

Cohering system change at scale

A guide for transformation-focused change-makers, facilitators and partnerships



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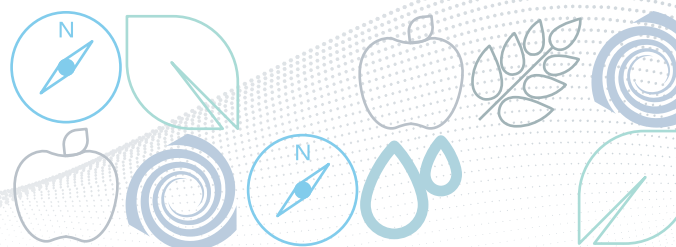
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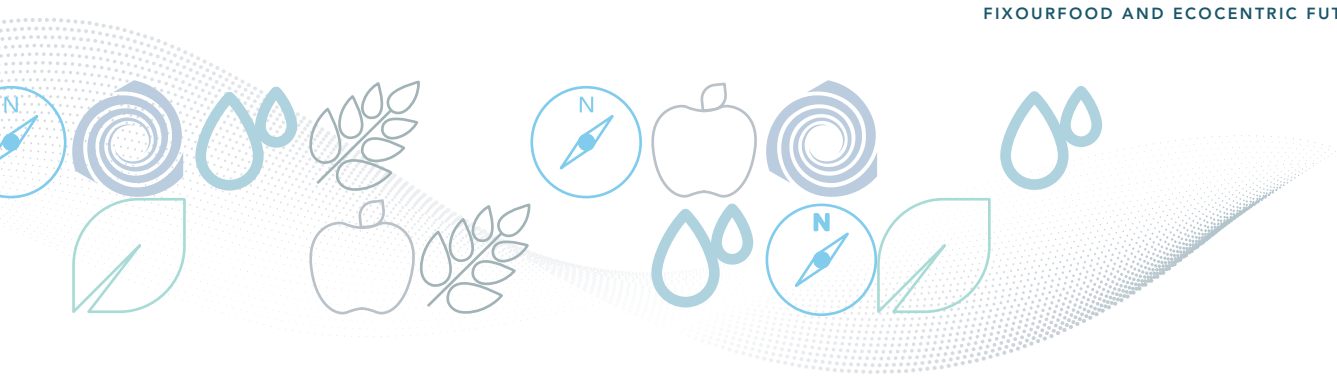
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The challenges facing contemporary societies — from climate change and biodiversity loss to food insecurity and rising inequality — are deeply interconnected and cannot be resolved through business as usual. They require transformation, including a fundamental change in the identity, purpose, and function of a system rather than marginal improvement. Yet most organisations, institutions, and partnerships are simply not set up to support change of this kind, particularly at the scale and over the timeframes that transformation demands.

This guide addresses that gap. It draws on five years of action research supporting food system transformation across Yorkshire and is complemented by insights from initiatives in health, higher education, and physical activity. The guide offers a practical, integrated approach to cohering transformation at scale. It is written for facilitators, conveners, and leaders seeking to bring diverse actors together in support of systemic change.

The guide is organised around seven interconnected foundations:

- Understanding what transformation actually means and scoping it clearly;
- Building a shared strategic framework for action using approaches like Three Horizons;
- Enrolling and aligning diverse actors through a middle-out approach rather than relying on top-down or bottom-up change alone;
- Identifying and cohering the catalysts already present in the system rather than generating new initiatives;
- Designing governance explicitly for transformation;
- Embedding evaluation as a driver of learning and momentum rather than compliance;
- Sustaining the conditions needed to resist the gravitational pull back to existing patterns.

Together these foundations are distilled into ten essentials that serve as a practical reference point. The foundations provided in this guide will help you apply your own efforts to navigate the complexities of supporting transformational change.





Introduction

Why do we need this guide?

This guide explains how to cohere action to support transformations towards desirable futures. Its focus is on large-scale system change, such as for a whole region or economic sector. It outlines ways of thinking, core concepts, steps, activities, and other essentials needed to begin to support effective transformation efforts. The guide responds to the need for new approaches to work with highly interconnected challenges.

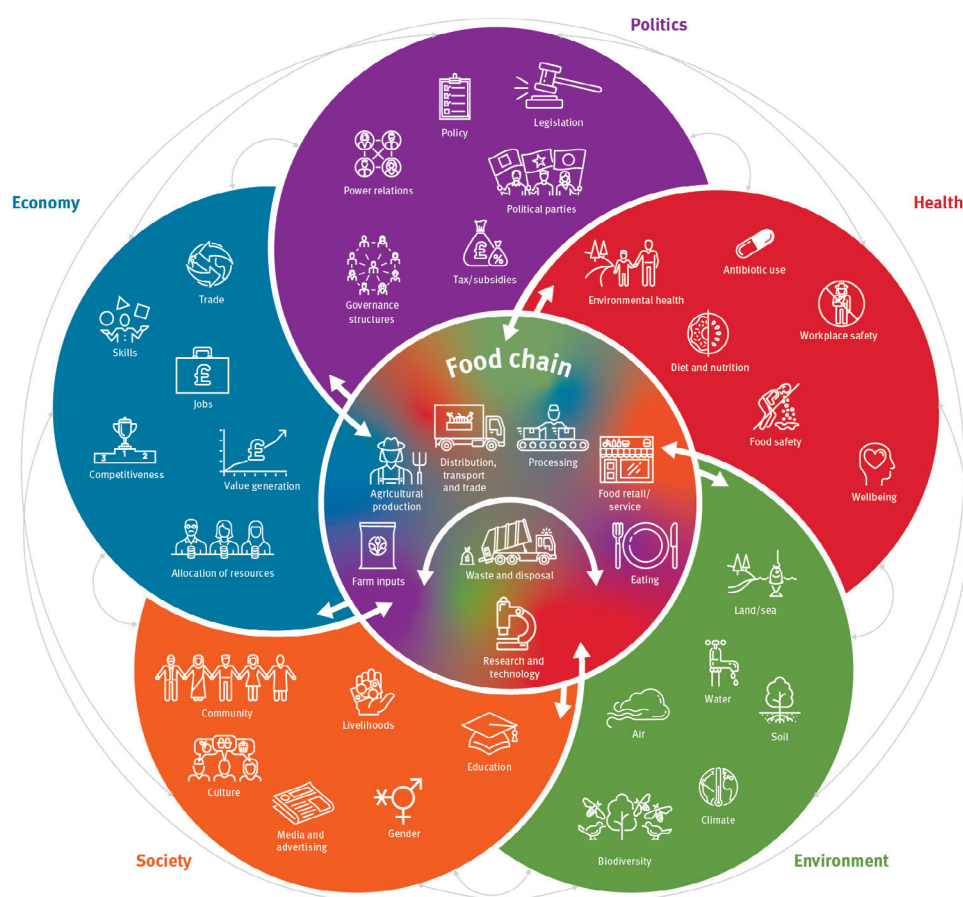
Contemporary challenges – including the deeply interrelated impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, rising inequalities, health crises, and the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) – are now affecting most people and organisations across the world. These challenges are symptoms of how our societies and geopolitics have developed and continue to be reinforced. Some of these challenges are now so serious they pose an existential threat to people and planetary life more widely. The challenges are highly interconnected. Actions to overcome one kind of challenge have a bearing on many others.

The scale, complexity, and interdependent nature of contemporary challenges represent a new age. In almost all aspects of our societies – including energy, healthcare, transport, food, and our economic systems more broadly – new approaches to working with change are required. A good example of this is food systems that provide much sustenance to millions of people but often in ways detrimental to human, social and environmental health. New ways of working in integrated ways across many sectors of food and across production, distribution and consumption, are required ([Box 1](#)).

There are many organisations and groups of people working to overcome interconnected challenges and to support the emergence of new patterns, ways of living, and ways of being. Yet humanity still has much to learn about how we can work together in effective ways to transcend contemporary challenges. In particular, we are still very limited in being able to work collectively to support transformational or systemic change at larger scales, across longer timeframes, and across different organisations and sectors.

This guide helps to address this gap by presenting an integrated way to think, organise, and act in support of systemic and transformational change.

Box 1: Example of the need for new approaches to supporting collective action at scale: Food system transformation



The 'food system flower' of Kelly Parsons and colleagues¹, showing the different dimensions of food systems.

Food systems include many different elements such as farms, markets, people, industries, and politics (Figure above). While current food systems are often efficient and provide sustenance to millions of people, they also create many undesirable outcomes. They contribute, for example, to climate change, biodiversity loss, food poverty and poor health for many. They can also perpetuate and reinforce inequalities among people, such as when prices of good quality or healthy food remain high. As the impacts of climate change and supply chain problems continue to grow, the food security and viability of our current food systems cannot be guaranteed.

It is therefore important to establish new visions of radically different future food systems. This might include future food systems that are resilient, enable access to healthy food, encourage different patterns of consumption and prioritise human and environmental health. We also need new approaches to support change towards these envisioned futures. Such approaches need to be able to cohere action and actors across many different sectors. The approaches to change also need to be able to do more than just trying to improve the current systems and begin to address underlying causes. This might include changing the mindsets and assumptions – such as about what the true costs of producing food in certain ways might be when social, health and environmental impacts are considered, or about what it means to have a healthy and affordable diet. Food system change will also require shifting the power dynamics driving our current pattern and tackling big elephants in the room, such as the lobbying power of certain parts of the food industry. Overall, tackling food systems requires working across all sorts of areas, including production, distribution, consumption and disposal of food.

What does this guide provide?

This guide aims to help you – in a practical way – to establish partnerships and support collective cohering of transformational change at scale. It includes key concepts and steps for you to plan activities, design workshops, and establish new patterns and ways of working.

More specifically, this guide explains how to:

1. Structure the development of large-scale approaches to transformation;
2. Frame activities to keep ambitions high and focused on transformation;
3. Establish frameworks for transformational action;
4. Cohere and align actions of different people involved in transformation;
5. Establish internal governance that allows the partnership to organise itself and sustain transformational action;
6. Develop transformation-focused forms of evaluation that drive transformation;
7. Maintain momentum for transformation.

Together, these aspects outline an integrated approach for cohering actors and activities to support system change.

Providing full 'how to' details and facilitation scripts is beyond the scope of this guide. Rather, we provide sufficient detail to inspire you to progress your own efforts to support transformation.

What is this guide based on?

The guide is primarily based on lessons learned from a five-year UK Government-funded, co-created action research project called FixOurFood ([Box 2](#)). This project involved collaboration between academics, practitioners and policy professionals to support food system transformation in the region of Yorkshire, UK.

We also draw on the lessons learned from other large-scale system change initiatives. The cases we draw on include:

- **Food for the Future North Yorkshire**, an initiative currently coordinated by North Yorkshire Council that aims to transform the North Yorkshire food system;
- **Engaged Futures**, an initiative coordinated by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), which focuses on transforming the UK higher education sector;
- **Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care System (SNEE ICS)**, a 10-year programme supporting systemic action in health and care;
- **Moving North Yorkshire**, an initiative coordinated by North Yorkshire Council and North Yorkshire Sport that aims to transform North Yorkshire's physical activity, sport and movement system.

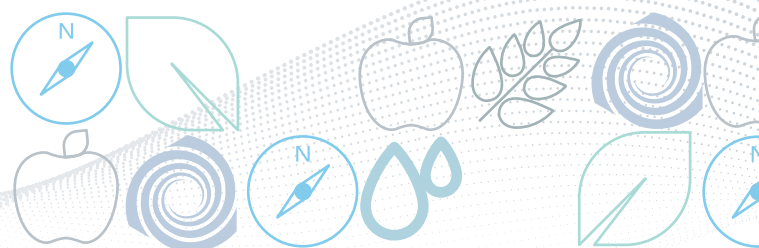
Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended for facilitators, conveners, leaders and others seeking to bring multiple people together to support system change and transformation. It is likely to have relevance for supporting transformation at any scale but is primarily focused on approaches for working at a regional scale (e.g. local authority, county, district, state, province, landscape, bioregion).

While the insights in this guide have mostly come from a food system context, they will be relevant to those working within almost any other system or sector, such as transport, biodiversity conservation, energy transitions, education or healthcare.

Caveat

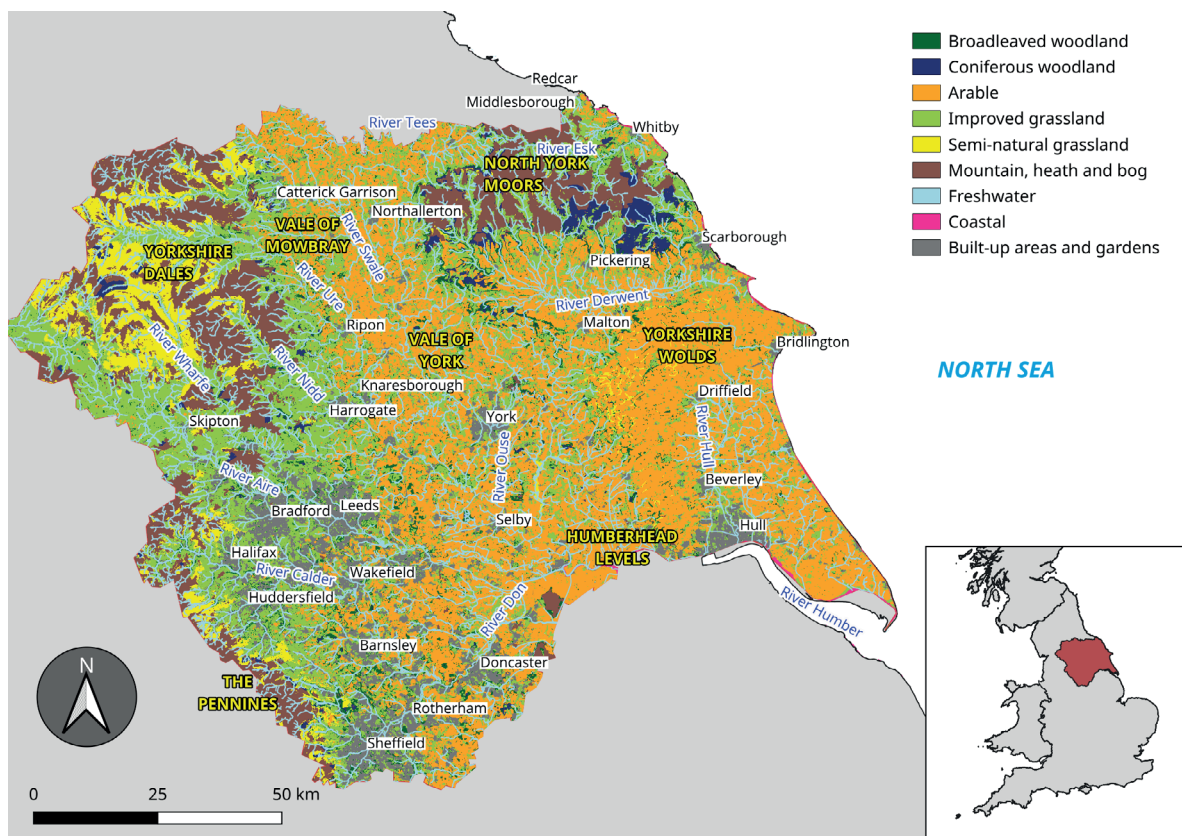
Our guide is based on our collective experience of intensive work in setting up and trying to support system change within the UK. This does not mean it is the best or only way. There are many other aspects, approaches and perspectives that we would want to incorporate in our future efforts. We consider some of these wider aspects towards the end of this guide.



Box 2: Where have many of our insights in this guide come from?

The insights presented in this guide draw on experiences of working collaboratively to support food system transformation across the extensive region of Yorkshire, UK (see figure below). The Yorkshire and Humber region covers 15,420 km², with a human population of around 5.5 million. The region features a diversity of soils, land cover, and farming systems, and extends across urban and rural environments. Yorkshire is also a hotbed of food system innovation, as highlighted by the highest concentration of food and drink businesses in the UK, a number of recent city- and regional-scale food strategies and action plans, and networks such as Yorkshire Agricultural Society's [Farmer Scientist Network](#), [Grow Yorkshire](#), [Deliciously Yorkshire](#)³, and [Yorkshire Food, Farming and Rural Network](#).

Yet, like in many other parts of the world, Yorkshire's food system faces many challenges. There are issues of food insecurity, reinforcement of inequalities, public health pressures (e.g. diet-related illnesses), and environmental degradation (e.g. the way agricultural practices deplete soils and contribute to biodiversity loss and greenhouse gas emissions). These challenges are tightly connected and cannot be transcended without working at a sufficiently wide scale that accommodates those interconnections. In addition, while there are many groups and organisations trying to work with Yorkshire's challenges, many of their efforts work in relative isolation. New approaches are therefore needed to enable different actors to work together to support transformation. Since 2022, the North Yorkshire Council Public Health team and colleagues from FixOurFood have been collaborating on the [Food for the Future North Yorkshire](#) initiative to support the mobilisation of different actors for food system change. This guide is the outcome of our collective experience in learning how to cohere and support transformation.



Land use map of the Yorkshire region, UK. Image produced using AgriFoodPy² and QGIS, based upon Land Cover Map 2023 © UKCEH 2024. Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown Copyright 2007, License number 100017572.

STRUCTURING YOUR TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE

Aims and purpose

Supporting system change at scale is very different from working with other kinds of change. Most of us are used to working with initiatives and actions that are primarily about improving something we already do or have, and at relatively small scales. Yet when it comes to transformation, efforts need to support change in ways that lead to something fundamentally different. To achieve significant change, supporting transformation requires challenging underlying assumptions and values that shape how change itself is approached. It also requires working in partnerships, such as finding new approaches to governance and learning that leverage the opportunities that come from working as a collective and beyond what can be achieved by heroic leaders acting alone.

This section gives an overview of some of the different aspects covered in this guide that need to be considered when supporting transformation and how they might be sequenced.

Starting point: the people who hold it together

Supporting transformational change is about enabling groups of actors to cohere and align their activities with others. It is through collective action, deep collaboration, and the way different activities reinforce each other that systemic and transformational change come about.

For the purposes of this guide, it is assumed that some kind of group – even if small – already exists of committed people willing to start something and sustain it. Over time, this small number of committed individuals with a shared sense of urgency can convene others, build a rationale for change, and create the conditions for wider engagement.

As more actors come on board, the initial group needs to evolve into something more deliberate, such as a more formal group that can cohere action across the partnership, maintain transformational intent, and bridge between senior institutional players and the energy of on-ground actors. Establishing a formal group can take time. In the case of Food for the Future and other examples we draw on in this guide, it took at least a year and often longer.

Importantly, you don't need a formal group immediately. It is, however, necessary to recognise that at all stages a group seeking to support transformation needs to be sustained and tended from the outset. Without a group of sufficiently influential, committed people actively holding the initiative together at its centre, all the other foundations described in this guide are difficult to establish and sustain.

Core aspects

Supporting transformational change at scale requires developing partnerships and undergoing a process of co-creating strategies and plans, bringing together diverse actors, and implementing ideas and activities in coherent ways. It begins with your group of committed actors and working through six critical aspects. The intended outcomes of each of these are summarised in [Figure 1](#).

Conceptualising and scoping your transformation (Section 2)

Before acting, it is important to develop a clear and shared understanding of what transformation means and what you are seeking to achieve. Transformation is a fundamentally different kind of change to improvement or reform and this distinction shapes everything when supporting transformation. Those embarking on a transformation initiative therefore need to agree on the nature of the change they are seeking, the geographic scale at which they will work, and the timeframe over which change is expected to unfold. A clear scoping statement that captures what is being done, by whom, and for what purpose provides an important foundation for subsequent activities.

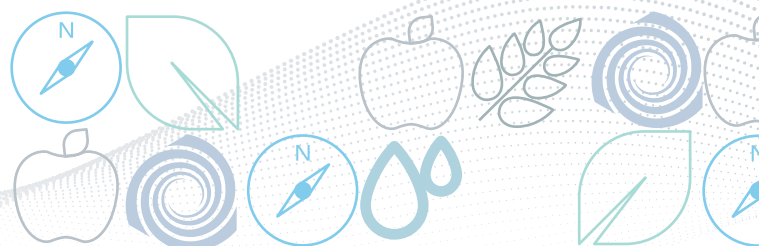
Developing transformation-focused frameworks for action (Section 3)

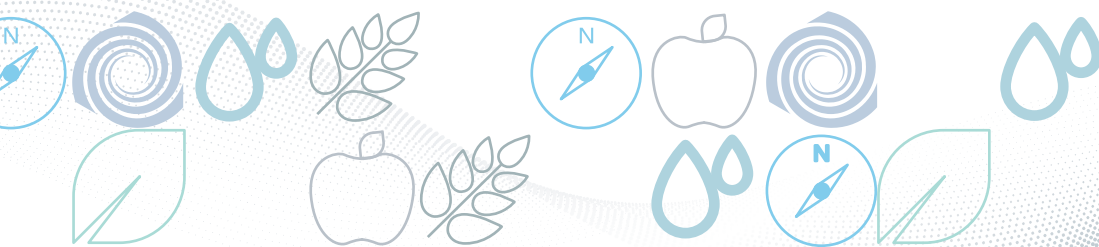
A transformation initiative needs a shared strategic framework that orientates action towards fundamental change rather than marginal improvement. Developing such a framework involves identifying the challenges inherent in the present system, envisioning a radically different future, and mapping the actors and activities most likely to support the transition between the

two. This is not simply a planning exercise: the process of co-creating a framework builds shared understanding and commitment among those involved. The resulting framework becomes a reference point that guides decision-making and helps to enrol new actors into the initiative over time.

Enrolling, cohering and aligning actors and partnerships (Section 4)

No single organisation or individual can support transformation alone. Effective transformation requires diverse actors – from across sectors, scales, and communities – to be enrolled into a shared initiative and to have their activities aligned towards common goals. This involves building a clear rationale and mandate for change, establishing partnerships, and creating structures that allow different actors to reinforce rather than duplicate each other's efforts. A sustained, 'middle-out' approach to cohering actors – a combination of top-down and bottom-up driven change – is typically more effective than relying solely on either top-down direction or bottom-up innovation. This is primarily relational and political work that is concerned with building legitimacy, mandate, and commitment across a wide coalition of actors and the continual process of enrolling others into the initiative. The question of how that partnership then formally organises its own internal decision-making and structures is addressed in Section 5.





Establishing transformation-focused governance (Section 5)

Once a partnership has established its shared direction and built its coalition of actors, a further challenge arises: how should the partnership formally organise itself internally? The way a transformation initiative structures its own internal governance has a profound effect on its ability to sustain fundamental change over time. For example, most conventional governance approaches were designed to maintain stability and are rarely sufficiently ambitious and flexible to support transformation. Developing governance that is explicitly focused on supporting transformation involves surfacing shared values, agreeing principles for how decisions will be made, and identifying the conditions needed for distributed action to remain coherent. Such approaches to governance recognise that the way change is governed also needs to evolve over time.

Designing and embedding transformation-focused evaluation and learning (Section 6)

Traditional evaluation approaches are often poorly suited to the complexity and uncertainty of transformation initiatives. They tend to focus on short-term measurable outputs rather than the deeper shifts in systems, relationships, and

assumptions that transformation requires. A transformation-focused approach to evaluation, however, can be used to help keep ambitions high. These forms of evaluation also encourage continuous deep learning, such as about what is happening in the system and how assumptions about how change will come about need to evolve. These forms of evaluation need to be embedded as part of system change practice, rather than simply be an external audit. Co-designing an evaluation framework that is woven into the initiative's everyday ways of working can help to drive momentum, sustain ambition, and ensure that your initiative can adapt rapidly to new information and changing conditions.

Maintaining momentum (Section 7)

Establishing the foundations for transformation – the ways of thinking, approaching, working together, and learning – is only the beginning. The strong pull of existing systems, urgent short-term pressures, and the difficulty of working at scale over long timeframes all create risks where intent for transformation is easily lost. Maintaining momentum requires continuous attention to the underlying dynamics of transformation, a deepening culture of shared stewardship, and governance and evaluation practices that keep ambition high. It also requires recognition that transformation typically unfolds over decades, and that sustaining the conditions for change is as important as any individual action.



SECTION 2**Conceptualising and scoping your transformation**

- A deeper understanding of the nature of transformation and how it differs from other kinds of change.
- A simple scoping statement that summarises your transformation initiative.

SECTION 5**Establishing transformation-focused governance**

- A partnership that has moved from shared ambition to ways of working capable of sustaining transformation over time.
- Values, principles, and enabling conditions needed to support collective and transformational action have been surfaced.
- An operational governance approach actively oriented towards supporting transformational change.

SECTION 3**Developing transformation-focused frameworks for action**

- An integrated strategic approach for supporting transformation.
- A set of key domains around which action can be cohered.
- A core committed group of actors with a shared vision, and a firm understanding of transformational change and how it could be applied in practice.

SECTION 6**Designing and embedding transformation-focused evaluation and learning**

- A co-designed transformation-focused evaluation and learning approach for your initiative.
- A shift in assumptions about the purpose of, and approach to, evaluation in your partnership.
- A form of evaluation embedded in your initiative that drives momentum and learning, keeps ambition high, and enables rapid adaptation to changing conditions.

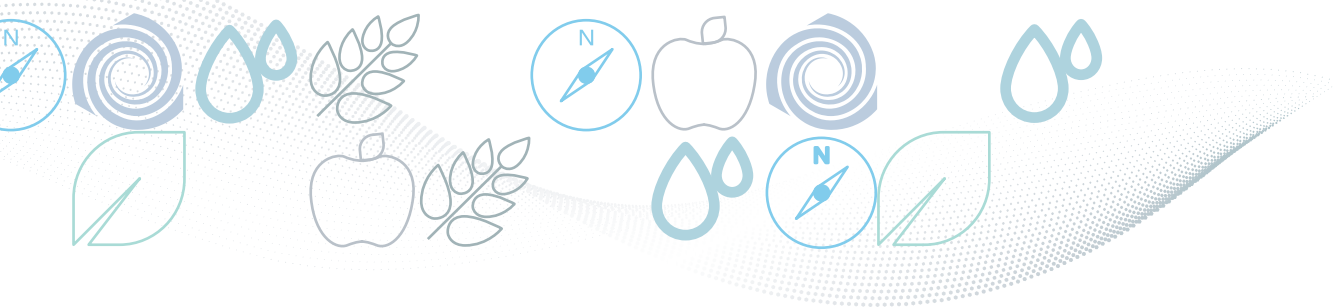
SECTION 4**Enrolling, cohering and aligning actors and partnerships**

- A clear rationale and mandate for transformation and your system change initiative.
- Sustained commitment of a partnership of actors from across your system who can progress and advocate for your initiative.
- A strengthened sense of shared purpose and accountability.

SECTION 7**Maintaining momentum**

- A shared understanding of the importance of resisting the strong gravitational pull back to conventional ways of working.
- Understanding of the importance of establishing a partnership culture that embodies transformation as a way of being, not just a set of activities.
- Recognition of the need to build and protect transformation infrastructure as a core asset, including capacity for convening, nurturing relationships, and supporting deep learning.

Figure 1. Intended outcomes of different aspects of developing effective partnerships for cohering transformational change at scale.



Sequencing

There is no precise way to sequence work to establish the core elements for supporting transformation highlighted above. Many are overlapping or need to be conducted in parallel so that they reinforce each other. In general, however, the process begins with scoping, followed by the beginnings of developing a framework for action and the cohering and aligning of different actors. The process can then be deepened by developing approaches to transformation-focused internal governance and evaluation. Together these aspects create a significant shift beyond envisioning and getting into action. The issue then becomes more about sustaining and maintaining momentum. A suggested pattern of activities is outlined in [Figure 2](#).

