

CECAN Webinar - Lessons from commissioning, implementing and evaluating a multi-site, complex system change programme using a developmental evaluation approach, with the Health Foundation and Cordis Bright



Thursday 9th October 2025, 13:00 – 14:00 BST

Presenters: Hardeep Aiden, Research Manager, the Health Foundation and Joshua Butt, Principal Consultant, Cordis Bright

Welcome to our **CECAN Webinar**.

All participants are muted. Only the Presenters & CECAN Host can speak. The webinar will start at **13:00 BST**.

Hardeep and Joshua will speak for around 40 minutes and will answer questions at the end.

Please submit your questions at any point during the webinar via the Q&A box in the Zoom webinar control panel.

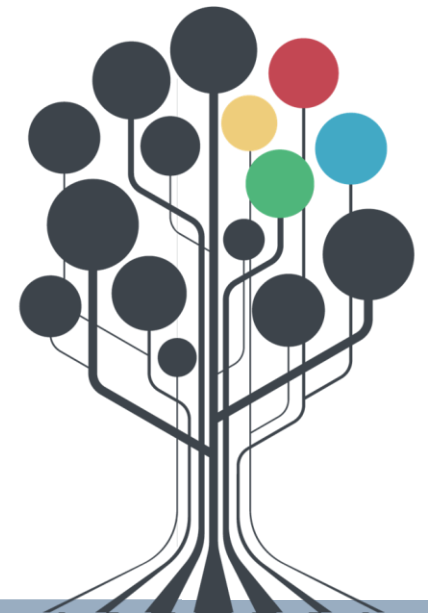
Today's webinar will be recorded and made available on the CECAN website.

E Mail: cecan@surrey.ac.uk

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Welcome



Hardeep Aiden
Research Manager at
The Health Foundation
(now Lambeth HDRC)



Joshua Butt
Principal Consultant
Cordis Bright
Joshuabutt@cordisbright.co.uk

Introduction

Part 1: About the programme and evaluation

- The SPHL **aims**
- An overview of SPHL's **implementation**
- The **research methods**.

Part 2: Lessons from implementing SPHL

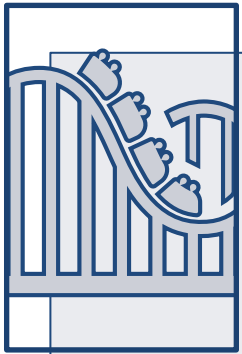
- What did we learn about **taking a complex system change approach** in these five places?
- **What worked well** and **what were the challenges**?

Part 3: Lessons from commissioning and evaluating SPHL

- Why commission a **developmental evaluation approach**?
- **Successes and challenges** of taking a developmental evaluation approach.

Conclusions and Q&A

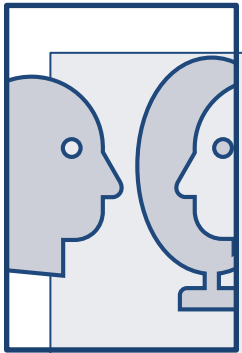
We commissioned a developmental evaluation to balance rigour with real-time learning and flexibility.



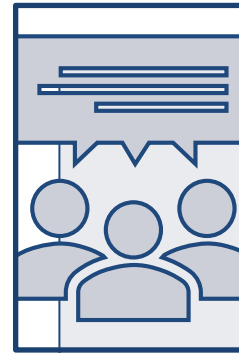
Adapting as the projects evolve



Taking full account of systems thinking to capture complex systems and relationships



Facilitating reflective practice



Providing ongoing, timely feedback

Key differences between '*traditional*' and developmental evaluations

A traditional evaluator

- Supports **improvement, summative tests and accountability**
- Is an **outsider**
- Produces **detailed, formal reports**
- Tries to **control design implementation and the evaluation process**
- Is committed to **rigour and independence**

A developmental evaluator

- Supports **innovation and adaptation**
- **Is part of the programme team function**
- Provides rapid, real-time feedback
- Learns to **respond to lack of control**, staying abreast of what is unfolding and responding accordingly
- Is **adaptable, agile and open**, engaging with multiple perspectives and providing iterative reflection.



Part 1: About Shaping Places for Healthier Lives

What was the Shaping Places for Healthier Lives (SPHL) programme?



