

Efforts to tackle enduring issues – such as domestic abuse, climate change, an ageing society, and knife crime – using the concepts of complexity and systems have gained increasing traction in recent years. This work, systems change, focuses on taking a wider approach to improving outcomes for individuals and communities than lone, narrowly targeted interventions. As this approach has become more prominent, a parallel discussion has developed about how best to evaluate systems change.

Here we lay out a range of approaches to evaluating systems change based on our own experience plus review of the growing range of guides and literature. There are also some signposts towards practical tools, guidance, and sources for further information.

Please get in touch with our Head of Research, [Dr Stephen Boxford](#), for more detail or to continue the conversation.

1 Introduction

Efforts to understand and tackle social issues using the concepts of systems and complexity have gained increasing traction in recent years. In parallel to this, the body of literature about systems change and its evaluation has also grown. For example, systems change evaluation is a core theme in the Government's newly-published guide, [Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation](#), as part of its [update to the Magenta Book](#).

1.1 Systems change

1.1.1 What is systems change?

Systems change work has been defined in a range of ways. One of the challenges with reaching a single definition, is that systems change work is likely to vary significantly depending on the context and the issue at hand.

However, the following definition is useful because it distinguishes systems change from work which, although it belies a will to change the established approach to an issue, is not sustainable, or widespread at required scale. The definition comes from CFE Research and The University of Sheffield, the national evaluators of [Fulfilling Lives](#), a multi-year multi-site programme to changes systems for people with multiple needs across the UK.

They define systems change as:

“Any change to a system which improves outcomes for the intended beneficiaries of a system, is sustainable in the long-term, and is transformational”

in contrast to:

“Changes which are tokenistic, doing the same thing under a different name, or which are overly reliant on key individuals. The implementation of good practice or flexing the system (making a one-off exception for example) are not system changes in their own right, but may be a good step towards longer-term systemic change.”

CFE Research and the University of Sheffield (2018)

In practice, **‘systems’ are not neat units** in the way in which the above definition might suggest. They can be interlinked, overlapping, and/or nested, and have unclear boundaries. It is the work of those designing, implementing, and evaluating systems change work to define the boundaries of the relevant system(s) for the purposes of their work, and to be clear about this bounding.

1.1.2 What is the case for systems change?

A key rationale for the systems change approach is that it offers an alternative to established approaches to complex social issues such as poverty or knife crime, which have not been successful in a sustainable way ([Lankelly Chase and New Philanthropy Capital](#)). The traditional response to these problems is to identify what works, and build ever more elaborate interventions which add to the complexity of already complicated systems ([Lankelly Chase and New Philanthropy Capital](#)).

The issues with this approach are:

1. Its **sustainability**. Often *“these interventions only last as long as there is the political will to support and fund them”* ([Lankelly Chase and New Philanthropy Capital](#)) and they seldom become hard-wired into mainstream services, even in times of plenty.
2. It tends **not to address the root causes of the issue** ([Lankelly Chase and New Philanthropy Capital](#)).

1.1.3 What are complex systemic issues?

This section outlines the key features of complex systemic issues which are pertinent to systems change work and its evaluation, particularly in relation to the health, social care, criminal justice, and children’s sectors.

Complex systems

There are many ways to describe the characteristics of complex systems.¹ The following points summarise the key characteristics of complexity which are relevant to systems change evaluations:

- **Complex systems** are comprised of multiple diverse interacting actors, and “non-linear and non-proportional interactions” between them (Coffman, 2007; [HM Treasury, 2020](#)). These actors can include people, services, organisations, institutional structures, policies, laws, and organisational cultures ([Egan et al., 2019](#); Latham, 2014). As described in Section 1.1.1, this make-up means that in practice, ‘systems’ are not neatly bounded units. These characteristics mean that understanding the complex system at hand during the beginning stages of an evaluation can be difficult. Within the literature, a range of possible techniques for this are discussed, such as systems mapping ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)).
- In **complex adaptive systems**, the components of the system and therefore the system itself can adapt or evolve in response to changes, for example a new intervention.

Levels of complexity

Complexity is sometimes categorised into three levels: simple (e.g. following a recipe), complicated (e.g. sending a rocket to the moon), and complex (e.g. raising a child) ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)). Some complex systems can also be thought of as more emergent, unpredictable, and adaptive than others (The Health Foundation, 2010; Coffman, 2007). In practice, few social issues can be thought of as simple ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)).

