



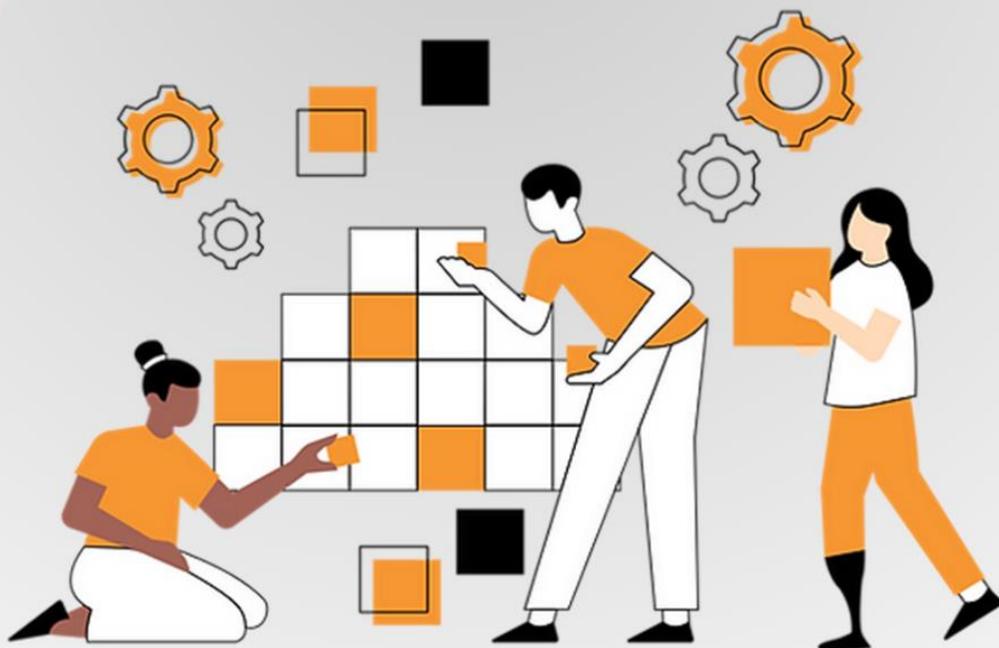
WELLBEING
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Foundation
Scotland

Applying the Upstream Mindset A Toolkit

January 2024



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Background

Foundation Scotland is encouraging more investment in community action that enables people and places to flourish. That's why we worked with the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll Scotland) to build our collective understanding of system change and evolve our practice of thinking and acting for the long term.

During 2022, a team of colleagues considered what it would mean for Foundation Scotland to put more emphasis on addressing the root causes of problems and investing in systems and practices where people can thrive. The project team developed our collective 'Upstream Mindset'.

This guidance document explains what the Upstream Mindset means and offers four practical tools to help apply it in a funding context.

Why Upstream?

Helping to build confident, thriving and resilient communities requires a spectrum of actions. Inevitably, action often focuses on alleviating immediate need or crisis. But we also need to take preventative action that addresses the root causes of why negative social and economic outcomes happen in the first place.

There are different ways of explaining prevention - and it is inevitably a spectrum rather than clearly defined, binary boxes.



What the Upstream Mindset means for Foundation Scotland

In pursuit of the long-term impact we aim to achieve, **we support activity across a spectrum of prevention.**

Here, we split prevention into upstream interventions (before harm occurs), midstream interventions (mitigating harm that has happened) and downstream interventions (actions to help cope with the harms). Others use the terminology of primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions or early, acute, and late action. The more upstream a project, the more it attends to root causes rather than symptoms which manifest in acute, crisis situations.

Upstream actions tend to be those which prevent harm from occurring by tackling political or cultural causes of complex issues.

Midstream action is that which mitigates harm and, to some extent, prevents it from recurring.

