



Nottingham Trent
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Getting School Ready Collective Impact Initiative: Year 1

Bec Aeddi

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“...the first thing I'd say was, thank you, thank you for just allowing this opportunity to happen. I've never come across anything like this before [...] I've worked in education in a lot of different schools, a lot of difficult schools, difficult areas for a very long time. And never come across anything quite like this before. [...] Thank you for the opportunity for our families and our community. Wherever it goes from here, this has started off a seed of something that isn't... it's not going to end, you know.”

Alex, 44:09

Summary and Key Findings:

Key Achievements

- Establishment of the Warm Welcome group, a vital space for community engagement and relationship-building
- Development of the Roots to Readiness document, coordinating expertise to support parents and children
- Improved relationships and communication among partners, leading to increased access to data
- Alignment with broader local authority priorities, such as the Family Hub developments
- Personal growth and empowerment of parent partners, enhancing their contributions to the project.

Backbone Organisation's Value

- Acting as a backbone, Nottingham Trent University (NTU) facilitated the development of and facilitated adherence to a strong common agenda
- NTU's independence and access to knowledge is instrumental in coordinating efforts and managing partnerships
- Backbone Coordinator plays a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and action between partners, which is supported by their ability to build trusting relationships
- NTU provided funding for the Backbone Coordinator position and secured additional resources, facilitating the Initiative's development
- NTU commissioned this evaluation to assess progress and identify areas for improvement.

Future Priorities

- Creation of a Shared Measurement System to track progress and inform decision-making
- Increased widespread communication between the Initiative, organisational stakeholders, and the wider community
- Managing the challenge of professional partners' capacity and competing workloads
- Increasing personnel and funding resources available to the project to ensure sustainability
- Enhancing community engagement and ensuring the initiative remains community-led
- Exploring opportunities to increase resources available to the Oak Tree community
- Recognising and rewarding the contributions of parent partners to the initiative.

Opportunities for Wider Impact

- Applying learnings to influence policy and practise at district, county, and national levels
- Demonstrating the value of strategic investment in university-community partnerships
- Serving as a model for effective collaboration and collective impact in other communities
- Informing the development of similar initiatives in other areas across the country
- Contributing to the growing body of knowledge on collective impact and systems change.

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1. Introduction & Context

The Oak Tree Getting School Ready (OTGSR) Initiative is aimed at enabling greater numbers of children from the Oak Tree Estate in Mansfield to thrive when they begin statutory education. In measurable terms, this means that they have achieved expected levels of development in at least 12 of the 17 Early Learning Goals (ELGs) within the five areas of learning relating to: communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; physical development; literacy; and mathematics (DfE, 2024).

Not every child reaches these levels of development. This problem can be more pronounced in some areas of the country, especially those with high levels of socio-economic deprivation. Oak Tree Primary is placed 46th of 20,224 for percentage Pupil Premium allocation (GOV.UK, 2023). Each year around 90% of children do not meet the expected levels of development.

A long-term project, the OTGSR Initiative is a Collective Impact initiative based on the principles of collective action, which work together to support a Collective Impact initiative (see Figure 1) (Preskill et al, 2023):

1. **A common agenda:**
A shared understanding of what needs to be done and how it should happen.
2. **Mutually reinforcing activities:**
Coordinated activities by partners, agreed through a plan of action.
3. **Continuous communication:**
Partners communicating consistently and openly, fostering trust, motivation and commonality.
4. **A shared measurement system:**
Consistent data collection and measurement across partners.
5. **Backbone function:**
Dedicated staff use their specific skills to coordinate the action of all involved in the project.
In this Initiative, the backbone function is performed by NTU staff.

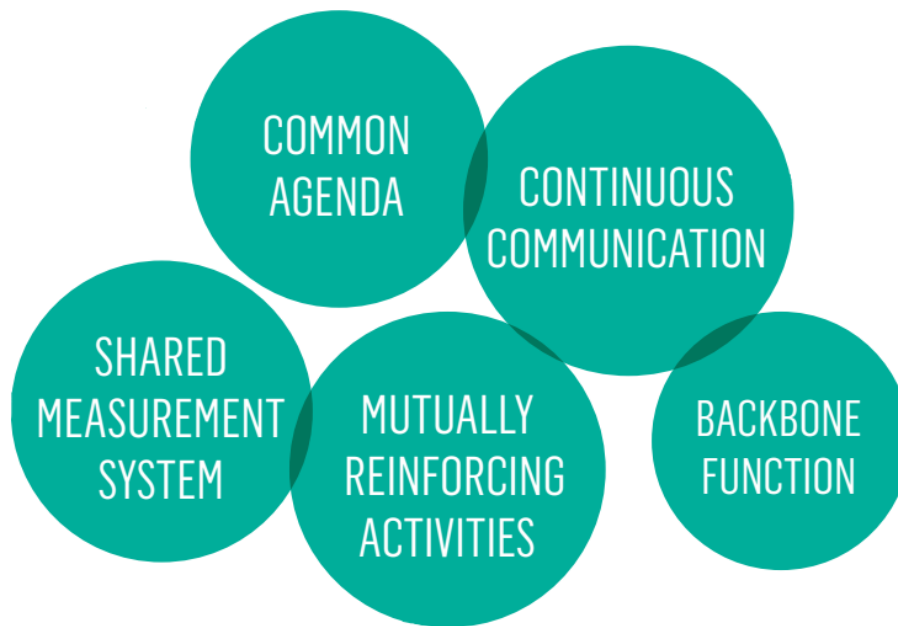


Figure 1: How the five conditions support each other (Adapted from: Preskill et al, 2023).

Collective Impact initiatives change as they grow, in response to a constantly evolving context and the consequent need to embed continuous, active learning into the structure of the project (ibid). Learning involves looking both inward and outward, meaning both evaluation and reflection should be core components of any Collective Impact initiative from the beginning (ibid).

Evaluation in the early years of a Collective Impact project centres around the design and implementation of the project, rather than outcomes related to the initiative's goals. This means that the five conditions should be used to inform an appreciation of the project's infrastructure (ibid). The findings will be discussed partially in relation to these conditions, as well as to the 5 Strategic Priorities defined by the Initiative's partners:

1. Better connections between professional services.
2. Ensuring that all parents and services have demonstrable knowledge of the full breadth of support from pregnancy to starting school, and how to access it.
3. Improved relationships between parents and services, characterised by trust and engagement.
4. A common language and shared commitment to collaborative system leadership developed across all partners.
5. Ensuring children are within a social environment characterised by pride, inclusivity, resilience and cohesion.

