

Connect to change

**Unlocking the value of systems
thinking in the built environment**

**Systems thinking helps us find effective
solutions by focusing on the right problems.**

**By applying systems approaches in the built
environment, we can achieve better outcomes
with fewer resources in more lasting ways.
It makes great economic sense.**

Choosing to get this right requires long term, strategic,
joined-up policy and governance, and it promises improved
environmental, social and economic outcomes.

Continuing as we are is to get it wrong. This threatens
society's resilience, security and sustainability, and it
will result both in lost opportunities and higher costs.

**Now is the
time for positive
systems change**



**Built
Environment
Connective**

We urgently need systems thinking

Our current approach is wasteful and inefficient.

We fail to realise the value of the existing built environment because we make siloed decisions that do not take account of its interconnected nature.

Building new is prioritised over better management of what we have already built. This reduces asset lifespans, increases whole life costs and impairs service delivery.

Siloed and short-term planning produces unpredictable fluctuations in investment, reduced resilience and greater environmental impact.

Our fragmented approach results in wasted resources, missed opportunities and unintended consequences. It hinders our ability to achieve a sustainable, resilient and equitable future.

We face interconnected challenges that cannot be solved in isolation.

Climate change, resource limitation and biodiversity loss are interconnected challenges that demand a systemic approach. Our current approach, characterised by siloed decision-making and focused on individual new projects, is inadequate.

Without addressing connected issues in a connected way, we are at best missing opportunities, and at worst headed towards multiple systems failures, economic damage and widespread hardship. Without systems thinking, which helps us to grasp interconnectivity and complexity, we expose ourselves to risks that could compromise our security – energy, food, health and even national security. The cost of inaction is too high.

The way we manage the built environment is not set up to meet these challenges.

The organisations that regulate and operate the built environment are not well connected. Sector silos run from government departments, through regulators, to owners and operators. There is no body that provides a joined-up view of the existing built environment or how new developments impact the outcomes of the overall system.

The information required to run the built environment is poorly connected.

We miss opportunities to gain more value from our existing assets due to inadequate data management, limited interoperability and insufficient information flows across organisation and sector boundaries.

Positive systems change is an urgent necessity.

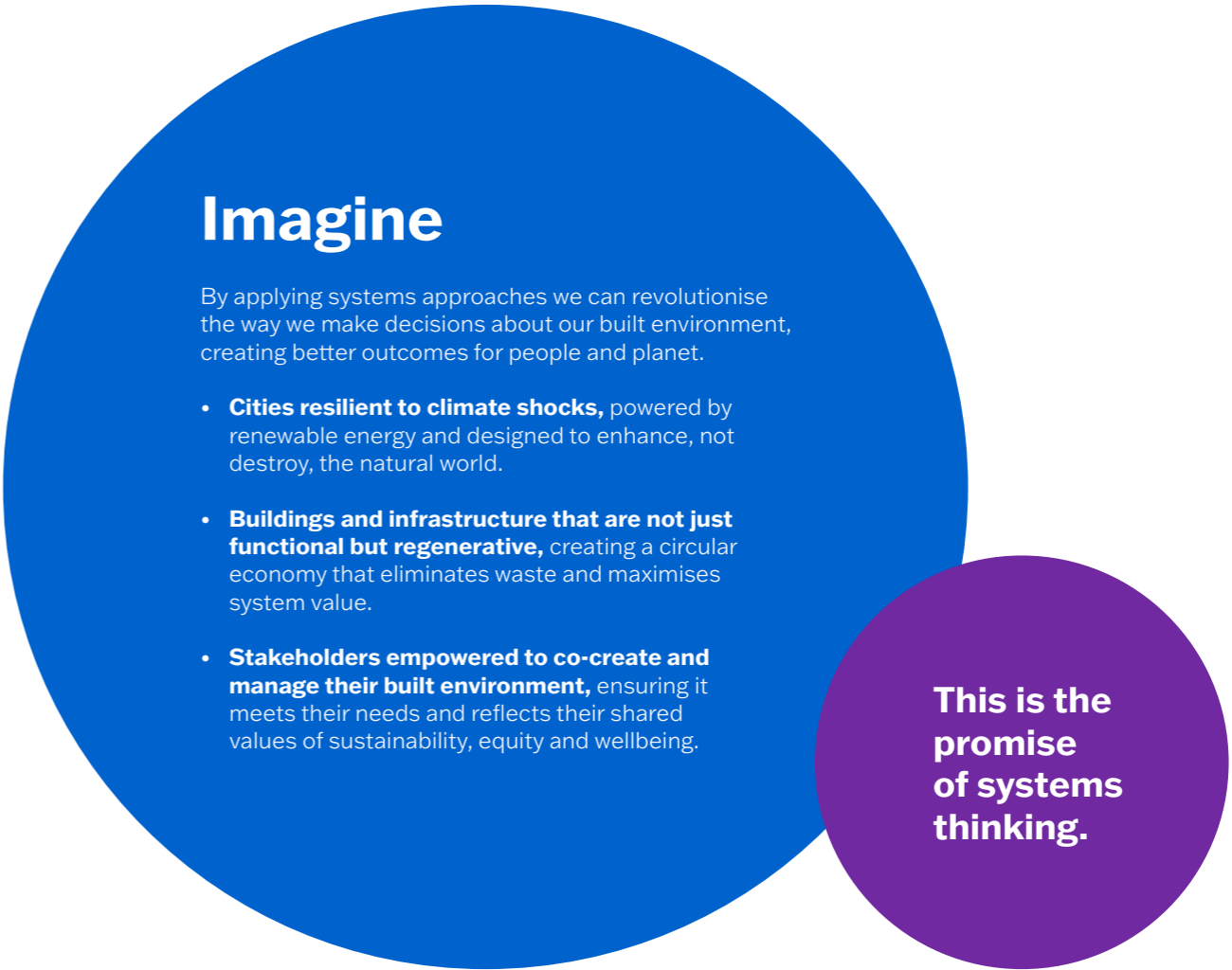
The time for action is now. It will become impossible to meet society's evolving needs unless we address the connected challenges we face. We are living on borrowed time.

