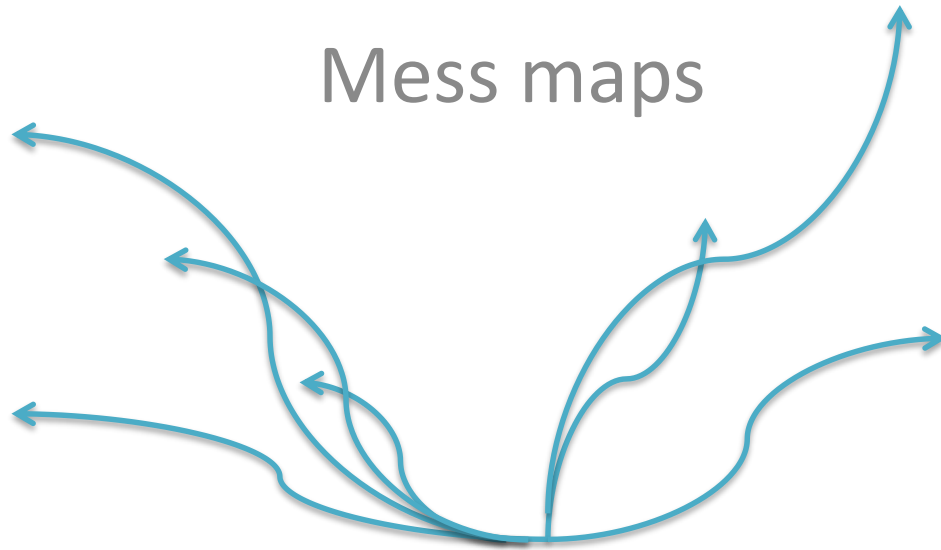# Action Research Programme

Wicked Problems

&

Mess maps

Tame, critical & wicked

Tame problems: usually have an end point where they are likely to be solved, like a jigsaw puzzle. You will probably have experienced something similar before. Tame problems can still be complicated but there is limited uncertainty.

Critical problems: are concerned with crisis, meaning there is limited time for decision making and action. Someone is usually directive in how a critical problem is resolved – it could be argued one of the problems with the Costa Concordia disaster was the lack of a directive leader

Wicked problems: are highly complex, have a no stopping point rule and there are no right or wrong solutions

Wicked problems?

Silver over Black, White, Yellow and Red, 1948 (oil & enamel on paper laid on canvas). Jackson Pollock

- Difficult to clearly define
- Many interdependencies and multi-causal
- No clear solution
- Attempts to solve them cause unforeseen consequences
- Often not stable
- Socially complex
- Multiple stakeholders or interest groups
- Involve changing behaviour
- Have a no stopping rule

Sources: Australian Public Services Commission (2007); Horn, R.E. & Weber, R. P. (2007)

Resolution

rather than *solution*.

- Wicked problems require thinking about resolutions not solutions – each action you take is likely to throw up something new about the issue
- There is unlikely to be a single right solution
- It is more likely that there will be a series of resolutions that work with the no stopping rule

- This is not new concept – it goes back to the systemic thinking of the 1970's if not earlier

- Knowing the theory around wicked problems is one thing but it raises the issue of how we handle them

- The idea is not to feel overwhelmed but to understand more about the breadth of the problem and where you can make a start

