

Our theory of change



Our strategy to 2030



Grow support for a wellbeing approach to public policy, led by evidence and insight on what works to improve our collective wellbeing and why.

We support governments and policymakers at all levels in the UK and Ireland, helping them to think differently about how we understand society, assess and contribute to social progress, and tackle issues that threaten aspects of wellbeing.

What is a theory of change?

- For policy organisations, it is important to connect how the activities we undertake contribute to the outcomes we want.
- A Theory of Change is a methodology for planning, monitoring, and evaluating policy interventions.
- It maps out the pathways between our inputs (funding, resources, staff time), our activities (advocacy, research, engagement) and the outcomes and impacts we want to see.
- Many policy organisations and government departments use theories of change to guide and inform their work.
- There are many different kinds of theories of change.

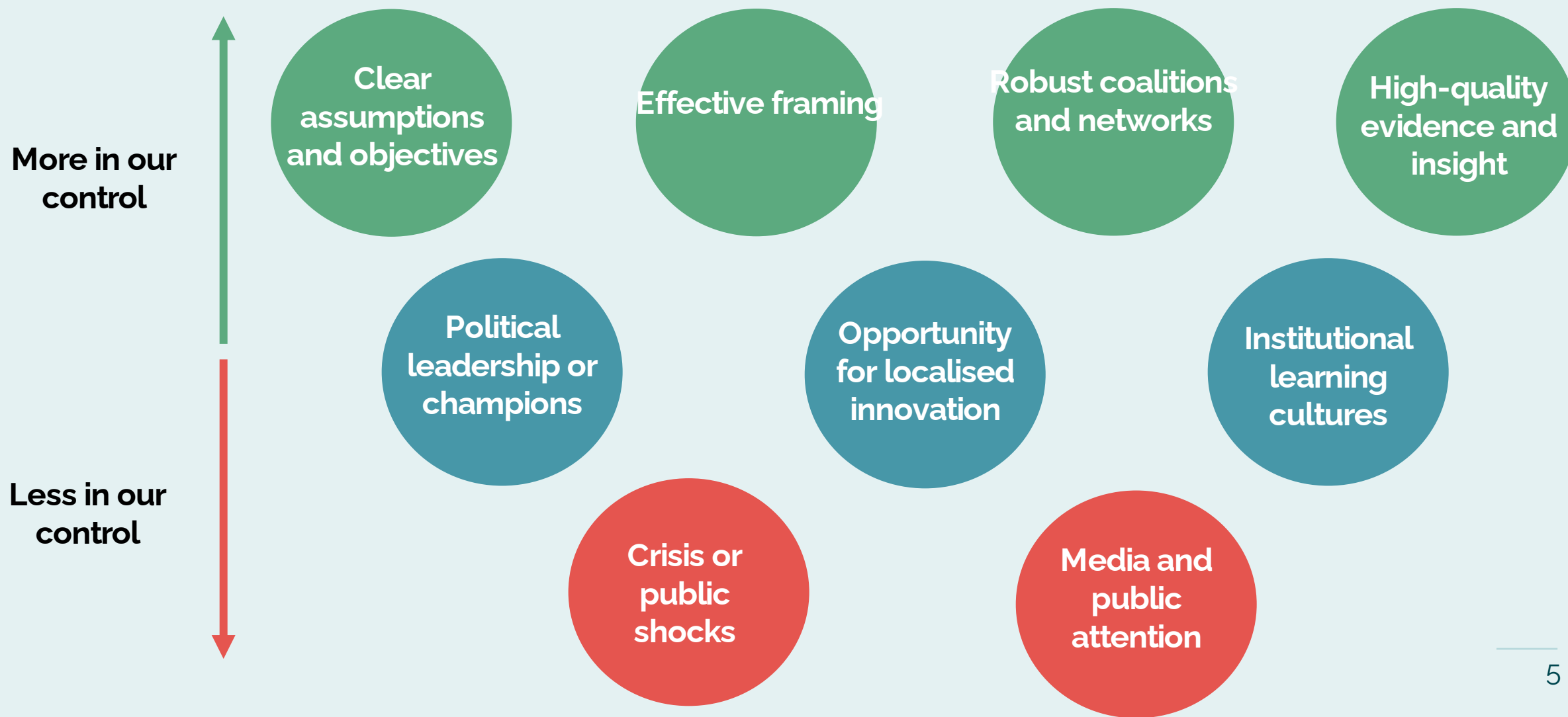
"The essence of good strategy is choosing what not to do."

