



Portsmouth
CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT PANEL

Review into the use of 'Systems Thinking' within Portsmouth City Council

Date published:

Under the terms of the Council's Constitution, reports prepared by a Scrutiny Panel should be considered formally by the Cabinet or the relevant Cabinet Member within a period of eight weeks, as required by Rule 11(a) of the Policy & Review Procedure Rules.

PREFACE

This review set out to develop a deeper understanding of the Systems Thinking method for reviewing the management and operation of public services as currently employed by Portsmouth City Council. As part of that review the panel met with a range of senior council officers, staff from services which have previously been reviewed and professionals from partner organisations with experience of using the Systems Thinking method utilised by the council.

On behalf of the Scrutiny Management Panel I would like to thank all those who participated in this review and supported us as elected members to get a better insight into Systems Thinking and its use by the local authority to drive forward progress and innovation in local public services.

During the review we heard a number of impressive examples of how Systems Thinking had been used to improve the services provided by the council, ensuring they are high quality, responsive and efficient. The reviews we learned about have undoubtedly resulted in better public services in our city.

As part of the review, we identified a number of recommendations for considering how the Systems Thinking method and implementation can be further developed, ensuring the model empowers staff and service users to help shape public services.

I am pleased to commend this report to the Cabinet and ask they give it due consideration as part of the political leadership they provide this local authority.

Councillor Cal Corkery
Chair, Scrutiny Management Panel

Date: 17 January 2024

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Aims of the Review

The aims of the scrutiny were for the panel to be informed of and to review:

- the current approach to the use of systems thinking in Portsmouth City Council;
- The methodology employed within PCC - to include an explanation of interventions, how they work and outcomes;
- How and why interventions are currently commissioned; and
- Potential future applications.

Recommendations

Recommend that Cabinet:

- i. Recognises and thanks the Systems Development Service for the outcomes of their work, which has resulted in significant improvements to the customer experience and the efficiency of the services that they have assisted;**
- ii. Recognises and thanks the Systems Development Service for the outcomes of their work with partner agencies, which has resulted in similar improvements to the customer experience and the efficiency of the services that they have assisted;**
- iii. Recognises that engaging with staff is an embedded part of the Systems Thinking methodology. However, it is requested that the methodology is reviewed with a view to identifying and implementing any further opportunities that may exist to further bolster or enhance this engagement and involvement;**
- iv. Recognises that the perspective of service users is considered as part of the current Systems Thinking methodology. However, it is requested that consideration be given to how service users could be more actively involved in the process where appropriate; and**
- v. Invites Cabinet Members to ensure Systems Thinking reviews be considered as an option where appropriate should it be identified that a process could be improved.**

Background

The topic for the review and a draft scoping document was considered and agreed by the Scrutiny Management Panel on 14 September 2023.

It was understood that the systems thinking methodology had been widely used in some parts of PCC to review and redesign services.

The panel agreed that the review be completed via a Task & Finish Group, with a draft report to be presented at a formal meeting of the panel in late January or early February 2024.

The Task and Finish Group met three times on:

23 November 2023 - An introduction to Systems Thinking at PCC (Presentation at Appendix 2)

The Task & Finish Group learnt about the Systems Thinking methodology at PCC, how it operated and the role of the Systems Development Service.

List of witnesses/contributors

- James Hill- Director of Housing, Neighbourhoods & Building Services
- David Adams - Lead Interventionist
- Eddie Stray - Lead Interventionist
- Jim Lines - Lead Interventionist
- Warren Norville - Interventionist

Members present

- Cllr Cal Corkey
- Cllr Graham Heaney

4 December 2023 - Practical Examples of the use of method at PCC Presentations at Appendices 3 and 4

The Task and Finish Group received three case study presentations from senior leaders who had commissioned a systems thinking intervention which demonstrated how the approach worked in practice.

List of witnesses/contributors

- David Adams - Lead Interventionist
- Jim Lines - Lead Interventionist
- Colette Hill - Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods) PCC
- Kaylee Mowatt - Team Manager Community Independence Service (PCC)
- Clare Scholfield - Clinical Director of Sexual and Reproductive Health, Solent NHS Trust

Members present

- Cllr Cal Corkey
- Cllr Graham Heaney
- Cllr Abdul Kadir
- Cllr Emily Strudwick

4 January 2024 - Consolidation of the information received and forming of recommendations.

The group met to consider the draft report, evaluate the information received during the review and ask further questions of officers to enable it to form conclusions and recommendations.

