

Taking a user centred systems  
thinking approach

*...with*  
**snook**



Hello, we are Snook.  
We're a design studio  
built to make a world  
where people and planet  
thrive



## **We think deep and look wide to transform the systems that shape our world.**

That means everything, everywhere – from exploring healthcare's digital future, to tearing down barriers to accessible transport. Bit by bit, we're making our world more human – so everyone can thrive.

**More accessible, more sustainable: more human and consequence aware, you will see these themes throughout the course.**



# We have over ten years of experience working across the public, private and third sector.

We've built great products and services in a huge variety of scenarios, putting people at the heart of the design process every time.

We've designed new systems, helping organisations join up their efforts and improve outcomes for the public.



# Event top tips:

- Ask ‘all the’ questions. This space is **full** of acronyms, and it’s important that everyone in the group knows what we’re talking about. Use **chat**, hands up or unmute!
- Respect each other, plus your and each other’s boundaries and stretch zones, but do try to stretch...
- Confidentiality: what’s said here stays here, what's learned here leaves here.
- Be present, lean in, for yourself and others Turn those tabs off 😊 Show up with humility and empathy even if opinions differ.

We ask you to have cameras **on** when in group discussions, tasks and sharing reflections, but **off** when we are sharing slides - but if low Wi-Fi, not comfortable, it’s fine to leave off throughout.

**“Leaving a camera off during calls can reduce carbon footprints by 96%”**

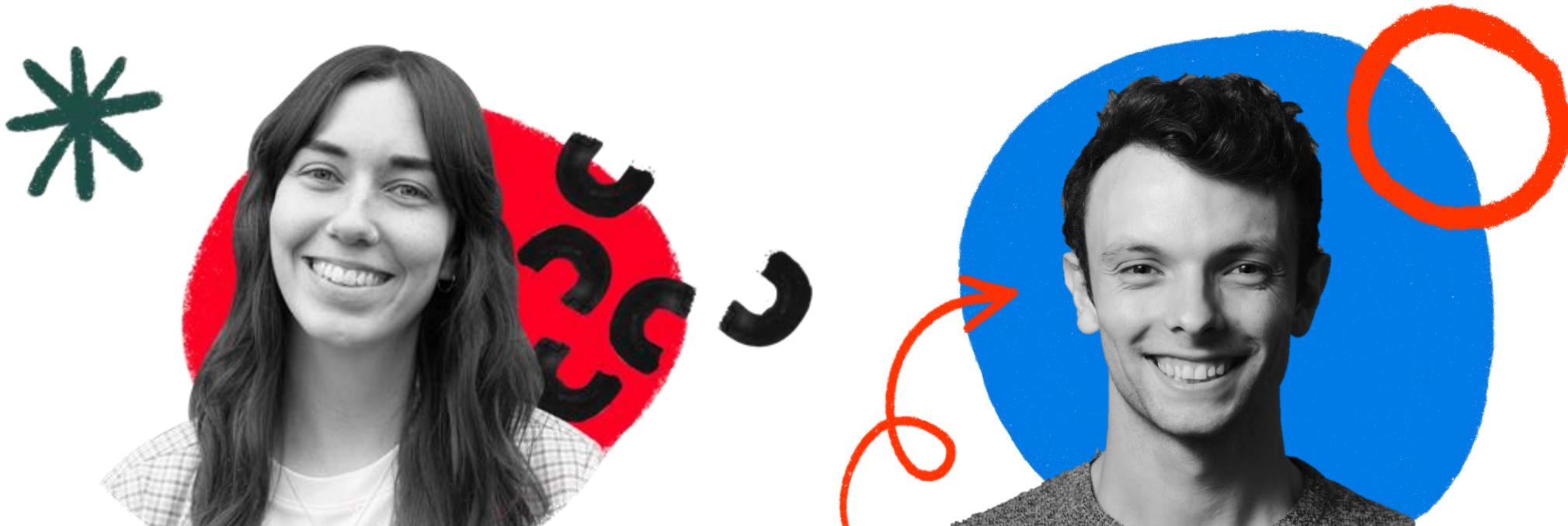
9.30 - 13.00

Today & Tomorrow  
With healthy breaks

[Reduce Environmental Impact in Virtual Meetings](#)



# We are Olivia & Rowan



**Olivia Holbrook**  
Senior Service Designer

[Twitter](#) | [Linkedin](#)

**Rowan Spear**  
Senior Service Designer

[Profile](#)

**Let's check in...  
Hello to you!**

What brought you joy today/this week?  
Personally, or professionally, what has  
made you smile.



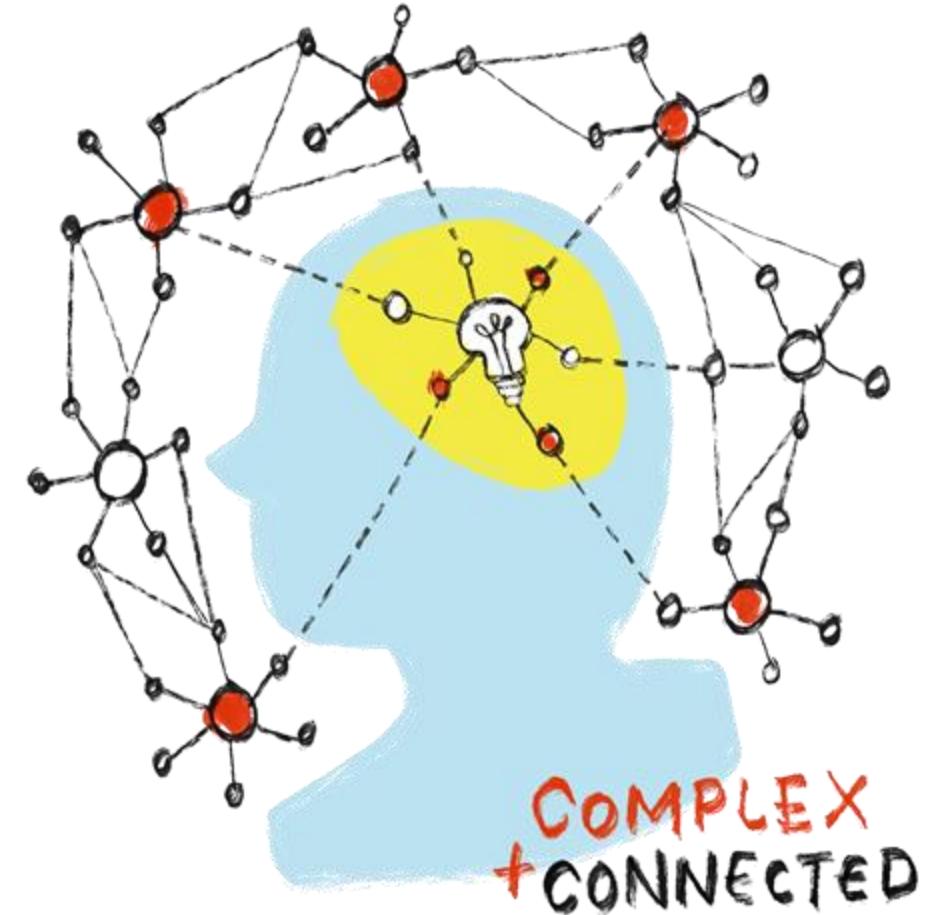
# Introduction to a user centred systems thinking approach



## Working in complex spaces

Organisations often struggle to make effective change when designing in complex spaces, where everything is connected, and all actions have a knock-on effect.

Problems rarely happen or are solved in isolation. As a result, projects fail or don't have the intended impact.

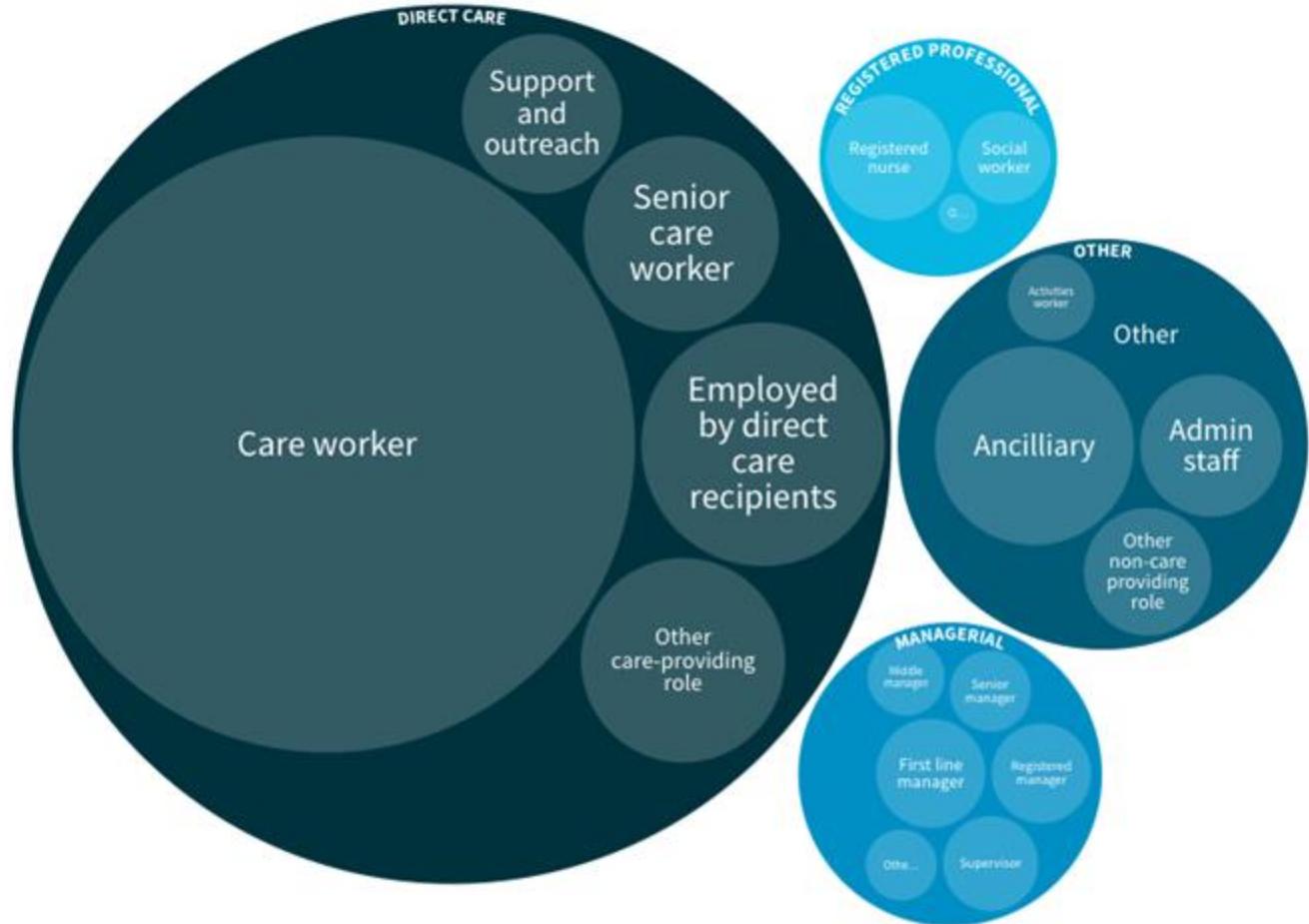


# What is a system?

**A system is a complex interconnected network** made up of elements or ‘things’, working together to deliver services, products and experiences.

For example, adult social care is a system made up of different elements such as people, organisations, cultures, biases, tech platforms etc.

How these elements relate and work together to deliver adult social care, creates a network known as a complex system.



# What is systems thinking?

**Systems thinking** is a holistic problem-solving approach that focuses on understanding the connections of a network or complex system. It's a practice of recognising how different parts of a system interact with one another, and understanding how changes in one part of the system can affect other parts.

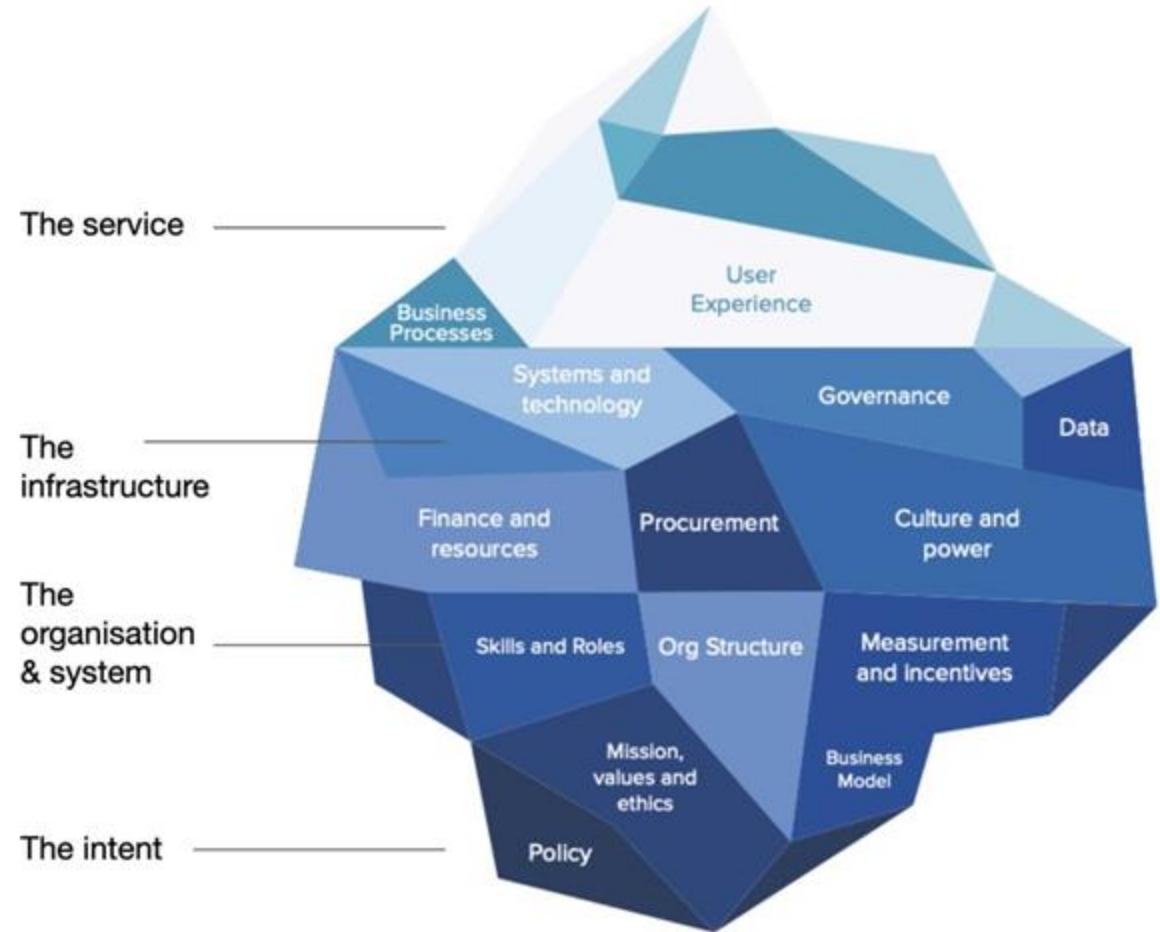
Using a systems thinking approach can help you see the bigger picture to understand why problems exist. Traditionally used to predict the impact of likely changes made.



# Example of systems thinking in design

In Snook we've begun introducing systems approaches by looking at the full stack when we design services.

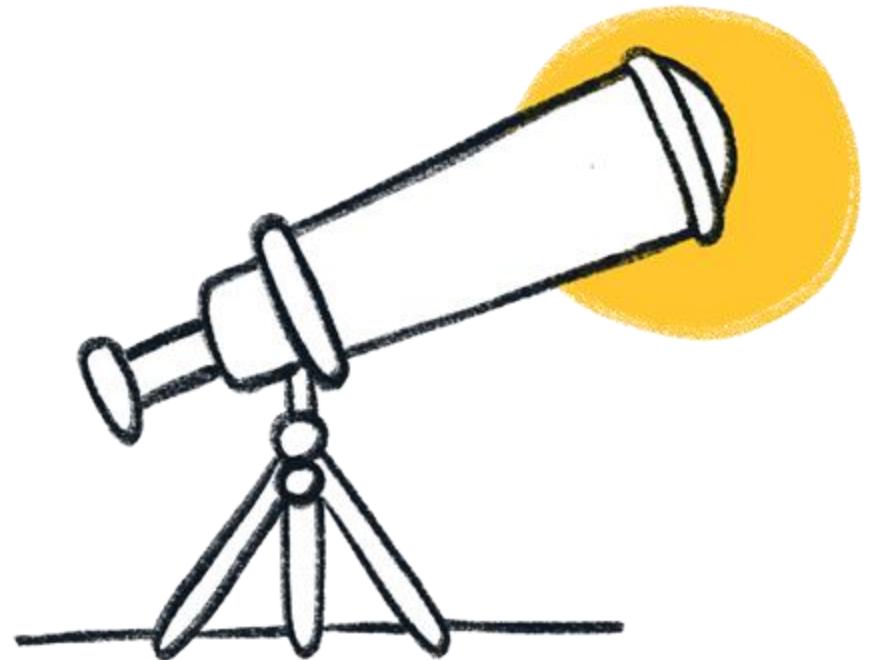
Helping us to zoom out and see layers and connections in the system.



## Zooming out

### Value

- See problems holistically
- Create alignment



It doesn't make these challenges any less complex, but it gives us a way to embrace complexity in order to design better solutions

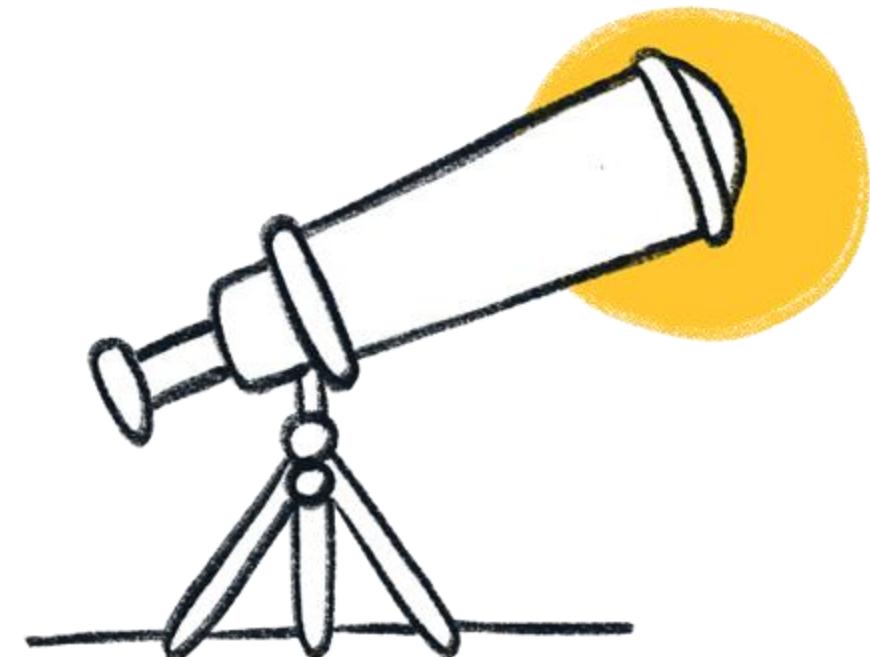
## Zooming out

### **Value**

- See problems holistically
- Create alignment

### **Why it falls short**

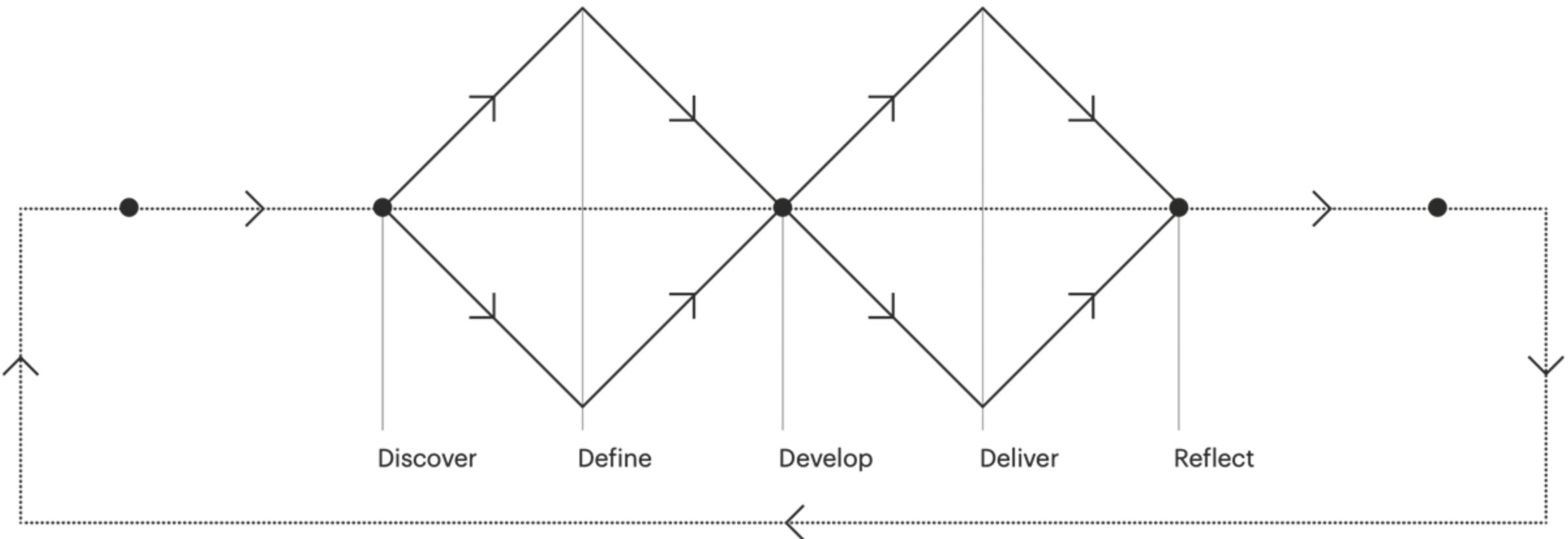
- Can be overwhelming
- Making decisions
- Designing for longer term thinking



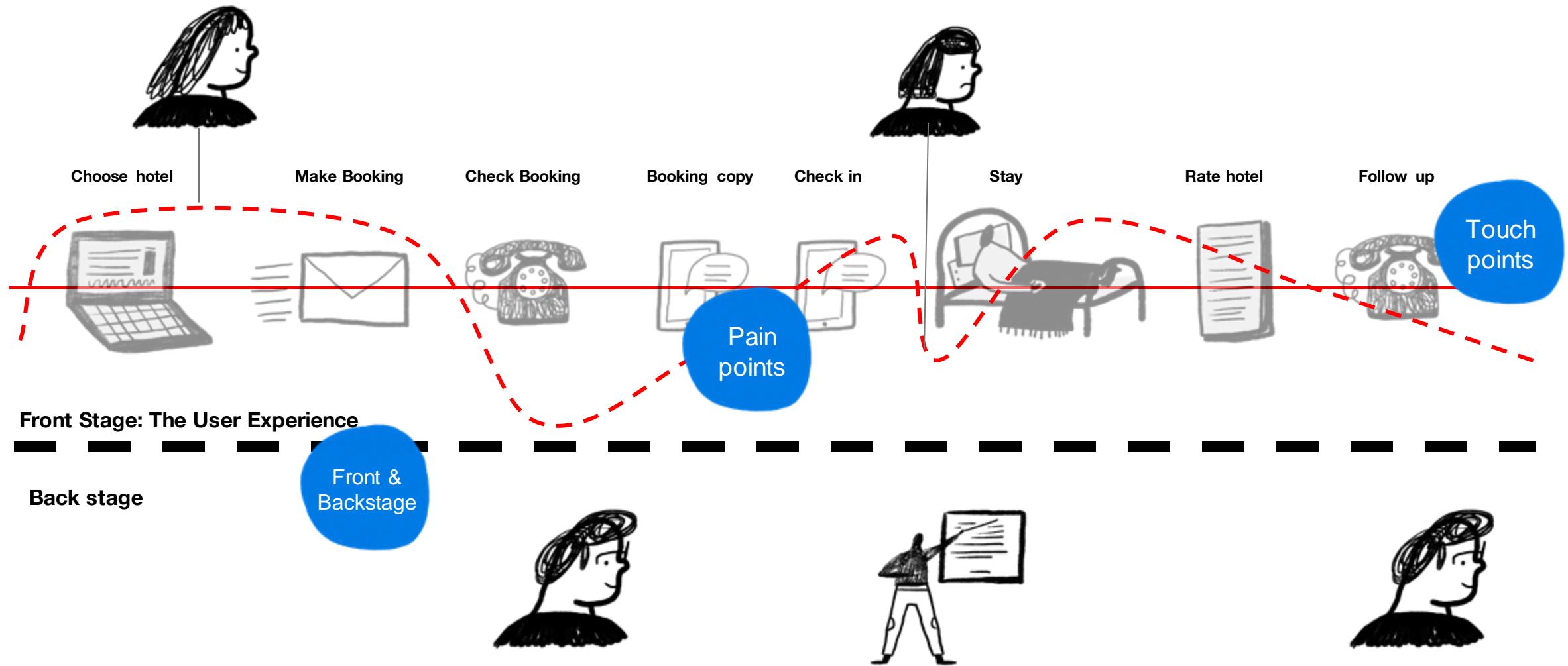
Traditionally systems thinking is used to understand a system, with a goal to speculating what the future might look like

# Recognising user centred design

Designing the right thing | Designing the thing right



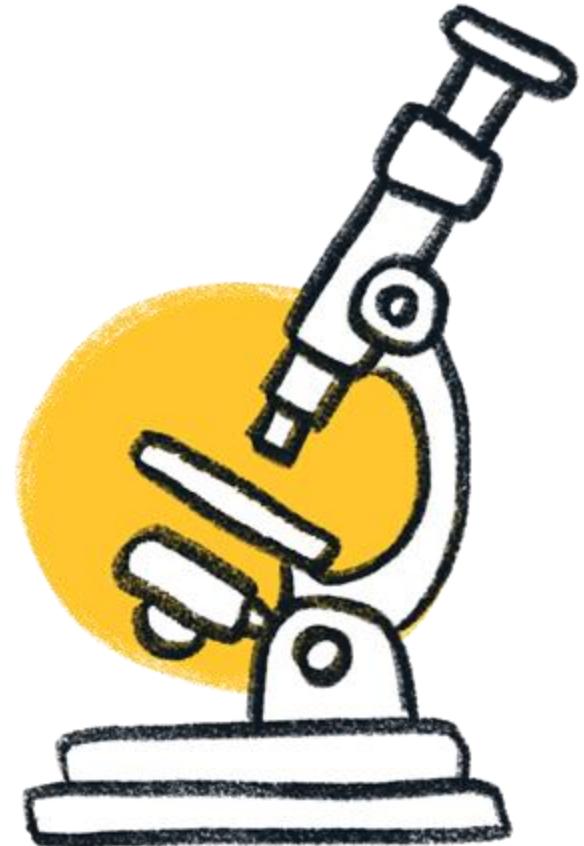
# Example of a journey map



## Zooming in

### **Value**

- Design methods are proven
- Capture's a lot of detail about a single service



## Zooming in

### **Value**

- Design methods are proven
- Capture's a lot of detail about a single service

### **Why it falls short**

- Not understanding the problems holistically
- Encourages linear thinking
- Designing for short term thinking



## Why do fixes fail?

Let's transport you for a minute to the island of Kiribati, in the middle of the Pacific.

For generations, the people on Kiribati survived by harvesting coconuts and fishing in the coastal waters. Resulting in tropical reefs off the island being severely overfished.

If fishing continued at the same rate, one of the island's main sources of food and livelihoods would be threatened, and the reefs would continue to be drained of their rich biodiversity.



## Why do fixes fail?

**Have you ever implemented something that didn't work out quite as planned? What happened? What frustrated you?**

**If you are only a winning success, have you read about fixes that fail?**

Note down your thoughts on paper or use notes on your computer

## In your teams

Say Hello (again)!

2- 3 minutes per person dig into sharing your experiences,  
Make sure everyone has a voice.  
Listen to your diverse experiences.

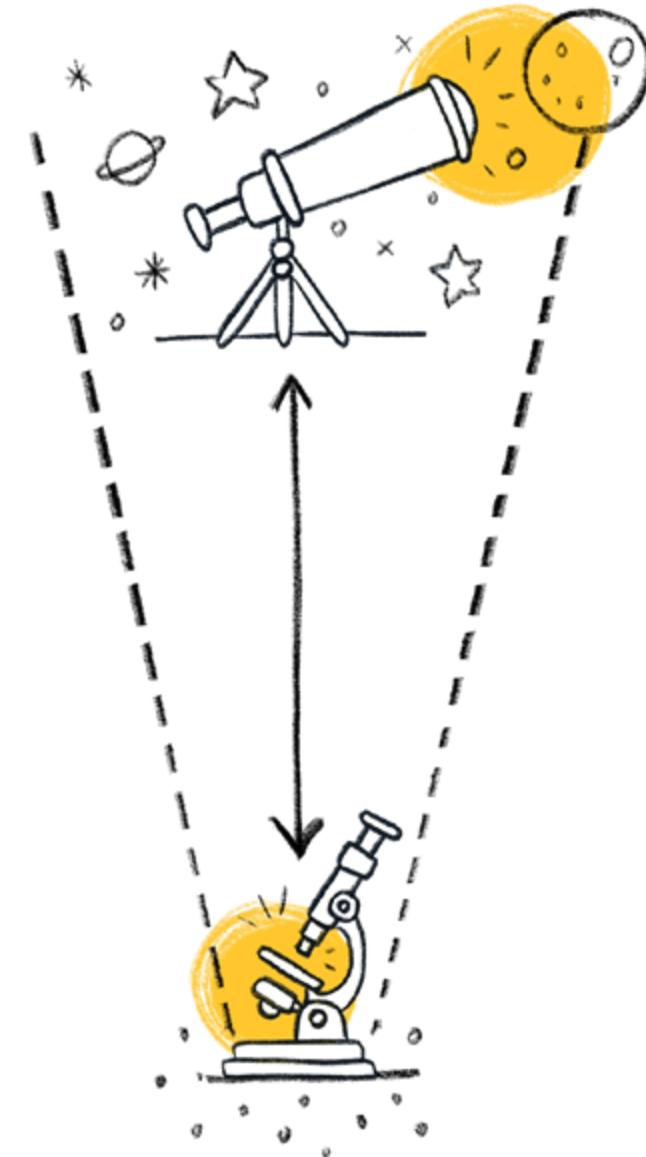
Be ready for 1 min share back from a couple of the teams

withhold judgements, share have fun and build  
on each other.

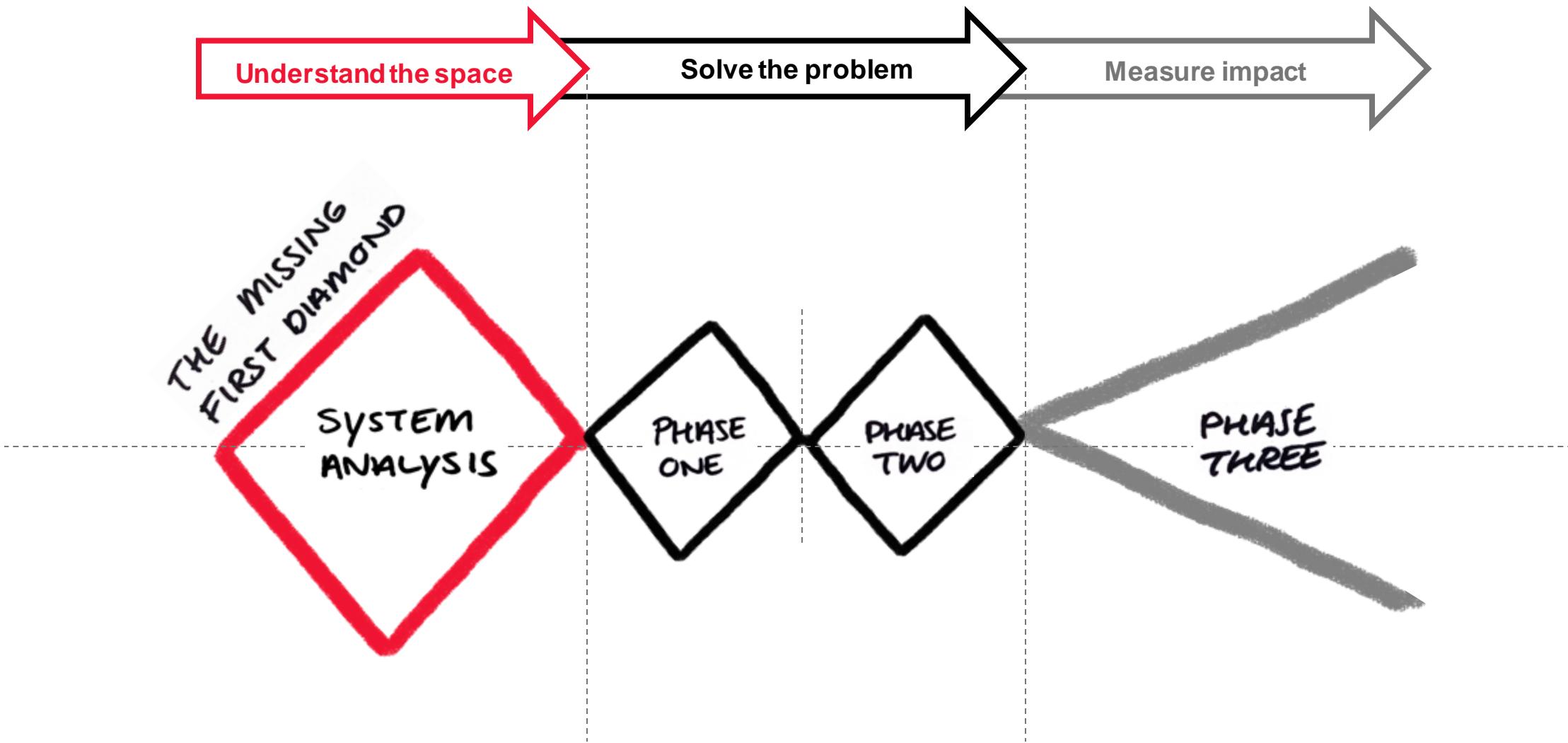
**Sharing is caring,  
let's work in the open and  
hear a couple of voices**



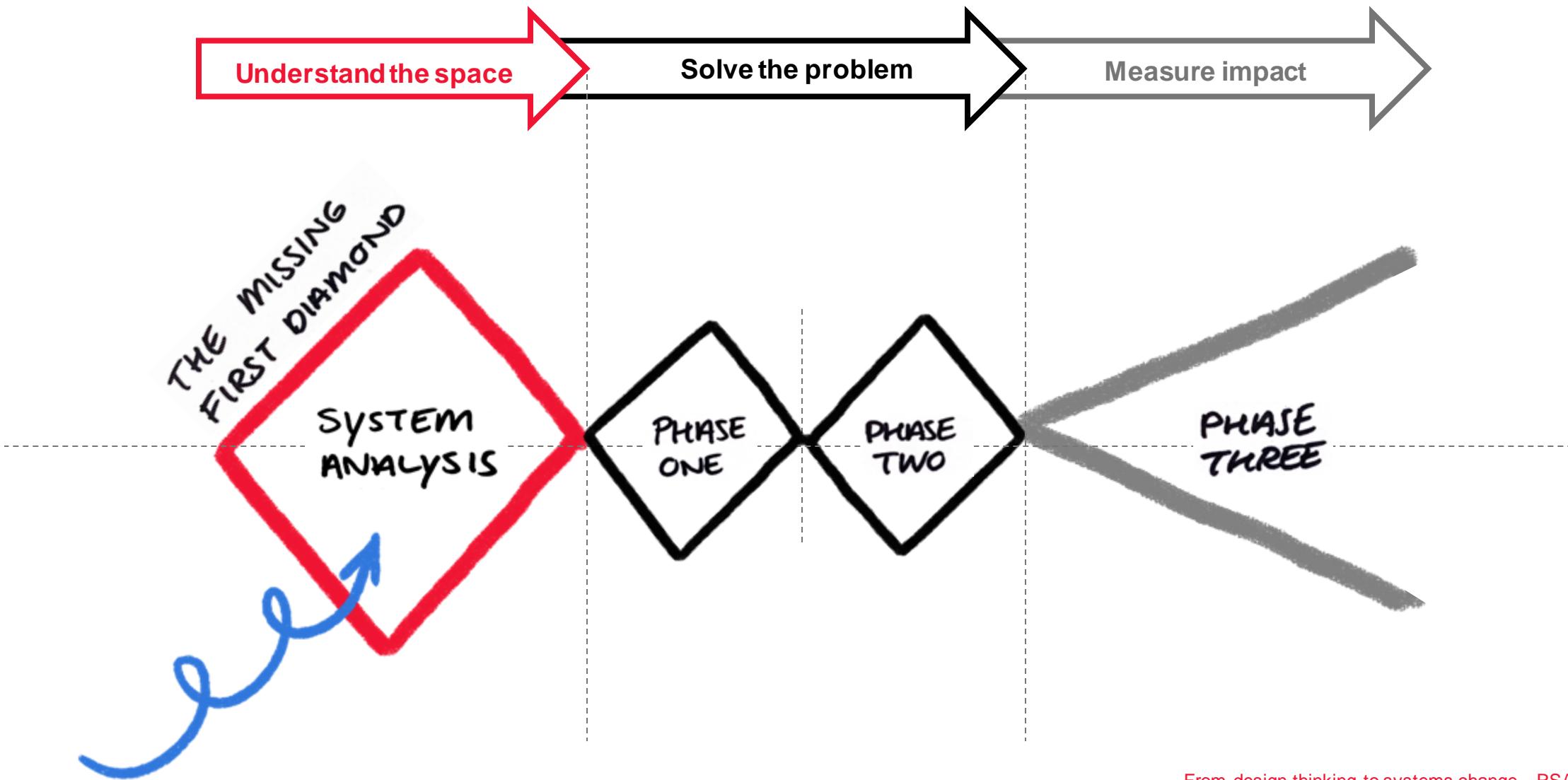
User Centred Systems Thinking is about repeatedly zooming in and zooming out to design effective and sustainable changes.



