Designing Transformation-Focused Governance

A guide for leaders and change-makers working on system change at scale

TRANSFORMING UK FOOD SYSTEMS
Strategic Priorities Fund

FixOurFood

UNIVERSITY of York

ecocentric futures
TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH & ACTION

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Summary

Transformative change is increasingly recognised as necessary to address interconnected challenges that cut across social, environmental, and economic systems. Because these challenges cannot usually be addressed by a single organisation acting alone, partnerships are often needed to bring together different forms of expertise, responsibility, and influence in support of longer-term change.

A recurring difficulty within such partnerships is that shared ambition does not automatically translate into governance arrangements capable of supporting transformation. While many partnerships recognise the need for inclusion, learning, collaboration, and long-term thinking, there is often less clarity about how governance should be organised so that these are carried into practice.

This guide offers a practical process for developing governance that is intentionally shaped to support transformation. It is based on action-oriented research undertaken with the Food for the Future partnership in North Yorkshire, where a process of co-inquiry was used to examine how governance could better support implementation of a shared food system vision. Rather than presenting a fixed model, our guide translates the learning from this co-inquiry into a sequence of practical steps that other partnerships can adapt to their own context.

The process outlined in our report begins by clarifying the purpose of the governance inquiry and examining how governance is currently experienced within the partnership. It then supports participants to identify the shared values that should orient governance, explore how those values can be translated into decision-making processes, and consider the relational and practical conditions needed for collaboration to function effectively. In the final stage these elements are brought together into an operational structure that clarifies where action sits and how coherence is sustained over time.

Part 1: Introduction

The Challenge

Many of the challenges partnerships are now trying to address are shaped by conditions that extend beyond any single organisation, sector, or scale. Issues such as health inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss, and food insecurity are shaped by interacting social, environmental, and economic factors. As a result, action in one area can influence others in ways that are not always immediately visible. For partnerships working in these conditions, this means that progress often depends on understanding how different parts of a wider system interact rather than addressing issues in isolation.

This has increased interest in forms of change that are more transformational in character, as partnerships seek not only to respond to immediate problems but also to influence the underlying conditions that shape them. For partnerships, this often means working across interconnected issues, linking short-term action with longer-term ambition, and identifying where social, environmental, and economic goals can be advanced together. Cross-system partnerships are increasingly important in this context because they create space for diverse actors to align effort, connect different forms of knowledge, and develop responses that no single organisation could achieve alone.

However, while commitment to ambitious change is often strong within such partnerships, practical understanding of how they can operate in ways that support transformation remains less developed. In particular, there is often limited clarity about how partnerships can be organised and governed so that shared ambition is supported by ways of working capable of sustaining learning, coordination, and collective responsibility over time.

What this guide offers

This guide offers a structured process for designing and establishing approaches to governance that can support transformational change at scale. The guide is based on a four year collaboration between researchers from the University of York and the Food for the Future Partnership in North Yorkshire. It offers a practical process for helping partnerships think through how governance can be intentionally shaped to support transformation. .

Where do the insights for this guide come from?

The guide is based on learning from the Food for the Future partnership in North Yorkshire, where researchers from the UK government funded FixOurFood research programme worked with the Public Health team at North Yorkshire Council to explore how governance could better support food system transformation. The partnership provided a practical setting in which governance could be examined through iterative reflection, experimentation, and discussion, generating insights that were later translated into the process presented in this guide (see Box 1).

Box 1
Evidence base for the process: Food for the Future Action Plan

This guide is grounded in action research carried out in England's largest county, North Yorkshire, with the Food for the Future partnership. The research was supported by the UK government Transforming UK's Food Systems programme which funded FixOurFood. The area includes diverse landscapes and communities and faces a wide range of interconnected food system challenges, including food insecurity, diet related ill health, environmental pressures, and rural access inequalities.

Food for the Future is a regional partnership convened through North Yorkshire Council Public Health, involving diverse actors across the food system including statutory services, community organisations, academia, and other local stakeholders. While the partnership had already developed a shared vision and action plan, it identified a key challenge: how to move from developing ambitious plans to organising and cohering action effectively.

Researchers then collaborated with Food for the Future to explore how a transformation-focused governance approach could be co-created within this partnership context. It used an action research design, working through iterative cycles of collective reflection, experimentation, and synthesis (method based on processes outlined by: Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Heron and Reason, 2001). The process resulted in a governance model based on three interconnected components: shared values, relational decision making practices, and structural conditions that support distributed action while maintaining system wide coherence.

Who this guide is for

This guide is intended for leaders, practitioners, and change-makers working within, or supporting, partnerships that are seeking to steward systemic or transformational change. This may include those working in:

- Councils and local authorities
- NHS and public health systems
- Voluntary and community sector organisations
- Anchor institutions and public services
- Sustainability, climate, or regeneration partnerships
- Research and innovation programmes supporting practice change

Although many of the lessons presented here emerged through examining governance in food system transformation, the guide is intended to be relevant across a much wider range of sectors where complex systemic challenges require collaboration across institutions, disciplines, and communities. This includes areas such as health, climate, pollution, transport, and environment.

Several of the insights developed through this work have already informed related initiatives across the North Yorkshire region. For example, lessons from this approach have begun to shape work in mobility and physical health initiatives, where similar governance challenges arise around coordination, long-term direction, and collective action across different actors and priorities.

Part 2: Background

Understanding the challenges governance must respond to

Many of today's most pressing challenges, such as climate change, food insecurity, biodiversity loss, widening health inequalities, and water stress, cannot be addressed through isolated interventions or incremental reform. Instead, approaches are needed that can:

1 Address root causes rather than symptoms

Efforts towards change need to engage with the underlying causes of problems rather than only responding to their visible effects. Working with interconnected challenges requires approaches capable of shifting the patterns, incentives, mindsets, relationships, and institutional structures that shape how systems behave.

For instance, climate mitigation is not simply a question of deploying renewable energy and other low-carbon technologies. Their success depends on wider institutional and economic conditions, including regulatory frameworks, infrastructure investment, land-use planning, and incentive structures. Likewise, food security involves more than increasing food supply. It is shaped by a range of interconnected factors, such as procurement policies, subsidy systems, land ownership patterns, dietary norms, and market concentration, which collectively determine who produces food, who can access it, and on what terms.

2 Recognise the interconnected nature of today's challenges

Contemporary challenges rarely exist in isolation and are therefore unlikely to be addressed through single, discrete interventions. Instead, they require approaches capable of working across whole systems.

Food systems, for example, connect directly to health outcomes, climate emissions, water use, soil degradation, labour conditions, and local economies. Air quality is shaped by transport planning, housing design, industrial regulation, and public health. Waste management is closely linked to consumption patterns, supply chains, and circular economy design.

Addressing such issues separately often leads to problem displacement rather than resolution. Approaches to change therefore require governance arrangements capable of working across sectors and policy domains, rather than reinforcing siloed mandates.

3 Work across scales

Many systemic challenges operate across regions, river catchments, metropolitan areas, or supply chains that extend beyond municipal and institutional boundaries.

Challenges that appear local in nature are often shaped by broader systems. Dietary shifts, for example, depend on regional distribution networks; flood risk is influenced by upstream land management; and air pollution routinely crosses administrative boundaries.

Partnerships seeking systemic change therefore need to coordinate across multiple organisations and scales if they are to work effectively with underlying drivers and long-term conditions.

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that responding to complex challenges often requires systemic or transformational forms of change. Such change is qualitatively different from improvement within existing arrangements and requires a different way of thinking about how change happens (see Box 2).

Box 2
Understanding transformational change

Transformation is a fundamental form of change that is qualitatively distinct from adjustment or reform. Where reforms seek to improve or sustain an existing system, transformation involves the emergence of something with a different identity, function, or purpose (Fazey & Colvin, 2023).

A useful analogy is that of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. The butterfly is not simply a faster or more efficient caterpillar; it is an entirely different organism, emerging through a process of dissolution and reorganisation. Transformations in social systems often involve similar dynamics: existing resources are not simply optimised, but also reallocated to support the development of something new. This frequently involves both winding down established patterns and nurturing the emergence of alternatives.

Several aspects are important when using the concept of transformation:

- **Subjectivity:** What counts as transformational depends partly on perspective. A change that feels transformational to one stakeholder may appear incremental to another. For example, a farmer may experience the adoption of advanced machinery as transformational, while from a systems perspective the underlying purpose and patterns of production may remain largely unchanged. It is therefore important to ask what transformation means in a particular context, and how it differs from other forms of change.
- **Normativity:** Transformations can be desirable or undesirable. Deliberate efforts to support transformation therefore need to be clear about the kind of future being pursued, and whose values and interests shape that direction.
- **Scale and speed:** Transformation unfolds across multiple interdependent scales — from individuals and organisations to regions and wider systems — and at different speeds. These dimensions need to be made explicit when designing initiatives intended to support transformational change.
- **Scope:** Transformation also requires attention to the breadth of elements involved: behaviours, technologies, institutions, infrastructures, and the deeper assumptions and worldviews that sustain current arrangements.