List of witnesses/contributors

- James Hill- Director of Housing, Neighbourhoods & Building Services
- David Adams - Lead Interventionist
- Jim Lines - Lead Interventionist

Members present

- Cllr Cal Corkey
- Cllr Graham Heaney

The wider context

Systems Thinking is a philosophy and academic discipline aimed at helping us to understand the world around us. It encourages us to understand 'wholes' rather than parts, and to acknowledge how the relationships between different parts of the system create the outcomes that we see.

Systems Thinking is applied to a wide range of systems. Examples of its application include environmental science and ecology; manufacturing, notably in Japan since the 1950s; and in public sector services around the UK and beyond.

When applied to how we think about the design and management of work, Systems Thinking offers a different way of understanding the problems we face; often in a way that contrasts with the assumptions of conventional management thinking.

In the UK public sector, it has been applied by a significant number of local authorities, in parts of the NHS, and in the police. Central Government has published detailed guidance for civil servants on the use of Systems Thinking in their work.

Because Systems Thinking as a discipline is so broad and varied, there is no consistent approach nationally, either in terms of the methods used or their applicability to given scenarios.

The local picture

There have been numerous attempts to codify the philosophy of Systems Thinking and the insights it offers into a methodology for change. The approach used at PCC, for example, is a variant of the 'Vanguard Method' for Systems Thinking.

The 'Vanguard Method' was developed in the 1980s and 1990s as a practical means to apply Systems Thinking in service organisations. PCC has used this approach since c2004 in a range of its services.

PCC Housing first used the Vanguard consultancy in c2005. At that time, the work concentrated primarily on Local Authority Housing. A number of interventions followed and this approach was adopted by the service as its key business improvement approach.

Over time, PCC has been able to internally grow its own capacity to do this work, thereby negating the need to use Vanguard and in 2015 set up the Systems Development Service.

The council currently has a small team of internal staff who support this work - the Systems Development Service, which sits within the Housing, Neighbourhood, and Building Services (HNB) Directorate but is available as a PCC-wide resource and also can work with commissioned services and PCC partners.

Evidence and Conclusions

The current approach to the use of systems thinking in Portsmouth City Council.

The approach used by PCC since 2004 is a variant of the 'Vanguard Method' for Systems Thinking as detailed above in 'the local picture' section.

For several years now, the resources of the Systems Development Service have been deployed both within PCC and in partner organisations on a demand-led basis. This means that there is no overall 'programme' of work to be completed. Instead, leaders of service systems approach the Director of Housing, Neighbourhoods and Building Services or a team member to commission support.

It was understood by the Task and Finish Group that there was a misconception that some more junior officers viewed the process as a top-down management tool. The service did not believe that this view was widely held and explained that the process was very much the opposite of top-down change. In fact, in some instances, it had been managers who had been more resistive, as the process challenged much of the thinking that characterises conventional management, and, as a corollary, service-design and measurement choices.

The Task and Finish Group learnt that the service had never been offered commercially, although there was an unwritten agreement that any requests for assistance from organisations with close links to the council would be considered on their own merits. On previous occasions a day rate had been charged.

In terms of how applicable the Systems Thinking model was, it was often said that the methodology did not work for all services or processes. However, with some slightly different approaches the model could be, and had been, adapted to a variety of service areas.

An example of this breadth is illustrated below:

- Local Authority Housing Repairs
- Sensory Impairment Service (assistance for those with sight and hearing loss)
- Residents' and businesses' planning applications
- Food, warmth & hygiene grant scheme for Covid-affected residents
- IT Service Desk
- Recovery Hub (substance-misuse service)
- Anti-Social Behaviour
- Community Independence Service (occupational therapy-led rehab)
- Green & Clean
- Sexual Health Service

How and why interventions are currently commissioned.

Interventions were requested for a number of reasons, although most commonly when there was a belief that an existing process was no longer believed to be fit for purpose or could be improved upon. This was the case with the sexual health service and the Green & Clean team case studies. The task and finish group also considered a case study in respect of the Community Independence Service (CIS) which was a new service that had been designed from the outset with input from one of the council's Lead Interventionists.