# The User Centred Systems Thinking Approach



# User Centred Systems thinking as an approach



# User Centred Systems thinking as an approach

Identifying systems thinking tools and techniques that can work alongside and complement design thinking

Systems thinking



1. Framing the system



3. Understanding the system



5. Exploring the possibility space



7. Fostering the transition

Design thinking



2. Listening to the system



4. Defining the desired future



6. Designing the intervention model



**Short Break**

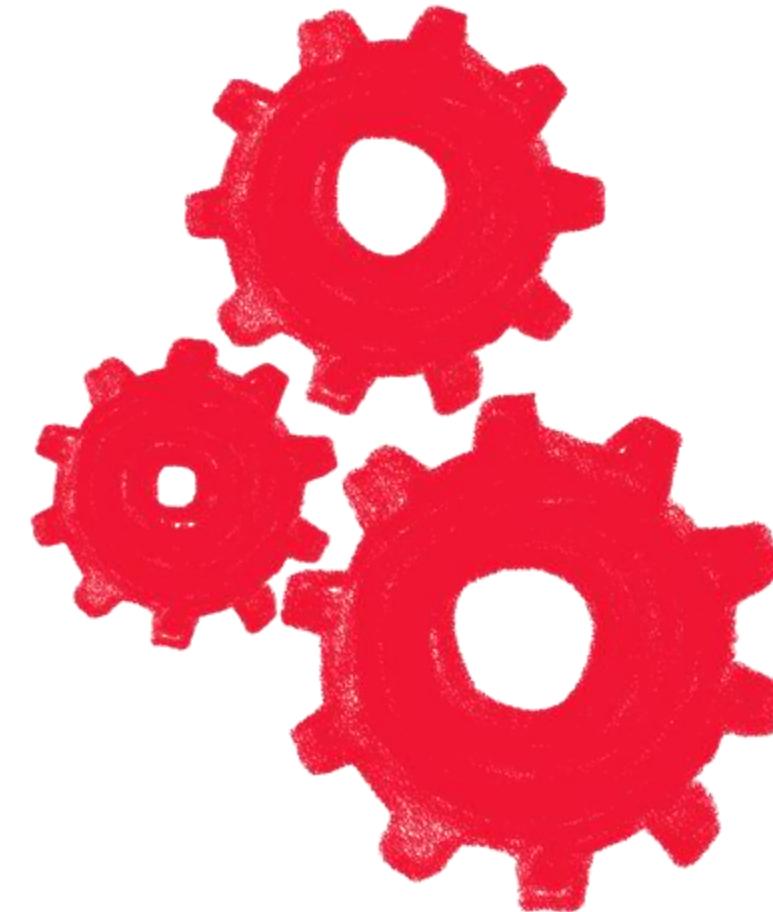
# When to apply a systems approach?

Deciding when to apply a systems approach is all about recognising if a problem you're dealing with is complicated or complex.

In 1966, Karl Popper, a philosopher of science, observed that some problems can be classified as **complicated**. Meaning they work like clocks. These problems are mechanical, finite, predictable and controllable.

On the other hand, some problems would be classified as **complex**, making them comparable to clouds. They are infinite, ever-changing, unpredictable, and hard to control.

*Some people also call these problems 'adaptive challenges' or 'wicked problems.'*



## ***Polio*** is a complicated problem



Although the problem is complicated to solve there is a solution – in this case a vaccine. How you plan to distribute the vaccine will be a complicated, requiring you to understand the steps of a journey and engaging a lot of stakeholders. But once the parts are aligned the problem will be fixed, like a clock.

## ***Homelessness*** is a complex problem



The solution isn't as simple as implementing a single intervention or change - introducing more beds to a homeless shelter won't end homelessness – to solve homelessness we need to understand people's relationship with finance, employment, dependencies etc. We need to review policies, processes, institutions etc. This makes it hard to control and change, like clouds.

**Think for a minute about the following problems.**

**Which would you characterise as complicated problems and which would you classify as complex problems? Why?**

- A new employee's inability to use Excel to create spreadsheets
- High rates of imprisonment in the United States
- Houses that have collapsed in an earthquake
- The refugee crisis



Sharing is  
caring

## What problems benefit from a user centred systems thinking approach?

According to [The Systems Thinker](#), if a problem meets these four criteria it could benefit from a systems thinking approach:

The issue is important.

The problem is recurring.

The problem is familiar and has known history.

People have unsuccessfully tried to solve the problem.



## Questions to ask yourself

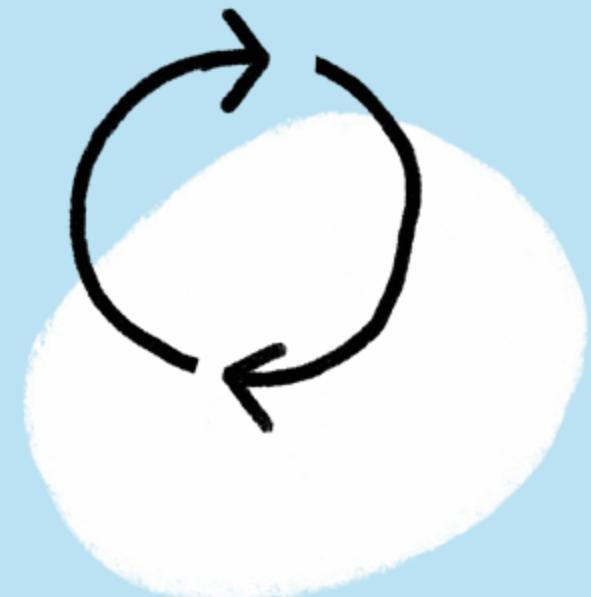
- Does the challenge you're trying to tackle transcend multiple orgs?
- Is this an entrenched problem that has previously tried to be solved but hasn't worked?
- Do you have allies across the system willing to engage and support this work?

# Adapting a systems mindset

## In practice tips

Adapting a systems thinking approach requires a change in mindset, **from linear to circular**.

**From fix to change; a system is never broken.**  
How it functions is how it was designed to function, whether it was consciously or subconsciously designed is another question.



# Adapting a systems mindset

## In practice tips

**Systems are like brownfields sites for development.** Very rarely are services and systems designed from scratch. Often, they are designed subconsciously piece by piece building on what existed previously

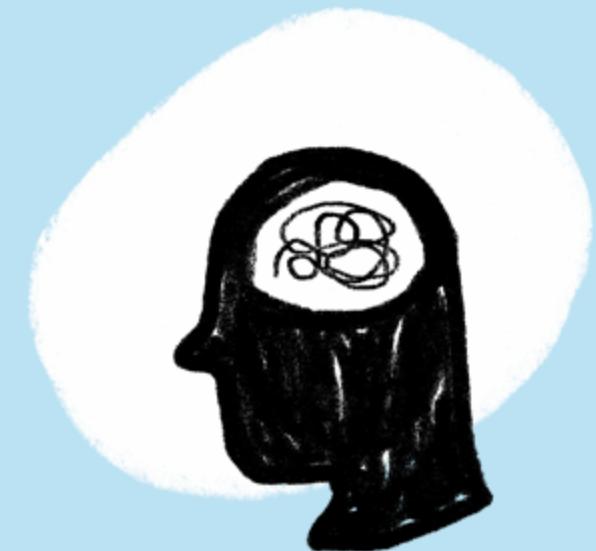


# Adapting a systems mindset

## In practice tips

Working in a systems thinking approach it's important to **feel comfortable with ambiguity**. You will never know everything about a system, nor should you. You only need to know enough to make the next step or decision.

**Understanding complexity** - Being able to acknowledge complexity and speak about it – recognising good complexity and bad complexity. Remember, don't try to simplify complexity, but rather make complexity simple to discuss

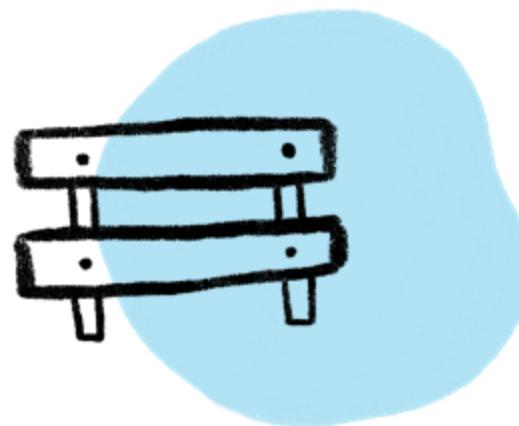


# A user centred systems thinking approach in practice

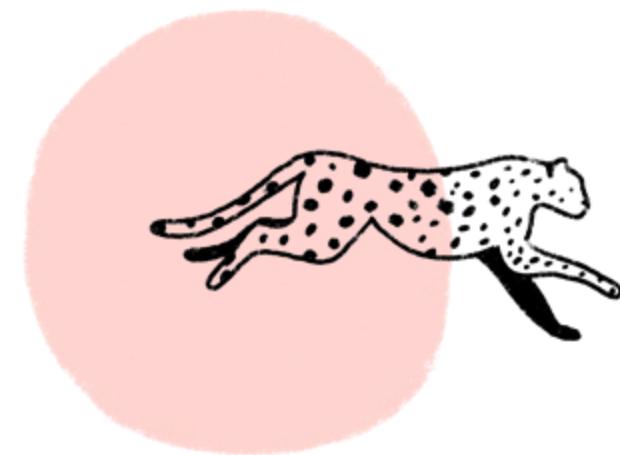
Understand  
the system



Set  
boundaries



Take  
action



## Why take a user centred systems thinking approach?

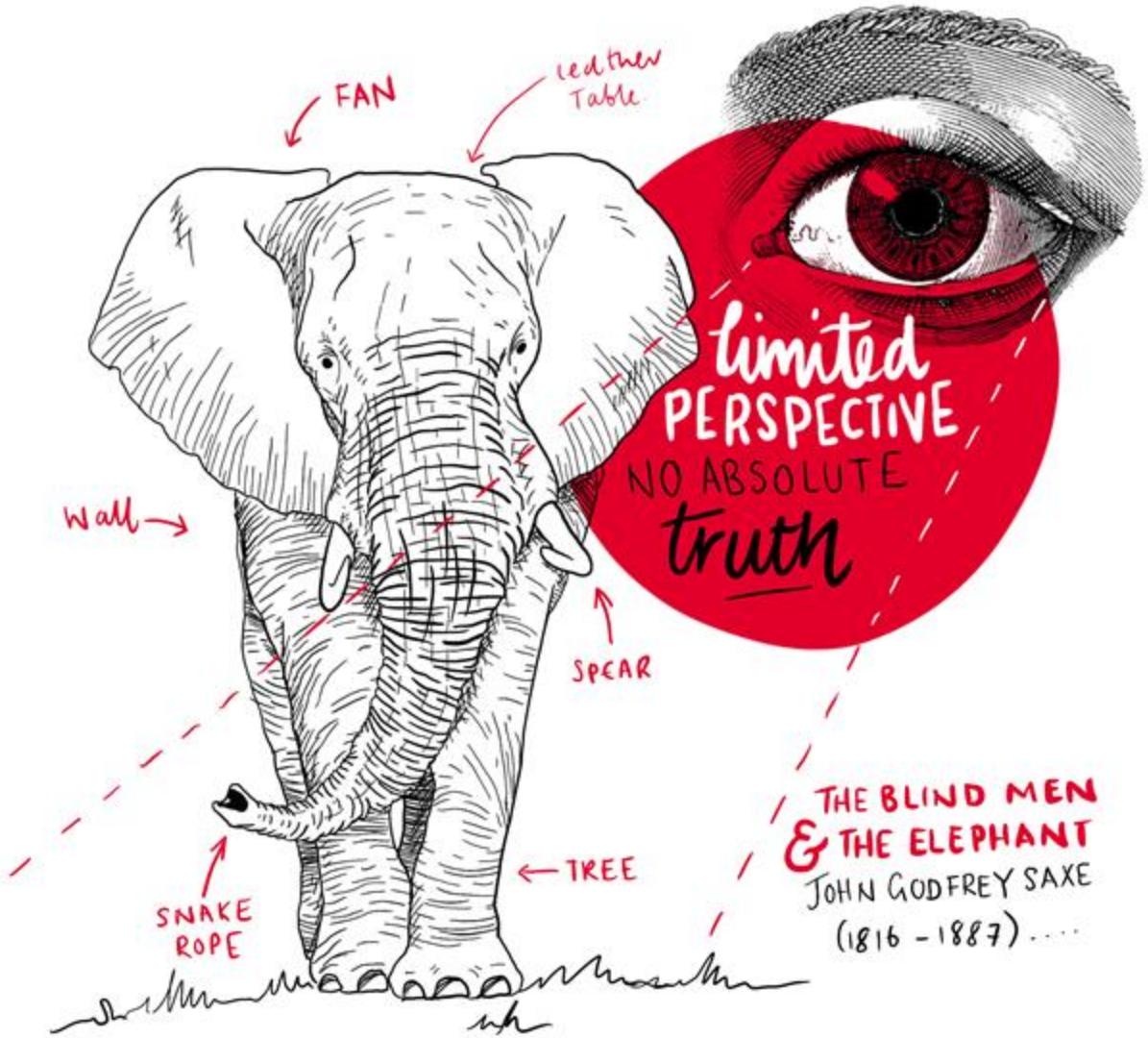
So you can understand a system well enough to facilitate conversations and enable decision making.

**It's not about finding new problems but connecting people around a problem to make an informed decision about how to solve it. Building consensus, to take action and reducing unintended consequences.**

# Understanding the system

Introduction to mapping tools and methods





The moral of the parable is that **humans have a tendency to claim absolute truth based on their limited, subjective experience as they ignore other people's limited, subjective experiences which may be equally true.**

# Understanding a system

If we apply the same logic as the parable, typically people will never experience a system in the same way – **our perspective is limited to what we see, hear and interact with.**

This means no one person will be able to solve a complex systemic problem on their own.

Before we can understand what needs to change, we need to know what problems exist. Which requires **an aligned view of the system**, a shared single perspective.



**But, how do we build alignment? Visualise the system**

# Maps are the tools that designers use to make sense of the world

“They’re great for starting conversations. They help teams and stakeholders to understand interactions with a service across touchpoints over time. They can be used as a research tool, for planning and operating services, and for storytelling”.



[Government service designers mapping together](#)



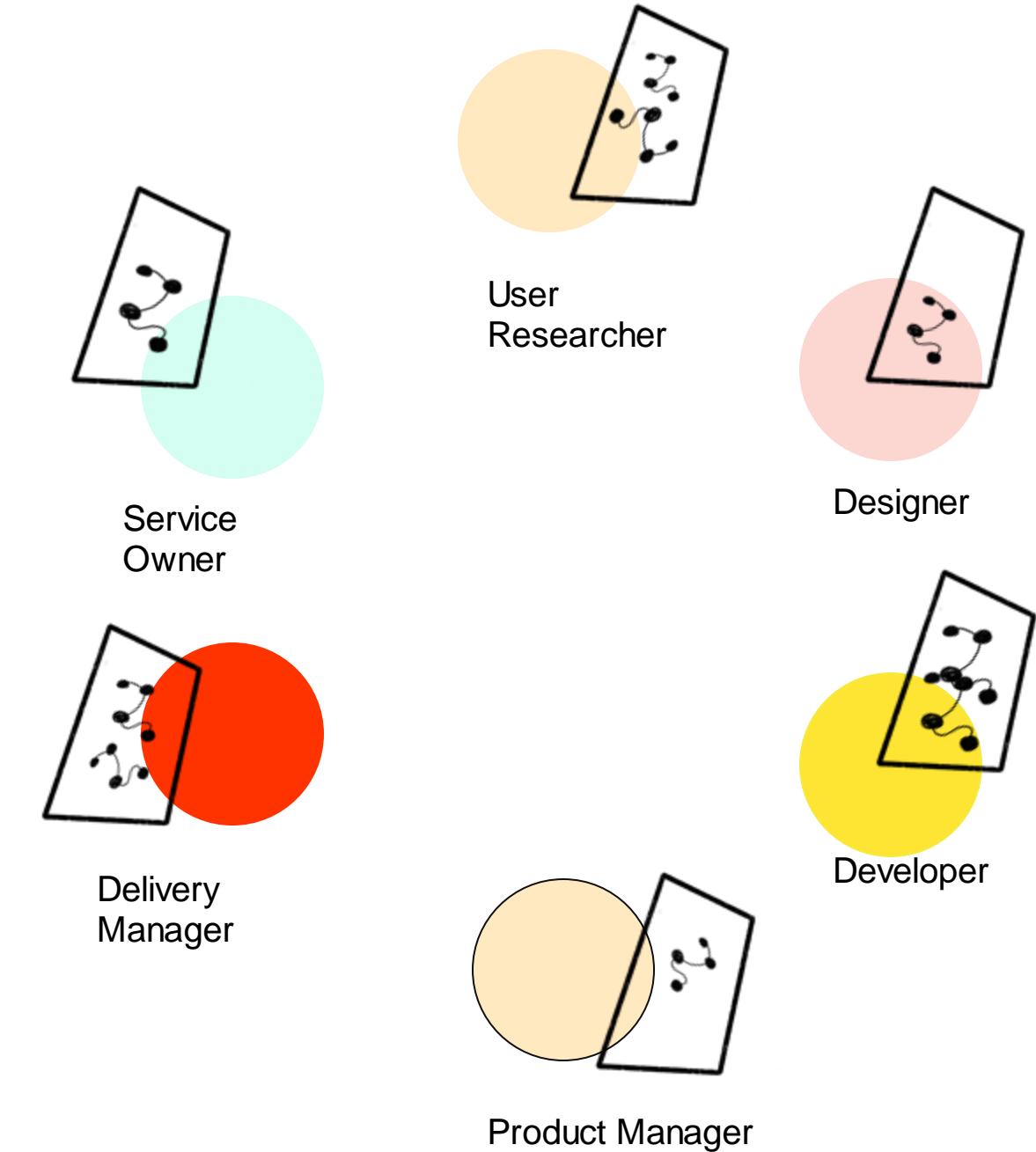
“Maps are an incredible tool when used as a living, evolving driver of change. As soon as you hang them on the wall they are outdated and just a pretty moment in time. I had a client that admired them for years, But.... I realised the only thing I had changed was his wallpaper.”

Miles Mayr  
Senior Service Designer Ostmodern

# Maps are a collaborative working tool

Mapping is powerful when it involves different people from the leader, to the team, to clients, to stakeholders as they all bring different perspectives on the situation.

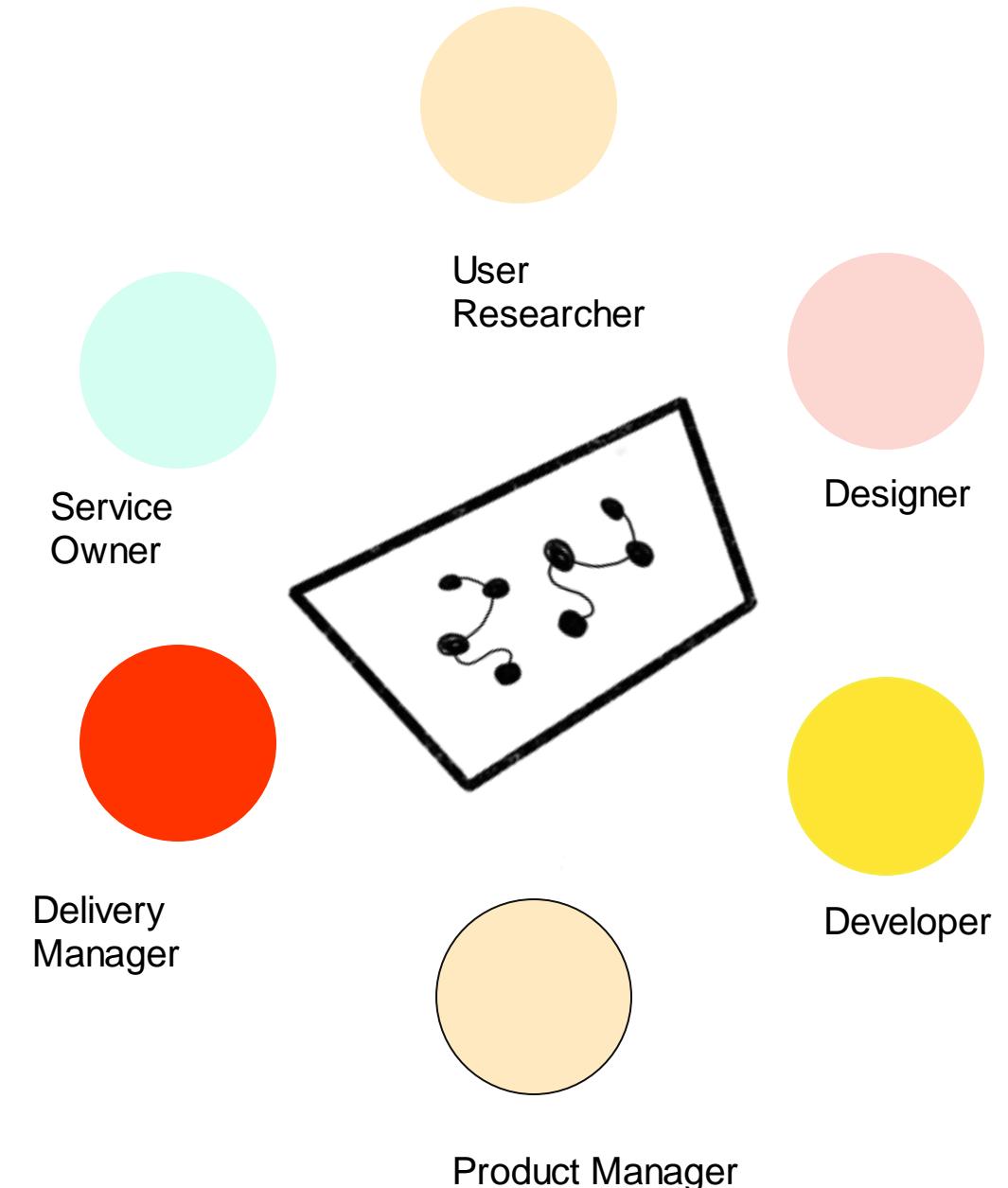
All will hold different mental models regarding how a system works and how it is experienced by its users. It's easy for misunderstandings to arise.



# Maps are boundary objects

Maps bring ideas and vision into a central shared space where everyone holds a shared understanding.

A boundary object is a ‘thing’ that is both defined enough that several communities can recognise it as the same thing, yet flexible enough that each can use it according to their own needs.



“There are lots of different ‘types’ of maps with specific names – try not to get too attached to particular types of maps or map templates.

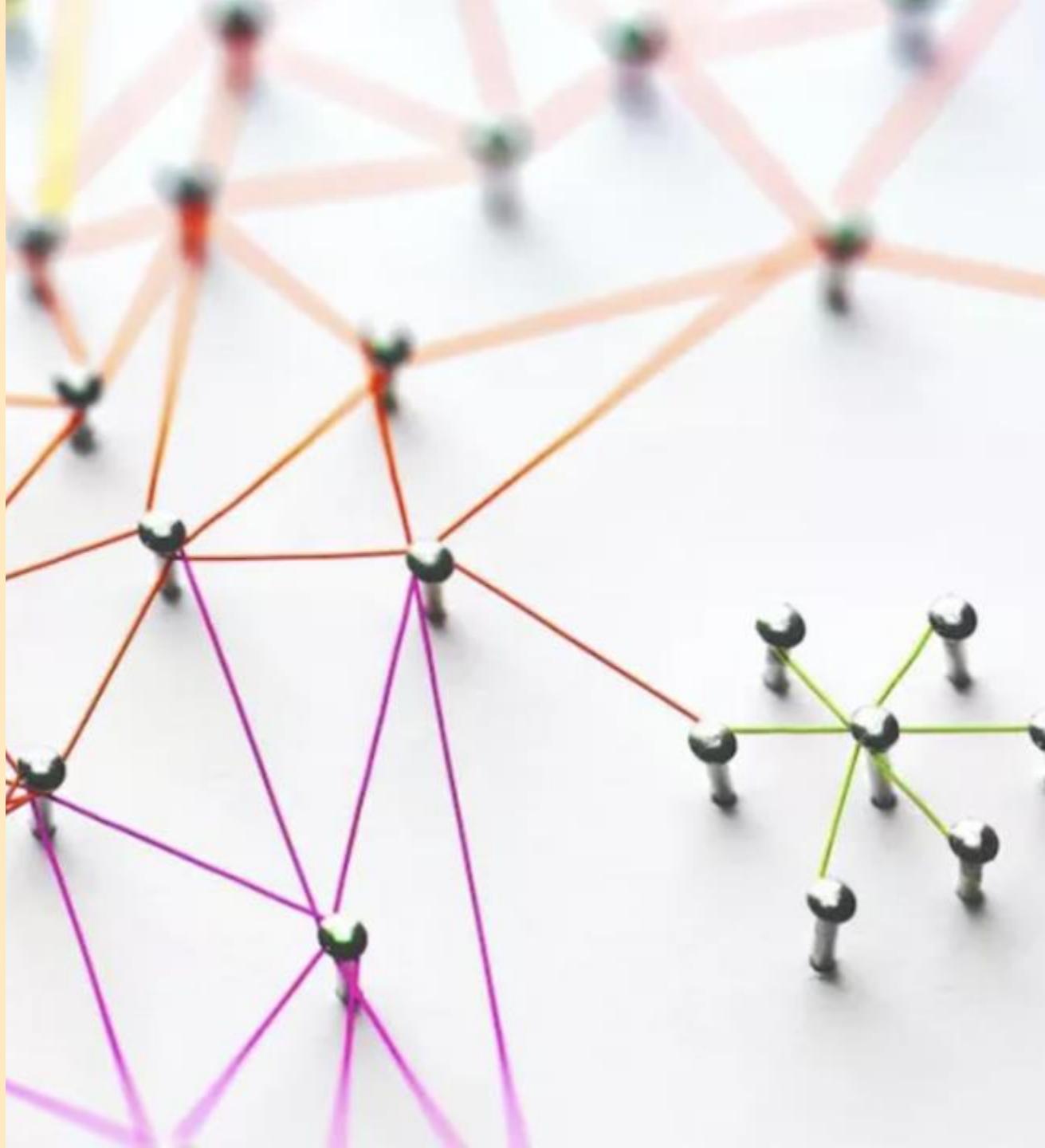
Decide what your map should look like based on your context, who the map is for and what you want it to do”

**Clara Greo - Service designer and training lead GDS**

[Service Mapping: a Step by Step Guide](#)

Here are some of the common systems maps used in the design space:

- The Iceberg model
- Three horizons
- Landscape maps
- Influence maps
- Hexagon maps



# Landscape map

## Systems approach to stakeholder mapping

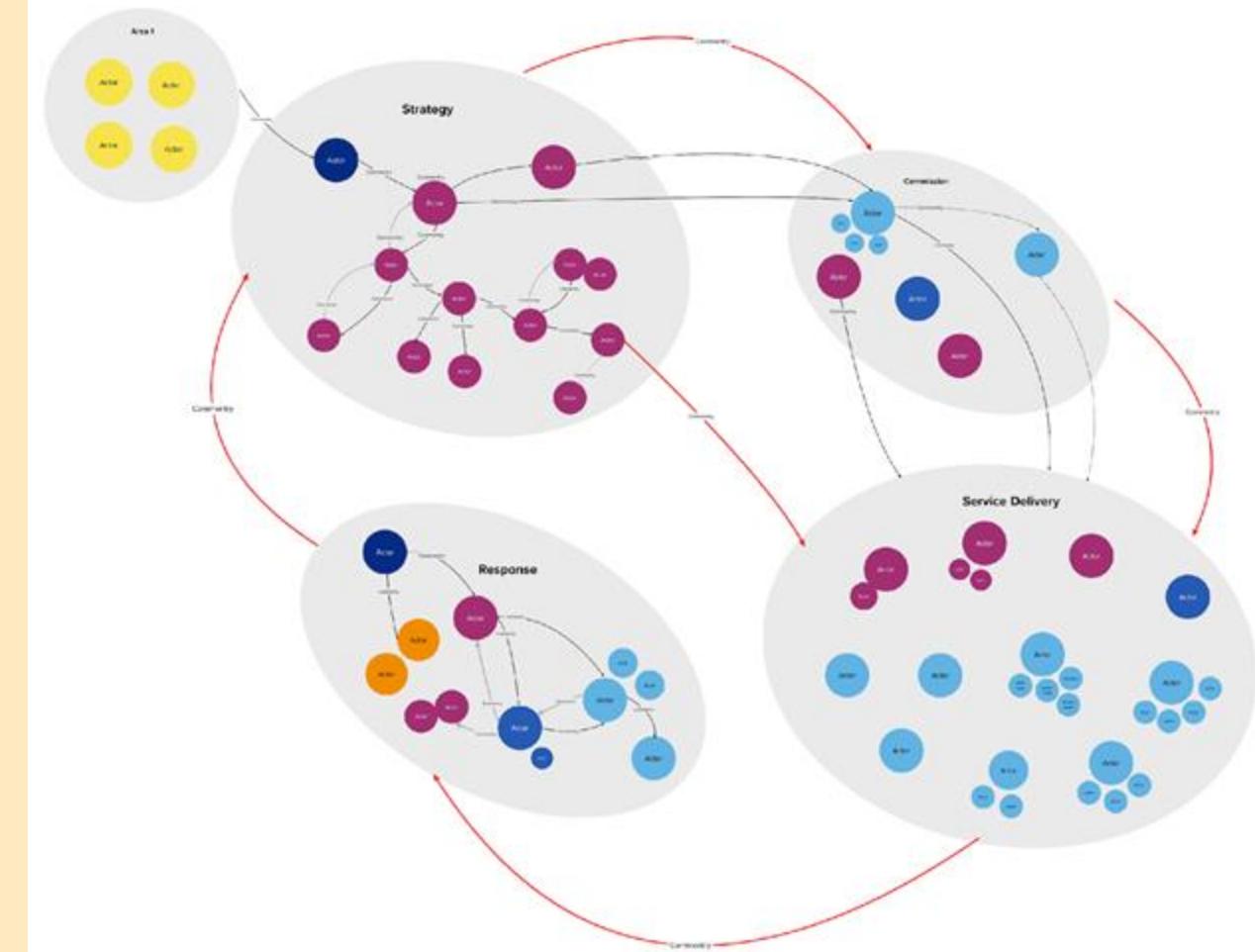
**What is it?** a mapping tool to build your understanding of the system. It focuses on capturing the connections between the elements of a system, documenting how they relate to one another.

**What value does it provide?** It's used to make sense of a system

- Identify actors in the system and how they connect to one another.
- Find gaps in your knowledge
- Begin creating shared terminology and a visual language

### Top tips

- Map what you know
- Start early and update



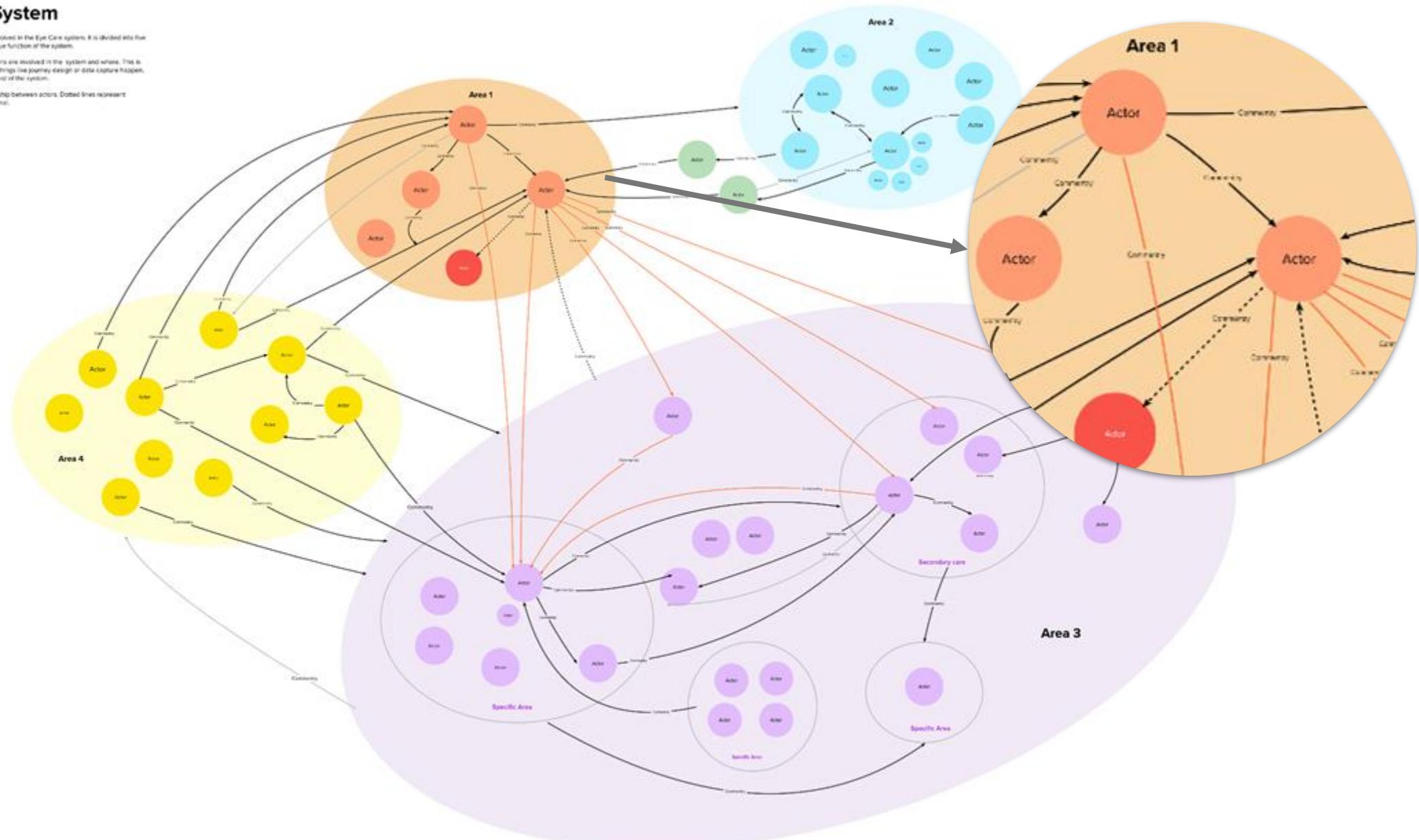
## Map of the System

This map shows the range of actors involved in the Eye Care system. It is divided into five sections. Each section identifies a unique function of the system.

It allows users to see what organisations are involved in the system and where. This is useful when trying to understand how things like journey design or data capture happen, and considering how they impact the rest of the system.

The black arrows describe the relationships between actors. Dotted lines represent connections that happen but aren't formal.

Key:



# Brief

## Persistent Absence from Schools in England



After covid school attendance for children in secondary school has worsened. Even months after returning to life back at school, attendance was still lower than before Covid.

