

Rethinking
the thinking
on
inequalities



Contact information

Naoimh McMahon, PhD

Faculty of Health and Medicine, Lancaster University.

n.mcmahon1@lancaster.ac.uk

www.naoimhmcMahon.com



Acknowledgements

I'm extremely grateful for the insightful contributions of the following people who have supported me in carrying out the research and in preparing this visual resource: Amy Clair, Clara Martins de Barros, Dominique Nylander, Elena Semino, Geoffrey Gleadhill, Hannah Fairbrother, Hilary Garrett, Jayne Price, Jennie Popay, Joel Llewellyn, Katherine Smith, Lisa Whiting, Louise Marshall, Martina Kane, Peter Durrant, Rob MacDonald, Saima Gull, Sarah Markham, and Tim Wilson. I would also like to acknowledge the very helpful conversations that I had with Julian Burton about creating visual metaphors, and my colleagues who have provided constructive feedback and critique on earlier versions of the booklet - you are too many to name but your time and help in finalising this resource is deeply appreciated. A very special thank you to Charlotte Caswell of Bearwell Creative Ltd for her patience, illustrative skills, and ingenuity in converting what was a work-in-progress idea into this finished creative output. We got there in the end!

Copyright

Copyright © Lancaster University 2025. All rights reserved.

Funded by



Preface



This illustrated booklet is a summary of the learning that I've gained through my Wellcome Trust-funded research project: "Framing inequalities through causal stories: a cross-case comparison and critical reflection" (224770/Z/21/Z).

The aim of the research was to explore how inequalities take shape as a problem across different health and social policy areas. I wanted to see if traditional approaches to putting shape on the issue might be making it difficult to get beyond responding only to the symptoms of inequalities, to reshape the conditions that give rise to them.

The first section of the booklet sets out **THE CHALLENGE** that underpins the research, before presenting an illustrated account of **WHAT MIGHT BE KEEPING THIS SITUATION IN PLACE**. The insights presented here have been developed primarily from academic critiques in the fields of health, early years, and youth justice. However, I'm also indebted to a range of thinkers whose writing helped me to make sense of what I was reading, and to recognise how limited my own thinking was at the outset of the research. Some key references are provided at the end of the booklet. The final section of the booklet visualises some contemporary ideas on **DISRUPTING INSTITUTIONALISED WAYS OF THINKING** to create the space to respond differently to inequalities.

The booklet is deliberately abstract to allow for its use across different topic areas, but no doubt will work better for some examples rather than others. It is not intended to be prescriptive, but instead is a visual resource to facilitate critical reflection and dialogue on what gets identified as an issue, how complex issues take shape within institutions, and the consequences for what actions are ultimately taken. I would love to hear your thoughts and any feedback that you might have on the resource and how it could be further developed and refined: n.mcmahon1@lancaster.ac.uk.

The challenge



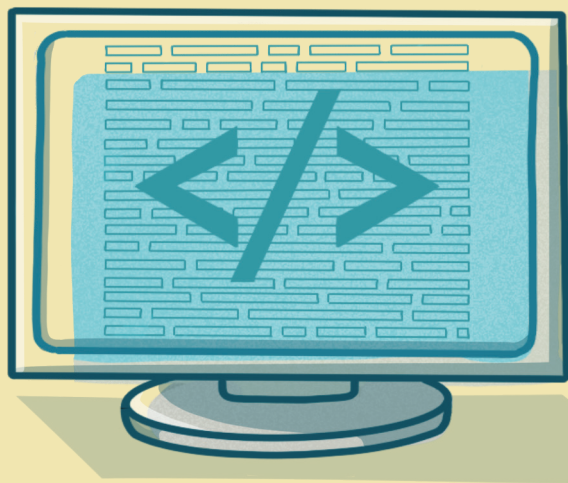
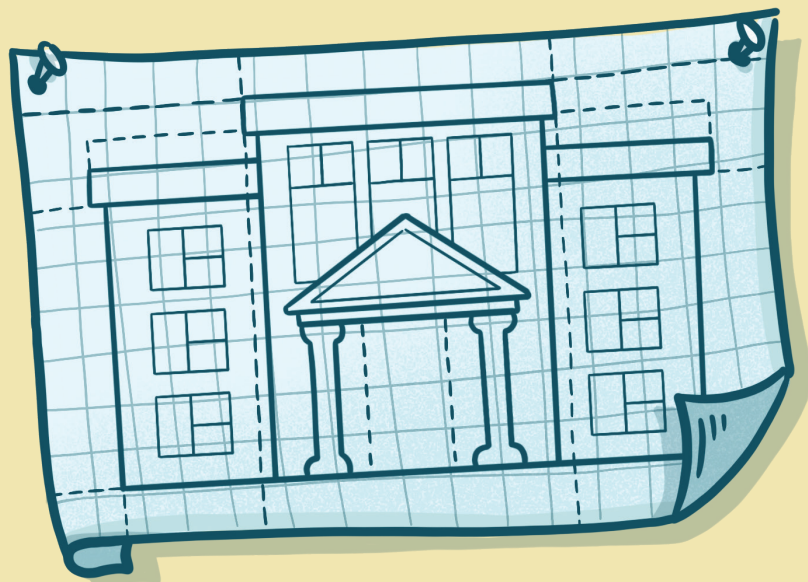
A fundamental challenge facing statutory institutions is the volume of time, money, and energy that is spent **responding to the symptoms** of social and economic inequalities (in an often siloed fashion), rather than **transforming the conditions** that give rise to them.

