What works in systems change interventions
A review of national and international evidence
Executive summary

Cristiana Orlando, Becci Newton, Shalu Jain, Swati Mantri, Howard White

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Youth Futures Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established with a £90m endowment from the Reclaim Fund to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Our aim is to narrow employment gaps by identifying what works and why, investing in evidence generation and innovation, and igniting a movement for change.

For more information about the report please email Peter Traynor: research@youthfuturesfoundation.org

Fivefields, 8-10 Grosvenor Gardens London SW1W 0DH, London, SE1 7TY.

institute for employment studies

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About the research team

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The Global Development Network (GDN) is a public international organization that supports high quality, policy-oriented, social science research in developing and transition countries to promote better lives. It supports researchers with financial resources, global networking, as well as access to information, training, peer review and mentoring. GDN acts on the premise that better research leads to more informed policies and better, more inclusive development. Through its global platform, #GDN connects social science researchers with policymakers and development stakeholders across the world. The Evaluation and Evidence Synthesis Programme of GDN produces evidence maps and systematic reviews for agencies around the world. Founded in 1999, GDN is currently headquartered in New Delhi.

Inclusive Terminology

The terminology used to define ethnicity continues to evolve, and greater awareness has arisen about gender, cognitive differences, and disability. IES seeks to be a learning organisation and we are adapting our practice in line with these shifts. Our preference is to refer to people's own choice of descriptor(s) rather than impose standard categories upon them, although this is not always possible. In these cases, we are aligned with Race Disparity Unit (RDU) which uses the term 'ethnic minorities' to refer to all ethnic groups except white British. We embrace government guidance and refer to disabled people and neurodiverse people as society imposes the restrictions and obstacles these groups face. In certain circumstances we may refer to individuals as gender nonconforming when describing those who do not follow society's stereotypes based on the gender they were assigned at birth. We use images and illustrations in our publications that are well considered for relevance to the output and that promote diversity and inclusion. We do this by representing diverse identities, ethnicities, gender, abilities, and body types and by ensuring equities in power relationships within images.

Introduction

In 2022, the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) launched its flagship Connected Futures Fund. This provides £16m to support young people to get good jobs through pioneering local partnerships and initiatives that seek to change the systems for youth employment in specified geographic areas. These partnerships are undertaking a wide range of place-based activities, aiming to create long-term and sustainable positive change. Given the complexity and challenges in England's youth employment support system, there is a need to investigate effective principles and practices to shape and transform this complex system so that better youth employment outcomes are achieved.

YFF has commissioned this review to support the YFF Connected Futures Fund. The review focuses on understanding the evidence on policies and practices that are effective in changing systems; including how elements and levers (identified by YFF) of systems change interact; and the role played by 'place' in systems change. It does so in two parts: the first is a review of the academic and policy systems change evidence drawn across policy spheres including health, education, and welfare; the second is an analysis of three policy intervention case studies relating to the UK youth employment system.

This summary provides an overview of the findings from the review. The review comprised an Rapid Evidence Assessments (REAs) for both topic areas. Findings are covered in detail in the main report body which is fully referenced to the sources used.

Defining systems change

Systems are a configuration of interacting, interdependent parts, connected through a web of relationships, that form a whole greater than the sum of its parts. In the policy and practice arena, systems are comprised of diverse actors that interact including people, services, organisations, institutions, policies, laws, and organisational cultures. They do this through intricate interconnections and overlaps, which are often non-linear and/or non-proportional[1].

A systems change alters the way the system works and aims to be sustainable in the long-term. Such change aims to improve outcomes for the beneficiaries of the system. However, not all systems change leads to improvements or sustainable changes. Simply tweaking the established approach to an issue does not constitute holistic systems change; this requires widespread and sustainable changes at multiple levels of a system.

Systems change interventions are often driven by the need to create a systemic transformation due to factors which are exogenous (for example, policy-led) or endogenous (such as changes arising from within the system). These changes often aim to tackle 'wicked' issues[2] or bring about sustainable changes in attitudes and behaviours across the system. Systems change interventions can take place when: existing systems fail to meet the needs of their target populations; in recognition of disparities and inequities within systems; in recognition of the limitations of linear, siloed approaches to tackle complex issues; and as a result of governmental or political agenda changes.

[1] meaning the ratio of one factor to another is not constant
[2] There are various definitions for 'wicked' issues. They centre on intractable, often social or cultural problems where not enough is known about the problem to enable effective solutions to be developed

Effectiveness in systems change

There is an inherent tension in conceptualising systems change as an outcome that is 'embedded' or 'sustainable', when systems are subject to constant change and organic development. This has led some researchers to suggest thinking of systems change as a trajectory or continuum. There are several spheres where evidence or impact on systems is frequently mentioned: centred on policy, cultural or organisational changes, indicators of broader change (covering achievement of system-level outcomes), and achievement of key performance indicators (KPIs) and outputs.