We must act now and we must act together.

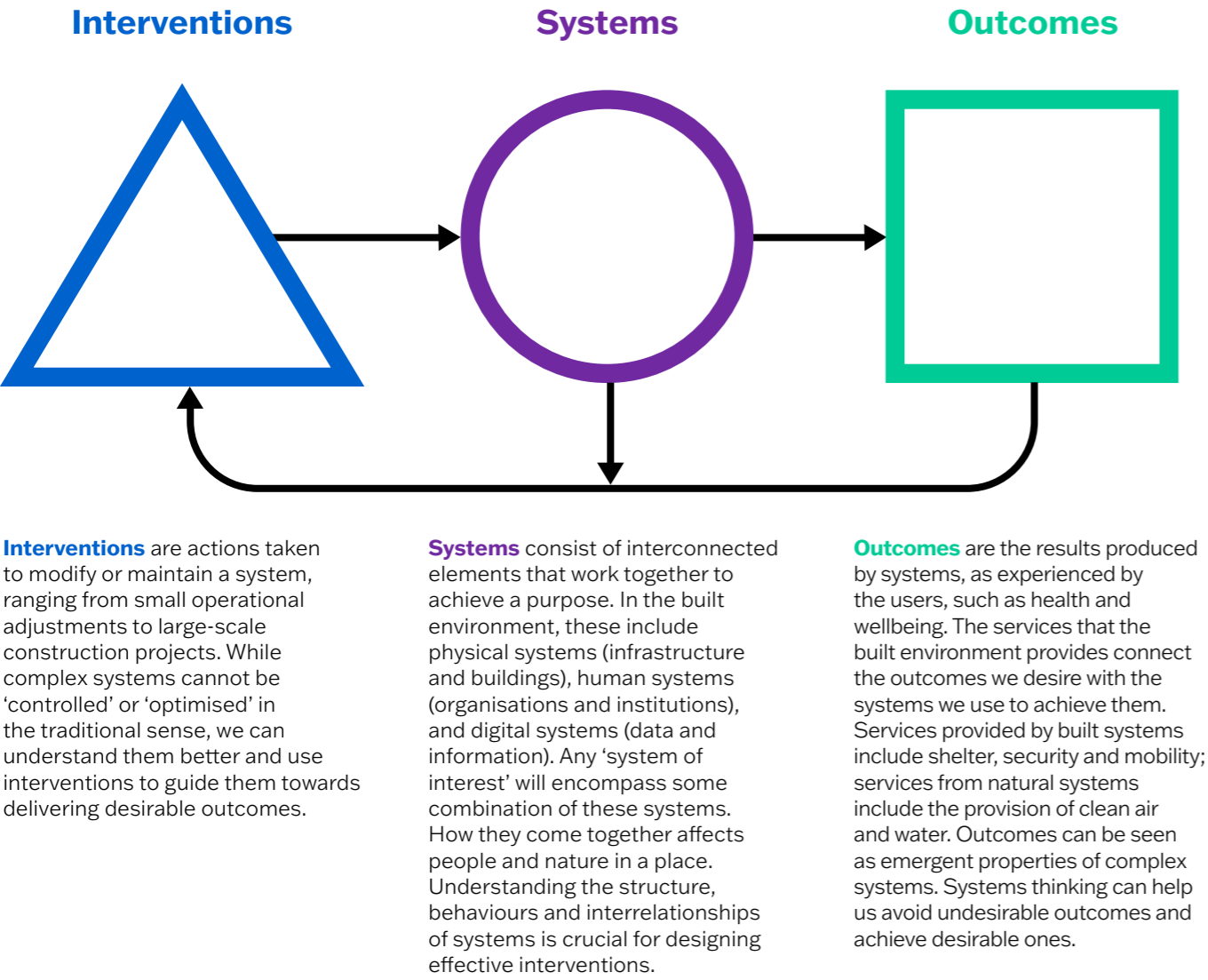
We must focus on improving outcomes rather than simply delivering the outputs of individual projects

It's time that we saw the built environment differently – not as a series of construction projects, but as a system of systems with the explicit purpose of delivering the services that will enable people and nature to flourish together for generations.

At an individual level, we require a shift in mindset and, at an industry level, a shift in culture. We need visionary, boundary-spanning leadership that embraces complexity. Effective industry leadership is systems leadership.