– Michael Porter

Theory of change types for policy work

Theory of change type	Summary	System change and policy change examples	Advantages
Rational Policy Model	- Assumes policy follows a logical sequence: Problem – Options – Decision – Implementation – Evaluation. - Relies on evidence, analysis, and institutional procedure.	- Pension Auto-Enrolment (2012-18) - Adoption of NICE in NHS (1999)	Prioritises evidence-based policymaking within structured institutional processes. Further reading.
Advocacy Coalition Framework	Posits that policy change results from long-term interaction among coalitions of actors (charities, industry, academics) with shared beliefs, operating within a policy subsystem.	- Climate Change Act (2008) - Same Sex Marriage - Housing First	Highlights the power of belief-driven coalitions over time in shifting policy. Works well on issues where disputes dominate. Further reading.
Punctuated Equilibrium Theory	Policy is mostly stable, but can change dramatically due to external shocks or shifts in attention, creating a “punctuation.”	- COVID pandemic response - Post-Grenfell housing regulation.	Demonstrates how a sudden public spotlight and crisis can rapidly change previously static policies. Further reading.
Multiple Streams Framework	Policy change occurs when problem, policy, and political streams align, creating a “policy window” seized by policy entrepreneurs.	- Creation of the NHS (1948) - Net Zero by 2050 targets - UK Devolution (1999)	Although rare, when multiple streams of activity align with the right policy window then transformative reform can happen. Seems sudden but is underpinned by long-term preparation. Further reading.
Narrative Policy Frameworks	Policy outcomes are influenced by competing narratives—actors use storytelling to define problems and justify solutions.	- Brexit referendum (2016) - Windrush Scandal (2018) - Levelling Up agenda	Prioritises the power of narrative over technical evidence in shaping policy change. Values emotion, identity and morality, where certain framing gains traction. Further reading.
Policy Learning Theory	Policymakers adjust their actions based on past experiences, evaluation, or learning from others. (domestic or international). Incorporates instrumental learning, social learning and political learning.	- Public health policy - Minimum unit pricing	Shows how policy evolves in response to feedback, public pressure, and political learning. Values evidence and evaluation. Further reading.

Common theory of change enablers



Implications for our practice

In thinking about all these things together, we are uniquely well placed to **combine approaches** in our rolling portfolio of programmes that focus on multiple enablers and account for how different theories of change can best operate together.

For example:

- A robust evidence base alone (Rational Policy Model/Policy Learning Theory) will not be enough unless we combine this with compelling narratives (Narrative Policy Framework) and the right timing of our engagement (Multiple Streams Framework).
- Coalitions (Advocacy Coalition Frameworks) can be powerful but often need crisis leverage (Punctured Equilibrium Theory) and effective feedback loops (Policy Learning Theory) to sustain influence and change.
- Those people that we need to champion and adopt our approaches (decision makers) often thrive when they themselves can combine technical, political and storytelling skills to advance change.