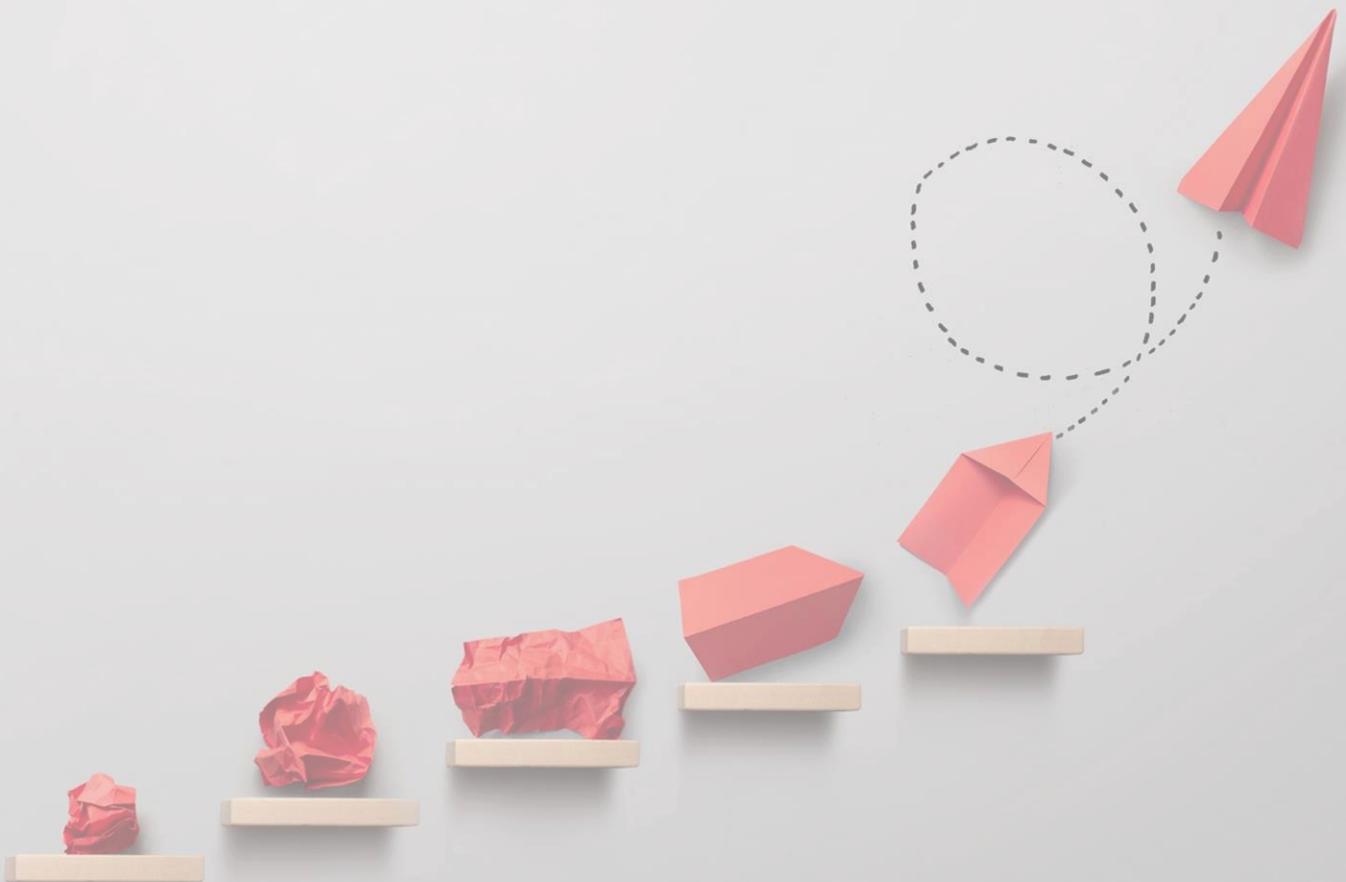
Downstream interventions are those which help affected individuals cope with acute harm but don't prevent this harm from returning.

All are important, but we want to explore and better understand how the funding we distribute can stop harm from happening in the first place.

Going forward, we will become more intentional and deliberate about where on the spectrum of prevention each project, grant, fund or programme sits. This will provide a better context for understanding the impact of that project, grant, fund or programme.

We will also look more intently at the following:

- Ensuring our **upstream mindset is reflected in our language**. It will require a collective and ongoing effort to work this into our communication.
- Being more **open to opportunities** for our practice to evolve - in how we design, assess, and deliver our work, and regarding who, where and what our awards support.
- Where we can, **we will start to link causes to policy areas**. This will help develop our knowledge and understanding of issues and encourage us to share that.
- As we become more adept at thinking in this way, we will find ways to share the mindset with decision-makers, donors, grantees and investees.



Tool 1: Conversation Loop

What it is

One of the fundamental ways to apply an Upstream Mindset is to keep asking "why?".

The Conversation Loop tool offers a simple process for doing this with stakeholders, thereby 'pushing the conversation upstream' and gaining more information to help us understand projects and expected impacts. The illustration below gives an idea of what this could look like.

The Loop has synergy with Toyota's historic [5 Whys](#) method that helped foster a culture of efficiency in industrial processes.



How to use it

The Loop will take you and others in the conversation through the process of understanding a current action or activity, diagnosing what change is needed, and refining the action towards a more powerful intervention.

By following the flow of the Loop, you will continually return to thinking about the action, but it is likely that, once the action has gone through the Loop, it will have become more upstream.

Suggestions for when and how to use the Conversation Loop

- Internally to help improve systems and processes.
- When you are talking with a grant applicant about the needs of their project.
- When you are approached by a donor who wants to explore which project to support.
- When you are following up with a group who have received funding, either during or after their award, to learn what the funding has contributed to and the difference it's making (these questions can help re-set the scene).
- When you want to work with a community (or donor) to help them think more upstream - for example, during fund design discussions.
- When in the “what could be better” phase of a conversation. Ask what could be built on something that already exists (strengths-based approach).

Remember, keep asking the 'why?' question as many times as you can.



