

Applying a systems approach to sustainable living places: 6 lessons learned

There are many ways (techniques, models, tools) of applying systems approaches. The choice of approach should always start with a consideration of the **needs or purpose being addressed and the nature of the problem** (what is known, what is not, the diversity of perspectives and so on).

The Sustainable living places (SLP) project applied the Acumen+ systems approach, which is based on techniques for qualitative, participatory mapping of systems, to the housing and infrastructure system. The process has brought into focus interactions between the current system for planning and funding at national level, the context for local planning, the role of residents and developers, and the potential role that a shared sustainability agenda might play in driving change across all levels of government. Lessons from this work may have broader application to other complex policy problems. The full report is available [here](#).

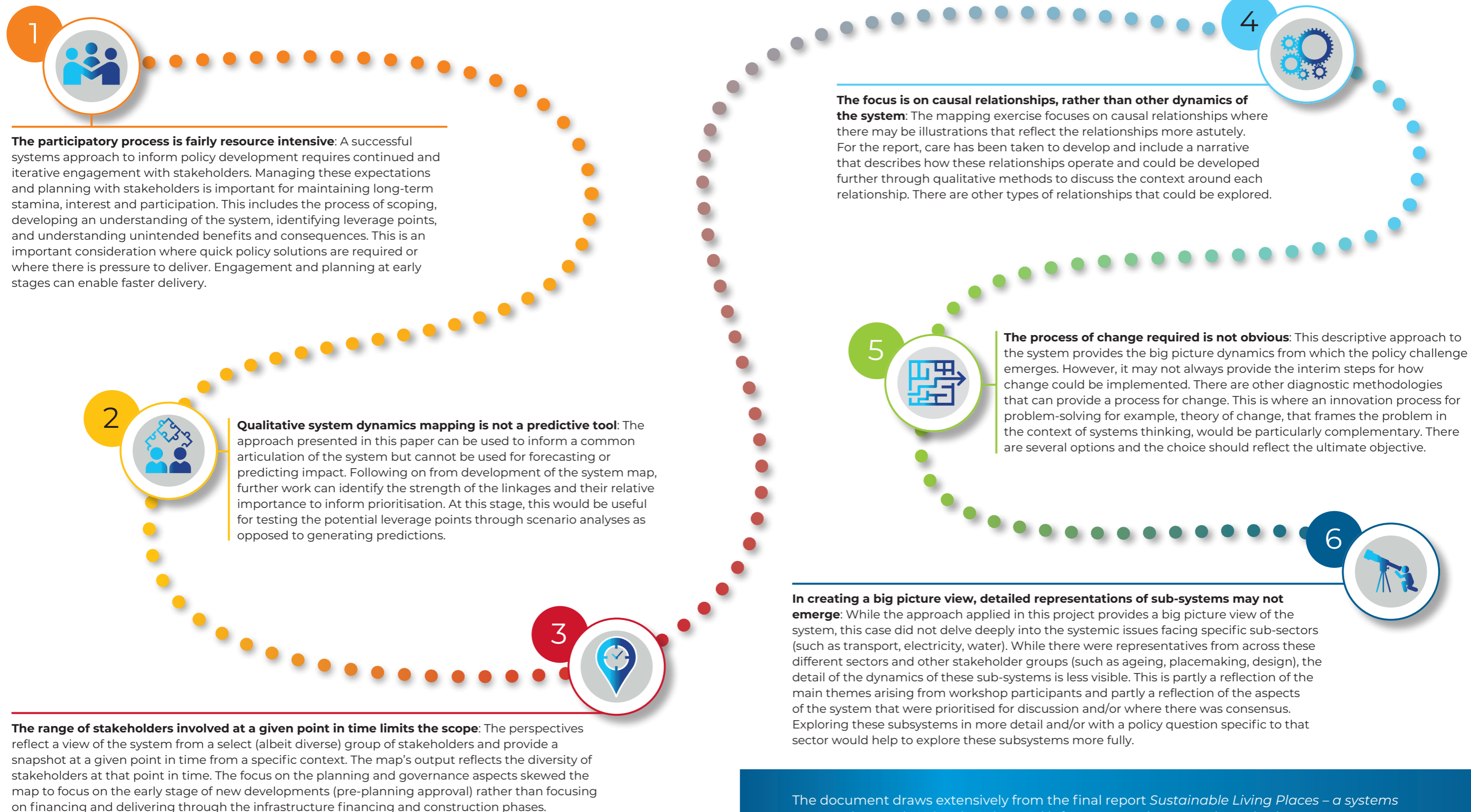
The study identified several leverage points that serve as starting points for improving the system to deliver SLP.

- a. Encouraging the development of a sustainability agenda around net-zero.
- b. Facilitating support for local planning and better master planning.
- c. Providing a flexible funding model to enable holistic business cases for place.
- d. Providing technical and financial support to planners in local authorities to address internal barriers to good master planning and delivery.
- e. Harnessing the power of data sharing.

Leverage points draw attention to areas in the system where interventions would strongly influence different parts of the system. These are starting points for exploring where interventions might have greatest impact and where unintended benefits and consequences could result.

The nature of complex problems means that they are not amenable to simple solutions and may require legitimate power to enact systemic change. **Systems approaches do not provide a 'silver bullet': They do not provide a quick answer to fix the problem, or a simple solution.** They provide a process for synthesis of multiple perspectives situated within a system and the dynamics by which system-level properties and behaviours emerge.

Systems approaches therefore provide a means of probing, learning and honing in on potential solutions in a way that gives due attention to the relevant perspectives and emergent, system-level properties of the system. It is also important to note that perspectives would need to be appropriately weighted. Nevertheless, several challenges in deploying a participatory systems approach emerged from this project. These are outlined below.



There was also evidence in the early discussions that the description of developers as being homogenous defies the inherent diversity in the types of developers, their scale, business models and the levels of influence they may or may not have. These lessons learned and limitations are documented for further exploration in future work.

The document draws extensively from the final report *Sustainable Living Places – a systems perspective on planning, housing and infrastructure* that was released July 2020.

The full report is available [here](#).

If you have questions, comments and/or want to get involved, please direct enquiries to nepc@raeng.org.uk

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