However, there are complexities in defining 'effectiveness' in systems change, linked to the challenges of establishing comprehensive and robust measures for understanding this. These challenges relate to defining the 'system' and setting system boundaries; establishing measures of systems change; long timescales for change; and the inherent fragmentation of systems, which are composed of multiple levels operating at different paces and scales.

Evidence on how these challenges can be addressed is limited, however there are some promising proposals. Using a 'maturity model'[3] helps categorise different levels of effectiveness in a structured manner, on the assumption that system components progress through these levels as they become more effective. This sits alongside adopting a systems change framework, covering indicators which accommodate the range of system components. Investing time to develop scope and defining systems change boundaries is essential to develop realistic and robust systems change proposals.

Robust evaluation evidence on systems change effectiveness is limited. However, in the evidence that does exist there are recurring themes on what contributes most to the effectiveness of systems change interventions:

- **Leadership**, which blends centralised and distributed models, taking top-down and bottom-up approaches in parallel to effect change, and aims to include individuals with different levels of expertise and experience
- **Coherent blueprints for change**, involving all leadership levels, clarifying timescales, lead times, and key decision points
- **Harnessing** knowledge or innovations within the system to continuously inform practice, creating space and capacity to think about, interrogate and catalyse change

[3] A structured set of levels that captures how well the system reliably and sustainably produces the planned outcomes

- **Sharp focus on partnership and coordination** facilitating multi-agency collaboration, long-term sustainability planning, relationship building, capacity building, and knowledge sharing
- **Building trusting relationships**, to align stakeholders, embed trust with and within communities, nurture long-term relationships between service users and system components, and increase momentum for change
- **Valuing and full engaging with user voice and involvement**, driving systemic change beyond the immediate scope, fostering deeper understanding of community dynamics, behaviour and motivations; supporting development of tailored strategies; increasing cultural relevance and empowering communities.

There are some common challenges that systems change interventions encounter in trying to realise effectiveness. These are interconnected, and tied to broader challenges in building consensus, successfully addressing contestations and shifts in the system, and responding with adequate resources to implement sustainable change. Challenges include: lacking a focussed vision, encountering barriers to buy-in/ resistance to change at the strategic and operational levels; maintaining operational focus on the large-scale and long-term nature of systems change; resource constraints; and limited integration and collaboration, leading to limited transformative change.

Levers of systems change

There are four key 'levers', or facilitators required to enable systems change processes. These levers were identified by YFF, and the evidence was used to test and corroborate these parameters. The evidence highlights:

- **Interest alignment and shared vision**. When establishing the parameters of a system and systems change, dialogue with the diverse set of systems actors is paramount. The aim is to build consensus and a vision for the change and for actors to accept the role of change agent, recognising interdependence, and broadening focus from individual to holistic considerations. Collaboratively defining the problem and determining the system's scope fosters shared understanding among stakeholders. Ensuring consistent messaging and framing issues as shared promotes alignment and unification. The process aims to shift from fragmented to interconnected conceptualisations, and supports a culture of shared responsibility and cultural readiness for change. Establishing clear communication and feedback channels between the strategic and operational levels avoids silos and promotes collaboration.
- **Service user voice**. A distinctive feature of systems change methodologies is to align change with the experiences, needs, and expectations of beneficiaries aiming to foster ownership and legitimacy. This may involve participatory methods (such as codesign), forging deep connections to amplify community needs and voices, and integrating community values and knowledge into intervention planning. These approaches are instrumental in promoting equity, transparency, and inclusion, to drive systems change. Local knowledge and user perspectives add validity to intervention visions, as communities jointly identify concerns and inform planned action. To be effective requires building trust, particularly when engaging young people and/ or vulnerable groups, to address power imbalances and foster openness. The approach acknowledges users' capacity to define problems and generate solutions 'bottom-up', transforming users into partners and building their social and political capital to influence and affect change.
- **Funding mechanisms**. Funding sources in systems change interventions vary widely and may not change in parallel to a systems change. Given the long-term and large-scale nature of many systems change interventions, shared and flexible funding mechanisms are common. These include: pooled budgets, managed jointly by key partners; 'braided funding', in which different funding streams are combined; and funding by charitable bodies to supplement core funding. Funding dynamics in systems change link with power dynamics, governance structures, and decision-making processes. However, it can be a challenge to scaffold systems change through funding due to: systemic funding shifts require a long time horizon to develop buy-in among stakeholders; complexities in

commissioning processes and the intricate pathways through which funding is released; resource limitations when funding ceases, or does not account for aspects of delivery; and variations in mechanisms for shared commissioning across actors and localities.

