans, such as Safe Spots and Bright Future Friends.

## **Moving at the pace of the collective**

Taking a women-led approach to action also meant the progress of plans had to follow the pace set by WoW Leaders. As described above, this included devoting significant time at the beginning of the work to build relationships, trust and capacity for WoW Leaders to be equipped to develop shared plans.

Similarly, in the Domestic Abuse Action Group, WoW leaders required significant time to build consensus around sharing videos featuring real stories of domestic abuse on their online training portal. It was critical that this work progressed slowly, with care and sensitivity, to ensure women did not feel pressured to tell their stories or consent to them being shared publicly. These delays were an inherent and essential part of ensuring that work which rested on individuals' lived experiences was genuinely driven by them.

The pace of work has also been shaped by the capacity of WoW Leaders to devote unpaid time to WoW, which has fluctuated with their interest and other challenges in their personal life. In the SEND Action Group, the pressures of caring for children with SEND in an unsupportive system meant that Leaders' capacity to engage in the group varied over time. This has increased the need for consistent coordination to maintain the progress of plans and records of decisions as capacity and participation in the group shift.

## **Navigating power dynamics**

Ensuring community leadership required navigating inherent power dynamics between funded agencies and WoW leaders to ensure full transparency around decision-making and commitment to community leadership.

This was initially challenging given that some partner agencies were not accustomed to sharing full budgets with those using their services and participating in coproduction. For example, after the first WoW Steering Group meeting, WoW

Leaders raised concerns that the meeting was dominated by staff. As a result of this, CLASS facilitated the development of the membership agreement setting out the remit of the Steering Group and stipulating equal representation from WoW Leaders and staff from support agencies. Bringing WoW Leaders into the process of budgeting and financial management alongside professionals required full transparency to ensure they understood where costs came from and why, recognising that most had little previous experience managing project budgets. CLASS's role was critical in supporting this, often mediating tensions to ensure WoW Leaders felt heard and supported

*“The most important learning curve has been about full transparency.... Everyone needs to see exactly where all the money is going, who’s getting what, why, the reasons behind it, and all that exact costing.”*

*Partner interview, August 2025.*

## **Building the resilience and capacity of women’s organisations**

The impact that WoW had on the confidence and skills of Leaders has, in turn, strengthened the resilience and capacity of their groups. Training around financial management and digital skills, alongside social enterprise coaching, strengthened the WoW Leader’s groups. For example, Bright Futures Friends were supported to transition from a group to a social enterprise that is now commissioned to deliver holiday activities. This is now enabling Bright Futures Friends to take on a more active role in facilitating the SEND Action Group.

CLASS has recognised that there is still a need for more capacity building to strengthen the resilience of WoW group. In developing training for WoW Leaders, it surfaced that there was a lack of local support for grassroots agencies to access funding, formalise processes such as safeguarding, and manage budgets. While training has improved this, CLASS reflected that further 1-1 capacity building would be needed to embed learning. Dedicating more time and resources to this in the future would support the sustainability of women-led action in Wythenshawe.

## **Ongoing coalition building**

The progress of the Housing Action Group, which was supported through the formation of Social Homes for Manchester and the Wythenshawe Central Coalition, demonstrated the importance of building coalitions that engage actors across the system to drive shared goals for systems change.

Connecting with aligned organisations more formally could support the progress of the Domestic Abuse and SEND Action Groups. The Domestic Abuse Action Group

plans to connect with other women-led action groups across Greater Manchester and nationally to collectively advocate for the voices of survivors in policymaking. Alongside this, connecting with other local voluntary sector domestic abuse services could support the Action Group's goals. Voluntary sector domestic abuse services often engage in training and advocacy with public services to ensure women experiencing domestic abuse can access the support they are entitled to, so they have similar goals to the Action Group and relationships with public services which could promote use of the training portal.

The SEND Action Group's work has also been strengthened by partnerships with the Grove School, a local SEND specialist school, and SENETA, a SEND advocacy service, which have both supported Leaders to develop a training programme for teachers on SEND rights. Going forward, the group will work more intensively with schools to engage them in its training programme. Beyond this, the Action Group could strengthen this work by exploring policy levers that would ensure better support for children with SEND in schools. The Action Group could progress this through connecting with national organisations pushing for policy change around better SEND provision in schools, to lend their stories and voices to pressure for policy change.

