

# Ending isolation, regaining control

How Network Partners in Carers Trust benefit from ADVANCE, a volunteer mentoring programme that puts learning at the heart of organisation and leadership development

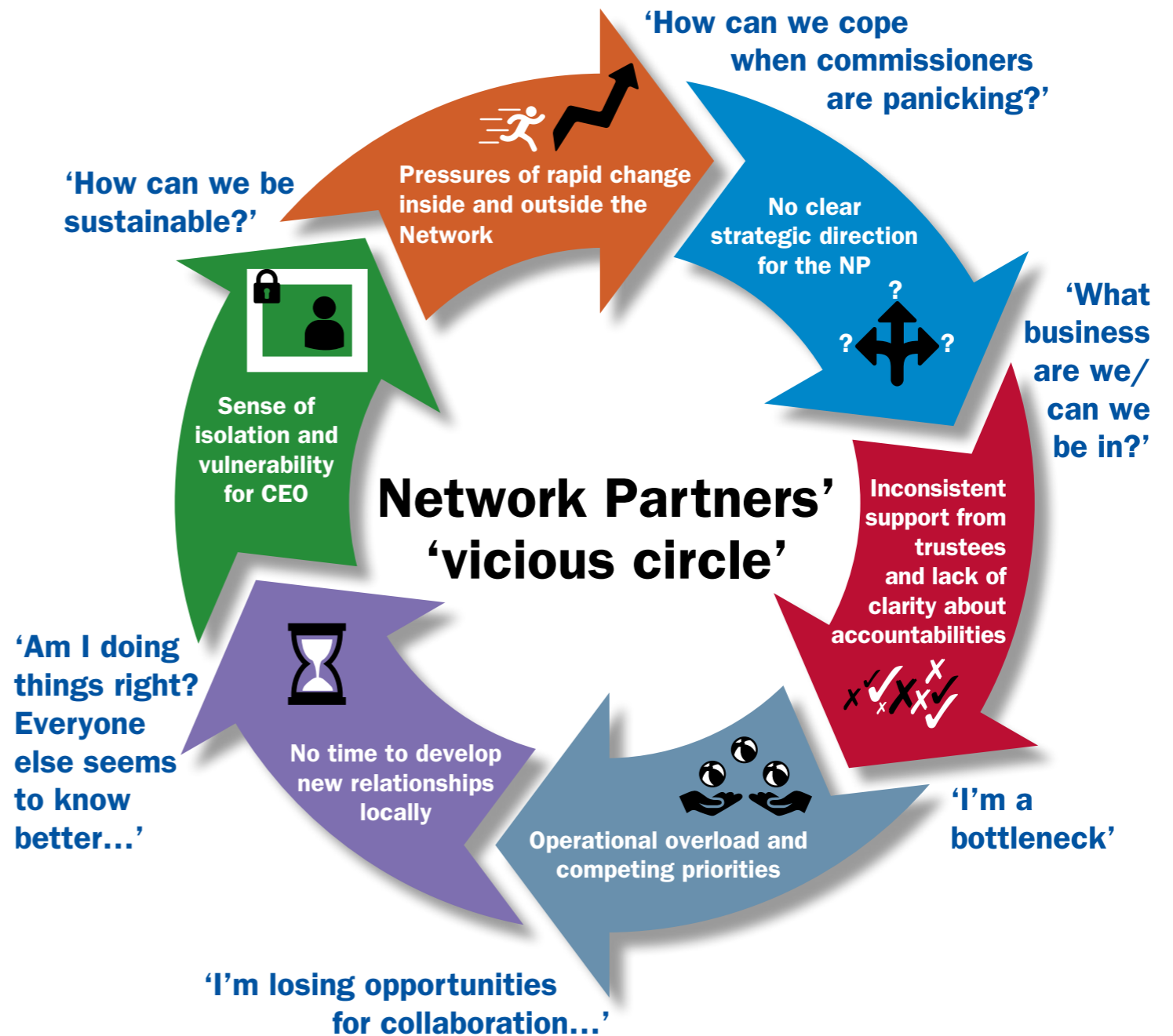


# 1 Having a mentor is about success not failure

Times are hard for carers and for the organisations that work with them. But the volunteer mentor programme ADVANCE has been shown to offer invaluable support to chief executives of Network Partners within Carers Trust.

