From evidence to impact

Reclaiming evaluation as a means to an end

Dr Lígia Teixeira • International Evaluation Conference • 16 September 2026

Centre for Homelessness Impact

What Works Network

AUSTRALIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY


You help people,
communities and
societies get better at
getting better.



For centuries, doctors believed bloodletting worked.



THE LESSON

Progress depends on our ability to ask ‘What am I missing?’, learn and change course



What if the body could still absorb water during severe cholera? That question helped unlock one of medicine's simplest life-saving treatments.

Smoking was once normal almost everywhere, then whole societies changed.



Over time our questions got bigger.

- Did it work?
- What changed?
- What caused the change?

NOW, WE ALSO ASK

- For whom?
- Why? And in what circumstances?
- Whose perspective are we missing?
- What happens elsewhere?
- Does it add up to the outcome we care about?

True or false?

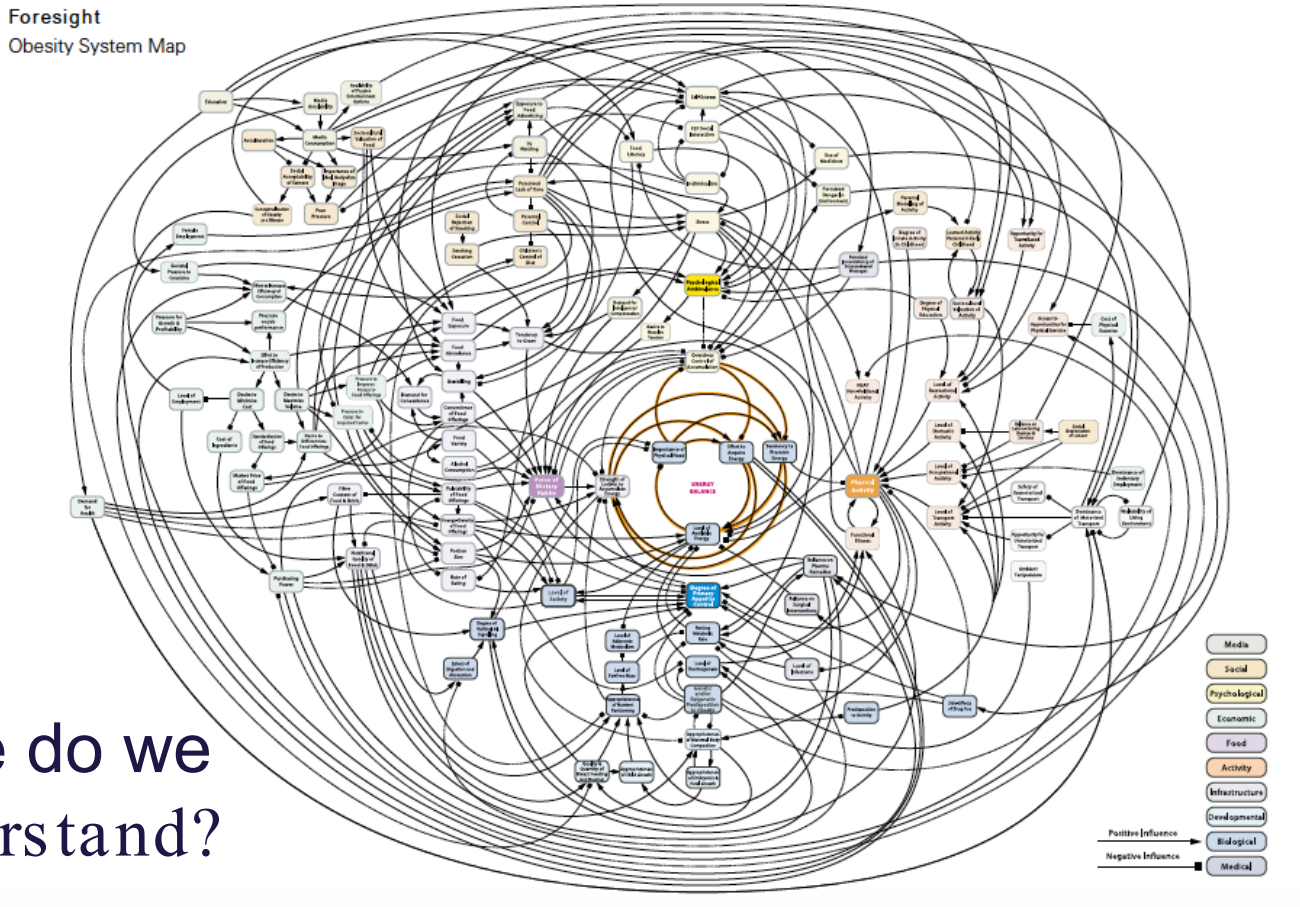
If an intervention has been shown to work, scaling it up should improve the population outcome?