Together, these insights suggest that supporting transformational change requires long-term vision, strategic clarity, and a willingness to work on the conditions that enable change. This often means investing in relationships, narratives, and capacities that may not produce immediate visible results, but which create the foundations for deeper shifts over time. It also means recognising that transformation is rarely linear, and that the capacity to learn, adapt, and maintain direction under conditions of uncertainty is itself central to long-term change.

Changing governance arrangements to support transformation

Many cross-system partnerships are now able to articulate ambitious visions for change. Visioning exercises, systems mapping, scenario development, and participatory design approaches are increasingly used to help actors imagine alternative futures and identify where social, environmental, and economic goals can be advanced together. These processes often create stronger shared ambition and a clearer sense of direction.

However, a compelling vision does not automatically translate into coordinated implementation. Many governance arrangements still reflect assumptions developed to provide stability, predictability, and control within discrete policy areas or administrative boundaries. While this can support coordination in established systems, it can also create lock-ins when change depends on working across organisational boundaries, adapting to uncertainty, or aligning action around longer-term goals.

Partnerships often reach a point where shared ambition brings practical questions about the processes that shape action in practice. How are decisions made? How is authority exercised? What does accountability mean when responsibility is shared? Whose knowledge is valued, and how is collaboration sustained over time? These are, in essence, questions of governance (Chaffin et al., 2014; Ingrid Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021). Existing governance arrangements often continue to organise these processes in ways that make collective action difficult to sustain across sectors, scales, and institutions.

In this context, supporting transformation often requires governance to be reframed so that enabling change becomes a more explicit purpose. Alongside maintaining continuity, it also needs to support learning, coordination, and collective agency under changing conditions. This means examining governance itself as part of the change process, including the relationships, decision-making routines, and forms of accountability that shape what becomes possible (Patterson et al., 2017; Leicester, 2022).

This guide responds to that need by offering a structured process of co-inquiry through which partnerships can explore how governance currently functions, where it constrains transformation, and how it might be reshaped to better support collective action over time.

Key Features of Transformation-Focused Governance

There are many governance approaches that help partnerships steer change, in complex and uncertain environments. Examples include adaptive governance, anticipatory governance, and transition-oriented approaches (see Table 1). Each has contributed important insights into how to work with uncertainty, embed learning, and support experimentation as systems evolve (Chaffin et al., 2014; Muiderman et al., 2019; Loorbach et al., 2017).

These approaches have strengthened the capacity of institutions to respond to change, anticipate emerging risks, and cultivate innovation. However, they have often operated largely within existing institutional arrangements rather than fundamentally challenging them. In practice, many focus on strengthening resilience, improving coordination, or steering innovation within prevailing policy and economic frameworks.

As a result, they do not always address the underlying structures, incentives, and power relations that generate unsustainable outcomes. In this sense, such approaches are often better equipped to help systems adapt, anticipate, or transition incrementally than to support the deeper governance changes needed for wider transformational change.

Table 1. Summary of governance approaches that aim to support change

Governance approach	What it focuses on	Strengths	Why it does not fully enable transformation
Anticipatory governance	Governing in the present with awareness of possible futures; uses foresight, scenarios, and horizon scanning to prepare for uncertainty	Strengthens preparedness; builds strategic awareness; helps actors consider multiple futures, and risks	Often operates within existing institutional and policy frames; tends to support risk management and incremental adaptation rather than redesigning underlying structures, values, or power relations. Can perpetuate the sense that the future is 'out there' rather than being something to act on now
Adaptive governance	Responding to change through learning, feedback, and flexible decision-making; often grounded in resilience thinking and social–ecological systems theory	Embeds learning and knowledge exchange; supports decentralised organisation; improves responsiveness to environmental change	Primarily oriented toward maintaining or stabilising a desired system state and focuses on resilience of existing systems (change to keep things the same) rather than questioning whether the system itself needs to be transformed (change to transform a pattern, organisation or system)
Transition management	Steering long-term socio-technical transitions (e.g. energy, transport, food systems) through visioning, experimentation, and innovation arenas	Provides tools for direction-setting; supports niche experimentation; recognises the importance of regime shifts	Often centred on technological and regime innovation; may under-address deeper shifts in values, power dynamics, and structural inequalities that reproduce unsustainable outcomes; often helpful to focus on change at scale, but has less emphasis on how partnerships can organise

For these reasons, there is growing recognition that more explicit transformation-focused approaches to governance are needed to reshape the structural conditions and paradigms that underpin governance and reinforce systemic challenges. Although research into transformation-focused governance is still in its infancy, several core features are increasingly viewed as important (see Table 2).

Table 2. Features needed for an effective transformation-focused governance approach identified in research.

Feature	What this means in practice	Why it matters for transformation	Sources
Integrative	Connects issues across sectors (e.g. food, health, climate); aligns action across scales; reduces siloed working, can support connection across disruptive initiatives that support the emergence of something new	Systemic challenges are interconnected and there is a need to work across issues. Fragmented governance reproduces fragmented outcomes	Visseren-Hamakers et al. (2021); Sundqvist et al. (2024)
Inclusive	Governance includes diverse actors, creates meaningful opportunities for those who are often marginalised to shape debate and decisions, addresses power imbalances, and builds shared accountability and legitimacy	Transformation requires broad ownership and shifts in agency, not top-down delivery	Visseren-Hamakers et al. (2021); Ribeiro et al. (2025)
Pluralist	Recognises and works with multiple forms of knowledge (for example professional, lived, Indigenous, and community knowledge), and supports co-production so that different perspectives can shape what is understood as important and how change is supported	Different perspectives reveal different leverage points and opportunities for change. No single viewpoint is sufficient	Pereira & Terrenas (2021); Ladio (2025); Visseren-Hamakers et al (2021); Korhonen-Kurki et al (2025)
Adaptive	Embeds learning, monitoring and feedback decision-making ; regularly reflects on assumptions, such as those underpinning how change is expected to come about; allows for flexibility and in response to change or new information to help keep transformational change in track	Transformation unfolds under uncertainty, so governance must evolve as the system changes	Bosomworth (2017); Visseren-Hamakers et al. (2021); Arnold et al. (2025)
Experimental	Creates space to test new approaches; supports and pilots innovation; learns from failure	New system patterns cannot be fully designed in advance; they need to be explored in practice and developed over time	Könnölä et al. (2021); Arnold et al. (2025)
Intentional	Clarifies the long-term change being sought, aligns action to a shared purpose, and helps keep attention on transformational rather than marginal or incremental change	Without direction, efforts remain incremental or reactive rather than transformative	Sundqvist et al. (2024); Könnölä et al. (2021)
Decentralised	Distributes leadership; enables self-organising groups; connects local initiative with regional coordination	Transformation cannot be controlled centrally. Distributed action increases adaptability, ownership, and agency	Rijke et al. (2013); Potiguar et al. (2025); Könnölä et al. (2021); Korhonen-Kurki et al (2025)
Structural	Identifies systemic lock-ins; questions rules and incentives; shifts underlying conditions	Surface-level improvements leave root causes untouched. Transformation requires structural redesign	Arnold et al. (2025); Bosomworth (2017); Korhonen-Kurki et al (2025)
Long-term focus	Recognises phases of change; sequences action over time; works with windows of opportunity	Transformation is not linear. Governance must adapt as momentum and conditions shift	Rijke et al. (2013); Potiguar et al. (2025); Sundqvist et al. (2024); Korhonen-Kurki et al (2025)
Balanced	Recognises interdependence of people, economy and ecosystems; works within ecological limits	Sustainable transformation must regenerate both social and ecological systems	Pereira & Terrenas (2021); Ignace (2025); Korhonen-Kurki et al (2025)

While the features outlined above provide a useful orientation for transformation-focused governance, how they translate into practice depends on the specific context a partnership is working within. What enables transformational change in one setting may not work in another. Rather than adopting a fixed set of principles or a predefined governance model, there is a need for processes of co-inquiry through which partners critically explore them in relation to their own objectives.

Part 3: Developing an approach to transformation-focused governance

This guide provides a structured process of co-inquiry through which cross-system partnerships can examine how governance needs to develop if it is to support transformation. It begins by establishing a clear sense of transformational direction and articulating the governance design question that frames the work. Partnerships can then move through a series of linked stages: understanding the current governance context, surfacing shared values, examining decision-making and collaboration practices, identifying enabling conditions, and synthesising these into an operational approach. By the end of the process, the aim is that partnerships have moved beyond shared ambition alone and developed a clearer governance approach capable of supporting collective action over time.

The process is designed to be flexible rather than a fixed method. Partnerships may adapt the questions, pacing, or activities to suit their own context. What matters is engaging thoughtfully with each level of inquiry and using the insights generated to shape a governance approach that can support transformational ambitions. In this way, governance becomes something intentionally developed and collectively owned.

When applying the process in practice, it helpful to consider the following:

1 Adapt the process to your context

Governance is always shaped by local history, institutional arrangements, capacity, culture, and power dynamics. The steps outlined in this guide are not a fixed model to replicate. Partnerships should adapt the sequencing, tools, and depth of engagement to fit their mandate, relationships, and constraints.

