

Systems-Led Evaluation and Design





About FPC

Your Partners For Impact

At First Person Consulting (FPC) we work across the areas of social research, evaluation and design. Our experience spans environmental, social justice and health sectors with a wide variety of clients at all levels. At the core of our approach is a genuine commitment to collaboration and partnership.

We care about our clients, the work they do and the people and places they seek to serve. We recognise that meaningful change takes time, and that we all have a part to play. We pride ourselves in being a part of your team, and embed efforts to build capability through any engagement.

We offer professional development opportunities, including one-off workshops, coaching and mentoring, and longer-term organisational growth programs. Each project is a partnership, not a transaction.

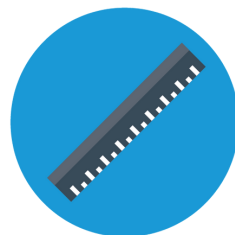
If you would like to learn more, discuss your needs and what this might look like, or what it is like to work with us in general. Please get in touch!



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RESEARCH



EVALUATION



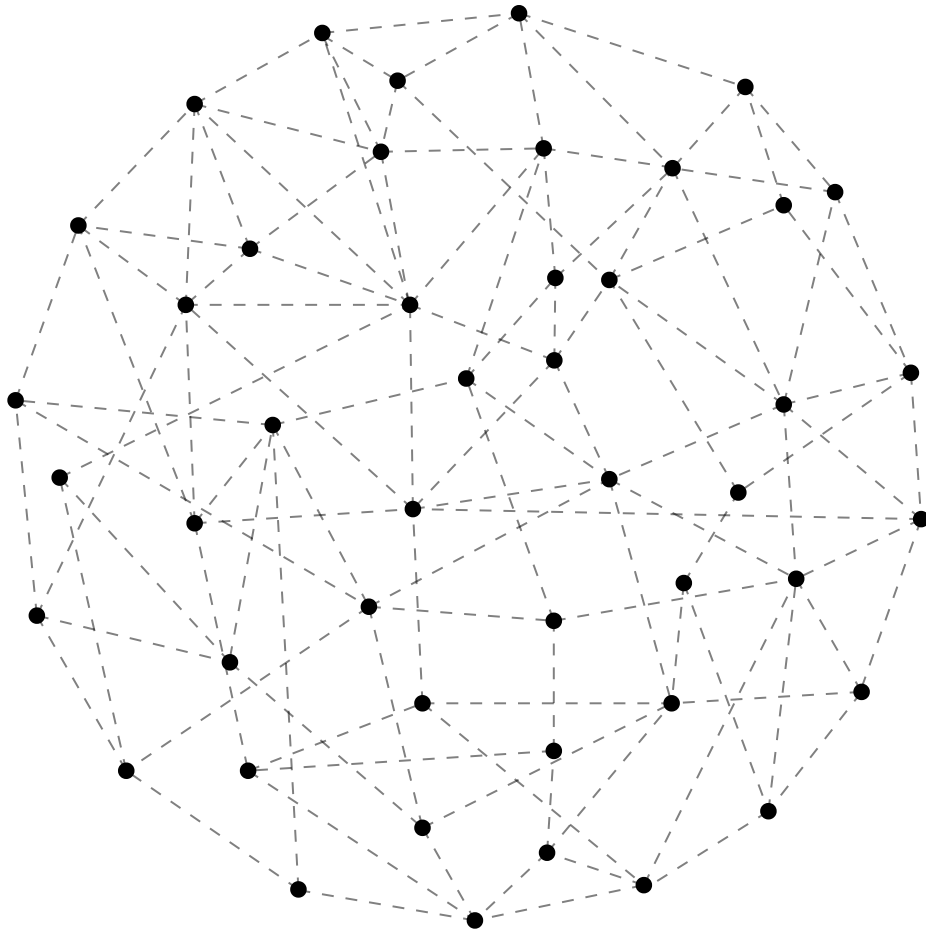
DESIGN



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What is a system?

A system is any set of components that have a relationship to each other, and whose interaction produces outcomes greater than the sum of their parts.



When we talk about systems, or systems change, we are talking about these complex networks that are shifting and changing.

Systems can relate to any of our day-to-day areas of work and span all sectors.

We see systems practice applied in relation to the environment, social justice and public health.

We see it applied in partnerships and collaboration, collective action planning and 'getting on the same page'.

This document presents some foundational thinking on how you might bring together the threads of systems, evaluative thinking and design practice together.

What is Systems-Led Evaluation and Design?

An collaborative revolving process to understand and influence systems that drive complex problems.

Systems-Led

We focus on the relationships between different parts of systems and what is produced as a result. We recognise horizontal and vertical interactions, and make considered decisions about where to intervene. We revisit and question 'what' our system is throughout our process, it is at the core of our work.