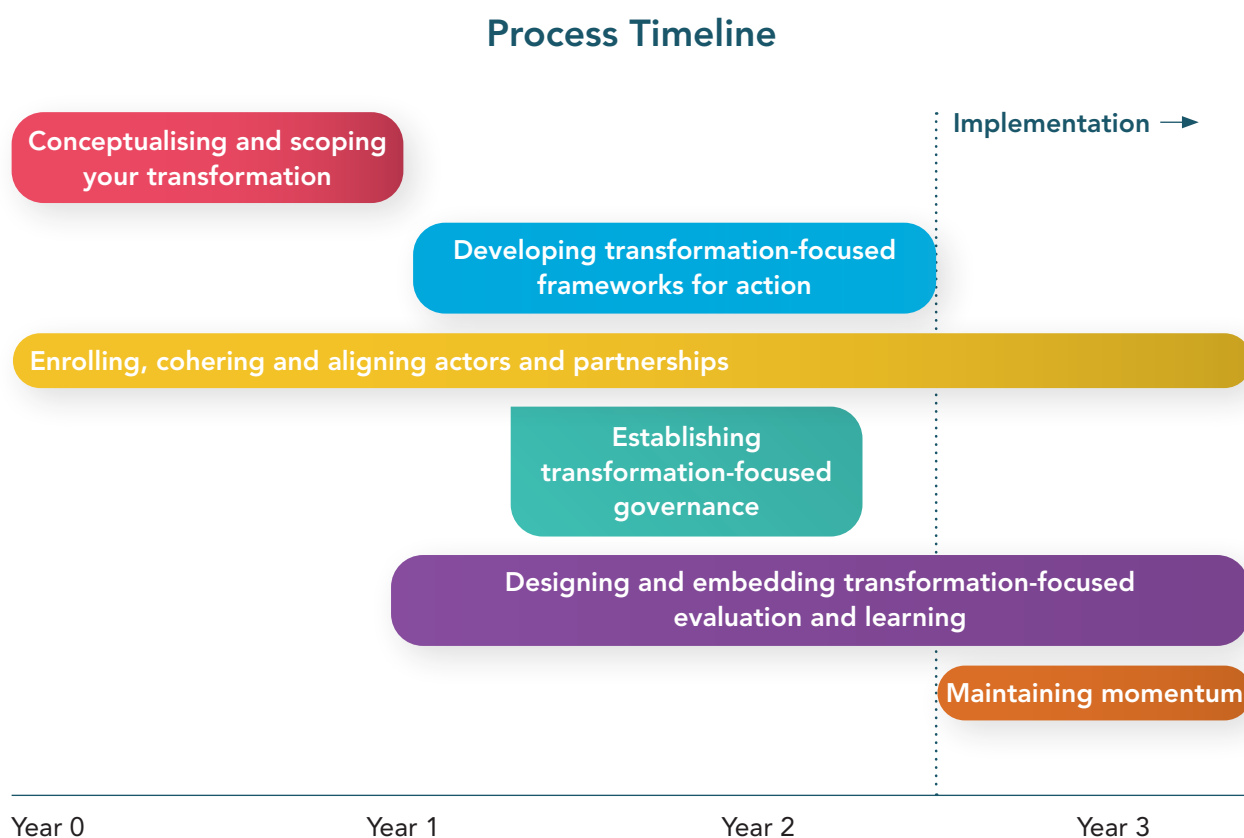
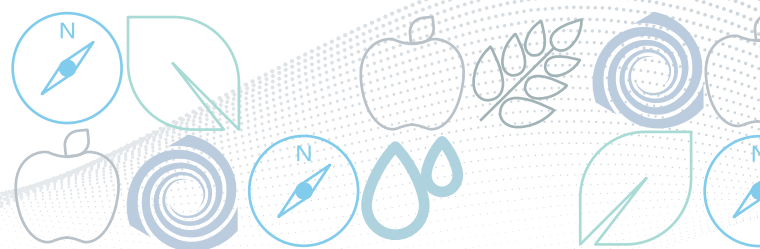


Figure 2. Suggested timeline for exploring and developing the foundations for effective cohering of partnerships to achieve transformation at scale.



Conclusion

The primary lesson from this section is that supporting transformation is not easy. Embarking on a journey of transformation requires considerable thought at the beginning about how it might be achieved. There are rarely resources allocated to such an initiative because our thinking, institutions and ways in which we approach change are simply not set up for transformation. It is therefore important at the outset to recognise the significance of the need to establish a strong rationale and mandate for change, to be ambitious and remain hopeful and inspired. As different actors come on board and the power of a collective is unleashed, the potential for genuine action becomes more possible.



CONCEPTUALISING AND SCOPING YOUR TRANSFORMATION

Aims and purpose

Our assumptions about change and how it comes about have a significant impact on the approaches we use and their likely effectiveness in supporting change. This section therefore outlines some of the core foundational concepts that are useful to consider when you are embarking on transformation at scale.

This section provides you with:

- A deeper understanding of the nature of transformation and how it differs from other kinds of change;
- Guidance on creating a simple scoping statement that summarises your transformation initiative.

This section is envisaged as being conducted prior to all of the others. It might be explored with only a small team, such as a facilitator and their sponsor who is beginning to embark on setting up an initiative. The concepts in this section also lay the foundations for, and can be embedded in, the work conducted in other sections.

There are three aspects covered in this section:

1. Understanding the nature of transformation;
2. Defining an appropriate scale and speed for the change and the components associated with transformation;
3. Establishing a scoping statement that summarises your initiative's intentions.

These aspects help you frame the kinds of change you are seeking to achieve and establish a clear statement of intent.

1. The nature of transformation

When embarking on a transformational endeavour, it is helpful to first consider what is meant by transformation. How we understand transformation matters because it shapes what emerges from our efforts to support change.

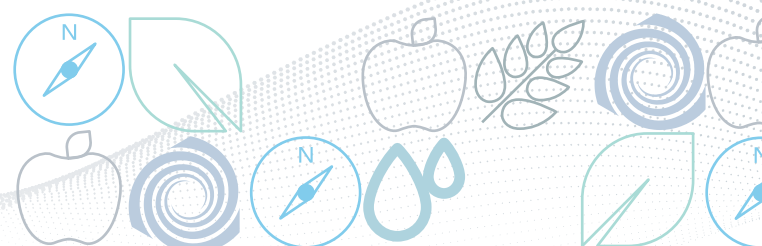
Transformation as a qualitatively distinct form of change

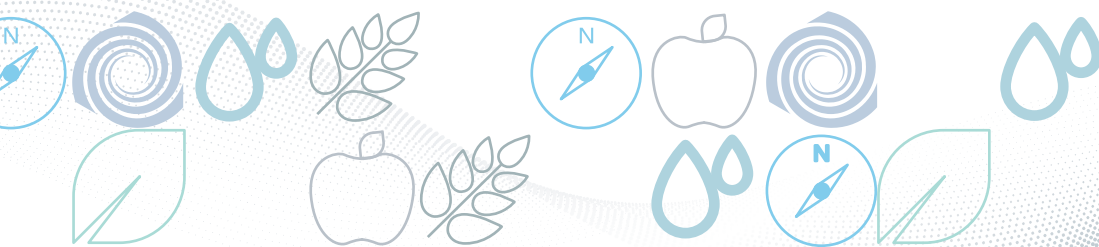
There are many ways in which transformation can be understood. At its simplest, however, transformation can be considered a fundamental change occurring over time and qualitatively distinct to more superficial or marginal forms of change such as adjustments or reforms⁴.

Adjustments or reforms tend to involve change to sustain or improve a status quo, whereas transformation involves a change to create something fundamentally different. Transformation involves, for example, asking different questions and having a very different purpose and action logic to adjustments or reforms (Table 1).

Table 1. Different kinds of change (modified from Waddell 2011⁴)

	Adjust	Reform	Transform
Core questions	Are we doing things right?	What are the things to be doing?	What is right?
Purpose	Improve performance	Change the system & its parts	Create previously unimagined possibilities
Power & relationship	Confirm existing rules	Opens rules to revision	Enable new ways of thinking about power
Action logic	Project implementation	Piloting	Experimenting
Typical actions	Copying, duplicating, mimicking	Changing policy, adapting	Visioning, experimenting, inventing
Tools logic	Negotiation logic	Meditation logic	Envisioning logic





Transformation involves a shift in identity and purpose

A useful analogy of transformation as a fundamental form of change is the change from a caterpillar to a butterfly. In this transformation, a caterpillar dissolves itself within a chrysalis, re-allocating the same resources to create something new. Rather than leading to a fatter, fitter, faster caterpillar – which tends to occur through adjustments or reforms – transformation involves an existential shift to something with a different identity, function, ability, and purpose. In the case of a butterfly, the transformation is essentially from being an eating machine to a butterfly that can fly, procreate and drink nectar.

major challenges – like those in current food systems – radical imaginations are needed to guide the desired change and avoid the reconfiguration simply reproducing the status quo.

Transformations are subjective

What is considered to be a transformation depends on a person's subjective position, values and perspective. For example, consider the change from a 1950s tractor to a new, technically advanced machine. Many farmers might view the shift to modern tractors as transformational because it allows them to be so much more efficient and effective in what they do. But others might consider this to be an adjustment or reform because the tractor's function and purpose have generally remained the same (it



Envisioning a radically different future

Transformations then also require a process of envisioning a fundamentally different future or form. In the example of the caterpillar, after dissolution 'imaginal cells' are invoked to shape the process of reconfiguration and guide the emergence of something new. To transcend

is still a tractor). Use of the advanced machines is also likely to lead to broadly the same kind of pattern of food production, albeit at greater speed, efficiency and scale. Thus, although what counts as transformational change is subjective, with scrutiny it can still be recognised as a distinct form of change.

Transformations are normative

Transformations can be judged as desirable or undesirable. For example, many undesirable transformations across human societies will occur if there is insufficient action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such as impacts from droughts, floods or financially stranded assets as markets shift to decarbonised economies. Often, such transformations are emergent and depend on cultural orientations.

Other, more desirable transformations can be deliberately shaped or stewarded⁵⁻⁷ such as

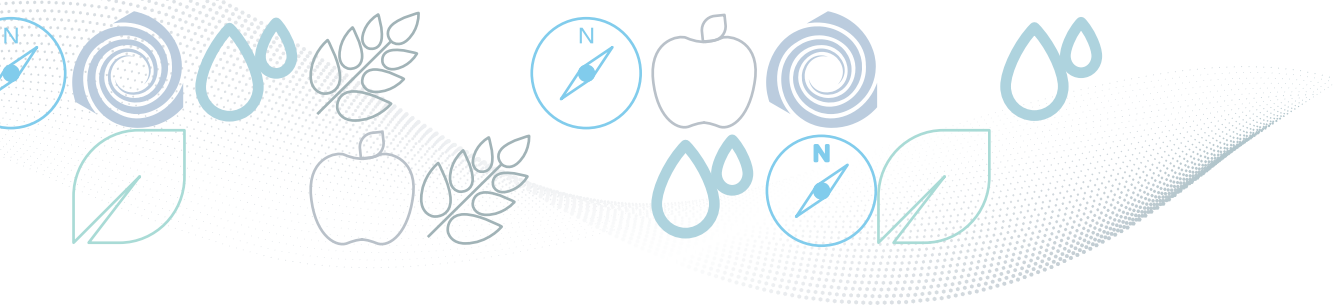
shifts towards regenerative and redistributive economies that enhance human and ecological wellbeing in reinforcing ways and address social inequalities. Again, what is considered desirable will depend on a person's perspective. The challenge is then to find ways that help us collectively support transformations towards a more positive future.

Together, these understandings lead to six important insights relevant to cohering transformations at scale ([Box 3](#)).

Box 3: Core insights about transformational change

1. Transformation is a fundamental kind of change that is qualitatively different from minor adjustments or reforms.
2. Transformation often involves a shift in identity, function, ability and purpose of a system. Such existential change is necessary to transcend the challenges and limits created by old patterns.
3. Transformation involves dissolution of the old pattern so that a new one can emerge. For example, a caterpillar cannot become a butterfly without disintegrating its old self. This is sometimes interpreted as a need for actively hospicing old patterns while simultaneously providing midwifery for the new⁸.
4. Transformation is a process where existing resources are re-allocated to create something new. It is not necessarily about finding more resources. Instead, it is about mobilising the significant resources held by mainstream patterns and giving them new purpose and ownership.
5. Transformation can be subjective while still being a qualitatively distinct kind of change.
6. Transformations can lead to desirable or undesirable outcomes and futures.

You can find more details about transformations in a separate guide – Transformation: An introductory guide to fundamental change for researchers and change makers in a world of crises⁹.



2. Considering scale, speed and system components

Defining the appropriate scale, scope and speed for your transformational change is important. It involves deciding what you will focus on, who will be included, and how you will cohere different actors and activities to support system change.

Geographical scale

The first aspect is deciding on the geographical scale of the transformation you seek to support. Transformation occurs at multiple scales, from individuals and households to organisations, cities, regions, and nations. Critically, these scales are interdependent. Households struggle to change without shifts in wider societal patterns and employment opportunities. Similarly, transforming farming practices on a single farm depends on broader government policies, incentives, and consumer demands. Conversely, smaller-scale change can enable wider transformation: for example, networks of individuals within organisations often catalyse broader institutional shifts.

A useful approach for larger-scale transformations is to focus on the scale of a bioregion and the many different components that operate at smaller scales within it (such as cities, local authorities etc). Bioregions are defined by boundaries that are both ecologically and culturally meaningful, rather than purely political

(Box 4). Food system challenges, for instance, require focusing on at least a bioregional scale to address interactions between production, consumption, land ownership, ecosystems, and governance. A bioregional scale is often sufficiently large enough to encompass interconnected contemporary issues and establish regional self-sufficiency and resilience. Without considering the integration of people and nature in this way, many challenges human societies now face are difficult to overcome because we risk degrading the natural processes that human wellbeing ultimately depends on. Other, even wider scales may be needed for working on transformations. Some organisations, for example, argue that planetary-scale challenges demand large-scale transformational investments, though this doesn't negate the need for change at smaller scales.



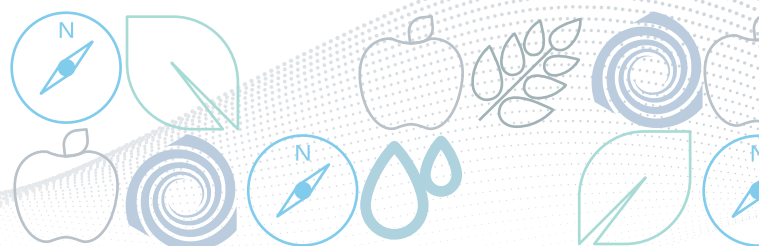
Box 4: Bioregions

A bioregion is an area whose boundaries are ecologically and culturally defined and meaningful, rather than based purely on human politics and administrative boundaries. For example, your bioregion might be approximated by a river catchment, valley, mountain or mountain range, desert, National Park, island, archipelago, bay, lake, or sea. Bioregions are not just a physical place. They are also a ‘terrain of consciousness’, including the cultural ideas that have developed about how to live in that place¹⁰.

There are several reasons why bioregions are a powerful scale for transformation efforts:

- Collective action is often most effectively founded in a shared narrative, stewardship of place, and regional identity; people often care strongly about their local region;
- Bioregions are large enough to make sense as a coherent whole for ecological functioning, whilst not being overwhelmingly large;
- Bioregions are often scales at which human communities can reach a high degree of self-reliance based on regional production from regionally generated resources (e.g. food and energy);
- Bioregions can powerfully illustrate how humans and nature intertwine, since they typically feature strong cultural dimensions – how we relate to our bioregion, how it weaves into our history, stories and legends and underpins our economies and livelihoods, how our worldview shapes the boundaries of our bioregion, and so on – as well as biogeophysical dimensions (terrain, climate, etc.).

A growing number of ‘bioregioning’ initiatives around the world are working to restore the health of their local bioregions. For more information on the many different approaches to bioregioning, see guides such as BioFi Project’s [A Guide to Bioregional Mapping & Planning](#)¹¹, Commonland’s [4 Returns Framework](#)¹², Gaia Education’s [SDG Toolkit for Designing Community Projects](#), and resources from r3.0’s [Relational Bioregional Knowledge Commons](#), the [Bioregional Learning Centre](#), and [Regenes Institute](#).



Speed of transformation

It is also important to consider the speed of your transformation. Some transformations occur faster than others. When speed of change is considered together with the scale at which it occurs, four broad types of transformation have been proposed (Figure 3)¹³. Most contemporary human challenges require urgent action, such as overcoming climate change and health inequalities arising from current food systems.

Most efforts to support transformations at scale will need to focus on rapid change over both smaller or larger geographic scales. That is, they will have a focus on what have been called 'emergent' forms of transformation¹³. Such transformations tend to be both actively

supported and deliberately stewarded while simultaneously recognising that this requires alignment with the changes occurring around them. In food system change, this might be the way in which rising food inequalities and rising fertiliser costs may create a change in conditions conducive to shifting towards different kinds of food production.

It is important to note that regional-scale transformations will not happen quickly and tend to occur over a few decades. This highlights that effective transformations require sustained effort, long-term vision and strategically supported actions in the present that contribute to a longer-term transformation rather than actions that reinforce a status quo.

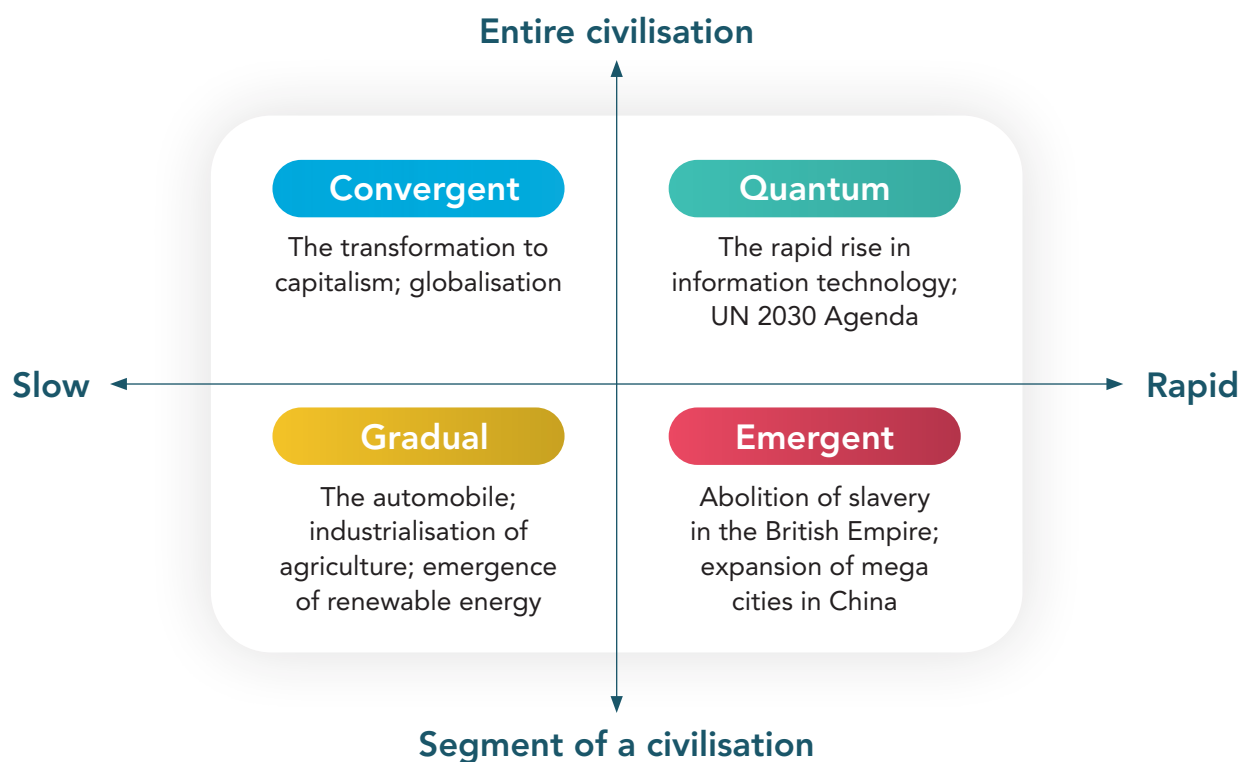


Figure 3. Four different kinds of transformations in relation to timescale and social/spatial scale. Emergent forms of change, with rapid transformation and for a segment of society (such as a bioregion), are the primary focus of our guide¹³.

System components

Finally, it is important to consider other system components that will be in scope, including the people, issues, structures and institutions that need to change or be part of the process of supporting change. This can be explored using methods such as: (a) actor, institutional or policy mapping; (b) examining the breadth of components within systems (e.g. Box 1); or (c) examining deeper components, such as the worldviews, mindsets, and assumptions underpinning current patterns¹⁴. At this stage a detailed exploration is not needed. It can, however, be useful to broadly consider what will be in or out of scope in the early stages.

3. Creating a scoping statement

All of these aspects – sense of transformation, scale, speed, and key components that need to be considered – can then be brought together to create a simple scoping statement that outlines what is being done, with or by whom, and for what purpose. This involves exploring the system of focus and its transactional and contextual environment ([Box 5](#)).

Box 5: How to scope your inquiry

Once you have a sense of the geographical scale and speed of the transformation you are likely to be supporting, it is helpful to scope the elements within the system of interest and which influence what you are seeking to change. Doing so can lead you to a simple summary statement that outlines – at least in your early stages – what you are seeking to achieve. This process can be done by examining three nested layers that help you understand the full landscape of change. Start with your **immediate system of focus**: the core issue or question you are exploring, defined broadly enough to stay open to possibilities rather than locking into narrow organisational interests (e.g. think “sustainable food production in East Africa” rather than “our company’s market share”). Next, map the **transactional environment** where change happens directly, identifying the users and beneficiaries, co-producers and partners, competitors, and key influencers shaping how things are done. In food systems, this might include smallholder farmers, agricultural cooperatives, food retailers, NGOs providing training, and government extension services. Finally, briefly consider the wider **contextual environment**. This operates beyond the core region and actors of your transformation, but potentially has a significant bearing on how change might unfold. For Food for the Future, it might include climate change impacts, urbanisation patterns, global commodity prices, and shifting dietary preferences and so on.

Once you have considered these you can summarise your scope as a statement that follows a simple structure:

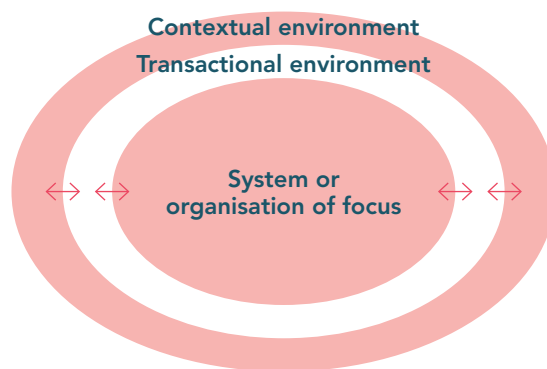
- OF something (e.g. the future of food production and consumption in the region of ... over the next 20 years);
- BY someone (e.g. leaders of the local authority and partners on a learning journey);
- FOR what purpose (e.g. to support transformation towards a regenerative food system). This should make your transformational intent clear.

The statement should be specific enough to provide focus but open enough to allow the exploration to reveal unexpected opportunities and pathways. The goal is to set out with shared intent while remaining open to discovery along the way.

An example scoping statement might be: *“An inquiry into the transformation of food production and consumption in East Africa over the next 20 years to be undertaken by leaders of local authorities and partners — including smallholder farmers, agricultural cooperatives, NGOs, and government extension services — for the purpose of learning how to support transformation towards a regenerative food system.”*

For more guidance on creating scoping statements, check out the [H3Uni Resource Library](#).

Mapping transactional and contextual environments



Critical insights from practice

Getting the conceptual foundations right before moving into action is more important than it might initially seem. The following insights are important when embarking on initiatives to support transformation at scale:

- **It is important to consider what transformation might mean in your context:** reflect carefully on whether you are aiming for fundamental change in function, identity and purpose, or improvement of existing patterns. Is your desired change genuinely to a butterfly, or simply to a fatter, fitter, faster caterpillar? Without this clarity, actions intended to support transformation can easily default to more marginal forms of change.
- **Understand what dissolution and emergence will require in your context.** Transformation involves letting go of old patterns while nurturing new ones. It helps to orientate effort by identifying early what may need hospicing — aspects of the current system that need to be wound down — and where midwifery is needed to nurture emergence of new patterns to emerge.
- **Make differing views of desirable futures visible from the start.** Different stakeholders will hold different views about what a desirable future looks like, reflecting their positions, values and experiences. Surfacing these differences early strengthens the legitimacy of your initiative and helps avoid a narrow vision of change that excludes important voices.
- **Identify where resources are held and what reallocation will require.** Transformation is not primarily about finding new resources but about redirecting those already held within existing systems. Beginning to map where resources sit and what it would take to reallocate them towards a different pattern, is an important early step that is often overlooked.
- **Work at a scale large enough to capture the interconnections that need to change.** Geographic scale matters more than is often appreciated. Regional transformations typically require working across political boundaries, since the interconnections driving current challenges rarely respect administrative lines.
- **Treat transformation as a long-term endeavour from the outset.** Regional-scale transformations typically unfold over decades. Recognising this early shapes how you approach momentum, sustain commitment, and sequence action in ways that genuinely contribute to longer-term change rather than reinforcing a status quo.
- **Establish a clear scoping statement before moving into action.** Articulating your transformation — of what, by whom, and for what purpose — provides a shared reference point that can be returned to as the initiative develops. The statement should be specific enough to give direction but open enough to allow unexpected pathways to emerge.

Conclusion

Exploring these aspects among those involved in your transformation initiative helps establish a shared understanding of your endeavour and what those involved are committing to. At this stage you don't have to fully define everything. But being able to articulate each of these aspects now and revisiting them as your ideas develop will help you clarify your learning about how you can sustain transformation rather than more marginal forms of change.

DEVELOPING TRANSFORMATION-FOCUSED FRAMEWORKS FOR ACTION

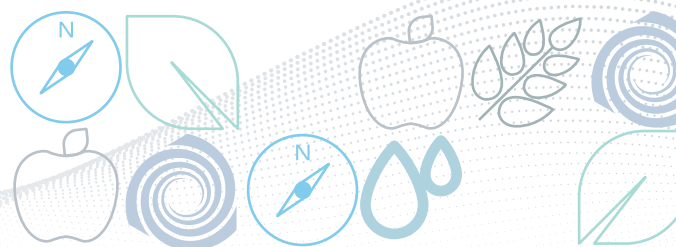
Aims and purpose

The previous section introduced key concepts relating to transformation. It highlighted that transformation involves a fundamental change that is qualitatively distinct from change that focuses on improving a system, rather than altering its deeper function, identity and purpose. The previous section also explained how to create a simple statement of intent for exploring how to support transformation.

This section builds on those foundational concepts. It aims to provide a process for developing a transformation-focused framework for action for a transformational endeavour. An example of such a framework is provided in [Box 6](#).

Developing a transformation-focused framework for action is helpful because it provides a shared documentation of core aspects, intentions and ways of working that are needed to cohere action at scale and across different stakeholders to support system change. This allows sharing with others, helping to enrol additional stakeholders into the process. Yet the framework is much more than just a document or a strategy. The participants involved in developing the framework undertake a process of co-creation where they learn from different perspectives and expertise about the system of focus, more deeply about change itself and how to approach it. The process of developing a framework therefore leads to:

- An integrated strategic approach for supporting transformation;
- A set of key domains around which action can be cohered;
- A core committed group of actors with a shared vision and a firm understanding of transformational change and how it could be applied in practice.