At its core, evaluation of an early-stage Collective Impact initiative should take a developmental approach, with the key strategic question being: '**What needs to happen?**' (ibid).

Towards this end, this evaluation takes a systems-thinking approach; as the OTGSR Initiative is an ongoing project, it can be considered a system of resources, information and processes that constantly interacts with its social and political environment (Rahi, 2019). Because of this constant interaction, the Initiative needs to be resilient to grow and for work to be sustained.

The resilience of a project depends on being aware of the resources that the project has, how these resources might need to be used, and what resources might be needed to meet future risks or challenges (ibid). Awareness of these resources and challenge interactions is the driving force behind a project or system's ability to adapt and remain resilient in the face of challenging events (ibid; Finsterwalder & Kuppelweiser, 2020).

As such, while this evaluation does not attempt to account for all the factors that might affect the OTGSR Initiative's resilience, it does aim to consider the resources and challenges discussed by the evaluation's participants. The aim of this conceptualisation is to support the development, direction, and future resilience of this early-stage project.

2. Methodology

A favourable ethical opinion, in order to take forward the research, was sought from and granted by the Architecture, Design and the Built Environment, Art and Design, Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Committee at NTU.

Thirteen participants were interviewed by one of three members of CenSCE staff. All but one participant was female, which is reflective of the gender distribution of those currently involved in the project. Three of the participants were parents, who are also involved in running the Warm Welcome group (see page 13). The remaining ten participants each work for the various organisations involved in the OTGSR Initiative, including from services situated on the estate, organisations that serve the community, local government, and local public health staff. Regrettably, a limitation of this study is the lack of involvement from clinical health professionals, but this is also reflected in the project itself (at least at the time the interviews were conducted).

The majority of the interviews were conducted remotely via MS Teams, while one interview was conducted in person. Most of the interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. However, as inclusivity for all partners is a key component of the project, and flexibility is at the heart of this, the three parent partners involved in the OTGSR Initiative were interviewed

together and in person as they requested. Similarly, two of the service partners were interviewed together remotely, per their request.

This did present some limitations in terms of transcription (which were overcome through extended data cleansing) and equal opportunities for each participant to speak (which was managed as much as possible through facilitation). While this may mean some methodological inconsistency, involving all partners in a way that supported their comfort ensured their participation, which was necessary for holistically evaluating the project. In total, this meant that ten interviews were conducted.

The MP4 recordings from these interviews were transcribed by OtterAI and were anonymised at the point of transcription using pseudonyms. The MP4 and MP3 files were deleted after the transcripts were checked for errors. During analysis, the files were stored on a secure drive with limited access given to CenSCE staff directly involved in the research.

Pseudonyms were originally randomly generated and matched to gender, but were changed to gender neutral pseudonyms after it was determined that only one male participant was to be interviewed. Any pronouns used when referring to participants throughout the report are also gender neutral. These measures have been taken to ensure the anonymity of all participants, though it is not intended that any intersectional differences in experience or perspective be overlooked.

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked a minimum of ten pre-determined questions, which, in line with the need for reflective practice in a Collective Impact initiative, utilised aspects of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 2013). The six aspects of this reflective cycle include: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusions (general and specific) and action plans (ibid).

As such, participants were asked to describe:

- Their involvement in the project
- How they felt at various points throughout the project
- Their capacity for involvement
- What aspects of the Initiative they felt worked well, and what they felt worked less well
- Any perceived positive and/or negative consequences
- Their analysis of why any perceived consequences had occurred
- What they felt could have been done differently
- What the future of the Initiative might look like.

After familiarisation with the data, the interviews were thematically analysed and coded in NVivo 14 using a combined inductive and deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There was high coding density throughout the data; in many instances, multiple themes emerged from individual passages within the data. The two members of CenSCE staff involved in coding the data met during the coding process to discuss emerging themes and agree on the broad structure of the analytic framework. One staff member led the analysis, which was then provided to the other for critique. This helped to ensure cohesion.

The data from the reflective interviews was coded against the agreed framework, which included both the five conditions and an appreciation of any resources and challenges described by participants. The themes identified in the findings beyond this framework arose from the data. This process led to benefits associated with inductive, 'exploratory' approaches, such as flexibility, depth of understanding, and the exploration of a broad range of viewpoints. At the same time, some of the structure and comparison inherent to deductive, 'testing' approaches was maintained.

Finally, in keeping with the participatory values at the heart of the OTGSR Initiative, a draft version of this report was presented as a slide deck to the OTGSR Steering Group for their comments. The ten professional partners, one parent partner, and two members of the backbone organisation (NTU) who were in attendance each reviewed a paper copy of this report as each slide was presented. After this presentation, there was an opportunity for group members to discuss their opinions.

The group was encouraged to make notes on their presentations in response to the report and discussion, and were informed prior to this that their notes would then be collected and reviewed by the evaluator. Six steering group members, three of whom had been participants in the interviews, made notes on their presentation copies and handed these to the evaluator. These notes were incorporated into the results section of this report where appropriate.

3. Results

The Oak Tree Getting School Ready (OTGSR) Initiative has made significant progress in its first year towards achieving its goal of enabling more children from the Oak Tree Lane estate to thrive when they begin statutory education. Through dedicated efforts from the backbone organisation, professional partners, and parent partners, several key resources have been developed that are essential for the Initiative's ongoing success and sustainability.

As the backbone organisation, Nottingham Trent University (NTU), has played a crucial role in facilitating the development of a strong common agenda, aligning partners' activities, and

fostering continuous communication. NTU's relative independence and access to knowledge have been instrumental in coordinating efforts, managing partnerships, and ensuring strategic direction.

Investments in the Initiative have yielded valuable outputs, such as the establishment of the Warm Welcome group, a parent-run weekly coffee morning that serves as a vital space for community engagement and relationship-building between residents and professionals. The Roots to Readiness document, currently in development, is another example of coordinated activity among partners that will help parents support their child's development from pregnancy to starting school. While early-stage collective impact initiatives cannot be evaluated for their impact, these achievements are expected to act as fertile grounds for future long-term outcomes.