Evaluation

We implement mechanisms to evaluate throughout the process - from understanding the system, developing interventions, to understanding experiences, changes and improvements.

Design

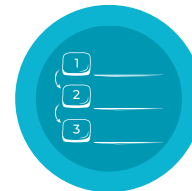
We identify appropriate processes to develop and implement interventions. This includes considerations of feasibility, desirability and viability, as well as potential positive, negative and unexpected impacts.



Understanding and defining the system, interventions and even the desired outcomes start with consideration of the values that we, and others, are bringing to the process. Constant reflection on this is crucial.



Effective systems practice involves zooming in and out across boundaries. This enables us to identify where we might intervene, how and the possible ripple effects.



While this is presented as a linear process, the reality is that we rarely operate in such a simple fashion. For example, you may already have an intervention and need to contextualise it in a systems way. You can start at any stage of the process, and move around as you need.



Working in systems requires us to be flexible, and embrace experimentation. We must put purpose before process and be willing to question ourselves, our assumptions and our ways of working.

In Summary



01 SYSTEMS DEFINITION

Collaborate to define and clarify the system. Make decisions on boundaries, levels of focus, areas of certainty and uncertainty.



02 LEVERAGE POINTS

Identify leverage points. Consider different factors to inform decision making on when, where and how to intervene.



03 INTERVENTION DESIGN

Translate into intervention design. Determine appropriate design methodology, including resourcing. Implement interventions.



04 EVALUATION MECHANISMS

Concurrently, develop evaluation mechanisms for the system and associated interventions.



05 SYSTEMS DEFINITION

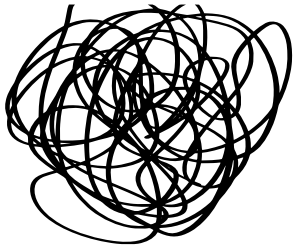
Drawing on evaluation outcomes and other influences, collaborate to define and clarify how the system has changed.



System definition

START
HERE

We influence and are influenced by the systems that we inhabit. These systems span natural and man-made constructs, and disentangling and making meaning of these is a big challenge.



One of the first steps in the process is to work together to identify and define our system. An important element here is the use of the word 'our' - because oftentimes the system we are talking about is described through a particular view or lens.



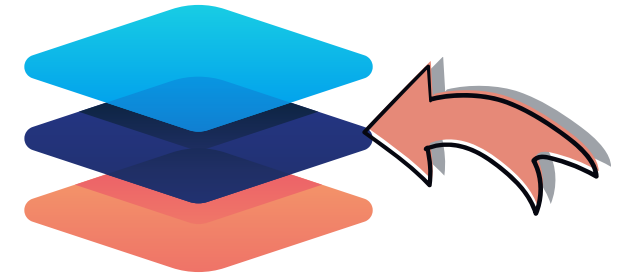
Understanding these perspectives is a crucial element of system definition. This process can involve a range of people, information and ideas - the system is not 'objective'.

These perspectives help us start to attach labels to the 'type' of system that we are talking about and build consensus. For example, the 'partnership system' that our organisation is involved in, or the system of determinants that influence mental health. This requires drawing on stakeholder perspectives, and existing data.

These can help take the messiness that can exist in our mind, and start to articulate specific components or elements. It doesn't reduce the complexity, but helps us make sense of it in a (slightly) more organised way.

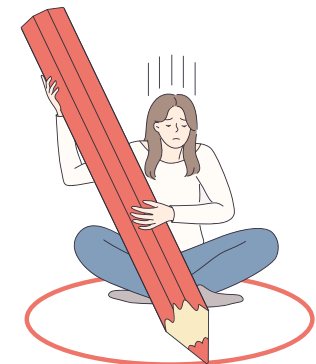


Our aim is to start attaching labels and terms to different parts of the system. Part of this might also involve specifying which 'level' of the system we are focusing on. Levels can also be a way of describing the meta-systems above or sub-systems nested in our system of focus.

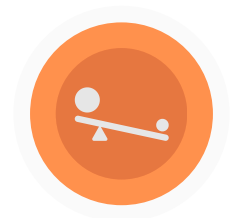


As we work further to articulate and define the various components of the system, we reach a point of relative clarity. This is informed by our shared understanding of 'what' system we are talking about, as well as things like your organisational remit, geographical or resourcing constraints and priorities.

All of these things combine to help us draw a boundary around our system(s) of focus.