Our unique policy strengths

At Carnegie UK we have five fundamental advantages which underpin all aspects of our policy work:

- **Our clear mission:** We exist to improve the wellbeing of people across the UK and Ireland. This is a useful north star to guide and inform our activity over multiple years. To help achieve this, our 2030 aim is to put wellbeing at the heart of government decision making. We use our definition of collective wellbeing to focus our work at the system level of upstream interventions in decision making.
- **Our independence:** We are apolitical, we are not beholden to any government or any funder for our resources. We can design and deliver our own work and choose who we want to partner with.
- **Our focus on long-termism:** We have existed for over 100 years. We may well exist for another 100. While we are urgent in our desire for change, we know from experience that sustainable and impactful policy change often happens iteratively over time. We can lean into this and take a longer view of the system and structural change needed to deliver impact at scale.
- **Our commitment to learning:** As a learning organisation, Carnegie UK seeks to continuously learn both about what works to improve wellbeing and to learn about how change comes about.
- **Our UK and Ireland remit:** We can work and share insight and learning from across the UK and Ireland.

The policy roles we play

Insight & ideas

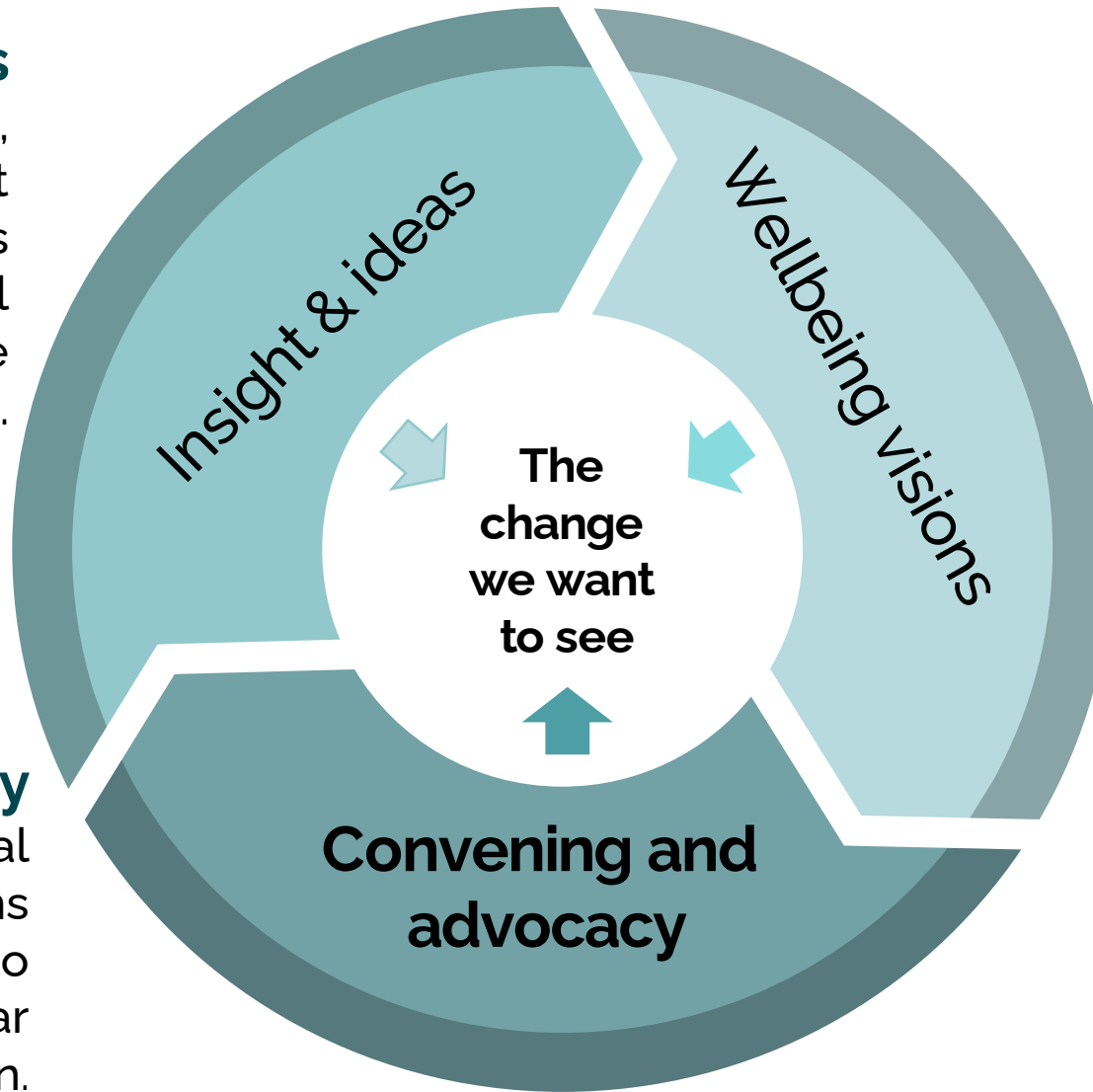
Generating the research, evidence, practice insight and policy recommendations to help people live well together today and into the future.