The Initiative has also facilitated improved relationships and communication among partners, leading to increased access to data and alignment with broader local authority priorities, such as Family Hubs – new local-authority led initiatives supporting families in Mansfield. Additionally, the personal growth and empowerment of parent partners through their involvement in the Initiative have created a positive feedback loop, enhancing their contributions to the project.

Looking ahead, this evaluation has identified several key areas for future investment and development. These include the creation of a Shared Measurement System, increased widespread communication between the Initiative and stakeholders, managing the challenge of professional partners' capacity and competing workloads, and increasing personnel and funding resources available to the project.

By strategically allocating funds to these priority areas, the OTGSR Initiative can continue to build upon its successes, ensuring its sustainability and maximising its positive impact on the Oak Tree community. The Initiative also has the potential to influence policy and practice at wider district, county, and national levels, demonstrating potential for far-reaching social return on investment.

Evidence for the value of NTU involvement in the OTGSR Initiative

This section will explore the various ways in which Nottingham Trent University's involvement as the backbone organisation has provided value to the Oak Tree Getting School Ready Initiative.

Development of a Strategic Plan:

The development of a Strategic Plan has been a key achievement of the OTGSR Initiative, and this section will discuss how NTU facilitated this process and the benefits it has brought to the project.

The various remits and concerns represented within the Initiative means the presence of different, occasionally conflicting priorities. At times, this mix of agendas may act as a challenge, both in terms of interpersonal communication and in deciding and acting upon strategic direction.

“...the only challenging part is I think, when we sit around the table to discuss things, and there may be some opposing views. But that happens [...] You can't always see eye to eye on everything, can you, with everybody?”

Ashley, 18:39

NTU was highlighted by multiple participants as a resource in managing these opposing views. Charlie reflected on how the relative independence of NTU allowed the multiple agendas present in the work to be managed:

“I think what they were able to do, I suppose, being independent, quite often was actually be able to pull all those organisations together, without any sort of vested interest in the piece of work, and be quite impartial, to, to steer it where it needed to go, and listen to all the different voices. Where sometimes, I think when I've tried to get involved in pieces of work like that, as a local authority, or as a council, everyone brings all their different agendas. [...] I think that kind of independence in some ways that NTU had led them to be in quite a good position. And, and, also the theoretical knowledge and the strategic knowledge that they have to be able to understand and be able to do that as well.”

Charlie, 12:49

As a fundamental aspect of their work as a backbone organisation, NTU helped to draw the multiple agendas represented in the work together into a strategy. The Backbone Coordinator facilitated workshops and discussions that led to the creation of the Strategic Plan, which encapsulates the Initiative's common agenda and five strategic priorities.

Several participants discussed how NTU-facilitated workshops with industry professionals at the beginning of the project promoted the development of a consensus around what it meant to be school ready and what this could mean for the goals of the Initiative. These discussions were then compiled into a plan detailing the various workstreams needed to support OTGSR's aims (see Appendix 3). The Strategic Priorities listed in the plan are:

1. Better connections between professional services.
2. Ensuring that all parents and services have demonstrable knowledge of the full breadth of support from pregnancy to starting school, and how to access it.
3. Improved relationships between parents and services, characterised by trust and engagement.
4. A common language and shared commitment to collaborative system leadership developed across all partners.
5. Ensuring children are within a social environment characterised by pride, inclusivity, resilience and cohesion.

As Leslie, below, discusses the value of this plan, they also highlight how the activity that informed it involved both professional partners and parents from Oak Tree, and facilitation from the NTU Backbone Coordinator.

“I think the fact that [Backbone Coordinator]'s really pulled it together into a, you know, an action plan [...] I think's been really useful, because it's got a really clear vision for what the project's about. And I think everybody's contributed to that. So it's not just [Backbone Coordinator] saying, 'This is what I think this project should be'. It's more... that's come from the parents that are involved and the professionals that are involved. So everybody's kind of agreed, that that's what that's what we're aiming for. So I think that's been a real positive that you can keep coming back to something and you can sort of almost measure your progress and see how far you've got with certain things and come back to make sure you still on the right track.”

Leslie, 11:11

As Leslie also notes, while the plan acts as a tangible resource to maintain focus on the agenda, it can also be used to communicate that commitment and engender buy-in from external stakeholders.

“And also using that to go back. As I said, before, talking to my line manager about it – I can take that back to her and show her, share with her what we've been doing. And, you know, that's also sparked some discussion with her, and her thoughts, and I can then take that back as well. So I think having that, that document that kind of gives it a framework has been really useful to kind of focus everybody and make sure we're all kind of working to the same objectives and that kind of thing, because I think there is a tendency sometimes in the meetings that we do go off a little bit of tangent, which is fine, isn't it? We quite often do that. But sometimes, you go off on a different agenda. And it's, it's useful to have that to kind of bring you back to, to what it is we're looking at. So I think that's been good.”

Leslie, 11:59

Overall, the development of the Strategic Plan is good evidence of NTU's value as a backbone organisation, particularly in relation to the development of a common agenda¹, ensuring strategic direction², and coordinating activities and dialogue³.

Improved relationships and communication amongst partners

Improving relationships and communication among partners is essential for the success of the OTGSR Initiative. This section will examine how NTU has contributed to this aspect of the project.

¹ The first condition of collective impact, as defined by the Collective Impact Forum (Preskill et al, 2023).

² The first essential function of the backbone infrastructure, as identified by the FSG (Collective Impact Forum, 2021).

³ The second essential function of the backbone infrastructure (ibid).

In the work that has been undertaken towards the fulfilment of the Strategic Priorities, the initiative has facilitated new connections, increased awareness of services, and fostered collaboration among professionals working in the Oak Tree community. Communication is at the heart of this; multiple participants discussed the Backbone Coordinator's strength as a communication leader and facilitator.

Two important values linked to written communication were flexibility and inclusivity. For instance, Blake described how, at the beginning of the Initiative, emails were being sent to partners, but "*because of the amount of emails, we were just sort of flicking through them*". A Teams group was subsequently created, but despite a considerable amount of information being uploaded to this, several partners "*didn't get notifications, because you have to go into it, to then read all the messages*" (10:53). Moreover, the parents did not have experience of using Teams, and while the backbone organised training for them, access to the group still presented a "*barrier*" (12:41). The Teams group is no longer used, and communication has now returned to shorter emails.