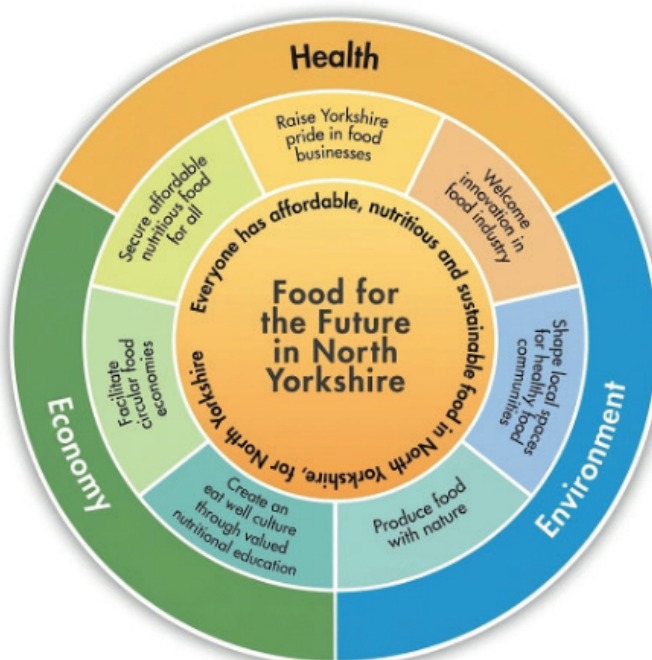


Box 6: A transformation-focused framework for action

The [Food for the Future North Yorkshire Framework for Action](#)¹⁵ provides a good example of what a transformation-focused framework for action looks like in practice. It is a co-created document that orients a partnership towards systemic change, developed through a process of collective inquiry that builds shared understanding, commitment and capability among those involved. It is distinct from conventional strategies in that it is explicitly designed to support fundamental change rather than improvement of existing patterns. The Food for the Future framework contains the following core components:

- A food system definition and context — establishing shared understanding of what the system is, who is involved, and why it matters. In Food for the Future this included mapping the full food system from production through to waste, and situating it within North Yorkshire's specific context: its agricultural heritage, its concentration of food and drink businesses, its community food networks, and the inequalities and environmental pressures the county faces
- A current state analysis — mapping not just visible problems but the underlying structures and assumptions sustaining them. In Food for the Future this drew on a survey of over 2,000 North Yorkshire residents alongside conversations with farmers, young people, community food organisations, and health, economic and environmental data
- A vision — a radical account of a desired future with sufficient contrast to the present to orient action towards transformation rather than incremental improvement. In Food for the Future this was expressed as: everyone has affordable, nutritious and sustainable food in North Yorkshire, for North Yorkshire
- Value contrasts — making explicit the cultural and mindset shifts that transformation requires, examining what fundamentally differs between present and desired future patterns
- Action domains and priority actions — clusters of mutually reinforcing actors and activities, each carrying specific priority actions, identified through reinforcement clustering rather than siloed thinking. In Food for the Future seven domains were identified, ranging from securing affordable nutritious food for all to facilitating circular food economies
- Existing case studies — examples already demonstrating what change looks like in practice in North Yorkshire, grounding the vision in tangible reality and providing early evidence of momentum
- An evaluation approach — establishing how the partnership will track whether it is maintaining transformational intent and making progress over time

The framework functions as a living reference point and boundary object. It is revisited as conditions change, used to orient decisions, and shared to enrol new partners into the initiative. It provides the foundation from which governance structures are built, priority actions are agreed, and distributed action across a wide partnership can be cohered and sustained over time.



Assumptions and framings

Three Horizons

When establishing a framework for transformational action, it is necessary to use an approach that is explicitly geared towards developing strategies to support system change. There are many different approaches that can do this. Some are more focused on explaining how change happens, such as specific theories or concepts. Others are more practical, providing a structured set of stages and steps.

A very useful practical approach for convening dialogue to develop transformation-focused frameworks is Three Horizons (Box 7). This approach was developed to support futures thinking: an interdisciplinary field interested in anticipating future conditions or exploring how change to different kinds of futures could be stewarded. In particular, Three Horizons was developed to help identify potentially transformative action in situations of high complexity and uncertainty¹⁶. The approach has been widely adopted in many different initiatives and contexts.

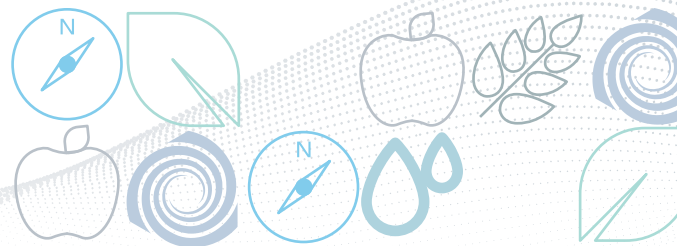
An example is the way Three Horizons is now used extensively to support implementation of the Welsh Government's [Well-being of Future Generations Act \(2015\)](#). This unique Act requires public bodies to take into account impacts on future generations in their policymaking and strive towards holistic measures of wellbeing rather than narrow economic growth metrics. It takes inspiration from Indigenous wisdom and the Seventh Generation Principle, which is based on an ancient Haudenosaunee philosophy that the decisions we make today should result in

a sustainable world seven generations into the future. Three Horizons provides a powerful way to shape conversations that brings a long-term view into short-term decision-making.

A transformation-focused framework for action might be developed using Three Horizons through multiple days of workshops with a core group of 15-25 key actors from different organisations, including extensive work in between gatherings. An example of the outcomes of a typical Three Horizons inquiry is provided in Box 8. Four core outcomes can arise from this process:

- A shared transformation-focused framework with a shared vision that orientates action towards transformational change and with core areas of the action needed;
- A group of actors enrolled and with vested interest in supporting the desired change with a common language about what constitutes transformation and how transformation is expected to come about;
- A powerful boundary object for enrolling further actors over time;
- A group of core actors with enhanced futures consciousness: a better understanding of how actions in the present can give rise to transformed futures¹⁶.

In general, there is now lots of useful information about Three Horizons and how to facilitate the process. You can find more information about it on the [Future Stewards website](#).

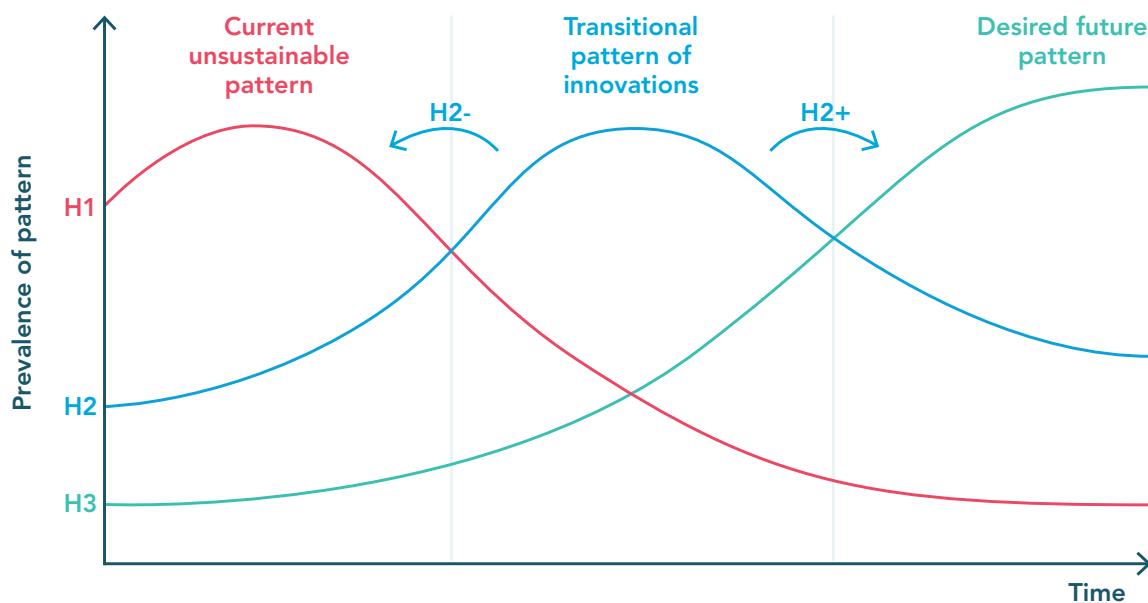


Box 7: Three Horizons

Three Horizons is an approach to help convene dialogue about how transformation can be supported^{16,17}. It involves a framework used to explore diverse elements in system change: challenges in the present, envisioned futures, and how actors and activities can help disrupt existing patterns and support the emergence of very different futures.

The simple framework imagines the future arising as a set of overlapping horizons. You are standing in the present horizon, looking out to a hazy, distant future (the third horizon), with an intermediate second horizon in between. Each horizon represents a set of different societal (e.g. technological, behavioural, economic) patterns relevant to the system for which change is being explored.

- Horizon 1 (H1) is the pattern that dominates the present but is declining as many aspects of it – ways of working, values, assumptions, technologies, and so on – become less fit for purpose as the wider environment changes.
- Horizon 3 (H3) represents an envisioned, radically different future – the sense of what a collective wants to bring into being.
- Horizon 2 (H2) is a transitional pattern of innovations – activity that affects the way in which H3 may or may not emerge. Some innovations in this transitional space are co-opted by H1, extend its lifespan and delay emergence of H3. These are referred to as H2- innovations. On the other hand, some innovations genuinely create space for H3 to accelerate, diffuse and ultimately reconfigure the system¹⁸. These are called H2+ innovations.



The left-hand vertical axis on the image represents the extent to which a pattern dominates (e.g. in terms of the amount of resources it holds or transmits, or the proportion of human activity taking place related to the horizon). For example, H1 activities dominate in the present and H3 activities dominate in the longer-term future. All horizons are present in every timeframe, however. There will, for example, be pockets of H3 in the present: niche organisations and initiatives already demonstrating radically different ways of doing things, which may become part of a transformed future pattern. Time flows from left to right: the present is found where H1 is dominant and all information to the right of this is in the future.

Box 8: An example of a Three Horizons map

The Three Horizons map below (Figure 4) comes from the [Engaged Futures](#) initiative coordinated by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE). This initiative aims to transform the UK higher education (HE) sector so that it is much more engaged with, and inclusive of, the communities, society and planet that it serves. An extensive Three Horizons process was used to establish the nature of the contrast between H1 and H3, identify transformational H2 domains of action, and explore how those domains could reinforce each other. Each of the high-level themes in bubbles in the map is underpinned by many other individual ideas that were identified through the development process conducted with diverse stakeholders. The H2 action domains grew from grouping many innovative H2+ actors already striving to change the HE sector. The value contrasts below the map are used by the initiative as a short-hand way of describing the transformation that is sought.

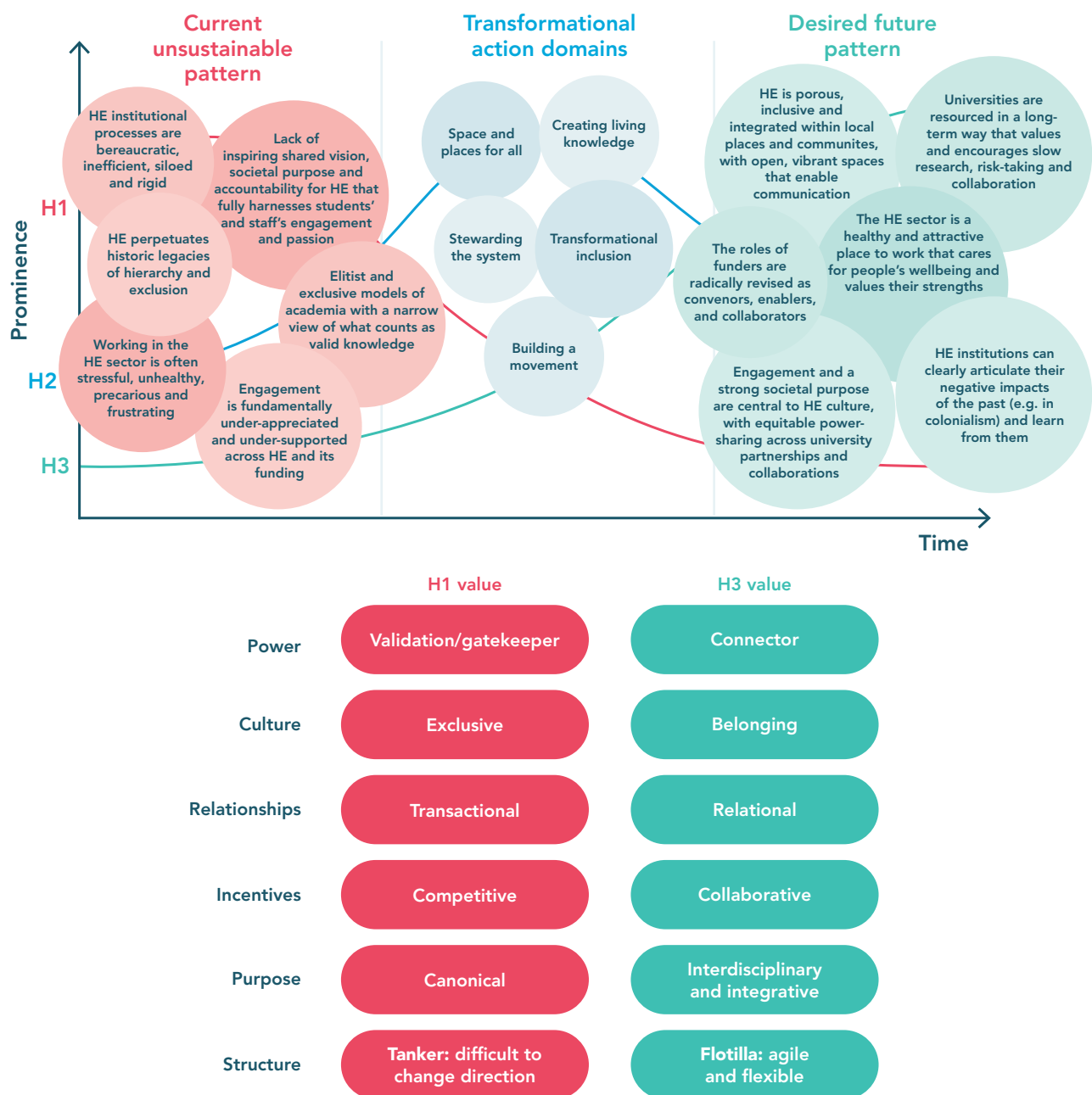
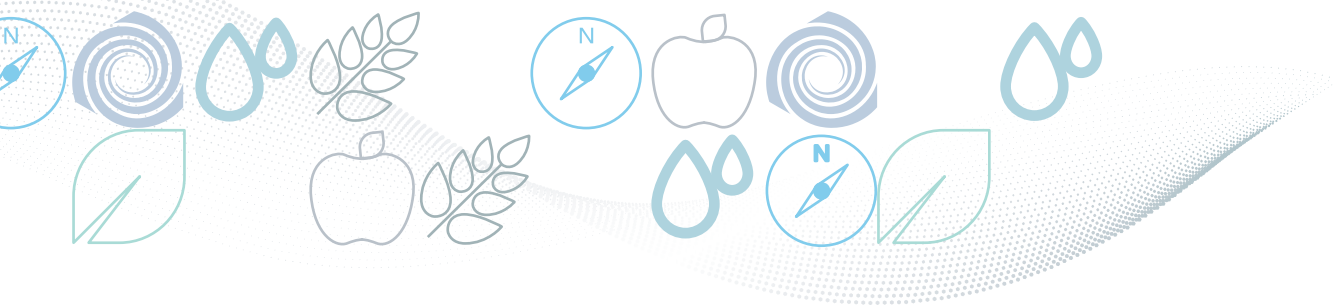


Figure 4. Initial outcomes of a Three Horizons process with a large number of influential actors as part of the Engaged Futures initiative, convened by NCCPE, to support transformation of the UK higher education (HE) sector.



Main phases

Developing a transformation-focused framework for action using Three Horizons involves six main phases:

1. Convening system stewards committed to progressing action;
2. Identifying the nature of the transformation needed;
3. Identifying transformation catalysts;
4. Identifying key domains of transitional action;
5. Examining how action domains can reinforce each other;
6. Developing frameworks for action.

Some of these phases are explored in workshops and in additional work (e.g. using surveys or wider stakeholder engagement outside of workshops) that build on each other. How these phases are conducted is unique to the transformation initiative in question and will depend on resources you have available, who is involved, and the wider system context.

Phase 1: Convene system stewards committed to progressing action

The process begins with bringing together diverse actors that can co-create a transformation-focused framework for action. Ideally, these need to be people who really 'get' the need for transformation, are willing to explore it as different kind of change, are already adept at partnership-building and galvanising others to come on board, and who are appropriately networked and influential to manage the level of convening and enrolment required. Being part of this process is just the beginning of the leap needed to make change happen, so participants should be prepared for long-term commitment.

Food for the Future had a clear convener – the head of public health from North Yorkshire Council – who established support from the Council's leadership and executive bodies to explore food system transformation and develop a regional-focused initiative. In this case the work was initially led by a small team of researchers and those from the local authority invested in continuing to work over time. This provided the critical anchor around which other partners could be convened and could cohere. For the purposes of the development of an initial framework, 25 diverse actors were brought into the process, including senior local authority staff and those from other influential local organisations. More guidance on enrolling, cohering and aligning actors and partnerships is provided in [Section 4](#).

Phase 2: Identify the nature of the transformation needed

This phase involves developing a deep understanding of the nature of the transformational shift required – your system's shift from caterpillar to butterfly. It includes exploring the challenges inherent in the present system, envisioning a desired future pattern, and then deepening understanding of the difference between the two. This enables much wiser judgments about what action is needed to support transformation. This phase requires you to:

1. Identify diverse challenges in the present that inhibit transformation

This involves exploring elements within the current system (Horizon 1) that make it difficult to support desirable change. It helps to consider diverse aspects of a system such as technological and behavioural aspects, systems and structures (e.g. underlying rules and finance mechanisms), and mindsets or ways of thinking¹⁴.

2. Establish a shared radical vision of the desired future

The next step involves establishing an audacious envisioned future by identifying what you might see and feel in the future if you were there. The purpose is not necessarily to create a perfect and intricately defined vision but rather to establish a fundamental contrast between present and future. This then allows a group to more effectively discern what action is needed to support systemic change. Without a radical contrast, there is a risk that actions to support change will simply lead to marginal improvement rather than transformation. In short, if you don't have a clearly defined butterfly that is very different from the caterpillar in the present, you risk supporting change that simply leads to a fatter, fitter, faster caterpillar.

Creating a radically different vision of the future is more difficult than you might think. Participants (especially adults) often struggle to envision something fundamentally new. This is because our minds are highly predictive, meaning that we project out what we would expect to see based on past experiences. For example, to catch a ball we must predict its trajectory, which in turn requires prior experience of the movement and catching of a ball. Adult societies also tend to insufficiently value, utilise and cultivate our capacities for imagination and creativity that are obvious when we are younger. Imagining something fundamentally different from what we have already experienced can therefore be a significant challenge.

One way to help is to explore how an envisioned future would be regenerative. Participants explore how a given system will support the health of its surrounding systems as well as itself (such as a city restoring the hinterlands that produce its food and water) and how reciprocal dynamics could be established within an envisioned future so that social, environmental and economic benefits can reinforce each other and 'spiral upwards' in a virtuous cycle¹⁹. This helps participants imagine not just what they would see in the future but how underlying system dynamics would transcend the largely

degenerative dynamics in current human-nature relationships that continue to degrade human and planetary health^{3,19}. For example, in work with the NCCPE's [Engaged Futures](#) initiative, an art-based method was used, asking participants to individually draw their vision of a transformed, regenerative higher education sector. This can generate metaphors that have different assumptions and dynamics underpinning them, such as higher education imagined as an 'open festival' rather than as a 'collection of gated communities'.

3. Examine the value contrasts between current and envisioned patterns

Once an audacious envisioned future has been identified, it is helpful to examine the contrast between present and future patterns to clarify the nature of the intended transformation. This is analogous to the underlying difference between your 'caterpillar' and 'butterfly'. A way to do this is to work with participants to identify the core contrasting values, assumptions, beliefs or worldviews that underpin current and envisioned patterns ([Box 8](#)). The Engaged Futures work provides a good example. Here, one of the contrasts described the current higher education sector as underpinned by a 'transactional' way of operating, compared to a 'relational' future sector.

Identifying value contrasts helps to establish the mindset and cultural shifts needed for transformation to occur, which is emphasised as critical in most system change concepts^{7,20–22}. Going back to the butterfly analogy, examining contrasts also focuses attention on existential aspects – in what way does our envisioned future have a different purpose and function





compared to the present and how does this help us transcend the kinds of challenges we currently face? When a deeper shared understanding of the nature of the transformation has been established, it is much easier to identify transitional activities that will genuinely support the transformation.

Phase 3: Identify transformation catalysts

The previous phases identified the nature of the systemic shift needed to transcend the challenges that we face in the present. This next phase involves focusing on the action needed in Horizon 2 to support change. This begins with identifying catalysts that are already beginning to support transformation. For this phase, there are two important conceptual aspects to note.

First, *effective system change comes from unleashing the potential to support transformation that is already present in the system.* The focus should then be on existing actors and how to cohere these rather than on identifying new ones. Some new activities may be needed to fill critical gaps but you will always find examples of actors beginning to disrupt patterns in systems. Participants usually find that working with what already exists is highly motivating,

as they are usually already overstretched and reluctant to work with a new long list of 'more things to do'. Existing innovators are often also doing inspiring work. Such motivation adds to a sense that audacious action is tangible and possible.

Second, *the focus should be on actors more than their activities (Box 9).* This is important because it is the actors who have agency and can be brought into a room to find better ways of aligning their activities. While you will need to make judgments about which actors to include based on what their activities and initiatives are, it is more effective to explore how actors can reinforce the impacts of other actors. Getting actors collaborating and reinforcing each other's efforts is also motivating, again helping to establish a sense that audacious change is possible.



Box 9. Three stages of change for system actors

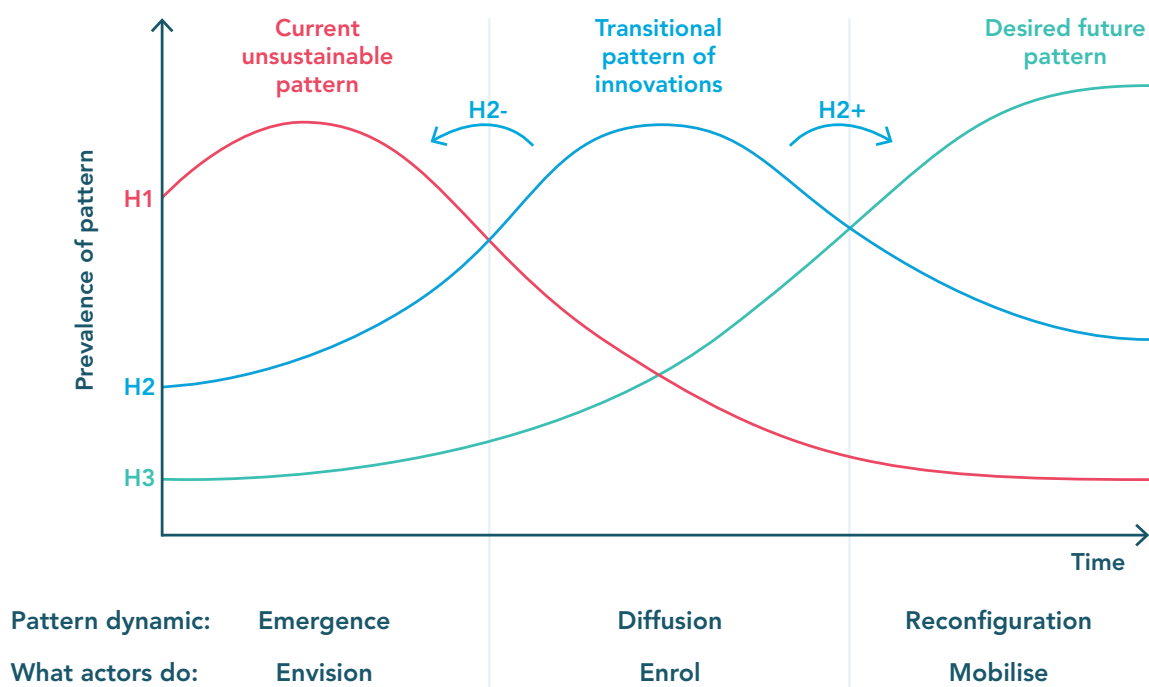
In most explanations and concepts of transformation there are three primary phases of change: a new future pattern *emerges* from the growth of niche innovations, ways of doing things, or mindsets. These gradually *diffuse* into the old pattern and grow, until they eventually *reconfigure* to become the new. For example, consider the way renewable energy has begun to take hold over the last three decades. Renewables began as *emergent* radical innovations, then began to *diffuse* into energy systems as they became competitors to fossil fuels. They will eventually supersede older forms of energy generation to create a *reconfigured* energy system.

These descriptions, however, explain what is happening in a transformation but not what actors trying to support transformation are doing. There are therefore phases of action among collaborators that support the shifts in the pattern dynamic. The first is the *envisioning* of a new future. This is where actors come together to examine how change might be brought about. The second is where more and more actors are *enrolled* so that their activities disrupt the current pattern. Finally, there is widespread *mobilisation* where these actors and their activities become the dominant system. Ultimately, when seeking to cohere effective system change, attention is needed on how the actors – and their innovations – can be convened for change to be amplified and accelerated.

In the second stage where actors are being enrolled and new ideas and practices are diffusing across the system it can be helpful to work from a 'minimum viable pattern'. This term, introduced by Bill Sharpe and riffing on Eric Ries' idea of a 'minimum viable product' from entrepreneurial product design²³, describes the minimum set of actors and relationships required to start a process of system transformation.

The power structures that hold current systems in place can be very resistant to direct change. Often, an effective starting point is not to push for sweeping top-down change straight away but to work with existing agency, energy and momentum to create something small (but which embodies the values and dynamics of a radically different kind of pattern). This might be a trial or pilot, or a partnership involving a relatively small group of committed actors. Further actors can then be enrolled into the minimum viable pattern, which builds its own momentum over time.

Different phases of change and what actors do together in enacting transformation.





Bearing these ideas in mind, identifying transformation catalysts typically involves the following two steps:

1. Identifying catalysts

The first step is to identify core catalysing actors (e.g. organisations, networks, initiatives, or specific people) that you believe are genuinely seeking to disrupt a status quo. You will likely already have some of these actors participating in your workshop. Search widely for diverse actors and ensure there is sufficient breadth that accommodates those engaged in the important issues you are dealing with in your system of interest.

In our experience, extensive consultation is needed to identify these catalysts. This can involve working groups liaising with many others across the system and region and snowballing on information gained about innovative actors and initiatives that already exist. In Food for the Future, this consultation was carried out by five to six preliminary working groups, themed according to different dimensions of the food system (e.g. 'Land use and biodiversity' and 'Nutritional security'). In Engaged Futures, the NCCPE convened and facilitated additional workshops and conversations with people who had not been involved in the main workshop

process and also resourced its Catalyst Group to convene their own additional conversations, all framed by Three Horizons. Actors suggested by consultees were divided into five themes (e.g. 'Funding and resources' and 'Research and teaching reimagined'). These themes or working groups are only interim and replaced in subsequent phases but are still helpful to structure and focus activity.