Despite enormous investment in research and policy, some of our biggest challenges remain stubbornly persistent.



Gastric bands can work, but that doesn't tell us how to reduce obesity across a population.



So what else do we need to understand?

EXAMPLE: HOMELESSNESS

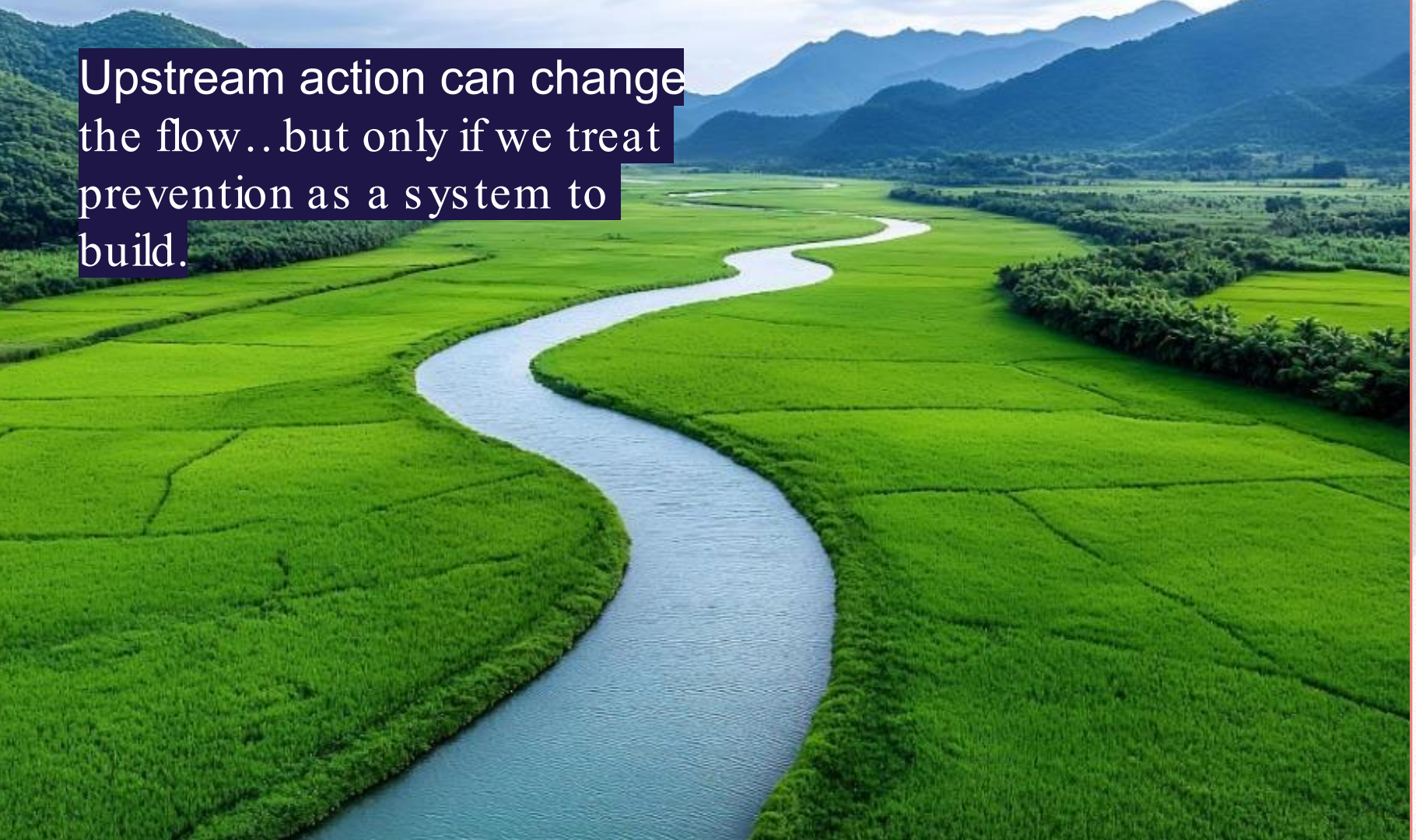
We know more than we ever have, yet homelessness continues to rise.