Steering group and other project meetings are held monthly at the school on the Oak Tree estate, at a time that is generally convenient for most partners. Organised and attended by NTU colleagues, meetings are also consistently attended by both parent and professional partners. These meetings are essential for the Initiative's success, as they are an opportunity for partners to meet in person and make decisions on actions needed for project progression. As Ashley states, generally, communication at meetings is "really, really good". Although there are "*a lot of strong views coming through*", there are "*a lot of the same views coming through as well*" (11:59).

However, the most common challenge associated with communication was the presence of differing views within these meetings and the potential for this to impede progress.

The backbone was noted as an important resource in facilitating interpersonal coordination, both in terms of dialogue and action between individual partners. The Backbone Coordinator was generally praised for their dialogue facilitation, particularly in relation to striking a balance between decision making and a commitment to equal participation. However, further exploration of facilitation methods as a professional development opportunity for NTU staff could enhance this already good practice.

"[Backbone Coordinator] is really enthusiastic. [...] He's a really good leader in terms of listening to everybody else's views, but then also making that decision of actually what we're about, where this is going, [...] he's really good at that as well. And also, you know, if we go off topic, he's good, he's really good at just, sort of, just coming back and just saying, 'Look, we can talk about that, but actually we really need to talk about this today, because everyone's time is really, really precious'".

Ashley, 13:02

As Ashley (above) and Cameron (below) highlight, it appears that dialogue is just the first step in this coordination. The Backbone Coordinator was praised for maintaining a focus on action, with all participants referring to coordination activity and decision making undertaken by the Backbone Coordinator in their interviews.

“I think there’s been really good listening work. I guess the question is, ‘So what?’, which is what parents and children often say to us. ‘Yeah, you’ve done all that listening. So what – what we doing about it?’ And I think that’s where it comes into its own because I think that [Backbone Coordinator] does bring that to the group and think, okay, ‘What do we do then? And you know, so what?’”

Cameron, 49:10

As Charlie notes, backbones play a key role in ensuring that the necessary breadth of voices is in attendance at steering group meetings, which is particularly important where this attendance is threatened by services’ challenges with capacity:

“I suppose it’s maybe as a backbone organisation, how quickly they pick up on that and notice that absence, and actually then what was done about it, and in terms of then reengaging them and getting them back around the table.”

Charlie, 21:32

Through this facilitation activity, relationships between professionals and the Initiative are developed, which in turn improves the expertise available to the OTGSR Initiative. This initially coordinated expertise is further pooled around activities and outputs, as discussed below. In this way, there is good evidence that the backbone coordinates both interpersonal and interorganisational activity across the Initiative, fulfilling its essential function as a coordinator of activities and dialogue⁴. While better connections between professional services and improved relationships between parents and services are themselves Strategic Priorities, the developed relationships and improved communication also help to support a common language and may in future improve parental and service knowledge of service provision.

Supporting the Establishment of the Warm Welcome group:

The Warm Welcome group has become a vital resource for the OTGSR Initiative and the Oak Tree community. This section will discuss NTU's role in supporting the establishment and growth of this group.

The Warm Welcome group, a parent-run weekly coffee morning, was set up as a result of the OTGSR Initiative. It serves as a space for community engagement and relationship-building between residents and professionals. The Warm Welcome group contributes towards the fulfilment of all Strategic Priorities, and is therefore an essential resource for the OTGSR Initiative, as well as a valuable resource for the Oak Tree Community. While this group is run by the parent partners and facilitated through their collaboration with professional partners, the Warm Welcome group has sprung directly from the Initiative and the relationships between partners that NTU has helped to facilitate.

⁴ The second essential function of the backbone organisation, as identified by the FSG (Collective Impact Forum, 2018).

The Warm Welcome group was the activity most widely discussed by participants. In fact, all but one participant mentioned the group in their interview.

“So we've set up a Warm Welcome group on the back of the Getting School Ready meetings, and the agenda is working with the parents that were already engaged as part of that [...], so we set that up December, November last year, we've become a constitutive group this September, we run regular Warm Welcome meetings every Friday during term time in our local Children's Centre building. [...] It's a warm welcome to the whole community, but we also invite professionals to join us, as long as they understand that it's on a very informal, sort of relaxed basis, so that they can get to know people and get to know our community and, and maybe get a sense of how actually what they're doing and the areas that they're operating in, how they can be of best benefit to sit with, with the community as a whole.”

Alex, 03:32

As well as running it, parent partners attend the Warm Welcome group alongside several other Oak Tree residents and some professional partners. The Backbone Coordinator also consistently attends. In addition to acting as a place to develop community ties and relationships between residents and professionals, the Warm Welcome group is a resource for facilitating communication between the community and the OTGSR Initiative:

“...we can also then use it for... So when we did our work around, sort of, the policy change. And, you know, ‘What do you think about, what do you know about policy? What do you think about policy changes? Are people on the ground living this?’ It meant we had a forum where we could bring students from NTU in, and we could ask those questions. And we could like gauge what people thought where they were, so... but that also helps empower the community because it also says to them that somebody's listening. Somebody's hearing, you know, wants our opinion”.

Alex, 23:33

This communication does appear to go both ways, to an extent. There was some evidence throughout that data that the Warm Welcome group, as well as parent partners' discussions at the school gates, supported the flow of information from the Initiative to residents.

However, although the Warm Welcome group does appear to be attended regularly by some residents, attendance is not sufficient for the group to facilitate wide-scale communication between the OTGSR Initiative and the community. This has implications for the consistency and interpretation of messaging from the Initiative and professional partner organisations to the community through the Group. It is recommended that NTU act to further support communication between the Initiative and community, such as through widespread communications like newsletters.

To gain a deeper understanding of community engagement, it is recommended that listening exercises or research be conducted with a larger sample of Oak Tree residents. This will provide valuable insights into their perspectives on the Initiative, barriers to engagement, and opportunities for improvement. The data collected should be analysed to identify patterns and inform strategies for enhancing community involvement. Some potential recommendations include regular community forums, surveys, or targeted outreach activities

to ensure the Initiative remains community-led and responsive to the needs of Oak Tree residents.

Overall, the Warm Welcome group is evidence of the first and second conditions of a collective impact project: mutually reinforcing activities and continuous open communication. Additionally, while the group sprang organically from the project and was not explicitly constructed by NTU as a backbone organisation, NTU supported the group's facilitation through their facilitation of the Initiative. As such, the Warm Welcome group can be considered evidence of the backbone working to build relationships and a sense of ownership in the community⁵ and coordinating activities and dialogue.