What is keeping this situation in place?

There are of course limits to the actions that different parts of the public sector can take in responding to social and economic inequalities.

However, there is increasing recognition that **institutionalised 'ways of thinking'** about the world, knowledge, and social action might be **compounding** this challenge by leading to issues, like inequalities, being thought about in quite narrow and limiting ways.

These ‘ways of thinking’ are like the **‘blueprints’** or the **‘source code’** of statutory institutions.



They are **not immediately visible** but are reflected in every aspect of their design and inner workings.

They could also be thought about as the **‘building blocks’** of institutional sense-making and problem solving, or the thinking that institutions are **‘rooted in’**.

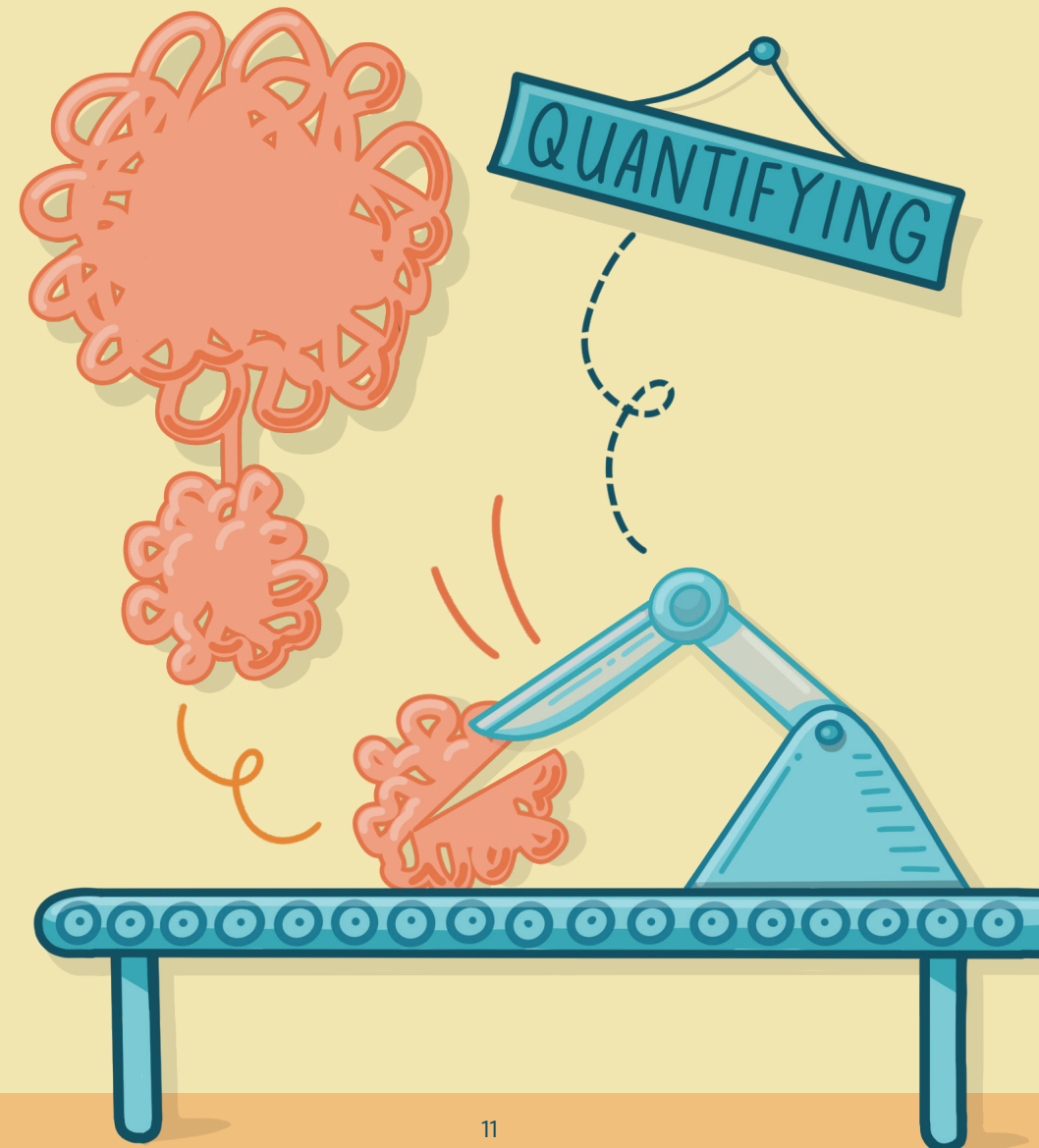


Their influence can be seen most clearly in the **processes** or the **‘internal mechanics’** through which institutions **put shape** on complex issues.

For example, when **identifying** an inequalities issue, there is a tendency to start with numerical data that illustrates patterns **in outcomes**, and that quantifies the scale of the differences between people and places.



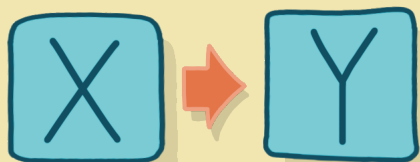
While these are invaluable insights about the **consequences** of wider social and economic inequality, **carving up** the issue in this way can **set in motion** a very particular approach to making sense of and explaining these socially patterned outcomes.



When trying to figure out ‘what is going on here’, there can be an institutionalised tendency to reach for explanations that describe the problem in terms of **discrete causes** (e.g., ‘**risk factors**’), which could be isolated and targeted for intervention.



Because this **knowledge**, like the numerical data that defines the issue, has been produced through **scientific methods**, it is often seen as providing an **objective, apolitical, and unproblematic** account of what is going on.



Knowledge and ideas that do not easily lend themselves **to simplified claims of direct cause and effect** (if you do X, Y will happen), or that are not **within the purview of what is considered possible**, can find that they are discarded at this stage of the ‘problem-solving’ process.