Green & Clean Team

The Green and Clean systems work started with a intervention in the cleaning service following consistent complaints about the quality of the cleaning service. The work moved naturally to cover other aspects of estate services including the grounds maintenance services and a single purpose led service - Green and Clean emerged.

Community Independence Service

This service was introduced in 2018 and was an occupational therapy-led service, with a stated purpose from the service users' perspective of 'help me to be independent and do the things that matter to me'.

This new service was developed from the outset with assistance from the Systems Development Service using Systems Thinking methodology.

Sexual Health Service

One of the drivers for completing this intervention was to improve access to the service. The scope of this intervention included contraception advice and provision, STI diagnosis and treatment, and reducing onwards transmission

Following the success of an intervention in the PCC-commissioned Recovery Hub (substance misuse service), the PCC commissioner agreed with her peers from the three other Local Authorities to commission a similar intervention in the Sexual Health Service.

The Sexual Health Service managed 314 patients' needs during the redesign experiment.

Resulting changes included:

- Maximising quality of first contact;
- Meeting patients' needs at first point of contact when clinically appropriate;
- When appointments were necessary, absorbing variation in when patients wanted to be seen; and
- Instead of a standard 'one size fits all' 30-minute appointment with a nurse, the length of time deemed appropriate was booked with the appropriate member of staff. For example, 10 minutes with a healthcare assistant, or 45 mins with a consultant doctor etc.

The effectiveness of the methodology employed within PCC

Engagement during reviews

In terms of employee engagement during a review, the interventionist would liaise with the senior leader to ensure that employee representations were representative. However, as the service under review was studied from point of customer demand to completion, the work carried out by numerous staff members in varying roles was observed 'live' and discussed with them first hand. This was a standard element of the 'Check' phase.

The Task and Finish Group discussed in detail the importance of all staff feeling engaged in any service review and emphasised the need for communication channels which ensured that they felt listened to and that their views were fully taken into account.

In respect of service user involvement, it was explained that the heart of the process involved viewing the service from the customer's perspective, including the 'failure demands' they placed on the service (demands arising from a failure to do something, or failure to do something *right* for the customer). These demands reveal a lot, both implicitly and explicitly, about what matters to a customer. Service users were asked questions and feedback was sought from them to inform the review.

Service user feedback was also sought on proposed changes. Previous experience had demonstrated that a lot of people did not know what changes would be most effective at the outset of the intervention and often the most effective changes had been different to those suggested by officers and service users at the outset.

The Task and Finish Group learned that to date, service user involvement as part of Systems Thinking service reviews had largely taken the form of council officers or other professionals trying to understand the service provided from the perspective of

the service user. The Task and Finish Group discussed how service users could be more actively involved in reviews themselves.

The context of the co-production agenda within Health and Social Care was discussed and it was noted there were potential methodological contradictions between co-production and Systems Thinking as currently implemented by the local authority. It was suggested such possible tensions could be overcome through the inclusion of service users within the intervention review teams.

The Task and Finish Group learnt about end results in respect of the case studies scrutinised:

Green & Clean Team

This intervention realised many benefits and embedded a culture of continuous improvement. Decision making about work that was required was put in the hands of those on site undertaking the work. For example, a schedule which involved cleaning floors that were already clean but not a door that was dirty no longer existed. Instead, an allocated time was given and elements that needed to be cleaned would be.

Some key improvements included:

- The removal of a fixed schedule and specifications, which resulted in areas that were already clean not being cleaned again;
- The creation of dedicated manager and supervisor teams;
- A new database to track the work, which helps to understand the work and associated issues along with leaseholder and other services cost recovery;
- Investment in equipment, infrastructure and materials;
- Gardening work was more predictable and had established rounds. Measures in hands of the gardeners/supervisors to determine whether to start again or how long they could be allocated to another task;
- Resources were allocated where and when needed and the flexibility existed to change where needed, eg a weekend round;
- Bulky refuse - the intervention improved the efficiency of the reporting and collection of bulky waste in housing areas. The average time of collection went from over two days to around four hours; and
- Introduced steps for investigation and changed the reporting protocol. As a consequence bulky waste was reduced by 40%.

