

Enabling Synergies towards Action for System Wide Change

Summary

Organisations and institutions responsible for improving socio-ecological systems increasingly recognise that no single programme or organisation can deliver systems change. Yet in practice, work often remains fragmented, with teams, sectors, and agencies acting separately.

Research from the [FixOurFood](#) programme shows that real progress depends on synergistic action - organisations deliberately aligning motives and working together in ways that make their efforts reinforce each other. Such coordination does not happen by accident. It requires clear intention, the right people, sufficient resources and creative ways of working.

To accelerate system-wide change, organisations should make synergistic action an explicit policy goal, to identify and support people who connect across boundaries and design strategies that create multiple benefits rather than isolated outputs. This would in turn reduce duplication, align resources, and accelerate progress on shared priorities.

Description of the problem

Across the UK, organisations such as the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, Natural England, university institutions, think tanks, funding bodies among others are expected to tackle complex challenges such as food insecurity, climate impacts, nature loss and health inequalities that cut across traditional boundaries.

However, the systems responsible for addressing these issues are often fragmented (Om et al., 2025). Teams work in silos, programmes run independently, and funding cycles encourage short-term delivery rather than long-term alignment (Swanson et al., 2012, Fazey et al., 2018). Although, there are efforts to create synergies across different work streams and organisations, fragmented and siloed ways of working persist.

There is limited understanding of what creating synergy means in practice and how to enable synergic forms of action. Now more than ever, we need to align our ambitions and resources, moving towards an integrated way of working to solve challenges that are systemic and interconnected in nature.

Research Findings

This research draws on interviews with 22 practitioners working across the Yorkshire food system, including public health teams, community organisations, farmers, educators, businesses, and environmental partners. The study explored how people are currently working together in synergic ways and what enables efforts for more synergic action to accelerate transformative change.

The research did not measure synergy as an outcome, but analysed the practices and patterns through which practitioners attempted to create synergy through an inductive thematic analysis resulting in the following three findings.

Three findings stand out:

- **Most collaboration is useful, but it rarely changes how the wider system works.** We identified three common patterns: (1) people joining forces around a single shared task, (2) projects that happen to create extra benefits, (3) and people who understood the wider interconnections in the system and brought together others to co-create processes for change (Om et al., 2025). There were few examples where people deliberately connected work across sectors and scales to create deeper, system-wide impact.
- **Five essentials make synergy possible.** Five conditions consistently enabled stronger, more joined-up action:
 - ➔ Leadership with wide reach and influence
 - ➔ Fostering trusted relationships and partnerships by enhancing local and place-based collaboration
 - ➔ Showing care and understanding between people and organisations through practices such as deep listening
 - ➔ A systems mindset that sees how issues connect
 - ➔ Fostering intentionality towards synergic action for systems change
- **Certain people act as “system connectors.”** Some individuals, such as public health leads, community organisers, faith leaders, and researchers, play a unique role in bringing others together. They understand the wider system, hold multiple roles, and can spot opportunities to align efforts. Supporting these people significantly increases the likelihood of synergy.

Policy Implications for Enabling Synergies

1. **Cultivate systems awareness** by mapping how actors, policies, resources, and challenges interact across the wider system. For example, a local authority addressing obesity should consider links between food access, transport, education, public health, and land use rather than treating them as separate issues.
2. **Identify and support system connectors** by mapping individuals that bring people and resources together, whether they sit in, for example, local authorities, research, NGOs or community groups. Support them through offering convening time, facilitation support, or formal recognition of their role from the beginning till the end of a project.
3. **Develop the capabilities needed for collaboration** by investing in facilitation, relationship-building, conflict navigation, and collective learning. For example, training programmes facilitate cross-sector workshops rather than relying solely on technical expertise.
4. **Create the conditions for shared intention for synergies and trust** by establishing spaces where actors can align around common goals and understand each other's motivations. For example, using participatory visioning exercises to build agreement on long-term sustainability outcomes before designing interventions.
5. **Intentionally amplify and connect existing efforts** by identifying where initiatives can reinforce one another and generate wider benefits. For example, linking climate adaptation funding with public health, biodiversity, and local food programmes to achieve multiple outcomes from a single investment.



Priority Actions

- Local authority sustainability teams, Combined Authorities, UK government programme teams and Innovation agencies should build collaboration and facilitation capacities into programme design and allocate dedicated resources.
- Funding bodies such as the UK Research and Innovation and Innovate UK among others, should require funded initiatives to explicitly demonstrate how projects will collaborate across different systems with other actors and initiatives to create synergies.
- All new strategies and programmes including food, health, climate, nature recovery, and water management plans, should include a simple synergy mapping exercise to identify where actions can reinforce each other (see Buckton et al., 2026) [Tool 22](#), [Tool 25](#) and [Tool 28](#)).
- Monitor not only outputs and outcomes, but also emerging collaborations, relationships, and synergies through techniques such as ripple effects mapping (see [Tool 15](#)).

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). This work was delivered in partnership with regional stakeholders across public health, environmental agencies, farming networks, utilities, and the voluntary and community sector.

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