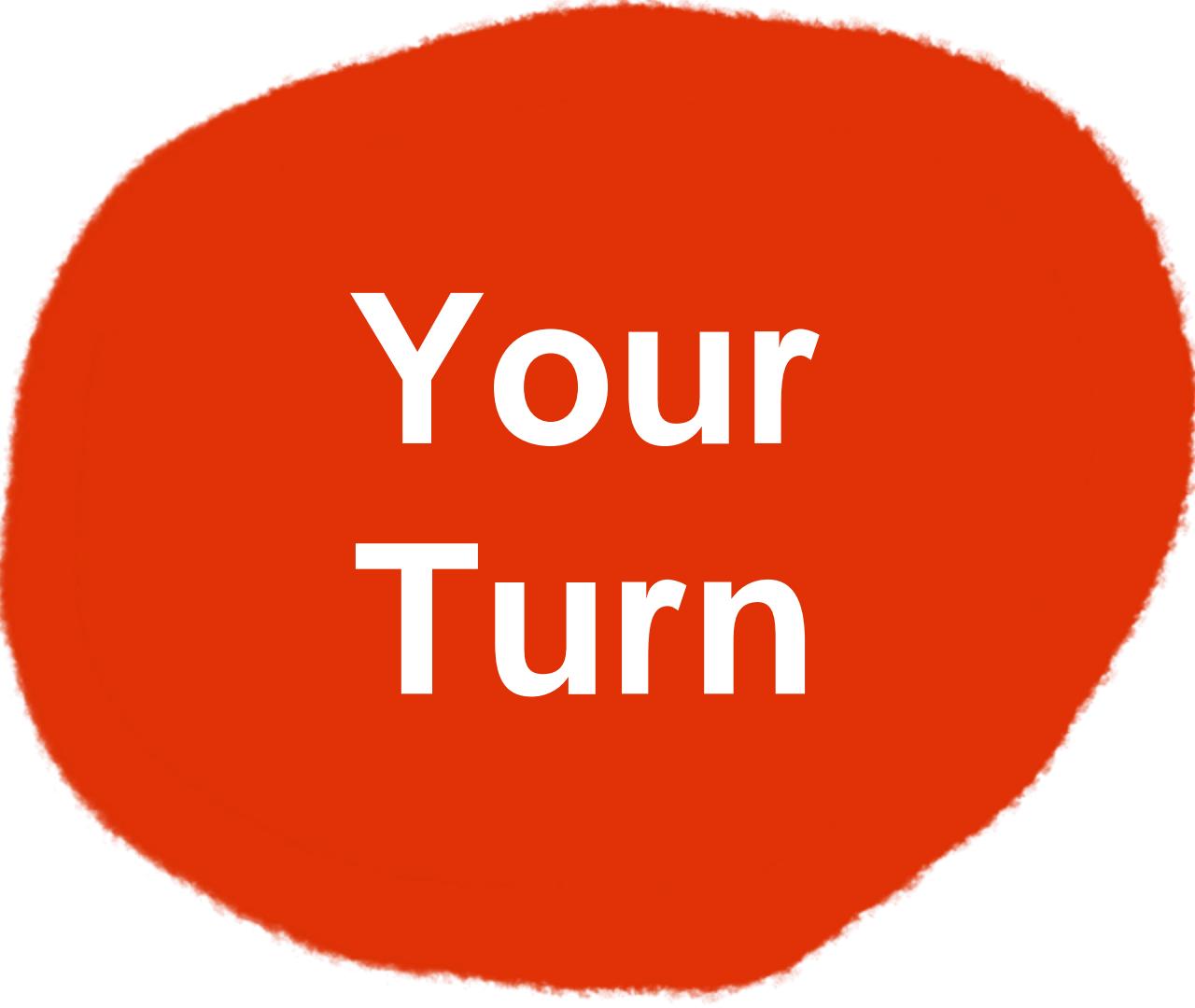
The Local Authority has tasked you with creating a way to improve the rates of attendance in the area across a number of schools. Using a user centred systems thinking approach, let's begin to understand the causes of persistent absence and how to build on our existing tools to address it.

### What?

Trying to understand what are the causes of absence - are they the same as they've always been? Are there new causes of absence?



**Short Break**



Your  
Turn

# User Centred Systems thinking as an approach

Identifying systems thinking tools and techniques that can work alongside and complement design thinking

Systems thinking



1. Framing the system



3. Understanding the system



5. Exploring the possibility space



7. Fostering the transition

Design thinking



2. Listening to the system



4. Defining the desired future



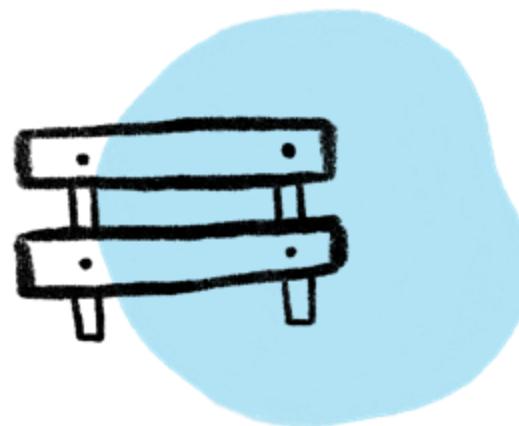
6. Designing the intervention model

# A user centred systems thinking approach in practice

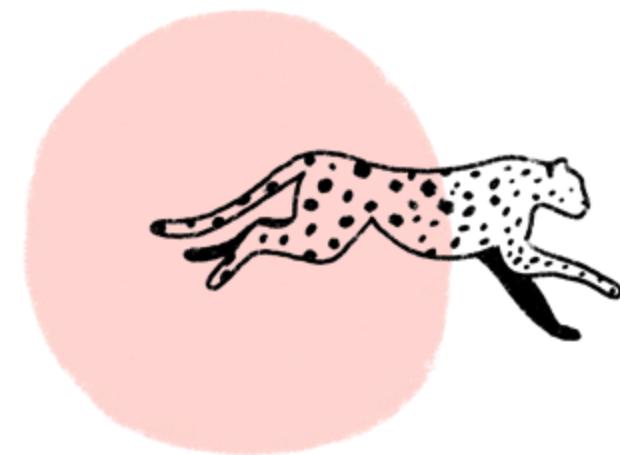
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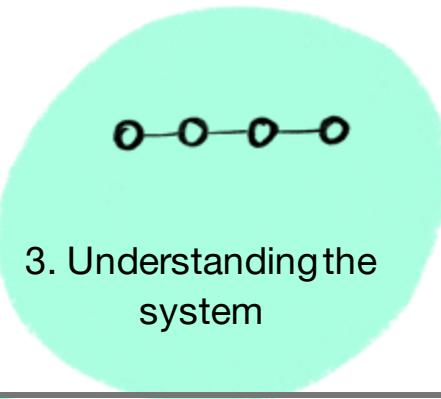
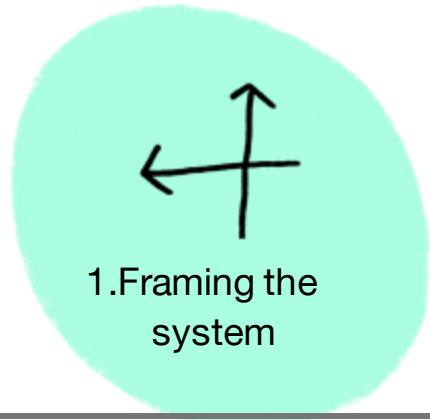


Take  
action



# User Centred Systems thinking as an approach

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# Time to have a go!

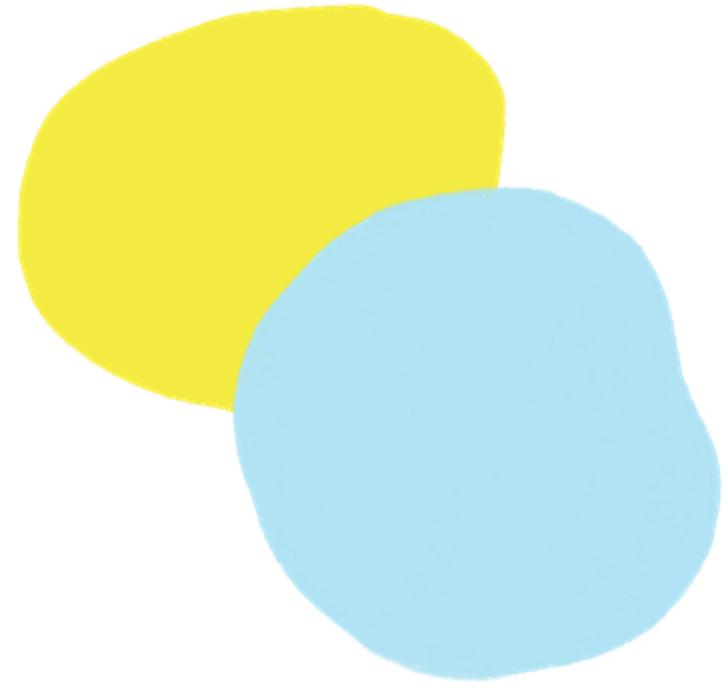
## Start mapping the connections in the system

On mural, you'll see we've created a list of actors in the system, we want you to begin building the connections between the actors based on the brief shared.

1. Are there any other actors missing?
2. Build connections between actors based on what you know
3. What other elements could you include?

You can use arrows, colours and words to build your maps. Just be sure you all agree on terminology and visual language.

Be ready to share back What gaps did you identify?





Sharing is  
caring

# Example of the school system

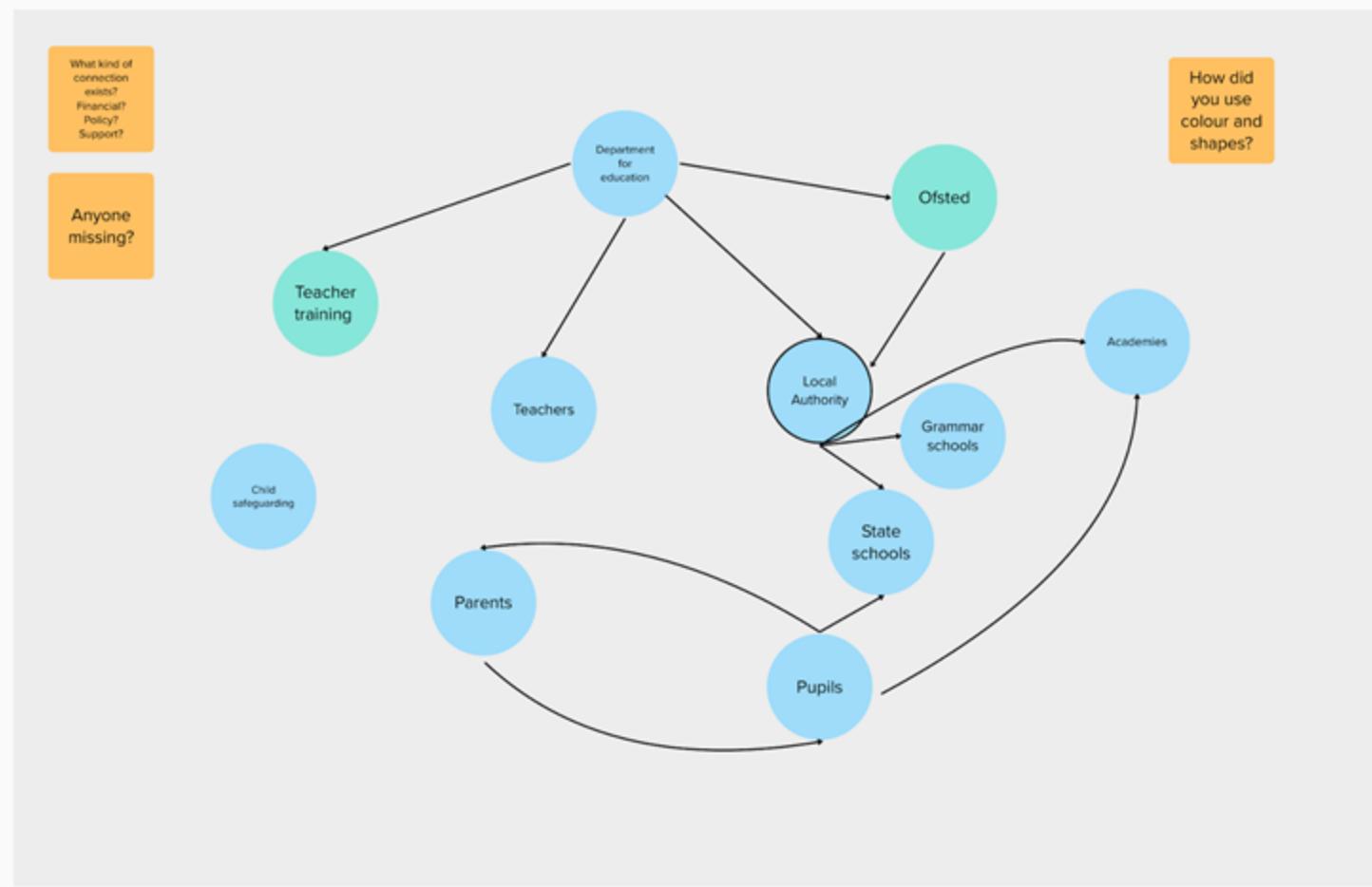
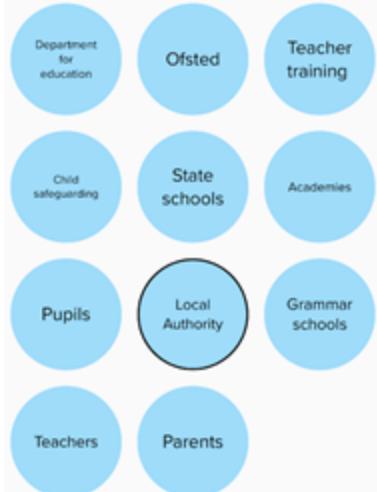
## Understand the system

Create your landscape map by building connections between the known actors in the space.

You can use arrows, shapes, colours and words to build the connections.

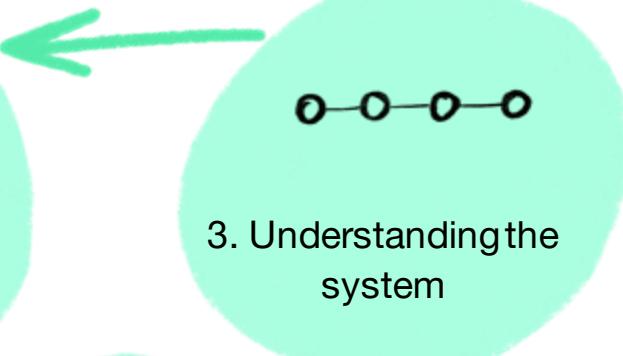
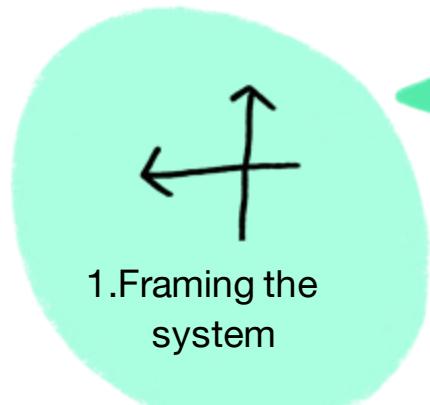
Take note of any interesting potential dynamics you're aware of.

Use the brief / scenario to support you.



# User Centred Systems thinking as an approach

Systems thinking

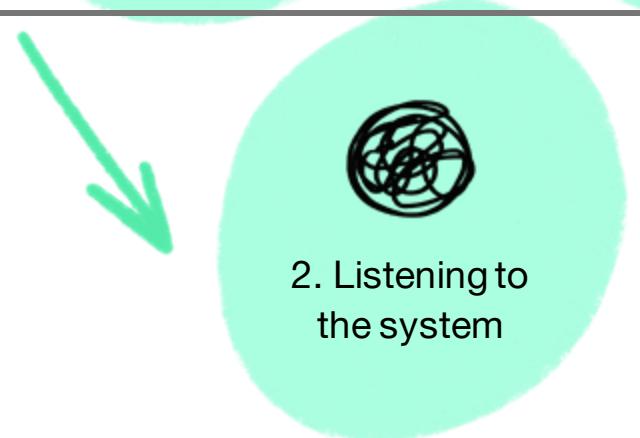


5. Exploring the possibility space



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Design thinking



4. Defining the desired future



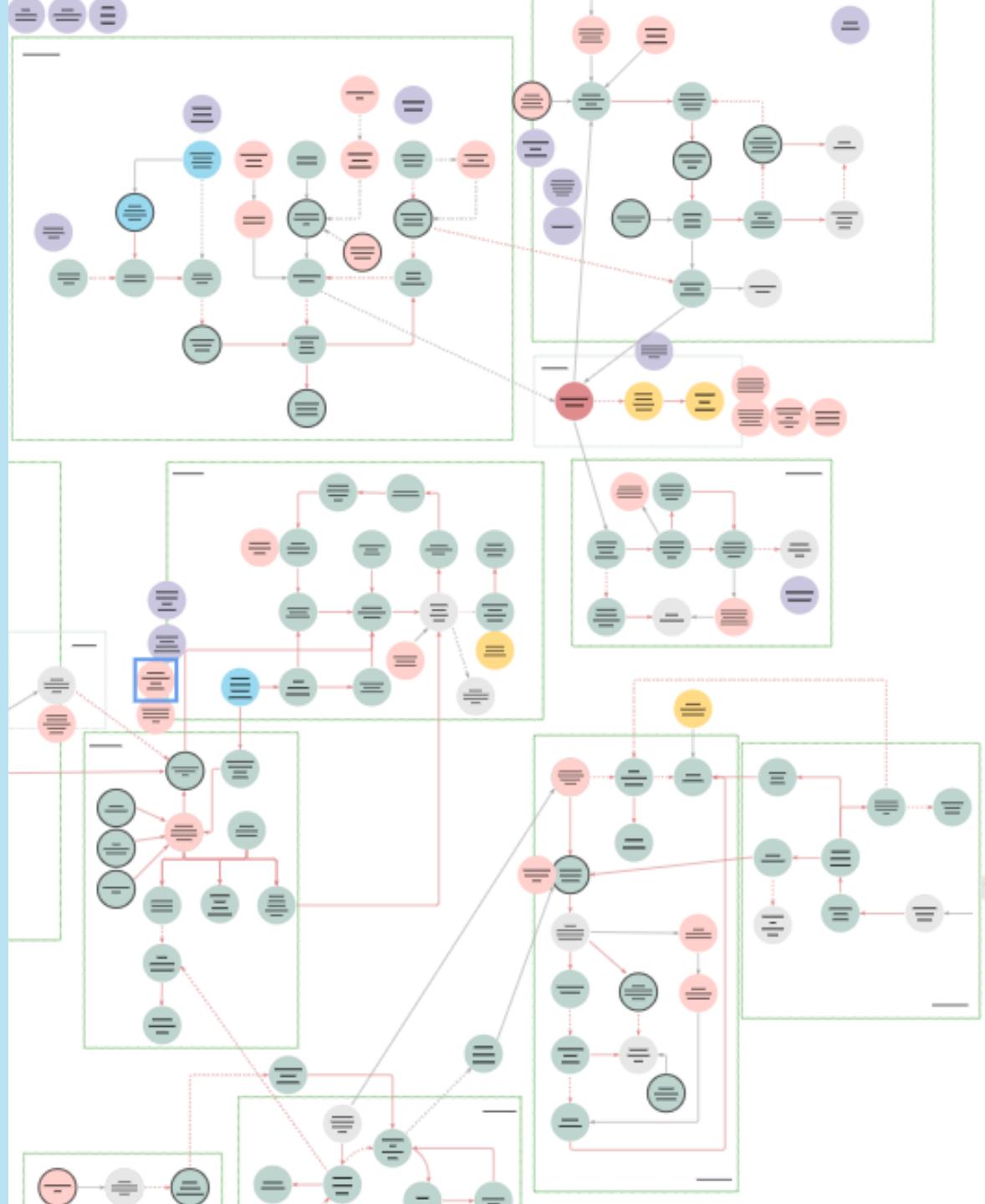
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# Influence mapping

**What is it?** A mapping tool used to build on our understanding of the system, moving from connections into dynamics.

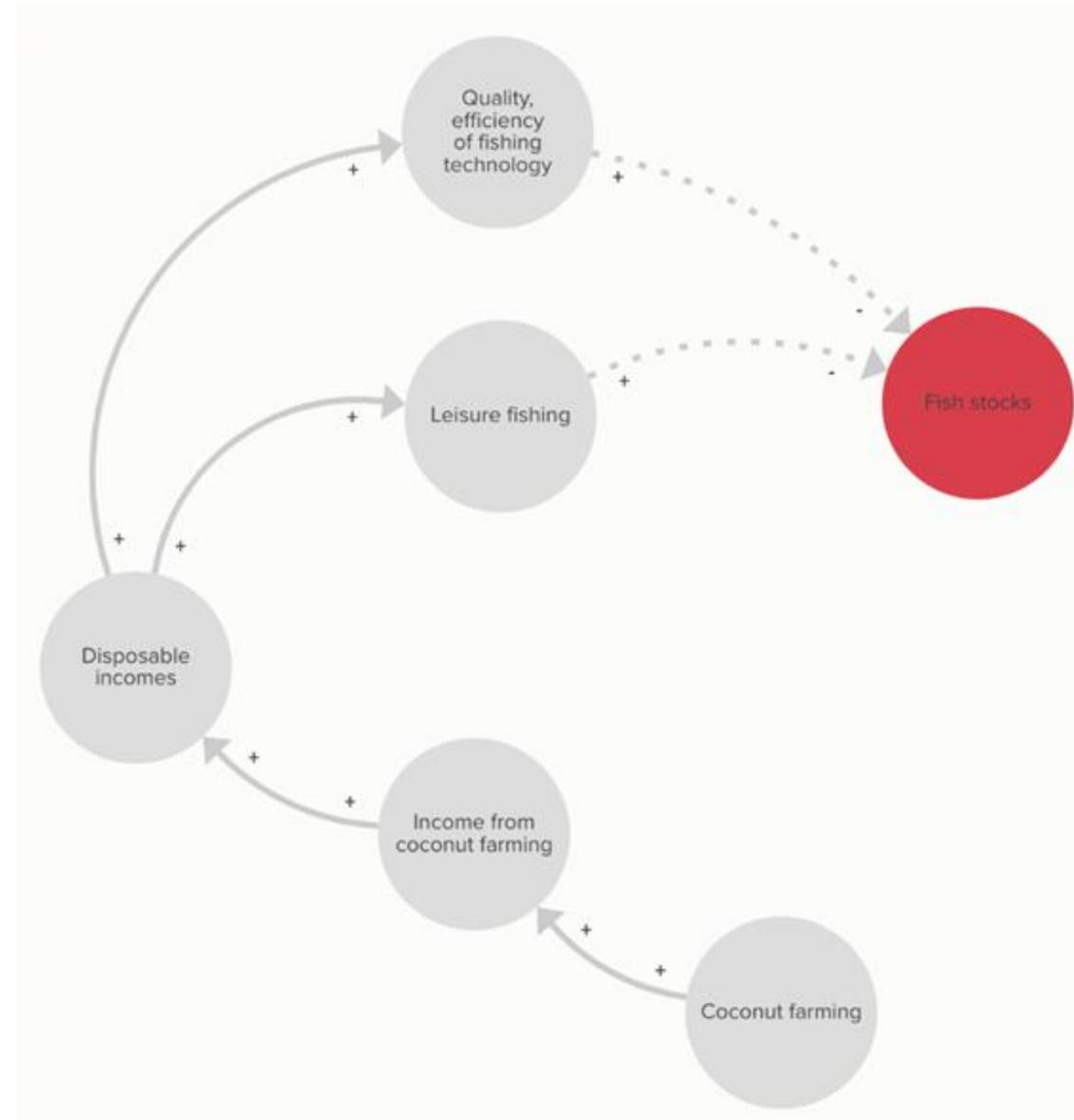
**Value of it?** Mapping the dynamics like this can help to identify where the important issues are in a system. We can then highlight and socialise these system stories to create alignment around the problem and move from systems thinking to designing interventions.

**Top tips -** Keep it neutral, it will continue to change



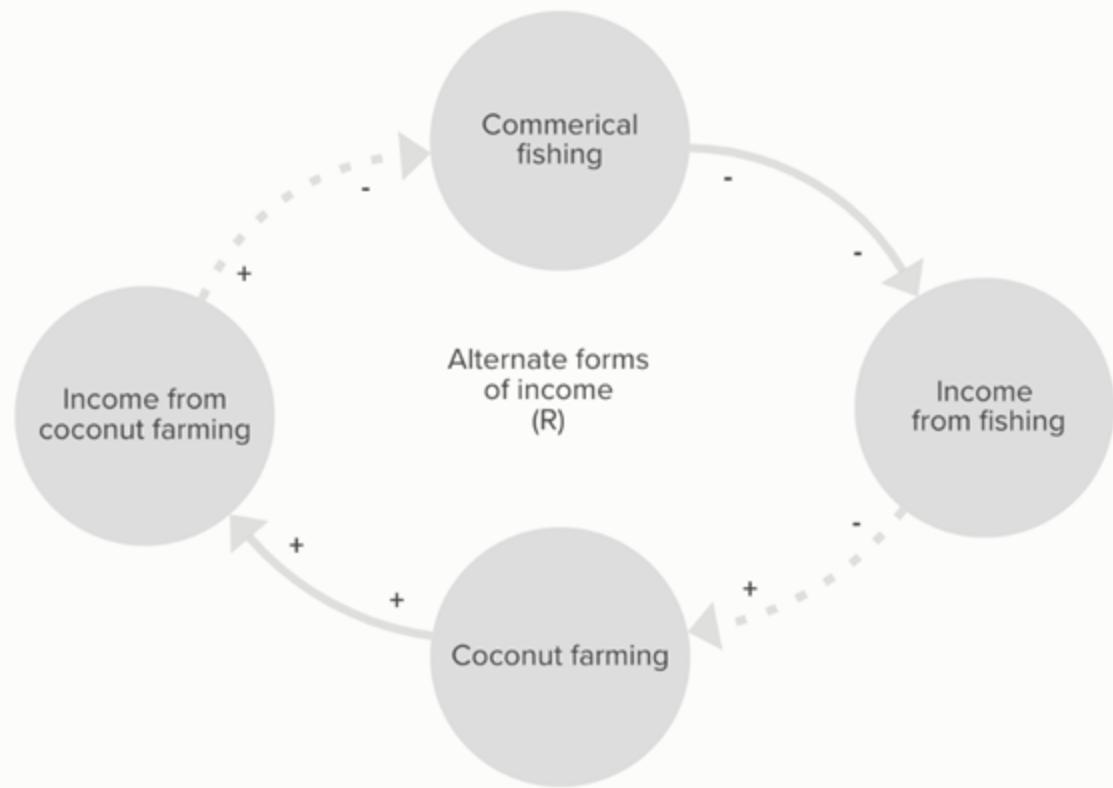
## Influence mapping

Creating a visual aid to discuss the dynamic of the system to highlight important narratives for decision making.



# Coconut farming

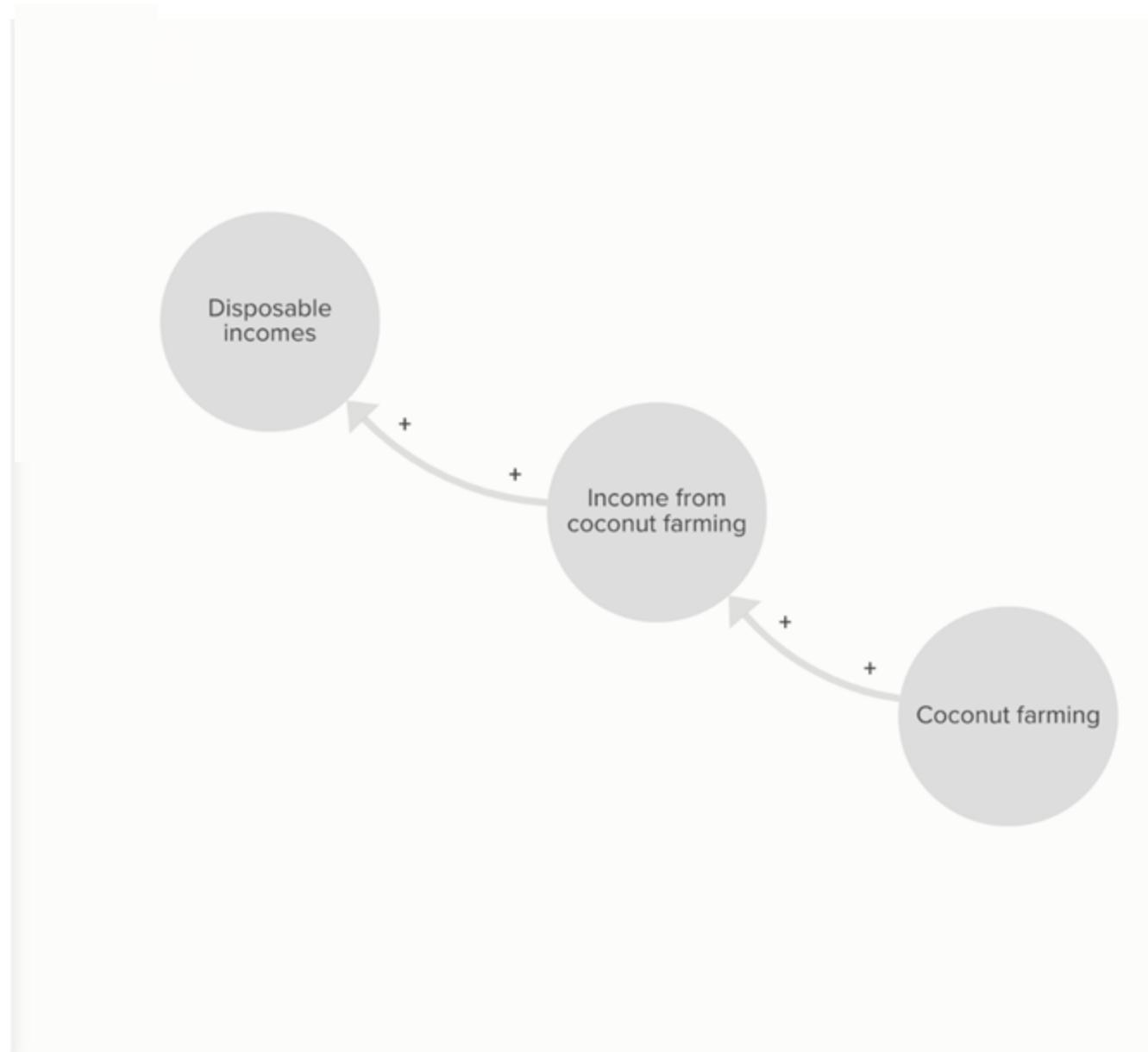
At first everything seemed to work as expected. Government subsidies caused more people to farm coconuts instead of fishing commercially, which caused a reinforcing cycle to promote further coconut farming.



# The effect of higher pay

What people didn't anticipate was that the higher paid coconut farming allowed them to work fewer hours.

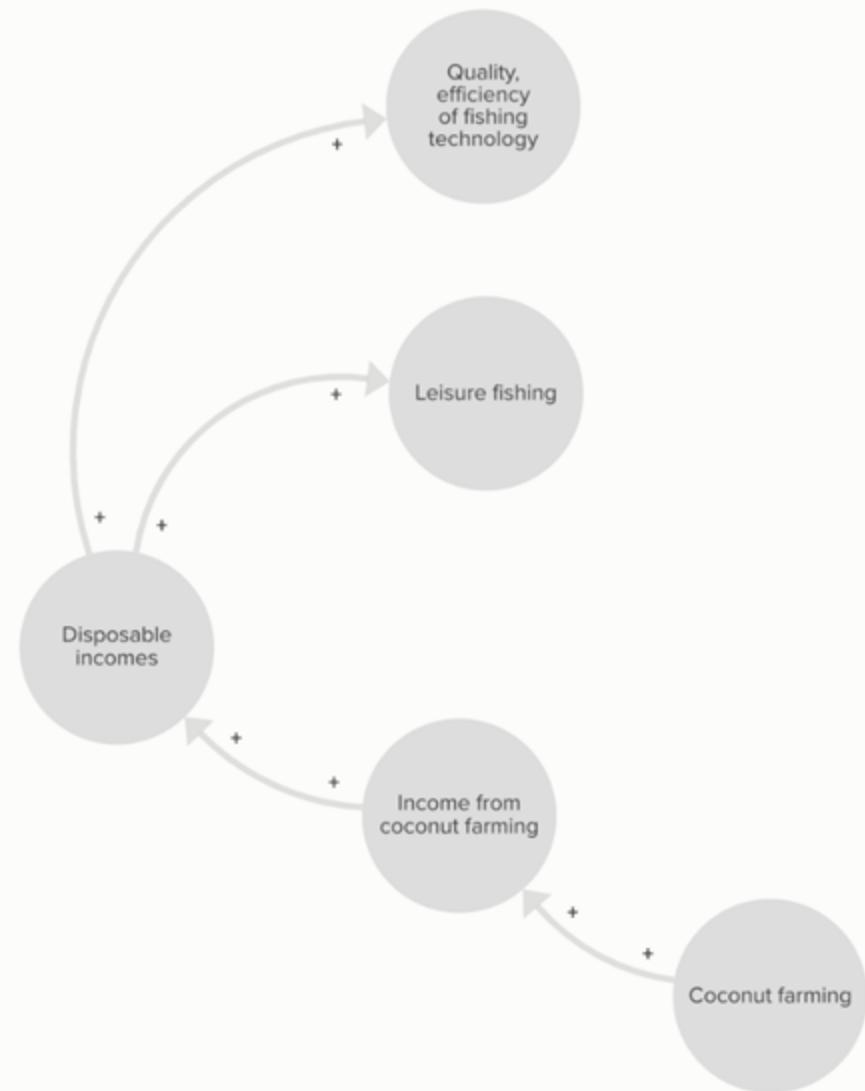
Guess what they used this additional leisure time to do?



# Unintended consequences

People used the additional leisure time to fish recreationally. They also used additional disposable income from the higher paid coconut farming to buy better fishing equipment (new boats, rods, and reels).

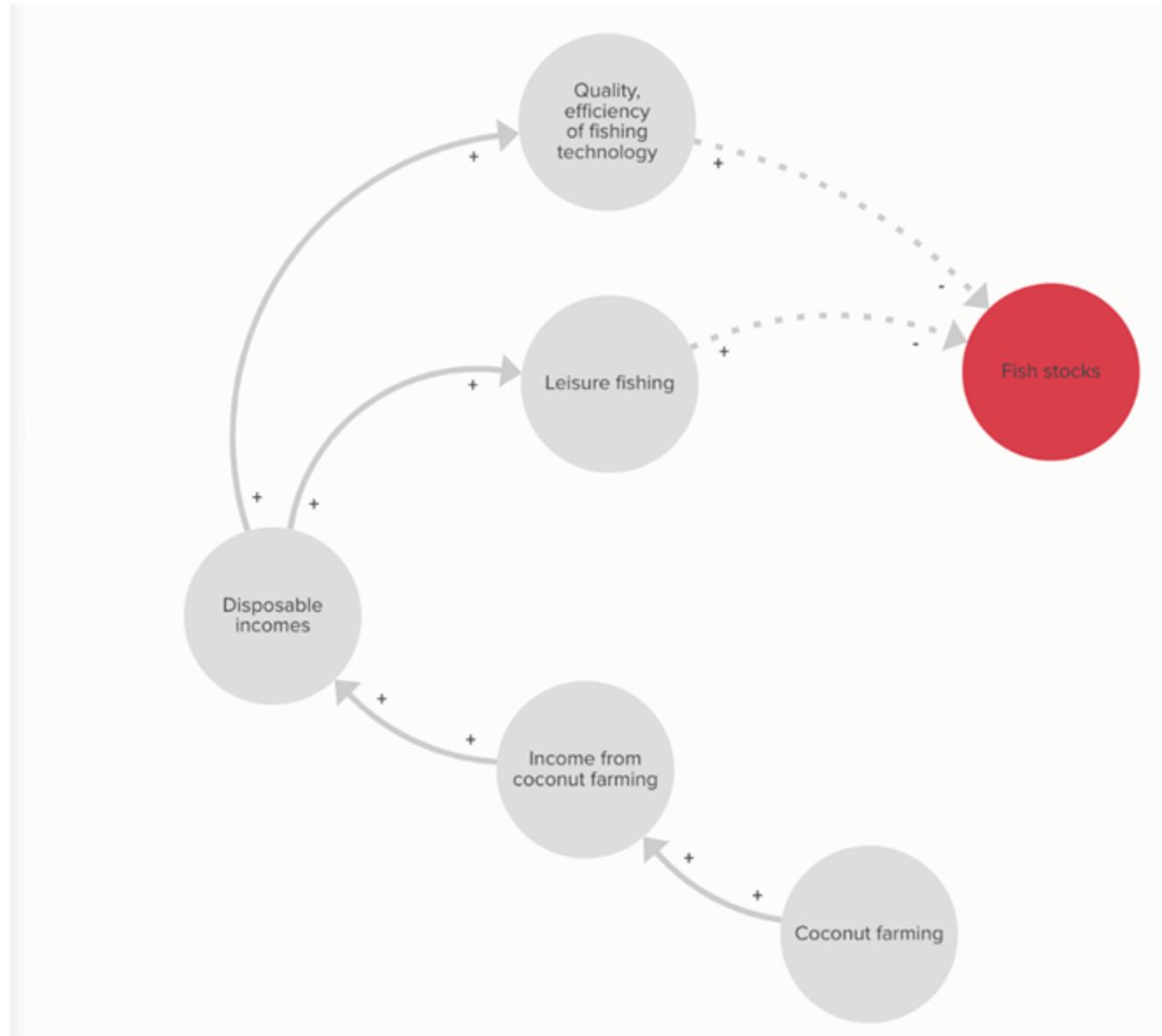
Talk about a double whammy for the fish population...