2 Expect governance conversations to feel sensitive

Governance touches questions of power, legitimacy, accountability, and influence. When partnerships explore how decisions are made or whose voices shape direction, discussions can feel personal or political. Moments of tension often signal where governance is most deeply experienced and where change may be most needed. These moments require careful facilitation rather than avoidance.

3 Work at a realistic pace

Transformative change takes time. Attempting to redesign governance through a single intensive process can overwhelm participants and compete with delivery pressures. Many partnerships benefit from shorter sessions spaced over time, allowing reflection, relationship-building, and iterative adjustment. Governance is often strengthened when it evolves alongside practice rather than being imposed all at once.

4 Be intentional about who is involved

Participation is rarely neutral or equal. It is important to consider who is shaping conversations, whose perspectives are missing, and what meaningful inclusion looks like in context. Inclusion may require practical adjustments such as accessible formats, compensation for community time, or creating smaller and safer discussion spaces. Intentional design helps avoid reproducing existing inequalities.

5 Pay attention to facilitation

This process depends on surfacing differences, holding dialogue constructively, and moving from reflection into action. Skilled facilitation supports psychological safety, balanced participation, and clarity of outcomes. The quality of facilitation can strongly influence whether governance conversations generate defensiveness or shared ownership.

6 Keep structure light at first

Early governance arrangements do not need to be complex. Starting with simple, workable structures allows trust and confidence to build. As relationships strengthen and clarity grows, governance mechanisms can become more formalised. Over-structuring too early can reduce flexibility and dampen momentum.

7 Consider how coherence will be maintained

Distributed or cluster-based working can generate energy and ownership, but coherence does not happen automatically. Partnerships may need a convening or coordinating function that maintains alignment with vision and values, connects clusters, and prevents duplication or drift. This role can remain light-touch, but it should be explicit.

8 Make learning part of routine practice

Governance in complex systems needs to remain responsive to changing conditions. Reflection can focus on questions such as:

- Are decisions aligning with our values?
- Are certain actors becoming over-burdened?
- Are clusters functioning effectively?

Embedding short, regular reflection points into existing meetings is often more sustainable than relying on occasional major reviews.

Part 4: Working through the co-inquiry process

The following section works through each stage of the co-inquiry in more detail. Together, the six steps move from establishing a clear direction for transformation, through exploring governance experiences, surfacing shared values, and testing decision-making practices, to identifying the conditions needed to support change and bringing these elements together in an operational governance approach.

Step 1. Establish a plan for transformation

Before beginning detailed work on governance, partnerships need enough shared clarity about the direction of change they are trying to support. This means understanding the longer-term ambition, the scale at which change is being pursued, and where the partnership expects to contribute most directly. In many cases, this clarity begins to emerge through earlier visioning or action planning processes, where actors come together to explore key challenges, identify priorities, imagine alternative futures, and develop areas of shared activity.

There are many ways to develop a shared direction for transformation. What matters most is clarity about the kind of change being pursued and the scale at which it needs to happen. Unlike adjustments or reforms, which improve or sustain an existing system, transformation involves a more fundamental shift in how a system functions, what it prioritises, and how it is organised (see Box 2). It may require letting go of established patterns, reallocating resources, and reshaping the structures and assumptions that hold current systems in place. Transformation is therefore not simply about doing more or doing better, but about creating something meaningfully different.

Developing a transformational direction typically involves three foundational considerations:

- First, clarifying what counts as transformation in your context. Because transformation can be understood differently depending on perspective, it is important to examine whether proposed changes alter underlying system patterns or merely improve existing ones. This often involves distinguishing between incremental improvement and deeper systemic reconfiguration.

- Second, defining the appropriate scale, scope, and speed of change. Transformation occurs across interacting levels, from individuals and organisations to regions and beyond. These levels are interdependent. Small-scale change can enable wider shifts, but it is often constrained by broader institutional and policy conditions. Conversely, large-scale ambition must be grounded in local capacity and relational networks. Being explicit about the geographical and institutional scale at which change is being pursued helps to focus effort and clarify responsibility.

- Third, articulating a compelling vision of the future system. Transformation is guided by a sense of what is being brought into being. This includes shifts in structures and technologies, but also in values, relationships, and ways of organising. Without a clear orientation towards a different future pattern, efforts risk reinforcing the status quo.

There are many tools that can support this work, such as the Three Horizons framework, which provides a way of distinguishing between the dominant present system, transitional innovations, and a radically different future pattern (Sharpe et al., 2016; Leicester, 2013). Other approaches focus on identifying leverage points, mapping system dynamics, or working across nested scales (Fazey & Colvin, 2023).

Developing effective frameworks for transformation can take time. For example, the development of the Food for the Future framework for action that then led to the work on organising and governance in this document was conducted during three different workshops with around 20-25 participants delivered over 10 months (see Box 3).

Whatever method is used, the outcome of this phase should be a shared understanding of the depth and direction of change being pursued, and a coalition of actors aligned around it. Governance redesign can then build from this foundation.

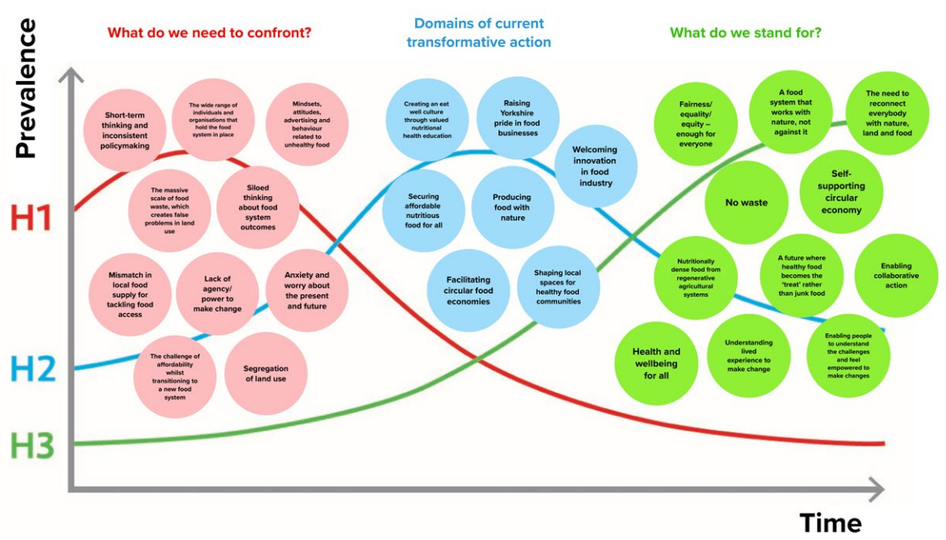
Box 3
Using Three Horizons to develop the Food for the Future framework for transformational action

The Food for the Future Partnership used Three Horizons practice to convene dialogue about how food system transformation was understood and how it could be supported.

This involved identifying the dominant challenges in the current food system (Horizon 1) and envisioning a desirable transformed future food system (Horizon 3). Attention then turned to Horizon 2, where participants identified domains of action — reinforcing actors and activities that could disrupt current patterns and help the desired future emerge. These domains highlighted where coordinated action was needed in the present to support transition.

A distinction was also made between H2+ activities, which actively support the emergence of the desired future, and H2− activities, which may unintentionally reinforce existing patterns.

The outcome for Food for the Future was a framework for action built around a Three Horizons map. The domains of action became core areas of work, each supported by a domain lead and key partners. Together, they identified where effort could most effectively disrupt current patterns and build momentum towards longer-term food system transformation.



Once a deeper shared understanding of what transformation looks like and how it is expected to come about is established, partnerships can begin addressing how they need to organise to support system change and ensure the domains of action are effective. To support transformation, it is then helpful to articulate a clear aim for the process (see Figure 1).

A governance model of

[the partnership or coalition governance is being designed for]

↓

By

[the people who will shape and steward it]

↓

For the purpose of

[the specific outcomes or capabilities governance must enable]

For example:

- **A governance model of** a place-based food partnership
- **By** actors across local government, civil society, and delivery organisations
- **For the purpose of** enabling coordinated action towards healthier, fairer and more sustainable food systems

Figure 1. Developing a clear aim for the co-inquiry process

The core message here is that the design of an approach to governance needs to be founded on a good and shared understanding of what transformation looks like and how it is expected to be achieved. In short, for an approach to governance to be effective, you need to know what it is meant to achieve.

Step 2.
Understand how existing governance arrangements constrain or enable transformational change

Aim of this step

This step aims to help a partnership develop a shared understanding of how governance is currently being experienced across the system, and how those experiences shape the partnership's capacity to act. It surfaces both enabling conditions and constraints, making visible the patterns that are often felt individually but rarely discussed collectively.

Why understanding constraints to existing arrangements is important

Before shaping governance for a partnership, it is important to recognise that participants often bring assumptions from the governance systems of their own organisations. These assumptions may reflect established ways of working that are effective within individual institutions, but do not always transfer easily to a shared partnership space where authority, responsibility, and decision-making are distributed across actors.

The purpose of this stage is therefore not to redesign each organisation's internal governance, but to create space for reflection on what kinds of governance are needed between organisations if collective action is to support transformation. This often involves questioning familiar expectations about control, accountability, speed of decision-making, or who should lead. It also requires consideration of how a partnership can operate differently when no single actor holds authority alone.