The level of complexity often increases with: the number of actors involved (Bishop, 2019; [HM Treasury, 2020](#)), however the level of complexity of an issue may also vary depending on the perspective used (Egan et al., 2019).

The main point about complex systems is that **their characteristics make their behaviour difficult to predict and pose challenges to those implementing and evaluating systems change** ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)).

A key characteristic is that **complex systems do not have straightforward dynamics**, and their dynamics may be inconsistent. For example, they may be in a state of continual change, but they may also resist change ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)). Feedback loops, ripple effects, and unexpected impacts are also common features of complex systems.² This

¹ For example, emergence, self-organisation, levers, hubs, and many others. There is not scope within this short review to explore these fully. Readers who are interested should explore the following sources: [HM Treasury, Magenta Book 2020, Supplementary Guide: Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation](#); [Egan et al. \(2019\) SPHR Guidance on Systems Approaches to Local Public Health Evaluation. Part 1: Systems Approaches to Local Public Health Evaluation](#); [Latham, N. \(2014\) A Practical Guide to Evaluating Systems Change in a Human Services System Context](#); [Preskill et al. \(2015\) Evaluating Complexity – Propositions for Improving Practice \(accessed September 2019\)](#).

² For instance, a universal health care system could contribute to people living longer, which results in an ageing population, which in turn leads to new challenges for the health care system ([Egan et al., 2019](#)).

characteristic of complex systems presents a challenge for systems change implementers and evaluators because paths to outcomes are less well-defined than in more straightforward interventions (Latham, 2014; [HM Treasury, 2020](#)).

Complex systemic issues

Key characteristics of complex systemic issues (sometimes referred to as ‘wicked problems’) also pose challenges for those implementing and evaluating systems change. These are:

- The implications of complex systemic issues “spill over and transcend established boundaries between departments, policy domains, sectors and research disciplines”, therefore **requiring integration of the knowledge and perspectives from multiple evidence bases**, many of which may be incomplete ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)). This challenge may be compounded by the fact that perspectives on complex systemic issues are often varied and partial (Save the Children UK).
- The issues interact in highly complex ways with one another ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)), leading to **unpredictability**.
- The issues have implications and effects over the long term, **calling for long-term thinking** in the order of several years or decades ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)).

1.1.4 Systems change initiatives

Systems change initiatives defy definition, because they vary widely depending on the complex systemic issue at hand and the context of the initiative.³ Indeed, the same intervention will often have different impacts depending on its context ([HM Treasury, 2020](#); [Hargreaves, 2010](#)).

Like complex systems themselves, systems change initiatives are often more complex than traditional interventions, to varying degrees ([Hargreaves, 2010](#)). Their complexity is likely to increase as the following factors increase:

³ Although each systems change intervention is different, a range of concepts have been used in the literature to describe systems change initiatives, which readers may find interesting to explore further. For example, Latham (2014) posits three concepts for elements of systems which are relevant targets for systems change interventions. These are: ‘systems structures’ (e.g. laws, organisational cultures, institutions), ‘systems pathways’ (the steps taken through the system by individuals, leading to particular outcomes), and ‘systems collaboration’ (the level of collaboration between people and organisations in a system).

[Lankelly Chase and New Philanthropy Capital](#) posit that some common underlying principles of systems change work are collectively developing solutions, building a learning culture, and avoiding an over-reliance on top-down leadership. [Cabaj \(2018\)](#) suggests that targets for systems change initiatives range from structural (such as policies), to semi-explicit (such as power dynamics and relationships), to implicit transformations (such as mindsets).

[Hargreaves \(2010\)](#) describes systems change work in terms changing patterns of behaviour by changing underlying dynamics, structures, and conditions, and levers or drivers of change such as national or local policies and strategies. [James Bell Associates \(2016\)](#) suggest that reducing duplication, gaps, and silos in systems are a common systems change objective.

- The number of causes of the complex systemic issue.
- The level of flux of the environment into which the initiative is being introduced, and the number of other interventions which are already in place there.
- The number of levels at which the initiative is being delivered, and whether it comprises multiple interventions.
- The number of actors required to deliver the initiative. A larger number increases the likelihood of conflicts of interest and different perspectives on the initiative.
- The number of policy domains covered by the complex systemic issue.
- The extent to which control over the initiative is shared, for example between organisations, departments, or agencies ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)).