# Fish stocks decrease by a third

In the end, what was supposed to increase fish stocks ended up decreasing them by a third.

Kiribati is now turning towards an outright ban of commercial fishing. Whether that will end up addressing the problem of declining fish stocks, only time will tell...



## How do we make an Influence map?

1. Identify and name the variables in the system
2. Draw the links between these variables
3. Socialise your map
4. Identify key narratives for system stories
5. Use these to define the future



# How do we make an influence map?

Using your research insights and your landscape map, begin to pull out key narratives to explore

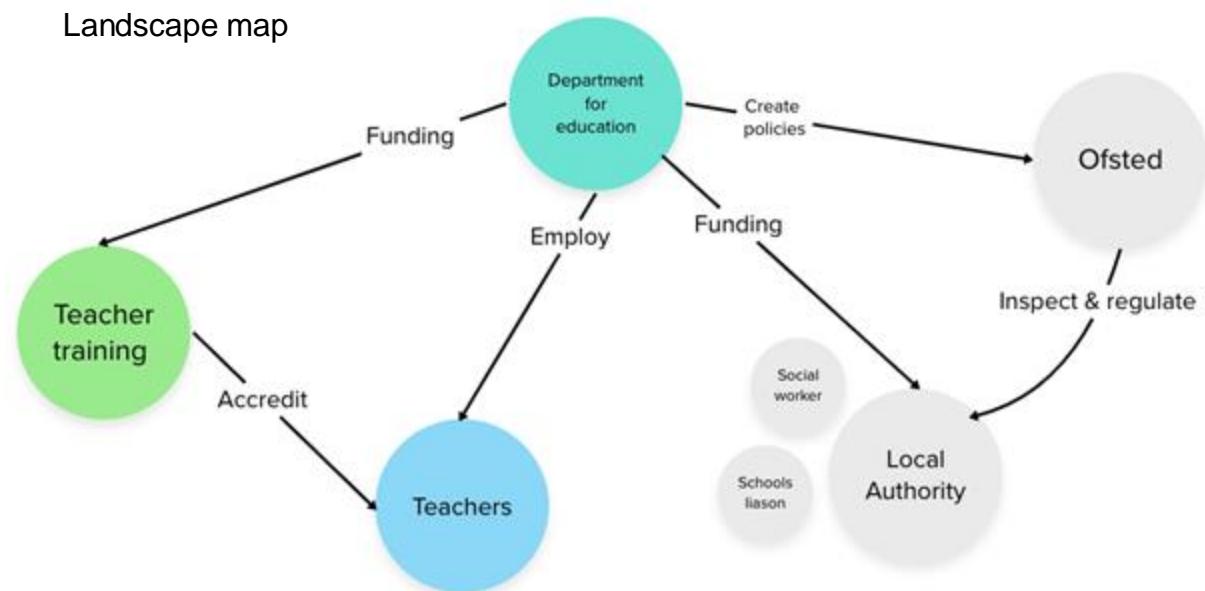
## 1. Identify and name the variables

First step is to identify the nouns or variables that are important to the issue.

Looking at your landscape map to see where elements are connected, and drawing from your synthesised insights you can highlight the important issue in the system.

*"I don't feel qualified anymore, we used to have refresher training but that's stopped"*

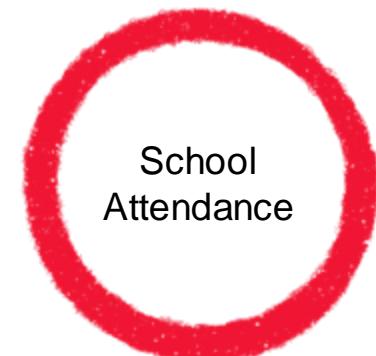
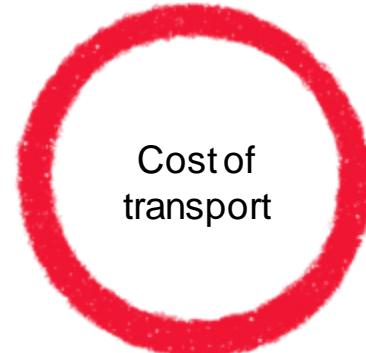
- System Stakeholder No. 6



## 1. Identify and name the variables

Use this knowledge to name the variable, from our insights we know

- The increasing cost of transport is impacting pupils' ability to travel to school
- Some pupils experience shame when it comes to missing lunch, therefore they avoid school



*\*Keep the variables neutral -this can also be used for future forecasting....*

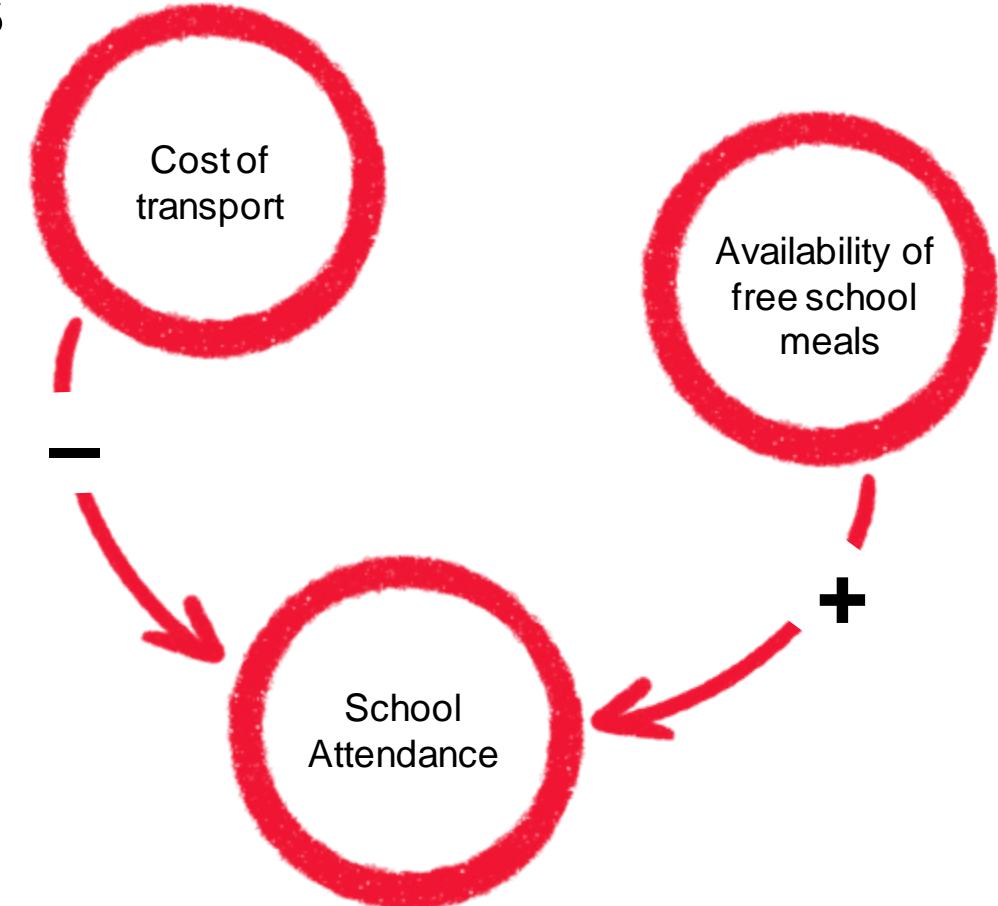
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Now connect the variables where possible, determining how one variable affects the other.

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*The Systems Thinker also says to label your loops where useful*

### **3. Socialise your map**

Begin sharing your drafted maps with colleagues, friends and stakeholders. Anyone with knowledge in the space who can add information or validate what you think you know.

Doing this iteratively, or collaboratively (in a workshop) is how you begin to build consensus by moving people beyond their perspective and understanding of the system, to a shared perspective.

**Results in** an evidenced based systems map (almost) everyone agrees with which you can now use as a tool to facilitate decisions about how to intervene and solve problems.



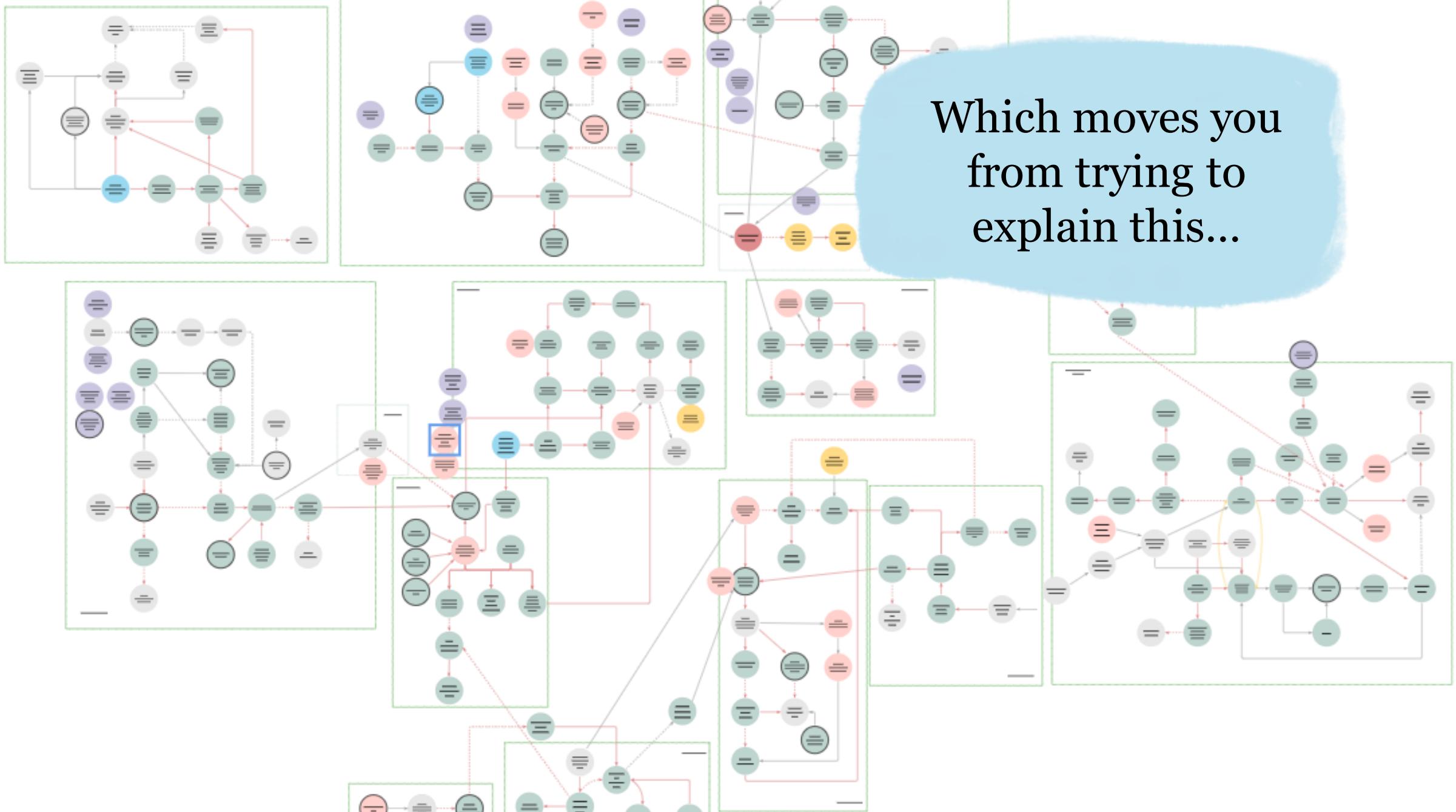
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Through socialising your map you can begin to pick out the important issues - parts of the causal map which seem important or necessary to focus on.

A map's full potential is only realized once you've woven your analysis into a compelling story you can share across your organisation, your community, and the world. The ultimate goal is to create convincing stories that **shift people's attitudes and change their behaviours to align with your overarching goal**.



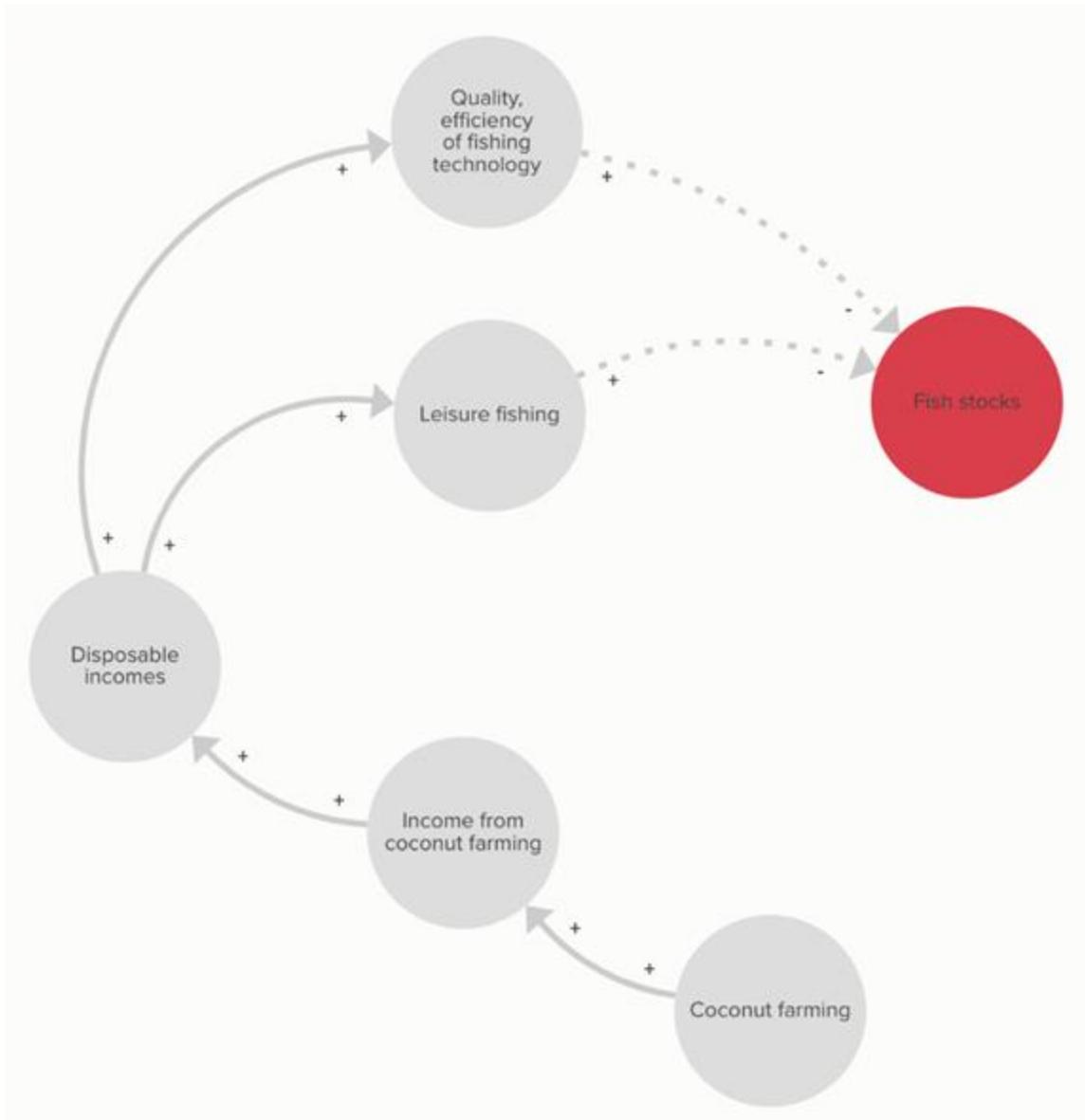
Which moves you  
from trying to  
explain this...

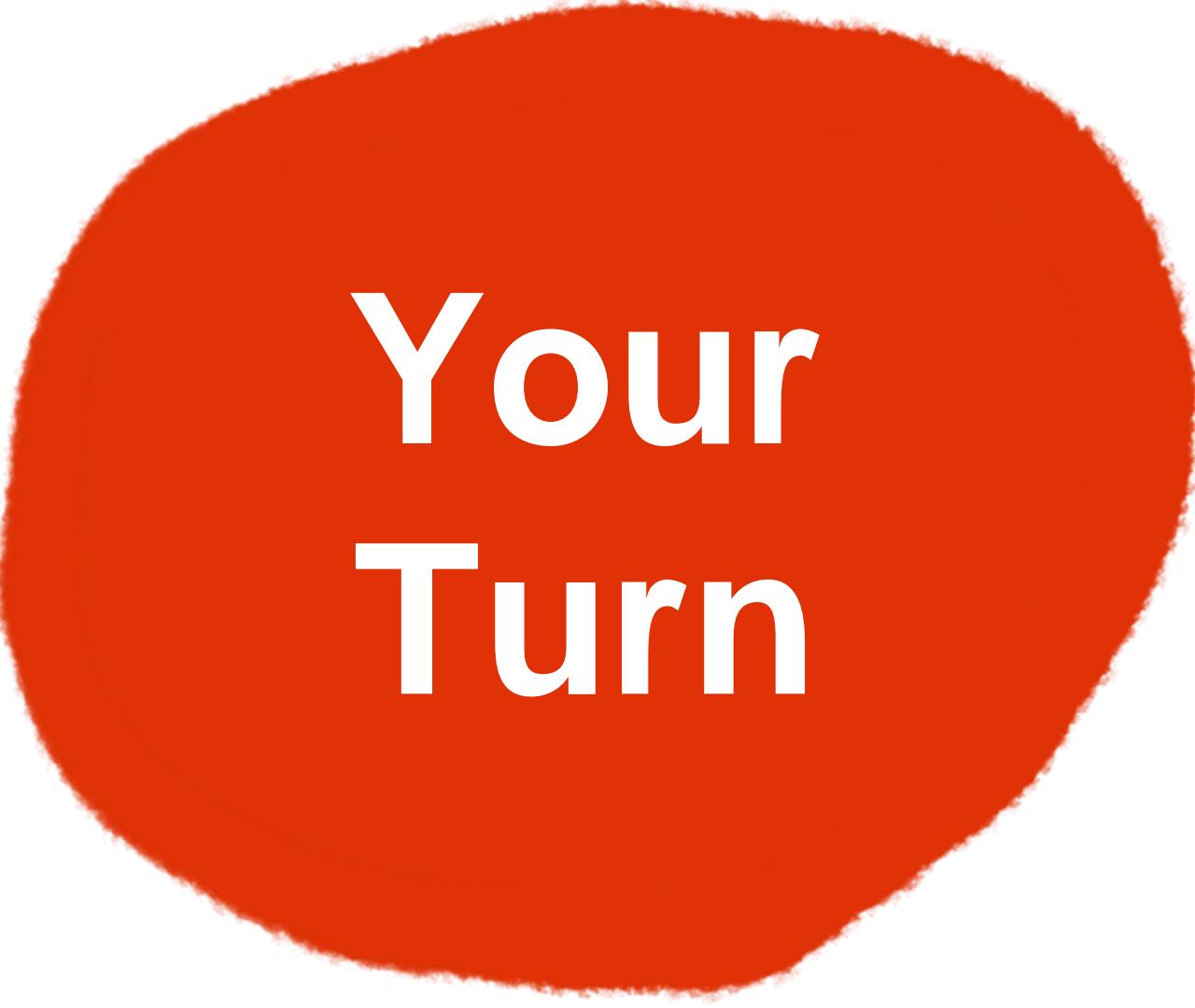


To sharing  
something like  
this...

**A system story** that shows the  
dynamic causing a complex problem.

These stories don't create solutions for problems, but they  
do create alignment around the root cause of a problem,  
which is essential before focusing on solutions.





Your  
Turn

# Brief

## Persistent Absence from Schools in England



After covid school attendance for children in secondary school has worsened. Even months after returning to life back at school, attendance was still lower than before Covid.

The Local Authority has tasked you with creating a way to improve the rates of attendance in the area across a number of schools. Using a user centred systems thinking approach, let's begin to understand the causes of persistent absence and how to build on our existing tools to address it.

### What?

Trying to understand what are the causes of absence - are they the same as they've always been? Are there new causes of absence?

## Actor Cards

Usually, a project team will gather user research to inform them how to tackle a challenge.

For the purpose of this course, we have created a set of actor cards to provide insight into the different user groups that make up the school system. In the learning space, these cards can be used instead of research insights to allow us to practice tools and methods without having undertaken our own research.

Feel free to read over them now, but you will have time to discuss them in your group during the course.



## Creating an influence map

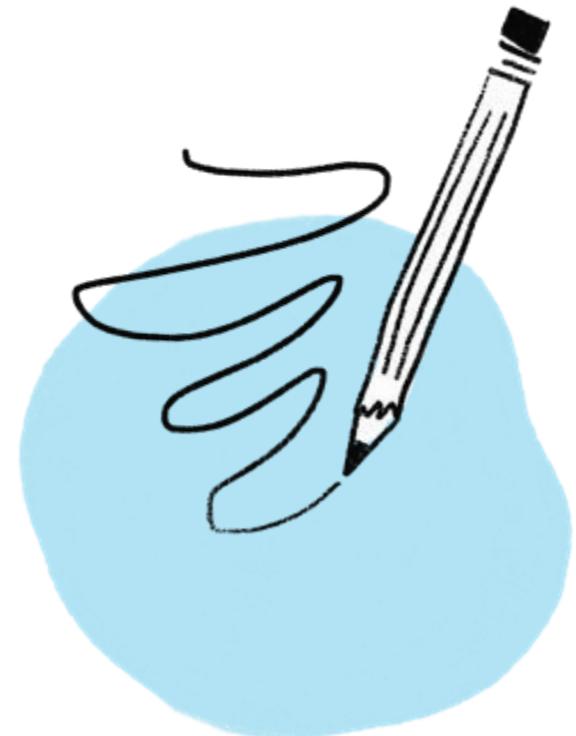
**What dynamics are impacting school attendance rates?**

We're going to try out this process for ourselves.

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2. Then draw the links between these variables

Make sure to nominate one team member to playback one story from the system you found interesting

Note: Be sure to write these variables as neutral nodes, that can change. It's okay to re-write them as your conversation progresses





Sharing is  
caring

**That's a wrap for today  
Any Qs or feedback**

We will happily stay to chat  
(not all day!)



[https://join.slack.com/t/friendsofsnook/shared\\_invite/zt-17hkcp146-vv9DnvRdjKZ\\_jO4XRo~wOw](https://join.slack.com/t/friendsofsnook/shared_invite/zt-17hkcp146-vv9DnvRdjKZ_jO4XRo~wOw)

Friends of Snook

# Day 2

# Event top tips:

- Ask ‘all the’ questions. This space is **full** of acronyms, and it’s important that everyone in the group knows what we’re talking about. Use **chat**, hands up or unmute!
- Respect each other, plus your and each other’s boundaries and stretch zones, but do try to stretch...
- Confidentiality: what’s said here stays here, what's learned here leaves here.
- Be present, lean in, for yourself and others Turn those tabs off 😊 Show up with humility and empathy even if opinions differ.

We ask you to have cameras **on** when in group discussions, tasks and sharing reflections, but **off** when we are sharing slides - but if low Wi-Fi, not comfortable, it’s fine to leave off throughout.

**“Leaving a camera off during calls can reduce carbon footprints by 96%”**

9.30 - 13.00

Today

With healthy breaks

[Reduce Environmental Impact in Virtual Meetings](#)



# Check in & Welcome to Day 2

## What we covered yesterday:

- What is a user centred system thinking approach and the value it brings
- When to apply it
- Some top tips for adapting a user centred systems mindset
- Began making sense of the education system

Today is about building on our understanding of the system to action Change!

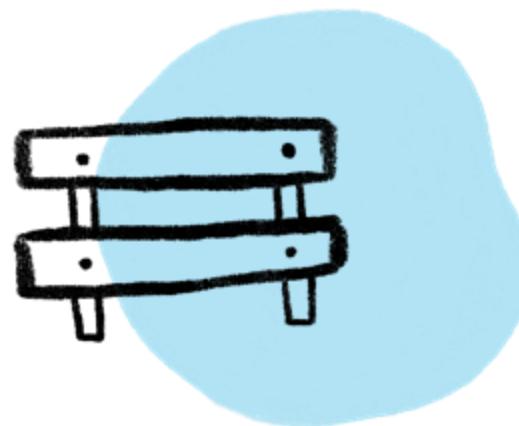


# A user centred systems thinking approach in practice

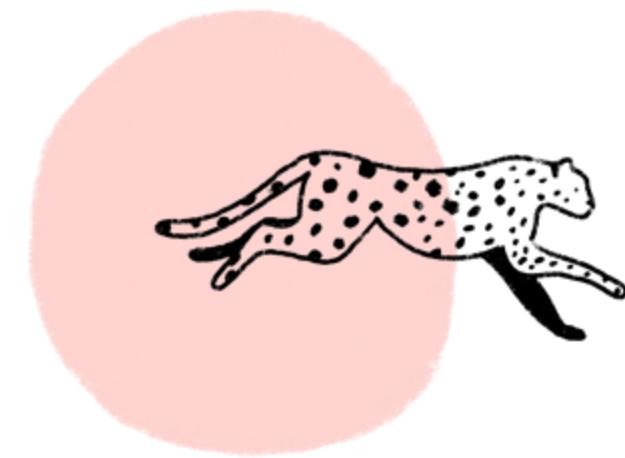
Understand  
the system



Set  
boundaries

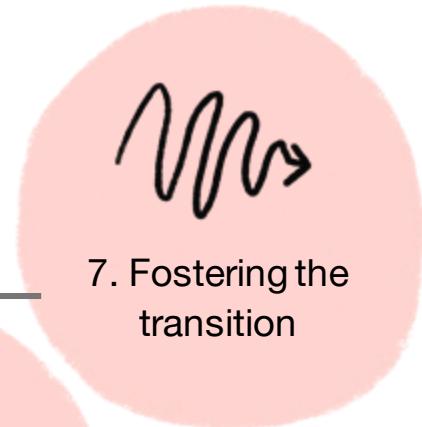
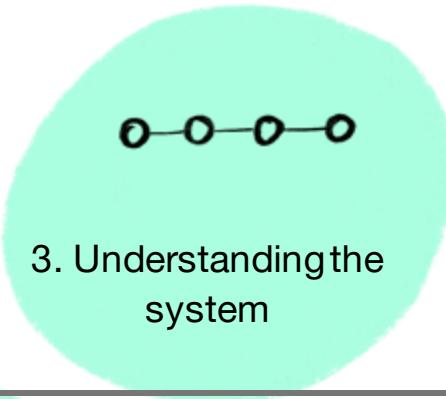
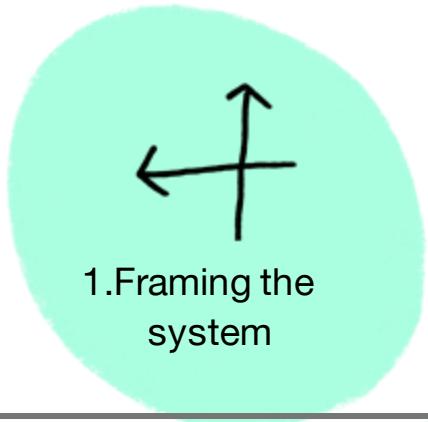


Take  
Action

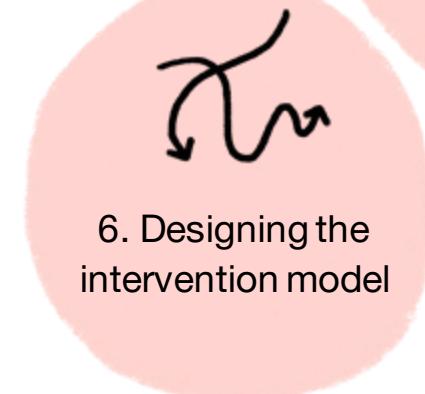
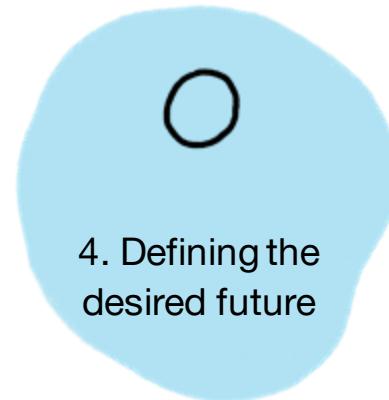


# User Centred Systems thinking as an approach

Systems thinking

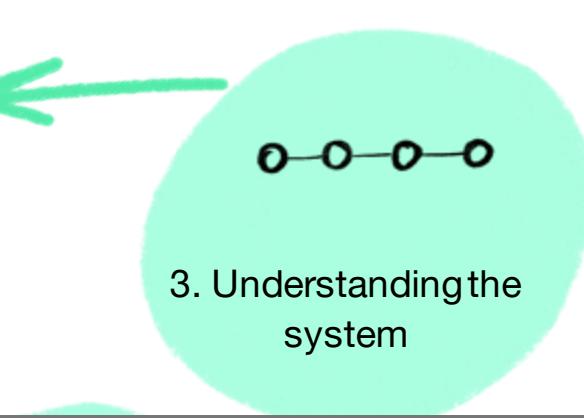
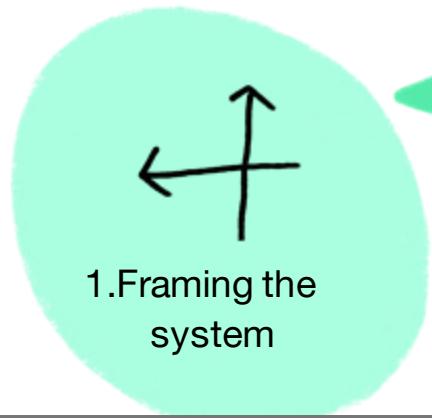


Design thinking



# User Centred Systems thinking as an approach

Systems thinking

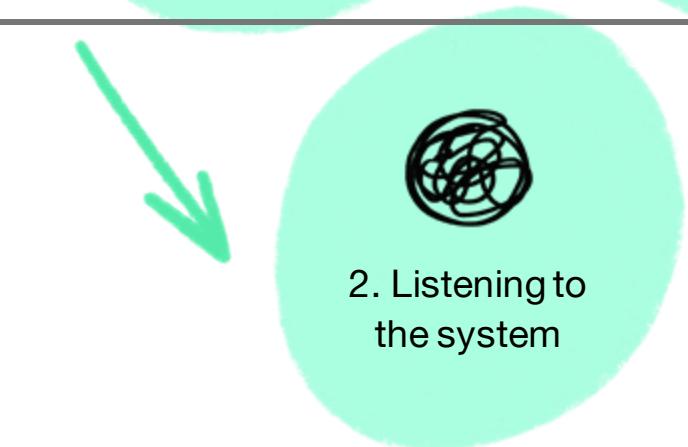


5. Exploring the possibility space



7. Fostering the transition

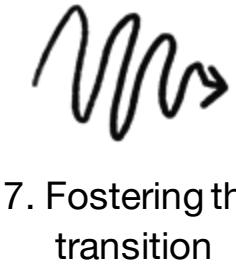
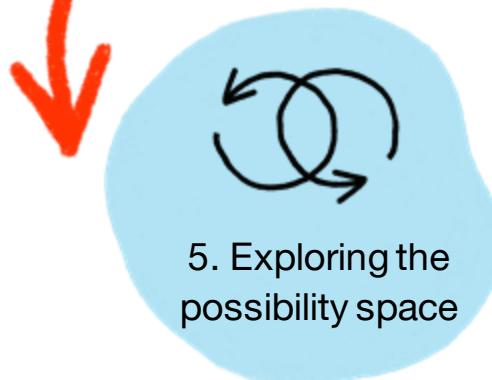
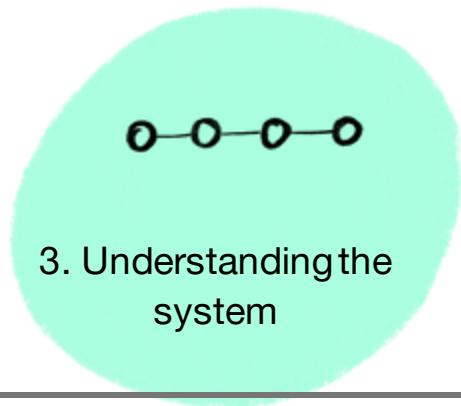
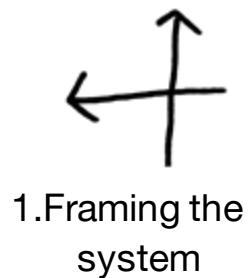
Design thinking



6. Designing the intervention model

## Design thinking

## Systems thinking



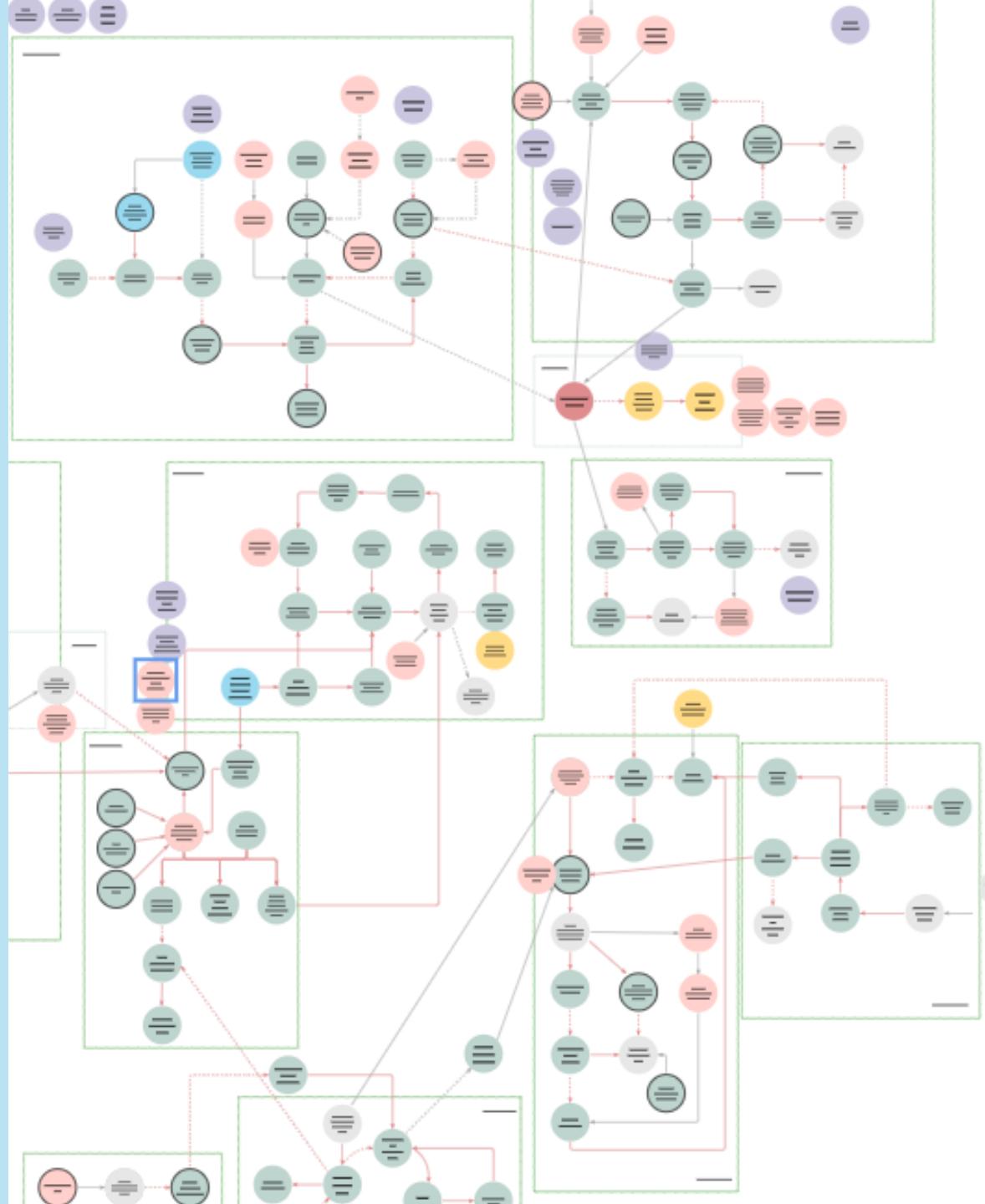
Jumping  
back in  
here

# Influence mapping

**What is it?** A mapping tool used to build on our understanding of the system, moving from connections into dynamics.

**Value of it?** Mapping the dynamics like this can help to identify where the important issues are in a system. We can then highlight and socialise these system stories to create alignment around the problem and move from systems thinking to designing interventions.