Mobilising cross-sector action on the wider determinants of health (social, economic and environmental factors)



Supporting five local authorities to develop local partnerships for system change on the wider determinants of health



Sharing learning about making sustainable changes to local systems designed to last beyond the programme lifetime

“The overarching aim to is to create place-based conditions for healthier lives by enabling authority-led partnerships to take system-informed action on the wider determinants of health.”

SPHL Theory of Change narrative

Overview of the SPHL timeline



**SPHL discovery
phase launched**



**14 local
authorities
awarded £20,000
each to develop
proposals**



**Five local
authority-led
partnerships
awarded £300,000
to implement their
proposals**



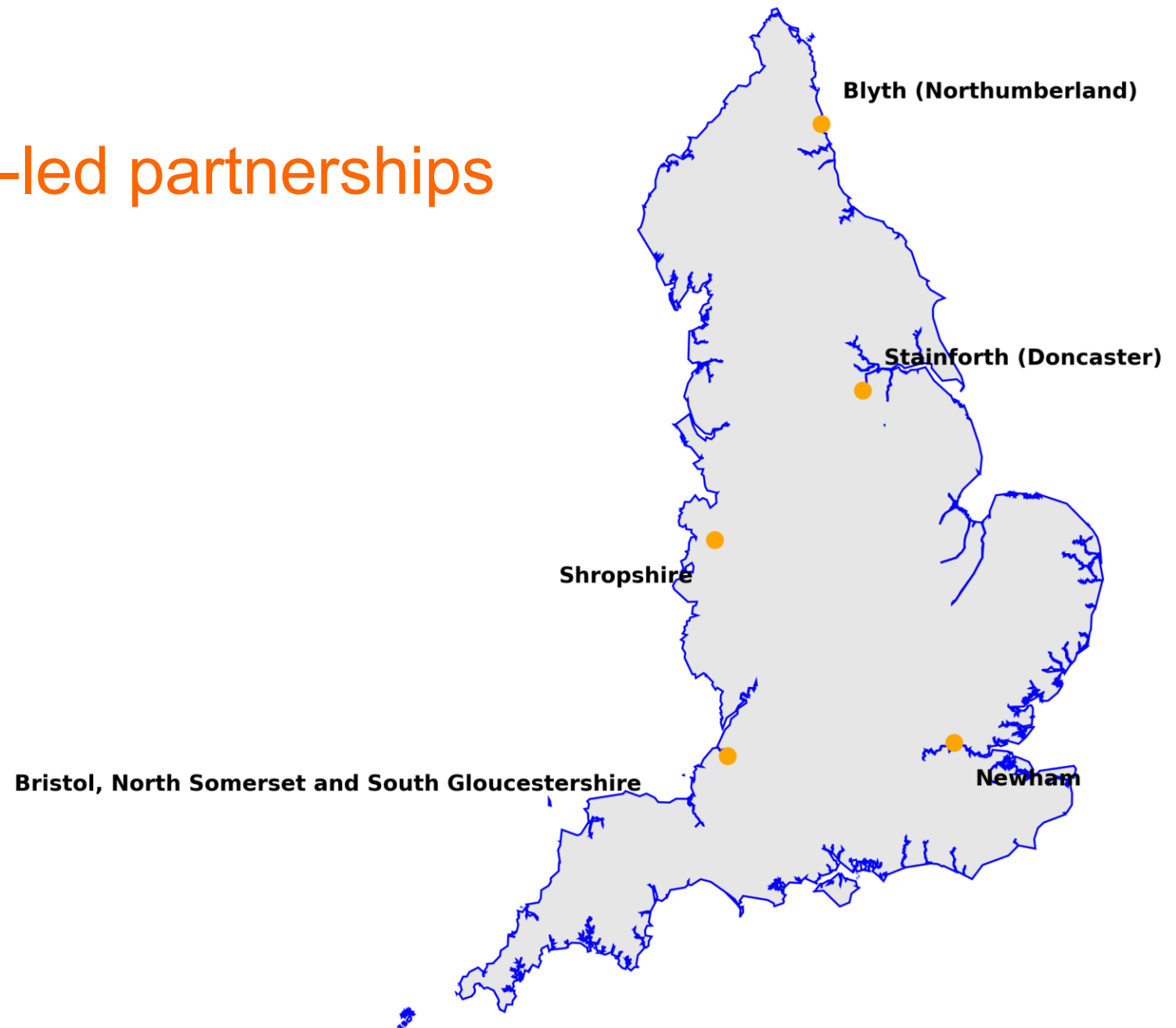
**Covid-19
arrived...**



Five local authority-led partnerships

Sites needed to feature

- A complex system perspective
- A system approach (i.e. not funding a new service model or intervention)
- Partnership working
- Potential for learning