In the next phase of WoW, all three action groups will sit within the broader Wythenshawe Central Network, which has become the legacy structure of WoW. This development responds to the need to shift resourcing for coordination of community-led action, described earlier in this section, and the importance of engaging with a broader coalition of community members, agencies and groups. Through being part of Wythenshawe Central Network, which already includes a large number of local residents, faith organisations, Councillors and services, the WoW action groups will be able to engage with more local agencies and policymakers, mobilise more community members and leverage these relationships to progress their goals for systems change.

*Systems change is such a big word and it takes so much more time than just a three-year project. The three-year project was basically just building the foundations and groundwork.”*  
*Partner interview, August 2025*

## Evolving the network

- **Resourcing the facilitation of community-led action:** Supporting genuinely bottom-up action requires substantial, dedicated facilitation and coordination. Revising the future funding model to consolidate resources currently split among many support agencies and instead target dedicated coordination roles will ensure adequate capacity and expertise.
- **Moving at the pace of the collective:** Taking a women-led approach can take time. Flexibility and consistent support is needed to allow the pace of activities to vary with as women carefully navigate how they want to use their lived experience and balance engagement with other personal challenges and responsibilities .
- **Navigating power dynamics:** Safeguarding community leadership requires actively managing inherent power dynamics between staff and those with lived experience. Clear processes around strong governance and transparency can support this.
- **Building the resilience and capacity of women's organisations:** Dedicated investment in one-to-one capacity building will help grassroots groups build their resilience and sustainability, supporting ongoing grassroots action.
- **Ongoing coalition building:** The success of the Housing Action Group proved that coalition building is a critical part of influencing change. The SEND and Domestic Abuse Action Groups would benefit from more intentional engagement with local stakeholders, which could be supported by their planned integration into the Wythenshawe Central Network.

## Part 2: Women of Wythenshawe's journey in systems change

Before moving to an analysis of how Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) has been progressing system change, this section outlines the theoretical frameworks and learning questions that guide this analysis. Learning on a combination of Renaisi's tools for measuring place-based systems change and the network's 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, Renaisi 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, Renaisi 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

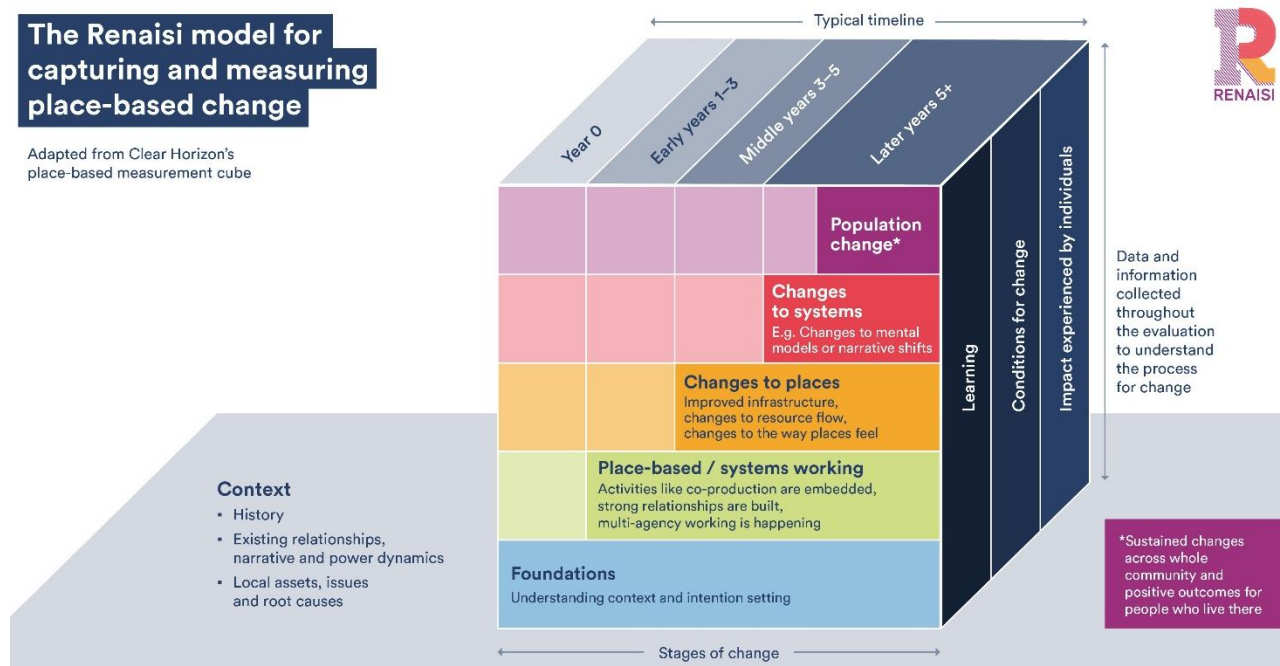
Throughout the programme, Renaisi captured evidence and learning around how WoW developed these ingredients for a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty, which has been a key data input for the report.

