

What is meant by ‘whole systems change’?

The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services (C4EO) aims to help those working in the sector improve the life chances of all children and young people, in particular those who are most vulnerable. C4EO enables Children’s Trusts and their partners to access evidence of what works to improve outcomes for future generations, as well as receive hands-on support for practical solutions. Services for children, young people and their families are provided across a wide range of organisations brought together by Children’s Trusts. C4EO believes that understanding systems, how they work and how they can change, can help people to find practical solutions and to support the changes in professional behaviour that make these happen.

Systems theory makes connections between the parts of the system and the whole. This is vital in terms of supporting improvements across Children’s Trusts because it enables us to look beyond the immediate and consider the wider impact of our actions. This is what we mean by the term ‘whole systems change’. A change made to one part of the system (for example a particular service or element within a Children’s Trust) will create change in other parts of the system. Appreciating this means that substantial change may be achieved through initial small changes. Looking at the Trust as a whole, a small change can be used to make wider changes that have a wider impact. It also helps us to anticipate some of the unexpected changes that can occur.

C4EO’s work makes use of whole system change thinking in its:

- Directors’ Summaries that show how key messages are relevant across Trust partnerships and services
- Progress Maps: these help managers to compare and benchmark, helping them to identify where change is needed and what improvements they can make to systems and services
- Tailored support: C4EO’s sector specialist can help local services to identify and improve how they operate systemically. They can offer support across strategic partnerships, within particular agencies, or to key individuals – recognising the impact that change in one area can have on other aspects.
- Specific systems resources: The OBA toolkit uses a systems approach to embed cultural change over time; The Change Management resource makes available some of the more popular and effective change management tools in use in public services.

- Evaluation: As part of the evaluation of C4EO's impact, Children's Trusts are asked about systems change they have achieved with C4EO support.