Examples of systems change initiatives

Systems change initiatives in which Cordis Bright has recently been involved in evaluating include:

- [The national Making Every Adult Matter \(MEAM\) Approach](#): A framework to help local areas design and deliver better coordinated service for people experiencing multiple disadvantage, defined as a combination of problems including homelessness, substance misuse, contact with the criminal justice system and mental ill health.
- [Blackpool Fulfilling Lives](#): Fulfilling Lives is a national programme to help local areas improve systems and outcomes for people experiencing multiple disadvantage. Partnerships receive financial investment from the National Lottery Community Fund (£112m over 8 years, across 12 local partnerships).
- [Greater Manchester Strategic Plan for Health and Social Care Local Care Approach](#): An approach to transforming health and care in Greater Manchester to improve quality and efficiency, and outcomes for the local population. It involves implementing a set of changes in each of the ten localities, including creating new ways of commissioning and delivering health and care services.
- [Northumbria Domestic Abuse Whole System Approach](#): A programme funded by the Home Office Police Transformation Fund, which injected resource into local systems in six police force areas (Northumbria, Cleveland, Durham, Humberside, North Yorkshire and West Yorkshire) to enable them to explore and deliver innovative approaches aiming to improve responses to domestic abuse, and therefore the experiences and outcomes of victims.
- [The Children's Society's Disrupting Exploitation Programme](#): A programme intended to disrupt the exploitation of children and young people across three cities in the UK (London, Birmingham, and Greater Manchester) and nationally through a range of systems change interventions including outreach and strategy change, and one-to-one case work.

- [NHS England Vanguards](#): A programme involving 50 vanguard sites implementing new models of care, in order to develop a blueprint for the future of the NHS and care services ([NHSE, 2016](#)).

2 Evaluating systems change

2.1 Overview of evaluation

Evaluations collect information in an organised way to find out the benefit (or result, or significance) of an activity, project, intervention. They examine elements of policies/programmes/interventions such as how they were implemented, their impacts, and whether the anticipated costs, effects, and benefits were in fact realised. All the while they relate to the underlying logic of the thing which is being evaluated, often laid out using a logic model or theory of change ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)).

Theory of change

As well as providing a structure for evaluation, theories of change can also make interventions easier to sustain, replicate, and scale.

For systems change initiatives, theories of change are likely to involve multiple co-ordinated pathways leading to a broad set of complementary outcomes, rather than simple causal links between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts ([Hargreaves, 2010](#)).⁴ An example of a theory of change for a complex, multi-year systems change initiative can be seen in our [Year 2 evaluation report of the Blackpool Fulfilling Lives programme](#), which aims to change systems and achieve a number of other impacts for people facing multiple disadvantage.

2.1.1 Types of evaluation

Some main types of evaluation which are used are:

1. **Process evaluation**: focussing on how an intervention was delivered and implemented.
2. **Impact or summative evaluation**: focussing on the intended and unintended impacts of the intervention.
3. **Economic evaluation**: focussing on the intervention's costs and value for money ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)).

In practice, evaluations often involve elements of more than one of these types.

⁴ See ([Mayne, 2015](#)) for a discussion of some elements which it may be useful to include in a theory of change for a systems change intervention, such as: the assumptions underlying the causal links between different elements (including the events and conditions that need to occur for each link to work as expected, and the risk factors affecting whether or not causal links will operate as expected), feedback loops, external influences on the elements of the theory of change, and the 'reach' of different elements of the theory of change.

2.2 Mitigating challenges in evaluating systems change

Key features of complex systemic issues pose challenges for its evaluation, as discussed in the previous section. These challenges tend to centre on the unpredictability and dynamism of complex systems, complex systemic issues, and systems change initiatives.