Cultural improvements:

- A more supported workforce and the introduction of regular time spent with staff;
- Fewer disciplinary cases;
- The identification of barriers to doing the work well. Managers focus on these areas in order to act upon them;

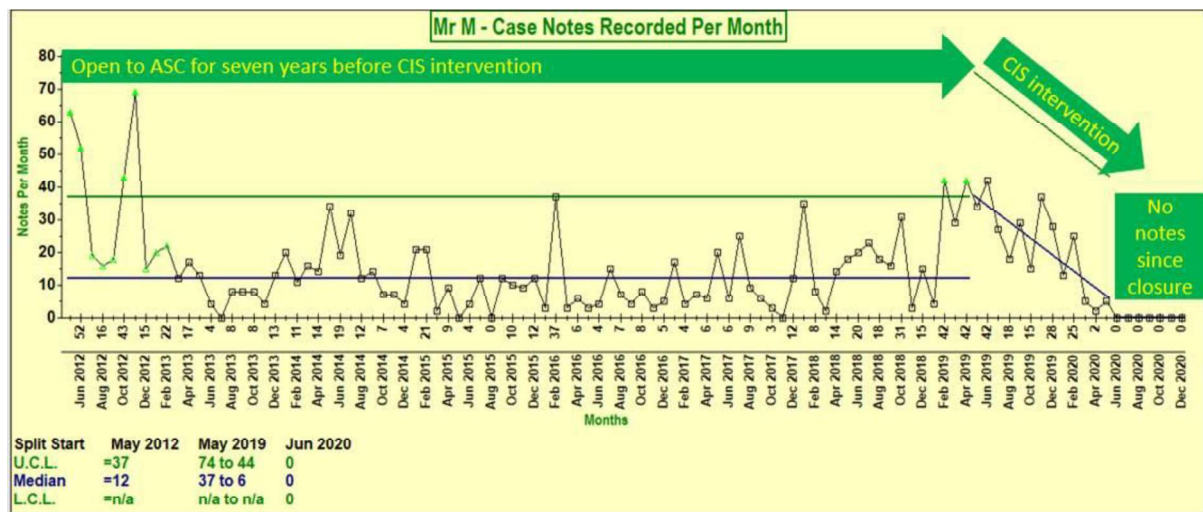
- An engaged workforce that feels empowered to raise issues and devise solutions. This drives work related changes and managers have oversight of any barriers and links to other issues; and
- A service-wide issues log is maintained.

Community Independence Service

In 2021 the Care Quality Commission awarded the Community Independence Service an 'outstanding' rating.

Several practitioners had joined the Community Independence Service from other local authorities and NHS services. A common theme had been comments about the sense of liberation they felt compared with their roles in other occupational therapy services.

The performance at PCC can be seen in the graph below, derived from a case study. This illustrates that a client of Adult Social Care's had been in regular contact with the directorate's services over many years. After 12 months' support from CIS in 2019/'20, however, the client no longer contacted the directorate's services because he had finally achieved the independent-living outcomes that he had long desired. This helped illustrate the cost-saving impact on the wider health and care system.



Contrasts in the operation between a typical Adult Social Care Rehabilitation Services and PCC's CIS service are summarised below:

Typical ASC rehab service	Contrast in systems	CIS
Focus on rehab for older residents	Service-user scope	Support any impaired adult to become more independent
Focus on mobility and personal care	Scope of service delivery	All independent-living skills
Form-filling; fragmented	Means of referral	Explorative conversation between referrer and CIS; integrated
Administrator	First point of contact	An Occupational Therapist
Standard six weeks' rehab	Delivery of rehab/enablement	Work with service user for as long as required to meet outcomes, applying PLAN
Functional silo	Role in health-and-care system	Recognising preventative impact on other services' demand and costs
Refer on to social work service to assess need and arrange care	Relationship with domiciliary care services	Arrange care as required, recognising role as best resource to do so, reducing fragmentation
Standard national metrics, based on arbitrary timeframes	Measures	Derived from purpose; means of analysis is common- and special-cause variation
Paperwork-heavy	Bureaucracy	Minimal