### **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 Renaisi, we have developed tools to design, learn about and measure place-based systems

change. Our model for capturing and measuring place-based systems change<sup>2</sup> (below) sets out five key stages of change (on the front of the cube) aligned to the timeframes that initiatives often spend in each stage (along the top), and three cross-cutting process related data points (on the right-hand side).

As will be explained in the following sections of this report, WoW currently sits in stage two of the model, **Place-based and systems working**.

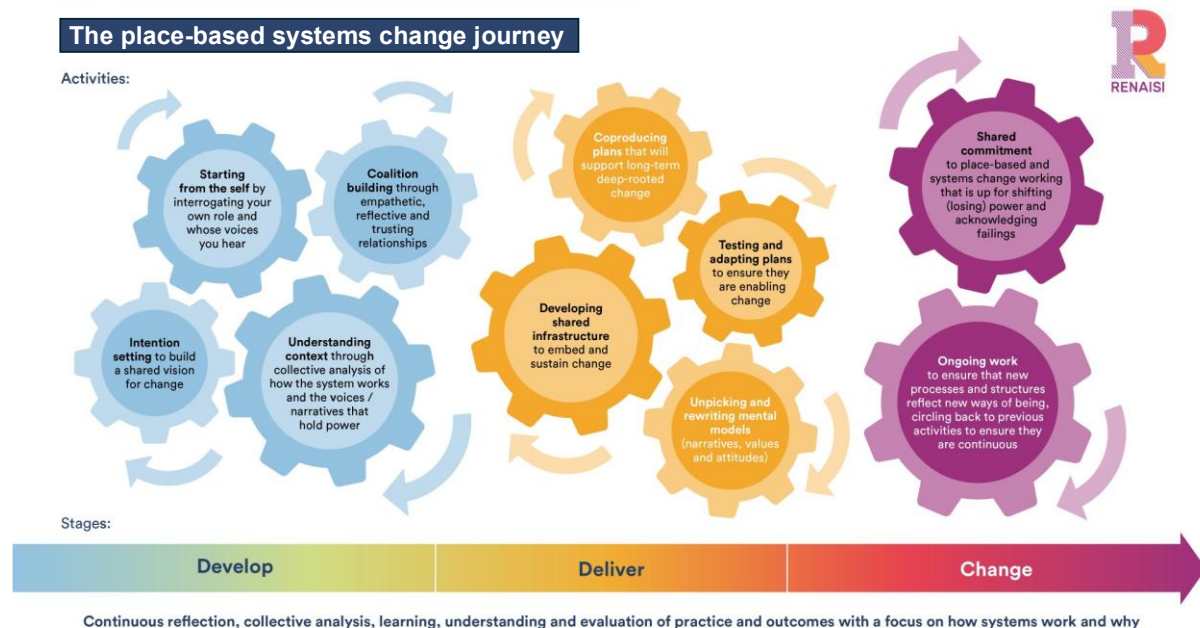


Much of Renaisi's work in programme design, learning and evaluation has focused on understanding how to identify and develop place-based systems working. Interrogating this stage more deeply through analysis of the place-based and/or systems change projects that Renaisi has historically worked on, we 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"<sup>3</sup> that culminated in our Guide to Systems Change<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> 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/>

<sup>3</sup> What does it take to change a system? Renaisi. <https://Renaisi.com/what-does-it-take-to-change-a-system/>

<sup>4</sup> 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 WoW practically developed a systemic approach to gendered poverty.