Facilitating Creation of the Roots to Readiness document (in progress):

The Roots to Readiness document, though not yet complete, is anticipated to be a valuable tool for parents and the OTGSR Initiative. In this section, the role NTU has undertaken in facilitating the creation of this document will be discussed.

The Roots to Readiness document, which is still in development, is set to act as a physical resource to help *“parents understand what steps they can take to support their child's early development, from pregnancy onwards and to be school ready”* (Jordan, 11:25). It will also communicate the existence of the Warm Welcome group and the aims of the OTGSR Initiative. When describing Roots to Readiness, Rowan predicted that it is *“going to be such a valuable resource.”* (14:13).

At the time of writing, a working group involving various partners has recently been established to continue the co-production of Roots to Readiness between parent and professional partners. This working group will act as a site of coordinated and mutually reinforcing activity amongst partners. Because Roots to Readiness has been facilitated by NTU as a backbone organisation, it can be considered evidence of the backbone function fulfilling the functions of ensuring strategic direction, coordinating activities and dialogue, and – due to the co-production aspect of the work – building relationships and a sense of ownership in the community.

In terms of the Strategic Plan, Roots to Readiness should support all five of the Strategic Priorities. By bringing together various professional partners in a working group, the document facilitates collaboration and strengthens connections between services. As professionals contribute their expertise to the document, they may gain a better understanding of each other's roles and identify opportunities for collaboration. Moreover, the document will serve as a comprehensive guide for parents, outlining the available support services and resources from pregnancy through their child's early years. By providing clear information on what support is available and how to access it, Roots to Readiness will empower parents to navigate the system effectively and ensure that

⁵ The third essential function of the backbone infrastructure.

professionals across services are well-informed about the full range of support they can offer to families.

The co-production aspect of the Roots to Readiness document may foster a sense of ownership and trust between the involved parent and professional partners. This collaborative approach may help to build positive relationships between parents and services, encouraging ongoing engagement and trust. Furthermore, the working group will provide opportunities for partners to develop a shared understanding of school readiness and the key milestones in a child's early development. By creating a common language around these concepts, the document can help to align partners' efforts and promote a shared commitment to collaborative system leadership.

Ultimately, by equipping parents with knowledge and resources to support their child's development, the Roots to Readiness document will contribute to creating a nurturing and supportive social environment for children. When parents feel empowered and connected to a network of support, they are better able to foster a sense of pride, resilience, and inclusivity within their families and the wider community. The document's emphasis on the importance of community and the Warm Welcome group will further promote social cohesion and a sense of belonging for families.

Alignment with Family Hub developments and other work throughout the system:

Aligning the OTGSR Initiative with broader developments, such as Family Hubs, is crucial for maximising its impact. This section will discuss how NTU has worked to coordinate the Initiative's efforts with other work throughout the system.

The OTGSR Initiative's existence has allowed professional partners from across the system to coordinate their existing activity with that of the Initiative's. Perhaps nowhere is this better evidenced than in the case of Family Hubs:

“And I think one of the real positives that come out of it locally, is, as a local authority, we're required to develop Family Hubs, which is about supporting children and families who are nought to nineteen, but with a real focus on kind of nought to five within those. And so our Family Hubs will help us deliver our Best Start strategy and help children be school ready.

[...]

I think what the Getting School Ready network has done is bring together practitioners on a local level and a very local level. And I think it's done that brilliantly. I think there are links that have been made, people met that haven't met before, people are aware of services that they weren't aware of before, which is really positive. And I think some of that should happen and will happen around the Family Hub developments. But I suspect Oak Tree is probably more local than those Family Hubs will be.”

Jordan, 26:14-32:59

While still in the development stages, Family Hubs' vision is aligned with many of the priorities in the Strategic Plan. If their delivery aligns with this vision, they will help facilitate better connections between professional services by bringing together practitioners at a local level, fostering links and awareness between services that may not have existed before. By serving as a central point of information and access, Family Hubs may help ensure that parents and services have knowledge of the full breadth of support available from pregnancy to starting school. If a welcoming, trusted environment where families can engage with support is created, Family Hubs will help improve relationships between parents and services. Finally, they may support the social environment of Oak Tree by providing a supportive, community-based setting that nurtures inclusivity and cohesion.

In multiple cases including the Family Hubs, NTU was discussed as instrumental in coordinating various system actors' activity. Again, Jordan highlights this in their discussion of the Family Hubs.

"I think there's been some brilliant conversations between [Backbone Coordinator] and other parts of the council and I believe elected members as well about the role of Oak Tree in that Family Hub world. And I just think that the future around joining up the ambitions of the authority and the ambitions of the Oak Tree Getting School Ready are like more aligned than ever, [...] Maybe it would, maybe it wouldn't have happened in that way without that group being there. And without that influence. I don't know".

Jordan, 24:14

In fact, all ten interviews discussed the backbone's ability to coordinate activity. This was especially well illustrated by the parents' account of their involvement in the Initiative:

Bailey: I think having [Backbone Coordinator] come from, you know, Notts Trent, though, and open up kind of opened a doorway for people to kind of, you know, take it upon themselves to put in something, some effort, or passion.

Logan: Giving up some time, and it will make a difference.

[...]

Drew: It's from getting round the table as well. All of us getting round the table, saying, 'Well, this is missing', and then [Backbone Coordinator] will reach out to that team. 'This is missing', then [they]'ll reach out to that team. So that's worked well, because then we've sat there and said, 'Well, this isn't there anymore. But it was' and, 'This worked, but it's not there'. That's how we've managed to get [Partner]. Because when we first started, if you remember rightly, one of the first things we mentioned was, '[Partner Organisation]. Where is it?' Yeah. So that brought [Partner] in.

27:52-38:49

Altogether, Family Hubs, along with other coordination activity described by participants, are further evidence of the backbone's fulfilment of its essential function as a facilitator of mutually reinforcing activities, communication, and a common agenda.

Community relationships

Building strong relationships with the Oak Tree community is essential for the success and sustainability of the OTGSR Initiative. This section will examine NTU's efforts to cultivate community engagement and ownership.