Many partnerships already contain strengths that support this shift, such as informal collaboration, distributed leadership, or experimentation across organisational boundaries. Surfacing these alongside existing constraints helps participants build from what is already possible while cultivating a shared understanding of how governance within the partnership itself may need to operate differently.

How this step works in practice

To understand enablers and constraints of current models of governance, individuals can be invited to share their experiences in one to one or small group conversations. Participants can be encouraged to reflect on how governance shows up in their day-to-day work and their wider experiences across the system.

Useful guiding questions might include:

- How does change normally happen in your organisation?
- Who needs to be involved, consulted, or give approval?
- How are priorities set and resources allocated?
- What makes it easier or harder to move from plans to delivery?
- How much flexibility is there to adapt plans once they are agreed?
- How are risks and trade-offs considered (including social and environmental impacts)?
- What kinds of evidence or knowledge carry most weight in decision-making?
- Are there processes for monitoring progress and learning from what happens?
- When working with partners, what helps coordination work well (and what gets in the way)?
- If you could change one thing about current governance to support long-term transformation, what would it be?

Once diverse insights have been gathered, it is important to take time to make sense of what they suggest collectively. Working with a small group can help bring different perspectives together, identify how existing governance currently supports or constrains action, and clarify which features may need to be protected, strengthened, or challenged through the later stages of the co-inquiry process.

What this step produces

By the end of this step, the partnership will have a shared picture of how governance is experienced across different roles and organisations. This includes clearer insight into where governance supports collaboration and learning, where it creates friction or delay, and where there may already be untapped potential for working differently (see Box 4 for example).

Box 4
Enablers and Constraints in the Food for the Future case

Examples from the Food for the Future partnership showed that:

- Governance often supported strong activity within individual organisations, but coordination across organisational boundaries remained limited, making it difficult to align action around wider system change rather than isolated delivery priorities.
- Accountability became less clear when action depended on collaboration between statutory and non-statutory actors, particularly where responsibility was shared but formal authority remained unevenly distributed.
- Formal procedures, statutory requirements, and risk management processes helped maintain legitimacy, but could also slow adaptation where emerging opportunities required quicker adjustment or experimentation.
- Participants noted that practices such as stakeholder engagement, planning, and monitoring were already being used, but felt they needed to be reshaped to encourage learning, shared responsibility, and coordination across local, regional, and national levels, rather than simply ensuring compliance.
- Informal relationships, trust, and cross-sector collaboration were already enabling movement beyond formal structures, creating spaces where experimentation and problem-solving could emerge more easily.
- A recurring tension existed between short-term delivery pressures and the desire to sustain attention on longer-term system change, especially where funding cycles or institutional priorities encouraged immediate outputs over longer trajectories.

Participants found that recognising both constraints and existing strengths helped shift discussion away from what governance was failing to do, towards which existing practices could be adapted or strengthened to better support transformation.

Step 3.
Identify the shared values of the partnership

Aim of this step

The aim of this step is to identify the values that need to be shared and strengthened if governance is to support transformational change. This involves building alignment around a common transformational intention and exploring what governance must consistently prioritise, protect, or make possible in order to support it.

Why identifying values for the partnership is important

Shared values provide a partnership with a basis for how participants understand what matters, how they intend to work together, and what qualities governance needs to support if transformation is to be pursued. In this sense, values help create a recognisable way of operating across actors who may otherwise approach collaboration through different institutional priorities and expectations.

Values can serve different purposes depending on context (see Table 3). In organisational settings, they may describe deeply embedded principles, aspirations for future development, minimum behavioural expectations, or informal habits that have emerged over time.

Table 3. Different ways values can function in organisational and partnership settings (adapted from Lencioni, 2002).

Value type	What it refers to	Main purpose	Relevance for governance design
Core values	Deeply held principles that already define identity and are treated as non-negotiable	Provide continuity, identity, and cultural coherence over time	Important to recognise because partnership members often bring different existing core values from their own organisations
Aspirational values	Values an organisation or partnership believes are needed but does not yet consistently embody	Signal qualities that need to be strengthened to support future direction	Relevant when partnerships identify qualities needed for transformation that are not yet fully present
Permission-to-play values	Basic behavioural expectations required for participation (e.g. integrity, professionalism, respect)	Establish minimum standards of acceptable conduct	Necessary but usually insufficient for shaping transformation because they do not distinguish how governance will operate
Accidental values	Values that emerge informally through habits, personalities, or existing culture rather than deliberate agreement	Reflect current practice, sometimes positively and sometimes restrictively	Useful to surface because they may already support collaboration or unintentionally reinforce constraints

In this guide, the values identified through the process are best understood as shared governance values. They are not treated as fixed organisational core values, because partnership members already bring different institutional values of their own. Nor are they purely aspirational in the sense of describing an entirely new future culture. Instead, they combine qualities already recognised as important in existing collaboration with qualities that need to be strengthened if governance is to support transformation.

This is particularly important in cross-system partnerships, where responsibility for change is distributed across multiple organisations, sectors, and scales. Complex challenges are shaped by interacting social, economic, ecological, and institutional factors that no single organisation can address alone (Chaffin et al., 2014; Loorbach et al., 2017; Loorbach et al., 2020). Shared values help create enough connection across this diversity for participants to orient around a common way of working, even where formal authority remains distributed.

Making these values explicit gives later governance discussions a clearer foundation. They provide a practical reference point for shaping relationships, approaching decisions, and judging whether emerging processes and structures remain consistent with the kind of transformation the partnership is trying to support (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007; Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021).

How this step works in practice

This step can typically be delivered through an exploratory in-person workshop lasting half a day (approximately 3–4 hours) for 15–30 participants with strategic, delivery, and community roles across a partnership (see Table 4). Inclusion of a diversity of organisational perspectives from different positions of influence, experience, and lived reality is important because values often become clearer when differences in perspective are made visible.

The clustering stage draws on the Hexagon Mapping method developed by H3Uni (for more information see: www.h3uni.org/facilitation-guide/hexagon-mapping). Hexagon mapping helps participants connect ideas in ways that move beyond simple similarity, allowing new relationships and themes to emerge through discussion.

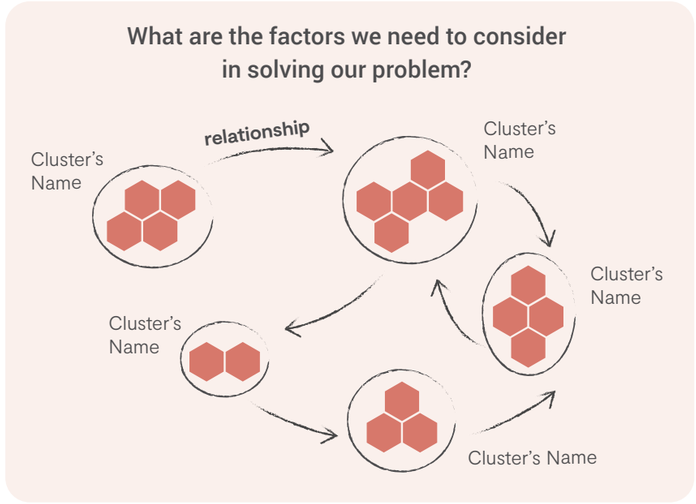


Table 4. Suggested process for a workshop to surface shared values.

Stage	Time	Guiding question	What to do (practical steps)	Why is this useful for transformation?	Output
1. Reconnect to the vision and create a simple articulation of the stretch goal	30–45 mins	If we fully realise our vision over the next 10–15 years, what will be different because governance worked well?	• Present the partnership vision and long-term ambition • In table groups, draft one bold 1–2 sentence statement capturing what the vision requires governance to enable • Share in plenary and agree one composite statement • Display this clearly for the remainder of the session	Anchors discussion of values in relation to the transformation being sought, helping participants connect governance to long-term systemic change rather than immediate organisational priorities	One agreed statement synthesising the vision into a governance-oriented ambition
2. Identify what governance needs to enable	20–30 mins	If we are serious about achieving this vision, what must governance consistently prioritise, protect or make possible?	• Ask each participant to write one idea on a hexagon (or post-it), using short phrases (3–6 words) • At each table, discuss and agree 5–8 key ideas to bring forward • Combine contributions into a collective pool of approximately 20–30 ideas	Surfaces diverse assumptions about what governance must make possible, revealing both shared priorities and areas of difference across the partnership	20–30 ideas describing what governance needs to enable
3. Whole-group clustering of the features governance needs to enable	45–60 mins	Which ideas reinforce each other and what connects them?	• Spread all hexagons on a wall or large surface • Cluster ideas collectively based on shared meaning • Move ideas physically, test groupings, and rearrange as discussion unfolds • Combine duplicates where appropriate • Aim for 3–6 clusters	Helps participants identify deeper patterns and relationships, moving from isolated ideas toward shared orientations that can guide governance	A visible set of agreed clusters

Stage	Time	Guiding question	What to do (practical steps)	Why is this useful for transformation?	Output
4. Name the values	30 mins	What shared value sits underneath each cluster?	• Discuss what shared value or orientation each cluster expresses • Agree a short value label (one word or short phrase) • Write it clearly and place it above the cluster • Refine wording collectively until meaningful and accessible	Translates practical concerns into shared values that can later guide decisions, relationships, and accountability	3–5 clearly articulated shared values that governance needs to support
5. Refine and agree	30–45 mins	Do these values clearly orient governance towards delivering the vision?	• Review each value in turn • Adjust wording for clarity and coherence • Merge overlaps where needed • Agree a concise final set and capture the wording clearly	Ensures values are collectively understood and sufficiently robust to act as a reference point in later governance design stages	Final agreed set of shared values

What this step produces

This step produces a set of shared values that act as a practical reference point for the way governance needs to support a partnership's activities and in support of transformation (see Box 5 for example). They help establish enough coherence across actors with different roles and priorities by clarifying how people will work together, how decisions should be approached, and what kinds of relationships need to be sustained over time. These values do not determine governance on their own, but they provide an important basis for shaping practice.