Five different complex system change approaches



Working at multiple levels of the system at the same time



Focusing on emergent properties of the system



Starting with relationships and seeking input from diverse stakeholders



Connecting and convening people



Being dynamic and adaptive in their approach

The SPHL evaluation methodology

- **SPHL programme stakeholders**, i.e., the Health Foundation, LGA and Design Council.
- **Project stakeholders**, i.e., the teams delivering SPHL projects in each of the five local authority areas.
- **Local stakeholders**, i.e., individuals involved in local projects but outside of the SPHL delivery teams (e.g., from a strategic perspective, as a partner, as a volunteer, etc.)





Part 2: what did we learn from SPHL?

Lessons and challenges of taking complex system approaches

Key lessons from the evaluation: what is the system?

Understanding the system

- **System mapping**
- **Consultation with local stakeholders**, which helped
 - Grow networks
 - Build understanding of place

Describing and defining the system

- **Place-based approach** using pre-existing geographical or administrative boundaries (n=4)
- **Specific population** (n=1)

Taking a complex system perspective

- Multiple stakeholders
- Outcomes driven by multiple factors
- Non-linear relationships of cause and effect
- Easier to describe the system rather than complex dynamics of how systems change

Key lessons from the evaluation: enablers and obstacles

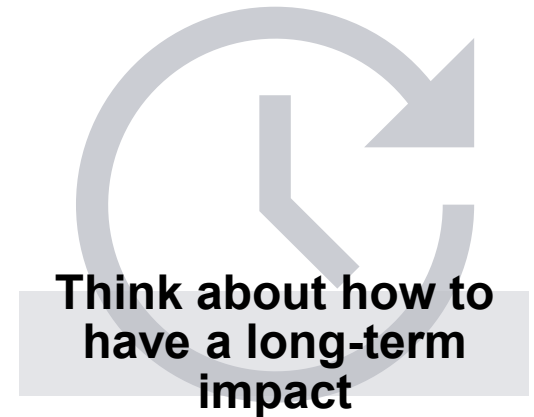
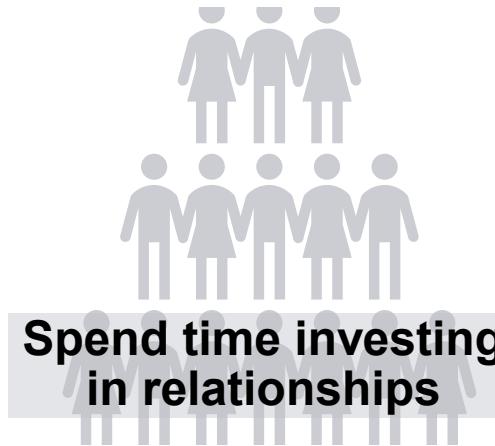
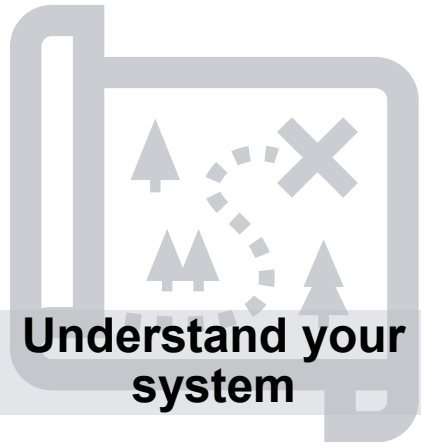
Enablers

- **Skills and local connections** of the team
- Alignment with **supportive local policy environments**
- Backing of **strategic system leaders**
- Flexibility of the **SPHL programme design**

Obstacles

- **Covid-19 and Cost of Living Crisis**
- **Resource constraints and time**
- Securing **buy-in** and maintaining **momentum**
- **Protecting time** to step back and reflect