To improve outcomes for people and nature, we must understand our built and natural systems better, so that we can deliver more effective interventions



The built environment is a complex system of systems.

Our built environment consists of interdependent systems that provide essential services for society. It includes our economic and social infrastructure, together with their interfaces with our natural environment. And the built environment is the host for all the other essential systems that operate within it, such as the financial, health, education and justice systems.

The built environment exists within and depends on the natural environment. Therefore, we must ensure that our activities in creating and managing it respect the Earth's resources and work within recognised planetary boundaries. Systems thinking approaches enable this.



Systems thinking helps us to see connections.

Buildings and infrastructure are not isolated entities but exist in a complex web of relationships with other systems. While individual components have their own value, far greater value and meaning are derived from their function within the larger system and their contribution to achieving desired outcomes. The value of the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts.

Applying systems approaches in the built environment:

- **Maximises value.** It is a means of intelligently getting more from what we have already built, going beyond 'sweating the assets'.
- **Multiplies benefits.** It allows us to see the bigger picture and understand how interventions in one area can affect others. It enables us to develop integrated solutions that address multiple challenges together, delivering co-benefits across sectors.
- **Improves the process of improvement.** It provides a practical framework for action and change because it better represents how the real world works.

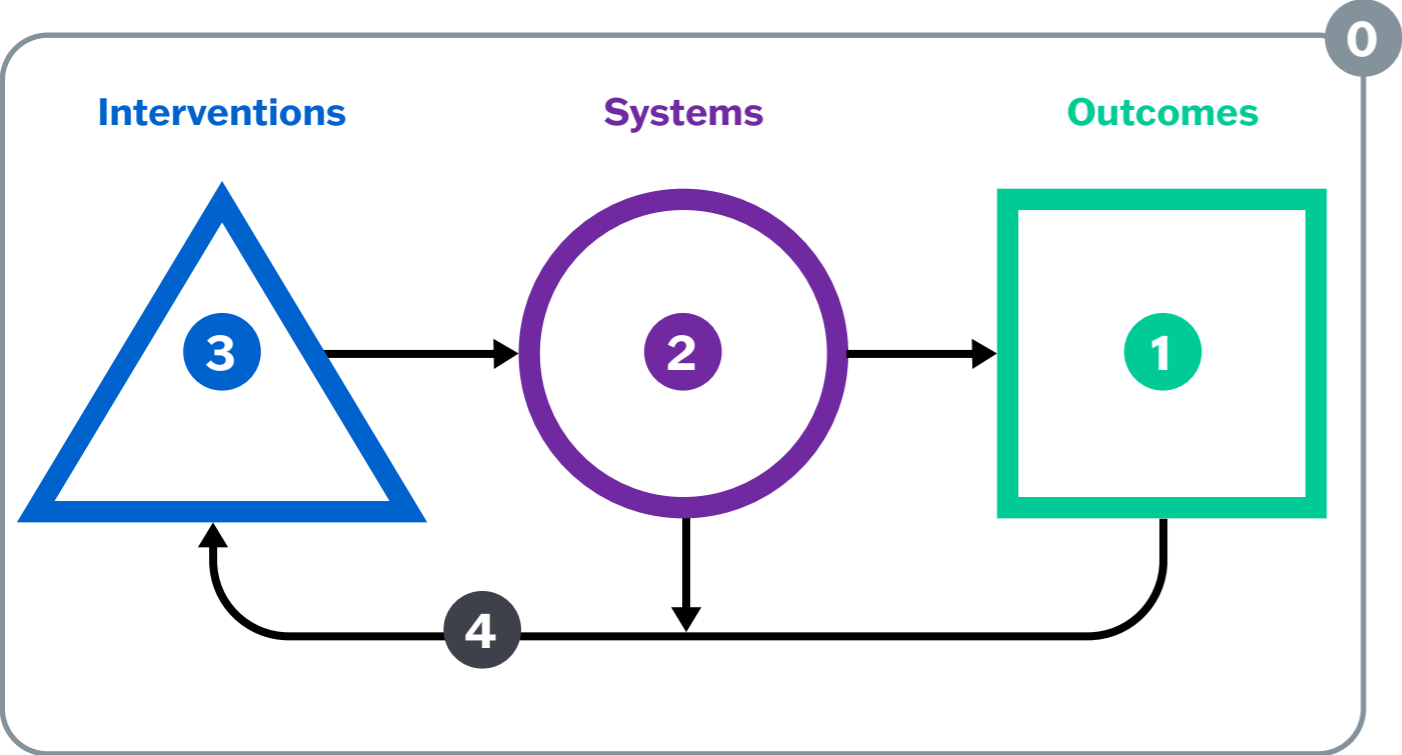
Established approaches exist. We must apply them in the built environment.

Over the years, many different systems-based approaches, methodologies and tools have been developed and proven in diverse sectors. Now is the time to bring the best of what they have to offer to the built environment. The essence is to adopt a more holistic, interconnected way of understanding, architecting and managing our surroundings.

Here's how to apply systems approaches at any level in the built environment

While the challenges we face and the route to achieving better outcomes can be complex, the process of applying systems approaches can be broken down into straightforward steps. These can be applied to any system at any level, such as a city, the interface between energy and transport, or a major project's supply chain.