Box 5
Shared values that emerged in the Food for the Future case

In the Food for the Future partnership, collective reflection led to four shared values that participants saw as important for guiding how governance should support transformational change. These values were not treated as abstract principles, but as practical reference points for shaping how the partnership would work together, make decisions, and organise responsibility over time.

- **Ambition:** maintaining orientation towards a longer-term goal, so that short-term decisions and actions remain connected to wider system change rather than becoming fragmented or purely reactive.
- **Reflexivity:** maintaining a commitment to learning, questioning assumptions, and adapting as relationships, opportunities, and constraints evolved.
- **Inclusion:** ensuring that different forms of knowledge and experience could shape governance, particularly where statutory, professional, and community perspectives needed to be brought into dialogue.
- **Collaboration**: recognising that trust and reciprocity were necessary if responsibility was to be shared across organisations rather than held centrally.

Participants emphasised that these values became meaningful when they helped establish a shared understanding of how the partnership would work, make decisions, and relate across differences.

Step 4.
Translate shared values into decision-making practice

Aim of this step

This stage aims to explore how shared values can be carried into practice through decision-making. It does this by testing different approaches and considering which are most likely to support the way the partnership wants to work, while enabling the kinds of change it is seeking to achieve.

Why shared values need to shape decision-making

Values only become meaningful when they shape how governance is enacted in practice. In transformation-focused work, the shared values help clarify who needs to be involved, what kinds of relationships matter, and which decision-making processes are most likely to support the change being sought. Decision-making is one of the clearest expressions of governance because it determines who participates, how trade-offs are handled, how authority is exercised, and whether responsibility remains centralised or distributed.

There are many decision-making approaches that can help partnerships explore these issues in practice. What matters is not selecting a single ideal model, but using different approaches to examine how participation, power, efficiency, authority-sharing, and system awareness are shaped by different decision processes. Table 5 outlines three example approaches and their potential contribution to supporting transformation. These approaches were selected during the Food for the Future process because each provided a different perspective on the governance challenges discussed above, although their relevance extends beyond this specific context.

Table 5. Summary of decision making models used to explore how values can be translated into processes.

Model	Key principles	How it works in practice	Why useful for transformation	Sources
Sociocracy	• Decentralised authority • Consent-based decisions • Clear mandates • Linked circles	• Smaller groups or circles hold defined responsibilities • Proposals move forward when there are no reasoned objections • Representatives link working groups to wider coordination	• Enables distributed agency while maintaining coherence across groups • Supports adaptive action across linked areas of work • Encourages shared ownership across multiple actors	Owen & Buck (2020) Care et al. (2024)
Systemic Constellation	• Systems awareness • Relational thinking • Surfacing interdependencies	• Actors, institutions, resources, or tensions are explored in relation to one another through physical positioning, symbolic representation, or structured mapping	• Helps reveal hidden system dynamics • Surfaces dependencies between actors and domains • Strengthens integrative and cross-scale thinking	Livotova & Livotov (2015)
Deliberative Dialogue	• Inclusive discussion • Shared reasoning • Criteria-building • Multiple knowledge types	• Structured facilitated dialogue enables participants to share perspectives • Examine evidence • Reflect on trade-offs before agreeing action	• Strengthens legitimacy • Supports reflexive learning • Helps partnerships work constructively across difference	Lidskog & Elander (2007) Plamondon et al. (2023)

How This Step Works in Practice

In this step, partners explore different decision-making models and determine how they best align or reinforce the shared values identified in step 1. This step typically involves a full-day, in-person workshop with 15–30 participants drawn from strategic, delivery, and community roles across the partnership (see Table 6). As with previous steps, a diverse group is important, as the purpose of the session is to collectively test how different decision-making approaches might function in practice.

During the workshop, three proposed decision-making models are introduced (A, B and C) with each embodying different principles. Participants role-play realistic scenarios using each approach, allowing them to experience how the model operates and how decisions unfold. The relative usefulness of the different decision-making approaches is then evaluated in relation to the extent to which they uphold or reinforce the values identified in earlier steps.

These decision-making approaches are not mutually exclusive and can be used in combination. Partnerships may draw on different elements of each approach depending on the decision being made, the level of participation required, and the degree of uncertainty involved. This can help partnerships develop decision-making processes that are better suited to their specific context and objectives.

Detailed Guidance for Parallel Sessions

Each group works with the same decision scenario. For example, groups could be asked to decide how to allocate a fixed amount of funding (e.g. £30,000) across six proposed actions (see Box 6). Working with a shared scenario allows participants to compare how different decision-making approaches shape participation, influence how choices are justified, and affect whose perspectives become more visible in the discussion. The purpose is not to identify a single "best" model, but to explore what each approach makes possible in relation to shared values and the kind of transformation the partnership is trying to support.

Box 6
Detailed guidance on the process of exploration for each decision making model

Group A – Sociocracy

What this approach is
Sociocracy is a consent-based decision-making approach in which decisions move forward when there are no reasoned objections. Authority is distributed across linked working groups rather than concentrated in a single centre, and objections are used to improve proposals until they are considered safe enough to try. It is designed to balance equality of voice with efficient coordination through structured rounds of consent.

Why it is selected
To explore how decentralised authority and structured consent processes might enable shared responsibility while maintaining coherence across a partnership.

Process

1. Introduce principle: decisions move forward only if there are no reasoned objections.
2. Clarify the aim of the decision.
3. Individual reflection: participants identify which options fall within their "range of tolerance."
4. First round: each participant shares preferences and objections in turn.
5. Adjustment round: participants reflect on whether views shift after hearing others.
6. Refinement: facilitator works through objections, adjusting the proposal so concerns are addressed and the group can test whether it is good enough for now and safe enough to try.
7. Consent round: the refined option or course of action is tested; each person states consent or raises any remaining reasoned objection.
8. Reflection:
   - How did the structured rounds shape participation?
   - How were objections handled?
   - Did the process feel efficient or slow?

Box 6
Detailed guidance on the process of exploration for each decision making model *(continued)*

Group B – Systemic Constellation

What this approach is
Systemic Constellation is a facilitated method that surfaces interdependencies within a system by inviting participants to represent and reflect from different system positions. It brings systems awareness and relational dynamics into decision-making. It supports decision-making by helping participants compare possible options through different system perspectives before agreeing which direction best fits the wider whole.

Why it is selected
To strengthen understanding of how decisions affect different actors and system elements, and to make interdependencies visible before choices are made.

Process
1. Assign system roles (e.g., public health, community groups, producers, natural environment).
2. Embodied reflection: participants reflect on the decision from the perspective of their role.
3. Positioning exercise: proposed actions are considered from each system perspective and mapped visually in relation to the overall aim (for example using concentric circles, where closer to the centre indicates stronger alignment), helping identify where objectives reinforce one another or where tensions remain.
4. Collective discussion: explore tensions and alignments across system elements.
5. Refinement: consider which option best aligns systemically.
6. Reflection:
   - How did taking system perspectives affect the discussion?
   - What became visible that may not have surfaced otherwise?

Box 6
Detailed guidance on the process of exploration for each decision making model *(continued)*

Group C – Deliberative Dialogue

What this approach is
Deliberative Dialogue is a structured process designed to support inclusive discussion and the integration of diverse perspectives, including environmental considerations, into collective decision-making. It emphasises shared criteria-building and reflective reasoning.

Why it is selected
To explore how open dialogue and jointly developed criteria can integrate multiple values into collective choices

Process
1. Open dialogue: explore shared understanding of the aim.
2. Develop criteria: co-create criteria for evaluating options.
3. Evaluate options against criteria.
4. Integrate environmental considerations explicitly.
5. Decision: vote or seek broad agreement.
6. Reflection:
   - Did the dialogue integrate diverse perspectives?
   - What shaped influence?
   - Were trade-offs surfaced clearly?

What this step produces

By the end of this step, the partnership has developed a shared understanding of how decisions should be made in ways that reflect the values identified earlier in the process. Participants translate these values into practical principles that guide decision-making, helping to ensure that governance processes remain consistent with the transformation the partnership seeks to achieve. Grounded in lived experience and tested through realistic scenarios, these principles have both practical relevance and credibility.