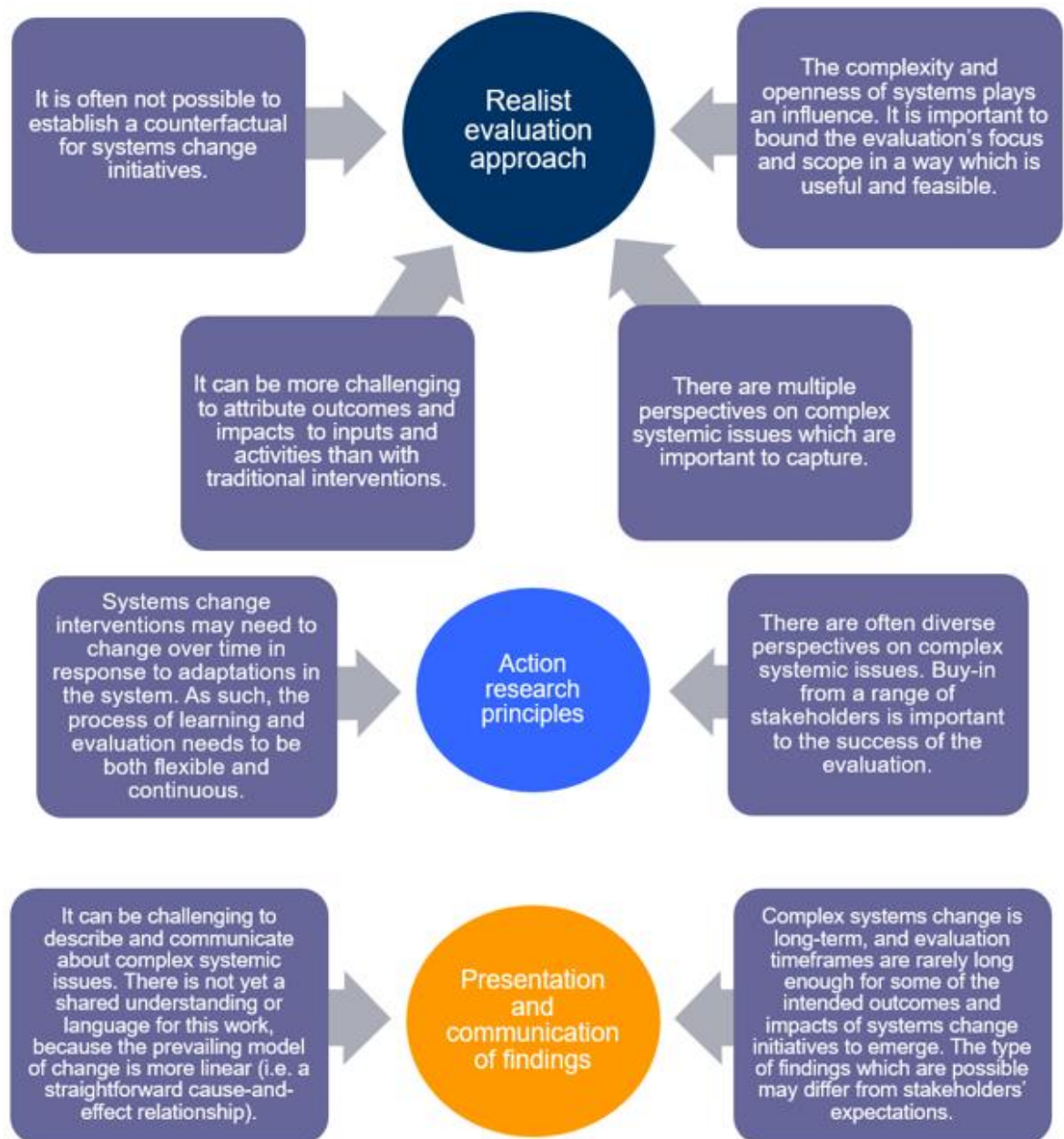
In this section, we discuss the main **ways in which the key challenges for systems change evaluations can be mitigated**, summarised in Figure 1 below.

A common thread running through the following sections, is that well-established evaluation techniques can be effectively applied to systems change initiatives.⁵ There are also a wide range of less tried-and-tested approaches which are sometimes seen in systems change evaluations, and which readers may be interested in exploring.⁶

⁵ HM Treasury's (2020) [Supplementary Guide: Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation](#) provides useful guidance on selecting evaluation methods when complexity is a feature in the evaluation.

⁶ For example, the [work](#) of the MRS/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit in the University of Glasgow's Health and Wellbeing Research Institute provides insight into some ways in which thinking is developing around evaluating complexity.

Figure 1: Common challenges for systems change evaluations (in purple boxes), and ways in which they can be mitigated



Sources: [HM Treasury \(2020\)](#); [Turner et al. \(2016\)](#); [Medical Research Council \(2006\)](#); [Bishop \(2019\)](#).

2.2.1 Realist evaluation

What is a realist evaluation approach?