Adopting a shared approach enables effective collaboration and helps us to align our efforts towards improving outcomes at local, regional, national and global levels.



0 Know your scope

Start by outlining what it is that you want to influence and at which level. Understand the scope of your system of interest and the related outcomes, recognising that this is an iterative process. Draw an exploratory system boundary to help clarify what is in and what is out of scope, and who the stakeholders are.

1 Focus on the outcomes

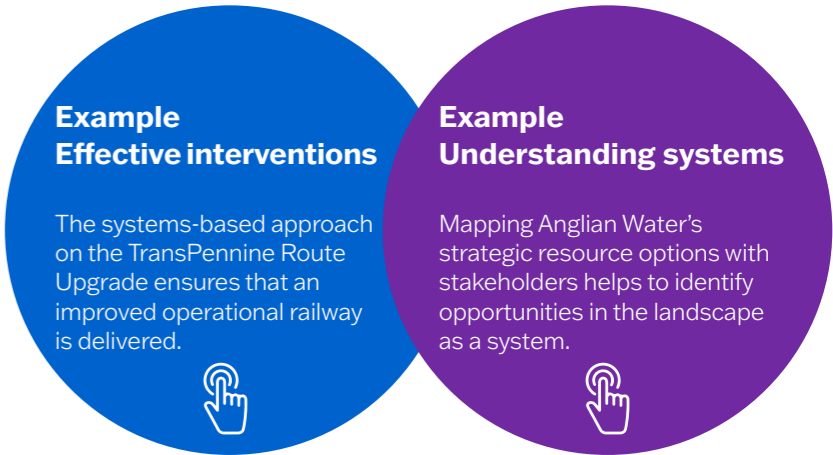
At the highest level, desirable outcomes will be a mix of environmental, social and economic factors. Pay particular attention to understanding the gap between the desired outcomes and the actual outcomes from the existing system, because this difference will be the key driver for systems change. Outcomes are experienced by people and nature in a place, either as benefits or disbenefits. Therefore, it is essential to involve all stakeholders, giving those that are unrepresented, including nature, a voice. This is vital for identifying and agreeing the desired outcomes that a system is intended to achieve, and for making better trade-offs between different outcomes.

2 Understand the systems

Analyse the systems to understand how they can deliver the desired improvement in outcomes. Find the root causes of any issues that need to be addressed and identify potential leverage points for effective interventions. These will often be in the gaps between organisational or informational silos. Use established tools and techniques to map, model and visualise the systems. It will help to distinguish between physical, organisational and digital systems, but it is important to focus on understanding the connections between them. When mapping the systems, remember that there will be connections that cross the boundary because systems are always parts of larger systems; no system is completely isolated from everything else. Listen to stakeholders who understand the system from different perspectives.

3 Drive effective interventions

Use interventions to nudge the systems towards delivering the desired outcomes. There are many different types of intervention, both large and small: operational interventions, maintenance interventions, and various types of construction interventions, including building new assets and modifying or removing existing ones. Within this framing, encourage initiatives to improve project delivery and construction productivity. However, the much bigger prize is to improve the performance and effectiveness of the existing built environment to achieve better outcomes, including national productivity.



4 Observe, learn and repeat

Systems thinking is an iterative process, so regular reflection and refinement are essential. Monitor and evaluate the impact of the interventions on both systems and outcomes. Develop meaningful metrics to help understand performance from end to end – from the interventions, through the systems, to the outcomes – but avoid the metrics becoming a target that replaces the actual outcomes. Pay particular attention to understanding the performance of the systems and the achievement of outcomes because these are least well measured at present. 'Value' is ultimately related to achieving the desired outcomes. Foster a culture of learning and curiosity, using evidence to drive improvement.

We must connect to change

Momentum exists. There is a growing consensus that now is the time for positive systems change. Given the diversity and autonomy of the stakeholders, the overall approach must be to convene, connect and coordinate aligned communities, rather than run a traditional top-down change programme.

Communities

Inclusion is fundamental to the success of this approach, so we must shift from heroic individualism to collective endeavour. This means:

- **Fostering connections** between existing initiatives and communities of action.
- **Coalescing new communities** where needed across government, industry, academia and civil society.
- **Driving change** that aligns with the goals of each community, and our shared vision and objectives.

The key is to connect **communities** of action with a **consensus** to drive **change**.

Consensus

Building consensus involves developing a shared understanding of systems thinking in the built environment. Yet this must allow communities the flexibility to tailor their approaches to their specific contexts. We are building consensus by:

- **Articulating a compelling shared narrative** that highlights the urgency for change and the capacity of systems thinking to deliver benefits.
- **Establishing a common vocabulary** to enable effective communication that connects communities.
- **Creating and sharing resources**, including case studies, tools and methodologies, that demonstrate the practical application of systems thinking to improve outcomes.