Tool 2: Dimensions of Prevention

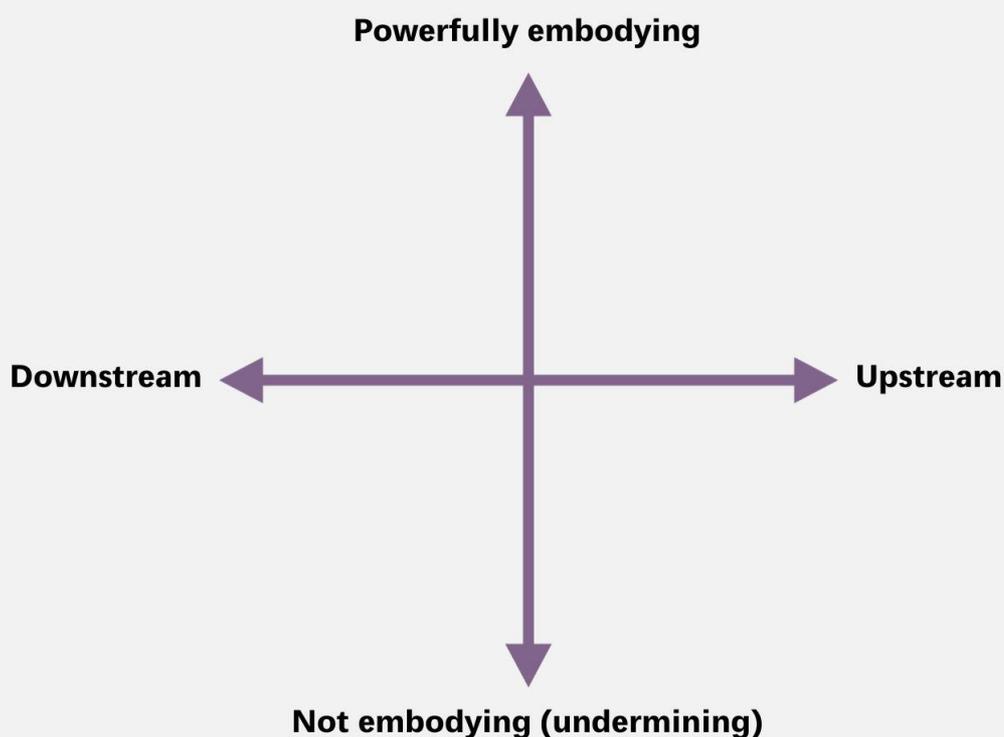
What it is

The spectrum of upstream to downstream represents how a project or activity enables progress towards a thriving economy and society, by highlighting whether it addresses symptoms, or causes of societal issues. The Upstream Dimensions Table below aims to guide you through various areas, setting out what would make a project or activity more likely to be upstream, midstream, or downstream across different aspects of that project.

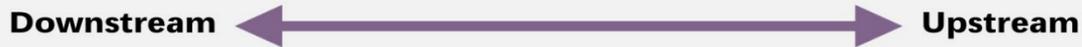
By considering some or all of these aspects, we can analyse where an activity sits on the spectrum of prevention.

How to use it

You may wish to use the Upstream Dimensions Table to help you plot an activity or elements of an activity on the horizontal axis of the Four Corners matrix, where actions are mapped between downstream and upstream. The Four Corners matrix is here (and is explored further as a separate tool later in this Toolkit).



And this is the horizontal axis:



You may simply use it as a thinking aid to help you interrogate and decide the extent to which a project or activity is upstream, midstream, or downstream.

Some suggestions for using the Upstream Dimensions Table:

- Print out or create a digital copy of the table so you can circle or highlight the most appropriate dimension for each aspect, thinking about your project, grant, fund or programme.
- Where you are unsure, identify what information you need to better understand that domain of the project or activity, and who can help you access the information.
- When you have considered all the aspects, look at the table as a whole. As an aggregate, are there more upstream, midstream, or downstream aspects? If it straddles the spectrum, why do you think that is, and what insights does that generate?

Upstream Dimensions table

Domain	Upstream	Midstream	Downstream
Purpose/ Intention*	Prevent the problem or solve the problem: the project intends to "do itself out of a job" by solving the problem in its entirety	Help people solve or mitigate the problem (so its effects are less harmful)	Help people cope with the problem: does not aim to solve it
Scope	Delivery, advocacy and awareness raising, often influencing policy	Delivery and research/networking	Delivery only
Who is targeted/ affected	Target group plus secondary and wider population Influencers, decision makers, politicians	Target group plus secondary	Target group
Situation of people	Not yet in crisis and hopefully never will be	Could be in crisis or known to be at risk	Already in crisis
Ownership	Initiated by target group	Project developed by external group in partnership with target group /doing with	Led by external group or agency / doing to
Power	Focus on changing the status quo (e.g. policy influence)	Aims to change <i>aspects</i> of how power is perceived or distributed, but this is not typically the focus	Status quo remains
Horizon	Long	Medium	Near
Collaboration	Features strongly – often intrinsic to the work	Some partnerships likely	Project often not linked with other groups
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	Intention to address inequality and discrimination	Service supports those affected by inequality and discrimination	Service ameliorates effects already being felt
Learning/ Amplification	Amplification is built-in and deliberate	Local with some broader reach	Local - contained
Risk Taking	Outcome often not known due to very long-term time horizon	Outcome is likely to be uncertain, but educated guesses are possible	Outcome is fairly predictable/ known, likely tangible

* **Purpose and intention** may be understood as both how an organisation operates and its aspirations. An organisation undertaking downstream activities might have upstream aspirations if it understands the need to pursue upstream actions to address root causes.

