# Fife Gingerbread's Upstream Mindset Framework

Our journey towards a preventative model of whole family support

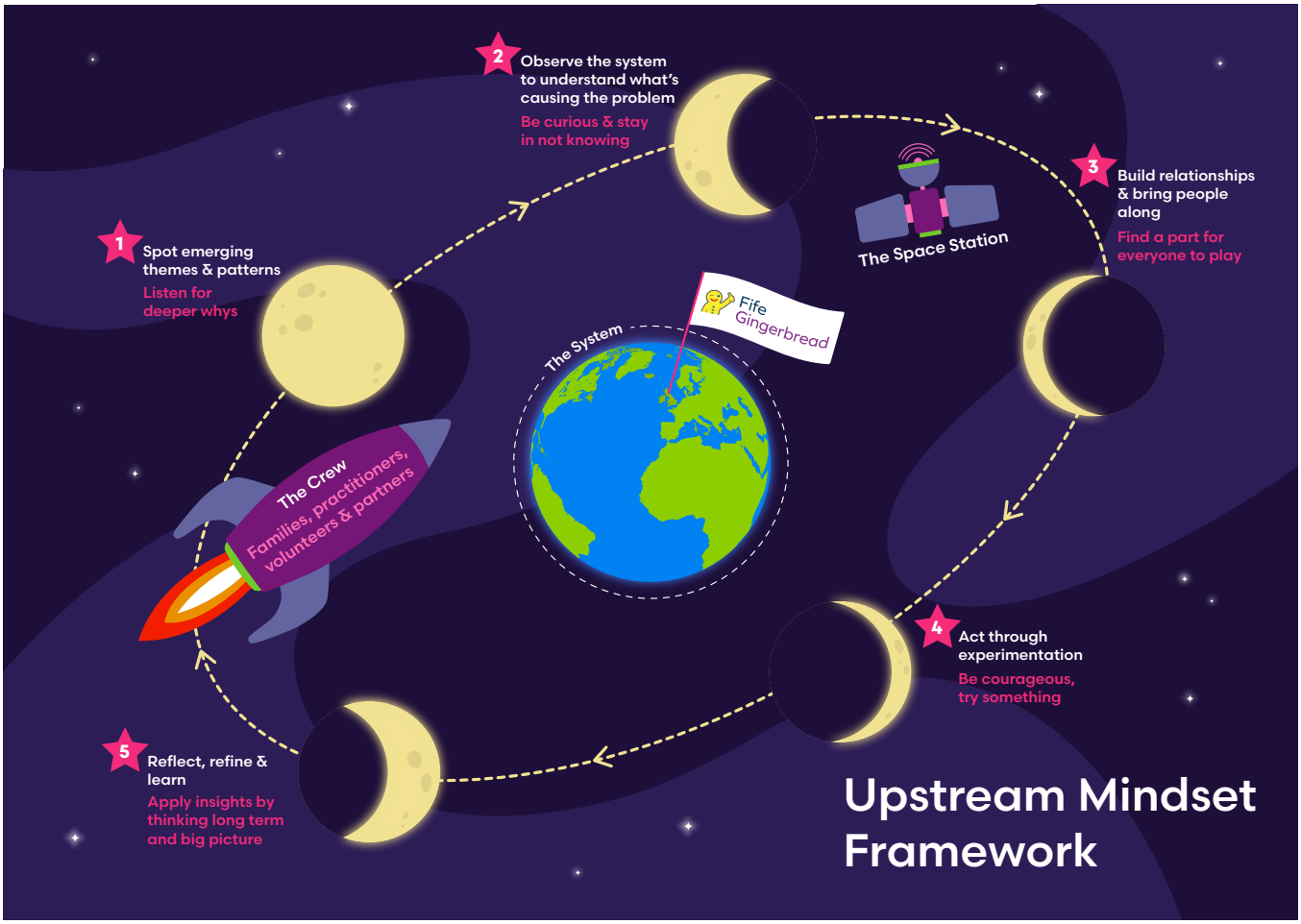


# Introduction

Fife Gingerbread sought support from Collaborate CIC to develop a framework that would help their team to make sense of their context, articulate their vision and demonstrate how they are working towards it. They wanted a framework that would act as a bridge between their strategy and day-to-day activities.