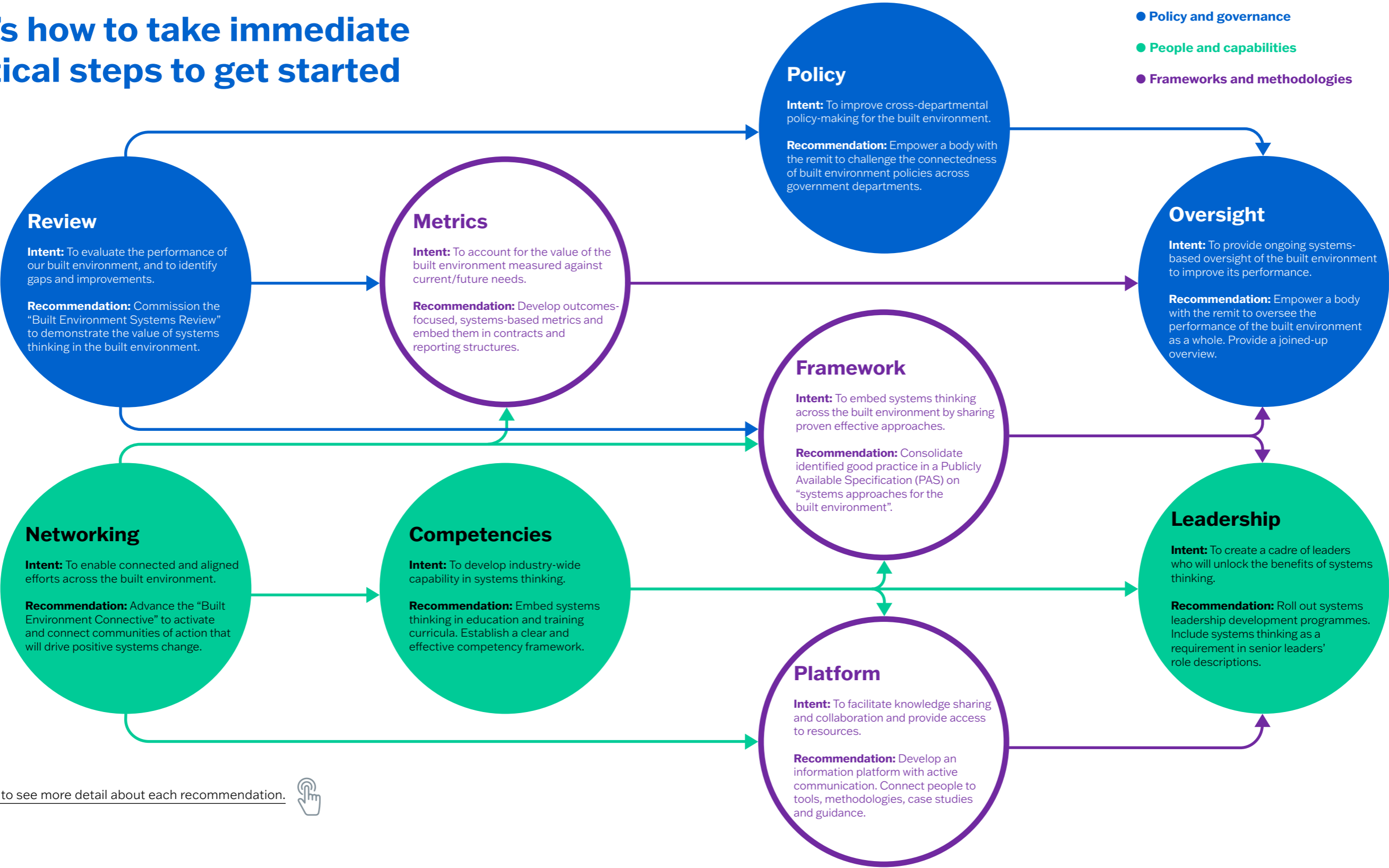
Change

Driving connected change requires a dynamic, iterative approach that emphasises learning by doing and progressing by sharing. This process is supported by:

- **Building effective governance** using meaningful metrics to monitor progress towards our shared vision.
- **Sharing good practice** and developing frameworks, guidance and industry standards.
- **Establishing feedback loops** and reflective processes to facilitate learning and adoption.

This is a call to all
**change-makers to be
part of the movement
to make systems
thinking mainstream
and to unlock its value.**