This clarity strengthens the partnership's capacity for transformation by linking shared values to the everyday practices through which governance is carried out. When decision-making reflects agreed values and long-term objectives, governance becomes a driver of change rather than simply a mechanism for coordination. In the Food for the Future case, four process principles were identified as practical ways of embedding shared values within decision-making processes (see Box 7 for examples).

Box 7
Example of outcomes from Food for the Future partnership

Through testing Sociocracy, Systemic Constellation, and Deliberative Dialogue, participants reflected on how different decision-making logics might support or constrain transformational ambition. Rather than selecting a single model, they examined the strengths and limitations of each in relation to their goals.

Sociocracy:

- **Opportunity** – enabled decentralised authority and empowered smaller groups to act with clarity and mandate.
- **Limitation** – risked fragmentation or narrow perspectives if not balanced with transparency and system-wide coherence.

Systemic Constellation:

- **Opportunity** – strengthened systems awareness by surfacing interdependencies and cross-domain impacts.
- **Limitation** – required skilled facilitation and could feel abstract without clear mechanisms for decision closure.

Deliberative Dialogue:

- **Opportunity** – enabled inclusive reasoning and integration of diverse perspectives through shared criteria-building.
- **Limitation** – could be time-intensive and risk slower movement toward action if not carefully structured.

Box 7
Example of outcomes from Food for the Future partnership
(continued)

Across the exercises, four principles were identified as particularly important for supporting the partnership's ambitions for transformative change:

- **Deliberation** – systemic change requires integrating diverse perspectives and revisiting assumptions, rather than reinforcing fixed institutional positions. This directly supports reflexivity and inclusivity, by creating space for different forms of knowledge, challenge, and shared reasoning.
- **Intentionality** – decisions need to remain anchored to long-term transformational aims, not drift toward incremental or short-term delivery pressures. This reinforces ambition, helping partnerships maintain focus on the scale and direction of change sought.
- **Decentralisation** – agency must sit with those closest to implementation to enable experimentation and responsive action. This strengthens collaboration, by distributing responsibility and enabling action across multiple parts of the system.
- **Accountability** – distributed authority requires transparency and clarity to maintain legitimacy and coherence across the wider partnership. This supports both collaboration and inclusivity, ensuring that shared responsibility remains visible, trusted, and connected to collective purpose.

Together, these principles were seen as mutually reinforcing, translating the partnership's values of reflexivity, inclusivity, collaboration, and ambition into practical conditions for decision-making, while helping balance distributed agency with system-wide alignment — a central requirement for governing transformational change.

Step 5.
Identify the conditions the governance approach needs to support for coherent action to occur

Aim of this Step

To identify the wider relational and structural conditions needed to support coherent and distributed action, while ensuring this is aligned with shared values and transformational aims.

Why identifying conditions to support coherent action is Important

Transformative change depends less on any single organisation's plan and more on the quality of relationships across the wider system. Where work spans multiple mandates, sectors and communities, progress depends on whether actors can connect, coordinate and adapt in ways that allow innovation to emerge while remaining coherent with shared aims. Transformation-focused governance therefore needs to create the conditions that support productive collaboration, beginning with making relationships across the system visible.

Actor mapping helps partnerships do this by moving beyond a general sense that "we need to work together" towards a clearer understanding of who needs to be connected around particular areas of action, and why. This is especially useful when partnerships shift from discussion towards implementation, because it reveals where coordination is already strong, where important connections are missing, and where activity may depend too heavily on a small number of actors.

A critical dimension of these relationships is reciprocity. In this context, reciprocity does not mean a direct exchange between two organisations or an expectation that each contribution is immediately returned by the same actor. Instead, it refers to trust that contributing to the wider partnership will strengthen conditions from which value returns over time, often indirectly through the actions of others. One organisation may contribute convening space, another technical knowledge, and another access to communities, with value emerging through how these capacities combine across the wider system rather than through one-to-one exchange. Transformative collaboration is strengthened when actors both contribute to shared activity and experience that participation generates meaningful value within the partnership, creating reinforcing rather than extractive relationships (Egmose et al., 2021; Buckton et al., 2024).

As these reciprocal relationships become clearer, clusters of actors often emerge whose work naturally reinforces one another, even where those interdependencies were not initially visible. These clusters can form practical spaces for focused collaboration, allowing groups to work more deeply around particular domains without requiring the whole partnership to carry every task collectively. In this sense, understanding relationships helps reveal where responsibility can sit and how distributed action may develop within the wider partnership.

The next step is to consider what enabling conditions are needed for these relationships and clusters to function effectively, including trust, communication, time, and sufficient flexibility for actors to contribute in ways that match their role and capacity.

How to do this step in practice

This step focuses on identifying the conditions to support the processes outlined in step 3. Having clarified shared values and decision-making principles, the partnership now turns to the wider relational and structural landscape within which action takes place.

The step is typically delivered through a half-day, in-person workshop (3–4 hours) involving 15–25 participants. For mapping stages, the process works best in breakout groups of 5–8 people, allowing for detailed exploration while maintaining diversity of perspective (see Table 6).

Prior to the session, it is helpful to identify one or two priority action areas. Facilitators prepare 30–40 actor cards with short descriptions (alongside blank cards to capture additional actors), and set up a large wall or whiteboard space for each breakout group. Actor cards are laid around the edge of the board, leaving space in the centre for mapping relationships and clusters.

Table 6. Suggested process for workshop exploring decision-making processes.

Stage	Time	Guiding question	What to do (practical steps)	Why is this useful for transformation?	Output
1. Frame and reconnect	15–20 mins	What are we now organising for?	• Revisit the vision, agreed shared values (Step 3), and decision-making principles (Step 4) • Clarify which action area this session focuses on • Explain that the purpose is to identify who needs to work together and what governance needs to enable	Reconnects relational mapping to transformational intent so that participants focus on the wider conditions needed for change rather than only immediate delivery relationships	Shared clarity of scope and purpose
2. Identify priority actors	35–45 mins	Which actors are critical to delivering this action area?	• In breakout groups, review actor cards • Agree a shortlist of approximately 15 actors per group • Discuss why each actor matters • Add missing actors using blank cards • Prioritise rather than selecting too many	Helps distinguish which actors are systemically important, revealing where influence, capability, legitimacy, or knowledge sit across the wider system	Shortlist of priority actors for mapping
3. Build reciprocal clusters (reinforcement logic)	60–75 mins	How could these actors reinforce each other through reciprocal relationships?	• Begin with one actor and state why it is central • Add a second actor that can offer something valuable (e.g. funding, access, legitimacy, delivery capacity, knowledge, convening) • Define what the first actor can offer in return • Continue adding actors that reinforce the emerging relationship • When a cluster reaches approximately 4–6 actors, begin a new cluster • Group by reinforcement rather than similarity • Name each cluster	Makes visible where reciprocal relationships can support distributed action, helping partnerships identify practical clusters through which transformation can be advanced	Visible actor map showing clusters of mutually reinforcing actors ("action domains")
4. Share and compare	20–30 mins	What patterns are emerging across groups?	• Ask each group to present its clusters • Identify repeated actors, missing connections, or areas where one actor appears over-relied upon • Note where clusters appear strong or fragile	Reveals system-level dependencies and potential vulnerabilities, helping partnerships understand where coherence may need active support	Shared system-level insight
5. Clarify the added value of each cluster	30–45 mins	What becomes possible when these actors connect (i.e. are we able to support the process principles in practice)?	• For each cluster, identify what transformation pathway it enables • Discuss what it achieves that actors could not do alone • Capture two to three statements per cluster	Helps move from mapping relationships to understanding how clusters contribute to wider system change	Clear articulation of each cluster's function
6. Governance implications	25–30 mins	What does governance need to provide to sustain these clusters?	• In mixed groups, identify three practical governance implications • Consider options such as convening roles, light coordination rhythms, shared learning forums, decision-rights clarity, or brokerage functions • Link these back to previously agreed values	Translates relational insight into practical governance design, ensuring enabling conditions are deliberately built rather than assumed	An understanding of the overarching enabling conditions needed

What this step produces

By the end of this step, the partnership has a clearer understanding of the wider conditions needed for agreed process principles to operate effectively in practice (see Box 8 for example). This includes greater clarity about where collaboration needs to deepen, where new links must form, and how reciprocal relationships can strengthen collective capacity across the partnership. Rather than viewing governance solely as structure, participants develop a clearer understanding of how action is sustained through relationships across organisations and domains.

This is important for transformation because systemic change depends on reinforcing interactions rather than isolated efforts. Exploring how clusters of actors can mutually support one another, and what coordination is needed to maintain coherence, helps identify the relational and structural conditions that must be intentionally supported if collective ambition is to translate into sustained system-level action.

Box 8
What emerged about structure in the Food for the Future partnership

During actor mapping, participants explored how relationships across the partnership were forming and where governance structures either enabled or constrained collaborative action. The Discussion revealed the importance of how connections between actors were organised and sustained.

Participants identified that:

- Self-organising clusters of actors that reinforced each other enabled deeper collaboration and reduced burden, allowing smaller groups to work more closely around shared areas of activity
- Clusters worked best when formed around shared intent and reciprocity, where members recognised mutual benefit in contributing to collective aims
- A light-touch convening role was essential for maintaining coherence, helping clusters remain connected without directing their work too tightly
- Structure was most enabling when it remained adaptable and could be revisited, so that relationships and responsibilities could evolve over time

Together, these reflections led to the recognition that governance for transformation depends less on centralised control and more on convening and coordinating relationships across the system.