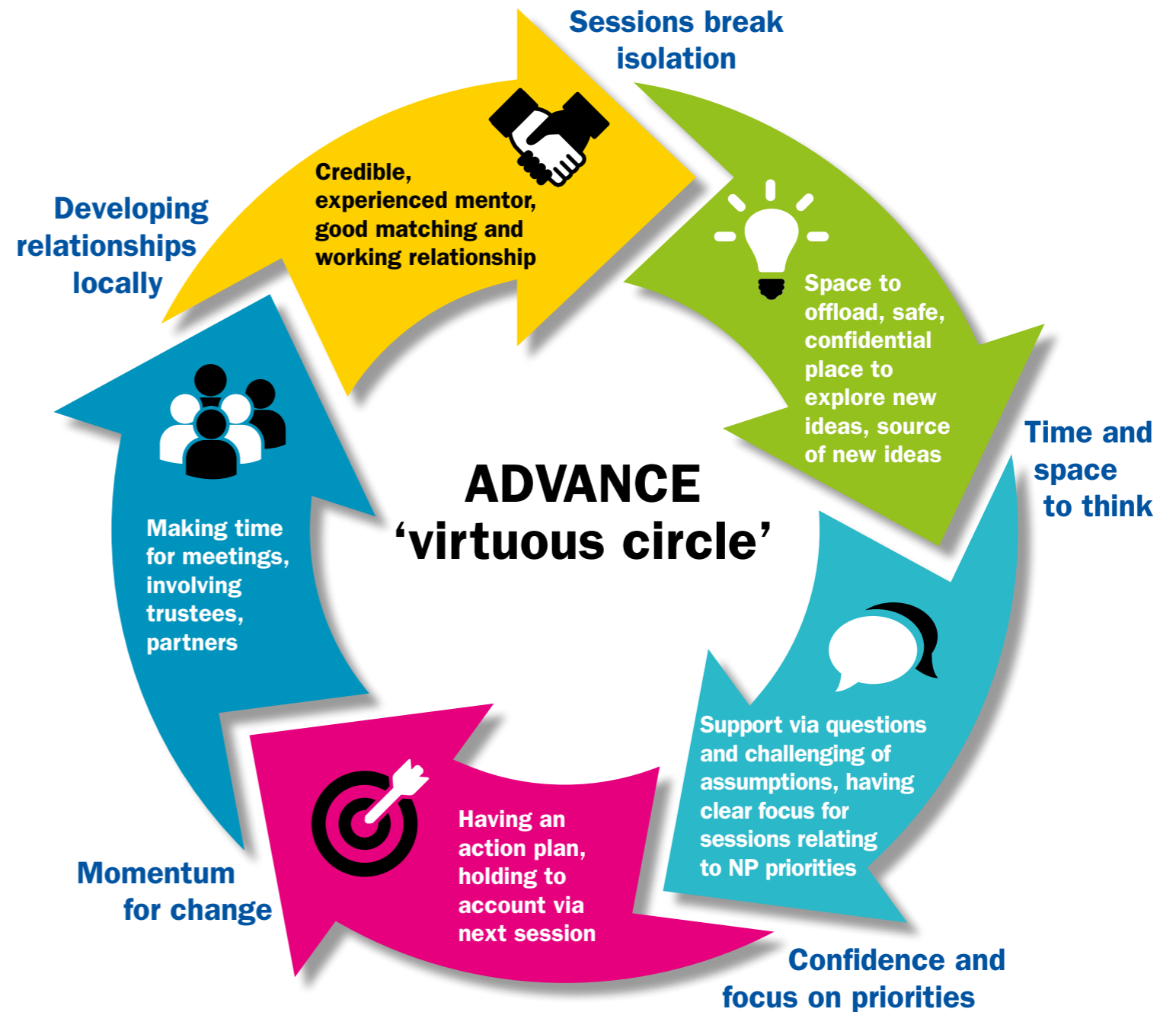
## Transforming vicious....

In a dynamic and unpredictable environment, things can easily spin out of control. Individual chief executives may not undergo all the ordeals outlined in the vicious circle, but the experiences and feelings are likely to be familiar.



## ...into virtuous

The ADVANCE programme is associated with a virtuous circle that challenges and transforms the storyline of the vicious circle. The programme gives chief executives time and space to focus on priorities, along with a critical friend of high calibre, and build confidence. In turn, this helps keep momentum going in creating change on the ground and making new types of relationships.