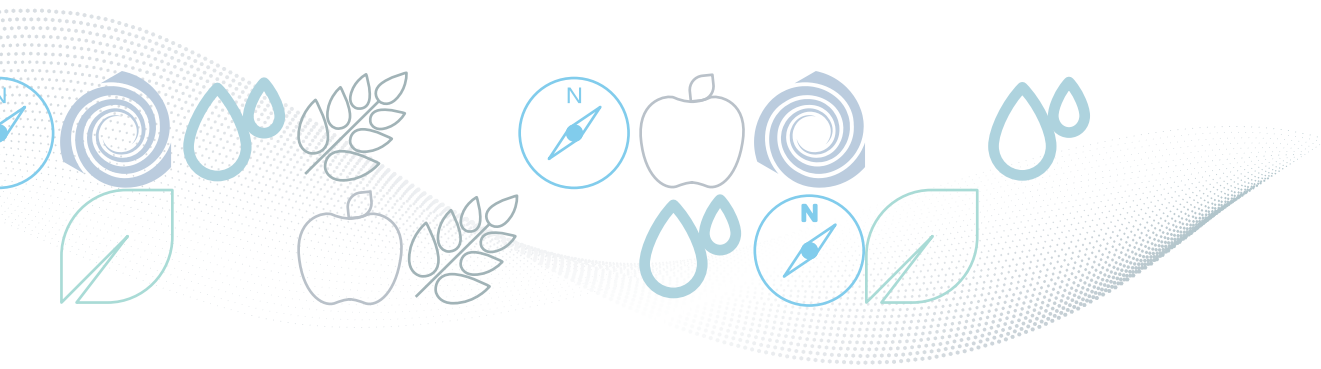
While it is important to work with a diversity of actors from different parts of the system – e.g. 'from farm to fork' in a food system context – a critical eye is also needed. The idea is to identify an initial priority set of catalysts to work with, which other actors can be enrolled into at a later stage. So, prioritisation does not necessarily mean outright rejection of some actors, although it helps for the initial set of catalysts to be those with the most transformational potential.

2. Prioritising catalysts based on their transformational potential

Once you have a substantial list of potential actors, it is time to scrutinise them in terms of their potential impact for transformation. You can do this by examining whether you believe they are a potential 'H2+' or 'H2-' actor. The H2+ are those actors with activities that are likely to support transformation. H2- are those actors working with initiatives likely to be co-opted to support the continuation of H1.

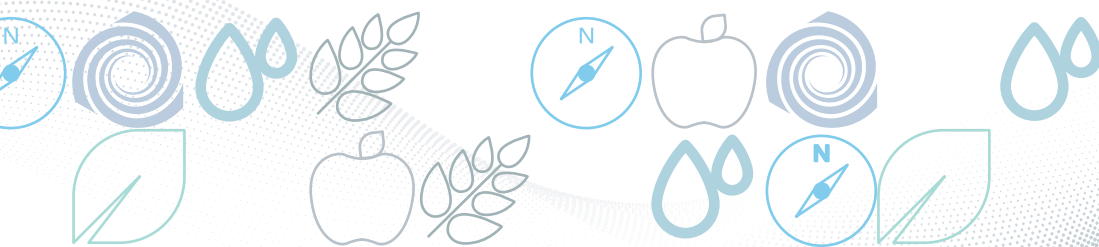
There are no hard and fast rules about what makes an effective H2+ actor and their activities. It is mostly a subjective judgment and depends on the context in which an actor operates as to whether they may be co-opted to reinforce H1. [Figure 5](#) provides some useful H2+ criteria with which to scrutinise your actors.





 CRITERION 1: DISRUPTION Positively disrupting the status quo	The extent to which the actor/action positively disrupts the status quo rather than becoming co-opted by it and propping up current problematic patterns.
 CRITERION 2: HOSPIGING Dissolving, repurposing and retraining the status quo	The extent to which the actor/action helps to 'dissolve' or retire the structures of the status quo, redefine its purpose, reallocate its resources, and retrain its actors with capacities and competencies appropriate for the emerging transition and envisioned future.
 CRITERION 3: INCUBATION Protecting and growing 'pockets of the future in the present'	The extent to which the actor/action protects and grows niche radical exemplars that already embody aspects of your envisioned future.
 CRITERION 4: DEPTH Encouraging value shifts	The extent to which the actor/action encourages deeper shifts in underlying values, paradigms, purpose and worldviews towards those that align with the envisioned future.
 CRITERION 5: BREADTH Supporting system-wide change	The extent to which the actor/action supports system-wide change.
OVERALL H2+ POTENTIAL	The potential of the actor/action to be H2+ (positively disruptive and helping a radically different kind of systemic pattern to emerge) rather than H2- ('change to keep things the same' that props up current problematic patterns and/or is co-opted by the status quo).

Figure 5. Criteria for deciding whether an actor or initiative is H2+ and likely to disrupt existing systems and support growth of more radical activities that become the new future. Image produced in Mural (Tactivos, Inc. dba Mural).



Ultimately, at the end of this phase you should arrive at a longlist of around 30-50 H2+ actors and initiatives, named as specifically as possible and recorded in tables or spreadsheets. Key information needed about each actor includes its name, type (e.g. type of organisation), geographical area of focus, a brief description of its main activities, and a sentence describing why it is H2+. This information can be included on A5 or A4 printed cards for further scrutiny by workshop participants. For instance, in Engaged Futures, several actors were removed as they were considered insufficiently H2+ and several new actors were added. This should ideally result in a refined shortlist of 30-40 actor cards, which form the basis of the next step of identifying domains of action.

Phase 4: Identify key domains of H2+ action

This phase involves generating thematic areas (domains) of H2+ actors and their activities. Importantly, identifying and working as domains of action is a way to work with second horizon actors and activities as if they are a transitional system – a coherent ecosystem of actors and their activities that are reinforcing each other's efforts in ways that disrupt current patterns and create space for Horizon 3 to emerge (Figure 6).

To identify action domains, it is important to avoid tendencies to create domains of actors that reinforce silo-based thinking, such as grouping them based on their similarity (i.e. 'like with like' or creating more obvious themes). In our work, we place considerable emphasis on looking for joined-up, cross-system action and unleashing

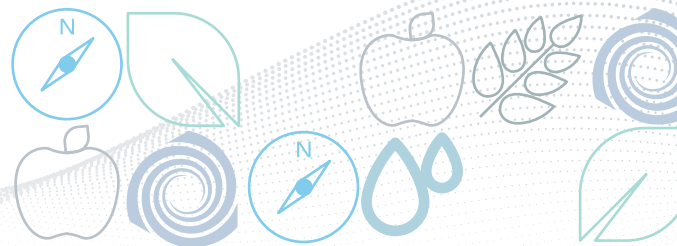
potential that already exists in a system. We use 'reinforcement clustering', based on H3Uni's [Hexagon Mapping](#) method, to help with this.

Reinforcement clustering is where H2+ actors and their activities are clustered together not because they are similar but because they support or reinforce each other. The analogy is that this is not about creating clusters as if they are 'wardrobes filled with the same item of clothing' (e.g. all shirts, or all skirts) but rather clusters as if they are 'wardrobes filled with outfits' (i.e. different items of clothing that complement each other). The process typically involves participants suggesting pairs of actors that support or reinforce each other in some way, and then additional actors that support the initial pair, and so on. The process leads to some core clusters, which we call the action domains. Names for each action domain (e.g. 'Facilitating circular food economies' in Food for the Future, or 'Creating living knowledge' in Engaged Futures) can then be identified, along with key takeaways or aspects that should be preserved from the clustering.





Figure 6: The action domains identified in Food for the Future North Yorkshire. Arrows represent the way one domain influences another in a positive and reinforcing way.



After an initial period of confusion, we find that most participants soon spot opportunities and connections, often between actors in very different parts of the system, that they could not see before. In Engaged Futures, for example, participants noticed obvious connections where a powerful alliance of system conveners could work together to align infrastructure development for an engaged higher education sector.

Overall, this phase to identify H2+ action domains helps those involved to change their view of Horizon 2 as discrete interveners or interventions to viewing it as a transitional ecosystem of mutual reinforcement, synergy and potential. The question then shifts from asking 'what new initiatives are needed?' to 'how we can most effectively cohere action to support transformation?'. The action domains – and insights generated from developing them – form the foundation of subsequent action-planning that can capitalise on the significant potential already available in a system. In many cases the action domains become the working groups for the transformation initiative.

Phase 5: Examine how action domains can reinforce each other

Once the individual domains of action have been identified, it is helpful to explore how they reinforce each other. An engaging way to achieve this uses a 'requests and offers' approach. The working groups corresponding to each domain request support from other domains or offer support to them in ways that enhance the effectiveness of the domains' contributions to transformation. Ultimately, a map is produced showing influences between each domain, helping to identify how more effective cohering can be realised, reciprocal and mutualistic relationships can be supported and how inherent potential for change can be harnessed. We revisit the cohering of action domains in [Section 5](#).

Phase 6: Develop frameworks for action

Previous phases will have identified action domains and the core group of H2+ catalysts and how actions can reinforce each other. From such work it is then possible to identify core priorities for action based on a more sophisticated understanding of what is needed

to support transformation. Action plans can then be developed at different levels. For example, they can focus on how individual actors, a cluster of actors, or the transitional system as a whole (all clusters) can have transformational effects. They can also be turned into priority actions or using ripple effects mapping exercises to capture initial and emergent outcomes that can already be identified^{24,25}. Importantly, such plans show how different actors can work together to support transformation in new cross-sectoral and systemic ways that transcend existing silos, build momentum, and which inspire others to come on board ([Box 6](#)). Turning insights into a transformation-focused framework for action provides a powerful foundation for enrolment of additional actors.

Overall, developing a transformation-focused framework for action can provide:

- Orientation for action, such as shared visions, direction and core domains around which to focus action, and providing continuous reminders as to what is needed to keep the focus on transformational rather than other kinds of change;
- The language and understanding of how it is different to be supporting transformation as opposed to other forms of change;
- A powerful boundary object for enrolling further actors over time;
- A foundation for establishing a unique cross-sectoral, cross-organisational, and sustained action-oriented partnership;
- Foundations for forms of governance and evaluation that can support transformational change (see [Sections 4-6](#));
- Inspiring other systems change initiatives in the region. For example, in the case of Food for the Future, the same approaches were used to develop a framework for action for 'Moving North Yorkshire' which focuses on enhancing mobility, health, wellbeing and provision of support for physical activity in North Yorkshire.

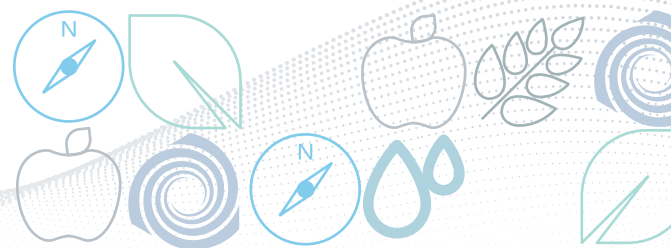
Critical insights from practice

Some of the key lessons for developing a coherent, action-ready framework oriented towards genuine systemic change rather than marginal improvement include:

1. **Bring together a committed group of system change conveners.** Genuine commitment to long-term action is an essential starting point. Conveners need to be sufficiently networked and influential to enrol others and ready to make change happen rather than simply produce a vision document.
2. **Identify the nature of the transformation needed.** This involves exploring challenges across diverse dimensions of the present system — not only technologies and behaviours but the underlying structures and mindsets that sustain existing patterns — and setting these against a shared, radically different vision of the future. Examining the core value contrasts between present and envisioned patterns helps to mitigate the risk that actions simply lead to improved existing systems rather than genuine transformation.
3. **Identify transformation catalysts.** Effective system change comes from cohering the potential already present in the system rather than generating new lists of things to do. Prioritising actors over activities is important, since it is people and organisations who have agency and can be brought together to reinforce each other's work.
4. **Establish domains of action.** It is helpful to view actors collectively as an emerging transitional ecosystem rather than isolated initiatives. Reinforcement clustering — grouping actors by how they complement rather than resemble each other, like a wardrobe of suits rather than identical items — surfaces cross-system connections that silo-based thinking would otherwise miss.
5. **Examine how action domains reinforce each other.** Exploring the requests and offers between domains helps identify reciprocal relationships that strengthen the system of transition. This then helps focus attention on actions that will reinforce and sustain cross-system action over time.
6. **Crystallise outcomes as a framework for action.** Action plans can be developed at multiple levels — individual actors, clusters, or the transitional system as a whole — with emphasis on how diverse actors can work together in cross-sectoral ways that transcend existing silos. A well-articulated framework also serves as a powerful boundary object — something that can be shared with others and facilitate discussion — that helps enrol new actors into the initiative and sustain momentum.

Conclusion

Through our facilitation work, we have found that the process of developing a transformation-focused framework is itself transformational in the way that it supports capability development for transformation. By cohering existing potential rather than prescribing new interventions, and by helping actors perceive the system and each other differently, the process can be inspiring, practical, and one which enhances shared agency and collective commitment to change at scale. The process of developing a framework for action also provides the important foundation for other aspects: developing cross-sectoral, cross-organisational, and sustained action-oriented partnerships (Section 4); appropriate forms of internal governance (Section 5); and forms of evaluation that can help drive transformation (Section 6).





SECTION 4

ENROLLING, COHERING AND ALIGNING ACTORS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Aims and purpose

Many of today's institutions have developed in ways that are misaligned to the scales or complexity of the challenges we now face. New forms of engagement and cohering of diverse actors through partnerships that can work across institutions, policies and activities are needed. These need to work over sufficiently long timeframes and at large enough scales to support system change.

The previous section outlined how to strategically orientate action and can be achieved by bringing a relatively small number of core actors together. The aim of this next section is to outline an approach to enrol additional actors and catalysts within a transformational initiative and help cohere and align their activities in the support of system change. This provides a foundation for developing the formal internal governance of the partnership itself, described in [Section 5](#).

This section first describes the assumptions and frameworks underlying the process of enrolling, cohering and aligning actors and partnerships. It then outlines three main phases of this process and key takeaways.

The primary intended outcomes of this process are to:

1. Establish a clear rationale and secure a mandate for transformation and your system change initiative.
2. Establish sustained commitment of a partnership of actors from across your system of interest who can progress and advocate for the initiative.
3. Establish a strengthened sense of shared purpose and accountability.

In our case of working with regional food system change, the enrolling and cohering of wider actors beyond the initial group was conducted in parallel to developing the framework for action ([Section 3](#)). Eventually, after 2-3 years, the enrolling, cohering and aligning activities became the main stream of activity with the framework for action and the cohering work complementing each other.

Assumptions and framings

Key assumptions and perspectives underlying this component include:

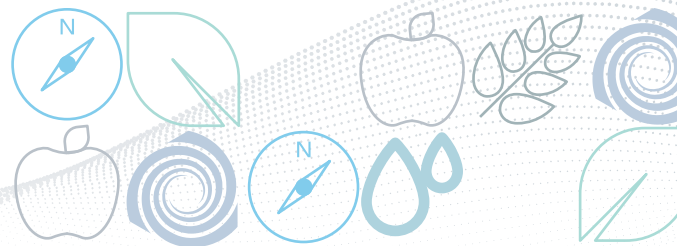
1. Multi-stakeholder engagement is essential.

Given the highly complex and interconnected nature of contemporary challenges, no single stakeholder can be effective by working alone. Issues like food security require collaboration among farmers, policymakers, businesses, communities, the voluntary sector, and consumers. Engaging multiple stakeholders ensures diverse perspectives, shared ownership, and coordinated action, which reduces duplication and siloed working while effectively utilising and sharing resources and expertise. It also builds trust, encourages innovation, and creates policies and practices that are more inclusive, contextualised, and resilient.

2. A 'middle-out' approach. Transformation rarely takes place through only ground-up change (e.g. from grassroots innovation) or only top-down change (e.g. from central government policymaking). In practice, a combination is likely to be needed. While every context will be different, in our work in North Yorkshire we found a 'middle-out' approach (Figure 7) to be the most pragmatic and effective way to bring people together. This middle-out approach recognises the importance of having institutions involved that can simultaneously coordinate top-down support from power-holders, engage with local residents and create enabling conditions for ground-up organisation and innovation to occur. They also need to be able to engage 'sideways' with other organisations, businesses and networks^{26–29}.

In the case of Food for the Future, North Yorkshire Council provided this central cohering role with support from action domain leads from other organisations and the University of York. The Council brought a depth of experience in working with power, authority, and influence and with North Yorkshire's food citizens more broadly. They brought a deep understanding of how decision-making can be more effectively distributed among different stakeholders and in ways that enable ground-up action to occur.

3. Transformation is long-term. Transformations typically require sustained commitment, adaptation, and continuous learning over years or even decades. They are rarely achieved by short-term fixes. This emphasises the importance of building alliances and partnerships between different actors that can maintain collective transformational intent and maintain momentum, such as by ensuring regular celebration of shorter-term progress and success.



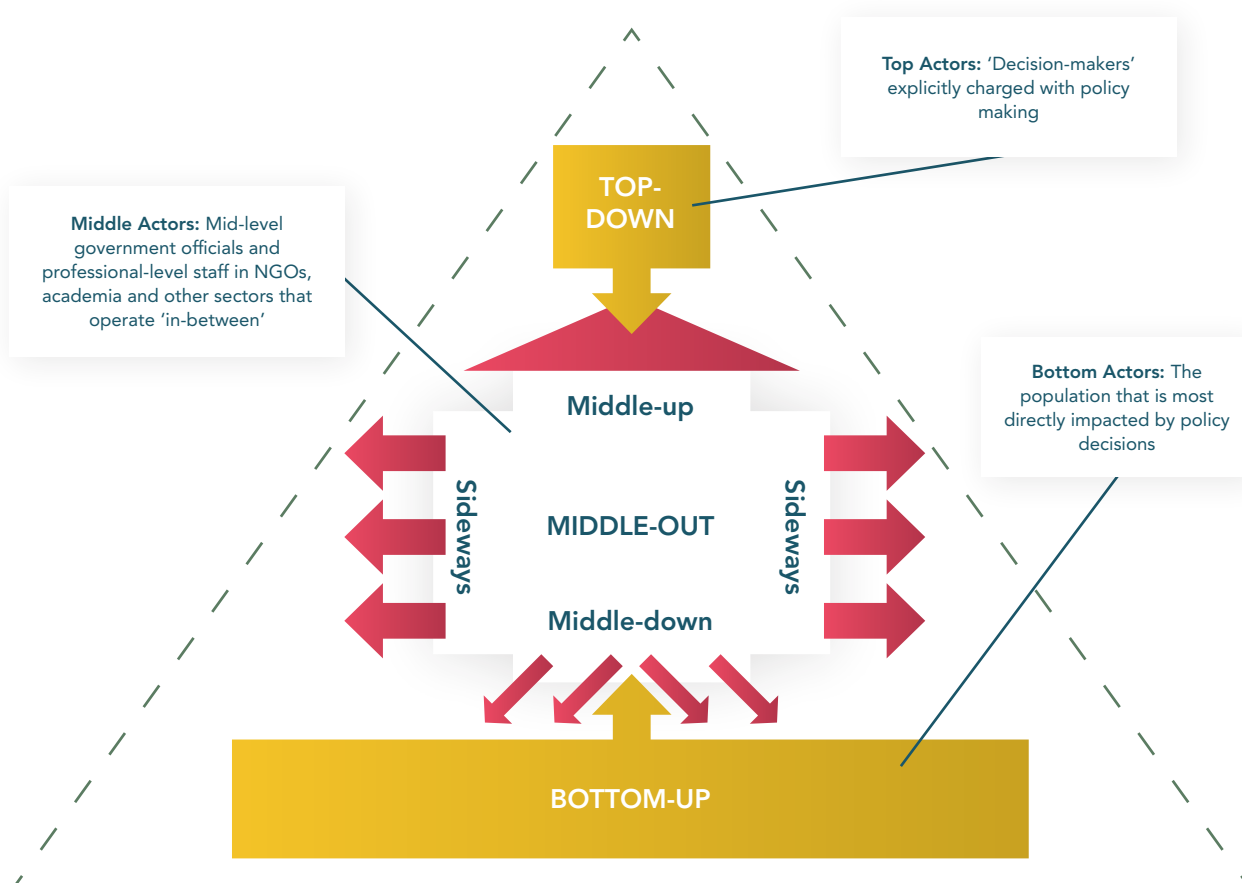


Figure 7. The 'middle-out' approach of organising for system change. From Kranzler et al.²⁷, CC BY 4.0.

Main phases

Enrolling, cohering and aligning actors can be enabled through three main phases:

1. Establishing an initial rationale and mandate for system change.
2. Further enrolling and alignment of actors alongside a Three Horizons process.
3. Sustaining and maturing commitment to transformative action, with a shift towards more distributed leadership.

The phases are described below in sequence, although in practice they are highly overlapping. They also take place alongside many of the other sections in the guide. Earlier phases occurred alongside developing frameworks (Section 3) and later ones in parallel with establishing transformation-focused governance and evaluation (Sections 5 and 6). In our work with Food for the Future, this process took roughly four years and is ongoing.

Phase 1: Establishing an initial rationale and mandate for system change

The purpose of this first phase is to establish a preliminary rationale and mandate for your transformation initiative. This phase takes place in very initial stages of your initiative before embarking on a process to develop transformation-focused frameworks for action (Section 3). Intended outcomes of this phase include:

- **A clear rationale for system change:** a clearly articulated need for system change and your particular initiative to catalyse it.
- **A clear mandate for system change:** sufficient backing from those in need and those in power for your initiative to proceed. There is a sense of enthusiasm around your initiative, with people showing genuine curiosity and willingness to get involved. Your initiative has created an environment where people feel safe to experiment, be creative, and challenge the status quo.
- **Clear understanding of the stakeholders:** a well-defined picture of who your key stakeholders are, what matters to them, how they stand to benefit from your initiative, and how they might contribute to it.
- **A formal Partnership Group in place:** a committed steering group of influential partners or collaborators is established, with clarity on how they will work together and what they collectively aim to achieve. The role of this group is more in guiding the overall direction of your initiative and providing authority and legitimacy, in contrast to the Core Group established later which is more directly involved in progressing actions on the ground.
- **Two to three lead coordinators appointed and resourced:** to maintain momentum and act as central points of coordination for your initiative, applying a 'middle-out' approach (Figure 7).

Achieving the outcomes of this phase requires dynamic application of multiple activities, including research, partner scoping, leveraging existing opportunities, gaining authorisation, reinforcing trust, strategic positioning, guiding, and steering (Table 2).

Key early actions needed are to define the problem being addressed and begin to engage stakeholders from across the system. Collating and presenting research and evidence of the urgent need for transformation, using a combination of quantitative data, case studies, and stakeholder insight, builds a rationale for change. It can also be helpful to explore previous efforts nationally and internationally to support transformation in related systems. Conducting initial conversations with stakeholders to understand their perspectives, concerns, and ambitions related to the system at hand helps build alliances and identifies potential advocates for a system change initiative.

Once you have begun this process, it is then possible to develop an initial vision and a compelling, relatable narrative for what the stakeholders involved in your initiative wish to achieve. These are partially developed in the Three Horizons process (Section 3) but the work can be widened to build trust and gain new ideas from a wider stakeholder group.

At the same time, it is also critical to secure formal endorsement for your initiative from those in positions of power (e.g. council executives in the case of North Yorkshire Council). This includes being able to highlight how your initiative is being given a wide mandate and ensure more senior leaders have clarity about the implications for their roles and accountabilities in driving and sustaining change.

An example of establishing a rationale and mandate for system change is provided in Box 10.

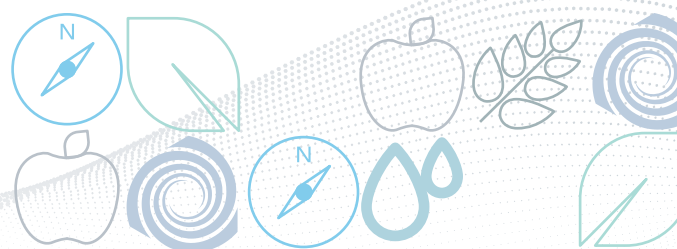
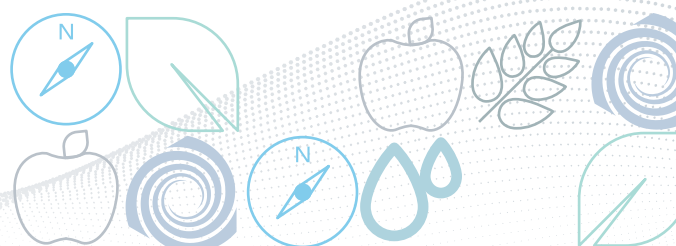


Table 2. Key elements required in establishing a rationale and mandate for system change and the activities required to gain them.

Activity	Description	Tips for effective implementation
Research to establish rationale	Developing an initial understanding of the current system that you are active within, to gauge the level of unmet need for transformation. Research questions might include: Is there a clear need for transformation? Who is already active in trying to change the system? What policies or frameworks already exist to tackle system problems? Where are there important opportunities or gaps for transformation?	• Map existing initiatives, organisations, and policy drivers. • Conduct light-touch interviews and conversations with people who hold contextual knowledge. • Identify any potential duplication or synergy and areas of unmet need. • Summarise findings in a format that can be easily shared with partners.
Scoping potential partners	Exploring potential partners, networks, and alliances that could strengthen your initiative. Understanding who has influence, who has the energy to contribute, and who may benefit from collaboration.	• Start broad – cast a wide net before narrowing your focus. • Look for complementary strengths, not just alignment of interests. • Assess each partner's capacity, motivation and potential contribution. • Keep early conversations informal and exploratory.
Leveraging existing activity	Identifying existing policies, strategies, and organisational priorities that your initiative can strategically align with to gain legitimacy, direction, and momentum.	• Pinpoint strategic hooks that resonate with senior leaders. • Use the language of existing frameworks to frame your work. • Demonstrate how the work helps others meet their goals. • Build on what already works rather than starting from scratch.
Gaining authorisation from power-holders	Securing support from senior figures and understanding the organisational power dynamics that influence progress. This includes knowing when to push, when to pause, and how to maintain trust.	• Engage senior leaders early with concise, compelling messages. • Understand decision-making pathways and informal influencers. • Utilise champions who can advocate on your behalf. • Read organisational signals and pace your efforts accordingly.

Activity	Description	Tips for effective implementation
Reinforcing trust	Building confidence in your leadership and intentions by demonstrating reliability, organisational awareness, and respect for existing structures, policy, strategy, and relationships.	• Follow through on commitments consistently. • Share information openly where appropriate. • Show sensitivity to organisational culture and politics. • Be dependable, steady, and predictable in your interactions.
Positioning to maximise buy-in	Approaching key actors and framing the work in a way that resonates with their interests, values, and capacity to contribute.	• Compile a diverse set of illustrative resources – such as visuals, stories, data points, case studies, and regional or national examples of similar work – to bring the concept of your initiative to life and make it easier for others to understand and engage with it. • Create compelling position statements tailored to different audiences that enable different groups to understand the purpose, value, and direction of your initiative in language that resonates with their own priorities. • Highlight mutual benefits and shared outcomes. • Try to set a tone that is open and welcoming, encouraging others to join the journey, share ideas, and feel part of something exciting and evolving.
Well-informed guiding and steering	Establishing a strong Partnership Group – a steering group that provides direction, authority, and legitimacy. This group becomes the visible leadership of the initiative.	• Select members with influence, credibility, and diverse perspectives. • Clarify roles, expectations, and decision-making processes early. • Ensure that the group feels ownership and agency. • Use the group to validate direction, unlock barriers, and amplify messages.



Box 10: Example of establishing a rationale and mandate for system change in Food for the Future North Yorkshire

Scoping potential partners: prior to Food for the Future, North Yorkshire Council had strong stakeholder networks within some areas of the food system through partnership work around the Healthy Weight Healthy Lives Strategy (2016-2026) which included actions around food environments and household food insecurity. Starting conversations from these existing partner relationships allowed initial conveners of Food for the Future to become more comfortable with sharing the aspiration and intention around food system transformation and offered us additional connections with other stakeholders. Existing relationships from other previous work and 'contacts through contacts' were used to identify stakeholders in different areas of the food system. Sometimes it took multiple conversations with different people from within one organisation to identify who from that organisation to involve.

Leveraging existing activity: early in the process, there was strong alignment of food system transformation work with action on climate change. North Yorkshire Council's [Climate Change Strategy](#) was adopted in 2023 and included action around the circular economy, reducing food waste, and decarbonising the agricultural sector. This provided an important opportunity to highlight the role of the food system within the Climate Strategy, giving us a language to describe their inter-relatedness. This helped build our rationale for Food for the Future.