**Top tips - Keep it neutral, it will continue to change**



## How do we make an Influence map?

1. Identify and name the variables in the system
2. Draw the links between these variables
3. Socialise your map
4. Identify key narratives for system stories
5. Use these to define the future



# How do we make an influence map?

Using your research insights and your landscape map, begin to pull out key narratives to explore

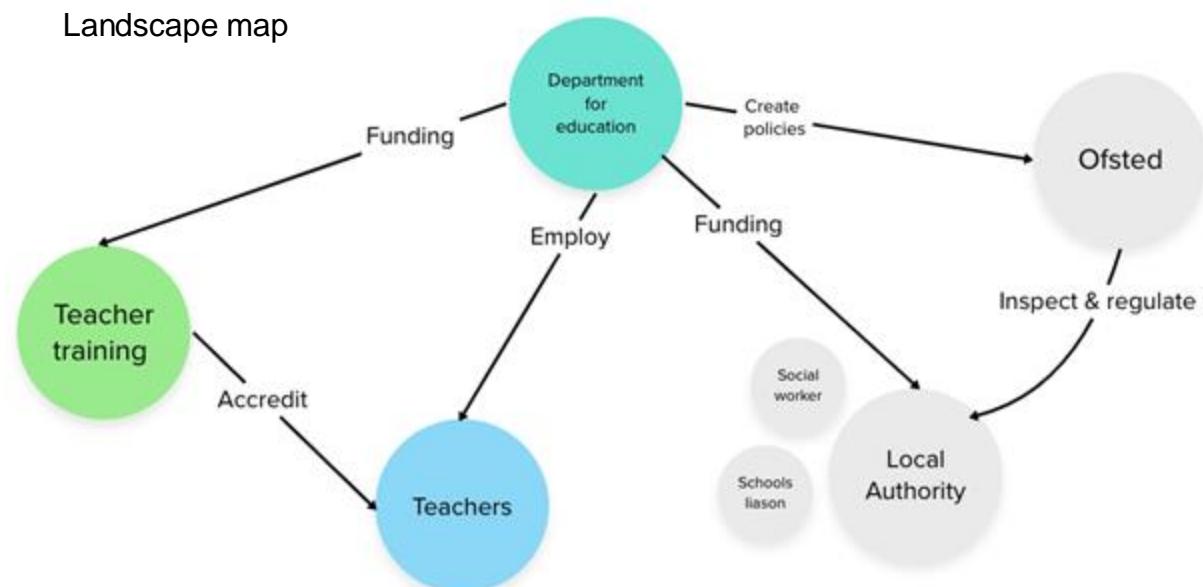
## 1. Identify and name the variables

First step is to identify the nouns or variables that are important to the issue.

Looking at your landscape map to see where elements are connected, and drawing from your synthesised insights you can highlight the important issue in the system.

*"I don't feel qualified anymore, we used to have refresher training but that's stopped"*

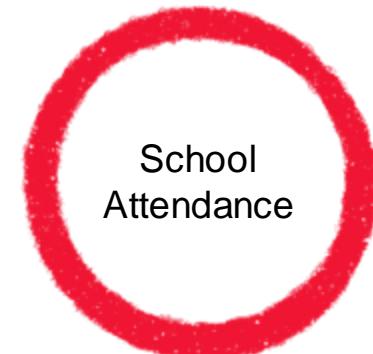
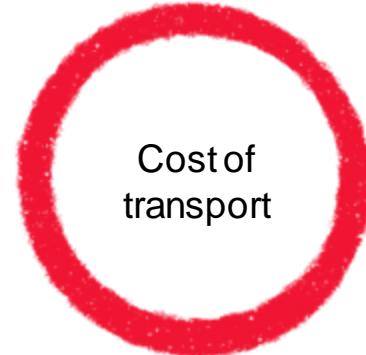
- System Stakeholder No. 6



## 1. Identify and name the variables

Use this knowledge to name the variable, from our insights we know

- The increasing cost of transport is impacting pupils' ability to travel to school
- Some pupils experience shame when it comes to missing lunch, therefore they avoid school



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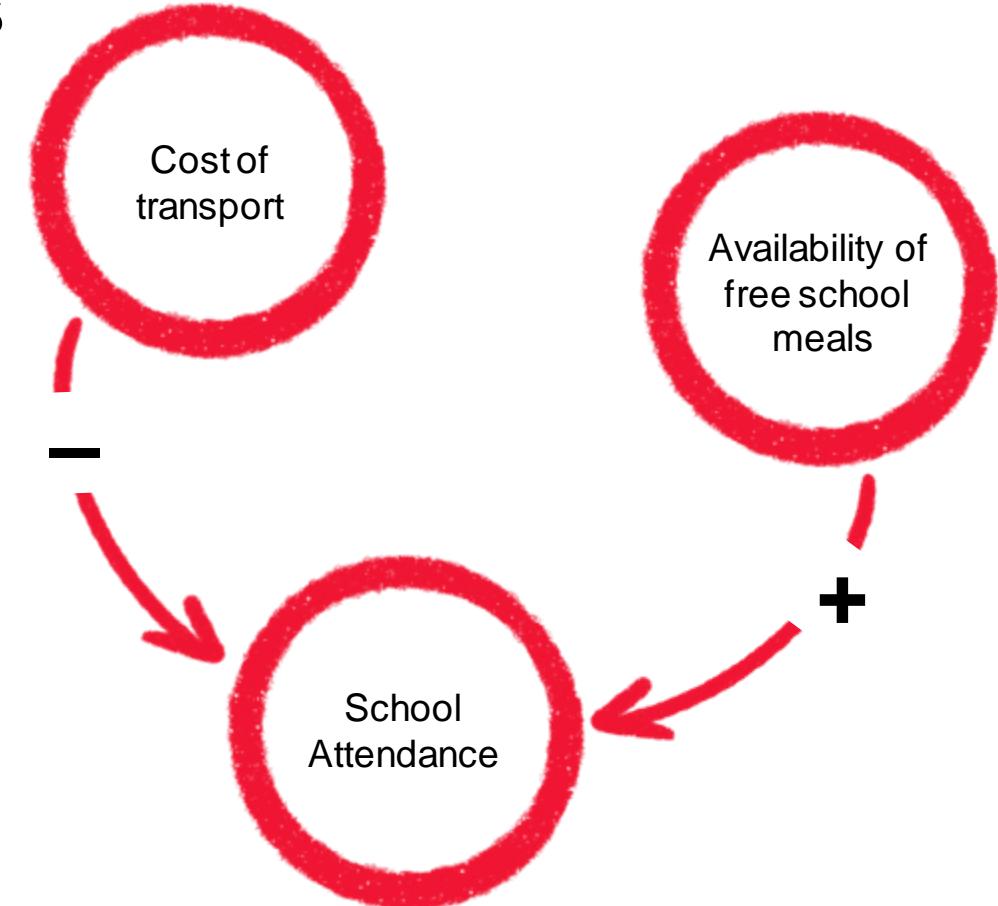
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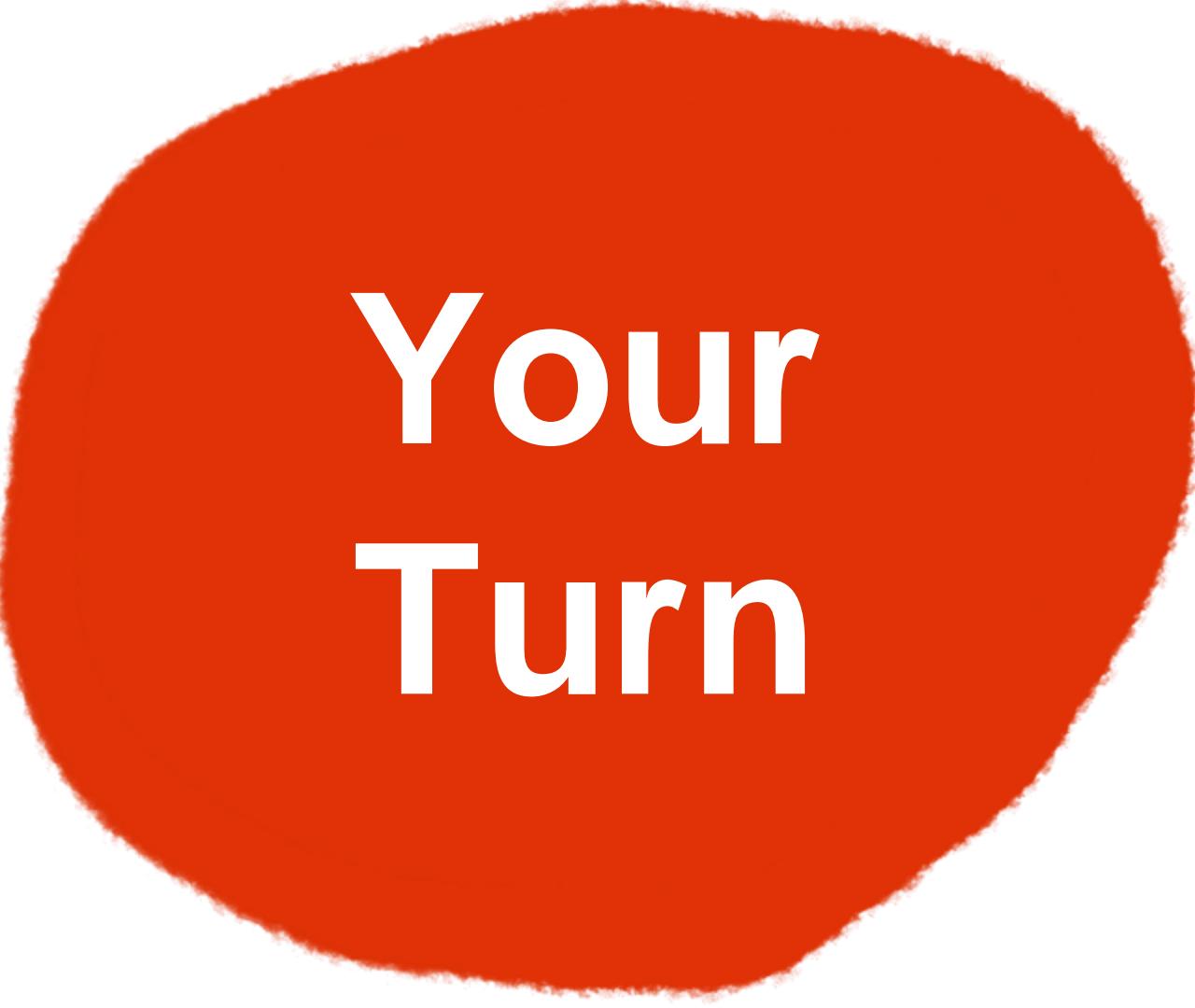
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Your  
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Usually, a project team will gather user research to inform them how to tackle a challenge.

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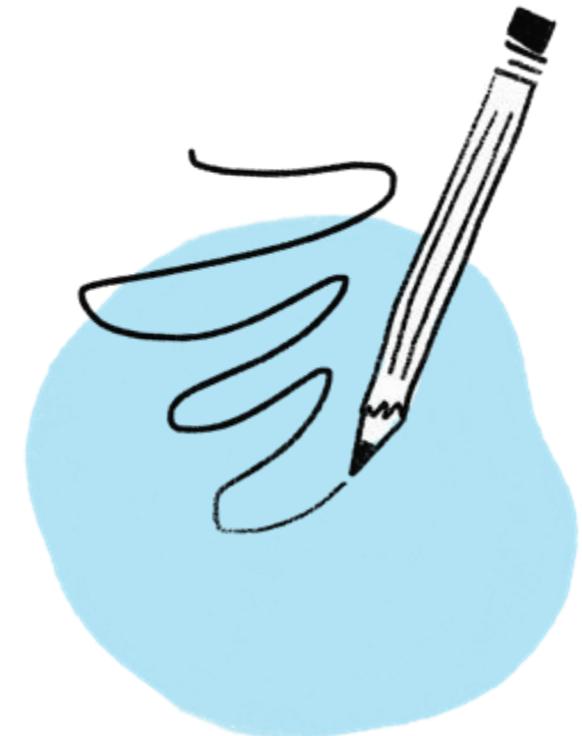
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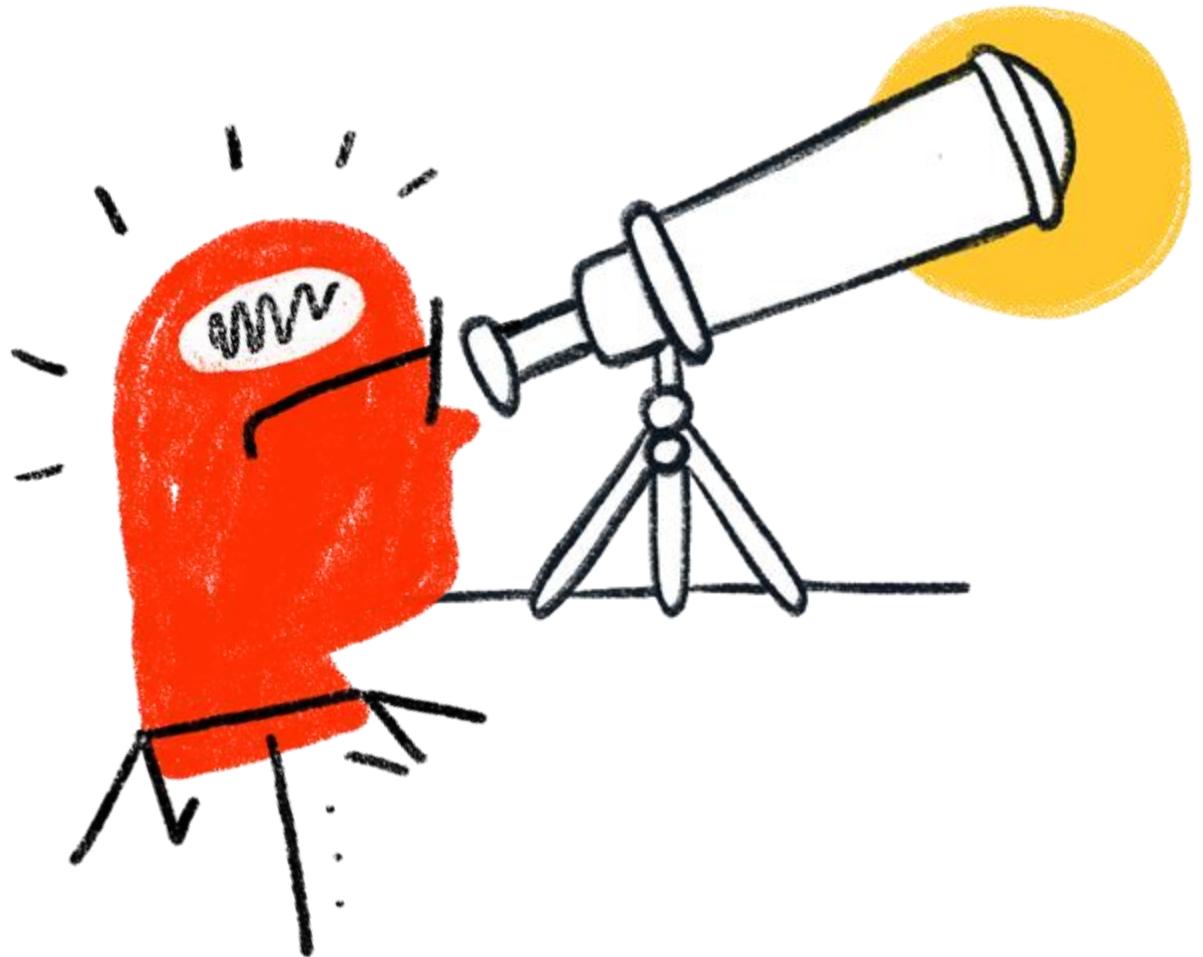
Sharing is  
caring

# Setting boundaries

Identifying the boundaries in a  
system to influence



Instead of predicting how the system could change, we're going to focus on deciding what should change.





## Swimming in a system

It's easy to get lost in the size of a system when you're mapping such a complex space and gathering so much input from stakeholders.

Don't get overwhelmed by the size of the system, instead begin to think about where your boundaries are. Constraints are your friend.

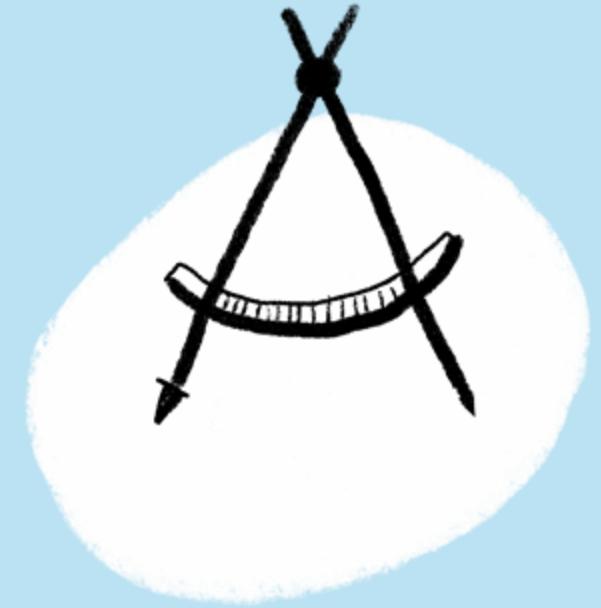
# Find your constraints

## In practice tips

You can influence anything, but the trick is to use this analysis of the system to determine where you should influence

To action your insights from mapping the system you need to find the points that you **should** influence by considering these factors:

- Organisational goals & constraints
- Project goals
- Budgets
- Allies in the space
- System stories & problems that you've identified



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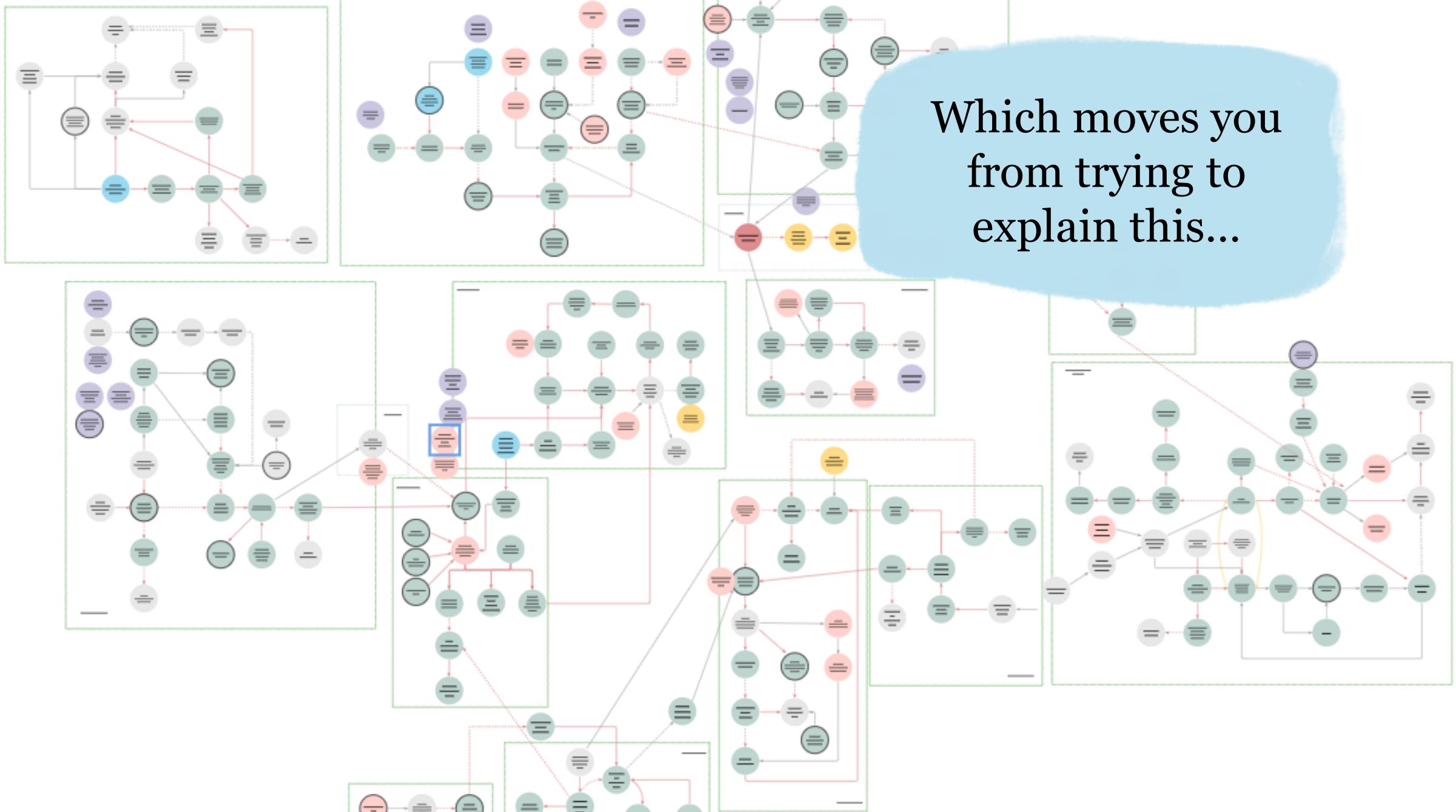
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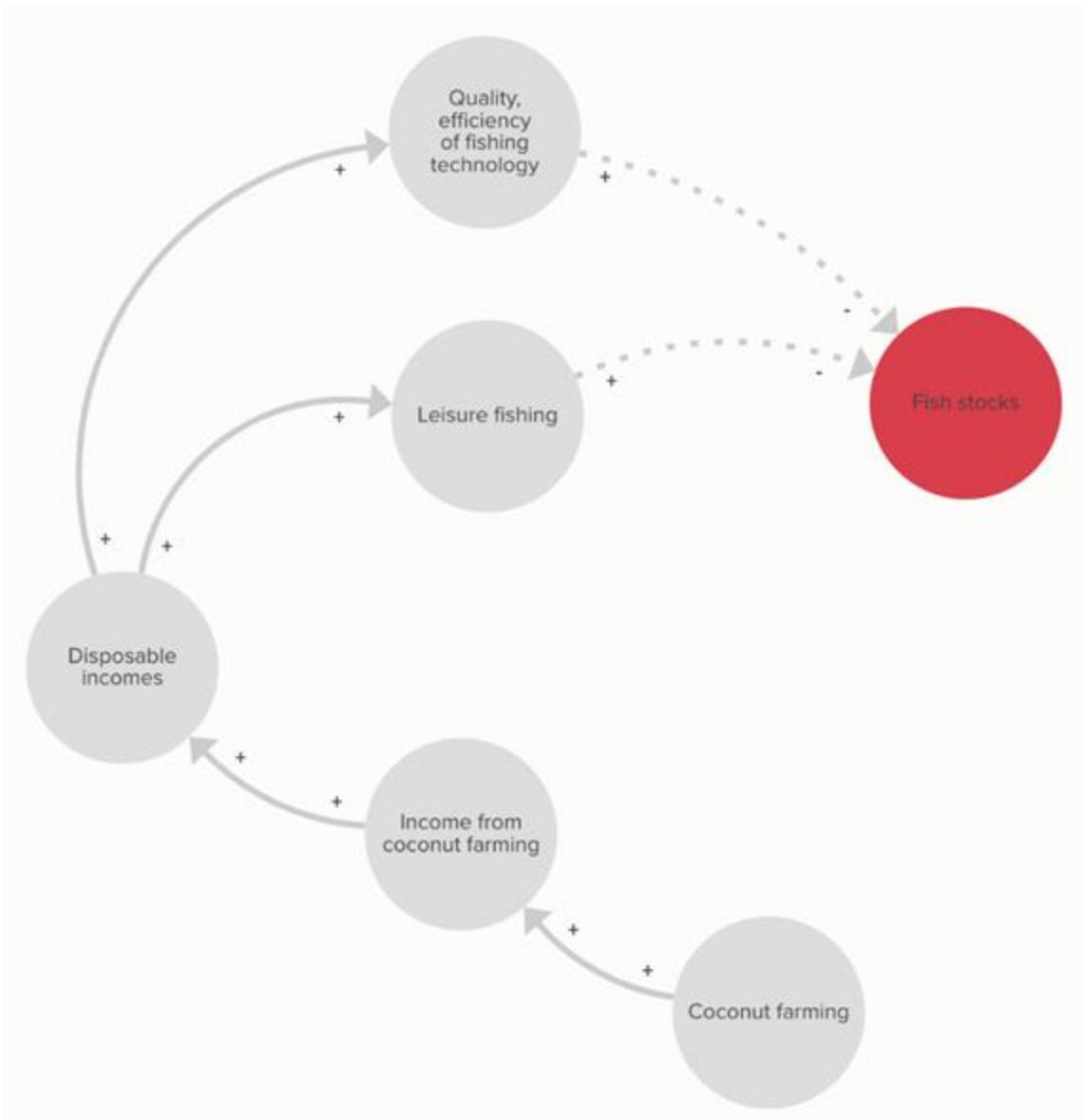
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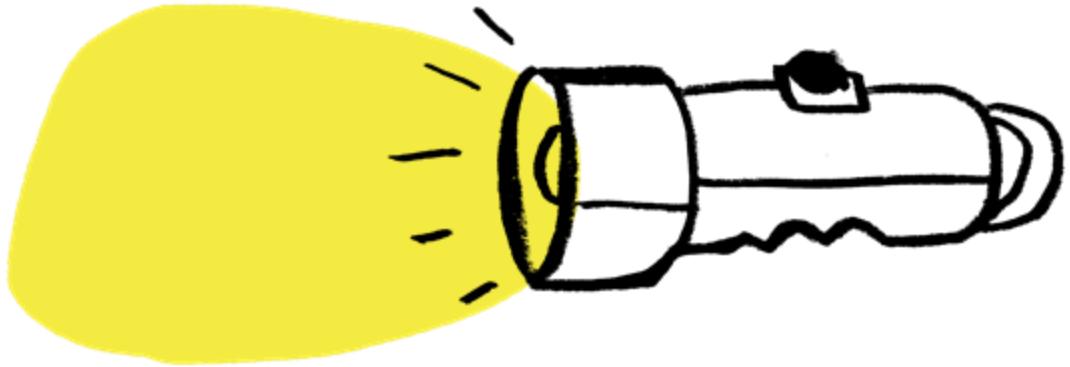




**Short Break**

# Identifying bright spots

Using our understanding of the system to explore opportunity spaces and set boundaries



## 1. Identify your bright spots

Begin by reviewing the causal map you've created and asking:

- Where is the system frozen? Look for places where system behavior is deeply entrenched and unlikely to change in the near future.
- Where are there places that seem like bright spots? Look for places where positive change is happening already. Where people are trying to change, allies in the system or interventions you can scale

## 2. Write your system stories

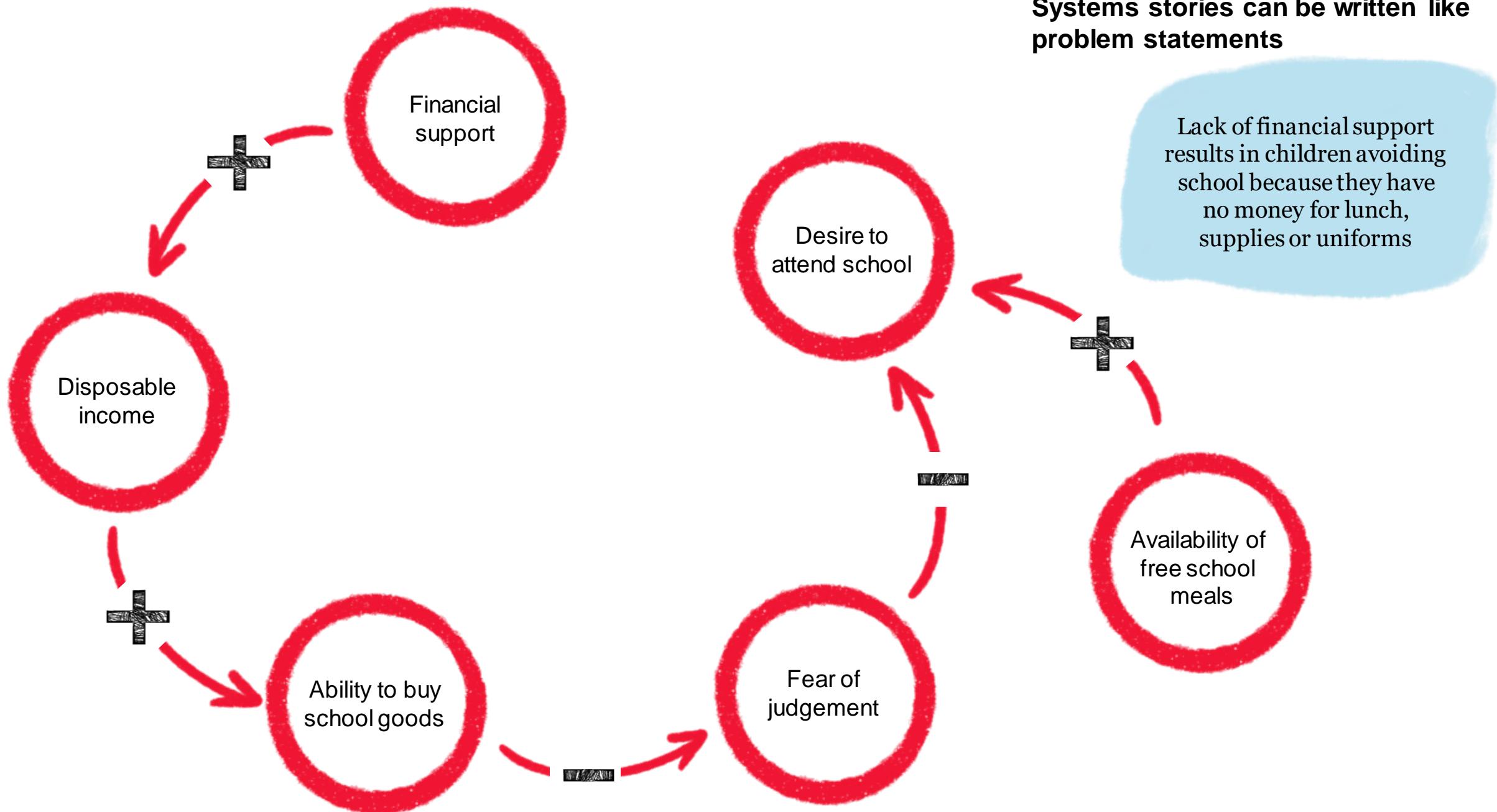
Focusing on your bright spots, pull out systems stories you want to highlight.

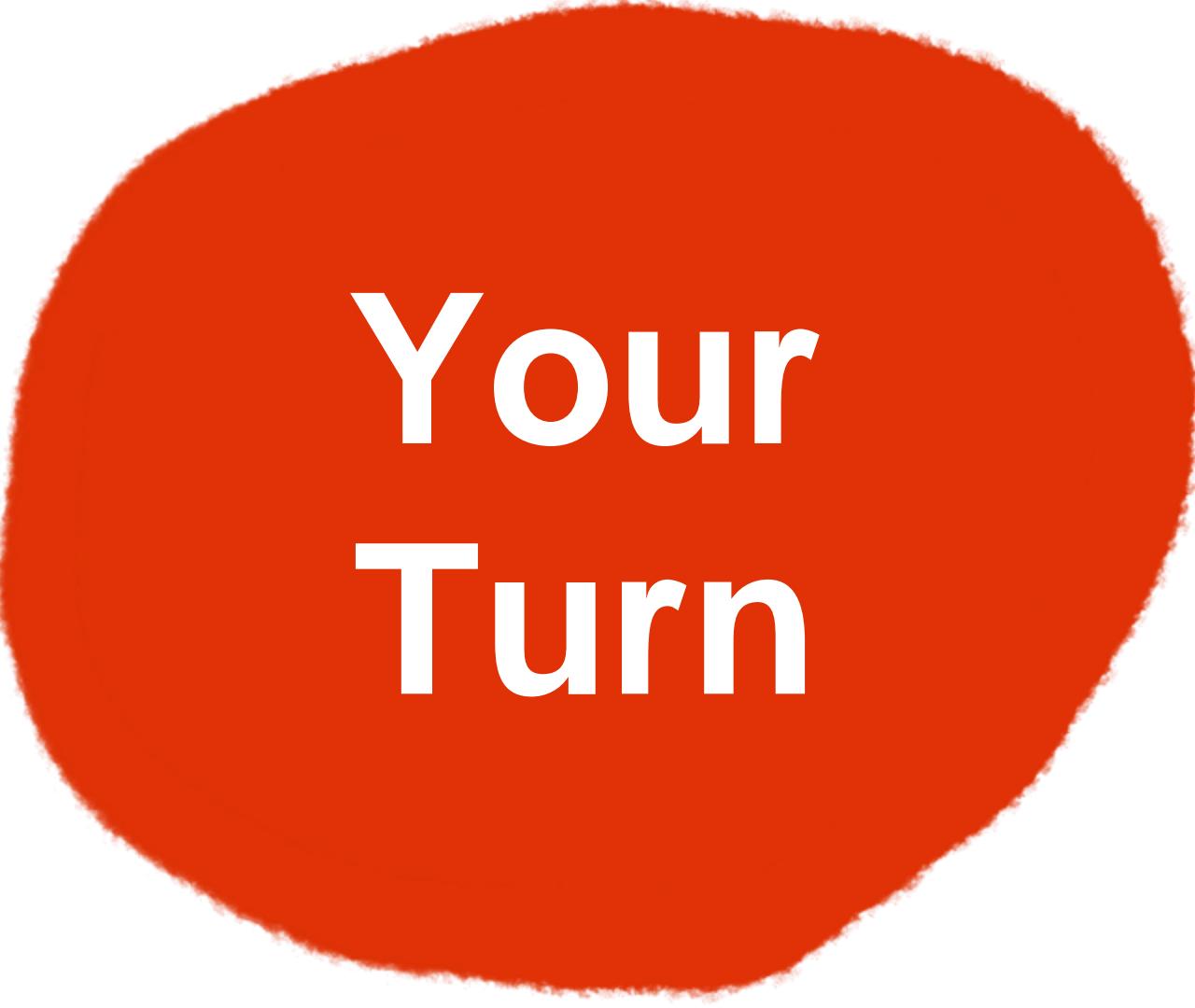
These stories should be the important narratives you want to share with stakeholders, to create alignment and understanding of the system.\*

Your system stories should communicate the dynamics at play in the system. These might be the areas you decide to implement interventions.