- **Leadership, power and relationships**. A key aspect of systems change leadership is the ability to look and work beyond one's own priorities, working collaboratively and in equal ways, increasing flexibility and trust. Change leaders are adaptive, proactive and utilise 'spheres of influence' to progress the goals of system change, establishing and maintaining the consensual vision and purpose. Shifting power and decision-making structures, from top-down to distributed models, emphasising individual, collective, and community efficacy is a parallel task. This involves reorganising decision-making to provide stakeholders, particularly service users, with more control. Relationships facilitate systems. They are a vehicle for information and resources to be disseminated through the system, and support the development of coordinated responses with shared norms, values, beliefs and attitudes. This is achieved by bringing people, organisations and agendas together, developing 'system stewardship', so that people and organisations take responsibility for forming working relationships to drive transformative change.

Applying systems change in practice

Achieving systems change requires elements of design and implementation, including:

- **Guiding frameworks.** System and conceptual maps and theories of change, are integral to the realisation of interest alignment. These visualise and theorise the interconnectedness of different factors contributing to systemic issues, and how actions can lead to meaningful changes. They serve to represent the system and change journey holistically to help articulate the desired impact. Frameworks identify social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors which shape the system, and leverage points for change. They help change actors assess resources and can enable assumption testing and identification of opportunities for collaboration and cross-boundary work. They can underpin the development of monitoring and evaluation approaches, through helping to identify planned indicators and outcomes of change.
- **Place-based approaches.** System change interventions often focus on 'place', recognising that where people live shapes the systems they interact with. Each community has its unique context, challenges, and assets, and areas exist as their own systems. System change interventions aim to create sustainable and radical transformation, which entails enabling communities to harness local resources and build on what works locally, in essence promoting community ownership. Local stakeholders, community members and service users, are active participants and co-creators of change. This helps develop local accountability and ensures that interventions align with local needs and priorities. Empowering communities fosters a sense of responsibility and resilience. Local leadership plays an important role, harnessing local assets and capabilities, aligning resources and services, and supporting the establishment of local collaborative networks
- **Partnership and collaboration.** Partnership work in systems change interventions embeds cultural shift in collaboration, across system levels, lasting after the nominal 'end' of an intervention; it is an ongoing and cyclical process. It requires representation and responsiveness to address the depth and scale of complex systemic issues. This requires: instilling collective identity among collaborators; supporting partners to understand, embrace and be adaptive to the context in which partnership operates; and building agency and autonomy in partners to develop tailored solutions. Success centres on partners developing shared ownership of the systems change process; trusting relationships between all partners; shared agendas across systems and partnership levels; and close connection between strategic and operational groups.
- **Support structures and resources** need to be compatible with systems change which means resource distributions reflect and support the

desired goals of a systems change effort. While economic resources are an essential condition, resources in the form of a coherent support infrastructure are also in scope. Many interventions share a focus on workforce development, training and supervision and invest in building good practice guidance, toolkits, and online resources. This upskilling is scaffolded through consistent and timely communication such as meetings to troubleshoot and discuss progress of the partnership or intervention.

- **Information and knowledge sharing.** The complex and interconnected nature of systemic challenges means identifying and fostering connections between different stakeholders and agencies to share information, skills and practice is important. This includes giving stakeholders access to data and reporting, as well as linking them through networks to provide new opportunities for insight and action. Dedicated inter-disciplinary working groups are common in systems change interventions. Collaborative forums are the conduit for sharing experiences, finding solutions to shared challenges, and spreading good practice.
- **Monitoring and evaluation.** System change interventions may lead to subtle, hard-to-measure changes in system conditions and monitoring and evaluation needs to adapt from seeking to attribute to measuring contribution. This means leveraging evaluation as a means to continuously test and modify the theorised change process; developing 'accountability measures' (away from outcomes attribution to intervention efforts); and involving those affected by the change in evaluation development. What does not change is the importance of specifying standardised data that will indicate the effect of a systems intervention and establishing a baseline understanding the system before the change effort.

Systems change in youth employment landscape

The findings above were based on the literature focused on systems and systems change which is distinctive, given its focus on collaboration and shared vision and mission for change, from the way in which the UK youth employment landscape changes where policy-making is more deterministic. This second part of the review investigates to what extent policy changes succeeded in changing the system to achieve better outcomes for young people. Two cases are drawn from England and one applied across the UK. The cases were selected for their relevance to supporting young people to attain good quality employment. They are the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA), Careers Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG), and Kickstart.