Well-informed guiding and steering: skilled facilitation of our Partnership Group proved essential to enable stakeholders to embrace the concept of transformation and of connecting different parts of the North Yorkshire food system. Skilled facilitation also ensured different voices were heard and different understandings of the system was being valued. Important tensions emerged that needed careful navigation, such as farmers' need for economic security versus a need for carbon reduction.

Clear convening role: in early stages, it also became apparent just how important it was to have a clearer role of the Partnership Group and of North Yorkshire Council's Public Health team to function as a steering, coordinator and convener for the Food for the Future initiative.



Phase 2: Further enrolling and alignment of actors alongside a Three Horizons process

This phase sits directly alongside the process of developing transformation-focused frameworks for action (Section 3). Work is needed around framework development to enrol and align additional actors into the emerging structure of your partnership and action domains. Findings from the Three Horizons inquiry can also strengthen the rationale and mandate for transformation that you have already started to establish in Phase 1 and greatly help you communicate your initiative to others.

Outcomes of this phase include:

- **A viable partnership with a clearer shaped vision and direction:** your partnership has developed a stronger shared understanding of the nature of the system transformation needed. There is a stronger sense of direction that feels both ambitious and achievable, lending the work a sense of hope, credibility and momentum.
- **Wider actors have been enrolled into action domains:** the action domains identified whilst developing a framework for action are providing a clear and compelling structure into which further actors can be enrolled. It is easier to gauge where gaps lie in representation of different parts of the system, enabling targeted recruitment of appropriate actors.
- **A Core Group within the partnership based on action domain representatives is established:** a 'Core Group' that regularly meets to discuss progress in working groups and explore cross-domain connections.

The Food for the Future Core Group meets bimonthly, although more frequent engagement may be ideal. The importance and features of a Core Group are explained in Box 11.

■ **A stronger sense of how individual areas of action contribute to a greater whole:** your action domains or working groups are encouraging systemic thinking by making interdependencies visible and showing how different foci contribute to an overarching action framework.

Many of the activities described in Phase 1 must continue into Phase 2 – including further scoping of potential partners, leveraging existing activity, reinforcing trust, positioning your initiative to maximise buy-in, and continuing the guiding and steering from your Partnership Group. Your initiative can continue to contribute to and influence other system change efforts, whether local work, national strategies, or sector-specific transformation, to amplify your impact and avoid duplication.

In this phase we found that it is particularly important to maintain and strengthen authorisation and support from power-holders and sponsors – whether institutional leaders, system change champions, or financial or in-kind support – to ensure that resources remain available as your initiative develops, even in the face of other short-term demands and pressures.



Box 11: A Core Group for cohering

Effective system change partnerships need a small, active group of people at their centre whose role is to hold the initiative together and keep it moving. This is the Core Group. Unlike a board or steering committee focused on governance and oversight, the Core Group is primarily concerned with cohering action. They ensure that different parts of the initiative are aware of each other, are reinforcing each other, and are collectively oriented towards transformation rather than drifting towards more incremental forms of change.

Critically, the Core Group needs to be made up of people who carry genuine influence and seniority within their own organisations and sectors. This matters for two reasons: (1) they need the authority and credibility to make things happen within their own spheres; (2) they need to be able to engage as equals with the high-level institutional players whose support and endorsement the initiative depends on.

In practice, an effective Core Group will typically:

- Comprise senior leads from each core area of action within the initiative, with the standing to represent and mobilise their area
- Meet regularly, with enough frequency to maintain shared direction and respond to emerging opportunities and challenges
- Embody a middle-out approach — actively bridging the strategic mandate and resources held by senior institutional players and the on-ground energy and innovation of the wider actor network
- Maintain transformational intent, consistently reorienting the initiative towards fundamental change as short-term pressures accumulate
- Develop sufficient shared trust and language to function as a genuine collective rather than a set of representatives reporting in from silos

In Food for the Future North Yorkshire, the Core Group brings together senior leads from each of the initiative's working groups — people with significant standing in their own fields and organisations — meeting bimonthly to discuss progress, surface connections across areas of work, and maintain shared direction. North Yorkshire Council plays a central coordinating and convening role, providing essential administrative infrastructure that keeps the group functioning consistently over time.

The initiative also includes a Partnership Group alongside the Core Group. This is a wider body of highly influential stakeholders including senior local government figures and significant institutional players. Where the Core Group focuses on doing and cohering, the Partnership Group provides strategic endorsement and ensures the initiative remains connected to those with the greatest influence over the food system. The seniority of Core Group members proves essential here: it means they can engage the Partnership Group with credibility and confidence, maintaining the trust of powerful actors while continuing to drive action on the ground.



Phase 3: Sustaining and maturing commitment to transformational action, with a shift towards distributed leadership

This phase marks a transition from developing a framework for action, to implementing and embedding it across your partnership. There is also potentially a transition towards more distributed leadership of your initiative, with lower reliance on a Partnership Group and a small number of central coordinators. However, this transition depends greatly on the level of maturity of the wider partnership, and more centralised coordination may continue to be essential for some time, not least because it provides dedicated administrative support.

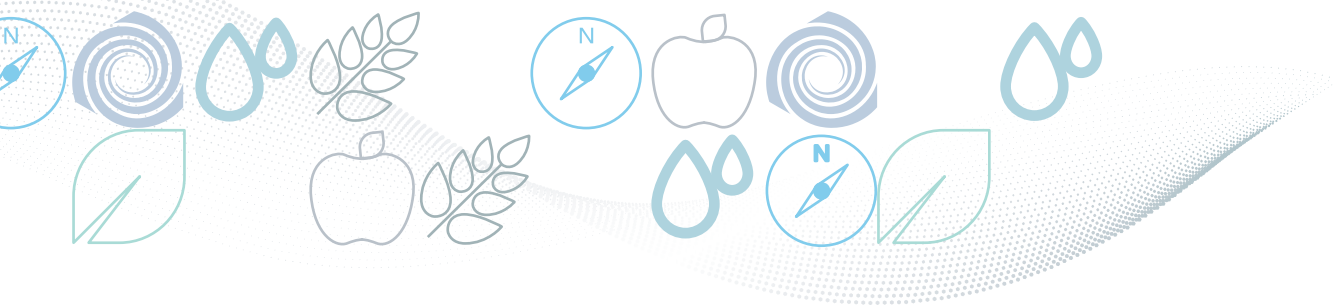
Intended outcomes of this phase include:

- **Strong familiarity amongst your partnership with the framework for action:** the framework is used effectively in your initiative's internal comms to the extent that it has become ingrained as a reference point in partners' individual and collective psyche.
- **The framework for action is becoming institutionally embedded:** it is woven into existing strategies, programmes and organisational plans. It is no longer seen as an add-on or separate piece of work but as part of how the system operates and makes decisions.
- **Wider awareness of your initiative is growing:** recognition and positive reputation of your initiative is growing across the wider system and beyond. Its voice is respected and its insights are increasingly sought.

- **Partners remain engaged because they are starting to see progress:** they recognise the value of their contribution.
- **More distributed ownership and responsibility:** leadership becomes more distributed, with less reliance on your Partnership Group. The Partnership Group shifts from being a central driver to a supportive agent, enabling others to lead, coordinate and innovate without needing constant oversight. Responsibility for the work spreads across the various organisations, communities and networks involved, strengthening resilience and reducing dependency on any single groups or individuals.

Along with continuing many of the activities outlined in Phase 1 and 2, establishing clear accountability is important for achieving the outcomes of Phase 3: clear roles, expectations, and processes so that everyone understands what they are responsible for and feels a sense of ownership over their part of the work. Such accountability can be strengthened through a transformation-focused approach to evaluation and governance, as explored in the next sections. This phase also involves continually sense-checking inclusivity, ensuring that wider community voices are heard and reflected in the partnership.

Continue to use your framework for action and action domains as a strategic structure that becomes a home for situating wider activity in the system. Ensure that the framework has clear, strong and collectively owned principles that make it difficult for others to weaken or divert from its intended purpose.



Critical insights from practice

The process of enrolling and cohering actors is essential for supporting transformations at scale. The following are some of the key lessons that can be learned from such work.

- **Treat enrolling, cohering and aligning actors as a critical strand of work.** While many initiatives put considerable effort into developing frameworks and strategies with a core group of actors, it is also essential to dedicate time to wider partnership- and movement-building – which can in turn reinforce the effectiveness of strategy development. This increases the likelihood that the framework or strategy will be applied and embedded in real-world action rather than sit on a shelf. A summary of what this requires is provided in [Table 3](#).
- **Start this cohering work early.** In our case, considerable effort went into establishing a rationale and mandate for system change prior to developing a framework for action. This was critical for securing buy-in and support from different levels. You can use existing relationships as helpful launchpads.
- **Top-down or bottom-up change by themselves are unlikely to be sufficient.** A ‘middle-out’ approach is needed to coordinate and align input from multiple directions, creating the enabling conditions for more systemic change.
- **A central convener is likely to be critical.** In our experience, it has been essential having North Yorkshire Council play a central coordinating and administrative role. Its necessity might decline over time, but it will be important as the partnership matures and gains its own momentum. Without a coordinator holding key governance and administrative infrastructure in place, there is a risk of a partnership dissipating.
- **Enrolment is never finished.** Over time, your ‘minimum viable pattern’ ([Box 9](#)) could enrol further actors until it reaches a critical mass that starts to reconfigure the wider system. Even then, an initiative will need attention to sustaining itself with new generations of actors.

Table 3. Summary of the key activities needed for effective enrolling, cohering and aligning of actors for transformation.

Phase	Key activities
Establish an initial rationale and mandate for system change	• Conduct preliminary research to scope out the need for your initiative in the context of your system of interest. • Seek authorisation and endorsement from those in positions of power. • Approach potential partners and frame your work in a way that resonates with their interests, values, and capacity to contribute. • Identify existing policies, strategies, and organisational priorities that your initiative can strategically align with to gain legitimacy and momentum. • Establish a Partnership Group to provide guidance and direction.
Further enrolling and alignment of actors alongside a Three Horizons process	• Enrol wider actors into the action domains identified whilst developing a framework for action. • Establish a Core Group comprising leaders of each action domain to periodically discuss action domain progress and explore cross-domain connections. • Maintain authorisation and support from power-holders and sponsors.
Sustaining and maturing commitment to transformative action, with a shift towards more distributed leadership	• Weave your framework for action into existing strategies, programmes and organisational plans to embed it institutionally. Continue to use the framework and its action domains as a strategic structure that becomes a home for situating wider activity in the system. • Communicate early progress and successes to encourage partners to remain engaged and recognise the value of their contribution. • Experiment with more distributed leadership that relies less on your Partnership Group but remain sensitive to the maturity of the wider partnership – it may not be ready yet for this transition. • Establish clear roles, expectations, processes and accountability so that everyone understands what they are responsible for and feels a sense of ownership over their part of the work.

Conclusion

Developing transformation-focused frameworks for action must go hand-in-hand with dedicated effort to enrol, cohere and align actors in partnerships. This is vital for establishing a clear rationale and mandate, sustained commitment of a partnership of actors from across the system of interest who can advocate for your initiative and ensuring shared purpose and accountability. This cohering work — establishing mandate, legitimacy, and shared commitment across the partnership and enrolling diverse actors — forms the foundation for the next stage: developing the formal internal governance structures through which the partnership will organise its own decision-making and sustain transformational action over time ([Section 5](#)), alongside the evaluation approaches that will drive continued learning ([Section 6](#)).

ESTABLISHING TRANSFORMATION-FOCUSED GOVERNANCE

Aims and purpose

The previous sections outlined how to conceptualise transformation and develop a shared framework for action (Sections 2 and 3), and how to enrol, cohere and align the diverse actors needed to support it (Section 4). By this stage, a partnership is beginning to take shape — with shared direction, a growing set of committed actors, and a Core Group of action domain leads convened to maintain momentum and connection across the initiative. The question this section addresses is different but equally important: how does that partnership now organise itself internally? It has already established what it is working towards and who is involved. The challenge is now to understand how a partnership makes decisions, distributes authority, and sustains collective action over time without inadvertently reproducing the very institutional habits it is trying to change.

We use the term governance in this section to mean the internal governance of the partnership itself: the explicit structures, shared values, and decision-making principles that allow the Core Group and its wider network of actors to keep working together with coherence and transformational intent. This might include the way decisions are made, and actions enacted that support interactions across organisations, networks and institutions and where authority, knowledge and responsibility are necessarily shared rather than centralised^{30,31}.

A focus on the internal governance of a partnership matters because most governance arrangements that partners bring from their own organisations were not designed for the distributed, adaptive, long-horizon work that transformation requires but rather to maintain stability within defined institutional boundaries. Unless the partnership deliberately develops its own internal governance that is explicitly oriented towards transformation, it will tend to default to familiar patterns that significantly constrain what the collective can achieve.

This section introduces a practical process for developing governance arrangements that is intentionally designed to support transformational change, building on the foundations from previous sections. In doing so, the process enables:

- Partnerships to move from shared ambition to ways of working capable of sustaining transformation over time;
- Values, principles, and enabling conditions that are needed to support collective and transformational action to identified;
- Development of forms of governance that actively oriented towards transformational change rather than simply coordination of activities and sustaining a status quo.

Assumptions and framings

A key challenge facing many partnerships and transformation initiatives is that internal governance arrangements for partnerships are usually based on assumptions that the governance is there to ensure continued stability and control within discrete policy areas or organisational boundaries³². While this works well for coordination in stable systems, such assumptions and associated governance constrain effectiveness when cross-organisational working, adapting to uncertainty, and maintaining focus on longer-term and ambitious goals is required³⁰. Furthermore, while many partnerships working on transformation already have shared ambitions developed through visioning processes, systems mapping, and participatory design, a shared vision on its own is insufficient to support coordinated action for audacious change.

Supporting transformation therefore requires new forms of internal governance that explicitly support fundamental change³³ and have deliberately been designed by the partnership for its own ways of working. Alongside maintaining continuity, governance is likely to need to support learning, coordination, and collective agency under changing conditions. Many partnerships often reach a point where new practical questions arise about governance. This might include questions about how decisions need to be made differently, how authority should be exercised, whose knowledge needs to be valued, and how appropriate accountability for transformation can be ensured. Unless such questions are deliberately addressed, a partnership is likely to fall back on familiar institutional habits that significantly constrain potential for transformation.

A growing body of research on transformational governance highlights a wide set of important features, such as the need for governance to be inclusive, integrative, or decentralised (Table 4). These features are useful but don't easily translate into practice. Instead, to develop governance that supports transformation, a process of co-inquiry is needed where partners develop governance for their specific situation and needs.

Through action research with the Food for the Future partnership, we found that developing the partnership's internal transformation-focused governance is best understood as requiring the

establishment of three interdependent 'layers':

Layer 1: Shared values to orient governance

Shared values provide the normative foundation for governance. They clarify what a partnership stands for, what it must consistently protect, and how participants intend to work together across organisational differences. These values do not determine governance on their own, but without shared values to orient governance, processes and structures tend to drift towards familiar institutional approaches underpinned by an outmoded value base.

Evidence from food system governance shows that when shared values are made explicit, they can strengthen legitimacy and support more coherent action. For example, in participatory food councils and municipal food initiatives surfacing shared values helps collectives negotiate trade-offs, be more transparent, and work towards common goals³⁴. Working with such values, however, needs to be embodied in practice, rather than just be tokenistic.

Layer 2: Process principles for practical conduct of governance

These principles translate shared values into the practical conduct of governance. They shape how decisions are made, how authority is distributed, how disagreement is handled, and how learning is embedded. Without deliberate attention to principled processes of governance, values may be stated but the way operational aspects unfold may undermine the values in practice. The case of the Baltic Sea eutrophication governance illustrates this clearly. Despite having shared goals, governance repeatedly stalled because decision-making authority was fragmented. There were no shared principles that could guide coordination, the handling of disagreements, or the support needed for joint learning. The result was slow and ineffective action³⁵.

Layer 3: Enabling conditions and structures

For effective values and principles guided governance, certain wider enabling conditions are needed, such as a culture of trust, appropriate communication, clear roles and accountabilities, and flexibility to adapt as circumstances change. Identifying these enablers makes it possible to



create the conditions through which value and principle-based governance can operate. There are many examples showing the implications of not paying attention to the wider enabling conditions. For instance, research on protected area management demonstrated that although governance arrangements were formally established, they struggled to be effective in practice because communication with local actors was limited, responsibilities were unclear across agencies, and rigid structures left little room for adaptation. These gaps weakened legitimacy and cooperation, illustrating how the absence of enabling conditions can undermine even well-designed governance processes³⁶.

Together, the three layers explain why transformation-focused governance cannot be reduced to simply a hierarchical organisational structure or a focus on how decisions are made alone. Effective governance also needs values to establish direction, process principles to shape how governance is enacted, and enabling conditions that make it possible for those practices to remain adaptive, coherent, and workable over time. The co-inquiry process described below is designed to develop all three layers deliberately and in relation to each other.



Table 4. Features needed for an effective transformation-focused governance approach.

Feature	What this means in practice	Why it matters for transformation	Sources
Integrative	• Connects issues across sectors • Aligns action across scales • Reduces siloed working • Supports disruptive initiatives	Systemic challenges are interconnected so there is a need to work across issues. Fragmented governance reproduces fragmented outcomes. Governance needs to align and enhance coherence of different initiatives and innovations relating to transformation.	32,37
Inclusive	• Includes diverse actors • Creates meaningful opportunities for often-marginalised voices to shape debate and decisions • Addresses power imbalances • Builds shared accountability and legitimacy	Transformation requires broad ownership to have legitimacy and needs to empower those who currently have limited agency and are most likely to be marginalised in the current system. Simply instigating top-down approaches to change are almost always inadequate as they often reinforce existing hierarchies of power.	32,38
Pluralist	• Recognises and works with multiple forms of knowledge (e.g. professional, lived, Indigenous, community) • Supports co-production so that different perspectives can shape what is understood as important and how change is supported	Different perspectives reveal different leverage points and opportunities for change. No single viewpoint is sufficient and diverse forms of knowledge need to be included such as what is needed and how best to support transformations.	32,39
Adaptive	• Embeds learning, monitoring, and feedback in decision-making • Regularly reflects on assumptions underpinning how change is expected to come about • Allows for flexibility in response to change or new information	Transformations unfold under uncertainty and are themselves usually highly dynamic as a system reconfigures. Conditions are constantly changing and there is rarely stability. As such, governance must be highly reflexive and evolve as both the system changes and as those involved in supporting transformation also learn.	32,40,41
Experimental	• Creates space to test new approaches • Supports and pilots innovation • Learns from failure	New system patterns cannot be fully designed in advance; they need to be explored in practice and developed over time.	41,42
Intentional	• Clarifies the long-term transformational change being sought • Aligns action to a shared purpose • Helps keep attention on transformational rather than marginal change	Without transformational intent, efforts risk remaining reactive and superficial and focused on more immediate issues that may not be aligned to supporting more fundamental kinds of change.	37,42

Feature	What this means in practice	Why it matters for transformation	Sources
Decentralised	• Distributes leadership • Enables self-organising groups • Connects local initiative with regional coordination	Transformation at scale cannot be fully controlled. It is partly emergent and partly supported. There will be many groups of people involved or affected by change. Distributed action where there is both a level of self-organising and cohering of action to support alignment is usually necessary for transformations. Such an approach can enhance the agency of those involved while also being strategically oriented towards supporting transformation.	42-44
Structural re-design	• Identifies systemic lock-ins • Questions rules and incentives • Shifts underlying conditions	Surface-level improvements leave root causes untouched. Support transformation requires governance arrangements to actively engage in re-shaping structures, rules and incentives.	40,41
Long-term focus	• Recognises phases of change, • Sequences action over time • Works with windows of opportunity by anticipating changing conditions • Sets up opportunities for succession	Transformations often occur over decades. Governance needs to be sustained and evolve and adapt in relation to different phases of change and to enable for effective succession of leadership and core actors.	37,43,44
Social and ecological balance	• Recognises interdependence of people, economy, and ecosystems • Works within ecological limits	Many deliberate forms of transformation focus on human aspects but fail to properly integrate ecological and the more-than-human in their efforts. Given that ecological aspects underpin healthy human social systems, they need to be fully considered in change efforts to avoid risk of reinforcing existing challenges.	39,43

Main phases

There are five phases of developing transformation-focused governance (Figure 8):

1. Understanding existing governance constraints and enablers;
2. Surfacing shared values;
3. Translating values into decision-making practice;
4. Identifying enabling conditions for coherent action;
5. Establishing an operational structure.

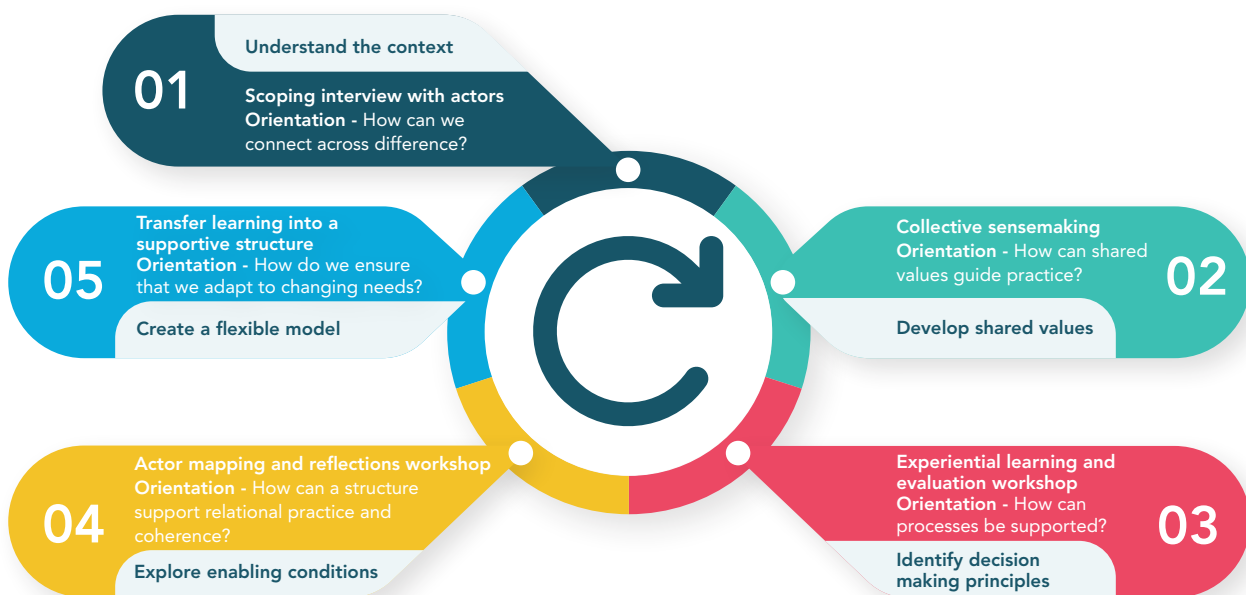


Figure 8. Five main phases of developing transformation-focused inner governance.

Together, these phases help partnerships move from shared ambition towards a governance approach that provides clearer collective direction, stronger alignment around how processes are enacted, improved conditions for collaboration, and a practical structure through which action can be coordinated and sustained over time.

While the phases are presented sequentially, they are iterative with insights from later phases often prompting a need to revise earlier ones. The process is also most useful when undertaken across multiple sessions over time rather than as a single intensive event so it can support development of relationships, shared understanding, and changes in governance arrangements.

In the Food for the Future North Yorkshire partnership, the designing of governance was undertaken through a process of iterative co-inquiry over 12 months. This process begins after framework development (Section 3) and in parallel with cohering and aligning (Section 4) so that these activities can mutually reinforce each other.

Phase 1: Understanding existing governance constraints and enablers

Before shaping internal governance for transformation, it is important to understand how governance is currently experienced across a partnership recognising that partners will typically arrive carrying assumptions from the governance arrangements of their own organisations. This is because participants typically bring assumptions drawn from the governance systems of their own organisations. While these assumptions may work well within individual institutions, they are often not transferable to a shared space where authority, responsibility, and decision-making are distributed across many actors.

The purpose of this phase is to surface both constraints and existing strengths in current governance arrangements, making visible the patterns that are often felt individually but rarely discussed collectively. This leads to:

- A shared picture of how governance is currently experienced across different roles and organisations;
- Understanding of existing strengths and constraints of governance, such as how it supports collaboration and learning, creates

friction or delay, or has untapped potential to work differently;

- A shift in discussions from what governance is failing to do towards what can be built on and what it can achieve.

Examples from Food for the Future can be seen in [Table 5](#). The shared understanding of current governance provides direction for the co-inquiry process, by surfacing what needs to be protected and enhanced, alongside what needs to be challenged.

This phase typically involves one-to-one or small group conversations with diverse participants, exploring how governance shows up in day-to-day work. It can also be incorporated into a multi-stakeholder workshop. Key questions include how decisions are made, how priorities are set, what enables or hinders movement from plans to action, and what would most need to change to support longer-term transformation.

Table 5. Examples of governance challenges and opportunities for transformation identified by stakeholders in the Food for the Future North Yorkshire partnership.

Existing elements constraining transformation	Existing elements that require adapting	Existing elements to enhance
• Siloed working without overall coordination • Unclear accountability structures • Rigid or absent monitoring and reporting processes • Slow and overly cautious approaches to change • Heavy reliance on statutory procedures, government objectives or hierarchical sign-off reducing flexibility	• Stakeholder engagement needs to better balance inclusivity with functionality • Strategic planning needs to be flexible and aligned across scales without domination by external agendas • Accountability needs to emphasise collective rather than individual responsibility • Monitoring and evaluation needs to include clearer indicators of change, be supported by more resourcing and focus on learning as well as delivery	• Trust-building and informal collaboration to strengthen relationships among partners • Connections across scales and sectors to broaden reach and legitimacy for transformation • Inclusivity in decision-making to accommodate multiple perspectives • Willingness to experiment, take risks and adapt strategies over time • Attention to equity and well-being in long-term goals

Phase 2: Surfacing shared values that orient governance towards supporting transformation

With a shared understanding of current governance in place, the next phase identifies the values that governance needs to uphold if transformational change is to be supported. These shared values provide a transformation partnership with a shared foundation that qualifies what matters, how they intend to work together, and what governance must consistently enable. The outcomes of this phase are:

- A set of values that combine what is already considered important in the existing collaboration.
- Understanding of what needs to be strengthened if governance is to actively support transformation.

This phase typically involves a facilitated workshop in which diverse participants — across strategic, delivery, and community roles — are invited to explore what governance must prioritise, protect, or make possible if the partnership's transformational vision is to be realised. A useful approach here is reinforcement clustering, in which ideas are grouped not by similarity but by how they relate to and strengthen each other. This helps to move from isolated concerns towards shared orientations (see [Section 3](#) for details). The outcome is a small set of shared governance values - typically three to five - that can act as a practical reference point throughout the rest of the governance development process. Examples from the Food for the Future partnership can be found in [Box 12](#).

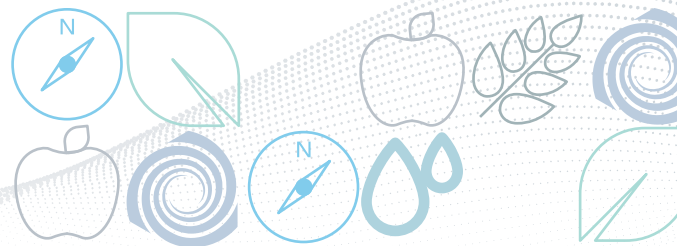
Box 12. Shared governance values identified in Food for the Future

In the Food for the Future partnership, four shared values were identified as important for shaping a governance approach capable of supporting transformation:

- **Collaboration** – to work across organisational and sector boundaries and align effort around shared challenges
- **Ambition** – to maintain attention on longer-term systemic change rather than incremental improvement
- **Reflexivity** – to question assumptions, learn through practice, and adapt as conditions evolve
- **Inclusivity** – to ensure diverse perspectives and forms of knowledge shape direction and legitimacy

These values align with some of the features of transformative governance ([Table 4](#)), such as having a clear direction and setting intentions, as well as widening participation to increase plurality.