The local authorities' key takeaways



Our key takeaways

The SPHL programme design has promoted an **innovative and experimental approach**

Participating local authorities are **committed to their complex system approaches**

A complex system approach **can be applied to systems of different shapes and size**

Taking a complex system change perspective **resembles a particular problem-solving mindset**

Building trust between the team and local stakeholders is an **essential component of system change work**

Communicating a complex system approach is **challenging**

Taking a complex system approach can make a difference, even in challenging circumstances and in a relatively short time



Part 3: lessons from commissioning and evaluating SPHL

Lessons from implementing a developmental evaluation

Inherent challenges of evaluating complex system change approaches, especially when the approach is developing alongside the evaluation.

Complexity of synthesising and sharing learning across five different areas, progressing at different paces and doing different things.

A lack of a single, shared theory about what complex system change meant.

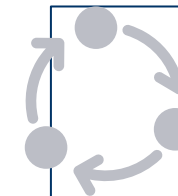
Teams were busy with their day-to-day roles, the SPHL programme and design activities.



Lesson 1: shared language about systems

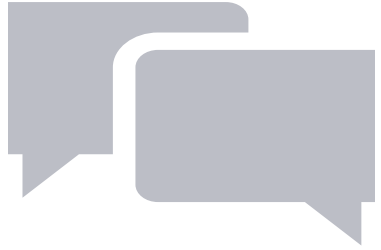


Lesson 2: integrating language and reflection into the delivery programme



Language 3: flexibility with methodology

Lesson 1: having a shared language about systems is important



To take advantage of the multi-site programme and facilitate learning between sites, it was useful to have a language everyone understood.

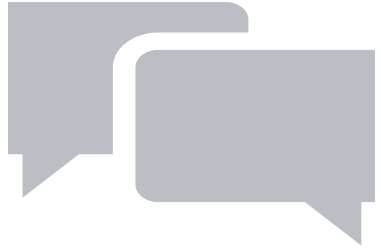


Without a shared language, it was a challenge to maximise the developmental potential of the multi-site programme.

This wasn't straightforward to do retrospectively.

- Some sites found the framework **less accessible** than others.
- We had to persuade some sites that we were **not trying to make changes to their programmes**.

Lesson 1: having a shared language about systems can sometimes be important



Thematic framework

Part 1 is the Action Scales Model (ASM) by Nobles et al. (2022).

Part 2 is based on work by McGill et al. (2020), which examines the different processes that take place when complex systems change

How do you change these systems to improve the wider determinants of health?

Beliefs. We will aim to change the norms, attitudes and values of people or organisations that are operating in the system.

Goals. We will aim to change the stated aims, targets or ambitions that the individuals, organisations, or the system as a whole are working towards.

Structures. We will aim to change mechanisms such as the flows of information, resources, relationships, and processes that define how different parts of the system interact.

Events. We will aim to change the things that happen in our system, like the behaviours of individuals or how services treat outcomes.

What happens to these systems when you make these changes?

Non-linear. The changes we've made in one area have resulted in other changes elsewhere. There is not a straight line between cause and affect.

Feedback loops. The changes we've made have resulted in further changes that have helped or slowed down progress.

Adaption. As we've made changes in one place, different parts of our system have changed independently in response.

Dynamism. Change in our system is happening all the time, but not always in the same way.

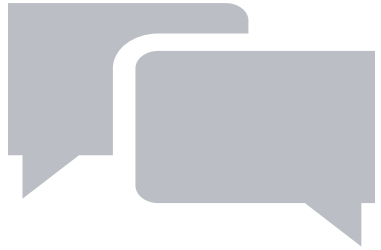
Co-evolution. Our system is changing with and in response to other systems. e.g. changes that are happening at international, national or even in neighbour systems affect our system too. This can be positive or negative.

Unintended consequences. The way our system changes is sometimes unexpected. This can be positive or negative.