Wellbeing visions

Developing and sharing compelling visions and ideas of what living well together looks like in practice. Focussed on the long-term changes we need.

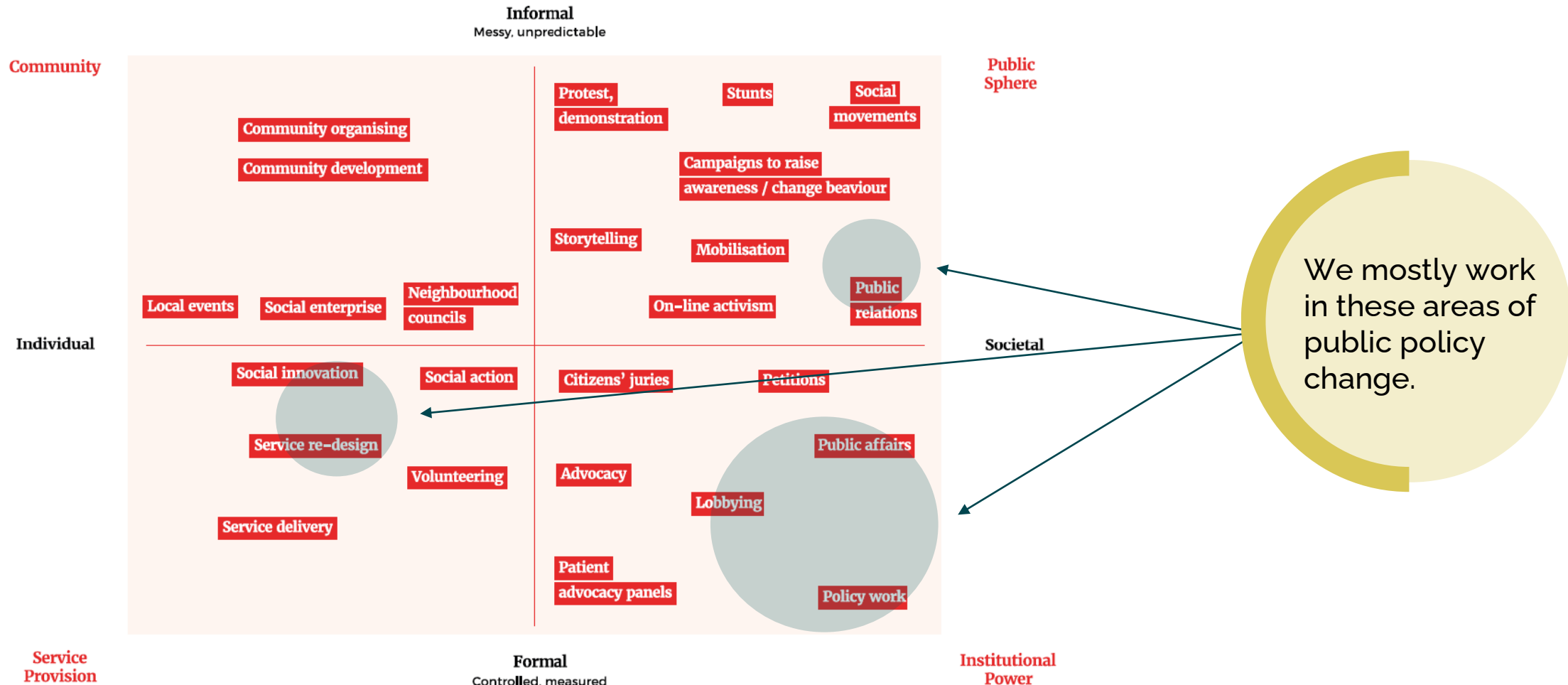
Convening and advocacy

Bringing together “unusual friends” to contribute to coalitions for change. Using our platform to promote voices that we hear from less often.