Often, the organisation might lack the capacity or resource to take upstream action. Therefore, aim to discover an organisation's aspirations rather than evaluating it solely based on its current projects and activities.

Preventative 'ripple effects' of downstream activity

Even very downstream activities (e.g. providing food in a soup kitchen) have ripple effects in the families and communities where support is provided. For example, a child who is fed may be able to concentrate in school that day, which helps to prevent them from falling behind at school.

As we learn about and encourage an upstream mindset, we mustn't forget to acknowledge and celebrate these positive 'ripple effects' of downstream activity.

Example of Dimensions of Prevention tool in action

- The Foundation Scotland project team used the Upstream Dimensions Table to look at the current headline descriptors of some funded projects, and then revise them to reflect how each project relates to the Dimensions. This involved looking at a fuller descriptor and drawing out details of root causes, long term intentions and scope of the project.
- The headline descriptor matters: it is the entry that appears for the project on Foundation Scotland's website, so is key in communicating what we fund - internally and externally. Improving these entries is a simple first step in applying the Upstream Mindset that will help build colleagues' understanding and make a quick impact.

Example developed by the project team

Existing summary descriptor	Revised summary descriptor
To cover the cost of running a mental health project for women.	To support the delivery of a mental health project for women who have experienced energy crisis, with a focus on building skills and confidence to move forward.
To contribute to core staff costs for youth workers for three years to support the Youth Café and other activities for young people, to improve opportunities, skills, confidence and mental wellbeing.	To contribute to core staff costs for youth workers for three years to deliver a young-person designed programme of activities to improve opportunities, skills, confidence and wellbeing.
To contribute towards purchasing IT equipment, work bench and chairs.	To contribute towards purchasing IT equipment, a work bench and chairs for the community, that will help build resilience, develop skills and enhance both employability and social networks.



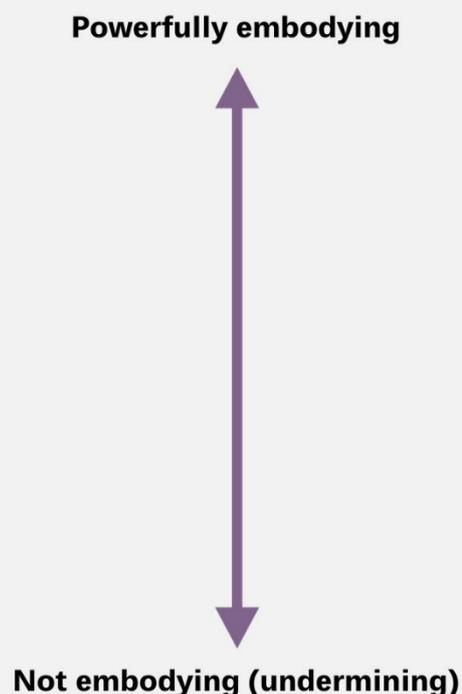
Tool 3: Embodying in Operations

What it is

Alongside solving problems, some organisations model the type of society where we can all thrive. In our current economy, it can be challenging for an organisation to fully embody the world we want. There are often systemic barriers, for example sustainable purchases might be prohibitively expensive, there may be a lack of infrastructure to recycle certain materials, or an organisation may struggle financially to pay adequate parental leave. The tool below helps to identify where an organisation has the opportunity to shift from not undermining the world we want to live in, to more powerfully embodying it - a bit like improving its intentions and walking the talk.

How to use it

You may wish to use questions suggested in the Embodying Table (below) to help you plot an organisation or elements of an organisation on the vertical axis of the Four Corners matrix, where actions are mapped between *undermining* and *powerfully embodying*. Or, you may simply use it as a **thinking aid** to help you consider the extent to which a group or organisation is undermining or embodying the world of thriving, resilient communities we want to live in.



Embodying Table

Identify challenges in embodying		Identify potential opportunities	
Question	Response	Question	Response
<p>How does the organisation, aim to mitigate societal harm and/or create thriving communities?</p> <p>Does it primarily aim to tackle a problem in society (e.g. homelessness), or is it focused on further strengthening desired community characteristics such as wellbeing, creativity, community participation and active citizenship (e.g. a community fair or arts centre)?</p>		<p>Are there opportunities for the organisation, to do more of both? If so, how?</p> <p>For example, if a community art centre currently focuses on fostering creativity, could it also begin to help those more in need of a welcoming and safe environment or other provisions they don't currently have access to?</p>	
<p>Most organisations, projects and activities create some undesired environmental impact. Where does such impact occur for the organisation? What challenges have you found in trying to mitigate this?</p> <p>For example, is waste being created, non-renewable energy or harsh chemicals being used?</p>		<p>What more could the organisation do to mitigate undesired environmental impacts?</p> <p>For example, could it switch to a renewable energy contract or put recycling in place?</p>	
<p>How does the organisation engage with and look after its people and those whose lives are touched to ensure that everyone is physically and mentally safe and happy? What might be improved?</p> <p>For example, how does the organisation ensure that people are not overworked, are appropriately paid and have the equipment and knowledge they need? How is an inclusive work environment created? Are there further aspirations?</p>		<p>How might the organisation take further action to look after its people?</p> <p>For example, could it commit to paying a living wage?</p>	