This led to a discussion about how clusters of actors could be convened around shared priorities, while a light-touch coordinating function supports connection, communication, and alignment across the wider partnership.

It was thought that this approach to governance would help to support:

- Flows of information, learning, and inspiration between clusters
- Mutual reinforcement across different areas of action
- Responsiveness as priorities, relationships, and opportunities change
- Continued alignment with wider transformational aims

In this context, transformation-focused governance was ultimately understood as creating the conditions in which distributed action can remain connected, coherent, and mutually supportive.

Step 6.
Establish how your governance approach can be operationalised to support change

Once a partnership has clarified shared values, identified process principles, and considered the enabling conditions needed to sustain them, the next step is to decide how this governance approach will operate in practice.

At this stage, the task is not to redesign governance again, but rather to use the foundations developed in earlier stages to design a structure that can carry the agreed approach. All too often, partnerships jump to identifying a structure without first exploring the assumptions, ways of thinking, and ways of working that it needs to support. Spending time on the earlier steps is crucial to ensure that any emerging structure serves the partnership rather than inadvertently reinforcing undesirable values or ways of working.

In practice, designing structure means deciding where responsibility for action will sit, how coordination will happen across different areas of work, and how governance will remain responsive as circumstances change.

Four practical questions can help guide this stage:

- **Where does the action sit?**
  Identify where responsibility and accountability for implementation will be held, such as within action domains, working groups, or clusters

- **How is coherence maintained?**
  Establish how different areas of activity remain connected and how wider alignment is supported

- **How are decisions guided?**
  Clarify how shared values and agreed process principles remain visible in day-to-day decision-making

- **How is learning sustained?**
  Build in reflection and feedback so that governance can adapt over time

The examples below show how these questions were addressed in the Food for the Future partnership. The first explains how the governance approach was brought together conceptually (see Box 9). The second shows how this approach to governance informed a practical coordination structure (see Box 10).

Box 9
How shared values, process principles, and enabling conditions interact to support governance in the Food for the Future partnership

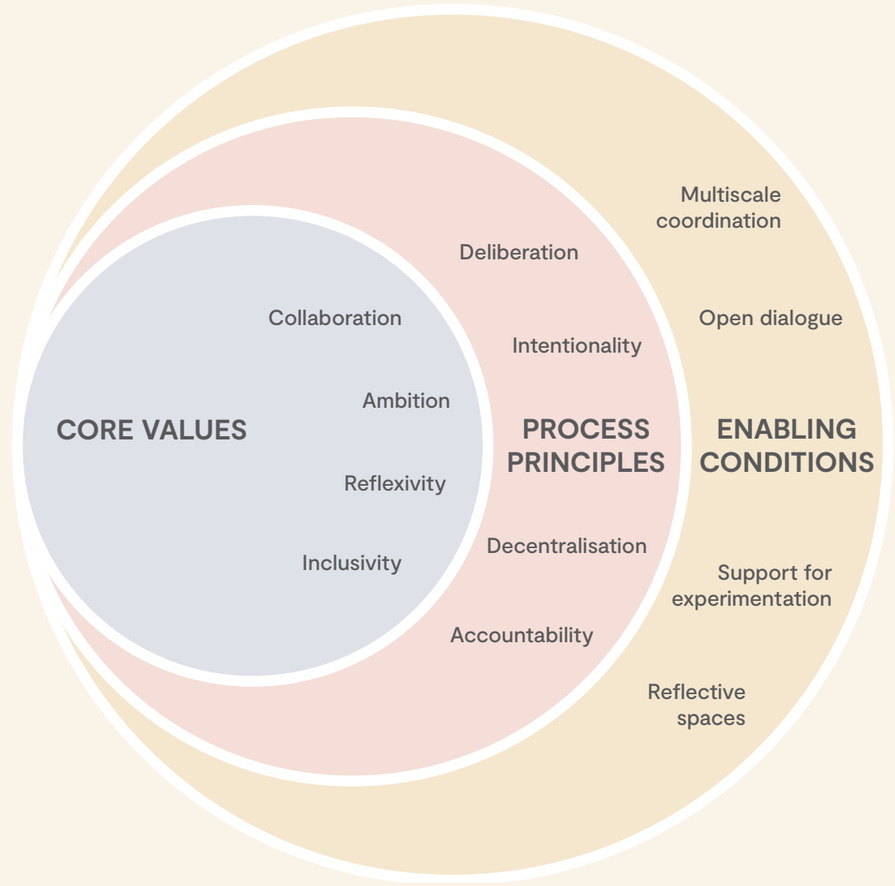
The governance model developed through the Food for the Future process identified three interdependent layers: shared values, process principles and enabling conditions (see below). These layers were not treated as separate components, but as mutually dependent dimensions of governance that together shape whether a partnership can sustain transformation over time. Shared values provide normative direction. They clarify what governance is intended to protect and enable when working across uncertainty, institutional difference and distributed responsibility.

In the Food for the Future case, four values became central: ambition, reflexivity, inclusivity and collaboration. These values helped participants articulate a way of working that moved beyond short-term delivery and procedural coordination towards longer-term system change. Ambition legitimised attention to wider transformation rather than isolated outputs; reflexivity emphasised learning and adjustment; inclusivity kept diverse forms of knowledge visible; and collaboration framed governance as shared responsibility rather than institutional control.

Process principles translate these values into governance practice by shaping how decisions are made, how authority is distributed, and how disagreement is worked through. In the workshops, four principles became particularly important: decentralisation, deliberation, intentionality and accountability. Decentralisation supported collaboration by locating decision-making closer to implementation. Deliberation enabled inclusivity by allowing proposals to evolve through dialogue. Intentionality reinforced ambition by keeping wider system aims visible through explicit criteria. Accountability strengthened reflexivity by making responsibilities and review processes clearer across the partnership. In this sense, process principles made the shared values operational rather than rhetorical.

Enabling conditions create a wider environment within which these processes can function effectively. Participants identified that even well-designed decision processes would struggle without sufficient trust, facilitation, time, communication across domains, and institutional flexibility. Conditions such as multiscale coordination, open dialogue, and support for experimentation were particularly important because they helped decentralised activity remain connected to wider system learning. Without these conditions, governance risks reverting to familiar institutional routines even where values and principles are agreed.

Taken together, the three layers explain why transformation-focused governance cannot be reduced to organisational structure alone. Values establish direction, process principles shape how governance is enacted, and enabling conditions make it possible for those practices to remain adaptive, coherent and workable over time.



Box 10
How the foundations to governance were brought together as an operational structure to support transformation in Future of Food

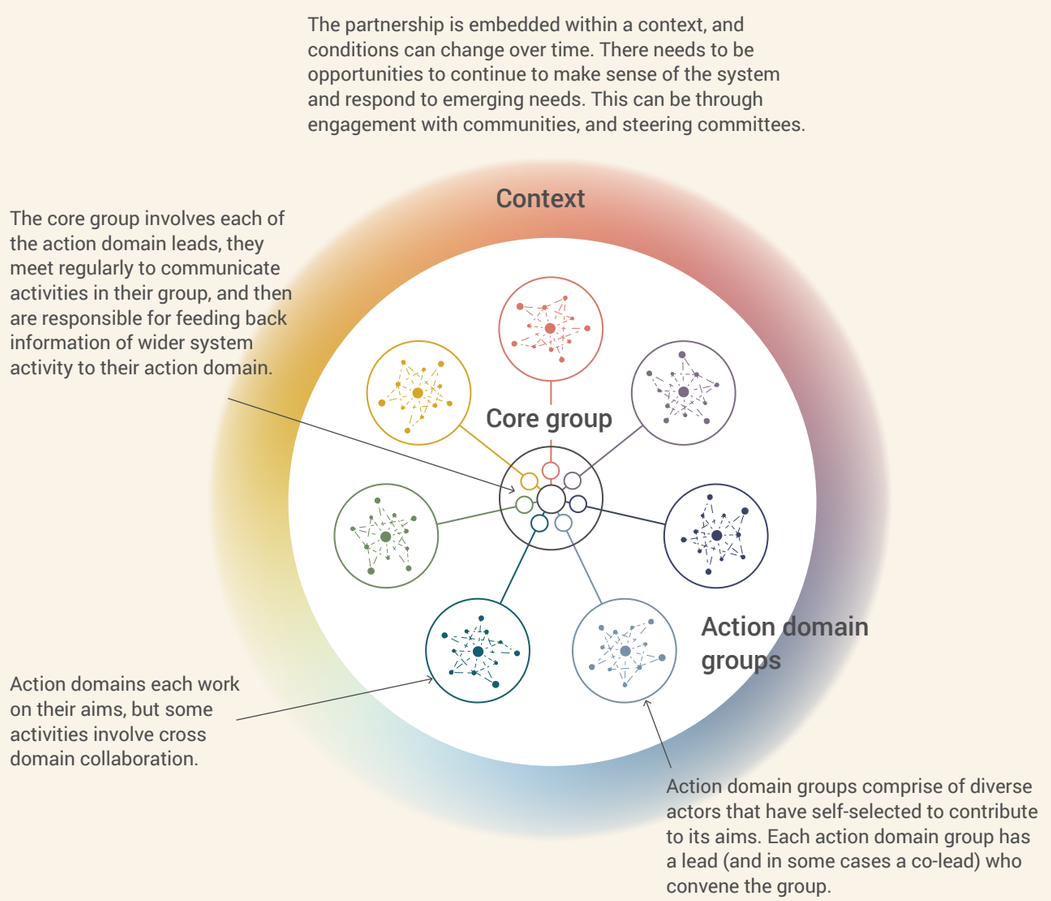
In practice, the governance model translated into a coordination structure designed to support distributed action while maintaining system-wide coherence (see below). Rather than creating a centralised decision-making body, the partnership adopted a flexible arrangement in which responsibility sat close to areas of implementation, while connections across domains were maintained through shared coordination and reflection.