# Developing systemic practice

Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) has developed an approach to tackling gendered poverty that is deeply systemic. The network's approach reflects many of the indicators for systemic practice and has laid a solid foundation for systems change. This section highlights the main areas of WoW's work that have reflected and built its systemic practice.

## Building power and leadership

WoW's approach aimed to shift power and perceptions of power in the area. Building a woman-led poverty action network to influence local policy and practice reflects an ambition to fundamentally change how decisions are made locally, and whose voices shape decision-making. WoW has progressed this by supporting women to take on leadership roles, develop plans to influence change and connect with agencies, political decision-makers and policy-makers to progress their plans.

WoW Leaders attested to this shift in power, sharing that they have been listened to and can see how their decisions and actions are driving change locally. Through participating in WoW, Leaders have met with local councillors, commissioners, directors of large voluntary sector service providers and MPs. They shared that the process has also felt empowering for them, building skills and confidence that is enabling them to step into their leadership roles.

The strength of WoW's approach to shifting power was revealed in the tensions that emerged between support agencies and WoW leaders throughout the work. The friction between support agencies and WoW Leaders at the early stages of the network evidenced that the approach required a significant shift in practice. Being part of WoW necessitated that agencies let go of power to empower WoW leaders to direct decision-making. Having a meaningful role in WoW has required agencies to actively reflect on whether they have the motivations and capacities to meaningfully engage in a community-led approach. As a result of this process, two agencies stepped back from WoW at early stages, and others have realised that they will not be able to have an actively supportive role going forward. The fact that

WoW's approach has forced active shifts in power and self-reflection for all involved reveals that their practice of community leadership is genuinely systemic.

The excerpt to the right from our Guide to Systems Change<sup>5</sup> highlights why one would expect to see tension and self-reflection as part of the shifts in power that are essential for systems change.

**Meaningfully engaging with systemic change requires that you build your readiness to think systemically, engage with others with humility and honesty, and acknowledge the narratives, attitudes and processes that might be causing harm.... This process necessitates giving away some of your organisational power to engage in long-term, meaningful coproduction. It can be uncomfortable, but it is a critical part of engaging in systemic change with clarity on your own role and how it needs to shift.**

## Targeting systemic issues

Over the past three years, WoW has developed a deeper understanding of the systems that drive and maintain gendered poverty in Wythenshawe, alongside how to change them. This has enabled the WoW Action Groups to develop and progress plans that have targeted systemic issues.

WoW has intentionally pursued activities to ensure its activities and priorities are rooted in a deep understanding of the system. This began with storytelling between women leaders to build a collective understanding of the range of challenges and experiences facing women in the area. It was followed by system mapping activities, which supported leaders to interrogate the systems around their three priority areas, SEND, domestic abuse and housing, and identify systemic issues that could target to drive meaningful, lasting change for local women.

This process enabled the WoW Action Groups to develop campaigns and actions that target systemic issues. For example, identifying that women's experiences of housing insecurity and extended time in temporary accommodation were driven by a lack of investment in new social housing drove WoW Leaders to support the development of the Social Homes for Manchester Campaign, which focused on shifting this investment via policy change. Similarly, the SEND and Domestic Abuse Action Groups 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. The training programmes developed by both these Action Groups respond to this systemic issue by building the capacity of services to respond differently.