Here’s how to take immediate practical steps to get started



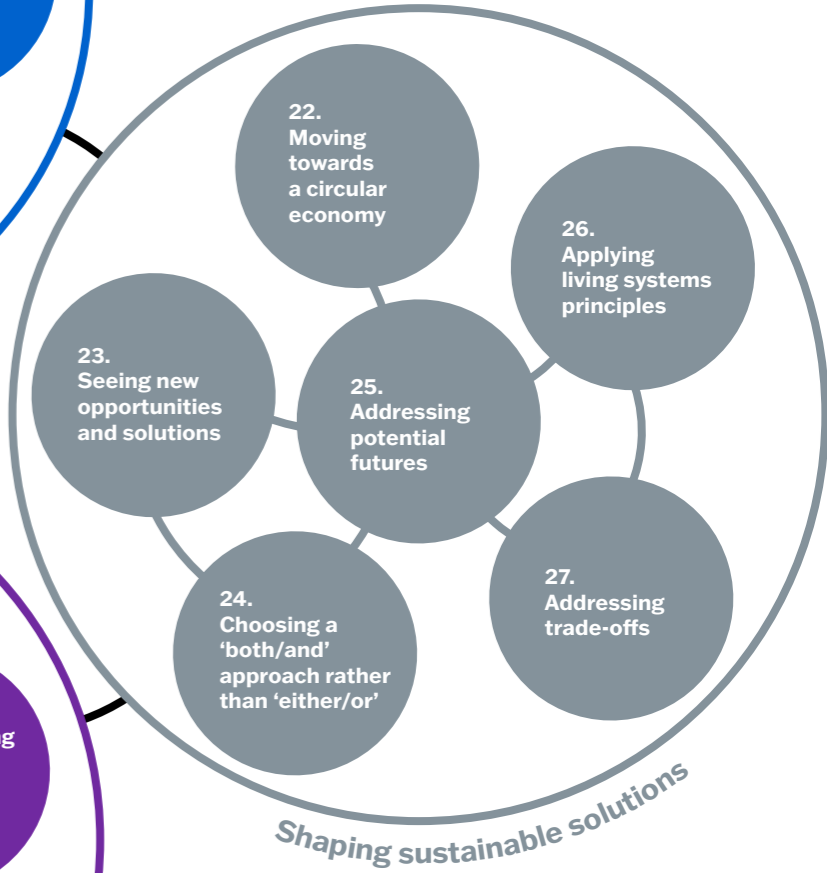
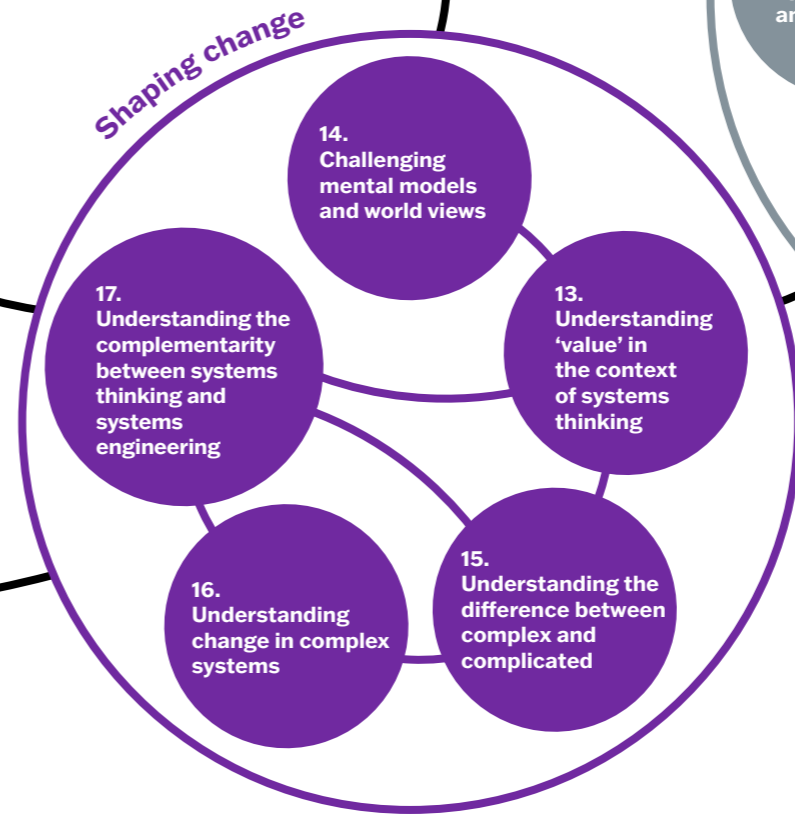
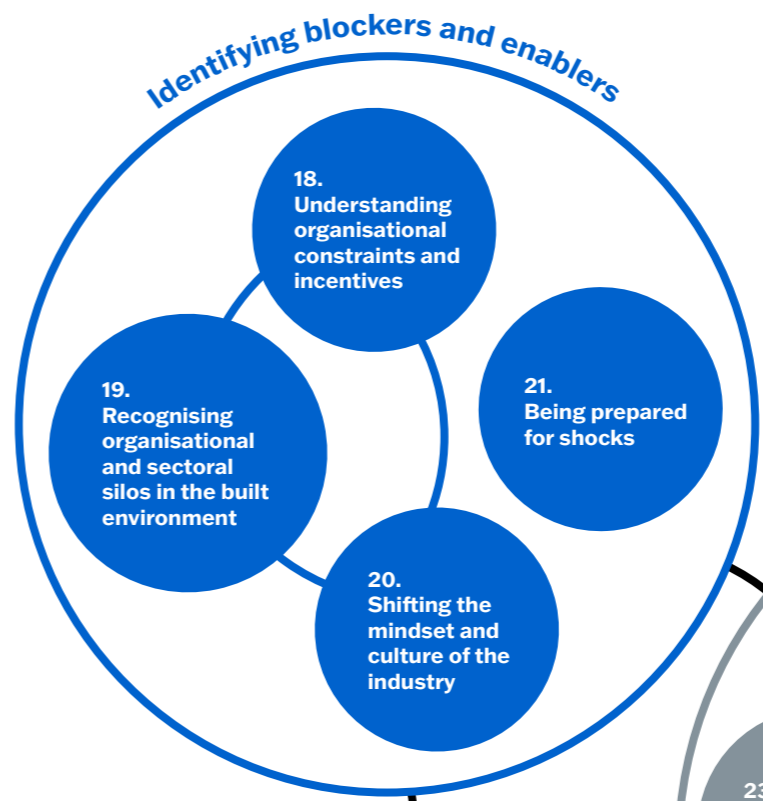