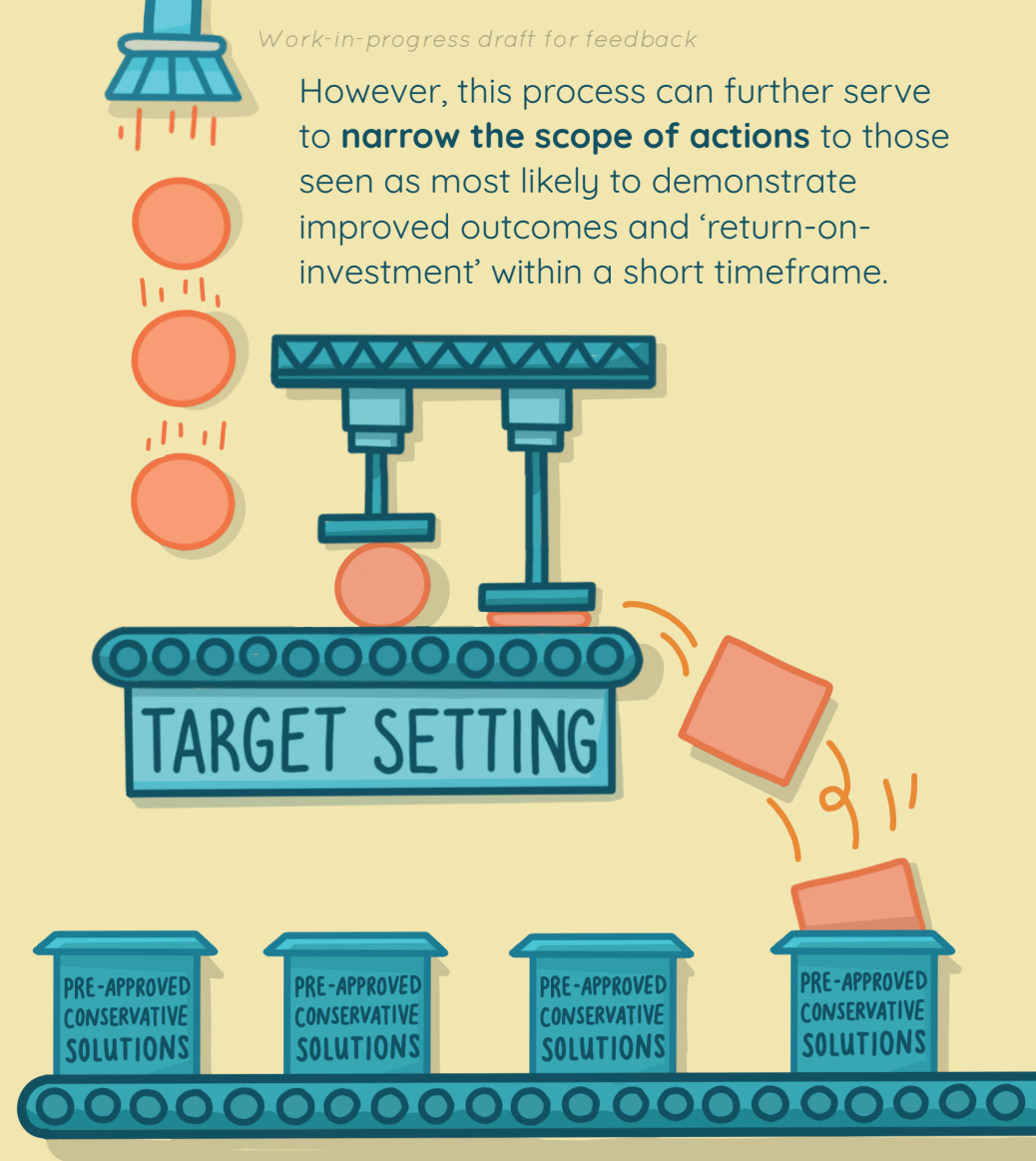


When planning responses to inequalities, these tend to be justified on the basis that they will **reduce the economic burden** on the state, and there can be limited opportunity to further interrogate **the goals** or **the purpose** of taking action.

To ensure public funds are well spent, targets are often set against which the success of different actions can be measured.



However, this process can further serve to **narrow the scope of actions** to those seen as most likely to demonstrate improved outcomes and 'return-on-investment' within a short timeframe.



What so often **comes out the other end** of this process is a **version of the problem** that legitimises interventions designed to offset the worst harms of social and economic inequality, but while leaving untouched the conditions that give rise to them.