A realist approach to evaluation is theory-driven but also recognises that interventions “are always introduced into pre-existing social contexts and [...] these prevailing conditions are of crucial importance when it comes to explaining the successes and failures of social programs” (Pawson & Tilley 1997:70)

This allows evaluations to explore the conditions that are needed for a particular mechanism to work. In practice, this means that a theory of change is developed and refined at the same time as testing how a programme succeeds in a local setting – that is, **what works, for whom, in what circumstances, in what respects, and how** (Centre for Innovative Ageing, 2013; Pawson and Manzano-Santaella, 2012:177; Nurjono et al., 2018).

As a result, the evaluation can be used to inform decision-makers about whether and how to adapt the intervention to different contexts, and to build an evidence-base about what works in which circumstances. Mixed methods tend to be well-suited to realist evaluation.⁷

How can it help meet the challenges of systems change evaluations?

It is often **difficult to establish a counterfactual for systems change initiatives**, because complex systems involve numerous factors at play. This creates logistical challenges and makes it difficult to isolate variables from one another (Medical Research Council, 2006). These characteristics also mean that it can be more **difficult to demonstrate the contribution of an intervention to outcomes** in terms of a linear ‘cause-and-effect’ relationship than in a simpler context.

Since realist evaluation focuses on the role of real-world circumstances when examining the intended and unintended impacts which can be observed, it **allows evaluators to still say something** useful about an initiative when techniques such as using a counterfactual are not possible. This often comes to life in evaluations of systems change initiatives taking place in multiple sites where the role of **context and history** can be drawn out.

Multi-site systems change evaluations

We are currently delivering multi-year evaluations for several systems change initiatives which each involve the same core approach being implemented in a range of different contexts. Two examples are:

- The MEAM Approach, in which 31 local areas are currently involved.

⁷ For example, quantitative methods tend to show the scale of the changes that have been achieved, while qualitative methods help with understanding how and why they have been achieved (Bishop, 2019; Cabaj, 2018).

- The Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership Local Care Approach, which is implemented across ten localities in Greater Manchester.⁸

In these evaluations, taking a realist approach has allowed a range of insights to emerge about what enabling or constraining factors play a role in the success of these initiatives. For example, a key finding from [Year 2](#) of the national MEAM Approach evaluation was that a limited range and supply of longer-term housing options in a local area was a commonly experienced challenge.

A further benefit of a realist approach is that, because of its attention to real-world circumstances, it is well-suited to the task of **'bounding' the complex system and issue at hand** during the evaluation design phase. As discussed in Section 1.1, the interconnected nature of systems mean that it is important to carefully select boundaries for the system(s) at hand for the purposes of the evaluation ([Latham, 2014](#); [HM Treasury, 2020](#)).⁹ This makes the evaluation manageable and ensures that the balance between depth and breadth of focus can yield useful findings.

Since realist evaluation focuses on what works *for who*, findings are further strengthened by seeking **a range of perspectives**. For example, [our evaluation of the national MEAM Approach](#) has been informed by co-production with people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage throughout – see our [blog post](#) and [podcast](#) for more information.

2.2.2 Action research

What is action research?

Action research (sometimes called 'developmental evaluation') is about research taking place alongside, and informing, the decision-making and strategy of initiatives to create change ([Latham, 2014](#)). It often means providing findings, learning, and recommendations from the evaluation in real time so that the initiative can be reflexively adapted, rather than waiting until the end of the evaluation period.

In practice, this often looks like:

- **Liaising with key stakeholders.** Evaluators may want to work with a specific 'learning team' of systems change agents and end users of the evaluation to design the evaluation, and to whom they can reflect findings and learning as they emerge ([Latham, 2014](#)). This may also help evaluators gain access to key collaborative meetings in which problems are tackled and decisions are made, which may provide insight into the collaborative functioning of the system and structural barriers, which may not be formally disclosed.

⁸ With our [Sonder](#) colleagues, we are the evaluators for seven of the ten localities.

⁹ The literature contains some tips for bounding complex systems for the purposes of evaluation. For example, [the Center for Evaluation Innovation](#) suggest agreeing upon explicit system boundaries with systems change agents and the intended users of the evaluation, and considering what is realistic to evaluate and who would be affected positively and negatively by different inclusions and exclusions. They also lay out some methods which may be useful to both systems change agents and evaluators for bounding systems, which readers may find interesting to explore further.