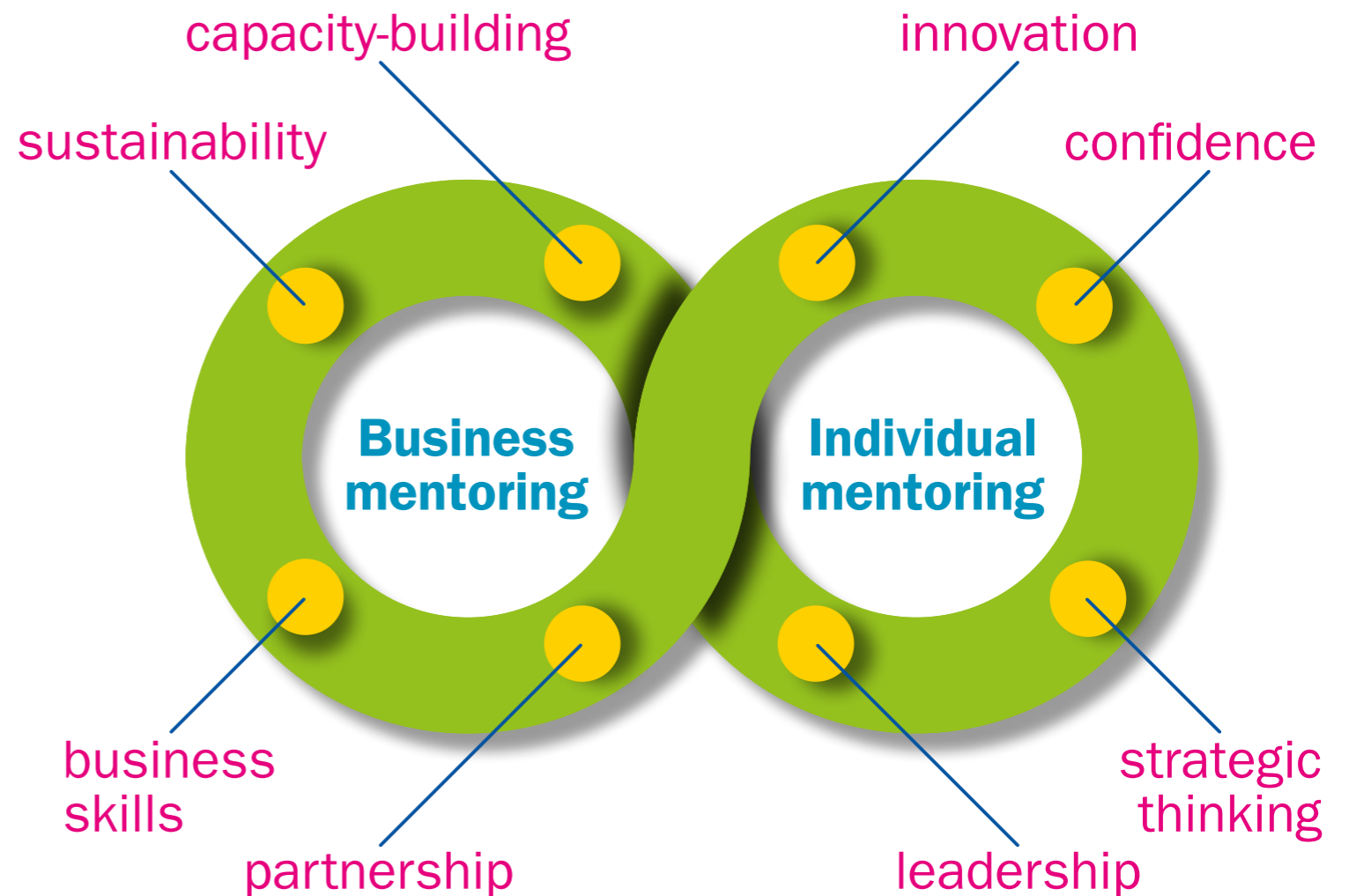
# 2 Mentoring supports personal and business development

‘Is the mentoring going to be about me or about my organisation?’ asked an early participant in ADVANCE. The answer, to her relief, turned out to be ‘both’.