Raising the Participation Age (RPA)

The Raising the Participation Age (RPA) policy in England, introduced through the Education and Skills Act of 2008 in England, extended the expected duration of education participation for all young people from 16 to 18 years. The origins of the policy lay with the Labour government (1997-2010). RPA has multiple goals; it aimed to boost participation; reduce the number of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET); enhance the qualifications and skills of young people to improve their future earnings; and, boost the nation's competitiveness and economic growth.

The 2008 Education and Skills Act required implementation in a staged process from 2013 for 16-17 year olds and to 18 years by 2015. This extended lead-in time allowed for preparation through four pilot phases involving Local Authorities (LAs) and Subregional Groups (SRGs); curriculum development; and infrastructure readiness. The change in government in 2010, meant that the policy was adopted and implemented by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government. While RPA is a national level policy monitored by the Department for Education (DfE), Local Authorities (LAs) were responsible at a local level. They took this forward as part of 14-19 education partnership structures that then operated. To support the policy's goals, the funding methodology for post-16 participation changed from payment per qualification to per student. The pilots led to the development of accountability measures such as the Key Stage 4 destination measure which has helped focus stakeholders on ensuring young people plan for and enter post-16 learning and training.

The monitoring data on rates of participation and NEET collected by the Department through education and training providers and LAs indicates that the policy may have led to an increase in the number of young people staying in full-time academic or vocational training beyond the age of 16. Other factors and policies are also likely to have contributed to this outcome such as the varied rates of participation in different areas of England linked to local labour markets and longstanding economic trends.

In considering the effectiveness of system change two questions are informative: whether the change took place as intended; and, whether the change achieved the planned effect. The evidence for RPA suggests a positive effect in that the system changed as intended. Although the Coalition abandoned making participation a legal obligation, systems are in place to support transitions between education phases to promote participation. Over time the proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who are NEET has fallen[4] and more young people are in full-time education and training compared to 2013. However the lack of legal obligation means there are no explicit penalties for failing to comply, which may affect the 'take-up' and success of the policy.

Whether RPA achieved its planned effect is less clear. The change in political leadership, from Labour to the Coalition and the complexity of the policy goal are the root causes. The Coalition's focus on austerity influenced the way RPA could work and the ways in which young people could be encourage (or compelled) to participate. The policy was also more effective in addressing its participation goal than its productivity goal. It aimed to increase competitiveness by investing in continued education or training post-16 to achieve better skills for the economy. However at the point of its implementation over 80 per cent of 16-17 year olds were already participating, which leaves open the argument that the main policy focus was the most disadvantaged 20 per cent, who were meant to be tracked and re-engaged. While rates of NEET have reduced over time, rates of attainment have not increased commensurately, and some young people still do not participate up until the age of 18. The complexity of policy goals for RPA conflicts with Tinbergen's rule that you need as many policy instruments as there are policy objectives. The hopes for increasing competitiveness lay in investment in education and training universally and not a focus on the most disadvantaged and attempting both goals with the same instrument diluted systems change effect.

Career information, advice and guidance (CIAG)

Initiated in 2001 under the Labour Government, Connexions was intended to be a universal service to support young people's transitions through offering impartial advice on education, training and careers; and to reduce social exclusion through providing targeted support to disadvantaged young people. The same as RPA there was a complexity in the goals for the service. For Connexions' implementation, the 1973 Employment and Training Act, continued to provide the framework for careers guidance for young people, but in 2001 responsibility was transferred from privatised careers companies to 47 Connexions partnerships. Connexions fostered strong partnerships between the government, statutory agencies, the voluntary sector, and

[4] Although the current trends show a fairly persistent proportion of young people NEET

private sector businesses. It emphasised coherence across service boundaries and the central role of personal advisers in providing comprehensive support to young people.

Despite this, the service experienced challenges in delivering targeted *and* universal careers services. The target to reduce the number of young people who were NEET led Connexions services to focus on the targeted support aspect of their work, over the universal provision of guidance. Connexions partnerships were dissolved in 2008 and the change of government, to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2010 brought a new policy approach. The Education Act 2011 handed over responsibility for universal CIAG services in England to schools and education and training providers. LAs retained duties to support and re-engage young people in education and training. Challenges remained to quality of careers guidance despite these changes. To support schools and providers to deliver to high quality standards, the Gatsby Foundation funded research and developed Benchmarks, the standards for provision of high quality CIAG, in 2014 and adopted as part of the careers strategy from December 2017. Since 2018, they form part of statutory guidance for secondary schools. Their delivery is supported and monitored through the Careers and Enterprise Company.