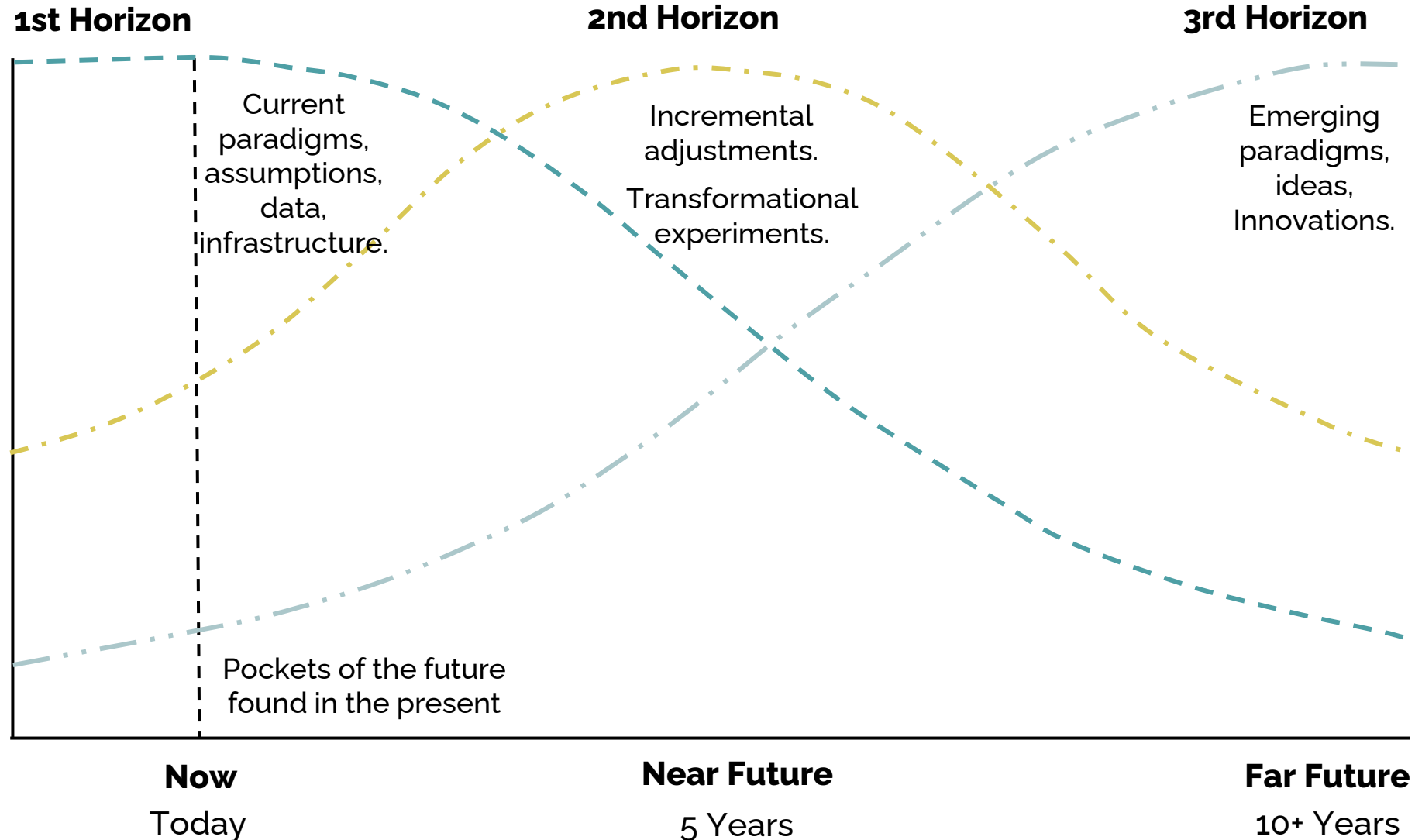


We sit in a wider system

The Sheila McKechnie Foundation's [Social Change Grid](#) is a useful way of understanding some of the more common types of activities organisations working for social change can play. It also helpfully describes the wider eco-system of change that exists and that we are just one part of.



The three-horizons timeline



Our impact learning framework

Our Impact and Learning Framework sets out the things we are curious about and what we are committed to continually learning about:

- **Learning about wellbeing:** We want to know more about collective wellbeing, what works to improve it and what works to sustainably embed wellbeing approaches into decision making.
- **Learning about how change happens:** We are curious and continually want to challenge ourselves to know more about how change happens, what enables it and how it has impact at scale.
- **Moving from proving to improving:** We do not have the requirement to 'prove' to funders or others that our work has had an impact. Instead, we want to learn about whether our practice and work is effective, and how we can continually 'improve' what we do.
- **Moving from attribution to contribution:** We take a complexity-based view of change when seeking to understand the contribution we can make in a particular area, rather than seeking to attribute specific changes solely to our work.

"Learning is more effective when it is an active, rather than passive process."

– Kurt Lewin

What we're learning about how change happens

Change requires vision, clarity and conviction

- We need to know what change we are pushing for and why.
- We need to be persistent in our pursuit of it.

Change is long-term and complex

- There is no single effective route to change or influence.
- The type of change we are interested in takes time - our efforts must be multi-faceted and adaptable (proactive and reactive).

Change requires coalitions and partnerships

- We cannot achieve the change we want to see alone.
- Our efforts must be additive to wider coalitions and lean into what we are uniquely well placed to deliver.