More could be done to improve relationships between the Initiative and wider community, particularly in a widespread manner. However, within the work that has been done, NTU has shown a firm commitment to relationship building within the community. For instance, while the Warm Welcome group is run by the parent partners, the Backbone Coordinator was noted for their regular attendance at this group by several participants. As Alex notes, “[Backbone Coordinator]’s happy to sort of sit there [...] but also, we can also then use it” (21:07); as well as mobilising the Warm Welcome group as a resource to aid community voice, the Backbone Coordinator participates in the group as a relationship building exercise.

Moreover, Ashley highlights how the attention given to the logistics of one of the community coffee mornings facilitated by the school and NTU was a key factor in its success. These coffee mornings are key for improving communication between the Initiative and the community, and as such are sites of relationship fostering. Importantly, many of the attendees of the most recent coffee morning had an existing relationship to the Warm Welcome group, highlighting the importance of the group for the further development of relationships.

“Timewise it was done straight after drop-off. So timing wise, [parents] didn't have to go anywhere and then come back, it was just there. It was sort of like: [...] quarter to nine, drop your children off, ten to nine, in the hall. So logistically, it was easy.”
Ashley, 15:58

The development of these relationships within coffee mornings, the Warm Welcome group, and steering group meetings involving the parental partners can be partially attributed to how the community members are interacted with. Multiple partners described these interactions as a “safe space” (Ashley, 14:45) for residents, characterised by respect and empathy. For instance, when asked about their perceived reasons behind their statement that relationships between parents and professional partners had improved, Cameron said:

“I think it's about human connection. And I think it's about the space that's been provided, possibly by [Backbone Coordinator] or, you know, the group of them. And I think it's, it's about trusted... it's about trust, it's about, it's about human needs. Basic human needs are being met, I would say probably in the spaces that are created via school, and through this project, and through the parents. You know, and I think because basic needs, human needs are being met, emotional, relational needs are being met. And I think through that you've got this space, which, you know, which feels very safe.”
Cameron, 41:15

There is therefore strong evidence of NTU as a backbone is working toward its essential function as a cultivator of community engagement and ownership. This work will help to fulfil

at least two of the strategic priorities: improved relationships between parents and services, characterised by trust and engagement, and ensuring children are within a social environment characterised by pride, inclusivity, resilience and cohesion.

Engagement and personal growth of parent partners

The engagement and personal growth of parent partners have been a significant positive outcome of the OTGSR Initiative. This section will explore how NTU has facilitated this growth and its impact on the project.

Parent partners have shown increased confidence and empowerment through their involvement in the Initiative, including presenting at a Regional Conference. Beyond the individual benefits, this has facilitated the parent partners' contributions to the project, creating a positive feedback loop between project engagement and personal growth.

“So, so yeah, it's been, it's been very empowering for the community and for those involved and to watch them grow. And to watch their strength come and develop and really sort of have a voice [...]. And you know, in terms of that, giving them the insight as well that sometimes you do have to sort of play an element of the game, and you have to sort of jump through some hoops, but you can always be more directive on that and sort of have that, you know, voice yourself and their opinion matters. So it's been amazing to watch them grow and develop as a group. And, you know, and, and, to see other professionals engage with them as well and to come away having sort of taken some real learning is, yeah”

Alex, 12:19

In their interview, Drew described the parent partners as inhabiting a “*middle ground*” between the community and professional partners including the school, as they can “*stand at the [school] gates and talk to the parents*” (27:30). This makes the parents uniquely placed to advocate for Oak Tree, with their ‘dual role’ as residents and Initiative partners allowing them to “*bite back*” (Bailey, 49:59) in conversations with organisations concerned with Oak Tree, in a way that professional partners may not be able to. In this way, parent partners work to give voice to the community, representing the community’s needs and priorities in decision-making discussions that concern the Oak Tree estate. As Drew says,

“There's people sat around tables, making decisions for things that they have no idea about. They've got no idea what it's like to live like this. And they've got no idea. So I can sit round a table and say, ‘Well you can't do that, you can't have that’... well they've never lived it.”

Drew, 15:49

This involvement was facilitated initially by the Backbone Coordinator, who approached the parents to request that they attend the project's first coffee morning. Importantly, the way that this contact was and continues to be made is instrumental; as Bailey states, “*I don't think I would have continued to come along, had it...if I didn't feel like... there was that level playing field, like it was on our level and that you [Backbone Coordinator] understood us*”

(40:33). The importance of this interpersonal connection has been noted by professional partners, with Billie observing in their interview that parent partners are “*spoken to like they're another professional partner that's sat around the table*” (41:34).

Part of Strategic Priority 4 stresses the importance of a ‘shared commitment to collaborative system leadership’ for all partners, which naturally includes the parents. ‘System leadership’ refers to both a process and designation based around employing systems thinking to drive change throughout an organisational system (Harris et al, 2021). While ‘system leaders’ have traditionally been individuals in formal positions of responsibility, “the ability to lead others at different levels in the system is the most important characteristic of effective system leaders” (ibid, p.401). In this sense, system leadership can and should be developed amongst individuals at different levels of the system – in this case, the community.

One of the ways through which this system leadership capacity has been fostered is via opportunities such as the conference described below by Alex. Alex, a professional partner, notes the impact of this kind of parental involvement within the system.

"...the parents were invited, along with [Backbone Coordinator], to speak at the Educational Psychologists Regional Conference. [...] [Backbone Coordinator] said, 'Shall we just do a question and answer?'. And they were like, 'Yeah, let's do that'. And do you know, what, there wasn't a single question that they were asked that they couldn't answer, that they weren't articulate about, passionate about. [...] that's probably been one of my proudest moments. [...] they were terrified. Honestly, but they were so brilliant, they really were so brilliant. [...] a lot of that comes from [Backbone Coordinator] - he could have gone along to that it could have gone all by himself, he could have, you know, but he didn't, he shared that with them. And that then empowers them to go on. [...] I do genuinely believe they are going to change the world."

Alex, 35:24

Reflecting on this in their interview with the Backbone Coordinator – whom they requested to be interviewed by – the parents discussed how their presence at the conference impacted them personally, as well as acknowledging that what they had to say had ‘connected’ with professionals in attendance.

Drew: I think yeah, I find it good to talk to people like that because to us, that's a completely different side of life we don't associate with people like that normally do we? And they don't really associate with people like us. And the fact that you could see they're all sad, and they were interested in taking it on board, what we were saying... it were good.