- **Reporting emerging findings to stakeholders** before the end of the evaluation ([Latham, 2014](#)). This could involve interim reporting, regularly holding meetings to discuss findings as they emerge ([Riley et al., 2018](#)), or workshops in which findings are shared and interpreted with stakeholders who then can disseminate conclusions more widely ([Preskill et al. 2015](#)).
- **Embedding learning processes into the initiative.** Evaluators could support systems change actors to embed monitoring, analysis, and reflection processes, akin to those used during evaluation, to continue beyond the evaluation ([Ledger and Sherlaw, 2019](#)).

How can it help meet the challenges of systems change evaluations?

Action research is well-suited to systems change evaluations because systems change initiatives tend to be reflexively adapted in response to the dynamism of the system and the issue that is being targeted, plus learning as it emerges. In practice, action research principles often go hand-in-hand with the **flexible and adaptive evaluation management style** required to respond to any changes in the systems change initiative and its context ([Bishop, 2019](#); [HM Treasury, 2020](#)). Treating the evaluation framework or strategy as ‘live’ is a key ingredient to this approach.

A ‘live’ evaluation framework

An evaluation framework lays out the questions or objectives of an evaluation, and maps the planned evaluation activities onto these to ensure that an evaluation meets its brief.¹⁰ It also ensures that resources are used effectively and that the plan is feasible. It is a key resource for understanding how any changes in methods or approach will impact the overall findings which it is likely to be possible to produce.

Treating the evaluation framework as ‘live’ – i.e. subject to review and change as the evaluation’s context and requirements may shift – allows evaluators of systems change initiatives the flexibility to respond to shifts within complex systems, which are characteristically difficult to predict. It also allows for changes in stakeholders’ and evaluators’ understanding of the issue at hand, which is likely to evolve over time and as the evaluation progresses ([Preskill et al., 2015](#)).

For example, there may be a need to update the theory of change as the systems change initiative morphs, or the evaluation questions could need changing if the decisions which the evaluation is intended to inform change ([Egan et al., 2019](#); [Center for Evaluation Innovation](#)). Therefore, it is important to maintain regular

¹⁰ Key components of an evaluation framework are: an introduction to the initiative being evaluated, including its theory of change (which can be used to structure the evaluation framework); the scope and purpose of the evaluation and its timeframe and schedule; overarching research questions which have been agreed with the intended end users of the evaluation – it is likely that these will need to be broken down into more manageable sub-questions; the evaluation aims and approach, e.g. evaluating the process of an initiative, evaluating its impact, and/or helping to form the initiative through action research principles; and the precise methods and data which will be used to answer each of the research questions and to meet the evaluation aims/deliver the evaluation approach.

communication between evaluators and stakeholders, and to plan stages in the evaluation for taking stock and adapting if necessary.¹¹

A key element of action research is the **feeding back of emerging findings to stakeholders on an ongoing basis**. This is particularly important for systems change initiatives, because the likelihood of unexpected or unintended outcomes may be higher than in a context which is less complex and adaptive ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)).

Working in this way also often brings **frequent engagement with stakeholders**, which can be useful for systems change evaluations in several ways:

- It is an enabling factor for carrying out evaluation activities.
- It can be a useful source of relevant information for the evaluation, particularly as different stakeholders often hold different perspectives on a complex systemic issue.

It can increase buy-in to the evaluation findings, which again can be a challenge when stakeholder perspectives vary ([Preskill et al., 2015](#)). One activity for this could be identifying priorities for the evaluation along with its intended end-users, both during the evaluation design phase and reflexively on an ongoing basis throughout the evaluation.¹²

- It can help stakeholders learn about and understand evaluation and offers an opportunity for **putting ongoing learning processes in place to last beyond the evaluation**. This can be useful given that systems change is long-term, and initiatives may morph over time as their context, aims, and resources change ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)). The literature contains useful ideas for doing this in practice.¹³

¹¹ See [Gamble](#) (2008) for examples of questions that evaluators can use when taking stock during an evaluation

¹² This is often key for systems change evaluations, because there are many possible elements of complexity which can be explored ([Egan et al., 2019](#)). One useful focus is the decision-making which the evaluation is intended to inform, which can help ensure the evaluation is practically useful.

¹³ For example, [the Center for Evaluation Innovation](#) suggest encouraging stakeholders to explain to staff how data and evaluations will be used to adapt systems change strategies and to influence other actors in the system. They highlight that this requires embedding the norms of inquiry into organisations, and effort to overcome challenges such as staff having limited time and skills to systematically learn as teams. They also provide useful suggestions for increasing buy-in to new learning processes, such as making learning a critical outcome for which staff are accountable.