£3.7bn
spent on homelessness in England, 2024/25

£2.8bn
on temporary accommodation

132,410 households
in temporary accommodation by June 2025

including more than 172,000 children.


Upstream action can change the flow…but only if we treat prevention as a system to build.

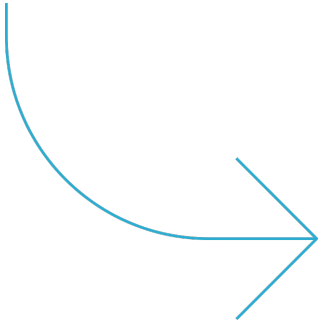


EXAMPLE: FINLAND

Finland is often cited for its success in reducing homelessness, and for good reason. But the real lesson isn't Housing First in isolation — it's how they redesigned the system around prevention.

So what does this ask of us?

Evidence is a means to an end…



the end is **impact.**

Evidence → Action → Impact

What we know
(from research, evaluation, experience)

Knowledge action gap

What people do
(decisions, policies, programmes, practice)

Action impact gap

What changes
(for people, places and systems)

Five principles for turning evidence into action

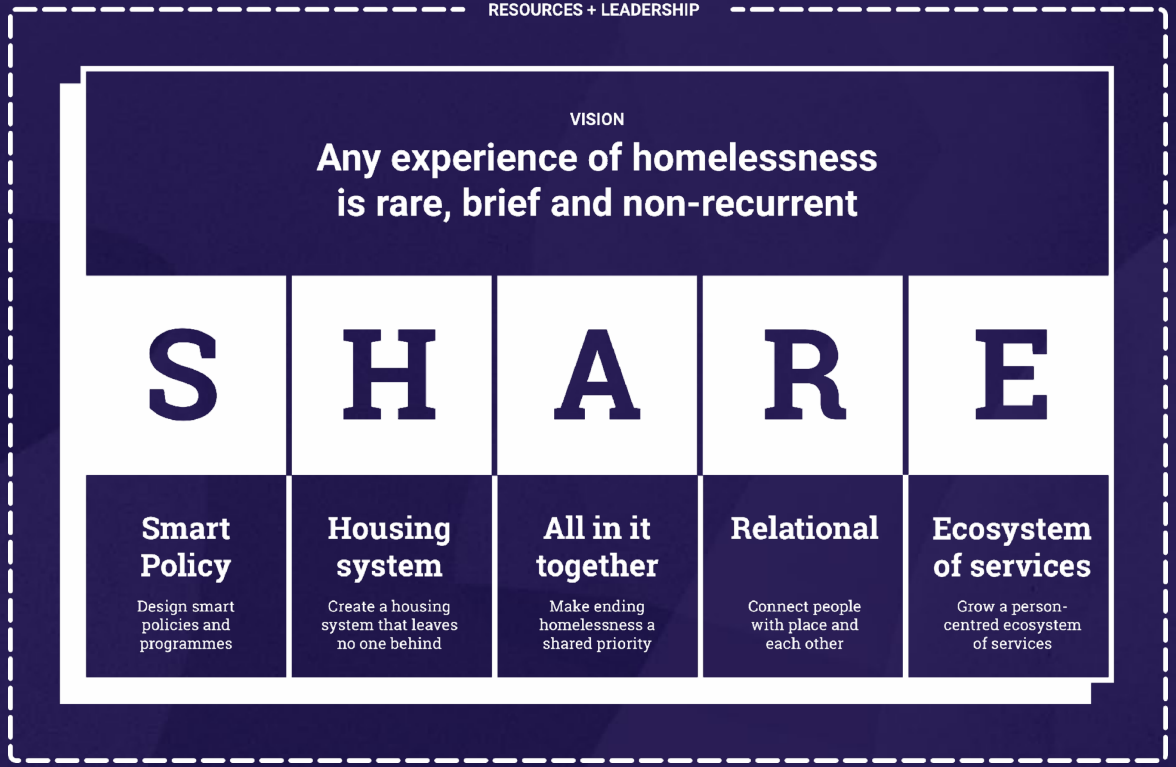
1. Start with the bigger picture.
2. Don't let perfect be the enemy of good.
3. Win hearts and minds.
4. Make others successful.
5. Keep getting better at getting better.