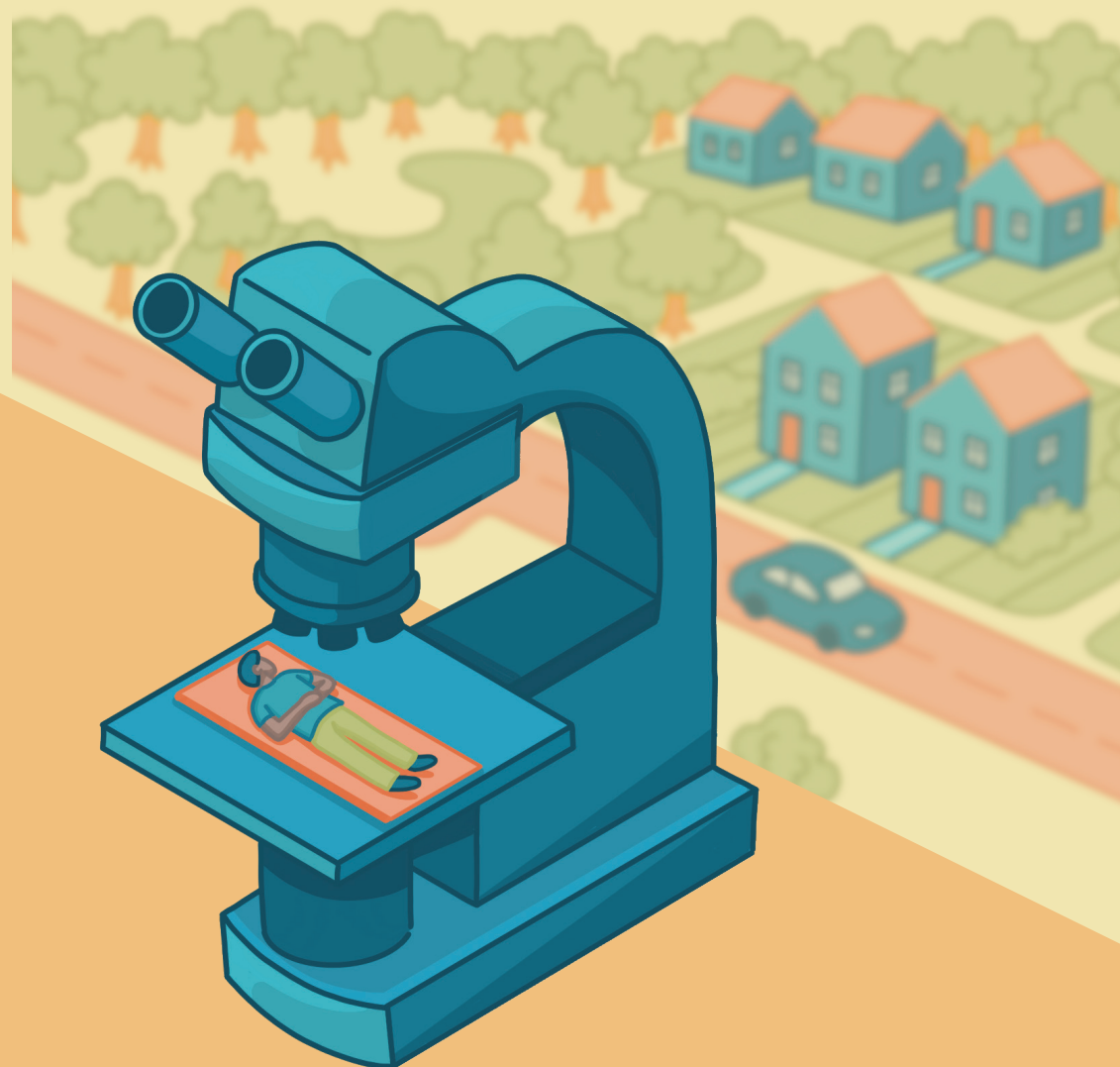
While there is recognition throughout this process of the important influence of wider political and economic forces, it is still often the case **that people themselves ultimately come to be presented as the ‘problem’**, and the target of change.

This is perhaps not surprising in light of the current design of statutory institutions that have such a strong focus on service provision.

However, it can unhelpfully reinforce the idea **that inequalities originate within certain kinds of people and communities.**



The forces shaping their lives are **pushed to the background** and **obscured**, and instead **they are put under the microscope** where their outcomes, motivations, and behaviours are subject to scrutiny and intervention.





As a result, inequalities can often come to be presented a **technical issue** that can be 'fixed' within the limits of current socioeconomic arrangements through professional-led evidence-based interventions.

Disrupting institutionalised 'ways of thinking'

Below are four questions that may be useful in critically reflecting on the process through which inequalities take shape as a problem within institutions, and how this could play out differently to create space for new ways of thinking and working.

What should be the ‘starting point’?