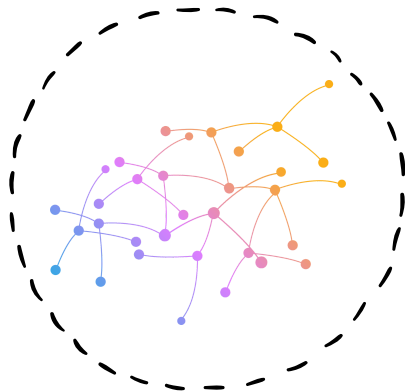


We can then take this clarity forward into the next step.



Leverage points

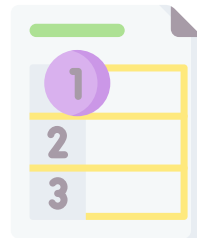
The next step involves consideration of **where to intervene**. By this stage you and your partners will have reached a stage of relative consensus over the nature of your system, and the **boundary** drawn around it.



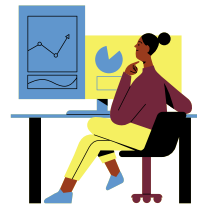
It is important to acknowledge that these boundaries are not fixed or impenetrable. They can shift, but they are also permeable.

The purpose of the boundary is to support us making sense of what it contains, but there will always be outside forces (expected and unexpected) that penetrate this boundary.

Interpreting the system and making decisions about where to intervene **'leverage points'** requires consideration of a variety of factors.



Organisational remit and priorities. Rarely will all parts of the system be within scope of what you can focus on.

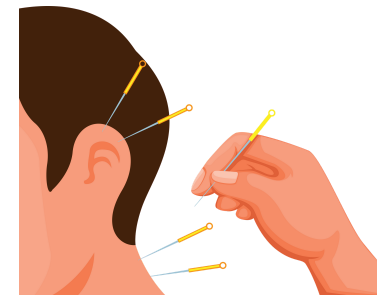


What does the data tell us?
Our system was defined through a mix of inputs, what does the evidence base tell us about hidden or underpinning drivers? Perhaps more importantly, what are the gaps?



What do those we work with care about? Beyond data, it is important to listen to the community - what are their priorities and lived experiences of the system?

Use these to inform your decision making about **where** in the system to intervene. Think of this like **systems acupuncture** - interventions at specific points of a bigger system to trigger positive ripple effects.



At this stage - in many ways - the intent is to help refine or focus in on parts of the system to ultimately answer a simple question. **Do we intervene?**



Intervention design

As mentioned in the introduction, while steps are presented in a linear fashion they can and should be treated in a less than linear fashion (e.g. by moving back and forward between them).

For instance, if you use a co-design methodology you would incorporate the system definition and leverage point stages into your approach. However, the extent to which you do this may vary - you may have already helped define the system prior to the engagement of co-design participants.

That said, not all design methodologies are appropriate or possible in all situations. Different factors will influence how you build your intervention.

There are a range of different design processes that you can use to design your intervention. The more commonly known ones - like design thinking or co-design - are easily searchable online for different models.

That said, not all design methodologies are appropriate or possible in all situations. Different factors will influence how you build your intervention.

Testing your interventions should incorporate common design approaches like prototyping, iteration and an openness to experimentation.

Try to avoid putting all your 'eggs in one basket' by investing heavily up-front - low-fidelity prototypes are an excellent way to **test assumptions**.

These prototypes can be developed in workshop settings and tested through developing **Theories of Change**. Developing these collaboratively is also an excellent way to test assumptions about what might work at a bigger scale, and can support your evaluation efforts.



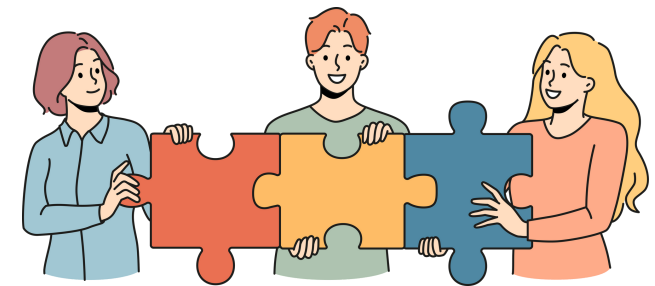
The **existing evidence available** to help test possible assumptions and ideas for interventions.

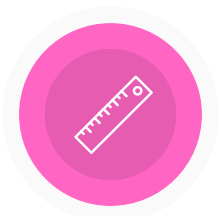


Time and resourcing available or that can be allocated to the process.



The **ability to reach and meaningfully engage** participants in the process.





Evaluation mechanisms

Establishing evaluative processes and mechanisms to support learning are a crucial part of effective systems change practice.

Admittedly, evaluation is a large field to summarise in the context of this approach. That said, there are three parts that can help to focus your evaluative practice.



Evaluation is your **critical friend** in the process. **It is good for someone to have a specific function in your team.**

They help you zoom in and out, and identify connections.