Fife Gingerbread's latest strategy from 2024 shared a stargazing journey of reflection and growth that involved their board, staff, volunteers, and parents in reimagining support for families. They set out to continue supporting families through moments of crisis, and to provide holistic whole family support to grow the resilience of families. Additionally, they committed to taking an upstream mindset to tackle the systemic challenges that trap families in poverty.

The team at Fife Gingerbread isn't afraid of grappling with complexity in order to change the status quo of 1 in 4 children living in poverty. The Upstream Mindset Framework is a tool for their team to deeply embed the mindset – and it's a tool they want to share with others seeking to make an impact on child poverty and safe and happy homes for families. Systemic change is only possible by working together.



# How we made the framework

Our support drew on our experience of working with organisations to help them understand systems change progress over time, and develop stronger learning cultures. We co-developed the Upstream Mindset Framework with Fife Gingerbread staff over a period of six months using the following methodology:

- **Discovery interviews** - Three group interviews and one 1:1 interview with various members of the team to better understand the context they work in, what an Upstream Mindset means to them, and what type of framework people would find most valuable.
- **In-person workshop** - A participatory session with a wider group of staff to start development of the framework. In the workshop, we more closely defined the Upstream Mindset, thought about when and how people use the mindset and designs for the framework.
- **Development of the framework** - Based on interviews, the workshop and our experience of developing frameworks and models to better understand and track systems change.
- **Virtual playback workshop** - Virtual workshop to present the draft framework to leadership and staff, as a chance to get feedback for framework iteration.
- **Launch** - Framework shared in an online event with managers and project coordinators to plan the implementation to embed the work in practice.

# An Upstream Mindset

## Defining the approach

An Upstream Mindset means **preventing harm** by understanding the issues that are **deeper than individual choice** and creating opportunities for **making a difference** on those issues for lasting change.

An Upstream Mindset is an approach to big picture thinking. Using this mindset, we can not just react and mitigate harm but focus on preventing issues in the first place. It's also about using our natural curiosity, learning about the system causing underlying problems and thinking about strategic actions to experiment with.

Adopting an Upstream Mindset means questioning what would make a difference – not only for a person's or a family's experience right now but in the future, and not just for them but for others, too. Ultimately, it is a way to work oneself out of a job.

It also involves more collaboration and co-production since outcomes of a system such as poverty are produced (and changed) by many actors and factors. We have to learn together about what works.

Using an Upstream Mindset requires sticking with gathering information and forming ideas about what might be happening or what might be worth trying before jumping to conclusions. Staying with the complexity is made possible by asking 'why', and finding ways to handle the discomfort of not knowing or having an immediate answer.

# How to use the framework

A framework is a structure or a set of guidelines based on some theory about the world, while offering enough flexibility for adaptation and expansion. The Upstream Mindset Framework is a guide for how to address systemic conditions that keep families struggling, preventing their recurrence.

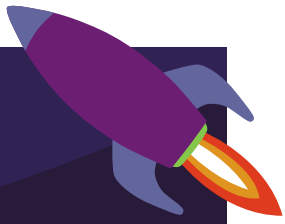
The Upstream Mindset Framework is versatile; it can be used in supervision meetings as part of identifying systemic patterns across different family's experiences, or used for reflection during team meetings. It can guide work with families and with partners, and be a way of framing a vision for change for a project, and for influencing policy.

The Framework has the potential to build resilience with a family member and make sure they can be part of a solution, give consistency and confidence to the team when it comes to adopting the Upstream Mindset, make sure things don't get missed and act as a guide to focus the work on what could make a big change, and help make clear how change is happening.

The Framework is made up of five phases. Two key principles threaded through all five phases are participation and learning through practice. There are supplementary questions for each phase that consider both things to do and things to think about.

The five phases are represented as a lunar cycle to link with the Stargazing Strategy but also, importantly, to indicate that systems change work is non-linear. Just as the moon becomes brighter in the night sky, we can gain more information and clarity as we work to change systems and share our learning.