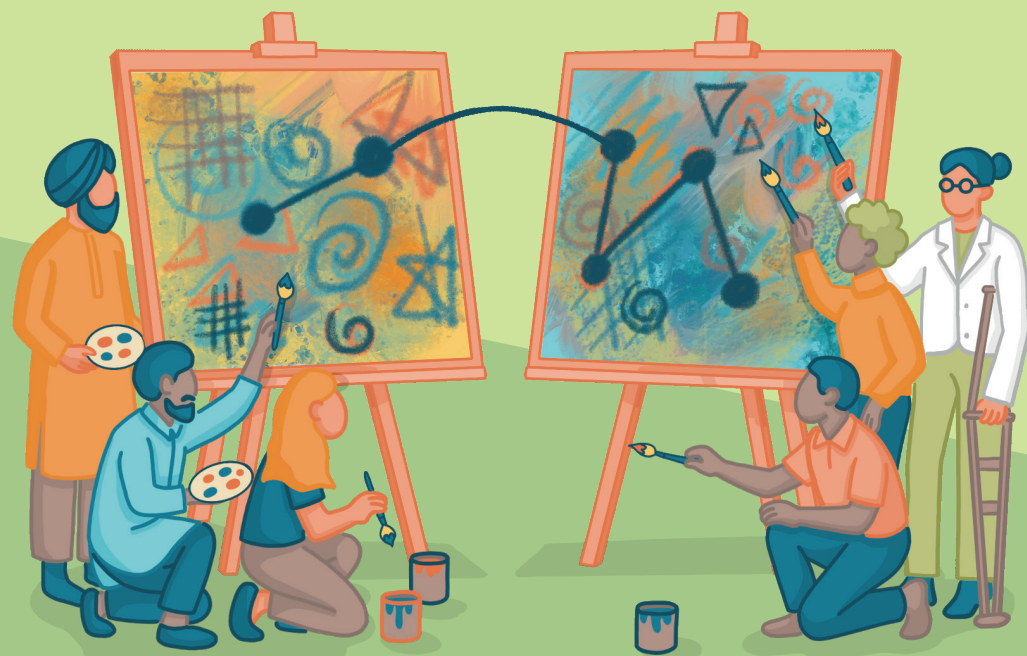
While accepting the importance of high-level data on institutional priorities, the work of identifying and defining ‘problems’ **could start in people’s concrete everyday experiences** and **look out** from there at the forces that are shaping people’s lives.



This shift in perspective may **counter the tendency** to make people themselves the ‘**unit of analysis**’.

What knowledge is needed for ‘problem-solving’?

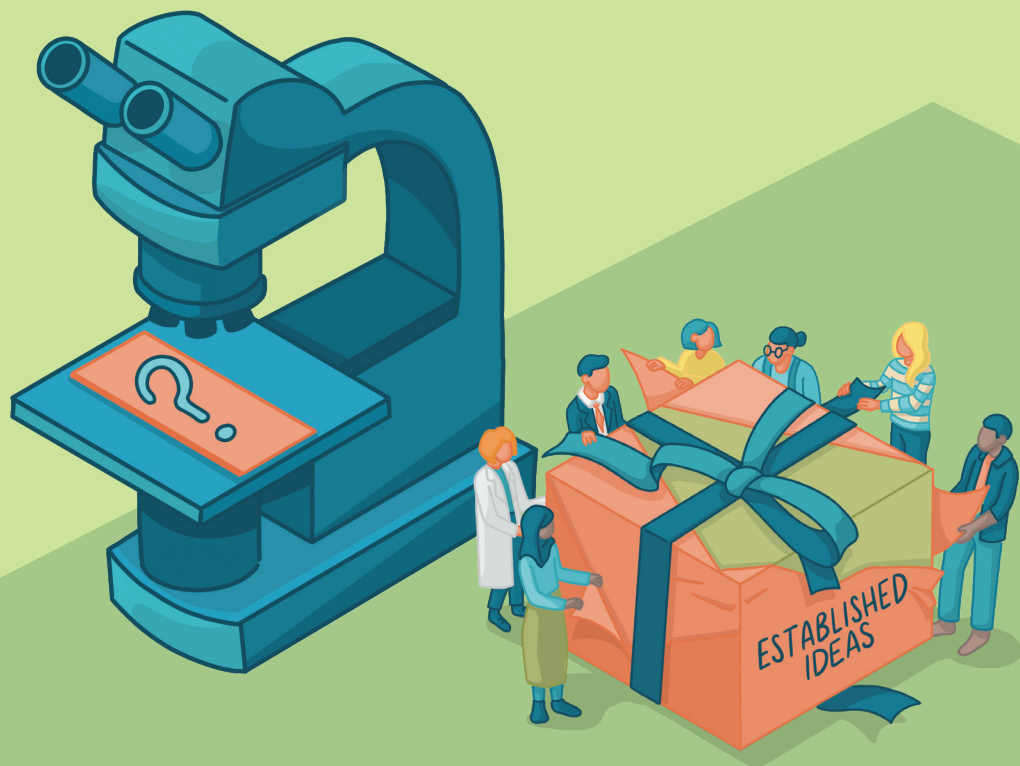
Rather than some forms of knowledge taking precedence, the ‘problem-solving’ process could draw in different perspectives and expertise to collectively **build up a rich picture** of what is going on, and to **more explicitly surface** why things are the way they are.



