

Building Transformation Capability in Public Sector Leadership



Summary

Public sector organisations increasingly recognise the need for systemic change to address challenges such as food insecurity, widening health inequalities, climate pressures and educational disparities. This requires taking a transformational approach to change, which seeks to tackle the underlying systemic issues giving rise to the challenges we face. Yet most training provided for leadership and change continues to be focused on how to improve systems rather than to change them more fundamentally. Research across food, health, education and physical activity systems shows that limited capacity to support transformation is a consistent barrier to progress. Leaders with strong intent and substantial resources often default to familiar improvement models, resulting in well managed programmes that reinforce existing patterns.

Supporting transformational change requires an understanding of how transformation differs from improvement, the ability to work across integrated systems, actors and at scale, and the capability to instigate new transformation focused ways of organising and using evaluation. Transformational capability is, however, not currently recognised or developed within public sector leadership frameworks. To support transformation, Civil Service Learning, the Local Government Association and the NHS Leadership Academy should develop a transformation capability framework, embed transformation capability within senior leadership competency training, and ensure that UKRI and government funders require evidence of transformation capability within leadership teams when engaging in systemic change programmes.

Description of the problem

Public investment in systemic change across food systems, health, climate resilience and education is not achieving the depth, breadth and scale of the impact intended (Doherty et al 2021). Fragmented funding and siloed governance contribute to this (Looney et al 2025), but research from the FixOurFood programme highlights a deeper issue. Leaders responsible for transformation often lack a clear understanding of what transformation requires and how best to approach it.

Compared with approaches to improve systems, transformation involves changes that lead to a shift in the system's purpose, function and identity (Fazey and Colvin 2023). Understanding transformation as a qualitatively different kind of change to what leadership training tends to focus on then shapes how change should be designed, governed, resourced, evaluated and approached (Fazey and Colvin 2023). When leaders do not recognise this difference, they can unintentionally make decisions that limit transformational potential or which reinforce patterns driving existing problems. For instance, incremental targets might be accepted, approaches to governance may perpetuate certain cultures and practices, and the evaluation approaches used may not support or capture the deeper shifts required.

This is not a failure of commitment: transformation capability is simply not developed within current leadership frameworks in the Civil Service, local government or the NHS. It is treated as intuitive when it needs to be cultivated and developed, and as peripheral rather than central to delivering long term change in the face of complex, contemporary challenges. Building appropriate frameworks, training and support is essential if public sector organisations are to move from having ambitious visions to enacting coordinated and sustained work that leads to transformation.

Research Findings

This research draws on five years of action research through the FixOurFood programme (Fazey et al 2026), supported by insights from three parallel system change initiatives. These include the [Suffolk & North East Essex Integrated Care System](#) and [Engaged Futures](#) which focuses on the higher education sector.

Three findings stand out for public sector leadership:

- **Transformation requires a clear understanding of what makes it distinct to other kinds of change.** Across all initiatives, leaders often initially treated change as improvement rather than fundamental change. Yet our work shows how it is possible to support development of strategies, governance arrangements and evaluation frameworks that reflect a more sophisticated approach to system change.
- **Transformation capability supports effective leadership decisions.** When leaders developed a shared understanding of how to support transformation through structured inquiry processes, the nature of their decisions changed. Visions became more ambitious. Governance began to become more adaptive, distributed and relational. Evaluation frameworks focused on system level shifts rather than outputs, and partnerships were better able to maintain direction under pressure. These changes emerged through actively learning about, and experiencing how best to approach transformational change.
- **Transformation capability can be developed and applied across sectors.** Leaders developed transformation capability through working with structured processes such as the Three Horizons futures method. Such learning was applicable for those working with different contexts, suggesting a common foundation relevant across public service domains. Leaders were also developing new habits of mind that helped them maintain transformational intent in complex and uncertain conditions.

Policy recommendations

- 1. Develop a transformation capability framework for senior public sector leaders.** Civil Service Learning, the Local Government Association and the NHS Leadership Academy should work together to develop a clear and accessible framework that explains what transformation requires and how it differs from improvement. The framework should be co-designed with practitioners who have experience of leading systemic change. A phased approach that begins with a pilot group of senior leaders would allow learning to be gathered before wider adoption. This would support better aligned governance, more realistic targets and evaluation approaches that can track system level change.
- 2. Embed transformation capability within senior leadership competencies.** Civil Service Learning and the Local Government Association should work with departments and combined authorities to integrate transformation capability into competency frameworks and appointment processes for senior roles that carry responsibility for systemic change. This can be achieved by updating existing frameworks but does require training provided by those with the levels of expertise that match the challenge of leading systemic change. It would help ensure that leaders have the conceptual tools and expertise from practice needed to guide transformation.
- 3. Require evidence of transformation capability in leadership teams for systemic change grants.** UKRI and government departments should include transformation capability as a named criterion in leadership assessments for systemic change grants. This would create a practical incentive for organisations to develop this capability. It would also help ensure that funded programmes are guided by leadership teams that understand the demands of transformational change. Impact can be assessed through the quality of governance, evaluation and vision setting in funded programmes.



Priority Actions

- Civil Service Learning, the Local Government Association and the NHS Leadership Academy should commission a six month scoping and design phase for a transformation capability framework, drawing on practitioner expertise from FixOurFood, Engaged Futures and the Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care System. A pilot with senior leaders in current transformation programmes should follow within twelve months.
- UKRI and government departments should add transformation capability as a named criterion in leadership assessments for systemic change grants in the next funding round.
- Combined authorities and government departments should review senior leadership competency frameworks within current cycles and identify opportunities to integrate transformation literacy ahead of full framework development.



FixOurFood

This brief draws on action research conducted through the FixOurFood programme which focused on transforming the Yorkshire food system. It was funded through the UKRI Transforming UK Food Systems programme (2021-2026).

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