Identify challenges in embodying		Identify potential opportunities	
Question	Response	Question	Response
<p>What is being bought by the organisation in order to deliver its projects or activities? Is there an opportunity to use these purchases to embody the world we aspire to, by strengthening local economies?</p> <p>For example, do purchasing choices preference local and sustainable (e.g. second-hand, Fair Trade, FSC paper etc.), where there are options?</p>		<p>How might the organisation begin to procure more sustainably to deliver its projects or activities?</p> <p>For example, could it use local, fairtrade organic food shops, or implement a zero single-use plastics policy?</p>	



Tool 4: The Four Corners Matrix

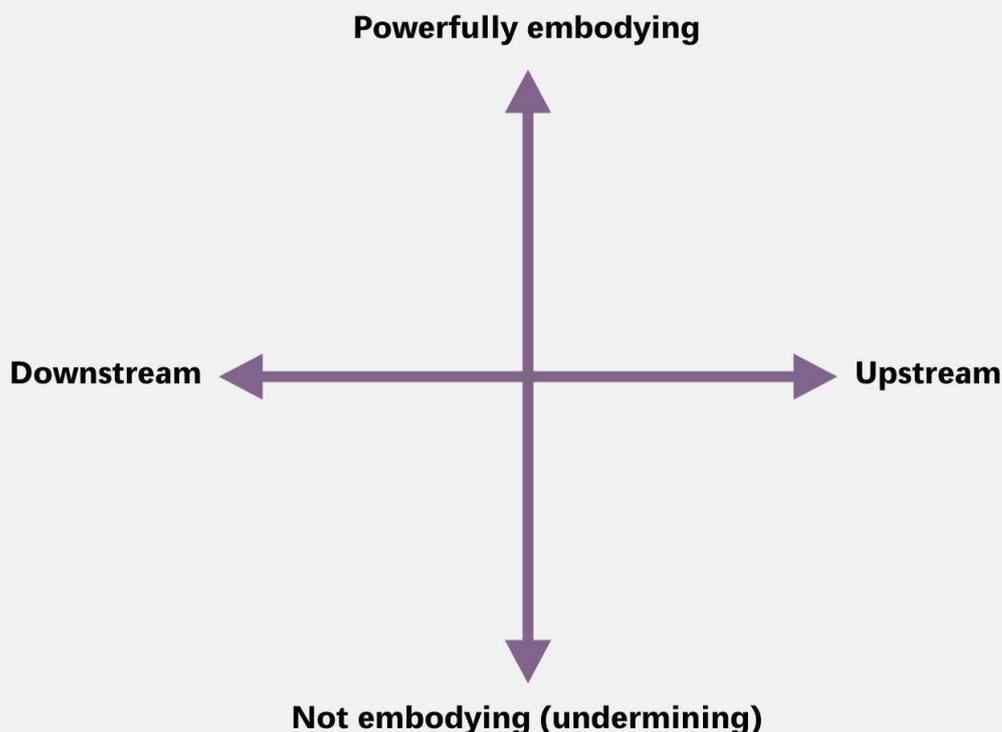
What it is

This is a matrix tool designed to help colleagues visualise the different elements of a project or activity and where it sits on the Prevention and Embodying spectrums. It's a way to combine and develop the outputs of Tools 2 and 3.

How to use it

For details on how to plot an activity, project or element of a project on the horizontal axis (downstream-upstream), please see the guidance above on using the Upstream Dimensions. For details on how to plot an activity, project or element of a project on the vertical axis (undermining-embodiment), please see the guidance just above.

Combining the tools creates the 'four corners'. An organisation in the bottom left-hand corner *must* aim to move up the vertical axis to avoid undermining progress towards a thriving community. It *may* also seek to expand into upstream work as it grows. This is because both downstream and upstream work valuably contribute to its vision, whereas undermining actions or activities do not.



Some suggestions for how to use the matrix:

- You may map various elements of a project or fund, giving a visual representation of how upstream or downstream it is on balance, and also how undermining or embodying it is, or to analyse certain elements (see example below).
- In a fund review process, think about the performance and outcomes of different funded projects, to consider whether the picture is the one the decision making group want for the fund. This will enable conversations about how to reorient the fund, if, for example, the desire is for it to be more upstream.