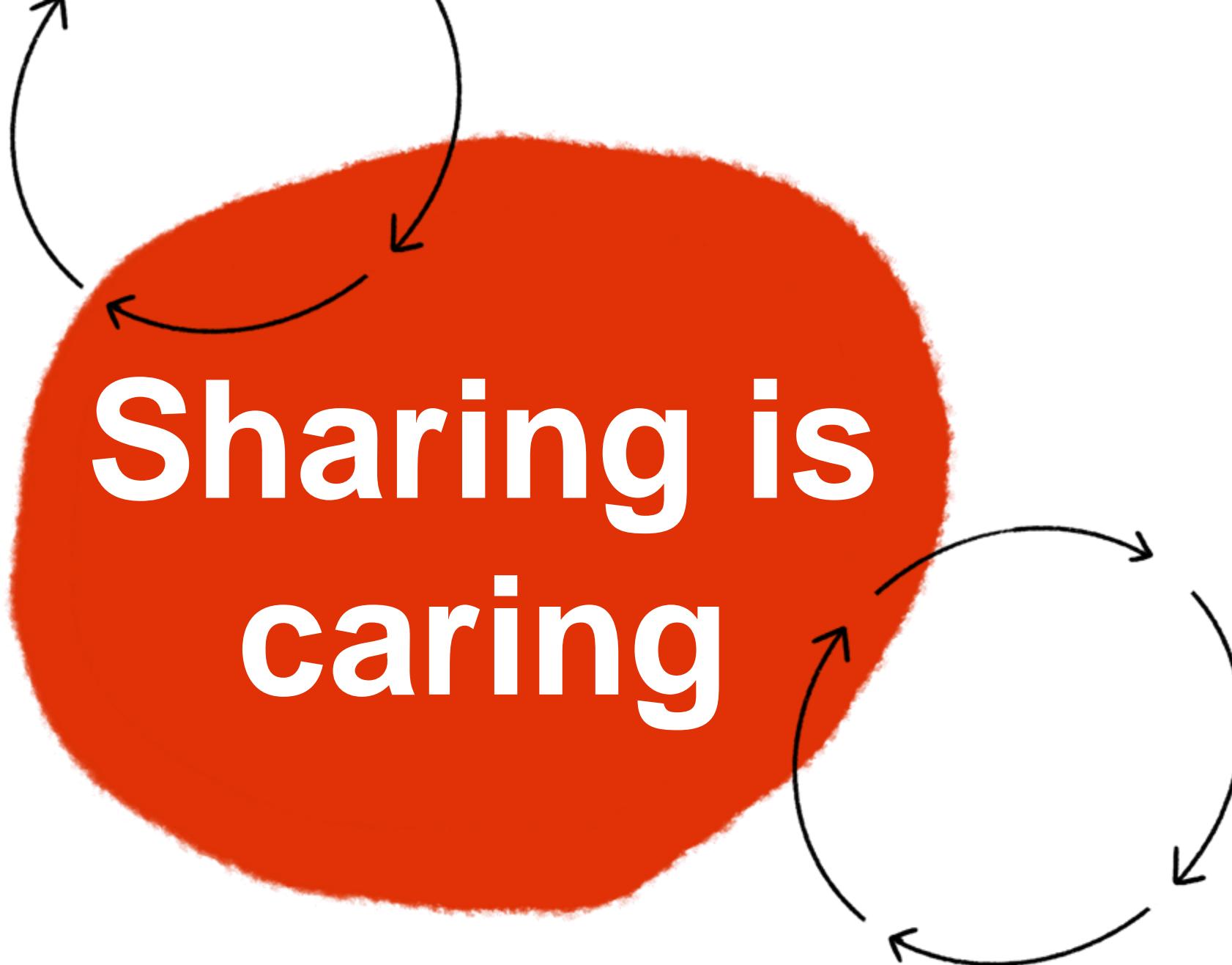
\* *It's okay to make assumptions, for now...*

**Systems stories can be written like problem statements**





Your  
Turn



Sharing is  
caring

# Set boundaries

Using our understanding of the system to explore opportunity spaces and set boundaries

## 3. Collate themes from your stories

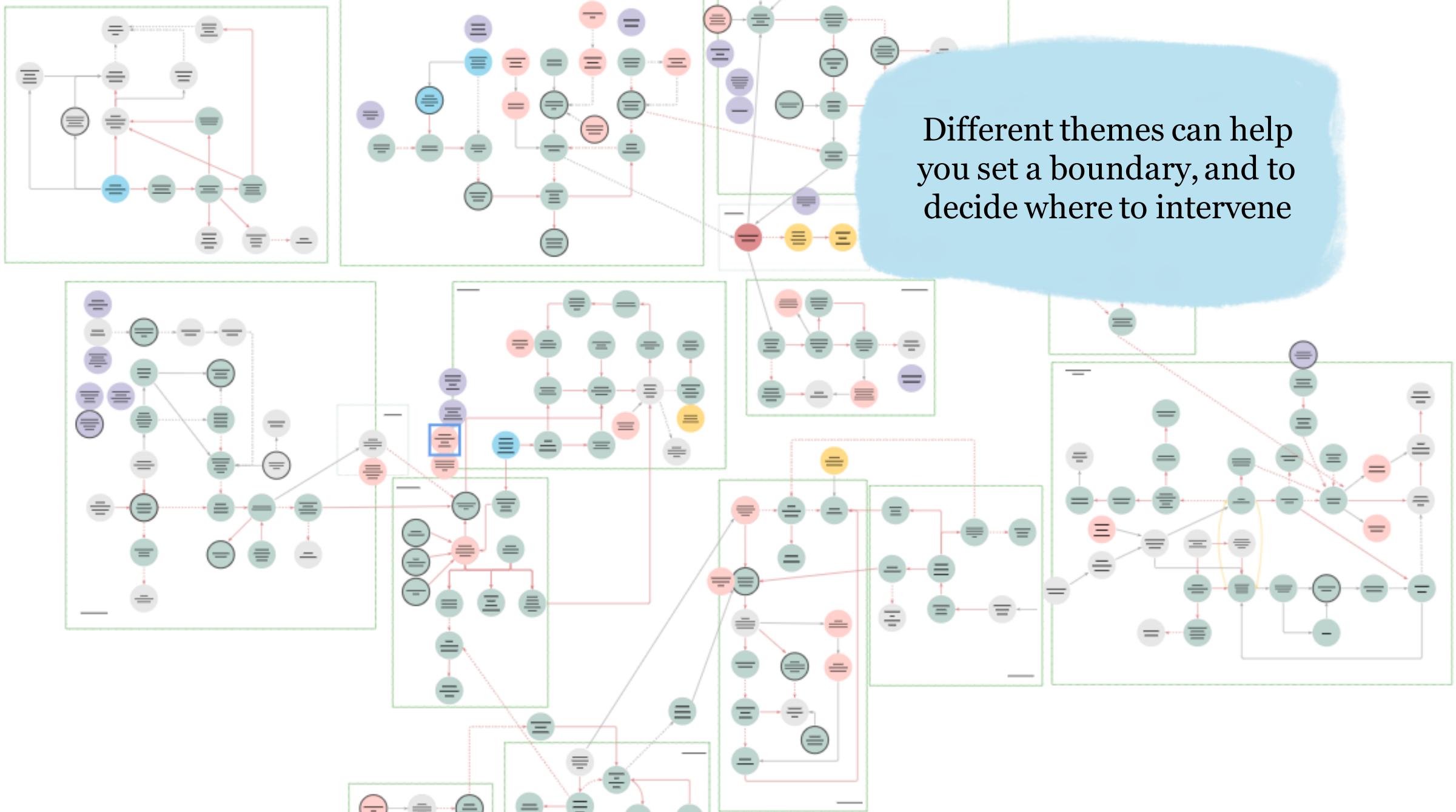
Begin making sense of the stories you've pulled out of your system by matching them into themes.

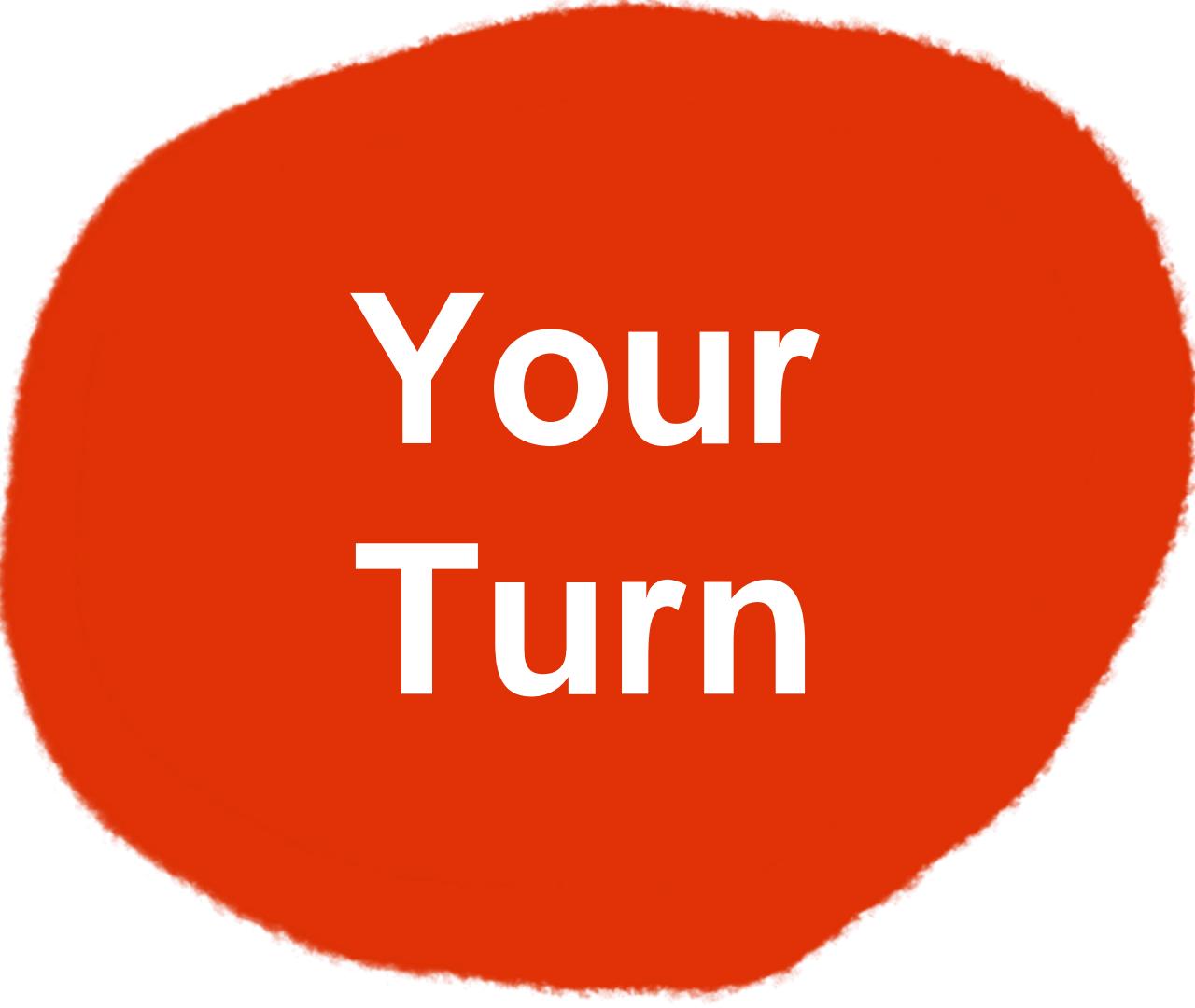
Consider, is there an overlap between your stories? Are they related or separate? Try and collate themes from these, we will need these themes later...

For example, if you have stories around cost of transport, lack of free school meals etc. you could collate them around the theme of 'financial barriers'

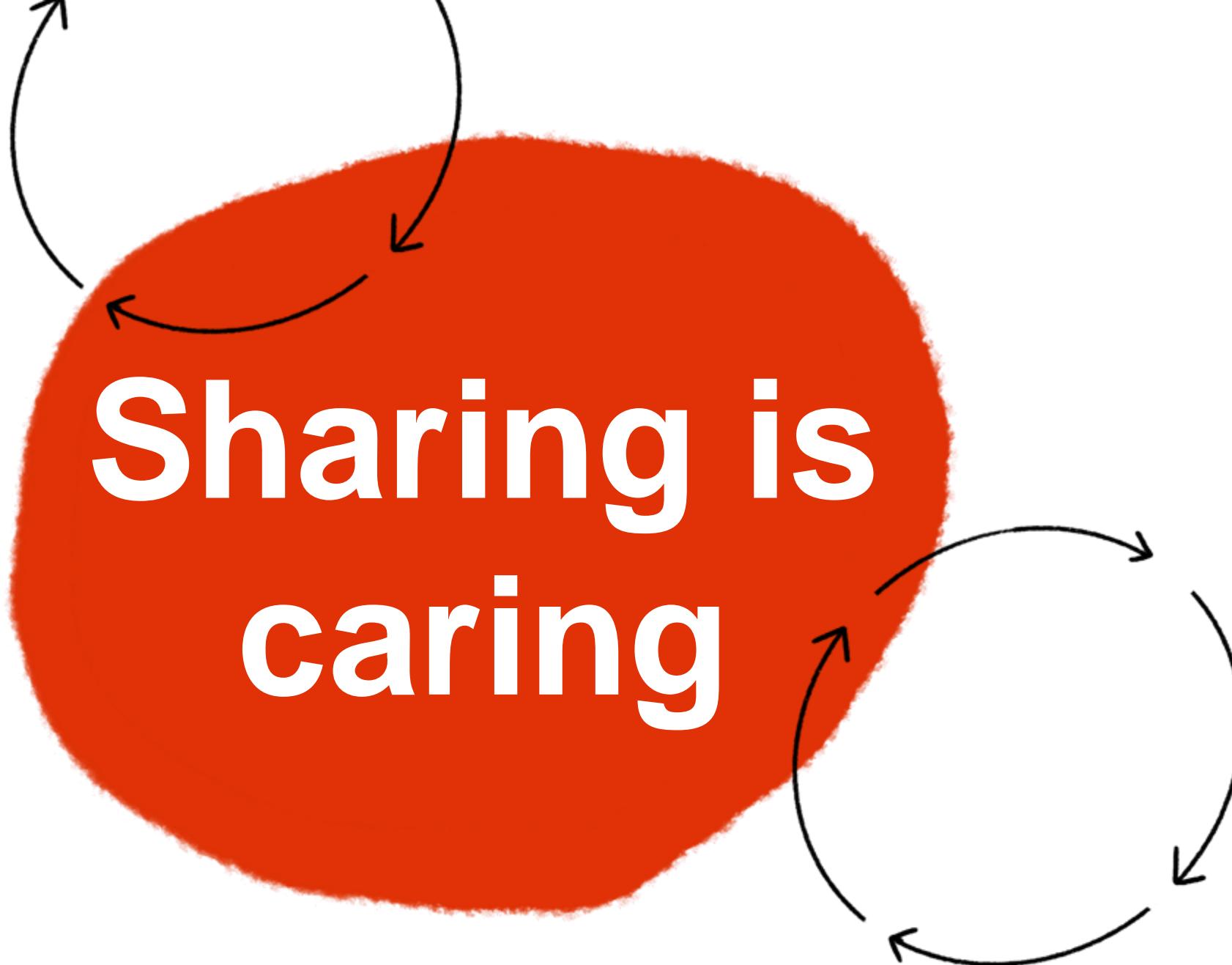


Different themes can help you set a boundary, and to decide where to intervene





Your  
Turn



Sharing is  
caring

# Understand your sphere of influence

## REMEMBER

Ideally, we can influence anything

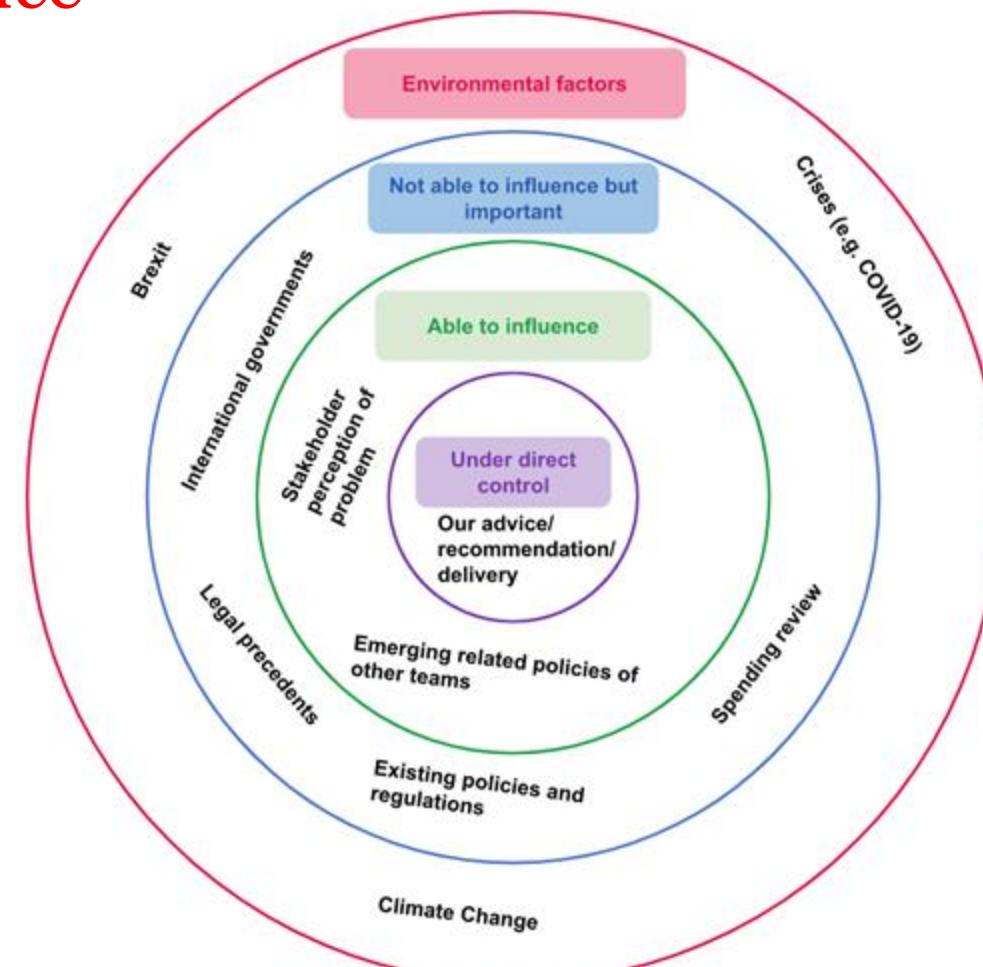
Realistically what do we want to influence?

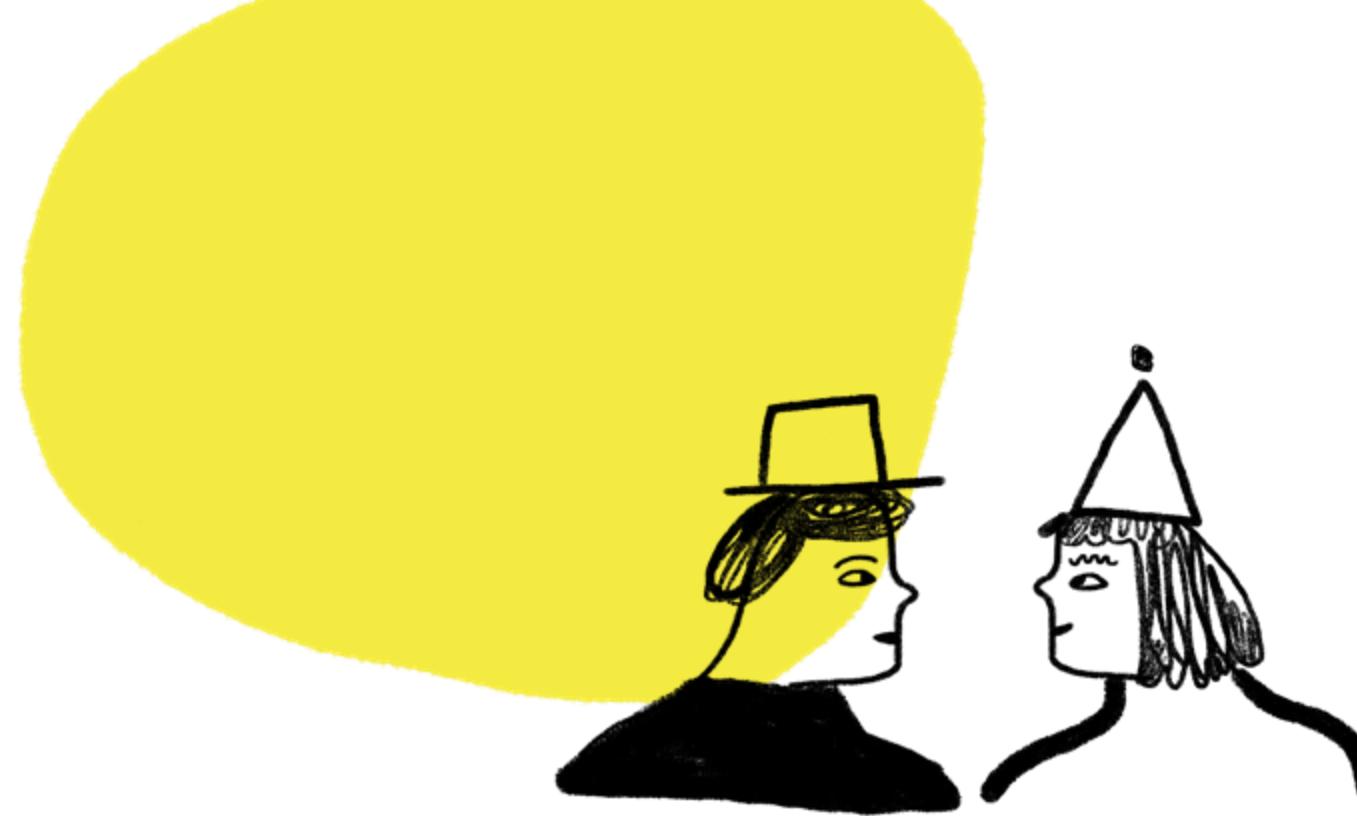
**It's about understanding what effort vs. impact you can have?** Should you spend hours petitioning government to change policies at a national level? Or should you work with local community groups to change attitudes at a local level? Where do you sit?

Consider which level of the system you're operating at –

are you challenging mindsets, policies, processes?

Are you working at a national, regional or local level?





**Short Break**



Taking  
Action

# User Centred Systems thinking as an approach

Systems thinking



1. Framing the system



3. Understanding the system



5. Exploring the possibility space



7. Fostering the transition

Design thinking



2. Listening to the system



4. Defining the desired future



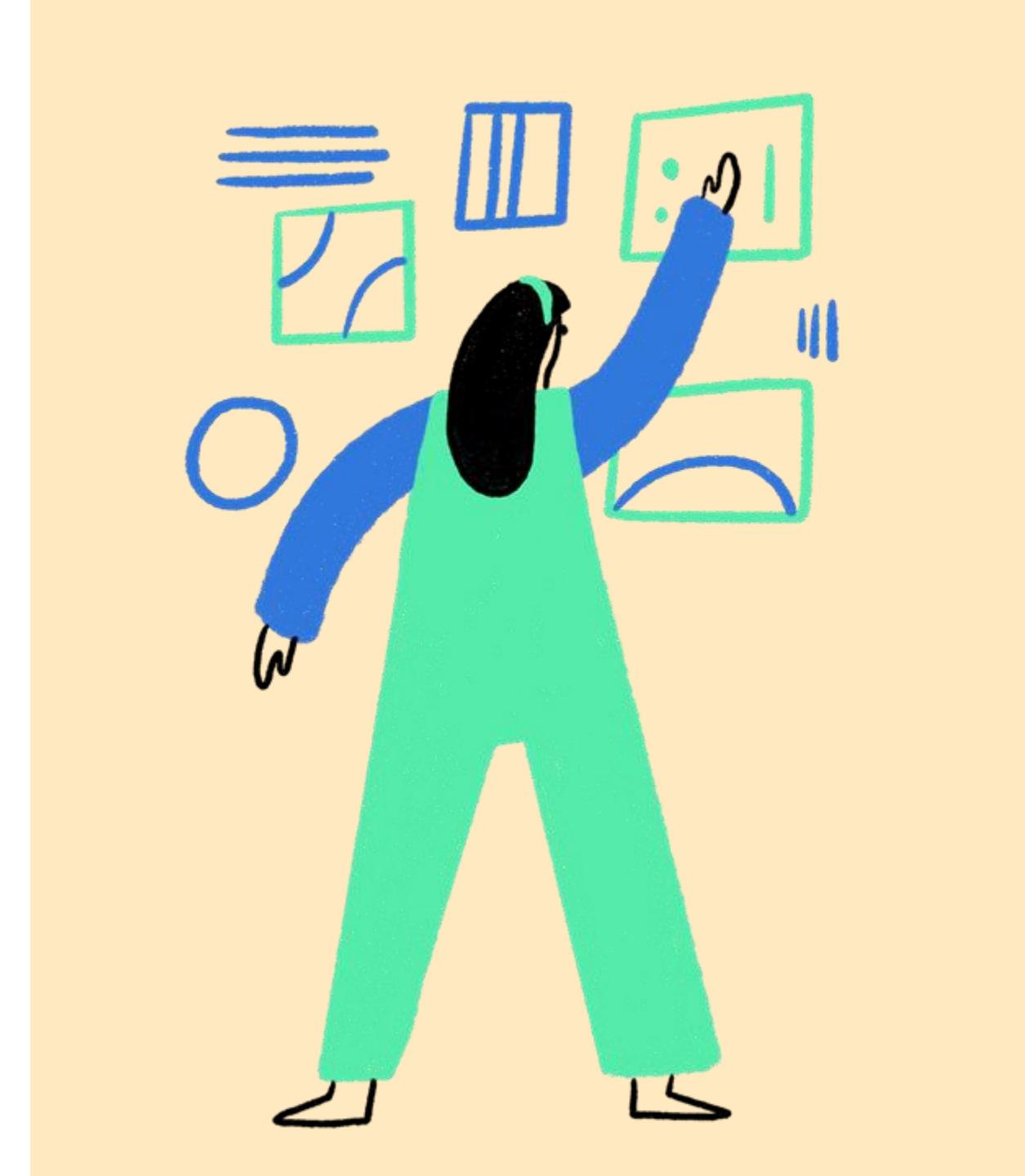
6. Designing the intervention model

# Create a theory of change

## What is it?

A theory of change is a tool designed to help you map out the necessary steps to take to achieve a particular goal. It can help you to identify the potential impact and risks of your plan and connect your work to a bigger goal. It also helps you to prioritise your focus on where to start.

**Put simply a theory of change can bridge the gap between what you plan to do and the outcome you're trying to achieve**



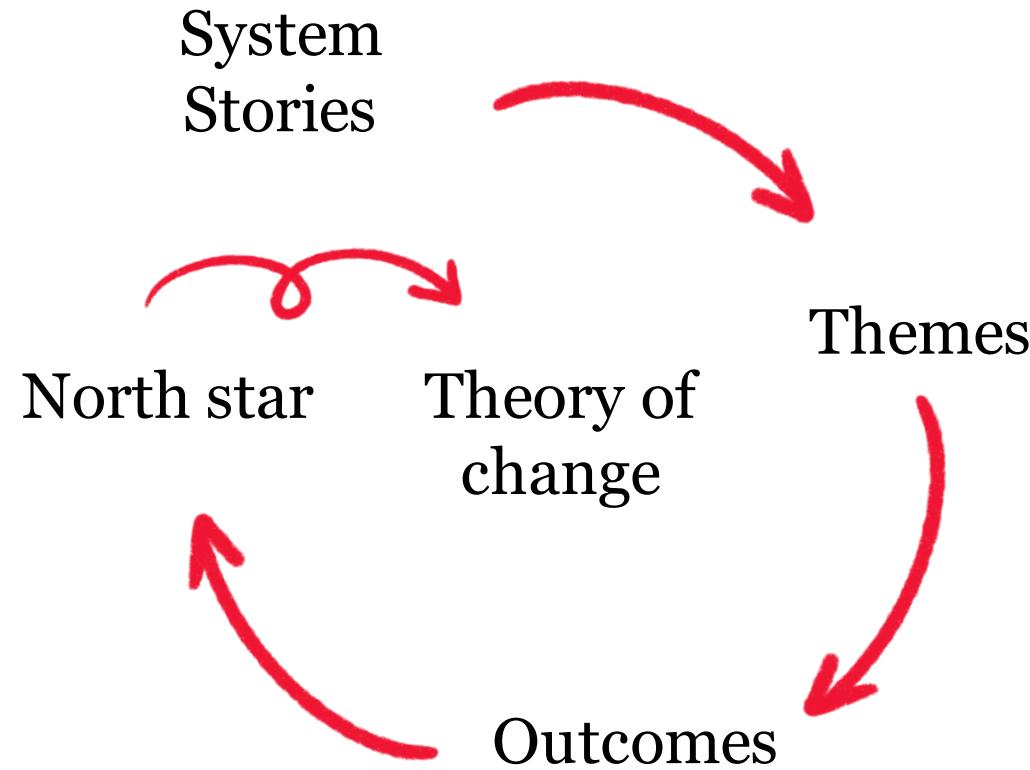
## Create a theory of change

Throughout the process, you might employ different theory of change frameworks to elicit responses from your stakeholders, ranging from broad alignment to detailed planning. In addition, you can use a series of frameworks in succession to get more granular in your discussions and decision-making. A structured way to think about each of the frameworks is to understand the following:

- **When to Use:** Are you trying to answer, “What should we do?,” “Why should we do it?” or, more specifically, “How should we do it?” The granularity you are seeking determines which framework you might want to use.
- **Objective:** Are you trying to get buy-in from key stakeholders, are you trying to involve new stakeholders whose input is sorely needed, or are you working with a core team to articulate a plan?
- **Components:** What are the key categories that make up the framework?

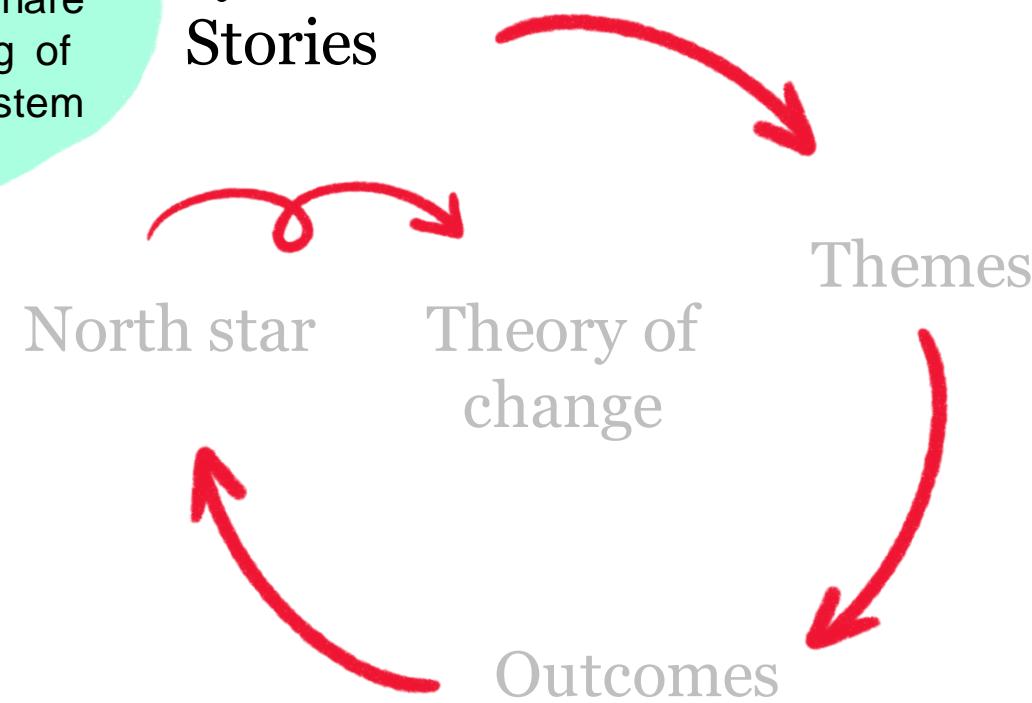


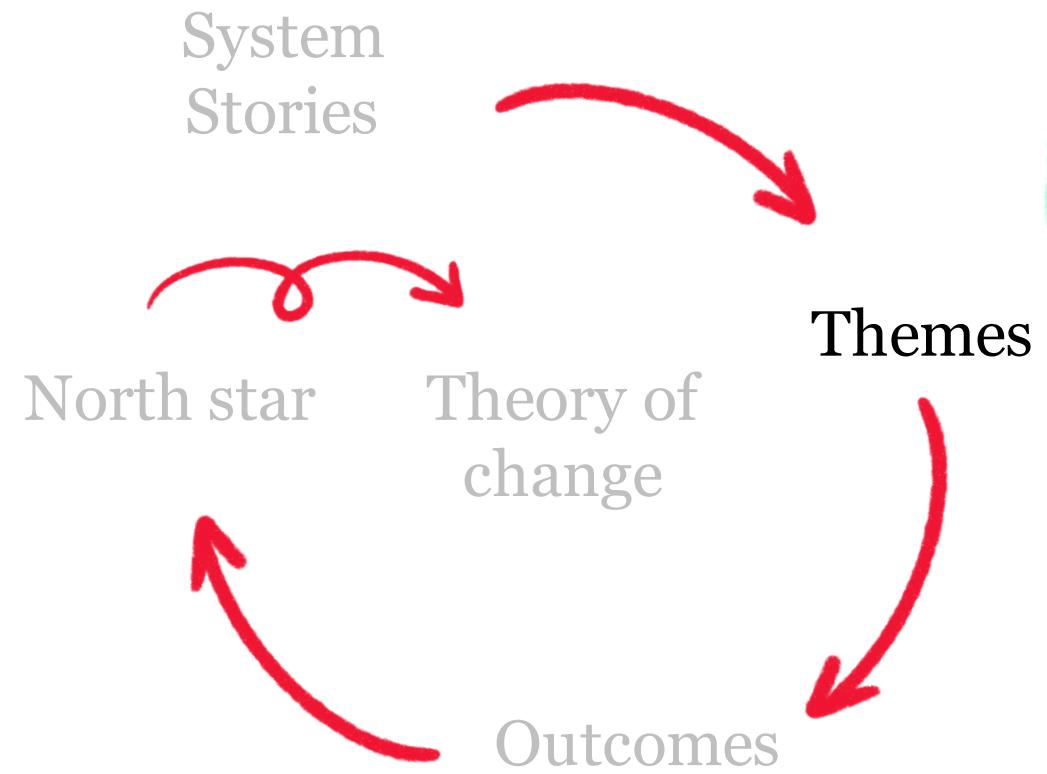
# What to expect today



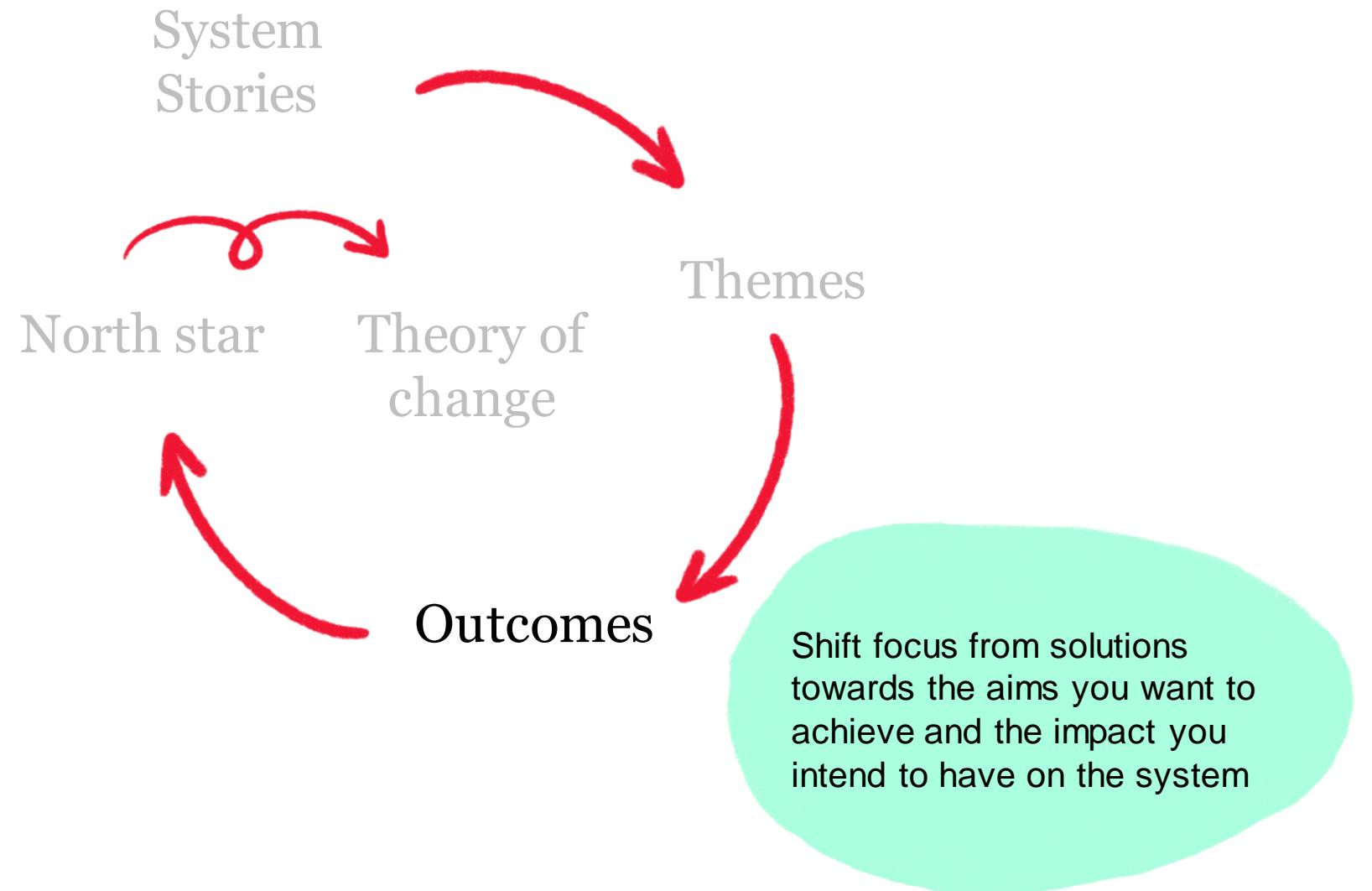
Identify the important narratives you need to share to build an understanding of the challenges in the system