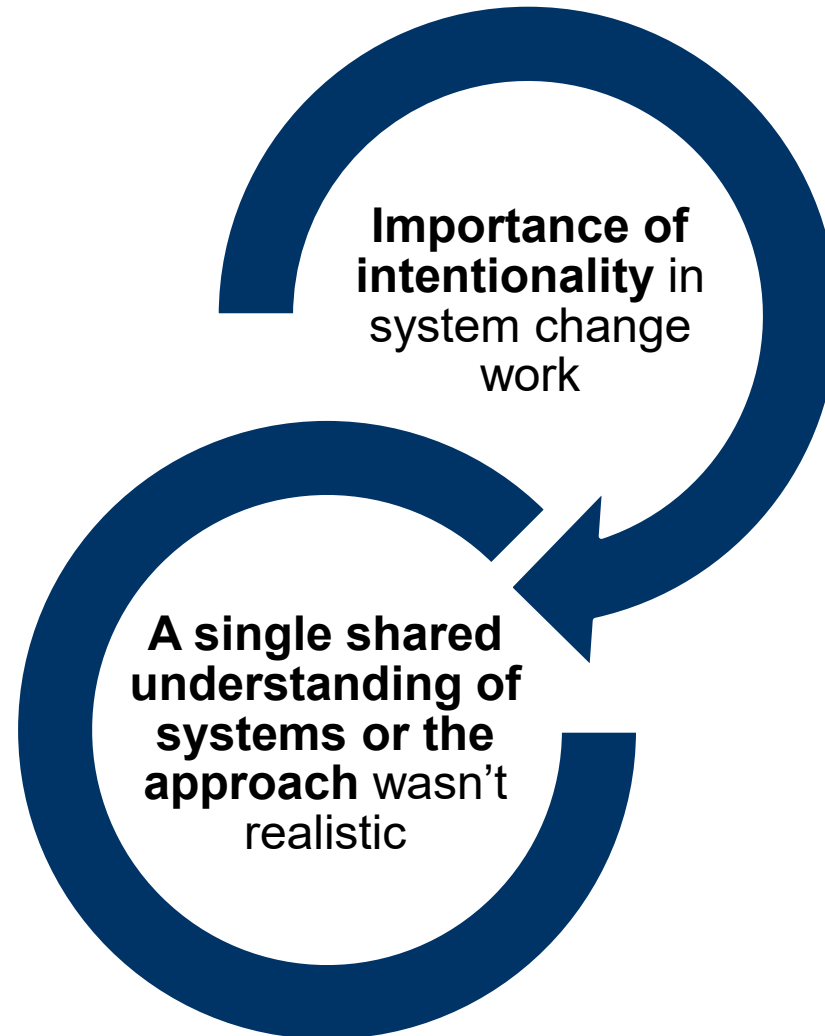
Emergent properties. Our system isn't the equal to the sum of its parts. Changes to parts of the system affect how it functions as a whole.

System trajectory. Sometimes change is slow and difficult, but sometimes it can happen suddenly and dramatically.

Lesson 1: but different language is needed in different contexts



But when it came to collecting evaluation data in each area, we also needed to meet people where they were at.