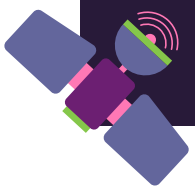
Fife Gingerbread's superpower is 'test & demonstration' where they take a challenging issue that is appearing for many families and develop a different way of working through partnering, experimenting and learning with families, practitioners, volunteers and partners.



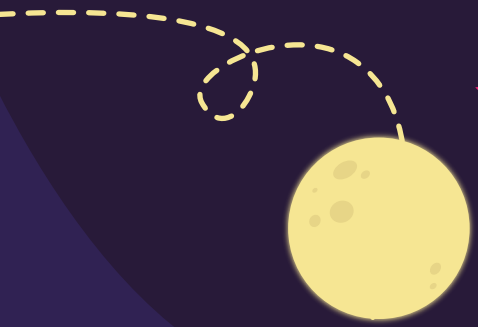
Underpinning the framework is both our **crew** and the **satellite**.

The **crew** are represented by our Participation Rocket with families, practitioners, volunteers and partners on board for the journey across the five phases. The crew are based in Fife where they can observe, identify patterns and gain a holistic view from through different lens. It is important that we take all key stakeholders on the journey and share power.

The **satellite** is represented by The Space Station where we identify complex challenges outwith our circle of influence, and look beyond our solar system to identify others working on this challenge. This can happen at any phase of the journey through the Framework.



# About the phases



## 1 Spot emerging themes & patterns

*Listen for deeper whys*

Noticing what keeps coming up or what seems to be at the root of what is going on through continually asking 'why'.

- Is this part of a pattern?
- Where else have we seen this?
- What do the situations have in common?



## 2 Observe the system to understand what's causing the problem

*Be curious & stay in not knowing*

Using systems thinking to further understand what is going on without jumping to conclusions or arriving immediately at solutions.

- What system is causing the problem?
- What do people need right now and what could prevent things from reoccurring?
- What systems are involved?
- What is the purpose of this support and where is it going?



## 3 Build relationships & bring people along

*Find a part for everyone to play*

Connecting with families, practitioners, volunteers and partners to co-produce interventions to test & learn together.

- Who can help with this?
- Who can I join forces with?
- How can families be part of the solution here?

4

## Act through experimentation

*Be courageous, try something*

Taking action in the spirit of experimentation, recognising what is possible or feasible now and what might need to stay on the back burner for later.

What test could we run?

What are the boundaries around what we can do?

Who can help us?

5

## Reflect, refine & learn

*Apply insights by thinking long term and big picture*

Taking the time to reflect on the outcomes of the test and think big picture and long term about what might be worth doing next.

What could we learn?

What could we do next that could not just mitigate harm but change things in the future?

What went well?



## An upstream culture

Ultimately, the Upstream Mindset and Upstream Mindset Framework are about connecting to purpose, to why Fife Gingerbread does the job they do: helping families. Having the space, autonomy and tools to test and learn can empower workers and communities alike to feel that change is possible in the face of burnout and stuckness. It makes a shift from plastering over problems and to the roots of them instead. It is with this kind of approach that we can make lasting change.



"The team at Fife Gingerbread are brilliant at modelling meeting people where they are and also getting upstream of the issues they are needing support with. Thinking systemically to prevent harm is a big undertaking but this framework shows how it can happen: through getting curious, drawing on the strengths and knowledge of others, and experimenting."

**Leigh Brown - Head of Practice | Collaborate CIC**

"We know that responding to crisis will never be enough if the systems behind it remain unchanged. An upstream, prevention-focused framework enables us to act sooner, tackle the deeper issues and build systems rooted in love and care for families. I am proud of this Framework and our journey so far. This is an invitation to the sector to join us and come together in pursuit of meaningful, long-term change."

**Laura Millar - CEO | Fife Gingerbread**



Fife Gingerbread

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This document was authored in April 2026 by Collaborate CIC, a social consultancy and think-tank that helps organisations collaborate to tackle social and economic challenges. Get to know us: collaboratecic.com.

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