The research literature has described mentoring as being about ‘growing an individual, both professionally and personally’. This is very true of ADVANCE. And, because the programme is client-led, the balance between ‘business’ and ‘individual’ mentoring varies according to the needs and preferences of different chief executives.

## Looping the loop – a worthwhile challenge

The diagram offers a potential approach to highlighting, and building on, the interconnections between business and individual mentoring. For example, each mentoring situation, or even a single conversation, can move to and fro between the two approaches and focus on any or all of the elements shown in yellow.



### Want to know more about the framework?

The diagram uses the ‘Möbius strip’ or loop to show the interconnectedness of two ideas.

See [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/möbius\\_strip](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/möbius_strip)



## Exactly what kind of development is involved?

The needs identified by chief executives of Network Partners relate to all the following:

- personal development
- development of professional/business skills, including strategic thinking
- organisational development
- local system development.

These areas have often been seen as distinct and lacking real connection with each other. But the chief executives in ADVANCE have made it clear that, to succeed in their role and lead sustainable organisations, they need to be able to make continuous links between them.

During the year they spend in ADVANCE, chief executives develop further confidence in both personal and business skills and become practised in balancing individual and organisational goals and achievements.

# 3 Mentoring helps you get better at juggling

‘The other day, speaking to a staff member, I found myself saying, ‘I know that our carers are used to this way of doing things – but no one is going to pay for it any more.’ She said, ‘Well, that shouldn’t be our problem’. And I thought, ‘Well, it sure is mine.’

Like this chief executive, many leaders of Network Partners are getting used to facing up to issues where there are no simple, straightforward answers. Responses to challenges cannot be ‘either/or’; they need to be ‘both/and’. For example, the future of Network Partners depends largely on the ability of their leaders to pay careful attention, and respond constructively, to the needs and preferences **both** of a range of carers **and** of organisations that are funding services.

In other words, there’s a need to manage tensions on a continuous basis rather than try to come up with one-off ‘solutions’ that in practice will only last a short time. And time after time, chief executives in ADVANCE report that their ability to stand back, to think – to move beyond a ‘fire-fighting’ mentality – is greatly improved by the mentoring process.

The framework shown on the next slide offers managers and leaders a constructive way of thinking about these tensions, to help guide decisions and action.