Sexual Health Service

Key outcomes of the service redesign were:

- Much lower end-to-end cost of the service;
- Patients are booked with the right clinician first time;
- Identifying clinical and social indicators at point of demand that would have previously been missed;
- Significant unsolicited positive feedback from patients;
- Radical changes in thinking of senior leaders;
- 1,000 fewer failure demands per month from Portsmouth patients;
- 3,000 fewer failure demands per month from patients across the area that the service covers;
- Calls per week from unique patients had risen by 20%;
- There had been a statistically significant reduction in DNA rate;
- 80% of patients have clinical value added at first point of contact, compared with the previous system;
- About 20% of demand is satisfied at first point of contact, saving many a clinical appointment;
- Doctors report that their clinic slots are now filled with appropriate patients; and
- Clinicians have reported fewer 'abandoned' appointments, as planned treatments are clinically appropriate.

The success of these changes had resulted in Southampton, the New Forest, and Aldershot's demand joining the new model from the beginning of November 2023.

The Task and Finish Group wished to place on record its thanks to those who had taken the time to share their experiences and success using the council's Systems Development Service.

The Task and Finish group was impressed by the outcomes detailed, which had delivered significant improvements in service and improvements to the customer experience.

Recommendations:

That Cabinet:

- i. Recognises and thanks the Systems Development Service for the outcomes of their work, which has resulted in significant improvements to the customer experience and the efficiency of the services that they have assisted;**
- ii. Recognises and thanks the Systems Development Service for the outcomes of their work with partner agencies, which has resulted in similar improvements to the customer experience and the efficiency of the services that they have assisted; and**
- iii. Recognises that engaging with staff is an embedded part of the Systems Thinking methodology. However, it is requested that the methodology is reviewed with a view to identifying and implementing any further opportunities that may exist to further bolster or enhance this engagement and involvement.**
- iv. Recognises that the perspective of service users is considered as part of the current Systems Thinking methodology. However, it is requested that consideration be given to how service users could be more actively involved in the process where appropriate.**

Potential future applications

The Task & Finish Group noted that the Systems Thinking methodology used by the Systems Development Service could either be utilised in its standard form or tailored where necessary and adapted to work successfully with a wide range of different services and processes.

At the same time, the Task and Finish Group noted the method may not be best suited for all circumstances and it was important that services retained flexibility when it comes to dealing with their own situations.

With this in mind, and the successes achieved, the Task & Finish Group was keen that the Systems Development Service be considered as an option should processes need reviewing.

Recommendation:

- v. That Cabinet invites Cabinet Members to ensure Systems Thinking reviews be considered as an option where appropriate should it be identified that a process could be improved.**

Integrated Impact Assessment

An Integrated Impact Assessment is not required in respect of this report and its recommendations, as no new policies or services are proposed.

Budget and policy implications of the recommendations

The following table highlights the budgetary and policy implications of the recommendations being presented by the panel:

	Recommendation	Action By	Budget & Policy Framework	Resource Implications
1	Recognises and thanks the Systems Development Service for the outcomes of their work, which has resulted in significant improvements to the customer experience and the efficiency of the services that they have assisted.	Cabinet	N/A	N/A
2	Recognises and thanks the Systems Development Service for the outcomes of their work with partner agencies, which has resulted in similar improvements to the customer experience and the efficiency of the services that they have assisted.	Cabinet	N/A	N/A
3	Recognises that engaging with staff is an embedded part of the Systems Thinking methodology. However, it is requested that the methodology is reviewed with a view to identifying and implementing any further opportunities that may exist to further bolster or enhance this engagement and involvement.	Systems Development Service	N/A	None identified
4	Recognises that the perspective of service users is considered as part of the current Systems Thinking methodology. However, it is requested that consideration be given to how service users could be	Systems Development Service	N/A	None identified.

	Recommendation	Action By	Budget & Policy Framework	Resource Implications
	more actively involved in the process where appropriate.			
5	Invites Cabinet Members to ensure Systems Thinking reviews be considered as an option where appropriate should it be identified that a process could be improved.	Cabinet Members and Directors, as appropriate and based upon need.	N/A	The Systems Development Service is an established team within the council that is free to be commissioned by any service area. Workloads and scheduling of interventions are managed within the team.