

Policy briefing: What works in systems change interventions: A review of national and international evidence

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Summary

The researchers undertook a systematic literature review focussed on defining the concept of 'systems change', the key levers of change and conditions that determine any intervention's success. Focused on the youth employment system, the report aims to understand the evidence on policies and practices that are effective in changing systems. The paper uses three candidate examples of changes in the youth employment system – raising the participation age (RPA), reforms to the Careers Information Advice and Guidance system (CIAG) and the Kickstart scheme – to provide key learnings for policymakers. The findings are captured in a final 'checklist' to support actors wanting to deliver systems change ranging from how to plan, implement, monitor and learn throughout the process.

Methodology

The researchers conducted a systematic literature review to investigate 'what works' in creating systems change, identified levers of systems change and established principles of effective systems change. Researchers aimed to identify workable definitions and used them to review relevant literature on three selected systems change interventions in the youth employment system.

Scope/Limitations

Existing research demonstrated the difficulties in measuring systems change. There was a lack of literature available or in-depth reviews of the three example interventions. There was also a variable quality and robustness of evidence, with most analysis skewing towards positive findings. The available literature was often presented as 'what works' evidence and focused substantially on place-based approaches. The perspectives of parents, educators, employers, and policymakers were not included in this study.

Key findings on systems change

Definition of systems: Based on the literature reviewed in the study, the authors propose a definition of systems as: a configuration of interacting, interdependent parts, connected through relationships. In policy and practice this means, people, services, organisations, institutions, policies, laws and culture.

Systems change is therefore widespread and sustainable change of the system at multiple levels, either incrementally or through transformation. This is often started when systems fail to meet the needs of their target populations. The report defines and outlines systems change in the following components:

- Conditions for systems change: policy drivers and political and/or economic feasibility;



- Levers for change: stakeholder and service user engagement, policy changes, distribution of power and decision-making, funding.
- Resources for change: creation of guiding frameworks and support infrastructure.
- Implementation of systems change: through partnership work, knowledge and information sharing, monitoring and evaluation, and policy adjustments.

Measuring systems change: Measuring systems change is complex owing to the difficulty in defining their boundaries and they are fragmented in nature. The impact of systems change is often measured over the long-term by noticeable policy shifts, cultural or organisational changes such as behaviours and attitudes.

Sophisticated measuring tools such as maturity models and systems change frameworks are recommended to measure broader and long-term effectiveness of systems change. They should use evidence-based approaches and involve partners in defining the system's scope and boundaries.

Levers of systems change: The four key levers of systems change are outlined as:

- **Interest alignment and shared vision:** created through consistent messaging and repositioning stakeholders as 'change agents';
- **Service user voice:** Delivered through meaningful engagement, that builds trust. This can be done via participatory approaches to co-design solutions;
- **Funding mechanisms:** Most effective are flexible, pooled funding where a strong relationship with funders is critical to sustain efforts; and,
- **Power and relationships:** Adaptive leadership, distributed decision-making, and collaborative relationships that empower stakeholders and service users to drive change.

Challenges include securing funding outside of strict models, overcoming traditional power structures, and ensuring meaningful participation rather than tokenism.

How to apply systems change in practice: The authors found the following approaches most useful in delivering systems change in practice:

- **Guiding frameworks**, like theory of change and system mapping, to visualise interconnectedness.
- **Place-based approaches** to empower local communities and foster accountability through leadership at the local level.
- **Effective early collaboration** to build collective identity and buy-in, allowing partners autonomy to develop tailored solutions.
- **Robust support structures**, including workforce development and resource distribution, to ensure timely assistance. This should include information sharing through networks to enhance insight and action
- **Ongoing monitoring and evaluation**, both quantitative and qualitative methods, to track progress and refine interventions.

Planning, piloting, and preparedness: The report found the following useful in setting out systems change proposals:

- Clear communication to define roles and responsibilities among stakeholders, fostering trust and a shared sense of purpose.



- A deep understanding of the existing system, including its boundaries and interconnection. This allows any system change to build on existing systems and enhances success rates.
- System mapping exercises to be conducted alongside clear, prioritized objectives.
- Piloting changes at the local level allows for practical insights while recognizing the importance of local contexts in tailoring strategies.

A focus on 'place': The report's focus on 'place' centred on finding a balance in power distribution, allowing top-down guidance and bottom-up flexibility. This would allow local adaptations to meet specific needs but was dependent on alignment of vision from the start.

Maintaining buy-in to secure funding: The report found funding models were a challenge to maintaining system change. It referenced approaches to maintain funding:

- Aligning organisational mandates with broader goals, supported by incentives such as continuously updated KPIs that demonstrate direct benefits of the changes.
- Building strong relationships with funders and other stakeholders to maintain flexible funding models, often drawing from multiple sources.

Key findings on review of previous Government initiatives

The report uses the above analysis of effective systems change to assess previous Government interventions to change systems in the youth employment space. The three interventions were RPA, CIAG reform and the introduction of Kickstart. The authors outlined the following that government may learn from:

Build on existing systems to learn from previous systems change:

- CIAG reform removed a wide network of relationships, including those that supported youth at risk of being NEET when Connexions was disbanded. This led to a loss of learned expertise.
- Kickstart did not build on existing learning from local schemes such as Youth Contract as it was delivered centrally.

Define goals to avoid 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to multi-faceted problems:

- RPA aimed to enhance young people's competitiveness in the labour market and increase participation in EET, which led to a lack of focus.
- Connexions aimed to be a universal and targeted service which led to criticism that it achieved neither goal.

Prepare extensively with a phased rollout:

- Stakeholders reported a lack of guidance in supporting 16 – 18-year-olds during the RPA rollout despite pilot trials.
- Schools were noted as being unprepared for their new role as commissioners of career guidance when Connexions was removed.

Embed monitoring and evaluation and young people's perspective:

- None of the systems change approaches have yet undergone an independent impact evaluation.
- None of the interventions consulted young people. A lack of meaningful engagement had an impact on uptake of interventions and their success.



Relevance to Government policy

It is likely to be of interest to DfE and DWP as they engage in a range of reforms, particularly across the skills space. For example:

- The introduction of Skills England to provide strategic oversight of post-16 skills strategy and reform of the apprenticeship levy, represent a significant shift away from the current skills system.
- Reform to merge JobCentre Plus provision with the National Careers Service represents another significant change to the CIAG system.
- The introduction of a new 'youth guarantee' which will attempt to provide both a universal and targeted offer.
- The acceleration of devolution which will further redefine the relationship between mayoral combined authorities, central government, businesses and colleges.

Each of the above will benefit from:

- Early engagement with service users, especially young people, to scope the services and ensure the uptake of interventions.
- Building on existing systems to ensure expertise are maintained and reducing the need for further resource creation.
- Avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to provide tailored, place-based opportunities with local ownership.
- Careful planning, stakeholder engagement and a pilot approach to rollout, to ensure it is monitored and evaluated effectively.

Next steps

The report builds further evidence about how to plan, implement and monitor systems change. Learnings from this report have been used and will continue to inform our approach within the Connected Futures programme that ultimately aims to implement and evaluate systems change interventions in places. This will help to inform Youth Futures policy development work.

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