- Reading the work of Horn and Weber and their visual mapping can help

"We have also come to realise that no problem ever exists in complete isolation. Every problem interacts with other problems and is therefore part of a set of interrelated problems, a system of problems...I choose to call such a system a *mess*."
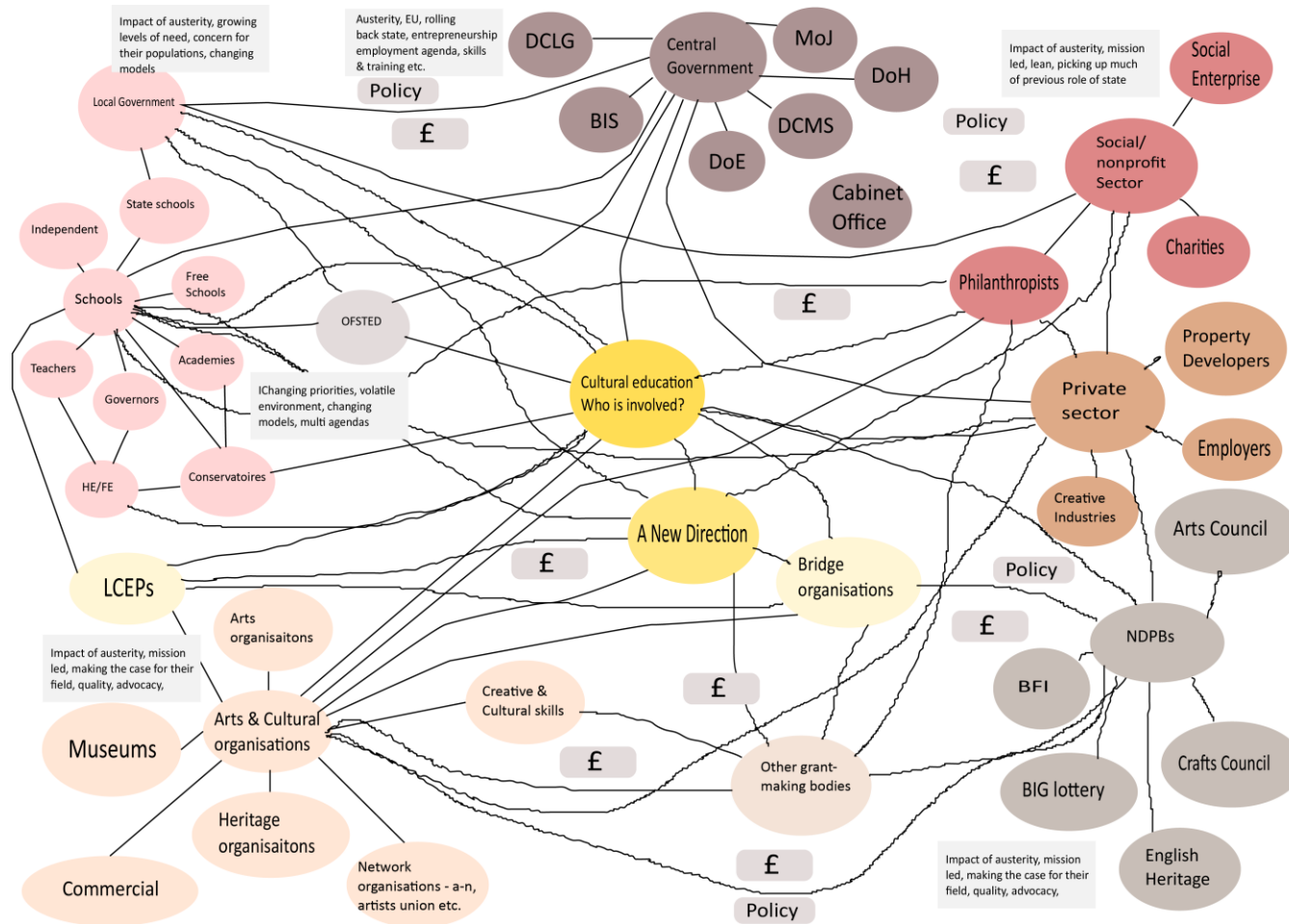
Ackoff, 1974

Mess Maps

This is one tool for exploring wicked problems once they are identified

A Mess Map represents a common mental model of the problem at hand that shows the important "chunks" of information and their relationships with other "chunks".

Horn, R.E & Weber, R.P (2007)

Cultural education in London – a mess map example

- This mess map shows the wide range of stakeholders involved and how the resources flow
- The next step in developing this would be to look at the issue from each of their perspectives
- It certainly looks like a mess!

Making your own mess map

Agree your wicked problem

Focus on 4 or 5 actors in the system

Taking each in turn what is their perspective on the problem?

Draw a series of arrows to show how the elements interlink

What might be some of the underlying causes – rules, customs, pressures, laws etc.? show these in separate boxes

Discussion and reflection
What sort of issues came up?
Did you start to build a common mental map?
Any surprises?
What might happen next? Where would you take it from here?