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE

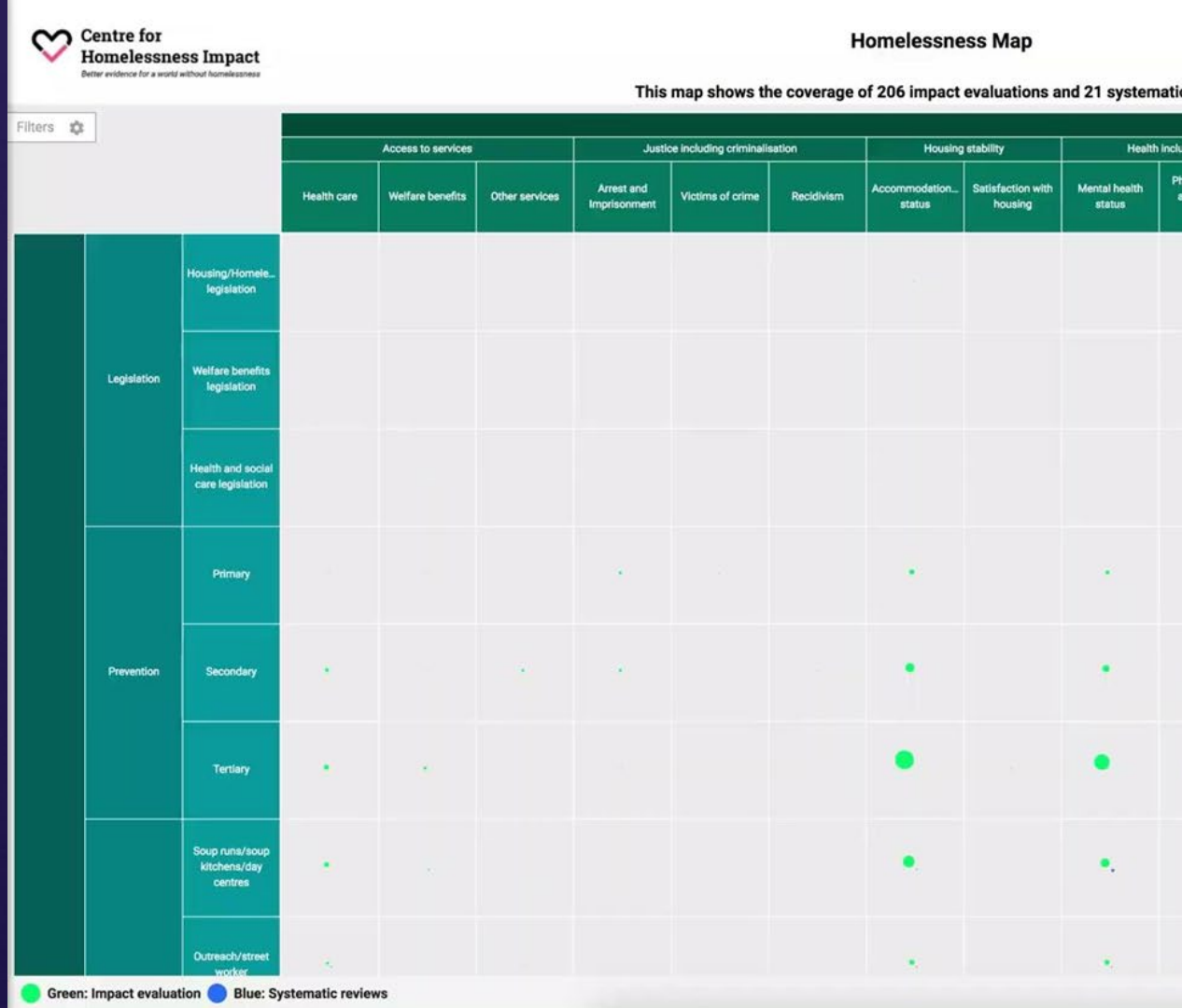
Start with the bigger picture.

1

What am I missing?


RESOURCES + LEADERSHIP
VISION
Any experience of homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurrent
S
H
A
R
E
Smart Policy
Design smart policies and programmes
Housing system
Create a housing system that leaves no one behind
All in it together
Make ending homelessness a shared priority
Relational
Connect people with place and each other
Ecosystem of services
Grow a person-centred ecosystem of services

Then ask: what do we actually know across that bigger picture?



And where are the interventions we evaluate actually acting?



THE SECOND PRINCIPLE

Don’t let perfect be the enemy of good.

2

Lead with what the evidence can tell us, not only with what it can't.

We made it our business to be useful.

Help people act on what we know today, while building better evidence for the future.