Or, evaluators could help stakeholders with identifying metrics for identifying and measuring emergent system characteristics, and what knowledge may be required to capture unpredicted factors emerging, as well as possible responses ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)). Latham (2014) suggests identifying indicators (sometimes called 'leading indicators' or 'interim outcomes') which can be used to help gauge whether the theory of change is working as expected (Latham, 2014). Evaluators can also encourage improved information sharing through the strengthening of feedback loops and improvements in access to information ([Preskill et al., 2015](#)).

2.2.3 Presentation and communication of findings

“Commissioners and other key stakeholders need to be aware that the level of quantitative rigour and certainty of outcome may be limited, even when using sophisticated evaluation methods; they need to be realistic about what can be achieved.”

Source: [HM Treasury \(2020\)](#)

Presenting and communicating findings from systems change evaluations often brings unique challenges and opportunities. The main reasons for this are:

- **The types of findings** which it is possible to produce from a systems change evaluation tend to look different from the findings which evaluation end users may be familiar with and come to expect. For example, commissioners may expect brief, easily communicable findings on whether or not an intervention has been successful ([HM Treasury 2020](#)). Since systems change evaluations summarise complex and ongoing situations, and the timescale for intended outcomes and impacts to materialise is lengthier than typical evaluation timeframes, their findings are likely to be less definitive or simple than this.
- **The range of perspectives in the audience.** It can be challenging to gain wide acceptance and buy-in to evaluation findings from systems change evaluations, because there are likely to be power dynamics and vested interests at play amongst evaluation end users in complex systems.

The best way to navigate these challenges will vary depending on each evaluation’s circumstances. However, there are two useful approaches described in this section:

1. Managing expectations about evaluation findings.
2. Involving evaluation end-users in making sense of findings in a participatory way.

Managing expectations about evaluation findings

Evaluation end users may expect findings to be more definitive, quantitative, and quicker to generate than is possible in the context of a complex system. Indeed, stakeholders typically look for steady, upward-trending progress on a narrow set of quantitative outcome measures ([Center for Evaluation Innovation](#)).

Some techniques to help manage these expectations are:

- **Emphasising that findings are snapshots in times.** This may mean providing decision-makers with an indications of the ‘direction of travel’, i.e. the trend in a system change effort’s progress towards outcomes and impacts [Egan et al. \(2019\)](#).
- **Emphasising that systems change is multi-faceted.** It is important to remind stakeholders of this, as it is common that progress is mixed across different outcomes and impacts. Learning to interpret findings in this way may require a change in mindset for end users of evaluations ([Center for Evaluation Innovation](#)).

- **Setting expectations during the early phases of the evaluation.** For example, conducting an evaluability assessment at the beginning of an evaluation may help to establish what findings are likely to be feasible ([University of Glasgow, 2019](#)). Interim reporting is also an opportunity for setting expectations. [HM Treasury \(2020\)](#) provides a list of questions for commissioners at each stage of an evaluation, which can help align expectations.

Making sense of findings collectively

A useful technique is to **present findings as tools for discussion** rather than final judgements, and **invite evaluation end-users to participate in helping to make sense of them** ([Center for Evaluation Innovation; HM Treasury, 2020](#)). For example, a workshop could be held to collectively sense-test findings and select 'headline findings' to prioritise in evaluation outputs.

The involvement of a range of stakeholders in this process can help to broaden buy-in to the evaluation findings. It may also help to productively navigate the diverse opinions and power dynamics of evaluation end users by creating a space for discussion.

Some tips for this are:

- **Emphasising that there is no 'one correct perspective'** on the findings ([HM Treasury, 2020](#)).
- **Acknowledging that it is unlikely that all stakeholders and readers will agree** with all conclusions and recommendations.
- **Framing the discussion** in terms of which recommendations appear to be the most important and/or actionable ([Egan et al., 2019](#)).
- **Involving allies and those with influence over stakeholders** ([Cabai, 2018](#)).

3 Conclusions

As systems change continues to gain popularity as an approach to complex issues in society and more and more voices are joining the discussion about its benefit, examining and exploring the role of evaluation is as pertinent as ever.

This review has intended to provide context to this discussion and help to unpick some of the wide array of possible approaches, both new and old, to evaluating systems change. A core thread running through this review is that whilst systems change initiatives vary and can seem unfamiliar, a range of well-established evaluation methods can usefully employed to evaluate them in a meaningful way.

It will be interesting to see how the discussion continues to develop.

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