Those tasked with delivering change often lack bandwidth

- The day-to-day pressures on elected officials, decision makers and those in local and national government are significant.
- We need to do the hard lifting on the "what", "why" and "how" of what we are calling for - develop compelling solutions that are easy to adopt.

What this means for our work

Good programme design is essential

- All programmes of work should connect to our Strategy. They must have clear objectives, an agreed hypothesis, identified assumptions and compelling narratives. All pathways of work within a programme must have agreed objectives.

Embrace risk and the things that are unique to Carnegie UK

- Our remit, our independence, our credibility, our convening power and our relationships are all huge assets. Our Trustees support a high-risk appetite for our programmatic work. We can think long-term and grapple with things others can't.

Be agile

- Not everything we do will necessarily work. This is fine as long as we learn from it. We need to be confident enough in our ideas and agile enough in our approach to recognise when something is not working and pivot.

Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good

- Where we can move quickly to add value, we should move quickly and add value.

Our Carnegie UK theory of change

We are focused on influencing government practice, processes and systems (local and national across the UK and Ireland) as we believe this is where we can achieve the most impact at scale over time.

We help to put wellbeing at the heart of decision making by:

- Generating and curating accessible evidence on what works.
- Championing compelling policy narratives.
- Convening and participating in impactful coalitions for change.
- Promoting long-term, adaptive approaches to policy making that empower decision-makers to act for the public good.



For more information please contact:

Adam Lang - Director of Policy, Insight & Advocacy
adam.lang@carnegieuk.org

Carnegie UK

Andrew Carnegie House
Pittencrieff Street
Dunfermline
Fife, Scotland
KY12 8AW

T +44 (0)1383 721445
carnegieuk.org.uk

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