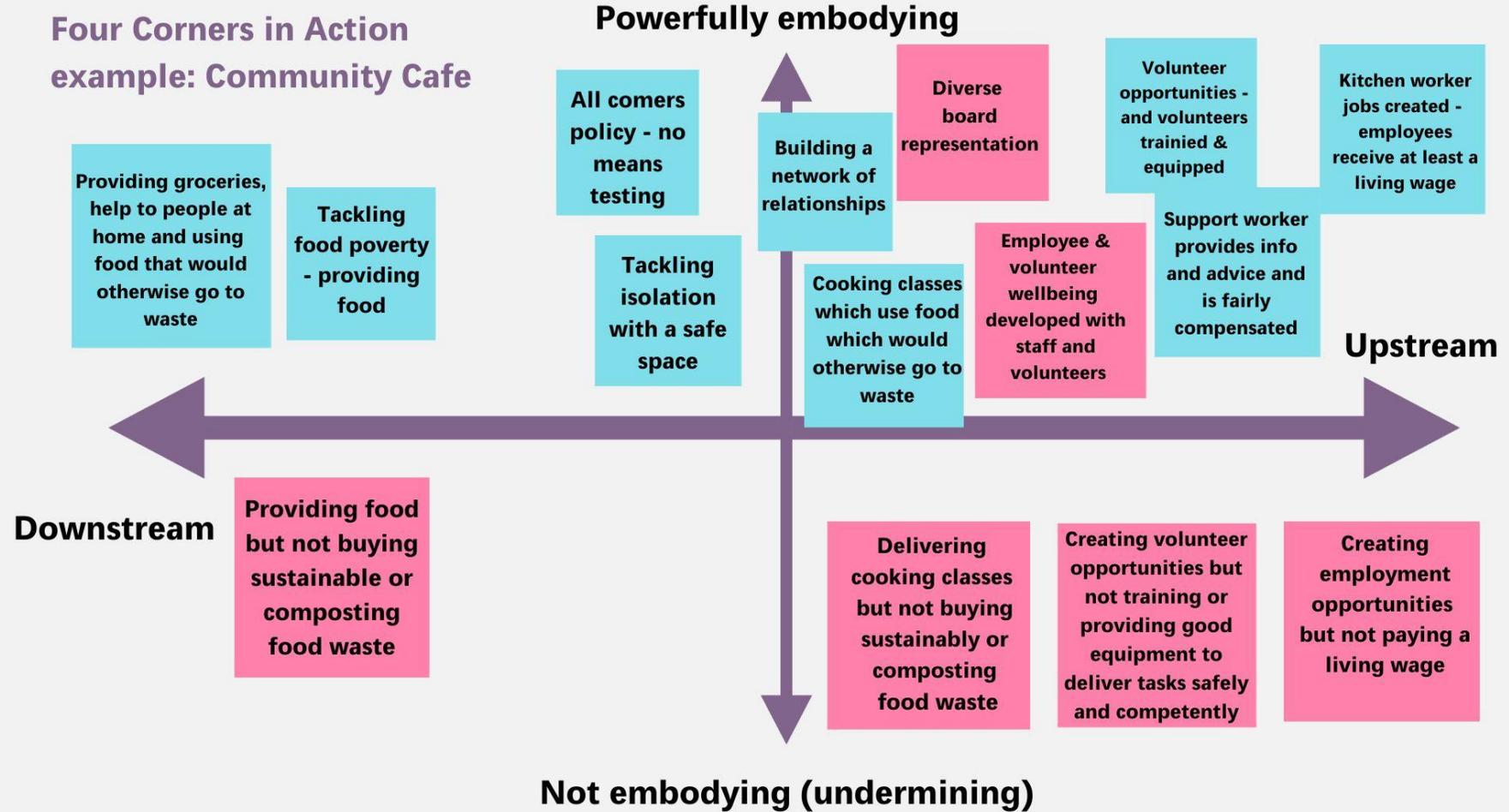
Example of the tool in action

The Foundation Scotland project team took the example of a real community cafe project and mapped different elements of the project using the questions from Tools 1,2 and 3. This is illustrated in the graphic below.

**Note that this has retrospectively been edited to embed changes in the tool; pink stickers represent hypothetical situations (not the Cafe's reality), to provide clarity on how different situations would be mapped.*

As you can see, this project has a spread of activities across the matrix. A colleague who knows the Cafe was involved in the discussion and found the process illuminating.

She said: "I kind of put this in the category of quite traditional problem solving, people are hungry, you know, a soup kitchen model and actually looking at it this way helps to bring out some of the other dimensions of it, which have just as much value but are maybe not what pops out first, when you're looking at the application. And so it's good to bring those other things out and make sure that the value of those is recognised."



When using this tool to map projects, ask:

- What would need to change for the organisation to expand into upstream work?
- What can the organisation/project do to shift activities from undermining to embodying?