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<sup>5</sup> Renaisi's Guide to Systems Change. Renaisi [https://Renaisi.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Renaisi\\_Guide-to-Systems-Change\\_final.pdf](https://Renaisi.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Renaisi_Guide-to-Systems-Change_final.pdf)

## Creating new evidence

All Action Groups created new evidence that centres voices and experiences which are often overlooked. Alongside building a clearer picture of how the system is failing women experiencing multiple disadvantage, this work is creating lasting sources of insight that can continue to guide changes in decision-making and practice

All three action groups' approach to change leans on creating greater awareness of how systems of support fail women experiencing multiple disadvantages, leaning on lived experience to build a deeper understanding of the system. For the Housing Action Group, a combination of research, supported by universities in the Social Homes for Manchester campaign, and documentary making has developed evidence about the shortage of social housing and how it impacts individuals. This has been brought to politicians, commissioners and communities across Manchester to build advocacy for policy change. The Domestic Abuse Action Group have also used community reporting to record 15 local women's stories about domestic abuse that now feature in its training portal for statutory services. This work has built new evidence about the realities of domestic abuse, which can continue to build understanding and shift policy and practice.

WoW has created evidence that intentionally illuminates systemic issues while advocating for change. This evidence creation itself, alongside WoW's work to influence policymakers and services to engage with this evidence, is laying the foundation for system change.

## Influencing policy and practice

WoW has intentionally built relationships with stakeholders across the system to influence policy and practice that impacts gendered poverty. This approach is systemic both through its focus on creating lasting change and its efforts to build coalitions united by shared ambitions for change.

As described above, the Action Groups' goals aimed at creating lasting shifts in housing policy, statutory services' responses to domestic abuse and schools' approaches to supporting children with SEND. The Action Groups have been developing relationships with influential policy-makers and local services to pursue these goals. For example, building a relationship with the Executive Director for Communities at Wythenshawe Housing Group (WHG) has led to a commitment from WHG to enrol staff in their training on domestic abuse. Given WHG's position locally as the dominant social housing provider and one of the largest providers of public services, if WoW's training is implemented consistently, it could contribute to a widespread shift in frontline responses to domestic abuse. Similarly, the SEND Action Groups' development of a close relationship with the Grove School, the local

SEND school, which is recognised for excellent and effective support for children with SEND, has given their training programme credibility and influence that will support its uptake by mainstream local schools. WoW's efforts to build close partnerships with key local organisations that can influence shifts in practice across the local system have provided the foundation for systems change.

With a focus on policy change, the Housing Action Group has also leveraged coalition building and relationship development to progress its goals. Earlier sections of this report describe how the Social Homes for Manchester campaign engaged communities, community and voluntary sector agencies, universities and political leaders to collectively advocate for policy change. Wythenshawe Central Network (WCN) is also using coalition building and grassroots mobilisation to influence local policy. Leveraging the support of local Councillors and its relationship with WHG, WCN has successfully pushed the developer and lead housing association to explore a new Community Land Trust model as part of the redevelopment process.

WoW's approach to influencing change in policy and practice, which has focused on the development of partnerships and coalitions, has laid a strong foundation for systemic change. These relationships and coalitions will support WoW's interventions to impact practice across the system and continue to build pressure on policymakers to support its calls for change.

## Supporting systems change

From its inception, Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) has aimed at systems change. As evidenced throughout this report, it has achieved a huge amount in three years, establishing an approach to change that is deeply systemic and has laid a strong foundation for systems change.

WoW sits in the "Deliver" phase of Renaisi's model for a typical place-based systems change journey, with many of its interventions in the system at early stages. Despite this, some of WoW's activities have already supported local systems change. This section highlights those achievements which are already changing the system experienced by women experiencing multiple disadvantage in Wythenshawe.

### Creating policy change

Through its participation in the Social Homes for Manchester campaign, WoW has driven major policy change. In July 2025, Manchester City Council passed a motion that increased affordable housing targets in the city to 30% of all new housing developments, of which 70% must be for social rent. This is a major shift from the previous target of 5% affordable housing. The increase in social housing supply that

will result from this change will have a tangible impact on the lives of women in Wythenshawe. It will enable women to continue to stay in the area they call home, enabling them to sustain and build connections with their community. It will also enable women experiencing homelessness to move on from temporary accommodation and unsuitable housing into a home where they can thrive. Rather than leading to a one-off increase in social housing supply, this policy change is systemic because it will lead to a continual growth in the supply of social housing, building the resilience of communities experiencing multiple disadvantages

## **Changing narratives around lived experience**

WoW's approach to building women-led advocacy has driven a change in attitudes, and narratives about community-led action that is already having ripple effects across the local system.