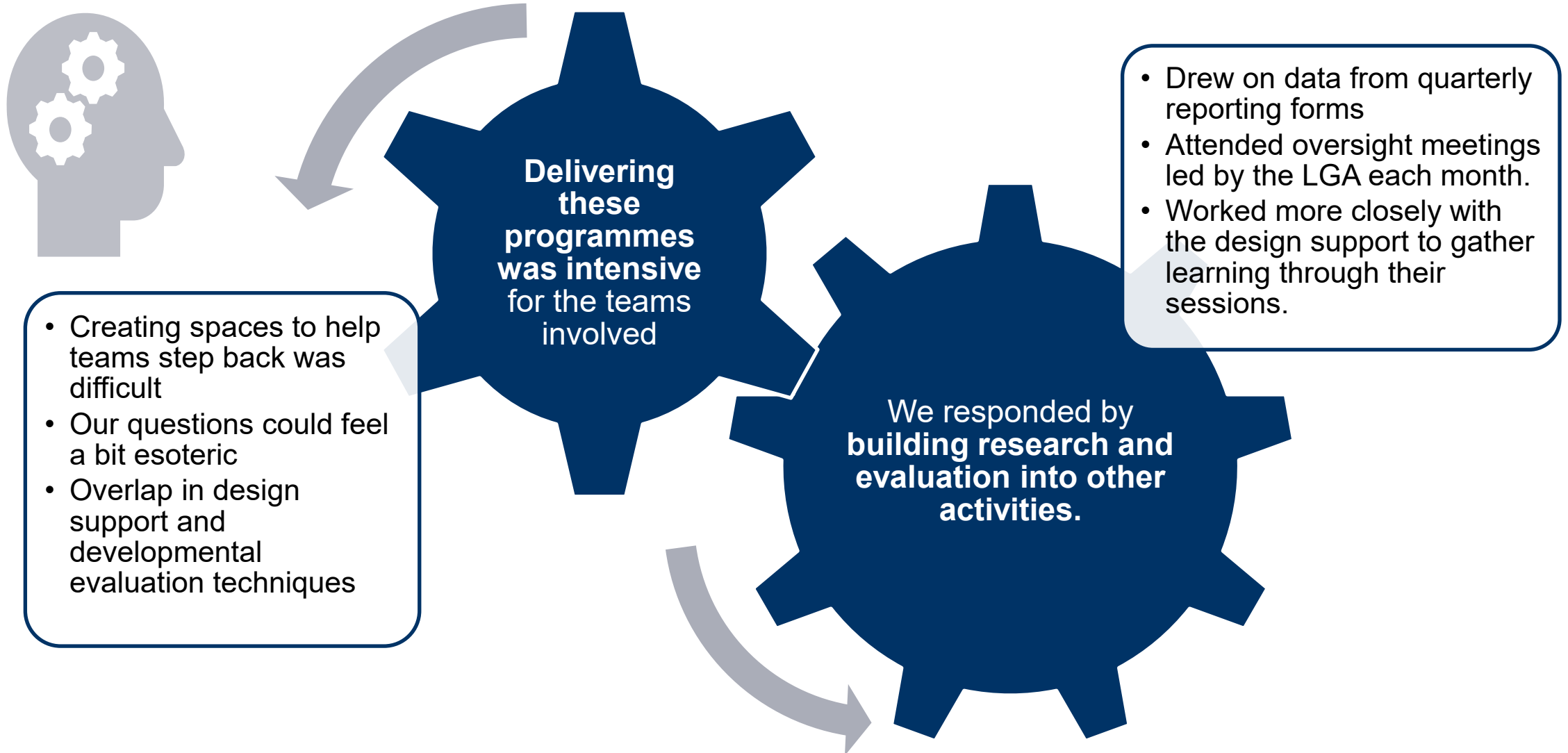


Relatively few people conceived of their work in terms of system change, especially among local volunteers.