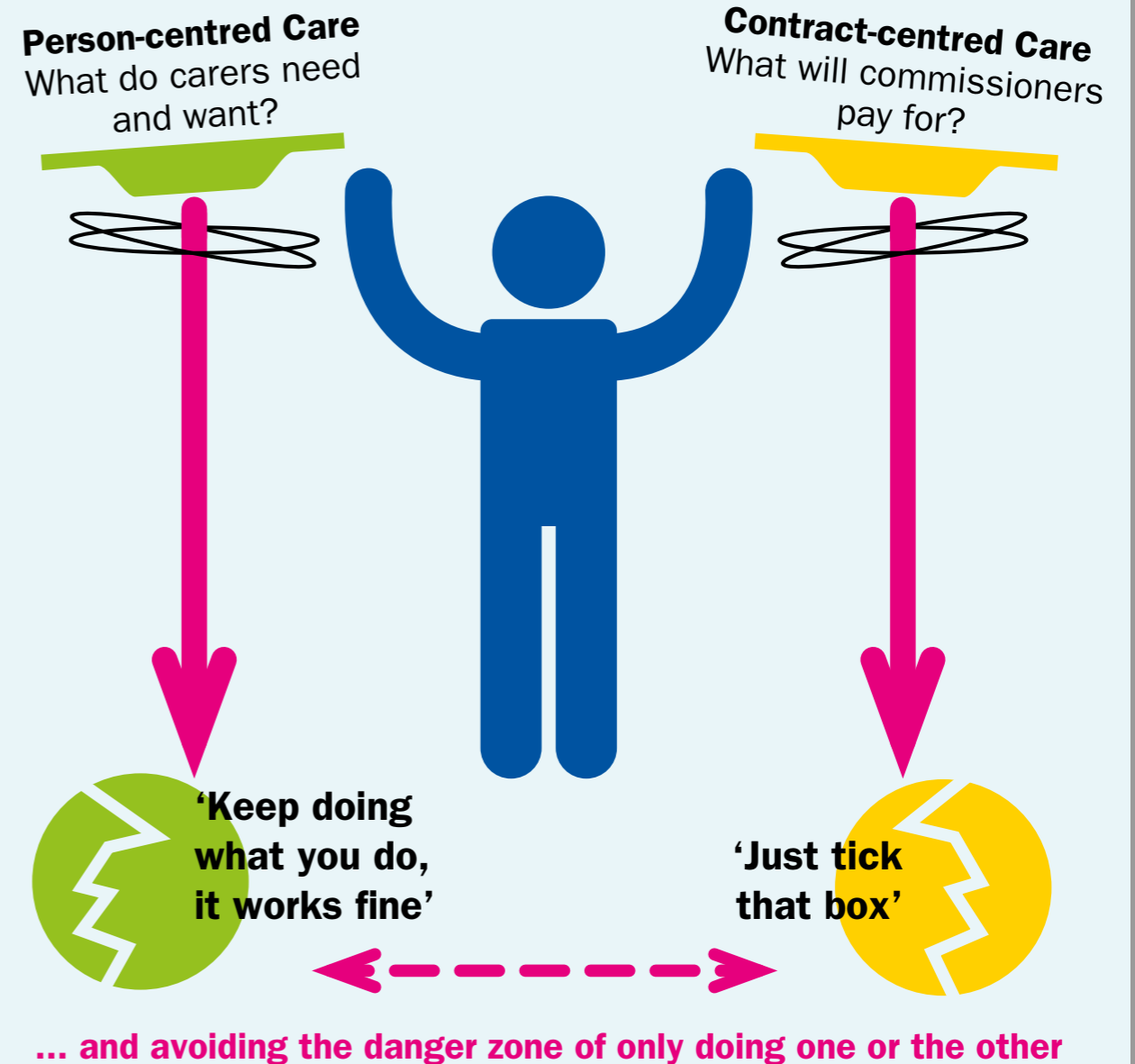
## An aid to juggling

The top line of the square identifies two important issues where skilled attention is needed to ensure the sustainability of a Network Partner. As shown in the diagram, however, the two issues can easily be seen as opposites. If you concentrate on one issue to the exclusion of the other, where will you end up? The pink arrows running down the sides of the square tell us the gloomy truth. The views on the bottom line express a head-in-the-sand mentality that spells danger for the organisation – and ‘fire-fighting’ for the leader.

### Want to know more about the framework?

See Marsh S and Macalpine M 1999 ‘A ‘really useful’ tool for managing paradox’, Journal of Management Development vol 18 no 8 at [www.publicserviceworks.com/resources-and-downloads](http://www.publicserviceworks.com/resources-and-downloads)

## Managing a core tension: attention to both carers and commissioners





## So, here's the challenge:

**In the fast-changing environment pressing in on organisations and the carers they support, how do you keep on the top line and avoid the danger zone?**

What strategies, plans, actions, partnerships will enable you to respond constructively to **both** issues and keep some kind of balance between them? How are you going to avoid 'either/or' thinking and sinking into the red zone?



# 4 Mentoring helps you ask better questions

‘The thing is – you can’t get the right answers if you don’t ask the right questions. It took me a while to really grasp this, but now I prod staff to keep on asking questions.’

This chief executive found that her mentor helped her in some unexpected ways. She was one of the many carers, care support workers, coordinators and managers, senior managers, trustees and mentors who contributed to describing the landscape surrounding the ADVANCE programme. The questions shown on the right lay at the heart of people’s concerns.

- Relationships linking management, staff, carers, trustees, commissioners and partners demand constant attention if Network Partners are to be sustainable
- Different groups have rapidly changing expectations

- Widespread and deeply felt lack of clarity at national, regional and local level
- Desire to work together more closely to clearly understood common goals

- Increasing fragmentation/unpredictability of the commissioning and legal environment, with accompanying burden of reporting requirements





## Other features of the landscape

It's almost always worth stepping back and taking a wider view of immediate concerns. This was certainly true of those involved in helping to frame the questions shown in the diagram. They found it useful to reflect on the following:

- There are **inherent tensions** between 'the centre' and 'the grass roots' in a national organisation with local members, such as Carers Trust – and so there's a need to identify practical ways in which such inevitable tensions can be eased
- It may sometimes seem that commissioners and funders hold all the important cards. But Network Partners have the **flexibility to collaborate** with each other and funders to identify what is of most value to carers and to pursue new ways of creating that value
- Organisations are finding it increasingly important to develop a **reputation as a good partner** – and this involves looking at opportunities through both organisational and personal lenses.