Bailey: I've never been in a room and felt like what we had to say mattered. But go in there, and you could genuinely feel that it did matter.

Drew: I think after we were finished as well, the fact that they came up and were like, ‘thanks for that’, and you got that bit of feedback that they were... because when you're talking and all, like when we were sat talking, it were going blalalala, like it was coming out, and after you thought ‘oh God what have I just said’, but then once they come up to you and were like, you know, ‘it were great’, and the feedback... so you know that you'd, like, connected with them. So yeah, I did enjoy that.

Backbone Coordinator: I thought that was brilliant. You guys are brilliant. And you really did connect. And you know, what you just said then about the gap, if you like, between your lived experience and people doing delivering services. That's my observation too its massive.

06:18-06:57

The parents' system-influencing activity extends beyond their indirect contact with professionals, however. Since the start of the OTGSR Initiative, and with some support from partners including NTU, the parents have worked to set up, run, and grow the Warm Welcome group. Their involvement in the Warm Welcome group has led them to take on further responsibilities, such as the development and management of a summer fair on the estate. This is the first of its kind on Oak Tree as far as the residents can remember, and as well as acting as a benefit to the community and a potential site of community cohesion – supporting Strategic Priority 5 – the fair was utilised by the professional partners in charge of the Family Hubs for community engagement.

Future iterations of the fair and other parent-run events may prove to be valuable resources for the fulfilment of the Strategic Priorities, which have been made possible by *“the parents, because they've got these links now with all these different partners and services”* (Jordan, 29:50). As Jordan goes on to add in their interview, the parents' mobilisation of these links to put on events is supported by *“the confidence of probably Luke and his team offering that support as well, [...] getting behind them and really champion what they're trying to do”* (Jordan 30:49).

Jordan's opinion is reflected in dialogue between two of the parent partners, Drew and Logan. Within this interview excerpt, the parents reflect on what they have gained from their involvement in the project; beyond the support they are giving to the community and project through their involvement, the parents' personal resource bases have also been expanded:

Drew: I do think that doing this and all has opened up things for us. Because if you look at it, before we were doing any of this, we were just at home, and now we've managed to like get Warm Welcome group up and going, we're out socialising with people... so I think we've realised that... Because I think when you've been staying home all these years, you think 'Oh I'm a stay at home Mum and I've got to start -' it's made you realise you can actually do stuff other than being a stay at home Mum.

Logan: We have made them relationships, though haven't we, like friends. We probably wouldn't have outside of this.

Drew: I think it's built confidence as well. Because if I were to look back a year or two ago, I wouldn't have gone 'Oh, yeah, I'll just go and talk to anyone, and go sit in this room, and blah, blah, blah, with everyone'. And now I'm like, 'People actually come in because they want to have a chat wi' ya, and they want to see what you can do'.

30:01-30:34

Increased access to data

Access to data is crucial for informed decision-making and measuring the progress of the OTGSR Initiative. This section will discuss how NTU's involvement has helped to break down barriers to accessing data.

The third essential function of the backbone organisation is establishing shared measurement practices (Collective Impact Forum, 2018). The establishment of a Shared Measurement System (SMS) is also the fourth condition for collective impact (Preskill et al, 2023). While an SMS is not one of the Strategic Priorities, it is essential for measuring progress against the Priorities' achievement.

Although an SMS cannot yet be expected due to the early stage of the project, the OTGSR Initiative has already helped break down partners' barriers to accessing data, such as sufficiency data for two-year-olds, which can inform planning and decision-making. Lines of communication between the OTGSR Initiative and external organisational stakeholders are integral in ensuring that quality, meaningful data is available to partners.

As Alex, below, discusses, the relationships needed for partners to obtain organisation-level data are beginning to be established as a consequence of this communication. While there is an apparent lack of formal regular communication between the Initiative and external stakeholders, it seems that the communication that is happening is impactful.

“It's just hard when you bring in a lot of different services around the table, they've all got their own agendas, and they'll have their own ways of... I mean, it's taken us 'til this year to be able to get sufficiency data for what two year olds, so what one year olds we've got in the community. I've been trying for years to get that information. [...] As part of this group coming together and sharing what this group is for – for the Getting School Ready agenda – that's broken down those barriers.”

Alex, 37:57

As Alex's quote illustrates, in an environment characterised by heavy restrictions on data sharing, external buy-in is an important factor in setting up the infrastructure needed to build a Shared Measurement System. Alongside communication, an alignment of values and responsibilities between organisations may support the development and strengthening of the relationships between and within providers needed for data sharing agreements to be constructed. This has important implications for the timeliness of data availability.

For NTU to fulfil its essential function as an SMS facilitator, and for the fourth condition of collective impact to be fulfilled, multiple recommendations have been made in 'Future priorities identified in the evaluation' (page 23) in the below section.

Evaluation and learning

Evaluation and learning are essential for the continuous improvement of the OTGSR

Initiative. This section will examine NTU's commitment to using data for reflection and improvement through the commissioning of this evaluation.

NTU has commissioned this evaluation of the OTGSR Initiative's first year, demonstrating a commitment to using data for reflection, learning, and improvement. This will prove valuable for learnings in further work both within and beyond the OTGSR Initiative's work.

The evaluation assessed the OTGSR Initiative's first year against the 5 conditions of collective impact identified by the collective impact foundation. In addition, progress against the 5 Strategic Priorities defined by the Initiative's partners was evaluated. Together, these findings provided insight into strategic directions that could be taken by the OTGSR Initiative and helped to elucidate the mechanisms behind the progress that had been made.

The below section will summarise the key resources that have been developed as a result of the OTGSR Initiative and the mechanisms they support.