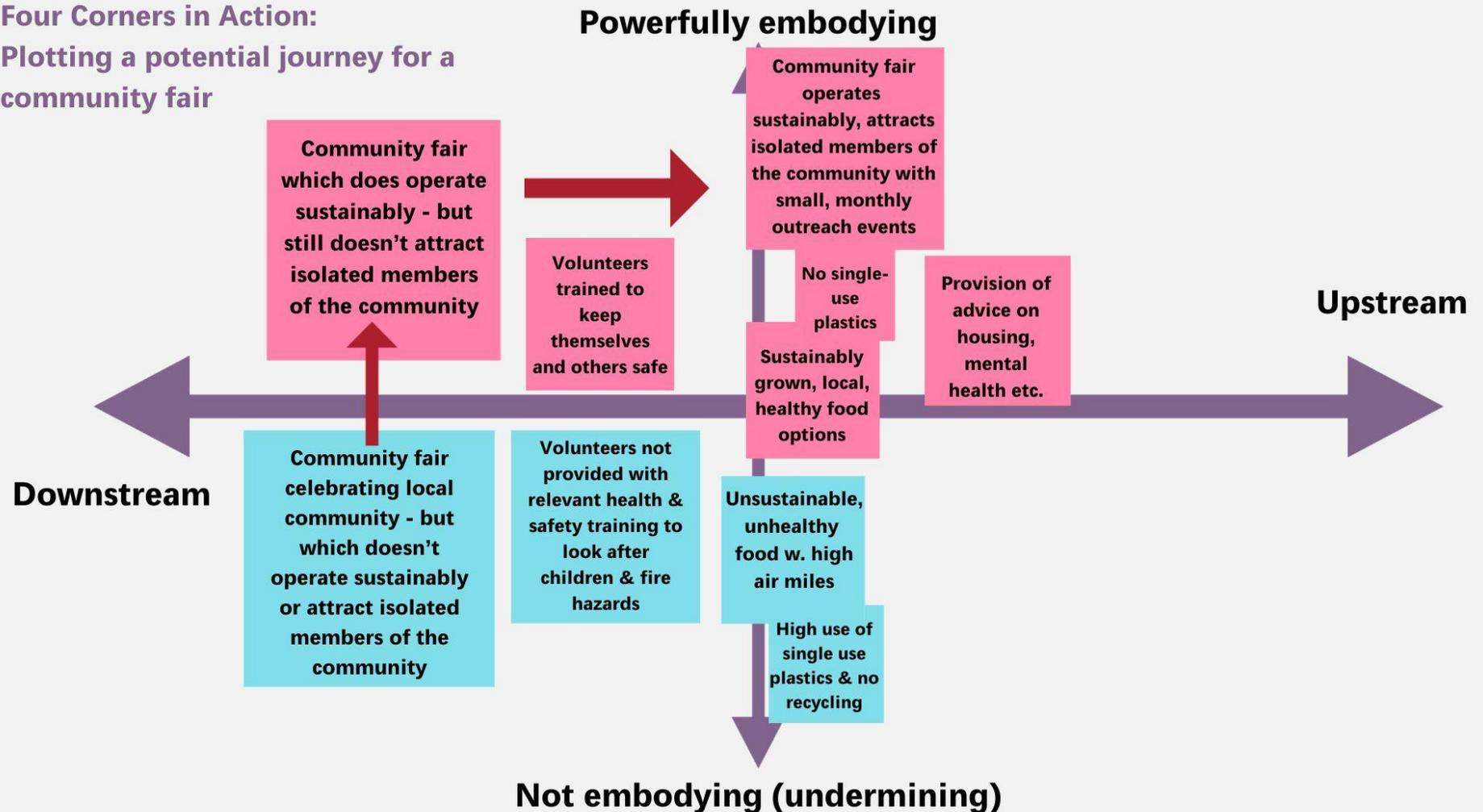
Below are some further developments for how this tool can be applied.