In assessing this systems change, the same two questions as for RPA apply: did the system change as intended and did the system change achieve the planned effects? The response to both overlaps. Both Connexions and the new approach are challenged in meeting the dual mandate of universal and targeted services. The system of career support services in England is arguably fragmented. Alongside schools' statutory responsibility to deliver CIAG, different departments and agencies at the national level are responsible for different groups of people. The DfE leads on career services for young people in education, and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is responsible for careers services for young adults who are unemployed or looking for a new job. LAs continue to play a role in providing career services for young people NEET 16-18 working with partners, including schools, colleges, and Jobcentre Plus, but the approach varies from place to place. This division of responsibility can lead to gaps, meaning that some people may not be able to get the support they need.

With the shift to school provision, CIAG services have undergone transformation so change has taken place. However, that change could not achieve the intended impact. The lack of preparedness for the transition from Connexions to schools-led guidance failed to offer schools enough time and resource to prepare, and for LAs to harness the partnership models which underpinned Connexions to provide targeted support. Concerns raised after the introduction of school-led services related not only to whether wider support would be provided. The funding model and eligibility criteria for access to services changed a bit. While the Gatsby Benchmarks have scaffolded schools' delivery, some groups still do not make effective transitions through education and the labour market illustrating the gaps.

Notably resources for tracking and re-engaging young people NEET have diminished over time.

The Kickstart Scheme

The Kickstart Scheme was introduced by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and operated from 2020 to 2023. It was a UK-wide initiative that offered funding to employers to create new six-month job placements for young people aged 16 to 24 who were on Universal Credit (UC). Part of the government's Plan for Jobs, the scheme aimed to avoid long-term unemployment among young people, particularly considering the potential negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their job prospects.

Accessible to employers across private, public, and voluntary sectors, initially there were three routes to Kickstart: employers could apply directly to the DWP if they created 30 or more jobs; collaborate with other employers to reach the threshold; or use a 'gateway', an intermediary organisation. Gateways liaised with employers to maximise placements, offering advice on managing new employees. Simultaneously, young people received six-month wraparound employment support during their placement, facilitating their transition to sustained employment post-Kickstart. This approach aimed to ensure effective implementation and support employers and young people. As part of Kickstart, employers were expected to offer careers advice and help young people to set goals, supporting young employees to find long-term work. Following completion, the job placement could be filled by a second candidate. As a training subsidy addressing youth unemployment, Kickstart was short-lived. It was intended to conclude in December 2021 but an extension until March 2022 was announced in October 2021. This aimed to accommodate ongoing demand, with the last referrals occurring in March 2022.

Kickstart used the positively evaluated Future Jobs Fund (FJF) (2009-11) as a starting point for design and underwent rapid development without a formal business case. The scheme aimed to enhance young people's skills, yet evidence on whether experiences and outcomes differed for different groups of young people is not fully clear as evaluation is ongoing. Notably, the National Audit Office (NAO) reports the absence of widening participation targets for Kickstart, highlighting its non-specific approach to addressing the challenges faced by specific groups on Universal Credit.

The effectiveness of Kickstart in changing the system, as for the previous case studies, is judged by whether the intervention took place as intended, and whether it achieved its planned effects on young people's outcomes. On the first question, the Kickstart scheme promptly addressed the risk of a mass youth unemployment crisis. It also created opportunities in the challenging context of the pandemic that would have not otherwise existed. However it was implemented as a short-term solution not a long-term change and it has not embedded in the policy toolkit, ready for future crises. Kickstart fell short on other stated objectives. The rollout may have been too slow to be a genuine response, especially given the challenges posed by lockdowns and it may have been more successful at providing authentic work experience than it was at targeting disadvantaged groups or supporting sustained employment. Evidence is yet to emerge on job stability and retention, but some data suggests that individuals aged 18 to 21, those with low or no qualifications, and those lacking work experience pre-placement were more likely to be unemployed post-placement than those without these characteristics. Without closer targeting on disadvantaged groups, job creation schemes face substantial risks of high deadweight costs, potentially diverting employable individuals from promising career paths into temporary, subsidised employment at the expense of more disadvantaged groups. As it has not embedded in the policy toolkit any future employment crisis could see a similar rapid design phase and the learning on what would make Kickstart more effective may be lost. In contrast, an evolutionary, systems approach to design by embedding it in the policy armoury in an adapted form based on this learning, might well increase future effectiveness.