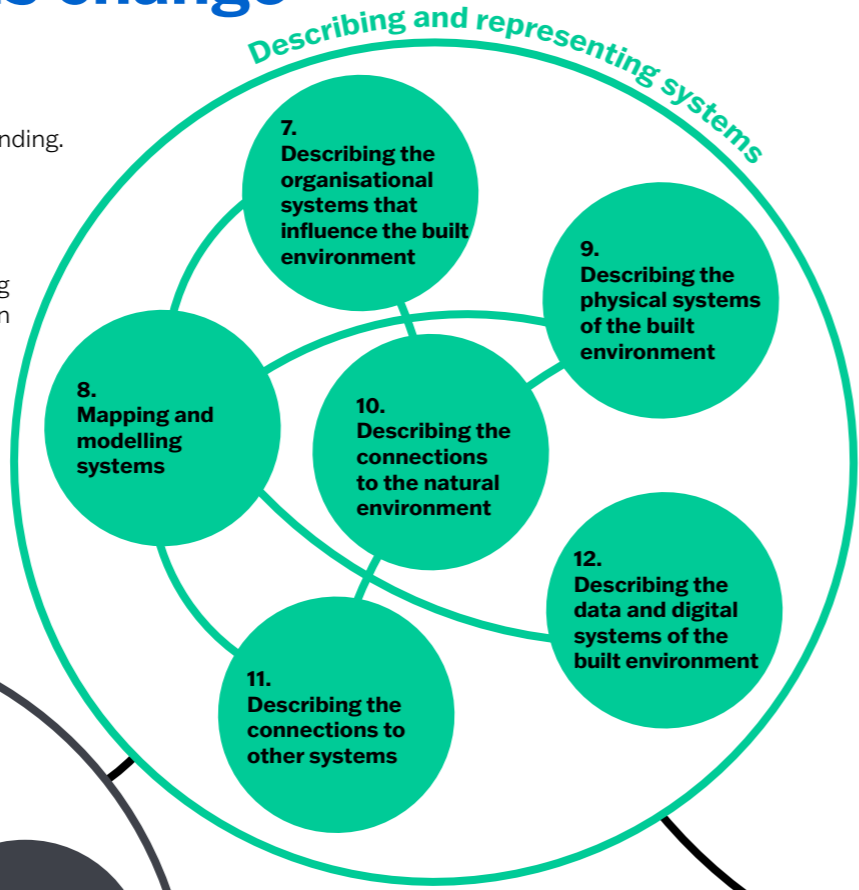
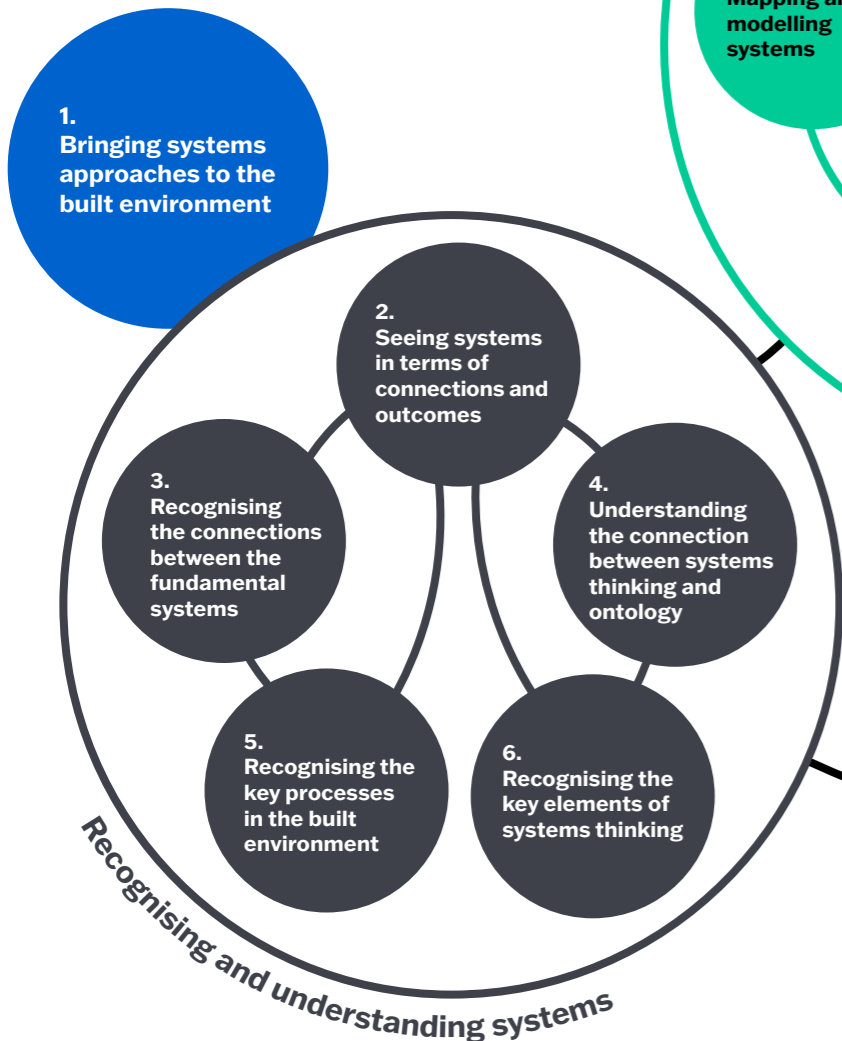
[Follow this link to see more detail about each recommendation.](#)