It is important to note that these are shared governance values rather than fixed organisational core values. Partnership members already bring different institutional values of their own. Making explicit a combination of values associated with what is already important with what needs to be strengthened for governance to support transformation provides a clearer foundation for discussion in later phases. Ultimately, the values also help ensure redesign of governance does not reproduce existing patterns and power relations.





Phase 3: Translating values into principles for decision-making in practice

Shared values become meaningful when they are embodied in practice and shape how governance is enacted. In this phase, the focus is on how shared values can be translated into principles that guide the practical conduct of governance. We focus on decision-making because it is often the moment when values become visible. Each decision-making process shows something about who is invited in, how power is shared, what knowledge is recognised, and how the wider system is understood.

This phase assumes that the partnership will need to make some collective decisions together. These may include agreeing priority action areas, allocating funding or resources, setting shared goals, determining approaches to monitoring and learning, or deciding how to respond to emerging challenges. Each of these decisions can be approached in different ways. Different values, for example, imply different expectations about participation, authority, legitimacy, and system awareness. In this phase, by working to translate shared values into principles for decision-making a partnership can establish how decisions can be made that support transformation.

In this phase, different approaches to decision-making are trialled to identify the kinds of principles that support the decision-making within your context and for the issues you are working with. It is helpful to trial several contrasting approaches so that participants can make judgments about their relative merits. From here, principles can then be identified resulting in a unique approach that is developed for specific to your context or situation.

A set of three possible decision-making approaches that were used in the Food for the Future partnership are summarised in [Table 6](#). These were chosen because they were all conducive to effective collaborative working across diverse partners and broadly help to distribute agency. These are not the only options available. Other approaches, such as the [Way of Council](#), [Wheel of Wisdom](#), [Holacracy](#), [Dotmocracy](#), [Polis](#) and [SenseMaker](#), can also offer valuable ways of supporting or structuring collective decisions.

To explore the different decision-making approaches, it is helpful to work with an example in a workshop such as deciding how to allocate funding across priority areas. Here participants are invited to role-play how this decision might unfold for each of the different approaches being trialled. This enables participants to experience how each approach feels in practice, what it enables and what it constrains. Principles participants want to carry forward that guide how they will make decisions can then be identified.



Table 6. Examples of decision-making models for exploring how shared values can be translated into governance practice.

Model	Explanation	Core features	How it functions	Relevance for transformation
Sociocracy	A governance method developed in organisational settings where decision-making authority is distributed to small groups, each with a clearly defined remit. Decisions require consent rather than consensus — meaning proposals move forward unless someone has a reasoned objection. Groups are linked through shared representatives, keeping the whole system connected. It gives actors genuine authority to act without always needing central approval.	• Authority is distributed to those closest to the work • Decisions are made with full consent • There is a clear mandate to work with that determines scope and purpose • Groups are connected through double-linking (two people who sit in both circles)	• Smaller groups hold defined responsibilities and decision-making authority • Proposals move forward when there are no reasoned objections • Objections are used to refine proposals until they are considered safe enough to try • Representatives link working groups to wider coordination	• Enables distributed agency while maintaining coherence across the partnership • Supports shared ownership across multiple actors • Encourages adaptive action without requiring central approval at every stage
Systemic Constellation	A method originally developed in family and organisational therapy where the relationships between actors, institutions, or competing forces in a system are made visible. It allows participants to sense dynamics and tensions that are hard to see from a single vantage point. It is useful here because it surfaces hidden power dynamics and interdependencies before decisions are made.	• Attention to wider system effects • Emphasis on relationships and shared understanding • Awareness of connections and interdependencies	• Actors, institutions, resources, or tensions are explored in relation to one another through physical positioning of people, symbolic representation, or structured mapping • Participants reflect from different system positions and consider proposed actions from multiple perspectives before reaching agreement	• Reveals hidden system dynamics and makes interdependencies visible before choices are made • Makes visible how choices shape the wider system and those within it • Strengthens integrative and cross-scale thinking

Model	Explanation	Core features	How it functions	Relevance for transformation
Deliberative Dialogue	A structured process in which participants share perspectives, examine evidence and trade-offs, and jointly develop criteria before reaching a decision. It treats different forms of knowledge — professional expertise, lived experience, community insight — as equally valid inputs. Unlike debate, the goal is mutual understanding rather than winning an argument. Useful here because it builds legitimacy for decisions that cut across institutional and sectoral boundaries.	• Space is created for all voices to contribute • Thinking and rationale are made visible to the group • The group develops shared criteria to guide choices • Different forms of knowledge are brought together	• Structured facilitated dialogue enables participants to share perspectives, examine evidence and trade-offs, and jointly develop criteria before agreeing action • Diverse knowledge (e.g. professional, lived, community) is explicitly included in the process	• Strengthens legitimacy by grounding decisions in shared reasoning • Supports reflexive learning by surfacing assumptions and divergent perspectives • Helps partnerships work constructively across institutional and sectoral differences



After exploring the different decision-making models, practical principles are identified that most strongly align with the shared values identified in Phase 2 and the broader need for transformation. For example, in Food for the Future, four principles emerged as particularly important:

- *Deliberation*: which enables inclusivity by allowing proposals to evolve through dialogue and shared reasoning;
- *Intentionality*: anchoring decisions to long-term transformational aims rather than short-term pressures;
- *Decentralisation*: ensuring that those working locally and closer to implementation are empowered to take collaborative action;
- *Accountability*: ensuring there is clarity about who is accountable for different aspects of transformation and that review processes are clear across the partnership.

When enacted during decision-making such principles can help your partnership attend to the features needed that will support transformations (Table 4). This might include the need for governance to balance local agency with system-wide alignment, ensure choices are informed by diverse perspectives, be anchored in long-term purpose, and be transparent. The principles in Food for the Future were also helpful because they were mutually reinforcing, together helping overcome the central governance tension of the need for both distributed action and system-wide coherence.

It is worth emphasising that the values and principles identified in phases 2 and 3 are only meaningful when they are embodied in practice. There is always a risk that they become tokenistic and abstract. Encouraging an experimental and experiential learning approach to the way in which a partnership and cohering operate (Section 6) helps to maintain focus on enacting key values and principles.

Phase 4: Identifying enabling conditions for coherent action

The aim of this phase is to identify conditions for coherent action and therefore how best to govern. This might, for example, involve identifying where there is potential for stronger impact from reciprocal relationships, where

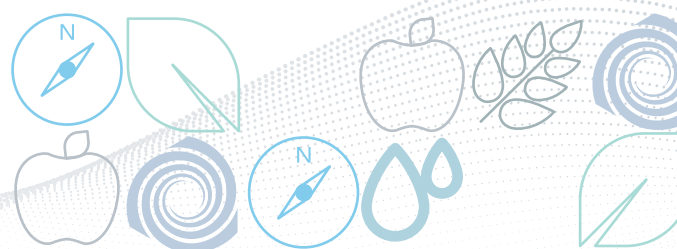
focused collaboration is most needed, or how distributed activity might need support to remain coherent. In this phase, attention is shifted from how governance needs to operate internally to the way governance needs to be supported by or work flexibly with external conditions.

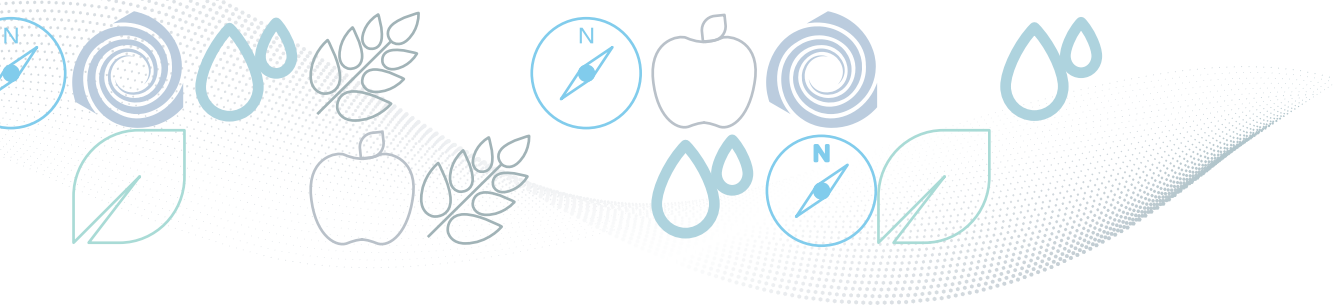
Actor mapping, such as applied in a workshop, is a helpful tool for this phase. By exploring relationships between different actors and their clusters it is possible to identify different situations where different approaches to governance might be needed. For example, in the Food for the Future, it helped identify areas or clusters of actors where:

- there was shared intent the work of different actors as already reinforcing each another;
- only light-touch convening was needed;
- governance needed to support more emergent processes;
- activity was overly dependent on a small number of actors and greater support was needed;
- wider coordination was needed to link this activity to other groups working across the partnership.

Importantly, working through this phase often reveals that not all actors need to work together continuously and that governance is better enacted within specific clusters, such as within the working groups or within a core group of leads. By working differently for different parts of the system, practical space for action is achieved without losing sight of wider system interdependencies.

The output of this phase is a clearer understanding of the enabling conditions needed to sustain distributed action in practice. This includes recognising ways in which critical connections can be identified, where cross-domain links must be maintained, and where a light-touch convening role is needed to help clusters collaborate and support one another.





Phase 5: Synthesis to develop an operational structure

The final phase brings together the insights from the previous phases into a coherent governance approach. The task here is to shape a structure for governance capable of enacting agreed values, process principles, and enabling conditions into sustained practice.

Working through the following questions guides this synthesis:

- **Where does the action sit?** Clarifying where responsibility and accountability for implementation will be held within action domains or working groups.
- **How is coherence maintained?** Establishing how different areas of activity remain connected and how wider alignment is supported without over-centralising authority.
- **How are decisions guided?** Clarifying how shared values and agreed process principles remain visible in day-to-day decision-making.
- **How is learning sustained?** Building in reflection, feedback and evaluation so that governance can adapt over time.
- Self-organising groups representing each action domain take responsibility for their priority areas of change;
- Each action domain group has designated leads whose role is to convene discussion, maintain momentum, and ensure decisions remain aligned with shared values and criteria;
- These leads come together as a 'Core Group' convened by North Yorkshire Council (NYC) to maintain connection between areas of work, surface interdependencies, and ensure focus on strategic aims;
- The NYC's role is defined primarily as convener and enabler rather than director, with coherence depending less on formal authority and more on shared criteria, communication, administration (e.g. organising and facilitating meetings and workshops, report-writing), and deliberate coordination across actors at different points in the system;
- Learning is sustained by embedding an evaluation process and framework alongside governance ([Section 6](#)).

The result is an operational governance structure that will enable the partnership to work in a way that embeds their shared values and principles of working. It is intended to evolve and change over time. An example from Food for the Future resulted in an operational model that included ([Figure 9](#)):

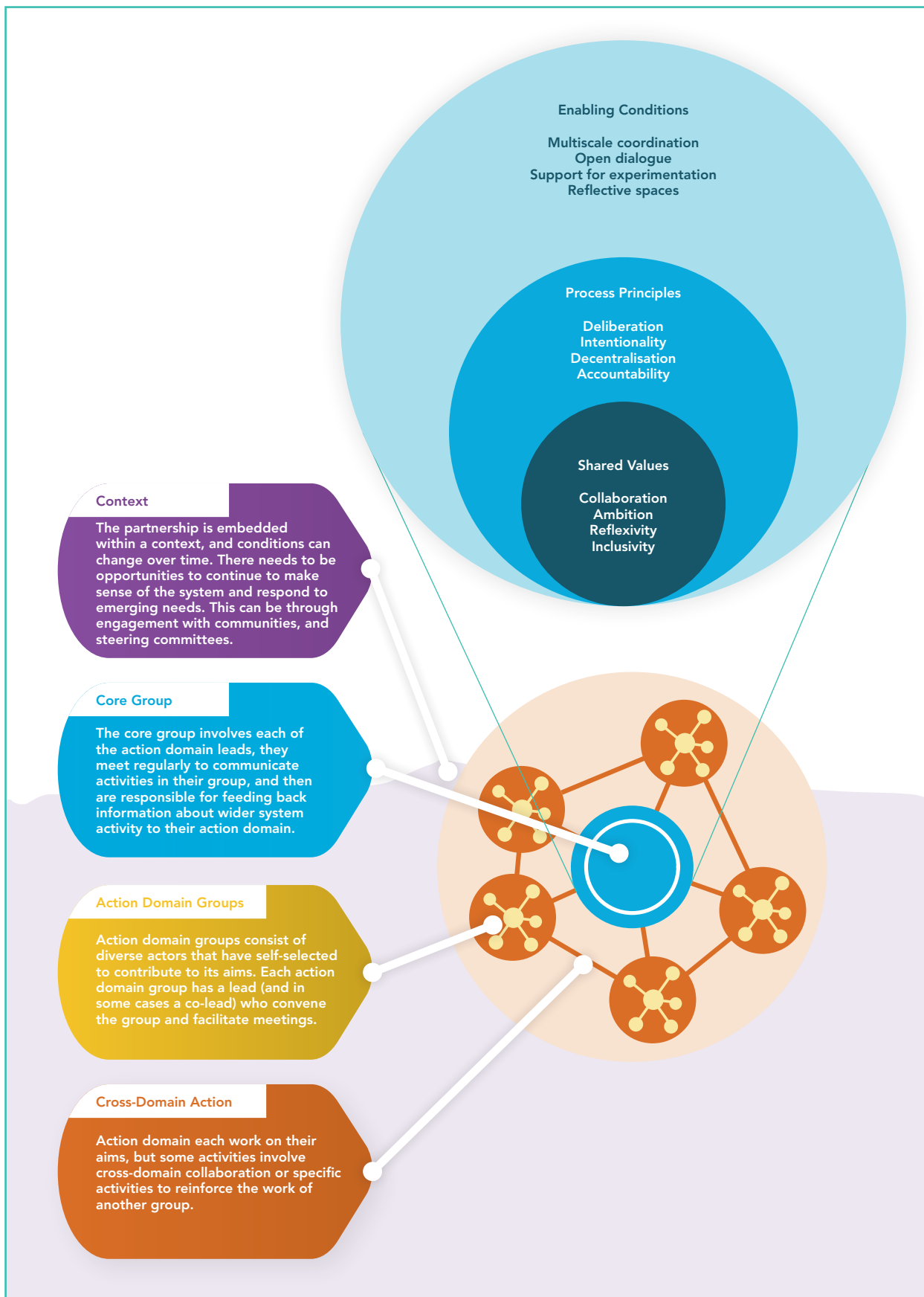


Figure 9. Operational governance model of the Food for the Future North Yorkshire partnership.

Critical insights from practice

Developing governance capable of supporting transformational change is more demanding than it might initially appear. It requires attending to many implicit assumptions people hold about what constitutes change and how it can be supported. The following lessons reflect what proved most important in practice from our experience.

- **Don't start by designing structures.** Begin by exploring what the current approach feels like and is experienced. This surfaces the constraints and existing strengths that any redesign must confront. Without this grounding, new structures risk reproducing the patterns they intend to address.
- **Principles are needed to translate values into decision-making.** Shared values, including those that intend to sustain transformational forms of change, are necessary to ensure governance is grounded in what a partnership believes is important.
- **Reciprocal relationships across a system need to be leveraged and supported.** Collaboration for transformation depends on patterns of mutual contribution across a system. Such enablers do not emerge automatically and require mapping, being made explicit, and deliberately sustained. Without this, distributed action needed for transformation to occur tends to fragment rather than cohere.
- **Keep the partnership's internal governance structure light and provisional at first.** Over-designing governance too early reduces flexibility and can dampen the momentum that comes from distributed initiative. Starting with simple, workable arrangements and iterating as relationships and clarity develop is consistently more effective.
- **Governance design is an ongoing process of learning.** Transformation unfolds under uncertainty and changing conditions. Governance needs to be treated as reviewable and adaptable, as an ongoing and central aspect of the change process itself. Embedding short, regular reflection into existing meetings is more sustainable than relying on occasional major reviews.

Conclusion

Effective transformation depends less on centralised control and more on creating the conditions in which distributed action can remain connected, coherent, and mutually supportive. How the partnership governs itself internally is then critical. It shapes how decisions are made among partners, how shared intentions translate into coordinated action, and how collective effort is sustained without defaulting to the institutional habits that each member brings from elsewhere. The process outlined in this section therefore helps you move beyond abstract aspirations into the practical work of developing effective internal governance arrangements that suit your partnership's specific needs. They help strengthen coherence and create conditions for distributed action aligned with longer-term transformational goals.

DESIGNING AND EMBEDDING TRANSFORMATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION AND LEARNING

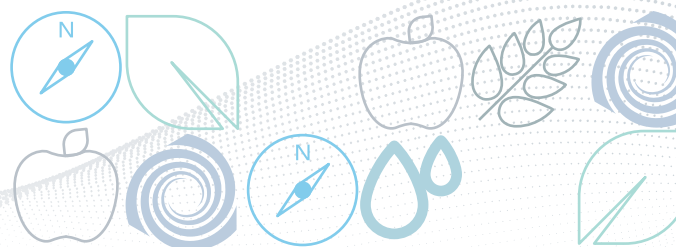
Aims and purpose

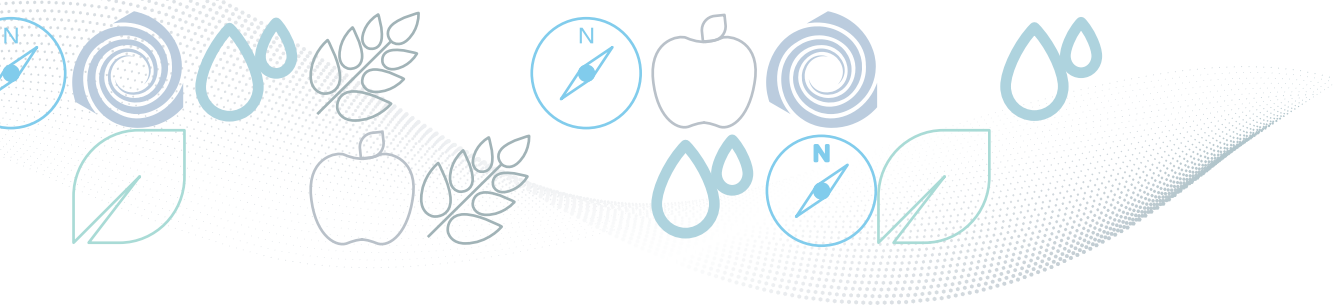
The previous four sections – foundations ([Section 2](#)), developing frameworks for action ([Section 3](#)), cohering actors ([Section 4](#)), and transformation-focused internal governance ([Section 5](#)) – explain how transformation at scale can be conceptualised, the kinds of action needed to support transformation, how to bring different people together, and how to organise to support change.

In addition, appropriate forms of evaluation are needed for working in a context of complexity and uncertainty. Evaluation can ensure continual co-learning about what is being achieved, how conditions are changing, how approaches to change can be improved, and how momentum and inspiration for continued transformational action can be maintained. In short, transformation initiatives need to be supported by transformation-focused evaluation and learning.

This section therefore describes how a transformation-focused evaluation and learning framework could be co-designed, implemented and embedded in system change efforts. The outcomes are an approach to evaluation that:

- Enables self-evaluation of progress for working in complex and uncertain change initiatives;
- Drives momentum, encourages inspiration, and keeps ambition high;
- Enhances learning about how to improve activities and align them to transformational goals;
- Supports rapid adaptation to new information and changing conditions;
- Supports deep learning to surface assumptions that are inhibiting transformational change.





Assumptions and framings

Traditional Western understandings and approaches of evaluation are often poorly suited to working with highly interconnected challenges and system change. They are at best inadequate for supporting transformation and at worst can actively constrain it. Mainstream approaches, for example, are:

- Often designed for compliance and accountability rather than supporting change directly, and geared towards understanding change in relation to isolated, short-term, linear, and pre-planned projects and activities;
- Typically focused on quantifiable metrics, giving limited attention to more qualitative dimensions of change;
- Based on evidence from the past and present, limiting their ability to work with uncertain or desired futures;
- Based on limited stakeholder participation in shaping the evaluation and the learnings arising from it;
- Often focused on meeting donors' needs (e.g. value for money) at the expense of a project's wider mission;
- Involve evaluators that are assumed to be value-neutral observers independent from the system of interest, constraining opportunities for reflexivity about how evaluation itself may influence change in the system (for better or worse).

Overall, most mainstream evaluation approaches can easily reinforce unhelpful understandings of change and who holds power within a system, ultimately constraining the potential of evaluation to be a catalyst of transformational change. As highlighted by Michael Quinn Patton, developing forms of evaluation that support transformations therefore requires transforming how we approach evaluation itself⁴⁵.

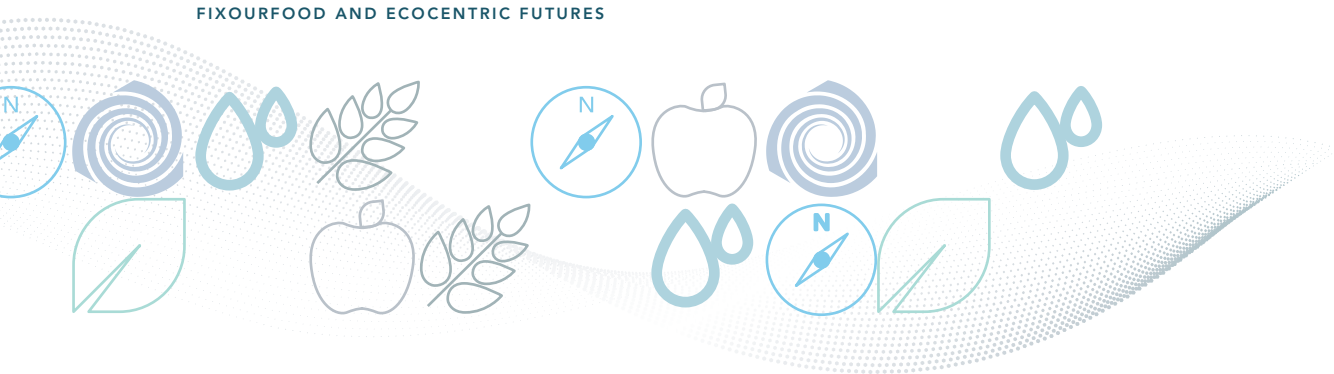
Evaluation approaches specifically developed to support transformation – referred to here as *transformation-focused evaluation* (TFE) – aim to drive learning, momentum, participation, and inspiration for positive systemic change. This includes shaping participants' underlying understanding of how change comes about, what constitutes transformation, and the way in which actions in the present can give rise to transformational outcomes.

TFE is based on twelve principles^{46,47} (Figure 10). These include: complexity-informed approaches; ensuring attention to power dynamics in system change and how evaluation can actively influence shifts in power; and how the evaluation process can purposefully uphold particular values, develop cultures of deep learning, and support desirable transformations as opposed to more superficial or marginal forms of change that fail to transcend system challenges. A focus on working with complexity, power and purpose leads to evaluation approaches that are: agile; inclusive, collaborative and co-creative, drawing on diverse forms of knowledge and ways of knowing; able to work with the complexities of system change; ethically grounded; reflexive and facilitative rather than directive; and accountable primarily to serving change towards flourishing planetary futures.

While independent or external evaluations may at times be required to hold organisations or initiatives to account, TFE is usually assumed to be embedded within an initiative. This enables more continuous self-evaluation, learning and empowerment of those seeking to support change. It simultaneously also places more direct accountability for action on those involved. The goal of developing an appropriate transformation-focused approach to evaluation is to embed it as a core everyday way of working in an initiative that is closely intertwined with the initiative's governance.



Figure 10. Twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation⁴⁶.



Main phases

Establishing a TFE approach and embedding it within a transformation initiative involves five main phases:

1. Convening a transformation-focused evaluation group – establishing terms of reference, expectations, roles, accountabilities, and principles for a working group and design team;
2. Iterative co-design of a transformation-focused evaluation and learning framework;
3. Piloting the implementation of the framework;
4. Developing a story of change: a collective expectation of how the initiative will achieve its aims;
5. Embedding the framework into the initiative's everyday ways of working.

The phases are described below in sequence, although in practice they are highly overlapping and cyclical. In our work with Food for the Future, the main design phase of the framework took about 1.5 years, with the overall process involving continual modification and learning over three years. An example of a framework resulting from this design process is provided in [Box 13](#) and [Figure 11](#). More detail of the process and an example of how it was designed and applied is described in other published work²⁴.



Box 13: An example transformation-focused evaluation and learning system

This box shows an example of the kind of evaluation framework you might create to support transformation. It comes from the Food for the Future North Yorkshire food system transformation initiative²⁴. The initiative's Evaluation & Learning Working Group created a design for the initiative's 'transformation-focused evaluation and learning system' (TFELS), which defines the system of actors continuously applying transformation-focused evaluation and learning from it, as an embedded culture of working. The TFELS thus treats evaluation holistically, considering its integration with the initiative's wider governance. Five dimensions comprise the TFELS, which is continually evolving²⁴:

- **Intended outcomes from the TFELS if it were functioning successfully.** These include: keen sensing of food system conditions, enabling rapid adaptation; more effective transformative action; a transformed understanding of evaluation; maintaining a critical, reflexive approach to evaluation that avoids greenwashing and cherry-picking results; deeper forms of learning, shared with like-minded organisations and initiatives to positively influence their behaviour; and maintaining transformational intent and hope.
- **Evaluation questions.** These frame the whole purpose and focus of Food for the Future as a learning- and transformation-oriented initiative. They focus attention on enabling conditions for an impactful initiative ('enablers'); transformative actions that the initiative should choose to support ('actions'); impacts of the initiative and their contribution (in light of contributions from other sources) to food system transformation and regenerative dynamics ('impacts'); and reflections on the initiative's processes and learning ('process'), which, if framed appropriately, could lead to deeper forms of learning that highlight the underlying conditions and paradigms needed for effective transformation.
- **Goals and guides.** These make explicit the transformation-focused principles, values and frameworks guiding the initiative – including Three Horizons findings, the initiative's intended story of change, and this evaluation framework itself – encouraging ongoing assessment of the initiative's fidelity to these goals and guides.
- **Integration with actors' organising for transformation.** TFE assumes that all actors within an initiative, in some way, need to take part in the evaluation and learning that supports desired transformation. Evaluation must therefore be considered an integral part of the change process and the initiative's wider governance.

Overall, this framework provides a way of making sense of the diverse dimensions and activities of evaluation needed for Food for the Future to understand its pathway to supporting transformation.