Effectiveness of systems change in the youth employment landscape

The cases illustrate policy attempts at systems change in England and the UK. In contrast to the evidence in Strand 1 which uses ‘systems change’ language and methodologies, the changes in Strand 2 were not designed and implemented in this way. Nonetheless, they aimed to change how the youth employment and skills system work for young people. The evidence highlights that the challenges faced by each meant the system was affected, but effective or positive systems change did not emerge. The major stumbling blocks, which led to change in processes but not effective systems change, were:

- **Failure to build on existing systems**, particularly for CIAG and Kickstart. In CIAG, the termination of Connexions partnerships removed a wide network of relationships that supported young people at risk of being NEET. While some staff who had worked in Connexions partnerships became service providers to schools there was no institutional continuity. Similarly for Kickstart, previous youth wage subsidy schemes, such as Future Jobs Fund, had been locally administered drawing on the established expertise and systems at local level. In contrast Kickstart was run centrally, which led to a large resource burden, in a new area of work, for a central agency.
- **Multiple goals with a single instrument**. RPA aimed to achieve the ambitious dual objectives of enhancing young people’s competitiveness in the labour market and increasing participation, but this presented a significant challenge. Connexions had the dual goals of both a universal and a targeted service but the accountability framework was focused on reaching young people who were NEET, and so universal guidance provision was relatively neglected. The situation has now reversed, with schools providing a universal service but inadequate provision for those most in need. This illustrates that top-down policies with overlapping goals are not suitable to address the multi-faceted issue of supporting the most

disadvantaged young people into positive destinations, which requires a tailored approach.

- **Lack of preparedness**. Systems change requires planning, piloting and partnership. In RPA, the pilots helped build a stronger foundation for delivery, identifying challenges, devising solutions, testing governance models, and documenting the implementation process. Challenges still arose related infrastructure as delivery commenced, the configuration of governance, and in coordination and partnerships. When the transition from Connexions to school-based CIAG took place, schools had never before commissioned career guidance and were not prepared; equally guidance services were not geared for delivery. The consequence was a lack of delivery: in the first year just one-in-five schools provided guidance to Years 9-11, and two years later one-third of schools still did not. The main challenge for Kickstart was lack of preparedness due to the lack of a lead-in period pre-implementation; staff at multiple system levels not prepared for the workload causing long lags, and employers were uncertain about the workings of the scheme.
- **Lack of monitoring and evaluation**. The impact of systems change is not instant, and monitoring the change and its effects should be a continuous process. The lack of evidence to document the progress and effect of RPA highlights the need for policies and initiatives to be regularly assessed to understand what works and why. While Gatsby Benchmarks now form accountability monitoring for CIAG, not all schools report on these and schools' performance on the Benchmarks varies greatly. A key limitation of Kickstart was its weak monitoring system, which makes it challenging to assess the additionality of jobs, their quality, and impact on the target group.
- **Lack of young people's perspective**. RPA, the CIAG reforms, and Kickstart were introduced as policies for young people, but young people were not involved in the development of them. Evidence suggests that the lack of meaningful engagement with young people as part of the design and implementation may have a bearing on take-up and success of the policies.

Lessons for systems change

The youth employment systems change case studies demonstrate that the impetus for change often comes top down from central government. These national changes require adaptations in systems at local level. The national system provides the parameters to which local systems must adhere. Differing local contexts, roles and responsibilities, lead to differences in the locally-developed approaches to implementation. Locally-developed systems represent attempts to implement the planned changes which are achieved by building alliances and developing incentives to make this happen.

Planning, piloting and preparedness as foundations for systems change

Planning is the cornerstone of systems change, according to its dedicated literature. Good planning is informed by piloting, which informs changes to enhance preparedness. For plans effective it is necessary to ensure stakeholders understand them and so communication is essential to success. Effective communication mobilises relevant actors to engage with each other to prepare for changes.

- A system change intervention should have a clear purpose. If there are multiple objectives, these need to be prioritised as having multiple or conflicting objectives within a single system change can create problems.
- Communication clarifies roles and responsibilities to build a shared understanding among stakeholders. Dialogue allows the incorporation of diverse perspectives to work out how to plan and prepare for the planned changes in the local context.
- Interest alignment means that actors have incentives to make the necessary changes to bring about the system change. Communication can support interest alignment but is rarely sufficient on its own.
- To be successful, systems change interventions need a good understanding of the existing system. This involves identification of: linkages within and beyond the system, possible effects of change, affected people, possible actors, but this can lead to a vast system with an unmanageable network of actors.
- By building on the existing system, it is possible to avoid duplication of existing services, confusion and tension, competition for funding, and a lack of clarity for users.
- Piloting helps to work out the practicalities of the system change, and so informs preparedness. It embodies the principle of adaptation, that is, trying things out to find approaches which are implementable in a specific context.
- Recognising the influence of place and local context on systemic interactions allows incorporation of unique challenges, assets, and

circumstances of each community. Engaging local stakeholders as active co-creators of change supports community ownership. Leadership at the regional and local levels plays an important role in leveraging local assets, aligning resources, and fostering collaborative networks.