Four Corners Matrix in Action: Example 1

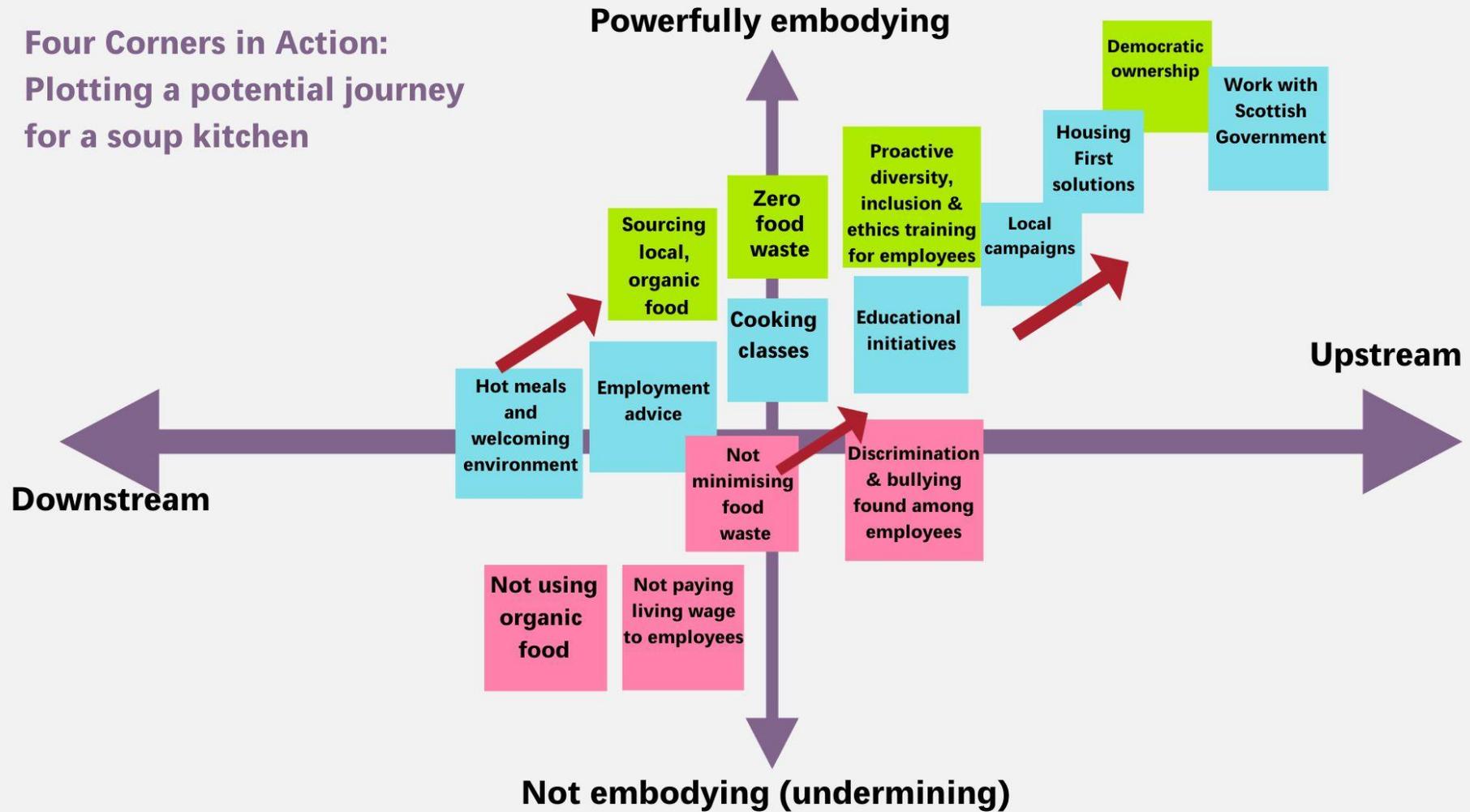
The scenario below demonstrates how a group running a community fair might use the tool. See how pushing upstream may require the group to re-evaluate some of the content of the event and what is provided whereas embodying is more about how it goes about organising the event.

Four Corners in Action: Plotting a potential journey for a community fair



Four Corners Matrix in Action: Example 2

Four Corners in Action:
Plotting a potential journey
for a soup kitchen



This second example, above, similarly reveals two key changes by the group in question. Negative impacts which undermine the pursuit of a thriving economy are addressed and turned into ways in which the project embodies it (from pink to green e.g. 'Not minimising food waste' to 'Zero food waste').

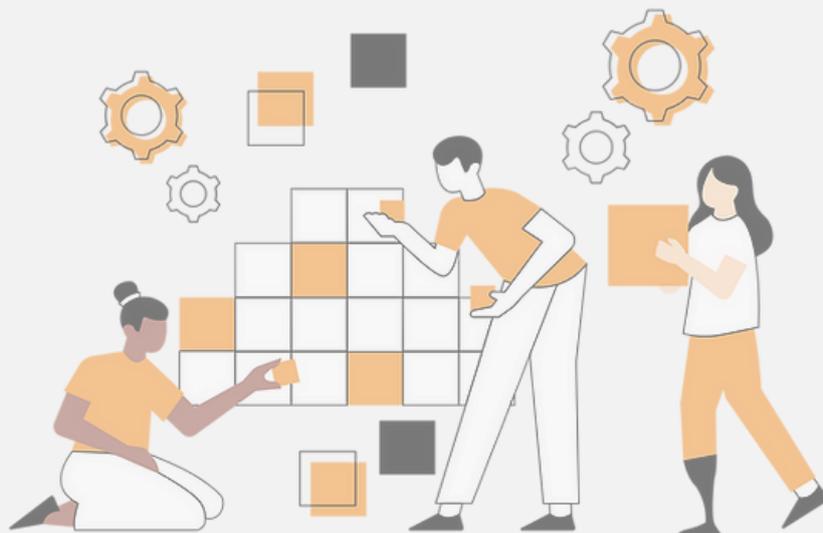
Second, this project expands into upstream action (the blue stickers). What's important to note is that it's not necessarily desirable for an organisation to shift entirely to upstream work, given that downstream provision is likely to be required long-term.

How to contribute to this evolving approach

- This is a living document, which will continue to evolve as colleagues use, refine and add to these tools.
- To contribute to this, we encourage you to provide feedback on the usefulness of this guidance, and your experience trying out the tools in your work.

Please share any thoughts or feedback with Deborah Cowan.

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