Key resources supporting these mechanisms and developed as a result of the OTGSR Initiative included:

- **Relationships between partners**, both in terms of links between professional organisations, social connections between the parents, and improved relationships between the community and professional partners.
- **The Warm Welcome Group**, both as a site of information communication and relationship building, and as a fertile environment for the development of new work. Relatedly, the parent partners and the voice they bring are essential to the Initiative.
- **Professional partners' responsibilities, remits and resources**. Organisations' overlapping priorities helped to gain buy-in from members of those organisations outside of the Initiative. Spaces such as a the school and children's centre acted as resources, which partners at times shared with each other for the benefit of the project. Shared remits were identified as potentially useful for the development of a Shared Measurement System, as they may support access to data.
- **NTU as a backbone organisation** was noted by several participants as uniquely useful due to its ability to mobilise funding to facilitate the Initiative, its relative independence and access to knowledge. This relative independence supported the Backbone Coordinator's chairing of steering group meetings, as well as allowing NTU to act as an impartial conduit between organisations, fostering relationships.
- **Correspondence from the backbone** was described as being flexible to partners' needs and inclusive of parent partners, although more communication is needed.
- **Steering Group Meetings** are integral to information sharing and decision making.
- **The Strategic Plan** acts as a resource because it ensures adherence to the Initiative's principles and workstreams, and can also help gain buy-in from partners' organisations.
- **Sites of future coordinated activity** will act as resources because they can draw together professional and community voice, encourage decision-making, and support other aspects of the project. For example, the Roots to Readiness document will communicate OTGSR Initiative's aims and the existence of the Warm Welcome group to the community.

The evaluation also identified several key areas for future investment and development in the OTGSR Initiative. The below section will discuss these priorities and provide recommendations for addressing them.

Future priorities identified in the evaluation included:

The development of a Shared Measurement System (SMS).

Developing a Shared Measurement System is a crucial next step for the OTGSR Initiative. This section will explore the challenges and recommendations for establishing an SMS.

This is a key priority as an SMS would allow for progress to be defined and measured quantitatively. Tracking and analysing the Initiative's progress against community defined indicators would provide strategic insights and would allow for progress to be shared with stakeholders.

Existing challenges to the development of the SMS include a lack of resourcing, both in terms of funding and dedicated data staff, a need for buy-in from data owners and for data sharing agreements, and some conflict between data owners' wider priorities and the Initiative's local focus.

Recommendations for this priority area include securing additional resourcing, exploring the potential for primary data collection within the project, and facilitating greater communication between internal and external organisational stakeholders to promote buy-in.

According to the FSG (Collective Impact Forum, 2018), the SMS' design process should be participatory and transparent. As the process has not yet begun, this cannot yet be evaluated. It is therefore a key recommendation that these values be at the forefront of the data collection and generation efforts as the SMS is developed.

However, development of the SMS will require funding. Beyond costs for dedicated data collection staff, financial resources will be needed for training, technology, and technological support (Preskill et al, 2023). It will be necessary to secure funding toward project development and allocate sufficient funds to the development, effective utilisation, and maintenance of the SMS. This will need to be overseen by the backbone organisation, who will also need to dedicate or coordinate significant resourcing to the development of data sharing agreements and other legal matter.

Given the importance of the SMS and the significant work that will need to be undertaken to build it, it is recommended that a working group be set up to help prioritise the necessary agreements and actions for doing so. Part of this work could involve a scoping or mapping exercise to understand key enablers and blockers to the SMS' development, as well as what data is available and what is needed. This could be further supported through the development of a Theory of Change to help identify the resources, actions, and key players needed for the SMS.

Recognising parent partners' unpaid labour

The parent partners' contributions to the OTGSR Initiative have been invaluable, but their work is currently unpaid. This section will discuss the importance of recognising and rewarding their efforts.

The parents' involvement in the OTGSR Initiative may have supported the development of numerous resources essential for the project, but their hard work is conducted on a voluntary basis. Drew notes the conflict between the demands inherent in their involvement with the project and their daily lives:

"I do have to say that's one of the hardest things I'm finding we're doing this because I'm trying to keep you know, you're always like, I'm enjoying doing this I said to [professional partner] the other week, like I've been thinking about getting a job. I don't want to until I've completed this, and now whatever job I get's gotta work round Warm Welcome because I love going to Warm Welcome group, but, so you've got to try and keep it like on a professional level even though you're not actually paid."

Drew, 50:08

Given the considerable time and energy costs that the parent partners are not currently remunerated for, it is a recommendation that their considerable input – without which the Initiative would not have made the progress it had this year – be recognised and rewarded.

This does not necessarily have to be through financial means – indeed, great consideration will be necessary to ensure no detrimental consequences are faced by the parent partners who are Universal Credit recipients if they are to receive any money in future. In the least, NTU should work to formally recognise the skills and responsibilities undertaken by the parent partners, and support the parent partners in ways that they wish to be supported in. As Jordan says:

"I'd love to see the parents have more opportunities in terms of, I don't know, what their aspirations might be, whether that's, you know, personal development, whether it's career development. But I'd love to see those parents, you know, progressing as, as far in whatever field they want to do."

Jordan, 32:59

The below conclusion will summarise the key findings of the evaluation and discuss the potential for the OTGSR Initiative to serve as a model for effective university-community collective impact partnerships.

Conclusion

The Oak Tree Getting School Ready (OTGSR) Initiative has made significant strides in its first year, demonstrating great potential value for strategic investments in university-community partnerships. The Initiative's progress can be attributed to the collective efforts of the backbone organisation, Nottingham Trent University, professional partners, and parent

partners, who have worked collaboratively to develop essential resources and align activities towards a common agenda.

Key achievements include the establishment of the Warm Welcome group, which has become a vital platform for community engagement and relationship-building, and the ongoing development of the Roots to Readiness document, which exemplifies the potential for the OTGSR Initiative's ongoing ability to coordinate expertise and resources to support parents and children.

However, ensuring the Initiative's long-term success and maximising its impact will depend on work to address the areas identified for future development. Prioritising the creation of a Shared Measurement System, enhancing communication strategies, managing partners' capacity challenges, and securing additional personnel and funding resources will be essential for the initiative's growth and sustainability.

The below closing statement from Charlie, a key stakeholder, was spoken in response to the question: "What do you think the future of the Initiative should look like?". Here, Charlie underscores the OTGSR Initiative's profound potential to create lasting change within and beyond the Oak Tree community. By continuing to invest in this initiative and its identified priority areas, NTU can help build upon the solid foundation established in the first year, ensuring that the OTGSR Initiative remains a driving force for positive change and achieves its potential as a model for effective university-community collective impact partnerships.

"I suppose my magic wand from this would be 'How do we take what we've understood and learned from probably the most deprived, most challenging area of the county [...] How do we actually take that and unpick that and create a better system within the county'? And actually, 'How do we see some change from it?', because the tendency with these things is we do all this amazing work, hear what residents have to say. But we just listen to it, and then nothing changes. [...] And that's my magic, magic wand is that the people that read it and see it, decide that something needs to change and do something about it".

Charlie, 24:02

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