Successful implementation: rules, relationships and partnerships

Successful implementation is supported by: getting the right balance between adoption of top-down rules and bottom-up localised approaches; building on existing systems; relationship and partnership building; and credible leadership embedding a collaborative approach. The systems change literature promotes best examples of this, while the youth employment systems change cases illustrate how leadership adapts to policy intent.

- Bottom-up local adaptation to a proposed system change is usually necessary for successful implementation. However, this is best done when a central (top-down) framework provides overarching guidance. The absence of clear parameters can result in confusion and inefficiency whereas overly detailed plans and micro-management do not afford the adaptive environment necessary for effective systems change. Ideally, top-down guidance sets out broad parameters and objectives.
- Successful systems change involves stakeholders recognising their roles as integral parts of a larger whole, providing the underpinning for collaboration towards planned outcomes. Focus is needed on the specific planned outcomes, and on system evolution. Unlike discrete interventions, collaborations foster shifts in ways of working that endure beyond the nominal 'end' of an intervention. Successful partnerships instil a collective identity, while granting agency and flexibility for tailored solutions.
- Clear definition of the target group and alignment between the group and policy objectives support success. Incorporating the user voice may help to achieve this. This aligns the intervention with the experiences, needs, and expectations of the user population. Service users, when recognised as partners and change agents, can support the development of a sense of shared ownership within the target population.
- Engagement of local partners helps adaptation to local context, working out the practicalities of implementation.
- Successful systems change interventions are best supported by strong, adaptive, and collaborative leadership that fosters a shared vision, aligns stakeholders, and addresses challenges to ensure sustained progress and momentum for change. It should be clear who is responsible for leading the system change process.

Maintaining engagement and buy-in: incentives and funding

Systems change is a long-term process. Maintaining stakeholder engagement underpins successful systems change implementation. This is supported through ongoing alignment of interests and mandates, fostered through understanding incentives, and ensuring adequate resources are available to support the change.

- Since people and organisations are motivated by their own mandates and accountability, identify meaningful, associated benchmarks to hold them to account for the systems change is important. Each requires incentives to motivate behaviour change, especially where change expands their mandate. To make systems change stick, individuals and institutions need to see benefits. Incentives should add value to stakeholders meaning they support behaviour change for sustainable transformation.
- Effective incentives, clear communications on objectives, roles and responsibilities, adequate funding and aligned KPIs can all help motivate stakeholders. A realistic plan can show stakeholders they can achieve their existing goals more efficiently through systems change, and that the sum of their collective efforts is greater than their individual part. This enables stakeholders to see themselves as an important part of a larger system and understand the benefits of operating in a more joined-up way.
- The range of organisations in a system means that funding schemes often involve a combination of sources, ranging from sources such as government and charitable grants. Standalone funding is typically not sustainable and may not support long-run systems change. For systems change to be sustainable it is necessary to establish a funding model that is not dependent on transient resources. Shared and flexible funding mechanisms, such as pooled and braided budgets and value-based payment models, are common in long-term, large-scale interventions.

Sustaining transformation: governance, learning, and evluation

The evidence stress the importance of a sustained focus on systems change, through ongoing monitoring and adaptation to ensure the system optimises in light of feedback and as further changes are experienced.

- Building sustainable systems change requires a strategic, long-term approach that recognises the time involved. Time is required to understand and implement system changes including: an adjustment period for stakeholders to understand and feel confident in their new roles, and to consider financial readiness, technical capacity and skillset to execute the intended changes. Time allows institutional and governance infrastructure and incentives to align with the system change and be reflected in accountability mechanisms.
- Clearly designated roles and responsibilities for the systems change process form the basis for accountability.
- Systems change is an ongoing process that is iterative, and adaptive. Continuous learning, refinement, and a commitment to adapting

strategies based on the evolving understanding of the system support successful, sustained systems change.

- Achieving meaningful change takes time and a culture of continuous learning through iterative implementation experiences. This involves actively listening to feedback, understanding the changing context, and being open to adapting strategies and tactics accordingly.
- Systems change in one area of a system may lead to unexpected changes in another. These unintended outcomes can hinder or undermine the success of change. Regular monitoring captures these unintended outcomes and informs adaptation. Using a theory of change, leveraging evaluation for continuous testing and modification, and involving stakeholders in the evaluation process can support these efforts.
- An adaptive approach should be informed by data on how the system change is progressing. Monitoring can provide quantitative and qualitative indicators of what has been achieved. Evaluation can dig deeper into implementation and assess the impact of the system change. The starting point for monitoring and evaluation design is developing a theory of change. Using advanced evaluation frameworks, participatory methods, and longitudinal evaluation, can help assess and track the impact of system changes. Standardising data collection and centralising data sources are important for effective monitoring, to inform decision-making, and maintain credibility of the findings.