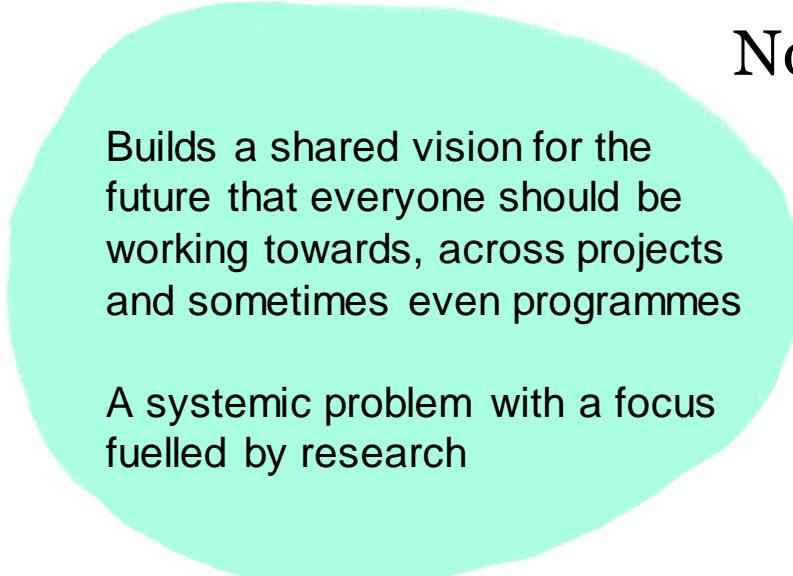
## System Stories





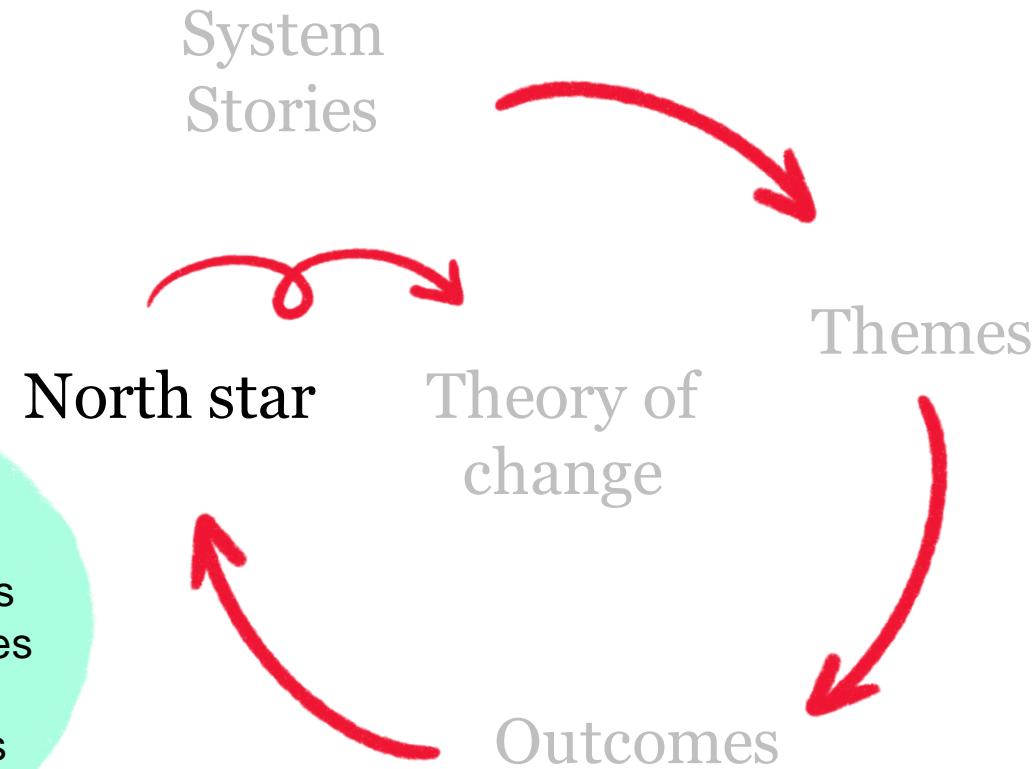
Allow you to group challenges to facilitate conversations about where to focus your interventions

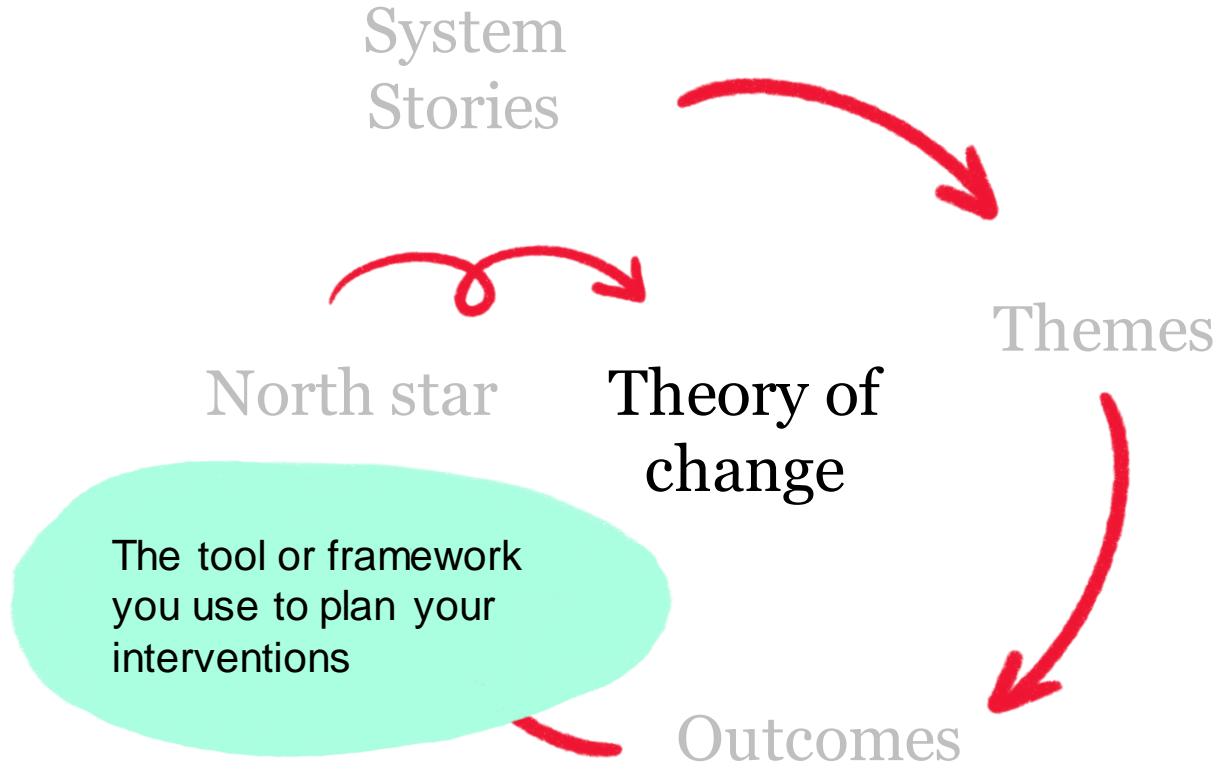


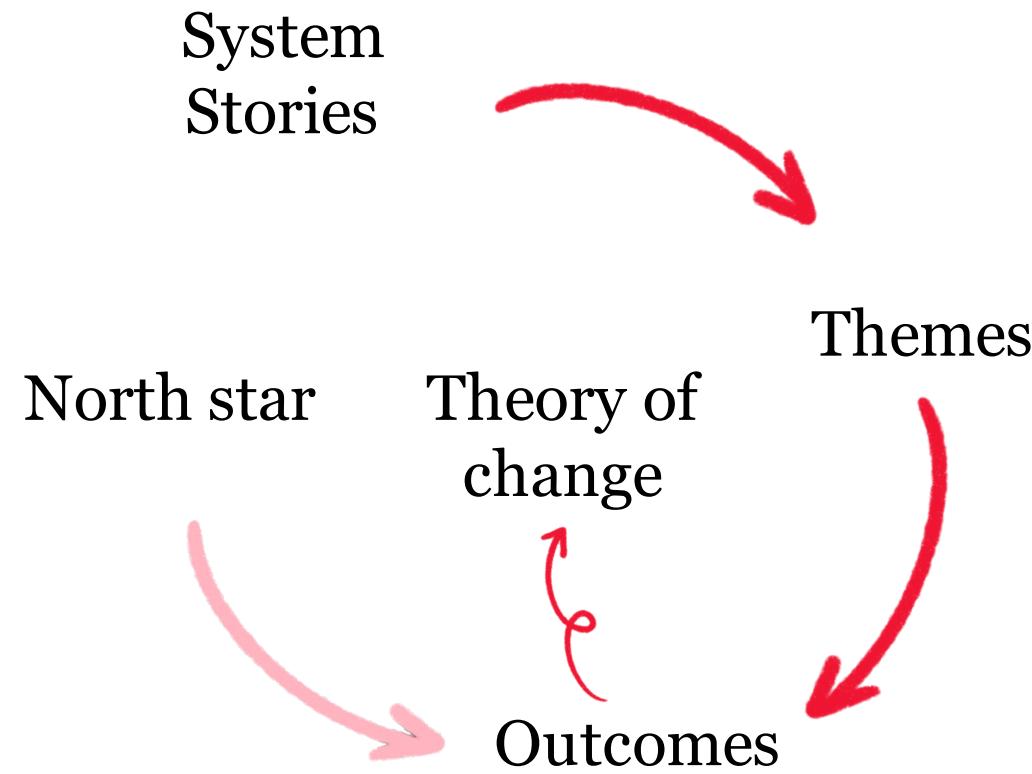


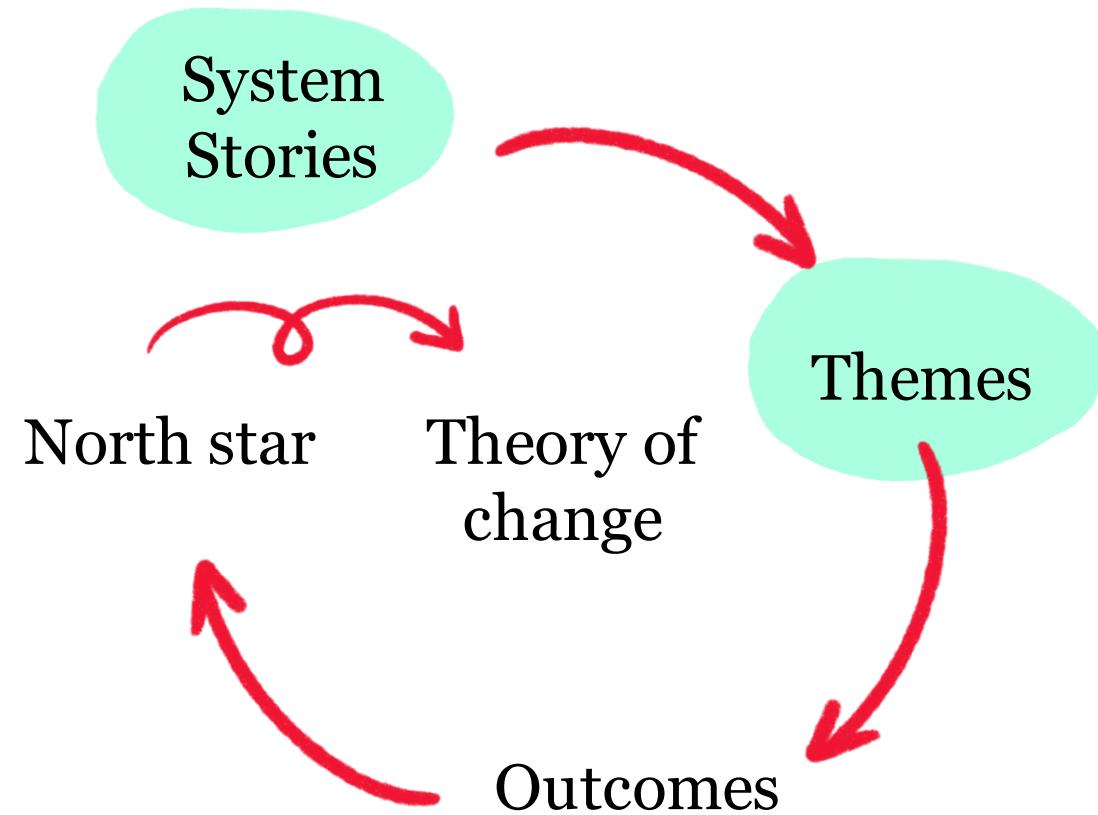
Builds a shared vision for the future that everyone should be working towards, across projects and sometimes even programmes

A systemic problem with a focus fuelled by research









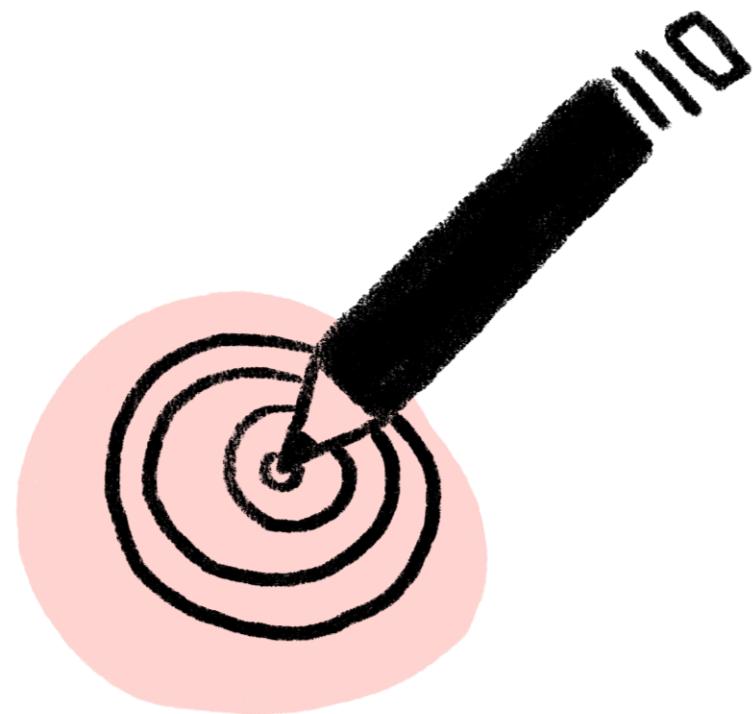
## Define your outcomes

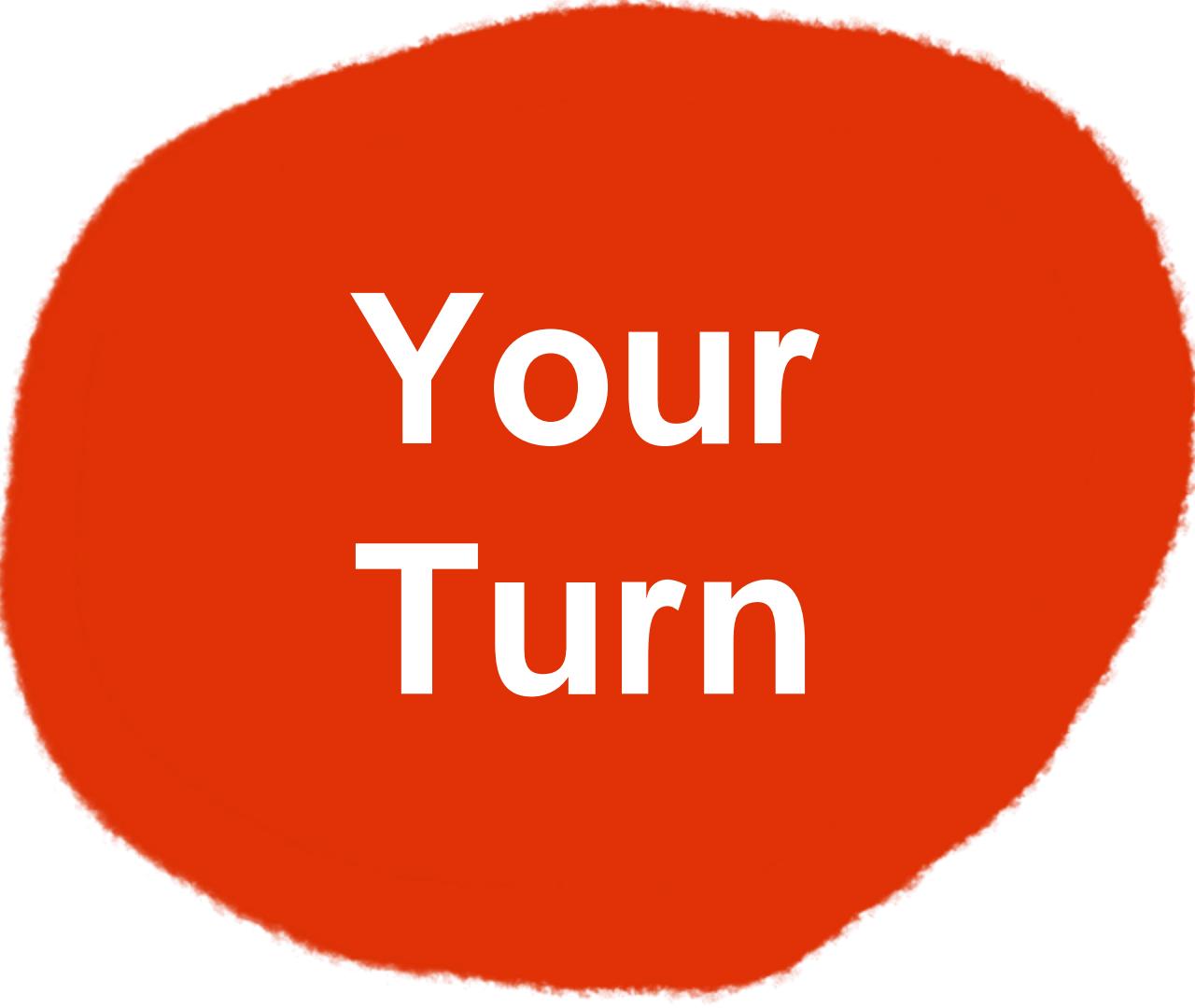
Using our understanding of the system consider what the outcomes are we want to achieve if we were to address the challenges we've identified.

Refer to the stories we've highlighted as important and the themes we've identified.

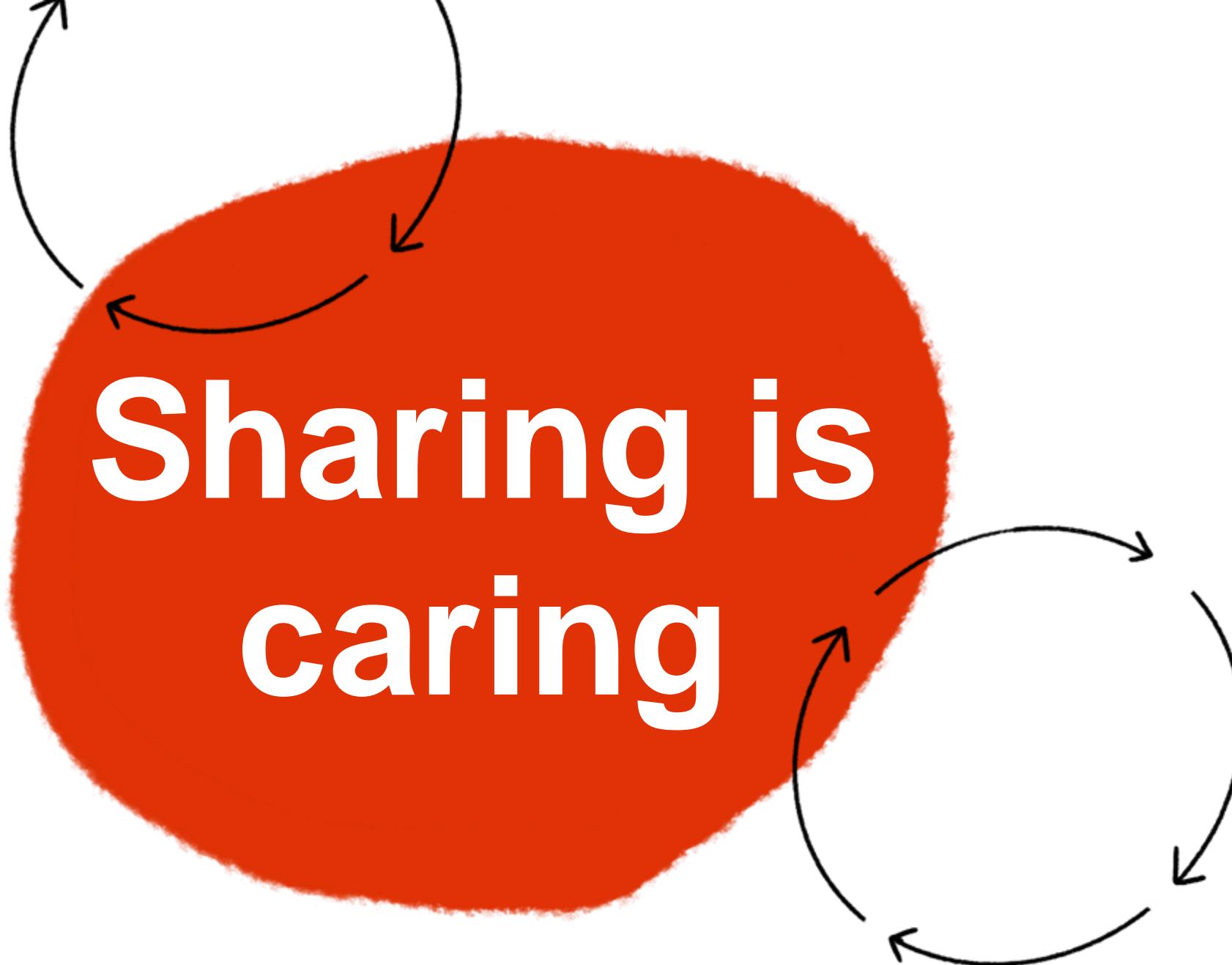
Remember:

- What is the goal we're trying to achieve? Or the impact we're trying to have? **Get more specific than the original brief**
- Don't slip into solutions mode, we're focusing on impact and outcomes, not interventions (yet!)





Your  
Turn

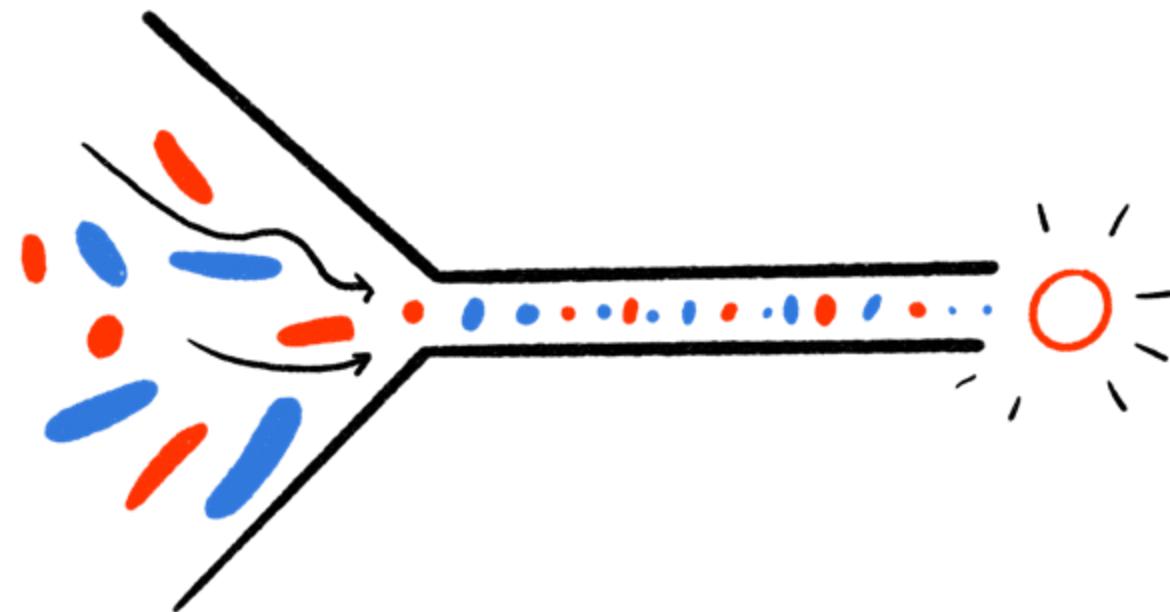


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caring

## Define the desired future

We know where we can influence in a system, it's time to think about what is our long term goal for the system. How do we want it to change? The best way to align around the desired future is to create an ultimate goal or north star for your system.

There's not always a clear linear path for creating The North Star. It's a little messy, and it should be—this is creative work after all and it's about unifying perspectives about the future.



# Define the desired future

## Creating a north star for your system.

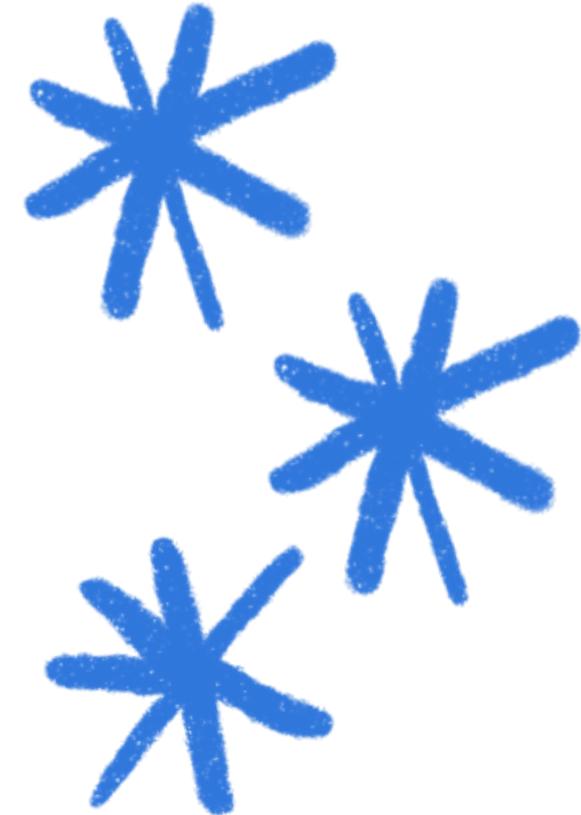
From what we've learned and know about the system we need to write a compelling statement which can act as a north star to guide us through the change.

Review the themes and outcomes you have and use them to create your north star following the format:

Our north star is a [name of system] that produces [desired condition or outcome].

Questions to consider:

- What future system is your team passionate about working toward?
- What themes are recurring? Using the outcomes you have prioritised (and your original goal or brief)
- What's our sphere of influence?



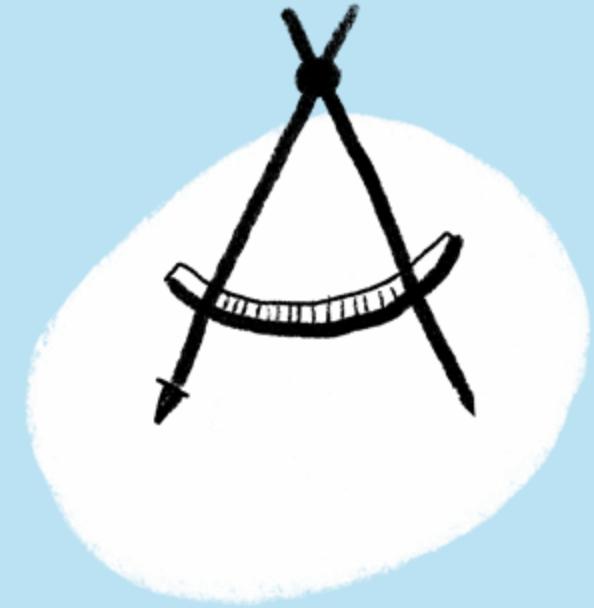
## In practice tips

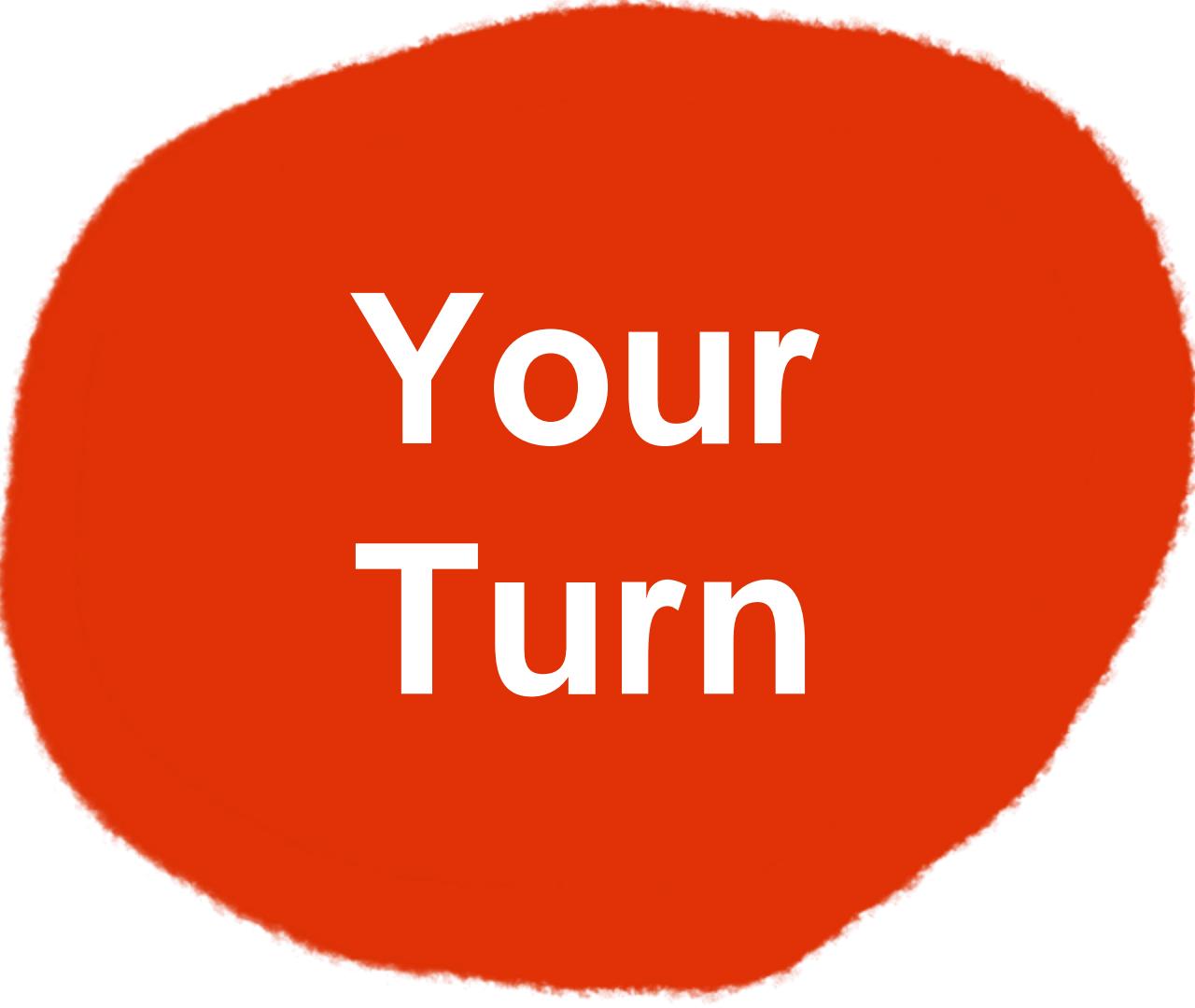
Make sure to keep people focused on the **outcomes** you're trying to achieve not the **outputs**. For example, don't focusing on 'implementing a digital platform', focus on improving access to care' which is an outcome that can be enabled by digital platforms.

Remember the parable of the blindfolded humans and the elephant? Good, because this is where those clashing perspectives can cause tension. Your vision needs to be high level enough to build consensus but not so vague that it loses meaning. It will take some iterations and wordsmithing.

This shouldn't be done in isolation - a vision is only as successful as those who believe in it, need to be involved to buy into it.

Make sure when you create your ultimate goal that everyone is aligned around the meaning of the words.





Your  
Turn

## Creating a north star

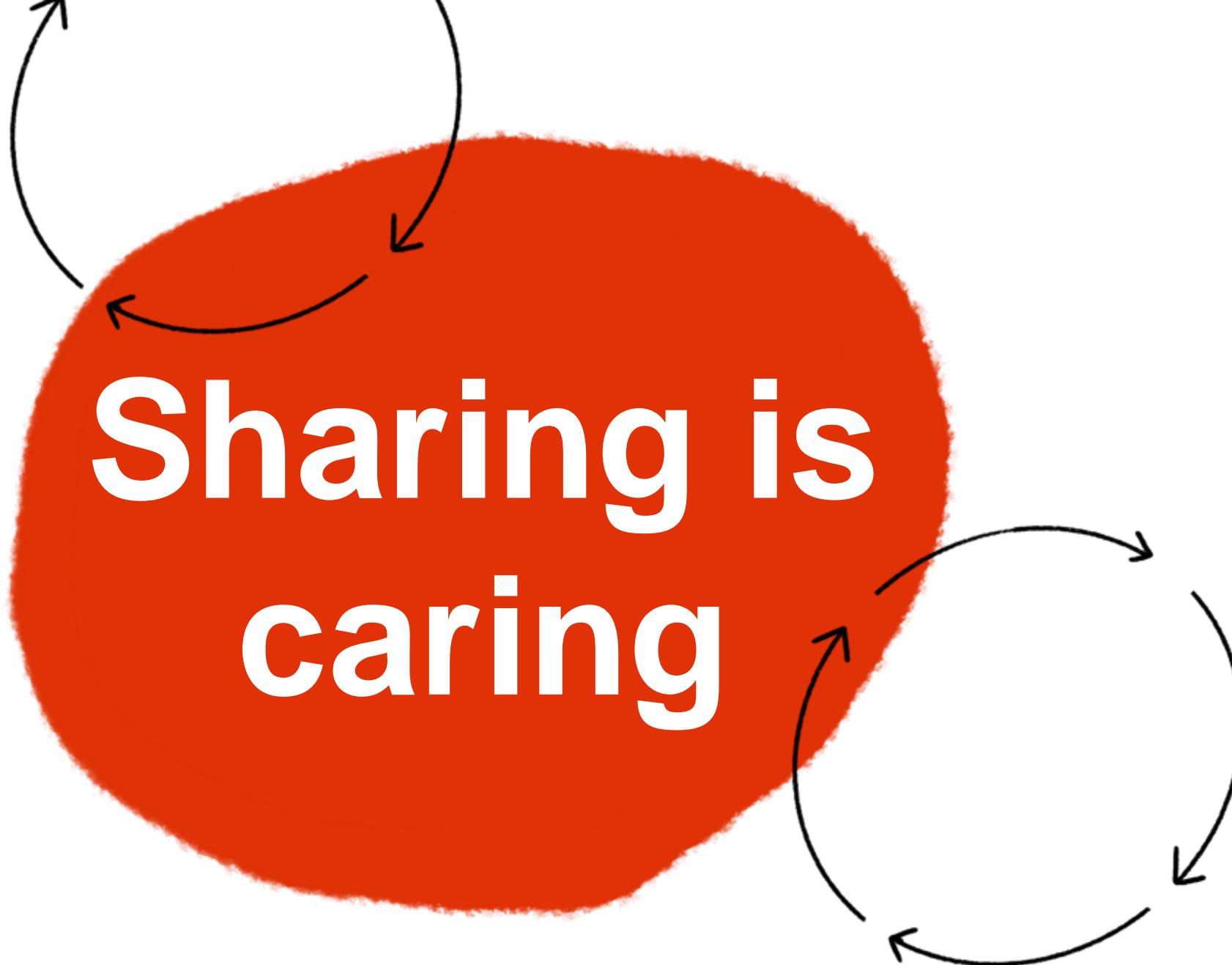
**Use these themes/outcomes to create a compelling goal for the future of the system, known as a north star.**

Take 10 mins to write your north star, using this format:

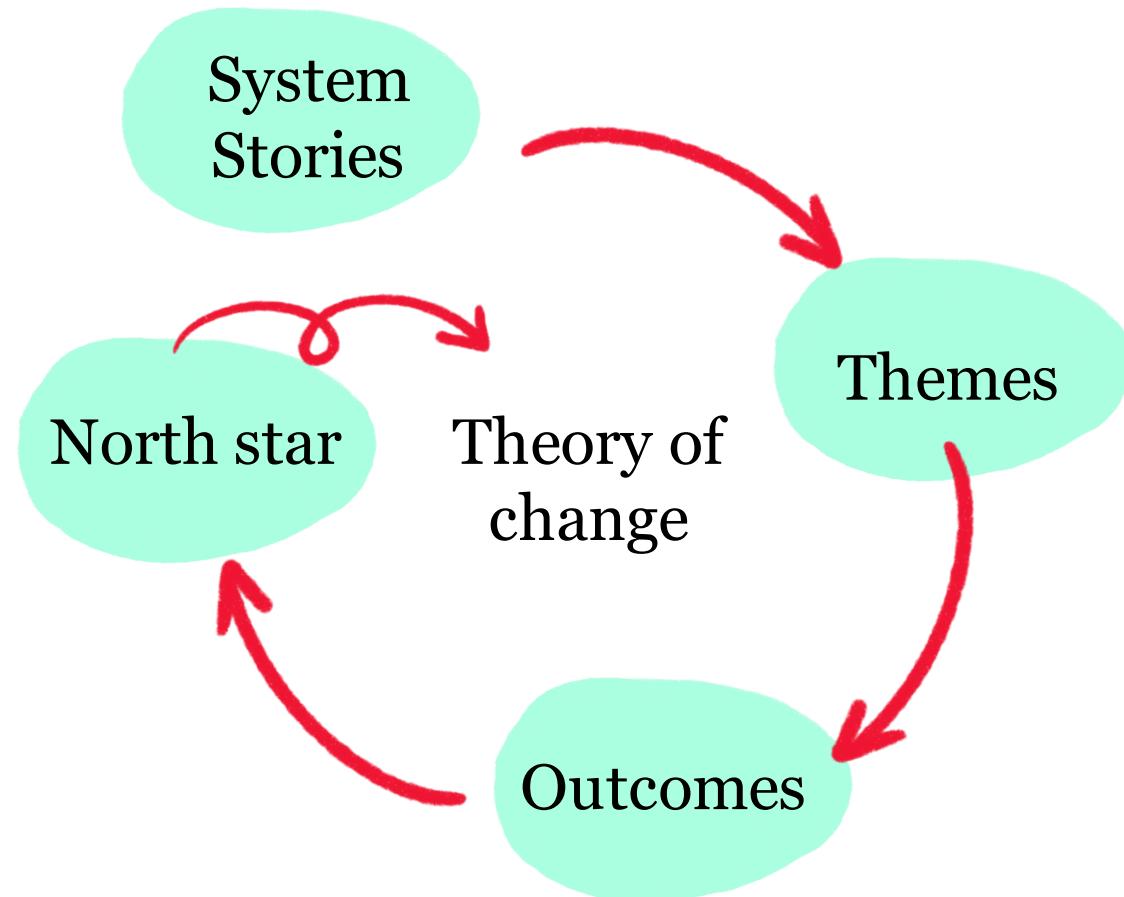
Our north star is a [name of system] that produces [desired condition or outcome]. For example:



**'Our north star is a system where school is accessible regardless of financial background'**



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# Theory of change models

Throughout the process, you might employ different theory of change frameworks to elicit responses from your stakeholders, ranging from broad alignment to detailed planning. In addition, you can use a series of frameworks in succession to get more granular in your discussions and decision-making

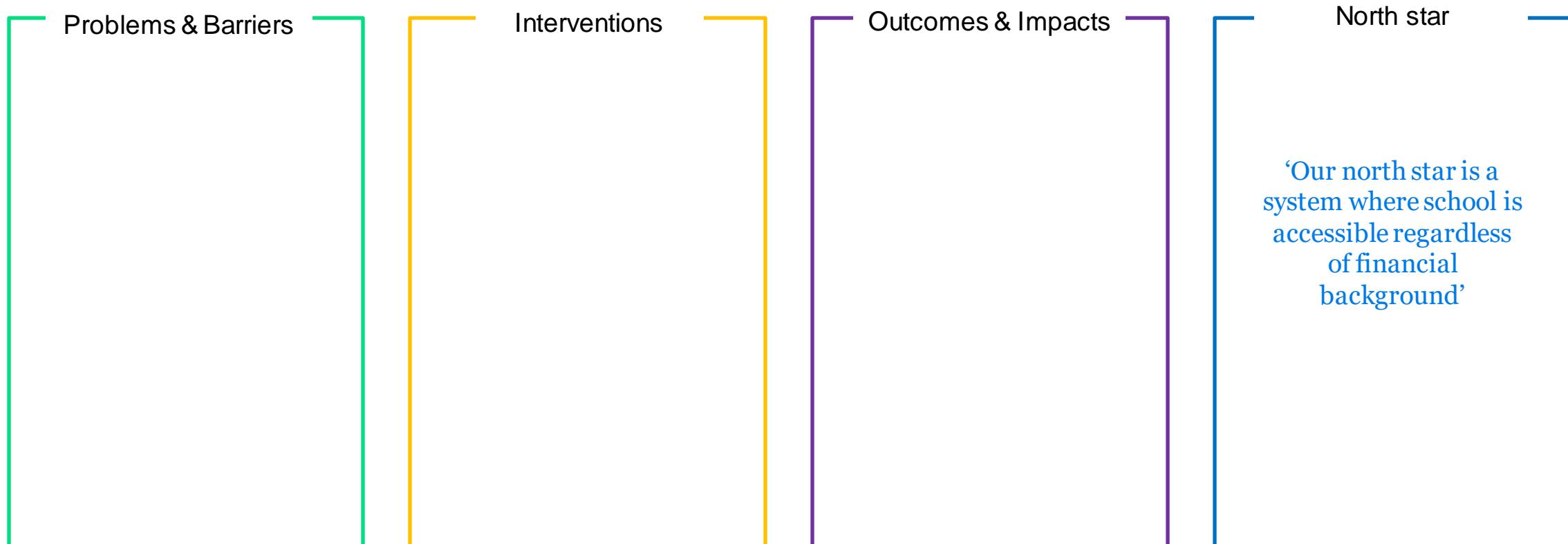
- Three horizons
- Hypothesis Driven Design
- Outcomes mapping
- Input to impact mapping
- Speculative design practices

The important thing is that you bridge the gap between what you plan to do and the outcome you're trying to achieve



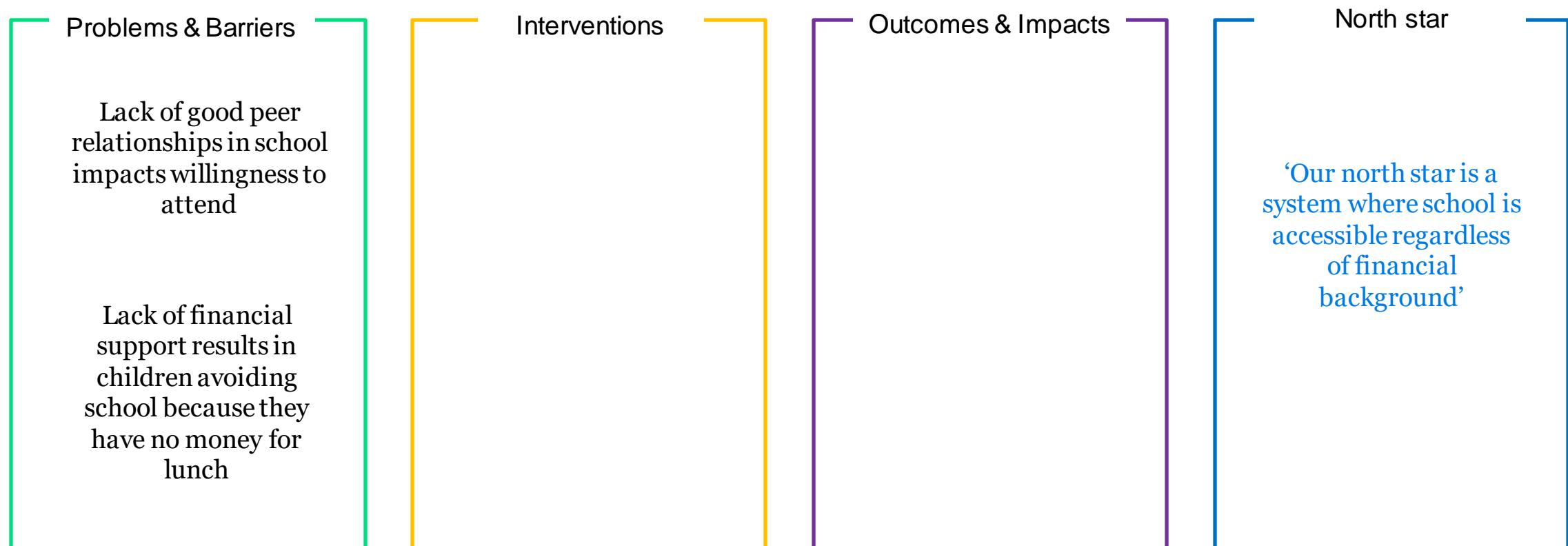
# Creating a theory of change through **outcomes mapping**

Now we have some challenges and an end goal we're trying to reach we can create a theory of change by mapping outcomes, which will become our guide for creating interventions. It focuses on designing interventions to tackle the many outcomes you hope to achieve in changing the system. This method is useful for aligning stakeholders, brainstorming interventions and getting agreement for what changes you want to make in the system. Start with your north star on the righthand side as a reminder of the impact you intend to have



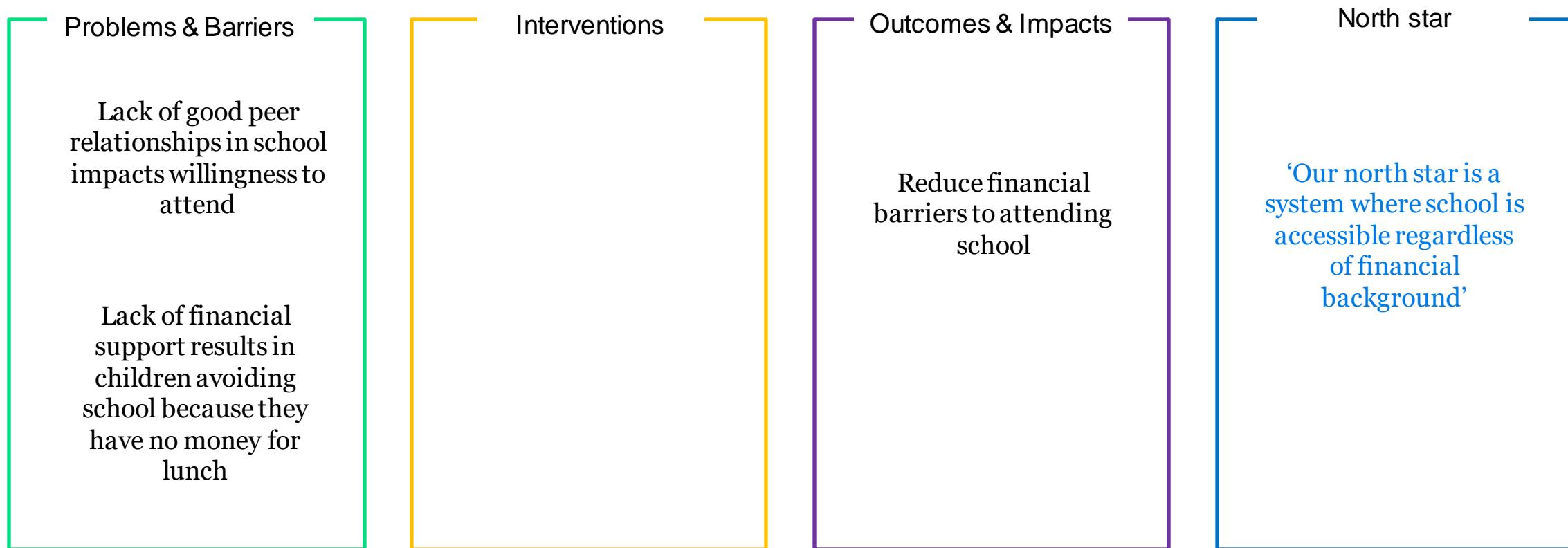
# Creating a theory of change through outcomes mapping

Begin by filling in the problems and barriers section, pulling in any of the important systems stories you identified.



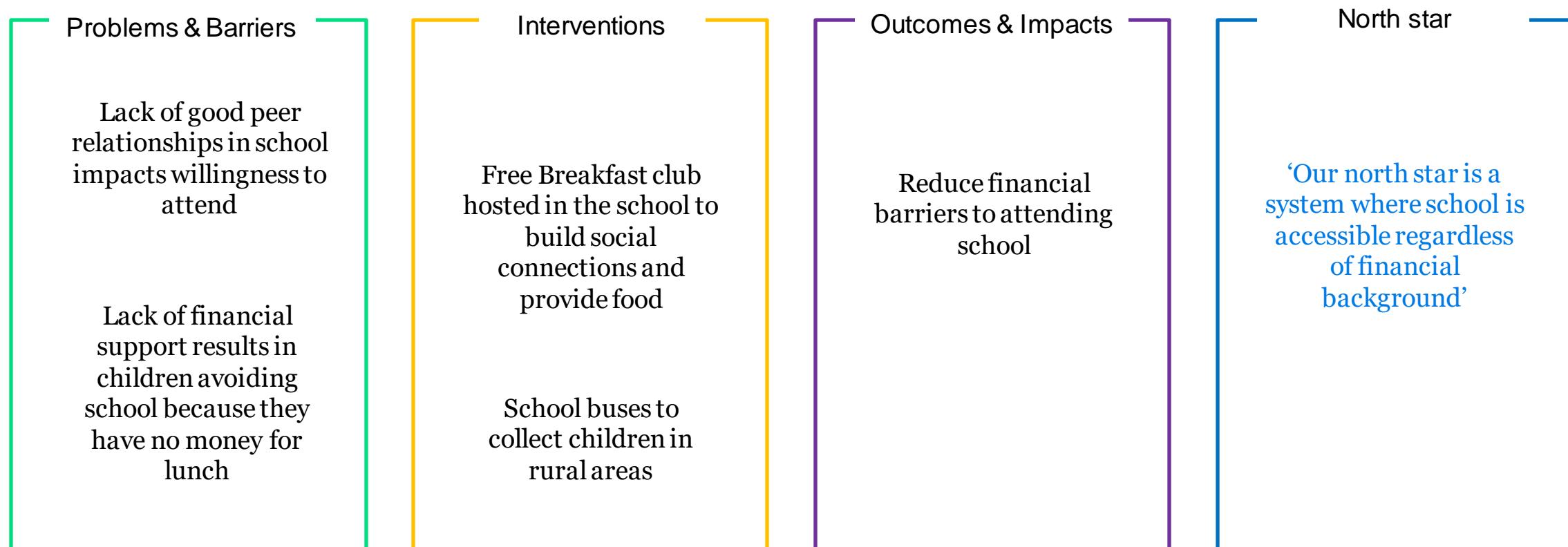
# Creating a theory of change through outcomes mapping

Then pull in your outcomes and impacts. Feel free to add as many as you want, you can use this activity to begin to prioritise which outcomes you want to focus on. As you guide stakeholders through the activity, you'll notice whether an outcome seems like a high priority based on the discussions in the room.



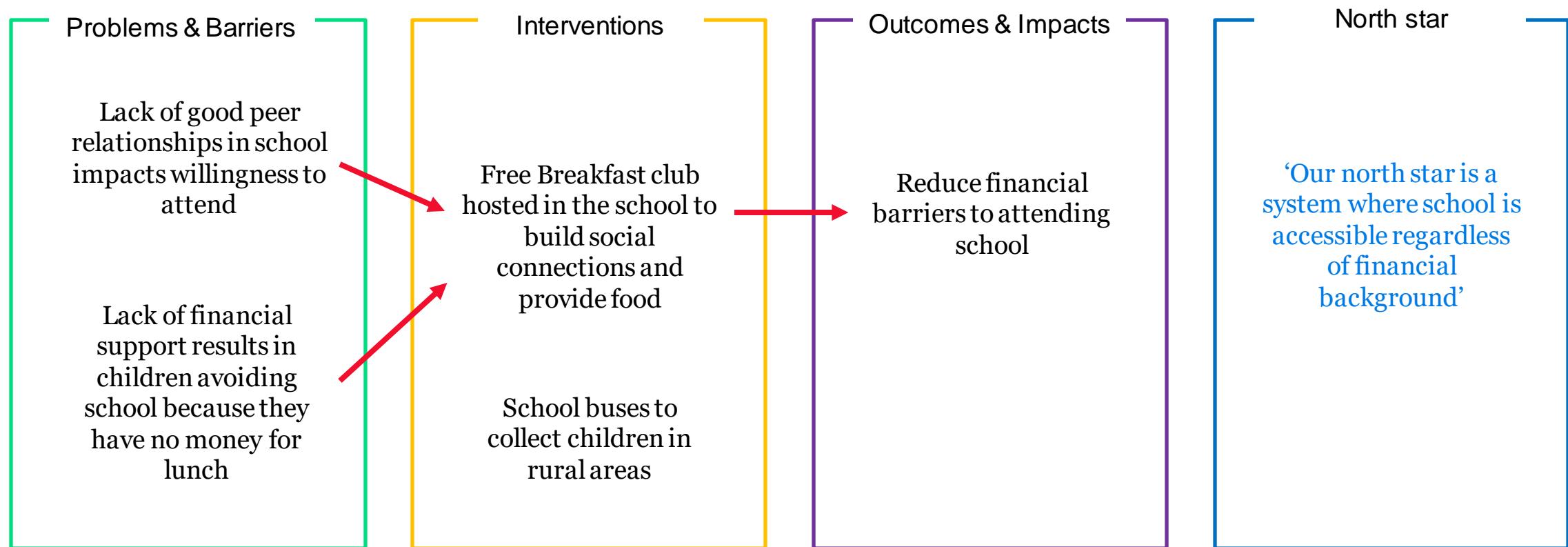
# Creating a theory of change through outcomes mapping

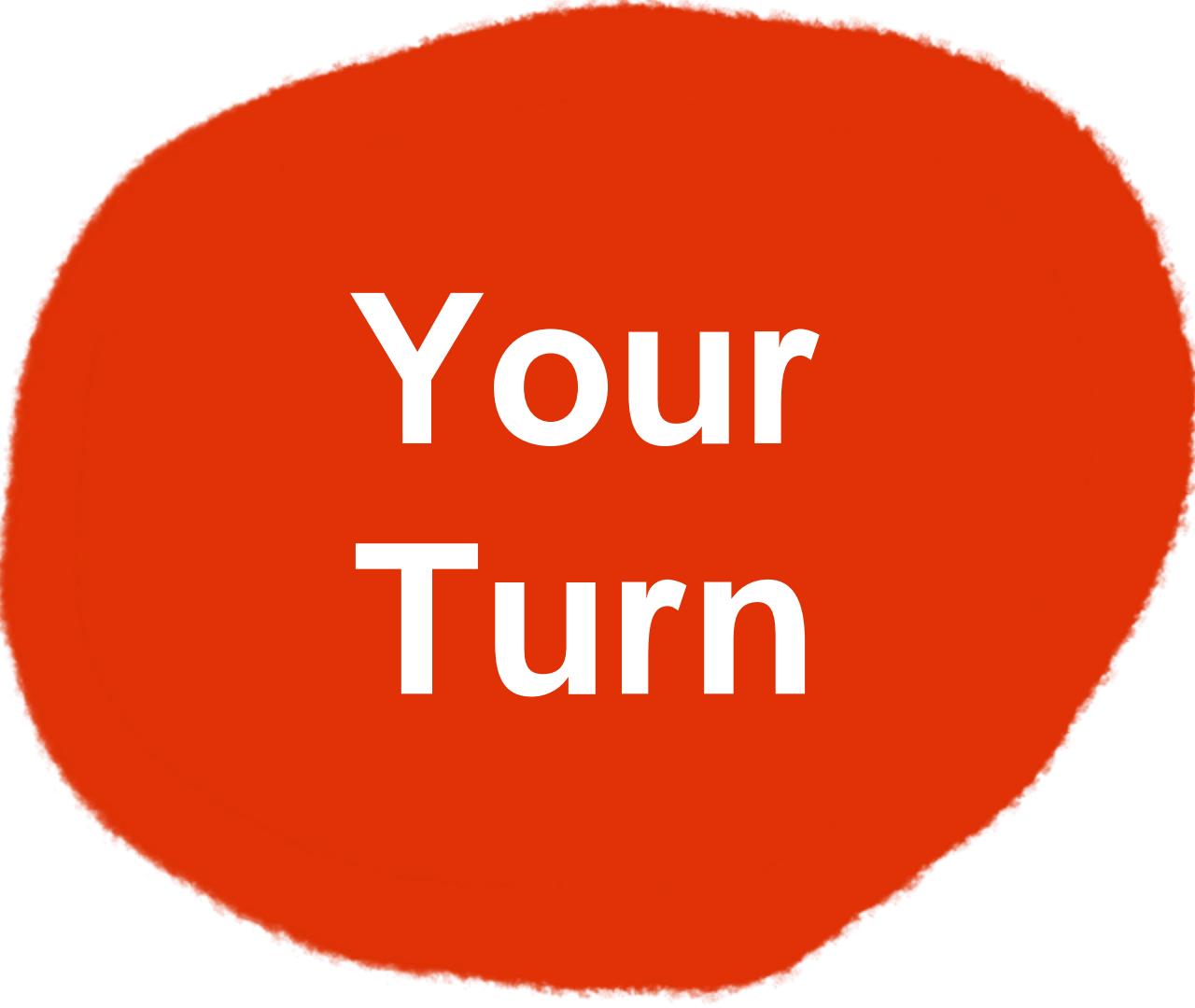
You can begin discussing interventions or initiatives with stakeholders, either individually or in a workshop. You can use this as a method to gather as many interventions as possible, as well as using it prioritise which ones to focus on.



# Creating a theory of change through outcomes mapping

When you've started filling in each box, begin to draw connections between them. Showing links between problems to be addressed, interventions and potential outcomes.





Your  
Turn



## Creating a theory of change

**Now we have identified challenges we want to focus on, created some outcomes and an end goal we're trying to reach, we can create a theory of change by mapping outcomes. This will become our guide for creating interventions.**

Start by capturing your challenges on the left, your outcomes and north star on the right in the boxes provided. Begin brainstorming and noting the potential interventions you could do to address the problems on the left, while working towards the outcomes on the right.

This theory of change framework should be used as a tool to facilitate decision making and create alignment. I.e. Do this with stakeholders to agree the areas of focus.

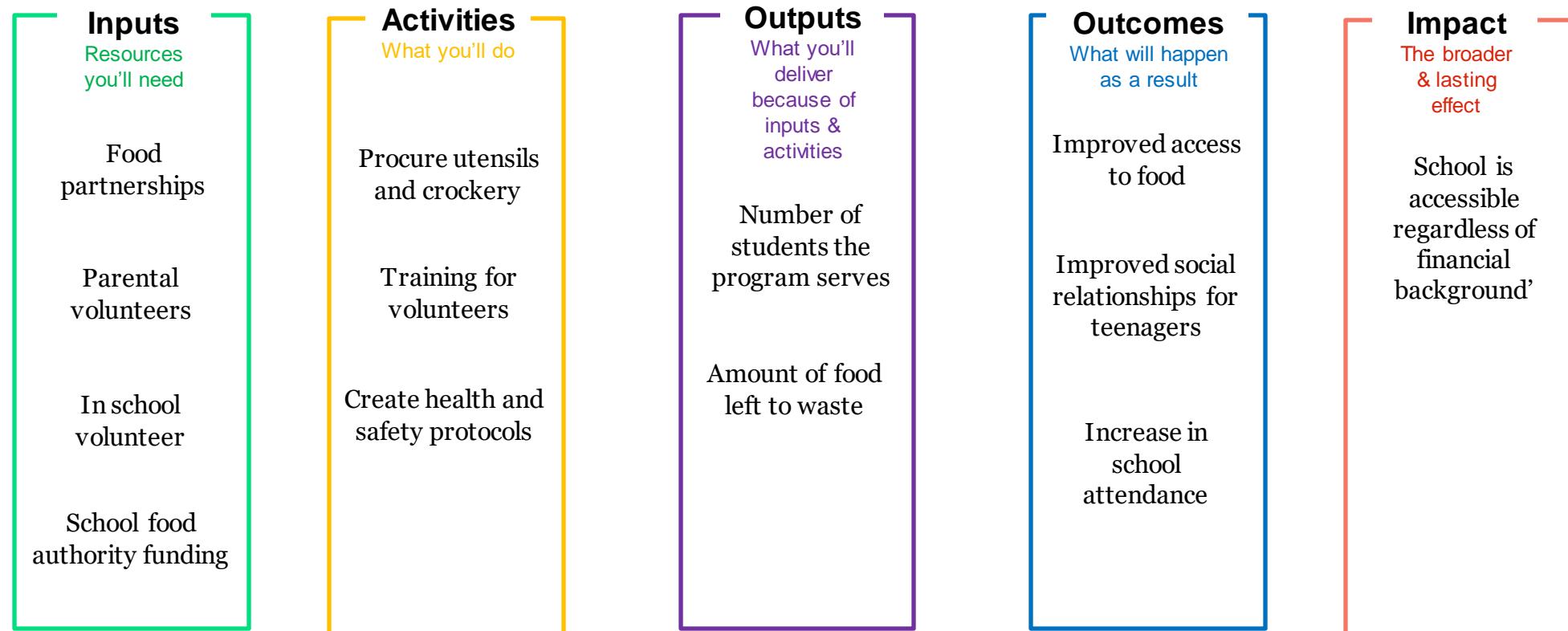


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# Creating a theory of change through ‘input to impact’ mapping

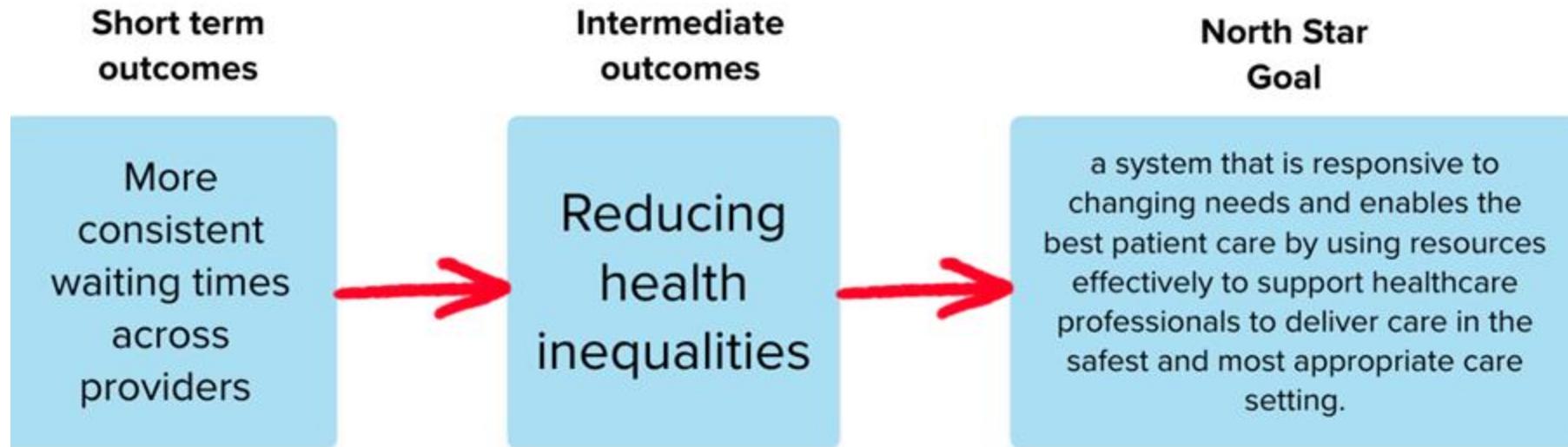
This model is useful for planning (in greater detail) for how to deliver change – it’s more granular than the one before and focuses on planning at a project level – where to start, how to do it etc.

For example, if we take the intervention of a free breakfast club, we can use this to plan out how to deliver that.



## Separate out your outcomes over time if helpful

If you feel like your outcomes don't sit at the same level, consider their relation to time it take to achieve. You might want to separate out short term outcomes form long term ones.

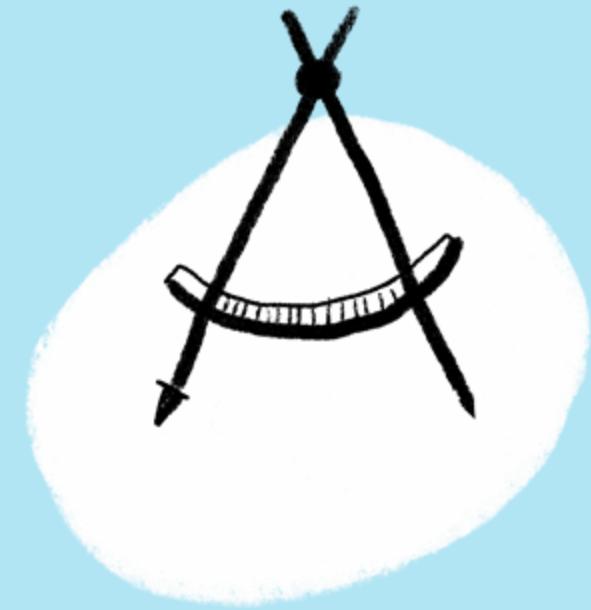


## In practice tips

**Keep fighting the good fight.** At this point of the project, you might feel like you're having the same conversations on a loop but keep going! This is how you create alignment and build consensus.

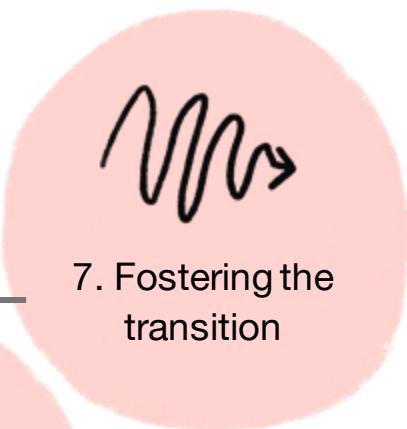
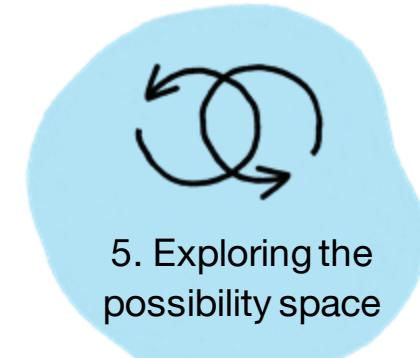
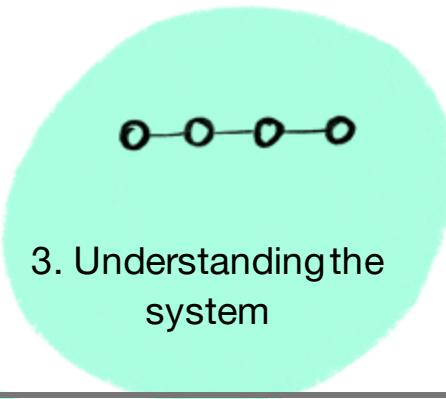
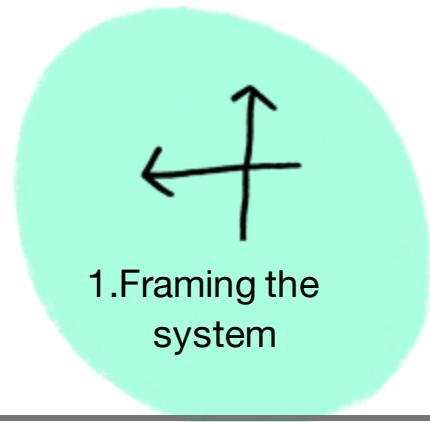
Don't be afraid to **adapt existing tools** to accommodate your needs as a team. There is no one way to create a theory of change. What matters is that it supports you in what you're trying to achieve.

Consider **how you capture your theory of change** and how it can be living and evolving. You should be continuously increasing your understanding of the system based on what you begin to research, test and learn. Make sure you don't lose sight of the broader outcomes as you get swept into the more familiar phases of the double diamond like detailed project planning.

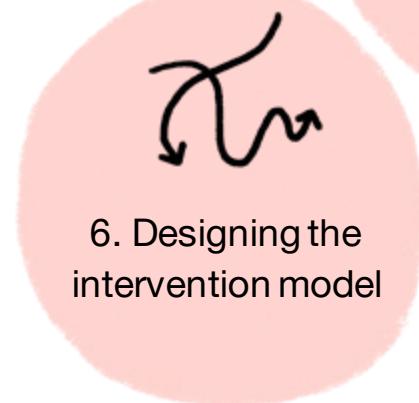
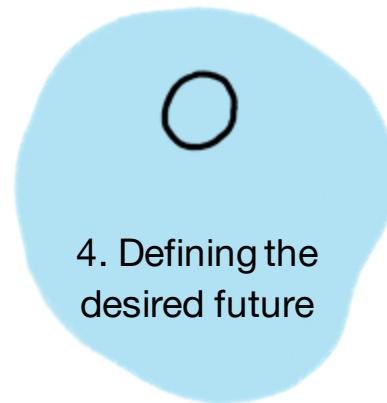


# Systems thinking vs. design thinking

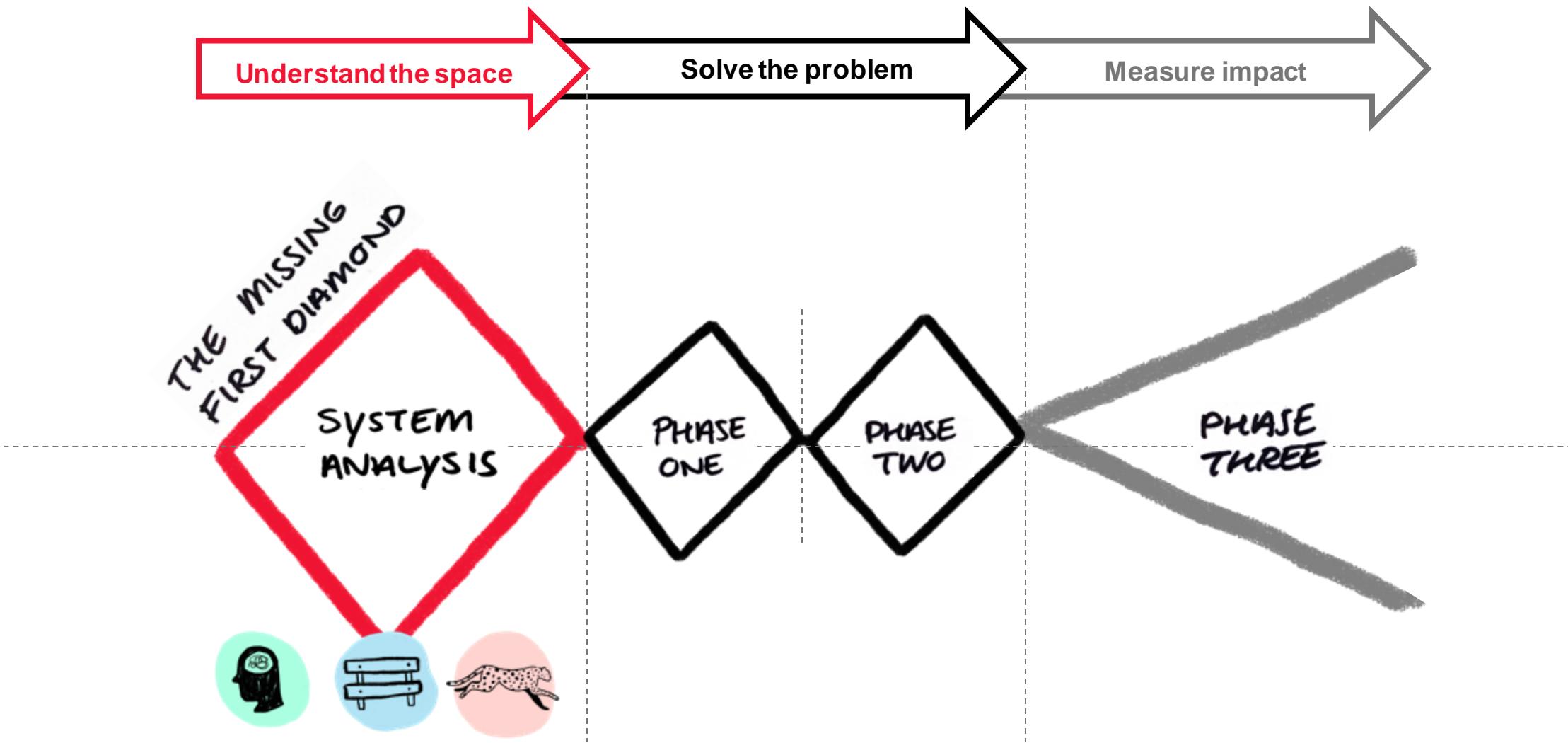
Systems thinking



Design thinking



# The User Centred Systems Thinking Approach



## What we've covered

What we've discussed:

- What is user centred systems thinking and why is it useful?
- When to apply it?
- How to take a user centred systems thinking approach
  - Understanding the system
  - Setting boundaries
  - Taking action

We've covered a number of practical tools:

- Identifying complex problems
- Landscape maps
- Influence maps
- Creating a north star
- Theory of change

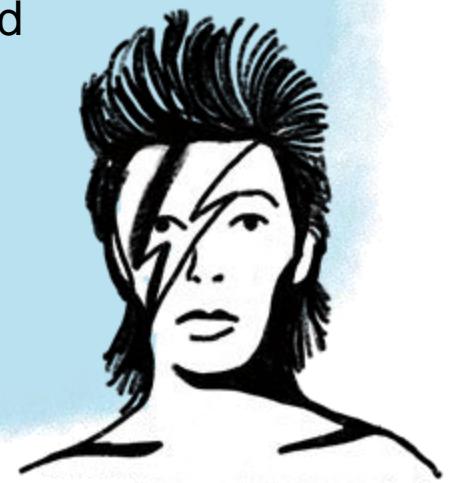
The value of this is how it **brings people together**

Working like this can feel difficult or disheartening when you're repeatedly met with push back from stakeholders or from hearing 'we already knew that was a problem'.

You're still zooming in to focus like you would with UCD projects but you're doing it with a conscious awareness of the system around you, making informed decisions about where to focus your attention.

You can return to these maps throughout the design process - in testing and piloting etc.

These don't have to be done in this order, use these tools as you see fit



Thank you!

**That's a wrap for today  
Any Qs or feedback**

We will happily stay to chat  
(not all day!)



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