Self-organising action domain groups were formed around priority areas of change identified through the wider Food for the Future process. These groups created space for actors working on related issues to organise activity within their own domain, develop collaboration around practical priorities, and respond to opportunities emerging within their area of work. This reflected the principle of decentralisation, with decision-making located as close as possible to those holding practical knowledge and relationships relevant to implementation. The intention was not for each group to operate independently, but for local action to develop within a wider shared governance approach.

Within each domain, designated leads and co-leads were identified to support continuity and coordination. Their role was not to direct activity hierarchically, but to convene discussion, maintain momentum, and help ensure that decisions remained aligned with shared values and agreed criteria. This responded to participants' recognition that distributed governance still requires visible points of responsibility if activity is to remain coherent over time. Leads also acted as important relational links between domain activity and wider partnership learning.

A core group, convened by North Yorkshire Council, brought together leads across domains to maintain connection between areas of work that might otherwise become fragmented. Its purpose was to surface interdependencies, identify where actions reinforced or depended on one another, and maintain attention to wider strategic aims across the partnership. The core group provided a coordinating space in which cross-domain alignment, shared reflection and criteria-based discussion could occur. This reflected the need identified in the inquiry for coherence without recentralising authority.

Across the structure, North Yorkshire Council's role was defined primarily as convener and enabler. Its contribution was to support continuity, create the conditions for collaboration, and help hold the wider partnership together without directing action through hierarchical control. Coherence therefore depended less on formal authority and more on shared criteria, communication across domains, and deliberate coordination between actors operating at different points in the system.



Part 5:
Next stages to consider

Once the model has been developed, the next stage is implementation. The initial task is to translate shared values, decision-making principles and relational insights into a simple, workable organising arrangement. In practice, this means clarifying where action sits, how coherence is maintained, and how decisions remain anchored to a shared criteria. Starting simple and iterating prevents rigidity and allows governance to evolve alongside practice.

Importantly, learning must be embedded as a core governance function. Rather than treating evaluation as retrospective measurement, evaluation integrates regular reflection of partnership activity. Short feedback cycles, periodic cross-domain sense-making sessions, and annual system-wide reflection events help surface unintended consequences and emerging opportunities. This in turn supports adaptive steering under conditions of uncertainty.

Finally, implementation depends on protecting enabling conditions. Without attention to these conditions, even well-designed governance principles can revert to default institutional routines. With them in place, governance becomes an active mechanism for sustaining collective agency and enabling systemic transformation over time.

Wider advice for overcoming constraints

This guide offers a structured process for designing transformation-focused governance, but it does not remove the wider constraints partnerships operate within. It's important to pay attention to some of the issues to address them effectively during the process (see Table 7).

Table 7. Issues that arise and guidance on how to approach them.

Issue	Why it matters	Practical advice for handling it
Power and participation	• Existing institutional roles, confidence levels, and access to resources influence whose perspectives shape governance discussions • Without attention, existing inequalities may be reproduced rather than redistributed	• Make participation expectations explicit • Create space for different forms of contribution • Support community and less formally powerful actors to influence discussion meaningfully
Time and facilitation capacity	• Developing shared understanding of values, decision-making, and relational structure requires time and skilled facilitation • If rushed, discussion may remain superficial or default to familiar assumptions	• Allow time between stages for reflection • Use facilitation that can hold difference constructively • Avoid expecting governance design to be completed in a single process
Institutional and policy constraints	• Statutory duties, funding rules, reporting requirements, and organisational mandates shape what governance arrangements are realistically possible	• Design with awareness of these constraints • Distinguish clearly between what can be adapted locally and what requires negotiation across institutions
Risk of over-design	• Governance models can become too detailed too early • Structures may appear coherent on paper but remain difficult to use in practice	• Start with a minimum viable structure • Clarify only what is necessary initially • Allow detail to emerge through use and review
Clarity of shared purpose	• Without sufficient agreement on why the partnership exists and what transformation means, governance discussions can become procedural rather than strategic	• Revisit shared purpose regularly • Keep governance design connected to long-term aims rather than immediate delivery needs

Once an agreed model of governance has been formed, it is useful to also consider how to overcome implementation challenges (see Table 8).

Table 8. Common implementation challenges and responses for transformation-focused governance.

Challenge	Why it emerges	Ways to respond
Sustaining motivation and momentum	• Initial energy often weakens once governance moves from design into ongoing practice • Competing institutional pressures, uncertain progress, or limited visible change can make transformation feel distant from day-to-day activity	• Build visible short-term progress points • Recognise practical achievements • Regularly reconnect activity to wider purpose and long-term direction of change
Maintaining coherence across clusters or domains	• Distributed forms of action can strengthen ownership and local initiative • Fragmentation can emerge when groups develop independently, priorities diverge, or communication weakens across domains	• Create regular opportunities for cross-domain reflection • Use shared criteria for decision-making • Maintain light-touch coordination that supports alignment without reducing autonomy
Responding to feedback and changing conditions	• Relationships evolve, external conditions shift, and new constraints emerge • Governance arrangements may no longer fit current needs once roles or routines become established	• Treat governance as reviewable • Schedule review points • Adapt roles, connections, or decision-making routines when experience indicates a need for change
Balancing flexibility with structure	• Governance requires enough clarity to support accountability and continuity • Overly rigid arrangements can limit responsiveness when circumstances change or new opportunities emerge	• Maintain transparent roles and agreed expectations • Use simple mechanisms for reporting, communication, and shared learning • Avoid unnecessary procedural complexity
Supporting reflective learning as a governance function	• Reflection is often displaced by delivery pressures • Reduced reflection limits awareness of emerging issues and makes governance adjustment harder	• Embed periodic reflection • Build feedback loops and collective sense-making into governance routines • Ensure learning informs ongoing adaptation

Conclusion

Cross-system partnerships are increasingly being formed in response to interlinked social and environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, and flooding. While many partnerships hold strong ambitions for change, progress can stall when insufficient attention is given to how action will be organised in practice. This guide has outlined a process of co-inquiry that helps partnerships explore the governance conditions needed to support transformational change, from clarifying direction and surfacing shared values through to shaping decision-making practices, enabling conditions, and operational structures. Rather than offering a fixed governance model, the guide emphasises that governance must be shaped in relation to context, purpose, and partnership capacity. In this sense, supporting transformation is not only about changing systems, but also about deliberately designing how collaboration, responsibility, learning, and coherence are held over time.

Terms used in this guide

Action cluster
A group of actors whose roles, capacities, or relationships reinforce one another around a particular action domain. Action clusters help organise distributed action by identifying who needs to work together for progress to occur in practice.

Action domain
A core area of work where coordinated effort is needed to support transformational change. Action domains identify substantive areas in which intervention, experimentation, or collaboration can help shift current system patterns.

Coherence
The capacity to maintain alignment between distributed actions, shared values, decision-making principles, and longer-term transformational aims.

Decision-making principles
The practical principles that guide how decisions are taken so that shared values are expressed in practice. These principles shape participation, authority, accountability, and how trade-offs are handled.

Distributed action
Action carried by multiple actors across different parts of the system rather than directed centrally. It allows responsibility and initiative to sit across organisations, sectors, and scales.

Governance
The processes, relationships, and arrangements through which direction is set, decisions are made, responsibility is shared, and action is coordinated across a partnership or system.

Reciprocity
A pattern of mutual contribution in which value emerges through the ways different actors strengthen wider partnership conditions over time, rather than through direct one-to-one exchange.

Shared values
The shared orientations that help participants clarify how they intend to work together, what governance should consistently support, and which qualities need to be maintained across organisational differences.

Stretch goal
A concise statement describing what governance needs to enable if the partnership's longer-term vision is to be realised. It translates broad transformational ambition into a practical governance-oriented direction for collective work.

Transformation
A fundamental shift in how a system functions, what it prioritises, and how it is organised. Unlike reform or adjustment, transformation involves changes to underlying patterns, relationships, assumptions, and structures so that something qualitatively different can emerge.

Transformation-focused governance
An approach to governance intentionally designed to support transformational change. It aligns values, decision-making processes, relationships, and structures so that governance actively enables long-term systemic change rather than simply coordinating existing activity.

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