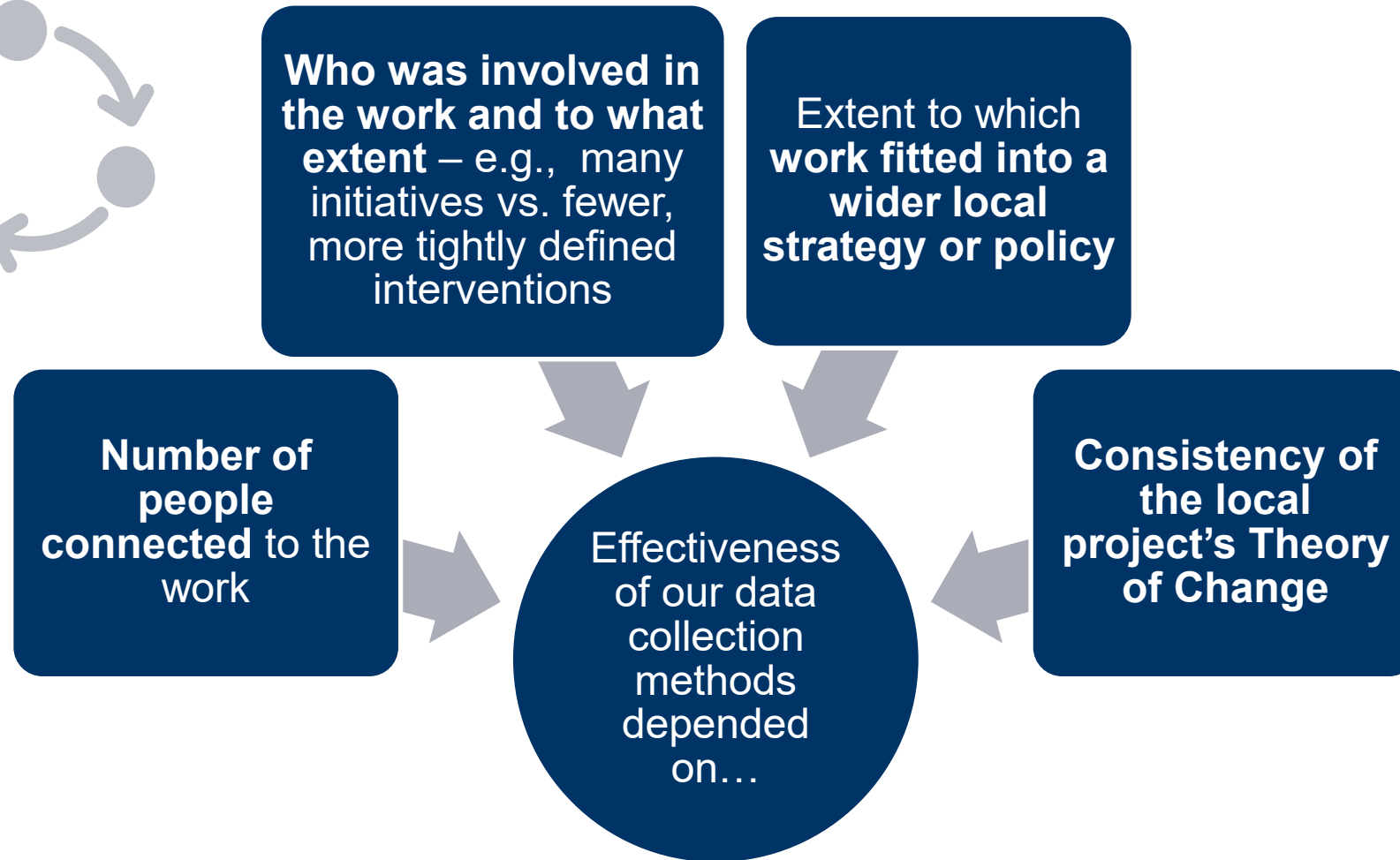
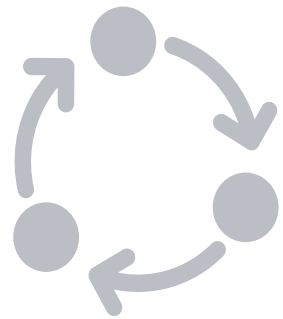
Had to find different ways of discussing work with different groups.

Sometimes places' system change approaches could feel diffuse as only a few people with real oversight of the system and/or approach

Lesson 2: integrating learning into other activities



Lesson 3: adapting flexible data collection methods to fit local context and understanding of systems



All these factors informed:

- Who we spoke to
- The nature of the conversations we had
- How many people we spoke to
- How learning could be used to support development of the practices

Health Foundation reflections: commissioning and delivering developmental evaluations



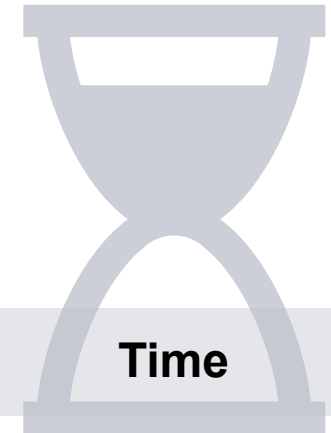
Getting buy-in



**Programme and
evaluation objectives
are the same?**



**Blurring evaluation
and learning**



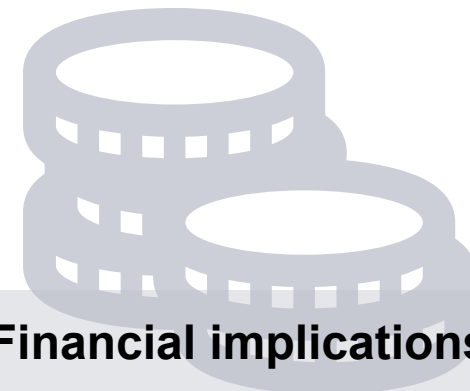
Time



New findings



**It's all about
relationships**



Financial implications

Key Takeaways



Developmental evaluations can feel risky



Time to reflect



Embrace the chaos