This shift may counter the tendency to default to overly **simplistic accounts** of the causes of inequalities, while also prompting a **joining of the dots** on different forces that are creating and sustaining patterns in experiences.

What should be the target for change?

The exercise of generating a rich picture of the various **processes and relationships** shaping people's lives (e.g., social, institutional, political, economic, commercial) would raise the question of **what exactly needs to be put under the microscope** and made the target of change?



Rather than established ideas about the purpose and scope of possibility for action being seen here as fixed and unchangeable, these could be **explicitly opened-up to collective scrutiny** and considered a potential target for change.

What is an appropriate theory of change?

Rather than action being limited to discrete interventions that can be known in advance and with 'certainty' to 'work', more space could be created for activities where **knowledge and learning is generated in the process** of collectively figuring out how to **reshape** identified targets of change.



This shift may counter the tendency to see social action in terms of a series of 'fixes', and prompt **more flexible, creative, and experimental approaches** to realising deeper changes both within and outside of institutions.

Does the diagnosis presented here resonate?

What different ways of thinking are already gaining traction where you work?

In what ways are the internal mechanics of institutions changing (or not!) to accommodate different ways of thinking?

What is the depth or scale of change that is being realised through alternatives?

What are the implications of different ways of thinking for knowledge generation and the role of research?

Are they going far enough to reshape thinking and action on inequalities?

Notes on influential resources

It's not possible to do justice here to the breadth of resources that have influenced the content of this booklet. Below however are some of the thinkers that I have found myself continuously returning to in order to help clarify my own understanding around some core themes. I feel I have grasped some of the ideas reasonably well but for others I'm fully aware that I'm still getting to grips with the challenge they pose to traditional ways of thinking about, and responding to social issues, and the depth and the scale of change for which they are advocating.

It was through reading scholarship from the study of social problems, and in particular the writing of Murray Edelman, that I came to understand the bias that exists in terms of what and who gets identified as a 'problem', when many damaging conditions and actions fail to achieve this status. These insights chimed with ideas cropping up across the cases that questioned the focus on individual behaviour when commercial forces and wider social harms are so often overlooked. It was through reading Dorothy Smith's *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People* that I came to fully appreciate the change in perspective required here from studying people, to studying the world from their perspective, and I'm indebted to Órla Meadhbh Murray who explained this particular version of standpoint theory as though you are standing at someone's shoulder looking out and up into the institutions, rules, and relations that are organising their lives.

Carol Bacchi's writing on the importance of taking a step back from eager efforts at 'problem-solving' to more critically consider how problems are being represented, and the consequences that follow, has been invaluable in guiding me through this work. I have also found the distinction that Bacchi makes between deliberate framing efforts, and

the taken-for-granted intellectual frameworks within which problems take shape, to be useful in focusing less on individual perspectives and understanding, and more on institutionalised ways of thinking about issues and action. It was Vanessa Andreotti's writing in *Hospicing Modernity* that helped me to further understand this point and how modern ideas permeate so many aspects of our thinking, in ways that are rarely acknowledged, and with profound consequences for how we come to understand the world and the scope of possibility for change.

The work of the Better Way Network helped me to get to grips with the influence of New Public Management principles in organising work within statutory institutions and I've been inspired to use the metaphor of institutional mechanics and machinery because of arguments made by Caroline Sloccock about the need to 'get under the hood of government'. More recently, I have found resources from the Human Learning Systems approach and the International Futures Forum extremely helpful in further understanding the concept of complexity, and its implications for knowledge and action.

I would like to also acknowledge scholarship specific to the study cases that has helped me to appreciate patterns in how social issues, like inequalities, get problematised across policy and practice. From the early years literature, I've been influenced by the contributions of Karen Clarke, Val Gillies, Rosalind Edwards, Donald Simpson, Peter Moss, and Alice Bradbury and their collaborators. From the field of youth justice, I've been influenced by the writing of John Pitts, Derrick Armstrong, Hazel Kemshall, Barry Goldson, John Muncie, Stephen Case, Patricia Gray, Laura Kelly and their collaborators. From the health inequalities field, I've been influenced by research from Kaveri Qureshi, Katherine Smith, Julia Lynch, Tim Blackman, Oli Williams, Rebecca Mead, Katie Powell, and their collaborators.