In practice that meant …

- Evidence for live decisions
- Tools that make evidence easier to use
- Build better evidence infrastructure over time

Sure start: what evaluation could tell us changed as the programme matured.

1999: Sure start begins
Centres bringing together early education, health, parenting and family support in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

2005: Early findings troubling
First national evaluation finds some adverse effects for the most disadvantaged children and families.

2008-12: a more positive picture emerges
As Sure Start matures, evaluation found benefits for parenting, but at age 7 there was still little evidence of impact on children's development.

2019-25: longer-term outcomes become visible

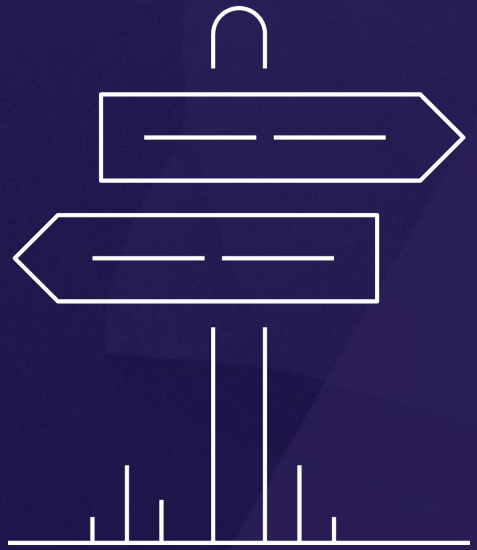
Linked administrative data found benefits, including better educational outcomes by age 16 and fewer hospital admissions through adolescence.



Two risks, one balance

Move with enough speed to be useful, without claiming more than the evidence can support.

Move too quickly and the question may outrun the intervention



Move too slowly and evidence arrives too late

Act on what exists today, while assuming it's the final word.

THE THIRD PRINCIPLE

Win hearts and minds.

3

Change the image, and you can change the story.

Challenge
Images of homelessness often reproduce stereotypes — particularly the idea that homelessness means rough sleeping.

Response
We created an evidence-based image bank with people who had experienced homelessness, who helped create and select how homelessness was represented.

Why it matters
Repeated images create repeated narratives. If homelessness is pictured mainly as rough sleeping, that shapes what the public thinks homelessness is, and which solutions seem necessary or possible.



Photo credit: Liam McBurney/PA Wire/Centre for Homelessness Impact

Stories make evidence memorable. They can also make bad ideas irresistible.

When the story is more compelling than the evidence.

Challenge

Scared Straight programmes took young people considered at risk of offending into prisons to confront the consequences of crime.

Response

The idea was intuitive, dramatic and highly persuasive. Rigorous evaluations found no deterrent benefit and evidence that participation could increase subsequent offending.

Why it matters

An intervention can feel right, tell a powerful story and attract passionate advocates — and still make outcomes worse.



Which do you see as the bigger risk?

Options:

A. Scaling because the theory, qualitative evidence and participant experience are compelling, without a credible counterfactual showing that the intervention caused better outcomes.

B. Drawing a causal verdict too early, before the intervention, outcomes or data are mature enough to provide a fair test.

Trust matters most when the evidence is inconvenient.

THE FOURTH PRINCIPLE

Make others successful.



Start with the goal, not the evidence product.

Challenge
A Spending Review is a live political and fiscal decision, not a seminar about research.

Response
Evidence provided through ongoing, confidential conversations and rapid analysis, shaped around the questions decision-makers actually had.

Why it matters
Influence depends not only on the strength of the evidence, but on trust, timing and understanding the pressures officials are under.



Knowing what to do is not the same as being able to do it reliably.

Challenge

Modern surgery depended on hundreds of actions and pieces of information being coordinated reliably across a team. Many failures were not failures of medical knowledge, but failures of execution.

Response

The WHO introduced a 19-item surgical safety checklist, with deliberate checks at three points around an operation. In the original eight-site study, major complications fell from 11% to 7%, and inpatient deaths from 1.5% to 0.8%.

Why it matters

Evidence can identify good practice, but impact depends on whether people have the conditions, routines and support to deliver it reliably.



WHO didn't just say:
'print it, laminate it and tell people to comply'



THE FIFTH PRINCIPLE

Keep getting better at getting better.

5


Ports spent centuries getting better at handling cargo. Then someone asked: why handle it so many times at all?

Evaluation capacity is not the same as improvement capacity.

Evaluation capacity

- Can we generate reliable learning?