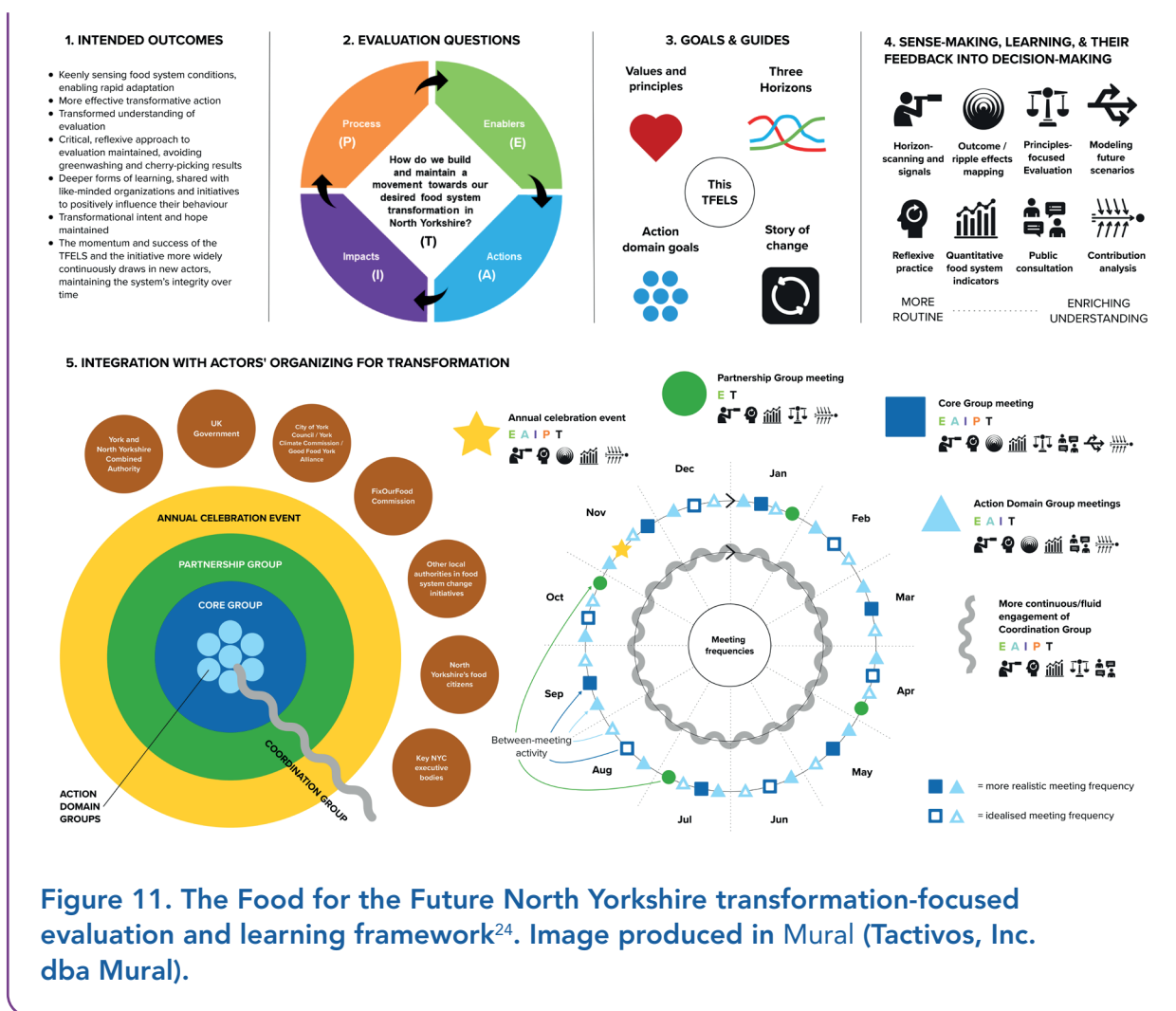


Figure 11. The Food for the Future North Yorkshire transformation-focused evaluation and learning framework²⁴. Image produced in Mural (Tactivos, Inc. dba Mural).

Phase 1: Convening a transformation-focused evaluation group

The purpose of this first phase is to establish terms of reference, expectations, roles, accountabilities, and principles for ways of working amongst the participants involved in designing a transformation-focused evaluation (TFE) framework.

This begins by establishing an Evaluation & Learning Working Group. While TFE is relevant to every person involved in a transformation effort, a dedicated evaluation-focused group is usually needed to support the design, implementation and embedding of the evaluation. Initial clarity can then be sought about roles and accountabilities within the group. A group might, for example, include a:

- Sponsor – accountable for ensuring that actions are taken forward in the initiative more widely.

- Chair – in charge of scheduling meetings, finalising agendas and minutes, and ensuring meetings keep to time. The chair might be the same as the sponsor, and/or you may decide to have a revolving chair.
- Facilitator – accountable for facilitating group exercises and discussions. The facilitator may or may not have prior evaluation experience. You might have multiple co-facilitators.
- Chief designer – accountable for drafting evaluation framework designs based on group discussions. This might be the same as the facilitator.

It is helpful to separate roles of facilitator and sponsor to enable the facilitator to focus more on facilitating an effective process, while the chair/sponsor can focus more on the implications for the initiative. You may also want to designate 'champions' or 'ambassadors' to liaise between groups in your transformation initiative and/or who will communicate the importance of

evaluation with wider audiences. Think also about the make-up of the group. Does it sufficiently represent and cut across the different groups of people involved in the wider initiative? Ideally, does it include representation of the people who will be impacted by the initiative? This is particularly important if you are choosing indicators of progress and success.

Initial discussions can also clarify how the group will engage, and identify the purpose of the evaluation framework, what members of the group want to achieve, and the principles that should be reflected in the final framework and the process to design it. Much of this could be achieved during an initial 2-hour to half-day workshop focused on a range of key questions (Box 14).

Box 14: Key questions to orient an Evaluation & Learning Working Group

You might ask these questions of your group in an initial workshop.

- What does evaluation mean to you?
- What importance does evaluation hold for you?
- What are your hopes for what we could achieve together as a group?
- What would you personally like to bring to the group? (E.g. particular expertise, connections, perspectives, or even just willingness to learn!)
- What would an evaluation approach for our initiative need to be able to do in order to be effective? (I.e. what would it need to tell us about? What are we curious to learn about together as an initiative?)
- What kinds of principles should the evaluation approach follow? (I.e. how should the evaluation be conducted?)
- Who or what are we accountable to or responsible for?
- How frequently should our group meet and how long should our meetings or workshops be?
- Should we meet online or in person, or both?
- Are there any key additional people who should be part of the group?

Overall, this phase is not a static, discrete process, and may need revisiting throughout the other phases below. The outcomes from the convening phase should also not be seen as final: participants' understanding will inevitably change by getting stuck in with designing and implementing the evaluation framework. The outcomes of convening are more to create an initial foundation that can be adapted and built upon.

Phase 2: Iterative co-design

The purpose of this second phase is to iteratively co-design a viable transformation-focused evaluation and learning framework that the initiative could implement. Intended outcomes include:

- A refined draft design of a transformation-focused evaluation and learning framework, including your initiative's goals and guides, core evaluation questions, how feedback and evidence will be gathered, and how evaluation might be integrated into your initiative's wider organising for transformation.
- Increasing clarity about the purpose of the framework being designed.
- Growing understanding of TFE in the group and nascent shifts in participants' assumptions about what evaluation is.

This phase is characterised by a series of periodic design-focused workshops. The role of the chief designer is to create iterative drafts of the evaluation framework design based on discussions and feedback in the group's workshops. As an example, the Food for the Future evaluation framework has gone through nine main iterations to date. We can now share the learning and designs from this process with others, such as in this guide, which might speed up your own process and reduce the number of iterations needed.

Workshops in this phase might include a combination of design discussions and exercises, and brief presentations by the facilitator or invited external speakers to introduce different aspects of TFE, the kinds of frameworks, tools and methods useful for implementing TFE, and how others have put TFE into practice. Overall, this phase should be both a learning and design experience to deepen participants' understanding of TFE. There are many tools and sources of inspiration to draw on when designing your framework ([Box 15](#)).

Box 15: Examples of frameworks, tools, methods and approaches useful for transformation-focused evaluation (TFE)

This box lists some examples of frameworks, tools, methods and approaches that you may find useful for supporting TFE. Many more examples can be found in a separate paper about principles and methods for TFE⁴⁶.

- **The Food for the Future in North Yorkshire transformation-focused evaluation and learning system**⁴⁸ – an example of a TFE framework.
- **Twelve principles for TFE**⁴⁶ – a set of recommended principles for enhancing the potential of evaluation practice to support transformational change.
- **Orders of Outcomes**^{49,50} – a helpful way of distinguishing between different levels of outcomes from a transformation initiative, including longer-term system change outcomes.
- **PESTLE analysis** – a simple framework for thinking about how enabling conditions in a system are changing.
- **Ripple effects mapping**²⁵ or **outcome mapping** – methods of quickly capturing emergent outcomes from a transformation initiative.
- **Qualitative Impact Protocol (QulP)**⁵¹ – a protocol for rapid assessment of qualitative evidence of impact from a transformation initiative.
- **Most Significant Change**⁵² – a method for gathering stakeholder opinions on the most significant impacts of a transformation initiative.
- **Contribution analysis**⁵³ – a method for assessing what contributions an initiative has made to system change in light of other influences, based on an iteratively refined story or theory of change.
- **Principles-Focused Evaluation**⁵⁴ – an approach for evaluating the quality of an initiative's principles and values (e.g. a focus on transformation) and alignment to them.
- **Sentinel Indicators** – a method of selecting critical indicators of system change.
- **Signals of Transformational Change**⁵⁵ – criteria for assessing whether transformational system change is occurring.
- **Triple-loop learning**⁵⁶ – a framework for distinguishing between different levels of learning, with triple-loop learning being the most transformative.



The purpose of this phase is not to produce a detailed, polished framework that tells you exactly what to do, but rather to create an overarching, high-level framework whose different dimensions can be subsequently fleshed out. You might, for example, not get as far as identifying specific quantitative or qualitative indicators. A simpler initial version may suffice. For further tips on an effective design process, see [Box 16](#).

Box 16: Tips for an effective evaluation co-design process

Based on our experience of co-designing a transformation-focused evaluation framework for Food for the Future North Yorkshire, we identified five key lessons that we would recommend to others embarking on a similar process.

1. **Broaden appreciation of evaluation beyond metrics and impact.** Evaluation is commonly equated to impact evaluation and monitoring quantitative metrics of change, but these are actually just two elements of a much broader set of roles for evaluation in transformation contexts – evaluating enabling conditions, actions, and processes as well as impacts, and drawing on many different forms of feedback and evidence, qualitative as well as quantitative evidence, and so on. Appreciating evaluation in this holistic way will help to embed TFE as a normalised way of working in your initiative.
2. **Draw attention to effective evaluation practice that is already being implemented.** Relatively transformation-focused and developmental ways of evaluating may already be taking place in your initiative, even though they may not be recognised as such. Your role is then to draw attention to these existing good practices that can be built on as part of a strengths-based approach and make them explicit. In Food for the Future, for example, teams were already adept at horizon-scanning for important opportunities and challenges. H2+ language and thinking ([Figure 5](#)) were also becoming well embedded. This will help TFE appear more tangible, familiar and feasible.
3. **Iterate towards a ‘minimum viable product’ rather than perfection.** It can be tempting to create a perfect evaluation framework design, but more important is to put some foundations in place focused on important core aspects, which can then be continually adapted and refined. For instance, you might not dive straight into selecting specific key progress indicators (KPIs) but rather focus on establishing the broader framework that indicators can be situated within. Keep your iterated designs as simple as possible whilst remaining focused and purpose-led.
4. **Be a bricoleur!** ‘Bricolage’ means drawing on knowledge of a wide variety of tools, frameworks and methods in your design process. Because every situation is unique, a single approach is unlikely to meet all your needs. It then becomes important to creatively combine and adapt various approaches to meet the unique needs of your context.
5. **Make the process as experiential as possible.** This means ideally piloting and applying your evaluation framework as you go along rather than keeping it purely abstract. This is likely to give you much more useful learning about what the framework needs to look like.

Phase 3: Piloting

The purpose of this phase is to begin implementing and trialling aspects of the evaluation framework that is being designed, which in turn will help to refine the framework design. Intended outcomes of this phase include:

- Implementation of TFE at least to evaluate your initiative's enabling conditions and the transformative actions that your initiative should support;
- Experiential learning about how to implement TFE;
- The evaluation framework is starting to feel more familiar and feasible to people outside of the Evaluation & Learning Working Group;
- Working group members are working with other groups in the initiative to support wider piloting and feel confident in this role.

Your Evaluation & Learning Working Group can pilot various aspects of TFE itself, such as using Principles-focused Evaluation to evaluate whether the initiative is staying true to its transformational values. Even more powerful than this, however, is for your group to support people in the wider initiative to implement TFE. In Food for the Future, for example, the initiative's 'launch event' applied several aspects of its evaluation framework. This included prioritisation of potential system interventions using H2+ criteria (Figure 5) and a simple outcome mapping exercise to provide a 'pulse check' of where the initiative was already providing value and where it needed to improve.

Bear in mind that it may not be possible to implement some aspects of your evaluation framework during early stages of an initiative. For example, you may not be able to carry out a meaningful contribution analysis until the initiative has entered a more action-focused stage. The aim, however, is to keep applying whatever aspects you can. The more your participants can directly experience TFE in action, the more powerful your collective learning about TFE is likely to be. This in turn will mean that you will be closer to embedding TFE as a normalised way of working in your initiative.

Phase 4: Developing a story of change

This phase aims to build a 'story of change' for your initiative. This is an important component of your evaluation framework that draws on the results of your action framework development using Three Horizons explained in earlier sections. A 'story of change' describes how you expect it to support desirable system transformations. It forms the bedrock of any impact evaluation, including contribution analysis (Box 15). The intended outcomes of this phase include:

- A draft story of change that explains how the goals and planned actions of your action domains reinforce each other and feed into your initiative's overall expected impacts and contributions to systemic change;
- The people involved in your initiative feel a sense of ownership of this story of change and are inspired by it;
- A basic understanding of how your initiative would apply [contribution analysis](#) based on the story of change.

If the strategy of your initiative is based on Three Horizons, your story of change structure might look something like Figure 12. You can build on the findings from your Three Horizons process as the foundation for your story of change, including requests and offers between action domains (see Section 3). You might hold a dedicated workshop to flesh out a story of change, including the quantitative and qualitative indicators that would tell you about different stages of progress. You could also incorporate storytelling tools, like storyboards.

From a story of change, you can then ask questions about the extent to which your initiative contributed to observed changes in the system, taking care to account for other influences beyond your initiative. For example, you might conclude that your initiative made a major contribution to stimulating transformation, or that it accelerated change that would have probably still happened in the absence of the initiative. What you observe in the system might tell you that your story of change is incorrect, or not convincing. Perhaps your initiative is achieving impact in a way that you didn't initially consider. In these cases, iteratively refine your story so that it better reflects reality.

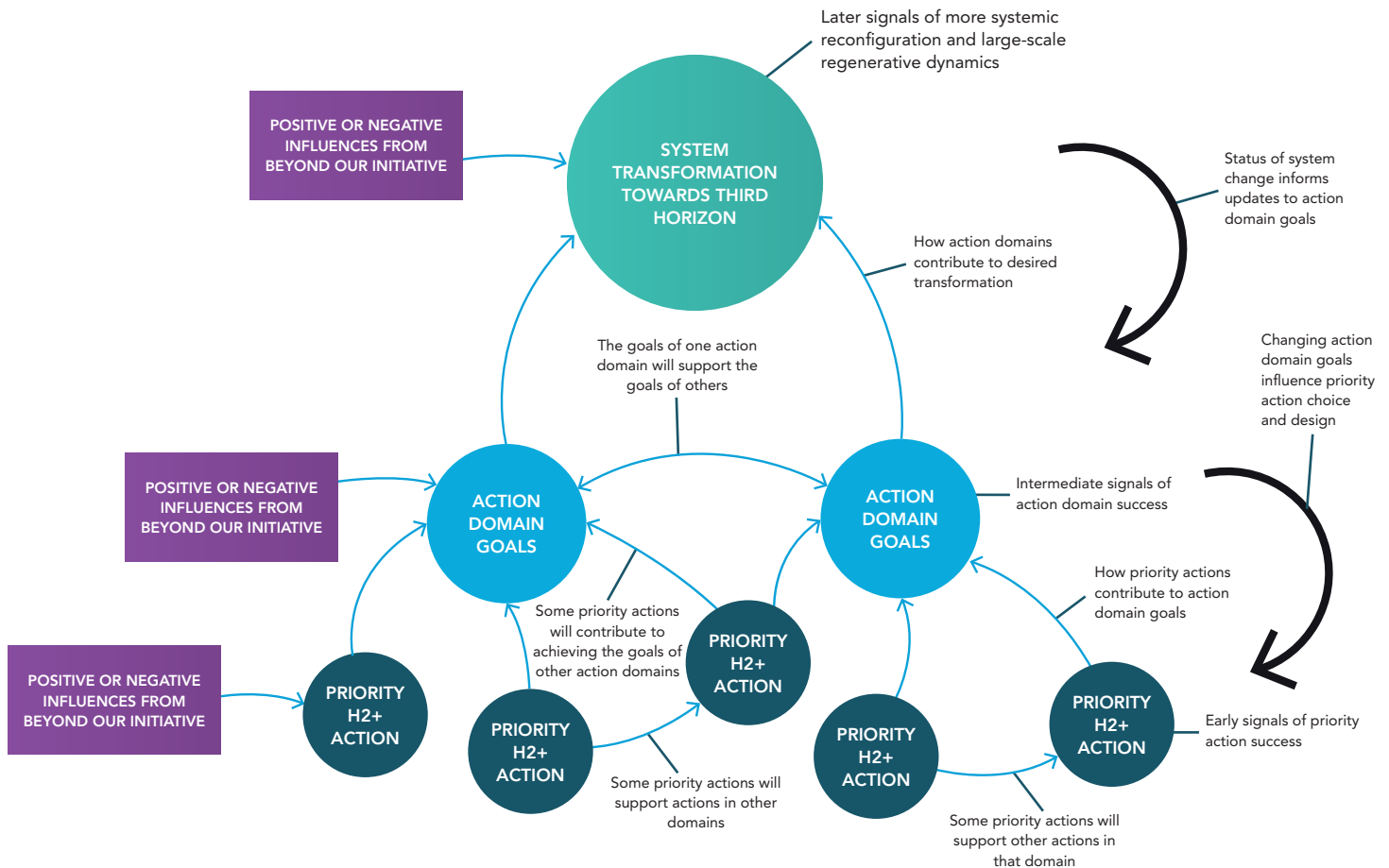


Figure 12. Suggested story of change structure based on Three Horizons, for the purposes of contribution analysis and other impact evaluation.

Phase 5: Embedding

The purpose of this final phase is to fully embed TFE across the initiative to the extent that it becomes normalised, ingrained, and strongly integrated into the working patterns of everyone involved. In short, it involves making your Evaluation & Learning Working Group redundant. Intended outcomes of this phase would include:

- Evaluative thinking and exercises linked to your TFE framework are being routinely applied by different groups involved in the initiative;
- Participants in your initiative beyond the working group can confidently share and explain their evaluation approach for interested external organisations and initiatives;
- Your initiative's goals and guides (including your story of change) are being regularly revisited and refined;
- All aspects of your evaluation framework are being actively applied, including evaluation of enabling conditions, actions, impacts, and processes;
- You are seeing evidence of the initiative changing appropriately in response to feedback and evidence;
- Transformational intent is being maintained;
- TFE-related terms and language (e.g. H2+, contribution, ripple effects, story of change...) are being used routinely in conversations;
- Your Evaluation & Learning Working Group feels confident that implementation of the TFE framework would still be effectively applied across your initiative even in the absence of the working group.

Achieving this level of maturity could be facilitated by embedding evaluative thinking and exercises into suggested meeting templates for the different groups of people involved in the initiative, and particularly on occasions when all the different groups come together (e.g. at annual celebration events). It is also important to keep familiarising participants with the evaluation

framework that you have designed, such as regularly referencing in PowerPoint presentations. This can also be achieved by actively seeking opportunities to share your initiative's learning in relation to applying TFE with interested external parties (or at least readily responding to requests for information).

Critical insights from practice

TFE is a very different practice to conventional evaluation and one that treats learning, accountability, governance and action as inseparable. The lessons below reflect what we have found important and challenging in developing and embedding TFE in practice.

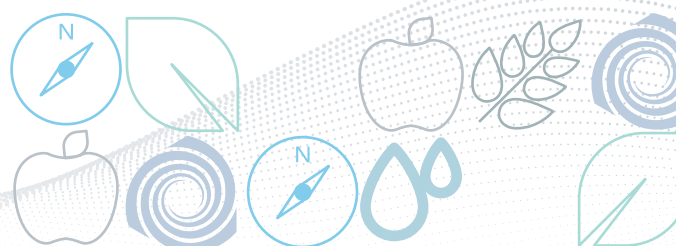
- **See evaluators and evaluation as part of a transformation effort rather than removed from it.** Evaluation is often considered an external technical exercise, but TFE aims to enrol *all* actors in a transformation effort into evaluation practice in some way, to develop a more widespread learning culture. This demands ongoing reflexivity about how individuals' own perspectives and blind spots shape evaluation and system change.
- **Co-designing TFE plays an important role in organisational learning and embedding.** Design work isn't just a preliminary exercise – it's an ongoing journey and one that is also key for embedding TFE. Like any form of culture change, embedding TFE requires the building of trust, common purpose, and shared language, which take considerable time and effort to grow. Designing TFE frameworks is a key experiential component of bringing people on a shared journey and reinforcing a new culture of working.
- **Simple frameworks can outperform sophisticated ones.** A simpler evaluation framework that people genuinely engage with may generate richer learning than an elaborate framework that sits on a shelf.
- **Highlight the wider roles evaluation can play beyond just evaluating impact.** Evaluation is commonly equated to impact evaluation and monitoring quantitative metrics of change. In addition, evaluation can play a role in supporting transformation such as by evaluating enabling conditions, actions, and processes of change. It can also draw on many different forms of feedback and evidence. Appreciating evaluation in this holistic way enables evaluation and learning to become normalised, supporting transformational efforts.
- **Evaluate the evaluation.** It is important to regularly examine how well the evaluation is supporting your learning and transformation. Embedding this in your framework will give you a sense of the extent to which you are enabling deeper forms of reflexivity and learning in your initiative.

Table 7. Summary of the key activities needed for effective designing and embedding of transformation-focused evaluation and learning.

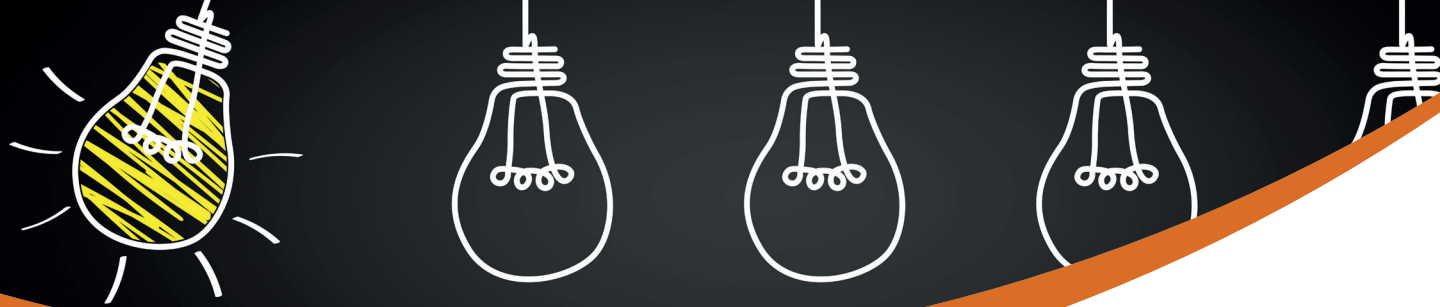
Phase	Key activity
1. Convening a transformation-focused evaluation group	Establish terms of reference, expectations, roles, accountabilities, and principles for a working group to support a smoother process of co-designing your transformation-focused evaluation framework.
2. Iterative co-design	Collaboratively and iteratively design a viable evaluation framework that could be implemented by your initiative, aiming for a 'minimum viable product' rather than perfection.
3. Piloting	Begin implementing and trialling aspects of your evaluation framework under development, which in turn will help you to refine the framework design.
4. Developing a story of change	Build a 'story of change' for your initiative that describes how you expect it to support desirable system transformations (e.g. based on your Three Horizons process). A strong story of change is the bedrock of any impact evaluation, including contribution analysis.
5. Embedding	Focus on embedding TFE and your evaluation framework across your initiative to the extent that it becomes normalised, ingrained, and strongly integrated into the working patterns of everyone involved. A sign of success would be that your evaluation working group becomes redundant!

Conclusion

Transformation-focused evaluation (TFE) is a major shift from how evaluation is often traditionally conducted. Its focus on enhancing awareness of complexities, power relations, and on driving change towards shared purpose means that it is conducive to understanding and catalysing system change. It involves and requires being reflexive, ensuring engagement with diverse perspectives, methods and forms of evidence. As opposed to quantitative, 'value-free' approaches and standardisation, TFE intentionally aims to have an ethical orientation towards supporting regeneration and justice. Effective design and embedding of TFE requires developing a deep understanding of the context, being collaborative. Ultimately, it also needs to be closely woven into your initiative's wider approaches to governance.



MAINTAINING MOMENTUM



Aims and purpose

This guide has outlined how to establish the ways of thinking, strategies, partnerships, governance, and evaluation to support transformations at scale. Establishing the core foundations for transformation takes time and effort. In Food for the Future, for example, it took around four years to work fully through all the stages outlined in previous sections. What emerged was a well-established, formalised and influential partnership capable of working across diverse issues and sectors at scale. Yet, given that there is always a strong pull back to conventional ways of doing things, this partnership is still vulnerable and there is always potential to fall back to old patterns and ways of working. Momentum, influence and support therefore need to continue to be built and maintained.

This section outlines some of the aspects to consider when trying to sustain transformation-focused partnerships. The insights are based on a number of cases, including [Food for the Future North Yorkshire](#) and the [Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care System \(SNEE ICS\)](#): a 10-year programme supporting systemic action across very diverse areas of health and care which was underpinned by strong emphasis on integrated action.

This section first explains the challenge of sustaining transformation then three core aspects that are helpful to consider when focusing on continued systemic change.

By the end of this section, you will have a deeper understanding of what it means to work with transformation and how to reframe the partnership as it matures to a way of being rather than simply a mechanism for improved ways of doing things.



Assumptions and framings

In addition to supporting on-ground action, the first few years of a transformation initiative are also about developing the dispositions needed to support transformational change. This includes the inclination to work in transformational ways; the sensitivity to know when transformational working is most needed; and developing the capabilities – individually and collectively – to support transformation. The guide has so far led you to developing many of these dispositions: mindsets for transformational action ([Sections 2 and 3](#)); active, extensive, sensitive and strategic engagement using middle-out approaches to build momentum, partnerships, and collective capacities ([Section 4](#)); new approaches to internal governance to support new collective ways of working ([Section 5](#)); and transformation-focused evaluation that provides new ways of working with, and learning about, change ([Section 6](#)).

All too often, however, even when all of this is in place, it is very easy for transformational efforts to wither and die. We have seen many inspirational efforts fail because of the challenges in sustaining audacious change. This is difficult to do because of the extremely strong pull back to conventional modes of operating and the patterns we are trying to escape. Most of our institutions have not been designed for working at scale, across integrated issues, and with transformation. The current system is where the resources are being held and there is a strong gravitational pull toward trying to sustain it. As humans, we also have limited ability to imagine and manifest something truly visionary that is beyond our experience and there is always a sense of comfort when we fall back to what we already know. To maintain momentum, transformational efforts therefore need to continue to aim high, push boundaries, and actively buck the trend.

There is no fixed formula for taking your initiative forward once you have gone through the processes outlined in previous sections. Understanding how to do this is still in its infancy. Yet much of it depends on the tenacity of those involved. It requires keeping focus on demonstrating impacts, ensuring there continues to be a mandate for change, building partnerships, confronting difficult issues, and reinforcing deep learning. Below we outline three areas that can help you maintain momentum:

- Maintaining focus on transformation;
- Gradually shifting towards a new way of being; and
- Continuing to build the right kinds of infrastructure that support transformation.

1. Maintain focus on transformation

Maintaining genuine focus on transformation throughout the life of an initiative is more demanding than it might initially appear. Even partnerships that have invested considerable effort in establishing strong foundations can find their transformational ambition gradually eroding under the weight of immediate pressures, short-term demands, and the powerful gravitational pull of existing systems. Three aspects are particularly important in helping maintain transformational intent.