Systems change Checklist

This checklist is not a set of instructions. And it is not a list of problems which necessarily arise in designing and implementing systems change. It is a list of points to be discussed by stakeholders in designing and implementing the systems change. The questions apply to systems change taking place at national, regional or local level, as well as thinking about local implementation of a higher level systems change. A detailed annotated version of this checklist is included in Appendix 1 of the main report.

Who is this checklist for?

The checklist is for all stakeholders involved in a systems change. It can be used by managers to plan consultations for the design and implementation of the systems change. It can be used by local actors in thinking through how they will adapt to the systems change. And it can be used by other stakeholders in thinking about their tole and contribution to the systems change.

How to use this checklist

The checklist is a guide to planning and action. It is not a questionnaire. Not all items will be relevant. And there is some repetition to give stakeholders a chance to consider and reconsider issues at different stages of the process. Managers should regularly consult the checklist to ensure that actions are being taken with respect to relevant items. Local stakeholders can use the checklist to inform the agenda of meetings to discuss the local adaptation and implementation of the systems change. Stakeholders not directly involved in official discussions can refer to the checklist as the basis for request to be included in consultations and planning.

1. Planning and design

1.1 Are the objectives of the planned system change clearly stated?

1.2 Is there any possible conflict or trade-off between the objectives?

1.3 Has a system and stakeholder mapping been undertaken?

1.4 Does the planned change utilise existing structures and systems where feasible?

1.5 Have stakeholders been consulted during the planning process? Stakeholders include those responsible for implementing the systems change and those who will be affected by it.

1.6 Has space been allowed in the planning process to incorporate the interests and concerns of stakeholders, especially those of young people?

1.7 Is there a written plan of the intended design of the new system? Is it clear in the plan who does what and when?

1.8 Does the plan include a communication plan for the various ways in which stakeholders will be informed about the new system and their roles and responsibilities? Roles refers to who is meant to do what, and responsibilities is who is meant to make sure it is done.

1.9 Does the plan contain activities related to the attainment of each objective? Are there clear roles and responsibilities for each objective?

1.10 Does the plan contain details about what will be done regarding the institutionalisation of incentives for individuals and organisations to carry out their roles and responsibilities?

1.11 Does the plan include a set of key performance indicators for monitoring purposes? Is it clear who is responsible for the delivery of each KPI?

1.12 Is there a feedback loop from the monitoring system to management?

1.13 Is there an accountability mechanism related to performance against the KPIs?

1.14 Is there a national or regional-level guidance on design and implementation? Have stakeholders been consulted on it?

2. Piloting and preparedness

2.1 Is there a pilot of the systems change? Is the pilot of sufficient scale and duration to identify issues which may arise and work out local solutions?

2.2 Are local stakeholders engaged in the pilots?

2.3 Does the pilot allow for adaptations in the design of the system change to local context?

2.4 Are mechanisms in place to learn from the pilots, and so to make adaptations at national and local level as needed?

2.5 Does the guidance contain a 'Preparedness Checklist' to help preparations at local level for the systems change?

2.6 Are the expected roles and responsibilities within the existing mandates of the individuals and organisations involved? If not, what is being done to formally extend their mandate and to support this expanded mandate?

2.7 Do the interests of the individuals and organisations involved in implementing the systems change align with their roles and responsibilities?

3. Implementation

3.1 Is the time line for the stages of the systems change realistic? Has sufficient time been allowed?

3.2 Are all stakeholders aware of their roles and responsibilities to support the proposed systems change?

3.3 Have partnerships been formed which will support the systems change? Have partners established ways of working together?

3.4 Is there a clear leadership structure for the system change? Does the leadership have the authority and credibility to mobilise stakeholders to support the change?

4. Maintaining engagement

4.1 Are the mandates of individuals and organisations consistent with their roles and responsibilities to support the systems change?

4.2 Have incentives facing individuals and organisations been clearly aligned with supporting the systems change?

4.3 Has a funding model been developed which will sustain the systems change? If not, what steps are being taken to develop one and secure the funding?

4.4 Is there a process for stakeholder feedback during the systems change?

5. Sustaining the systems change

5.1 Are the mechanisms for continuous learning and adaptation? Has an M&E system been established? Are the feedback loops in the monitoring system? Are regular independent evaluations commissioned?

5.2 Has clear accountability been established for the systems change?

5.3 Is there a mechanism for identifying unintended outcomes? Is a process in place to adapt these if necessary?

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