Improvement capacity

- Can we act on it and keep learning?

The missing middle

Evaluation only improves outcomes if the system can **absorb it and act on it.**



What if learning were infrastructure rather than an occasional project?

The challenge

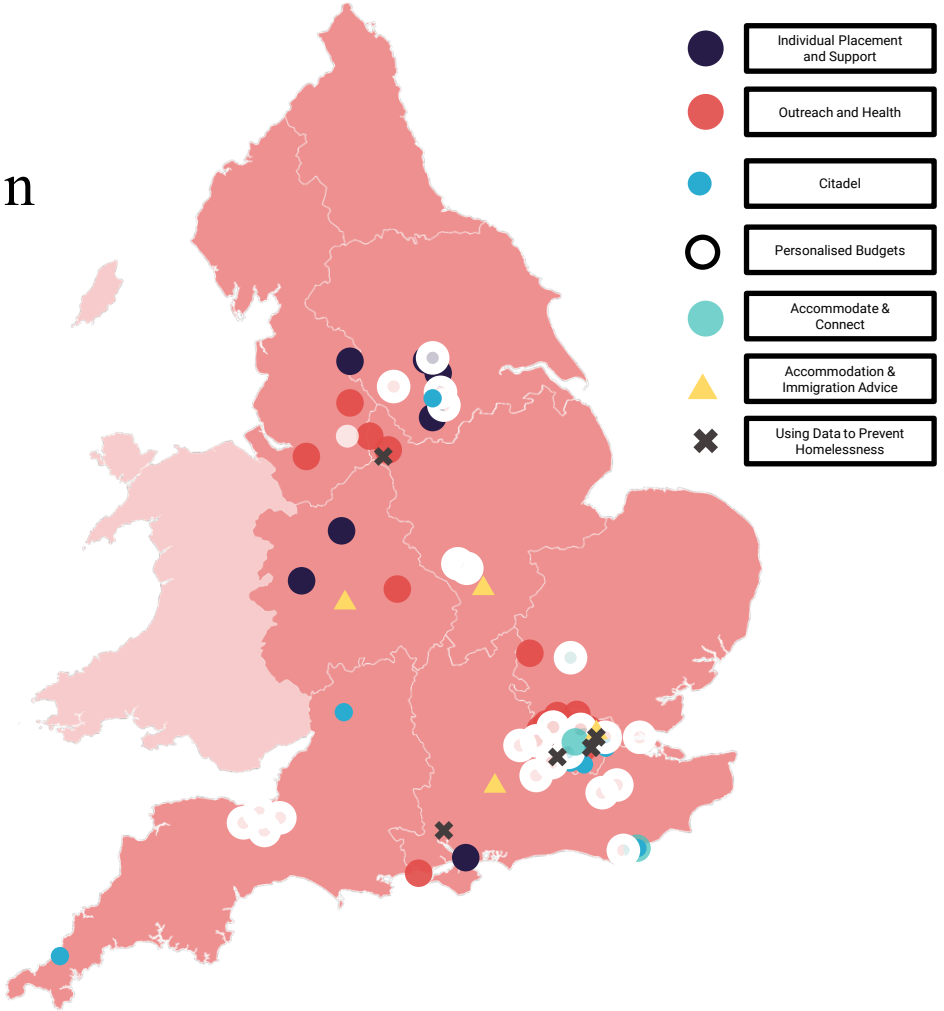
Local areas face different conditions. Too often they test ideas in isolation and learning stays local..

The response

Test & Learn connects local experimentation, rigorous evaluation and shared learning while approaches are still evolving.

Why it matters

Places can test → learn → adapt → spread, rather than repeatedly starting again.



Someone has to hold the system together.

The challenge

National decisions on housing, welfare, migration, health, justice and funding meet in the same places, and in the same people's lives. Progress in one part of government can create pressure somewhere else.

What is needed

National government has a unique responsibility to connect the outcome we want, policy and investment, local delivery and population-level outcomes.

Why evaluation matters

Systems-wide evaluation can reveal where policies reinforce one another, where they collide, and where problems cannot be solved locally because their causes sit elsewhere.

Devolution needs local freedom and national coherence.



Know your craft.
Know your limits.
Keep looking out.

Individually

Stay curious beyond your own field.

Relationally

Work with people who see what you cannot.

Organisations & systems

Build learning into how decisions are made, and how the parts connect.


Better evidence. Better questions.
Better at getting better.

Thank you for listening.

Any questions?

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