Cathedral thinking

Transformation initiatives must be viewed as a long-term endeavour but with an understanding that the future only arises from decisive action in the present. A useful analogy to this is what is called 'cathedral thinking'. This is a leadership and planning mindset that focuses on long-term, multi-decadal or even generational outcomes rather than short-term gains. Cathedral thinking is inspired by medieval builders who planned projects spanning centuries and which lasted well

beyond their visionaries' lifetimes. Importantly, while these efforts were visionary, they also recognised that a cathedral could only be built by getting on with it. They didn't put off the challenging bits till later or waited until conditions improved. They also actively designed for the long-term, including with plans for succession, by ensuring what was built was made to last, and by making investments that benefitted future generations. Like cathedral thinking, transformation only emerges when there is focus on real action in the present but with delivery strategically oriented towards audacious and long-term change.

Recognise and work with different orientations to change

Maintaining a focus on transformation also requires recognising that it involves collective working across three different mindsets to change. The first mindset is that of a manager. These individuals are important in a transformation for 'keeping the lights on' and ensuring the existing system does not collapse. The second are the entrepreneurs who work with what is possible in the present. They recognise the limits of the manager's view but also that there is a need to focus on what opportunities exist for change more immediately and they worry less about the long-term vision. The third are the visionaries who continue to highlight how, for example, change may not be happening sufficiently quickly or who can see the depth of the change needed. They continually push for that audacious goal and are more likely to see the depth of the challenges being faced.

All three mindsets are important and need to work together. The managers to provide stability, the visionaries to drive direction and motivation for change, and entrepreneurs to help establish disruptive innovation that creates the space for further change to occur. Yet all too often, there are clashes between these mindsets. Visionaries may look at managers as if they are dinosaurs and managers at visionaries as if they are crazy.

Managerial mindsets are one example. These can play a powerful role in supporting transformation if they recognise it as a process of resource re-allocation. Yet this is rarely the case. Most performance measures of managers, for example, tend to focus on improving efficiency and profitability to sustain a status quo rather

than gradually dismantle it. Their role is literally perceived as being to keep things the same, not to support a significant change.

To keep momentum, a focus on continually finding ways where all three mindsets can work together in synergy is required. This requires all parties to understand that the challenge being faced requires transformation and re-allocation of resources. This then allows for constructive dialogue about the way they need to apply their orientation in practice.

Appreciate different ways transformation can unfold

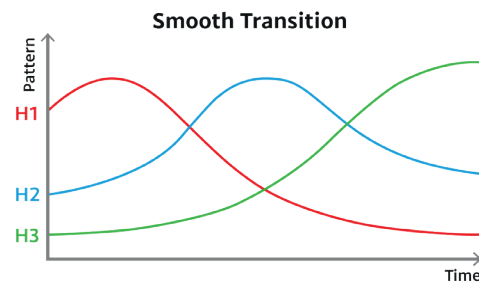
Smooth transformations – as indicated by the classic Three Horizons pattern applied in [Section 3](#) – are very rare. They depend on a wide range of different kinds of support for each phase of a transition. This includes hospice work for the old, midwifery for the new, and the nurturing of different innovations so they can become the new pattern and system. Even when transformations do occur, they do so in many ways ([Box 17](#)). For example, a pattern common in the public sector where there is limited mandate for change (no-one wants to mess with the National Health Service or with the education system) is capture and extension. This is where well-intentioned second horizon innovations seeking to result in disruption instead get co-opted to reinforce a current pattern. This happens because these innovations when scaled get toned back to fit the current system rather than disrupt it.

Those seeking to support transformation therefore need to be able to identify and work with the different dynamics outlined in [Box 17](#) that are likely to be in play. Regularly reflecting on whether you are in a particular pattern and how you might strategically respond becomes important. This can become an active part of transformation practice, supported for example by the way evaluation is used.

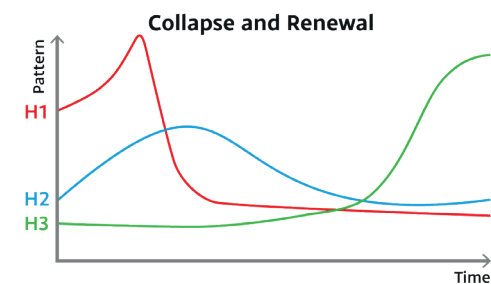
Together, these three aspects — a long-term temporal frame, an awareness of the different mindsets at play, and a clear-eyed understanding of how transformations can unfold — provide a practical foundation for keeping transformational intent alive over time. Yet sustaining focus is not only a matter of strategy or awareness. It also depends on how a partnership comes to embody transformation in its everyday ways of relating and working. This is the deeper shift explored in the next section.

Box 17: Different ways in which transformation can occur¹⁸

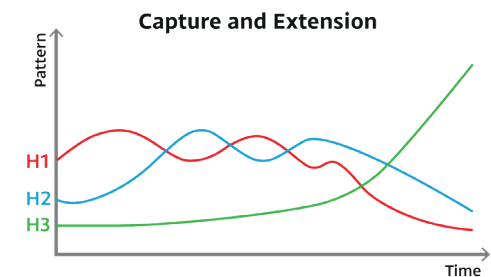
Smooth Transition involves orderly change through gradual dissolution of old patterns and purposeful creation of new ones. The need for fundamental change is recognised early. Innovations that actively disrupt current patterns and thinking are deliberately established. Radical innovations representing pockets of the future are purposefully encouraged and protected, allowing fundamentally new patterns to emerge and grow alongside disruptive changes that challenge the status quo. Norway's shift to electric vehicles demonstrates this through bundled incentives, infrastructure investment, and phasing out fossil fuel support. The key requirement is appropriate regulatory, governance and institutional support for each stage—hospice work for the old, midwifery for the new, and infrastructure to enable transition.



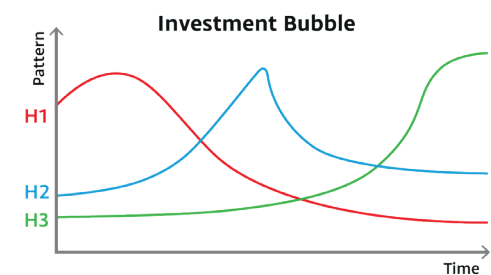
Collapse and Renewal arises when an existing system under threat responds by doubling down to protect the status quo. Collapse follows when resistance to change becomes impossible. Incumbents may not acknowledge their failing model while stakeholders seek alternatives. Non-radical innovations are likely, but none fundamentally address changing needs or purposes. Collapse typically affects entire sectors rather than isolated organisations, as seen in Soviet communism's collapse in the late 1980s after decades of maintaining the system through repression of innovation. Renewal after collapse is not guaranteed. The critical practice is to detect dynamics early before extensive damage occurs—loss of learning orientation and suppression of uncomfortable conversations are warning signs requiring urgent action.



Capture and Extension occurs because of the dominant pattern's strong gravitational pull. Market mechanisms and policy focus primarily on maintaining and improving existing systems, rewarding efficiency and supporting incumbents. New, potentially disruptive innovations emerge but are co-opted to support the existing pattern and maintain the status quo. Educational innovations, for example, are often absorbed into existing examination systems and curriculum requirements rather than transforming learning. The result is delayed emergence of genuinely new patterns, with lost time, energy, and resources. Overcoming this requires maintaining transformational intent through explicit strategies, with high-level sponsors actively protecting visionaries to build innovations with different value bases from those absorbed into the dominant pattern.



The Investment Bubble emerges through herd behaviour rushing toward a "silver bullet" solution. Attention and investment concentrate on a single innovation that cannot bear the weight of expectation and eventually disappoints. The 1990s dotcom bubble exemplifies this: speculative investment in internet companies burst in 2000, though it eventually expanded the tech ecosystem and enabled genuine transformation. Resources are released for redistribution elsewhere, but the eventual emergence of new patterns is delayed. Short-term gains prove short-lived as other more significant factors come to prominence. Investment bubbles can be opportunities for transformation if their energy is harnessed artfully—the key is to avoid getting swept up in hype around single solutions and engage on your own terms to prevent becoming a victim of exuberance.



2. Reinforce a new way of being

As a transformation initiative matures, a deeper shift becomes possible. This is a shift not just in strategy or structure but in how the partnership understands itself and how its members relate to one another. Rather than seeing the partnership as a hierarchy of planned interventions, or as a complex diagram of nested organisational relationships, it is helpful to understand it as a living ecosystem: fluid, emergent, and responsive. What holds a transformation initiative together over time is the quality of the relationships within it. This includes the ways different actors see and support each other and how they recognise the connections and opportunities that arise between them. This way of being — which focuses on how we relate rather than simply how we are organised — becomes increasingly central as a partnership deepens and matures. Five aspects are particularly important in supporting this transition.

Transition from a named initiative to a shared social movement



Over time, one of the most important shifts a transformation partnership can make is to move beyond its identity as a project or programme and towards something more akin to a social movement. Named initiatives can be fragile because they depend on funding cycles, institutional champions, and formal mandates that can all change. A social movement, by contrast, is animated by a shared identity and narrative, and a distributed sense of ownership that does not reside in any single organisation.

Nurturing this means consistently amplifying the voices of citizens and communities most affected by the challenges being addressed, and supporting the activists, local champions, and storytellers who carry the work forward in ways that formal structures cannot. Regular events that bring the wider partnership and community together play an important role. These are not just for reporting but also for renewing shared purpose and to reinforce collective identity that can help shape direction.

In Food for the Future, the need for wide ownership was recognised as being important. Its instigators on the one hand realised that an anchor for the work — North Yorkshire Council — was critical. Yet at all stages, they sought to make sure that they were more of conveners rather than hierarchical leaders. Partners increasingly began to behave as co-owners of direction and delivery rather than just being contributors at the edge. A combination of an anchor and widely distributed action has enabled a case for change to be sounded continuously that has in turn kept alive a sense of urgency and possibility that can easily fade as day-to-day pressures mount.

Move from heroic to systems leadership and invest in relational infrastructure

A maturing transformation partnership requires a conscious shift in how leadership is understood and exercised. Heroic leadership — where change depends on the energy and vision of a small number of key individuals — is both unsustainable and misaligned to the nature of systemic transformation. Systems leadership, by contrast, involves convening multiple perspectives, facilitating dialogue across difference, and working openly with uncertainty rather than projecting false clarity. Systems leadership distributes agency rather than concentrating it, and it prioritises the conditions that allow others to lead and act. This shift is supported by investing in relationships, rather than designing ever more elaborate governance structures. This includes making explicit the shared values, creating cross-sector learning opportunities and the enabling environments that allow trust to deepen and collaboration to become self-sustaining.

In addition, leading transformation over long timeframes carries a significant personal cost. Those at the centre of transformation initiatives frequently absorb the anxiety, grief, and relational tensions that accompany deep system change. Actively supporting the wellbeing of leaders — and helping them to understand the tensions they experience as guides to deeper insight rather than signs of failure — is key to sustaining momentum.

Make power visible, discussable, and actively redistributed

Transformation cannot be sustained in partnerships where power remains implicit, concentrated, or unexamined. As a partnership matures, it becomes increasingly important to make power visible, including understanding of who holds influence, whose knowledge is valued, whose voice shapes decisions, and where these dynamics may be reinforcing the very patterns the partnership is seeking to change. This requires building a shared capacity across the partnership to see and discuss power openly and without defensiveness. It also requires creating forums and meetings that provide real benefit. This can include spaces where diverse partners, including those with lived experience of the challenges being addressed, can contribute to shared sense-making, surface dissent safely, and shape priorities across the whole partnership rather than simply within their own domains. In Food for the Future, this has included several large events, with between 60 and 80 people, including new partners that have been invited in.

Importantly, the tensions that arise between different actors are rarely obstacles to be managed away. More often, they are signals pointing towards the significant opportunities for transformation: places where different values, priorities, or understandings of change are in productive friction. Learning to steward these tensions by allowing space for them to be explored is a core capability of a mature transformation partnership and one that frequently unlocks the most significant shifts in the system.

Begin with purpose, not structure, and protect the conditions for transformation

A persistent risk as transformation initiatives gain visibility and credibility is that they begin to be

drawn into responding to immediate problems and pressures within the existing system. While such responsiveness may feel valuable in the short term, an excessive focus on immediate problem-solving gradually erodes a partnership's transformational orientation. It draws energy away from the conditions — relational, cultural, and structural — that will give rise to something genuinely new and instead back to the very patterns that the partnership is ultimately seeking to change.

A more helpful practice is to begin continually asking why something is needed before focusing on how to do it. In the case of SNEE ICS, they applied a dogged and continued asking of the question 'why' something was being done. This helped establish orientations, structures, inclusivity, partnership development, and a drive towards demonstrable outcomes in health.

Asking why helped SNEE ICS keep focus on building relations and cultures, to the point where those involved in the partnership felt different when they were working together. It also helped them to resist the temptation to shape structures around what already exists rather than around what was genuinely needed⁵⁷. Working in this way requires a willingness to periodically redesign how your partnership operates as understanding deepens, as the system changes, and as new lock-ins or opportunities become visible. Keeping the operating model adaptive and purposeful — rather than allowing it to calcify into familiar routines — is part of what it means to work as a living system rather than as a fixed organisation.

Sustain deep learning as a way of being

Underpinning all the above is a commitment to deep learning as a continuous and embedded aspect of the partnership's way of being, rather than a periodic review or evaluation exercise conducted at the end of a phase. This means cultivating psychological safety so that difficult questions can be asked openly across organisational boundaries; deliberately designing processes that break down siloes and surface absent perspectives; and connecting reflective practices to concrete accountability so that learning translates into changed action rather than remaining abstract. It also means ensuring that progress — including small wins — is regularly communicated and actively celebrated and recognised in ways that sustain motivation

and which enable risk of burnout over long time horizons to be countered.

The learning outcomes that can emerge when this is done well are substantial, as illustrated in [Box 18](#). They include not only better strategic decisions but meaningful shifts in how participants understand themselves and their role in the system. This can include a transition from narrowly defined professional roles towards a broader sense of themselves as connectors, conveners, and agents of change. Much of this can also be supported by the kinds of transformation-focused evaluation outlined in [Section 6](#).

Taken together, these five aspects describe what it means for a transformation partnership to grow into a genuine way of being. The shift is ultimately from a partnership that *does* transformation — following processes, developing strategies, convening meetings — to one that *embodies* it in how its members relate, lead, challenge, and learn with one another. It is this quality of relationship, sustained and deepened over time, that gives a transformation initiative its greatest resilience and its most enduring potential for change.

Box 18. Example of learning and capacity building outcomes of effective strategic change processes

Well-facilitated strategic change processes can generate meaningful shifts in how participants think, relate, and act. In the experience of the Food for the Future programme, interviews with participants of the processes used to develop the frameworks for action highlighted four kinds of capacity building and learning outcomes.

1. **Participants developed a deeper awareness of the wider system and a better understanding of their role within it.** They had been exposed to diverse perspectives and often explained how they were moving from fragmented, discipline-bound viewpoints towards a more integrated understanding of how different parts of a system relate and interact, enabling them to be better able to identify key leverage points. They also had a better understanding of not just their formal responsibilities but also the informal influence they held through networks and relationships.
2. **Participants developed a growing sense of emotional and psychological safety** as they gained a better understanding of others and through the way uncertainty was normalised in conversations. They then found themselves shifting from guarded interaction towards more candid exchange, which further created conditions for more creative and intellectual risk-taking.
3. **Participants developed a stronger sense of collective agency and individual empowerment.** This manifested as a growing recognition of the value of their own expertise and positional influence. As they worked alongside others towards a shared vision their sense of isolation in their work also decreased.
4. **Participants began to translate inner personal shifts into more effective external practice.** This included a change in how they approached themselves as professionals within the system, moving from viewing their role in narrowly defined ways towards having a broader sense of themselves as connectors, conveners and change agents. The inner personal shifts were enhanced when follow-through was built into the process, which required them to be more accountable for what they had committed to doing.

Overall, these outcomes highlight how deep learning and capacity building can occur and how inner transformations become core to supporting systemic transformation.

3. Build and protect infrastructure for transformation

The previous two sections have addressed what a transformation partnership needs to cultivate in relation to mindsets, cultures and focus. Yet even a partnership with clear strategic focus, strong relationships, and genuine transformational intent will tend to struggle over time without the material and institutional infrastructure that makes long-horizon, cross-system work genuinely possible. Going back to cathedral thinking, long-term initiatives are unlikely to survive without the establishment of strong systems and structures that can sustain them.



This means that, while initial stages of partnership development focus mostly on getting the work going, at some point it becomes necessary to move from foundations to establishing something concrete with the effective infrastructure to support it. Such transformation infrastructure includes the convening capacity that holds diverse actors together, the cross-sector learning architecture that allows knowledge and insight to flow across a system, and the sustained investment in relationship-building that underpins trust over time. In the case of Food for the Future, it was through the vision of its public health staff that such infrastructure has emerged. They continue to provide the important convening power, albeit with limited resources.

The existence of such infrastructure, in reality, is usually lacking. It is especially important to provide the capacity to cohere action in support of transformation across the whole system. Without this, it is very difficult to help support the re-allocation of resources, cohere those with different orientations to the future and align the many different kinds of innovation needed to support transformation. In short, a form of governance is needed, supported by infrastructure that provides oversight. This oversight is not just across geographical scale or long timeframes. It is also to ensure alignment

of activities in a fluid and emergent way in the service of transformational change. This is almost always lacking and there are very few examples of the kinds of cohering governance or infrastructure that plays such a role¹⁸. Examples like Food for the Future, Engaged Futures and SNEE ICS – while having their own limitations – are very rare.

In addition, when some transformational infrastructure is present it tends to be routinely treated as expendable rather than as a core operating asset. It is often among the first things reduced when budgets tighten or short-term delivery pressures intensify. A case in point is that of SNEE ICS. After ten years of extensive partnership building and significant on-ground outcomes for health and care in the region it served, it was disbanded as political priorities shifted. New integrated systems were being established, but the shift was at a major cost in terms of loss of extensive trust, relational power, and ability to work in synergy and systemically. The outcome has led to new regions of focus but with much less infrastructure to support the work. Attending to infrastructure alongside more conventional measures of performance and delivery is therefore one of the most important commitments a transformation initiative and its institutional sponsors can make.

Intentional system transition, overall, remains a relatively new and poorly understood discipline. The institutions, financial instruments, policies, and professional capacities needed to sustain it are still largely underdeveloped. Building the institutional foundations for transformation therefore involves not only protecting what is already in place but actively developing new capacities — new approaches to financing long-horizon collaborative work, governance arrangements capable of spanning institutional boundaries, and skills oriented towards systemic stewardship — alongside advocacy for the wider policy and regulatory conditions that make these possible.

In conclusion, infrastructure for transformation is, in this sense, as much a political and cultural challenge as a practical one. Securing sustained investment in the convening capacity, evaluation and learning, and in relational foundations that make long-horizon systemic work possible requires making the case — repeatedly and to those who hold resources — that the

infrastructure is not overhead but core to addressing deep-seated challenges and making change possible.

Critical insights from practice

Maintaining momentum over the long timeframes that transformation requires is demanding. The following insights reflect what we have found to be important in practice when trying to sustain transformational intent over time.

- **Plan for the pull back to conventional ways of working.** The gravitational pull back to existing patterns is stronger than most partnerships anticipate. Actively plan for this and treat the navigation of this challenge as a core focus of your work.
- **Help managers, entrepreneurs and visionaries find common ground.** The three mindsets and orientations to the future are essential for transformation yet clashes between them that erode momentum are common. Enhancing recognition that those with these mindsets are working with transformational change can address this challenge. This also then leads to important opportunities for working in synergy.
- **Work towards a partnership that is not just about doing but is also about a way of being.** As members begin to see themselves as co-owners of a living ecosystem
- of interacting partners rather than just as contributors, a culture of relationship rather than a set of activities emerges. A focus on such a way of being develops trust and reciprocity, unlocking opportunities for working at scale and enhancing resilience in ways that would otherwise not be possible.
- **Treat tensions between actors as signals, not problems to manage away.** Friction between different values, priorities and understandings of change often points to the most significant opportunities for transformation. Having the capacity to hold space for these tensions and explore them openly rather than smooth them over is a sign of a maturing partnership.
- **Build and protect transformation infrastructure as a core asset.** The convening capacity, relational foundations and learning architecture that sustain long-horizon work are routinely the first things cut when budgets tighten. Without sustained investment in this infrastructure, even well-established partnerships can be vulnerable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to sustain momentum, a transformational shift from a partnership that does transformation to one that embodies it as a way of being is required. This involves a shift from following processes, developing strategies, convening meetings to a partnership where relationships, shared identity, and collective commitment become the primary medium through which wider systemic change becomes possible. It is this quality of being, rather than any particular activity or structure, that gives a transformation initiative its deepest resilience and its capacity to support transformation. This will, however, be continuously threatened by the strong gravitational pull back to existing systems and ways of thinking. Sustaining momentum therefore requires not just focusing on what your partnership is doing but also focusing on both how to strategically navigate this pull, how to continually build a mandate for its existence, and on continually recommitting to what the partnership is trying to be and achieve.

TEN ESSENTIALS FOR COHERING SYSTEM CHANGE AT SCALE

This guide has outlined how to set up partnerships for working collectively to support transformation at scale. The following ten essentials draw on the years of action research and practice across multiple large-scale system change initiatives that are outlined in earlier sections of the report. They are intended as a practical reference point for anyone seeking to cohere transformation at scale and will have relevance whether you may just be beginning to build a partnership or working to sustain one over the long term.

1. Understand transformation as a qualitatively distinct form of change

Transformation is not simply an improved version of what already exists. Instead, it involves a fundamental shift in many aspects, including in the identity, purpose, and function of a system.

How we understand the nature of the change we seek to bring about then matters because it shapes subsequent decisions about strategy, partnerships, governance and evaluation. It is therefore important to distinguish clearly between more marginal forms of change — such as adjustments or reforms — and transformation. Establishing a clear transformational scoping statement — articulating what you are seeking to transform, at what scale, over what timeframe, and for what purpose — provides an initial shared foundation from which all other work can develop. Crucially, the scale chosen needs to be large enough to encompass the interconnections driving the challenges, since efforts working within boundaries that are too narrow are unlikely to reach the root causes of what they are trying to change.

2. Start with a committed core group anchored by a convening institution

Transformation at scale begins with a small group of people who share a sense of urgency and are willing to sustain effort over the long term. It greatly helps to have at least one organisation willing to play a central convening role and to provide the basic administrative infrastructure, continuity, and coordination and generally hold the work together. This institution becomes an anchor around which others can cohere: scheduling and facilitating meetings, maintaining momentum between them, holding governance and communications infrastructure in place, and ensuring the initiative does not dissipate when pressures mount. Over time, the core group evolves into a more formal and distributed structure, but the importance of that convening anchor rarely diminishes. Without such an anchor, many initiatives fall apart.

3. Build a shared framework for action

A transformation initiative needs a shared strategic framework that orients action towards fundamental change rather than marginal improvement. Using structured processes – like Three Horizons – can help collective mapping by diverse actors of present challenges against radically different visions of the future. Such a process might include exploring what is failing in the current system, envisioning what a fundamentally different future would look like, and identifying the domains of action most likely to support the transition between the two. The process of co-creating the framework can intentionally be transformational. These processes can build shared understanding and commitment among those involved and produce a powerful reference point for enrolling new actors into the initiative over time.

4. Identify and cohere the catalysts already in the system

It is generally much more effective to identify and cohere the potential for transformation that already exists within the system rather than simply generating a new and long list of things that need doing. Focusing on actors that already exist rather than activities alone is also important, since it is organisations and individuals who ultimately have agency and can be brought together to reinforce each other's efforts. Grouping these actors not by their similarity to one another but by how they complement and strengthen each other surfaces cross-system connections and opportunities that more conventional, silo-based thinking would otherwise miss.

5. Establish a clear mandate for change

No transformation initiative can sustain itself without a well-evidenced and compelling case for why fundamental change is needed. A mandate from those with the authority and resources to support it is therefore important. This involves engaging senior leaders and institutional power-holders early, framing the work in ways that resonate with their priorities, and securing formal endorsement that gives the initiative legitimacy and protection. Without this mandate, even well-designed partnerships and frameworks are vulnerable to being marginalised or absorbed back into the very patterns they are seeking to change.

6. Enrol and align actors through a middle-out approach

No single organisation can support transformation alone, and neither purely top-down direction nor purely bottom-up innovation is sufficient on its own. A middle-out approach — where a coordinating institution works simultaneously upward with power-holders and downward with communities and ground-level actors, and sideways with peer organisations — is often more effective at creating the enabling conditions for systemic change. Sustained, relational work to enrol diverse actors, align their activities, and build a growing coalition of commitment is ongoing and central to transformation initiatives.

7. Design internal governance explicitly for transformation

Most governance arrangements that partners bring from their own organisations were designed to maintain stability within institutional boundaries, not to support the distributed, adaptive, long-horizon work that transformation requires. Unless a partnership deliberately develops its own internal governance, it will also tend to default to these familiar and constraining patterns. Effective transformation-focused governance is built in layers: shared values that orient what the partnership stands for, process principles that shape how decisions are made, and enabling conditions that allow distributed action to remain coherent. Developing this through a process of co-inquiry — such as by surfacing current constraints, agreeing shared values, and trialling different approaches to decision-making — is more effective than designing organisational structures in advance.

8. Embed transformation-focused evaluation

Traditional evaluation approaches — focused on short-term measurable outputs and external audit — are poorly suited to the complexity and uncertainty of transformation. At worst they can actively constrain it by reinforcing narrow understandings of what change involves and what it looks like. Instead, transformation-focused evaluation approaches can drive continuous learning about what is being achieved, how conditions are changing, and how assumptions about change need to evolve. These approaches need to be embedded within the initiative as a core everyday way of working rather than conducted at arm's length. Co-designing an evaluation framework with diverse participants, iterating it over time, and weaving it into governance processes helps maintain transformational ambition and enables rapid adaptation to new information and changing conditions.

9. Think in cathedral time

Transformation at regional scale unfolds over decades, not project cycles. It can therefore be challenging to maintain momentum to act decisively in the present whilst also focusing on the long-term. A useful strategic approach – called cathedral building – is helpful in this regard. Medieval cathedral builders planned across generations, made investments designed to outlast their own lifetimes, and built for succession. They also recognised that the cathedral could only be built by getting on with it and not by waiting for conditions to improve. Sustaining this orientation requires active attention, because the gravitational pull of existing systems — short-term pressures, funding cycles, and the comfort of familiar ways of working — is stronger than most partnerships anticipate. Navigating this gravitational pull must be treated as a core and ongoing focus of the work.

10. Move towards the partnership as a way of being

As a transformation initiative matures, the most important shift is from a partnership doing transformation — following processes, developing strategies, convening meetings — to one that embodies a new way of being. This includes the development of a culture of trust, strong relationships, and deep and collective learning. It requires nurturing a shared identity and narrative that does not reside in any single organisation, making power visible and actively redistributing it, and sustaining deep learning as a continuous way of working rather than a periodic review. It is this quality of relationship — and the collective commitment and resilience that grows from it — that gives a transformation initiative its greatest capacity to support change over the long term.

All ten essentials reinforce each other and deepen as an initiative develops. Taken together, they highlight that cohering transformation at scale is fundamentally about how people think, relate, and act together over time. Getting this right matters as much as any strategy, framework, or structure. The pull back to conventional ways of working is real and persistent, and no guide can fully prepare you for it. Instead, the essentials – and the rest of this guide – highlights just how important it is to maintain focus on transformation as opposed to other forms of change.

What this guide has offered are approaches about how to develop a solid foundation. The approaches described here have been developed through years of collective effort, and they are still evolving. Applying them in your own context will require adaptation, patience, and a willingness to embrace uncertainty. The work, however, is worth doing. The challenges that make transformation necessary are not going away. The partnerships, relationships, and ways of working described in this guide also represent some of the most promising responses we have for moving forward. We are confident that the foundations provided here will serve you well as you navigate your own efforts to support transformational change.

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