# 5 Mentoring helps you play to your strengths

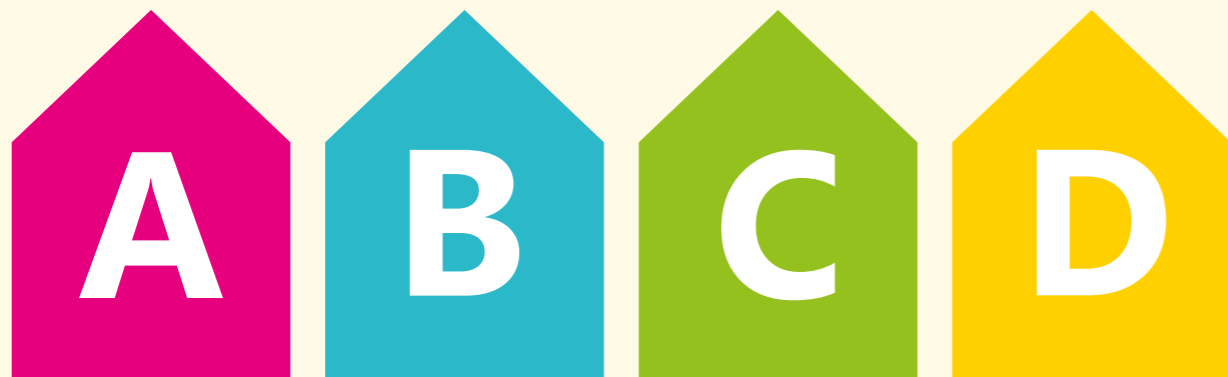
Talking about current expectations of them at work, people in the Carers Trust Network often use the phrase ‘the extra mile’. Carers want more; and staff are expected to do more. Resources meanwhile remain at the same or a reduced level.

A chief executive of a Network Partner commented: ‘The ‘extra mile’ is the new norm – this new world needs a new organisation.’ The challenge for Carers Trust and its Network Partners is to bring that new organisation into being. The ADVANCE programme aims to contribute to that goal by enabling Network Partners to build sustainable organisations, leadership capacity and partnerships – and by sharing learning about what is needed to succeed in new and challenging environments.

The core issue in meeting these challenges is to **help Carers Trust and Network Partners identify, and play more effectively to, their (complementary) strengths.**

## How do you work with strengths or assets?

Within any community, there are strengths and deficits. Where should the focus for development lie? If it lies on the deficits, there is soon a perceived need for a rescuer – a specialist provider of services perhaps. If the focus is on the strengths, the impetus is on supporting people to manage their own health, community or area, rather than providing everything for them.



Asset or strengths based approaches are becoming widespread in public services. This approach stems from pioneering work in Chicago over several decades known as ABCD – asset-based community development.

The idea is to hone and build on existing strengths within a community rather than bolster its deficiencies. Some principles that guide ABCD and reflect issues in the Carers Trust ‘community’ include:

- **Each person in a community has something to contribute, but relationships build a community:** people must be connected to achieve sustainable development
- **People care:** challenge notions of ‘apathy’ by listening to people’s interests
- **Listen:** decisions should come from conversations where people are heard
- **Ask:** asking for ideas is more sustainable than giving solutions.



**Want to know more about the framework?**

For social services examples of asset-based community development:

[www.iriss.org.uk/resources/strengths-based-approaches-working-individuals](http://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/strengths-based-approaches-working-individuals)



Some of the language associated with this approach has been used inappropriately in the political arena. It is important to stress therefore that to focus on strengths is not the same thing as to ignore difficulties or to glamourise struggle. Practitioners have to work in collaboration – helping people to do things for themselves, as co-producers, not passive consumers of support.

The ADVANCE programme itself is an example of building on strengths. Mentors and mentees work together on honing skills and deepening understanding. The first four cards of this series crystallise some of the frameworks that are most relevant to the challenges involved.

### **Want to know more about ADVANCE?**

The findings outlined in this document come from an independent impact study on ADVANCE, see

[www.publicserviceworks.com/resources-and-downloads](http://www.publicserviceworks.com/resources-and-downloads)

For more information on the ADVANCE programme, see

<https://professionals.carers.org/advance-mentoring-scheme>

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