We need a shared commitment for positive systems change

This paper marks the beginning of our shared understanding. It has been co-created by many contributors who have articulated the need for an approach that is outcomes-focused, systems-based and community-enabled.

It is dynamic. Going forward, our shared understanding will be co-curated by connected communities of action involved in driving positive systems change.



Follow this link for more detail on the key concepts in our shared understanding.



Systems change involves us all

Everyone who wants to make a positive difference in the built environment has a part in this. Systems thinking doesn't require everyone to be an expert. What it does require is a shared understanding and a commitment to work together.

With many thanks to all the contributors so far.

Alastair Emerson, Mott MacDonald
Alex Marsh, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol
Alex Tosetti, Cities Reloaded
Alexander Budzier, Oxford Global Projects
Alexandra Bolton, Curgenvén Wolfe
Alexandra Smyth, Royal Academy of Engineering
Alice Moncaster, University of the West of England
Amelia Burnett, Bentley Systems
Amin Hosseinian-Far, University of Hertfordshire
Andrea Powell, EY
Andrew Crudgington, Independent
Andrew Mylius, Independent
Andy Smith, Anglian Water
Anna Bowskill, Allora
Barry Hembling, Watson, Farley & Williams LLP
Brendan Bromwich, Mott MacDonald
Brittany Hsieh, Royal Academy of Engineering
Changez Shafi, AECOM
Charlene Cranny, Climate Governance Initiative
Chris Elliott, Pitchill Consulting
Clare Wildfire, Mott MacDonald
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Colin Taylor, University of Bristol and South West Infrastructure Partnership
Daniela Paddeu, University of West England
David McKeown, Institute of Asset Management
David Whitehead, Jacobs
Dee Dee Frawley, CSIC, University of Cambridge
Eleni Papadonikolaki, Delft University of Technology
Emma Langman-Maher, AECOM
Gary Smith, International Society for the Systems Sciences
George Johnston, CISL, University of Cambridge

Ges Rosenberg, University of Bristol
Gwyn Rhodes, CISL, University of Cambridge
Hattie Emerson, Independent
Heather Marshall, Mott MacDonald
Holger Kessler, AtkinsRéalis
Huda As'ad, Accenture
Ian Gordon, Arup
Ian Roderick, Schumacher Institute
Ivan Lucic, Jacobs
James Daniel, HS2 Ltd
James Norman, University of Bristol
Janet Greenwood, KPMG
Jeni Giambona, University of Southampton Business School
Jennifer Schooling, Anglia Ruskin University
Jeremy Galpin, Costain
Jessica Hollidge, Mott MacDonald
Jinying Xu, University of Cambridge
Joanna Bonnett, COWI
Joe Rice-Jones, Bentley Systems UK
John Carstensen, Mott MacDonald
John Clarkson, University of Cambridge
Jonathan Eyre, Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre
Joshua Sutherland, Sutherland Systems Engineering Enterprise
Joss Colchester, Si Network
Julie Wood, Mott MacDonald
Karim Farghaly, University College London
Katherine Jackson, Mott MacDonald
Kevin Macnish, Sopra Steria
Kirsten Gilbert-Dempsey, Pinsent Masons LLP
Lauren Clarke, Royal Academy of Engineering
Lissadell Karalus, Mott MacDonald
Liz Varga, Infrastructure Systems Institute, UCL

Luke Coomber, Mott MacDonald
Lydia Walpole, Bentley Systems
Margaret Kalaugher, Care City Innovation CIC
Mark Baptist, Amey
Mark Coates, Bentley Systems
Mark Enzer, Mott MacDonald
Melissa Zanocco, Accenture
Michael Avant-Smith, BMA
Michael Salvato, InfraRE Partners
Michael Spencer, IMIA
Mónica A Altamirano de Jong, Altamira
Natasha Watson, Buro Happold
Neil Carhart, University of Bristol
Nick Wilson, Bentley Systems
Nike Folayan, WSP
Olivia Henshall, Pinsent Masons
Pablo Newberry, University of Bristol
Paul Shepley, University of Liverpool
Pooran Desai, OnePlanet
Rachel Skinner, WSP
Ralph Evins, University of Victoria
Richard Brice, World Water Works
Robert Cooke, Buro Happold
Rob Solly, Cosimmetry
Ron Lang, AtkinsRéalis
Rosie Mitsina, Accenture
Sam Cocking, CSIC, University of Cambridge
Sam Hanan, University of Bristol
Sara Humber, NISTA
Sarah Lamshead, AtkinsRéalis
Sarah Toy, Sarah Toy Consulting
Simon Spooner, AtkinsRéalis
Steve Denton, WSP
Steven Boyd, Longstone Consulting
Will Varah, EY
Wolfgang Schuster, Independent

The message of this paper is supported by these leading organisations.



Join us

Be part of the movement to drive positive systems change. As individuals, as organisations, and as an industry, we must take forward the recommendations in this paper.

We must connect to change.



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Connect with us on



www.be-connective.com