Evaluation questions which help guide inquiry across **process and impact which result in learning** tied to the stages of system definition and changes, leverage points and intervention design.



Regular cycles of data collection, analysis and reflection. Use the outcomes of these cycles to revise or update relevant **Theories of Change.**

In many ways the evaluative questions you ask across your systems change process are one of the most important tools in your toolkit. **Being critical and reflective is the most important thing.**

Try not to focus too early on setting or formalising specific methods (though it is good to think about it). You do not want to lock yourself into a particular view or perspective - **flexibility is your friend.**

Your starting point should be to build your **evaluative muscle** to ask simple questions throughout the process. At the core is **what are we learned and observing?**

Remember the basics:

WHAT?

HOW?

WHY?

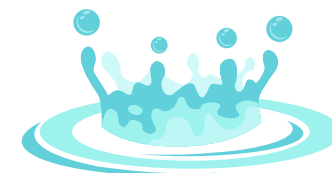
Here's some example questions as a starting point to consider in your process.



- What inputs were used to define the system?
- Whose values defined the system, and were any perspectives missing?
- What assumptions were made to map the system, and do we need to test any?



- Who was involved in the design process? Were any voices missing?
- Did we allocate enough time and resources to the process?
- Do we have a Theory of Change supporting our thinking? What do we need to test?

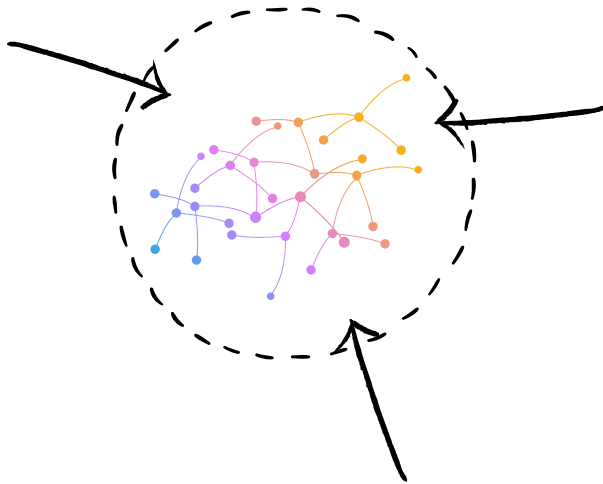


- Was our intervention implemented as planned?
- What outcomes were produced?
- How did the system shift over time?

System definition (or re-definition)

A fundamental principle of systems are that they are **dynamic and changing**. Our reasoning for intervening - more often than not - is because it has been identified that the system is producing undesirable outcomes.

As such, the aim through our work is to **shift the system into a more desirable state**. However, the system can also change as a result of a range of factors - some of which have crossed the boundary that we drew earlier.



These influences could vary (e.g. external funding) which may be a positive or negative thing depending on the context)

Regardless, like a good **Theory of Change** process, it is important to set regular review points to define (or redefine) your system of focus.

This helps us to recognise that as a dynamic space, we do not 'fix' systems or hold them in place. Rather our aim is to shift them to strengthen good outcomes, and mitigate the bad ones.

Process-wise, this is no different to the start of this work. This work is inherently cyclical (and messier) than how it is presented here. The goal is to test your assumptions, understand what has changed and what this means for your subsequent work.

Most importantly, do not be surprised if your updated system is radically different to what you started with. Consider how this re-defined system is operating, the outcomes it is producing, and use this thinking as you go into the next stage of your change effort.





Key terms

A summary of some key terms highlighted throughout the document.

Design

An overarching term referring to the suite of methodologies used to develop possible interventions for your system. Usually incorporating processes of prototyping and testing before full-scale roll-out.

Evaluation questions

Guiding lines of inquiry that help to focus our thinking, data collection and interpretation of evidence. They typically span process and impact or outcome areas, with an emphasis on learning.

Evaluative thinking

The day-to-day application of critical thinking and questioning to consider the value or merit of something. This involves identifying assumptions, asking reflective questions and pursuing deeper levels of understanding.

Leverage points

Identified elements or components of the system that if influenced or addressed will have flow-on effects to the rest of the system.

System

A system is any set of components that are have a relationship to each other, and whose interaction produces outcomes greater than the sum of their parts.

Systems acupuncture

A metaphor to help visualise what it 'looks like' to intervene in or influence a specific leverage point.

Systems boundary

A conceptual line drawn around the system of interest to help make sense of the complexity, focus our thinking and set a scope.

Systems change

Efforts to shift a system or components of a system that interact to produce emergent outcomes.

Theory of Change

A narrative and visual representation of your systems challenge, assumptions, vision and the steps or conditions needed to get there.