WoW's approach to women-led action has shifted the erasure of the voices and experiences of women experiencing multiple disadvantage. As referred to earlier in this report, WoW Leaders uncovered that gendered poverty is driven by an underlying mental model dictating that the experiences of women, particularly women experiencing multiple disadvantage and those who are minoritised, are not distinct and important enough to cater for in mainstream service provision. 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.

This power-shifting does not stop with the community leaders. WoW has also supported wider community organising through Social Homes for Manchester and the Wythenshawe Central Network, both of which have engaged local people to advocate for change. Through this, WoW has built a wider practice of community-led action that is connecting those with lived experience to those delivering services and creating the policies which shape them. This approach is shifting narratives around whose voices and insights should guide decision-making.

## Recommendations for progressing systemic change

Drawing on the evidence in this report and Renaisi's experience working with organisations and partnerships driving systemic change, we recommend that Women of Wythenshawe pursue the following avenues to progress systemic change:

- **Building capacity for sustainable women-led action:** Continuing to dedicate resources to building the capacity of women's groups, through 1-1 coaching and training around fundraising, service provision and financial management, will support their sustainability, which will ensure the sustainability of women-led action in Wythenshawe. Building their capacity to support and coordinate collective action will also support the sustainability of WoW's approach beyond CLASS's involvement.
- **Monitoring shifts in practice:** Progress SEND and Domestic Abuse training initiatives while engaging with service managers to ensure that training is implemented at a frontline level. Engaging with service users and mothers will be essential to monitor how this training impacts their experiences.
- **Explore further policy levers:** Deepen Leaders' understanding of the policy landscape around SEND and domestic abuse to explore policy levers that could be targeted at a local level to progress their goals
- **Building coalitions that can shift practice:** Domestic Abuse and SEND Action Groups should connect to aligned local and national agencies that can build their understanding of routes to policy change and support shifts in statutory practice
- **Continue to mobilise community-led action:** Action Groups should work with WCN to engage more active community members in their groups. This will build the groups' capacity alongside continuing to develop community leadership.
- **Maintain pressure from Social Homes for Manchester:** Use the momentum from recent policy change to continue to advocate for the campaign's other policy proposals. WoW leaders might be particularly engaged in calls for Stronger public accountability and scrutiny for the setting and enforcement of developer obligations to build new social housing.
- **Facilitating ongoing shifts in power:** Developing spaces that engage local agencies in shared decision-making with WoW Leaders, while safeguarding their leadership, could support more agencies to shift power to those with lived experience and engage in deep reflection on how they centre the views of those with lived experience in their work. This could occur via the creation of a decision-making panel focused on an element of Wythenshawe Central Network's work, such as the development of a Community Land Trust, or via the creation of scrutiny panels to support the enforcement of developer obligations to build new social housing.

# Conclusion

In three years, Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) has successfully established a deeply systemic approach to tackling gendered poverty, laying a strong foundation for future systems change. WoW's impact stems from its approach to developing women-led action that targets systemic issues facing local women. It has built the capacity of a group of local women experiencing multiple disadvantages who are now actively engaging with local powerholders to advocate for better services for women. This has already led to significant systems change outcomes, including driving policy change around social housing and shifting local narratives around the role of lived experience in policymaking.

Despite the impact that WoW has driven, its structure has not ultimately been supportive of its goals. Moving forward, a planned shift away from fragmented funding towards investing in posts dedicated to supporting community action will ensure activity is better resourced. The next phase of work will also see WoW become part of the Wythenshawe Central Network (WCN), enabling the network to expand to include more local people and organisations, while maintaining the integrity and focus of action groups. Action Groups will benefit from leveraging the relationships formed through WCN to progress their goals to improve support for women experiencing domestic abuse and caring for SEND children.

To progress and embed systems change, WCN should continue to focus on building the resilience and capacity of grassroots organisations and community leaders to plan, coordinate and lead poverty action, alongside creating spaces that connect these leaders to local services and powerholders. This will ensure long-term, sustainable shifts in power that can drive changes in policy and practice.

## Get in touch

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