



Systems Thinking and Complex Systems
Interest Group

Recommendations for Funders for the Incorporation of Systems Approaches in Prevention Research

A call for systems thinking in prevention research

Systems approaches are a way of uniting diverse voices and contexts, capturing evolving policies, and representing ideas in a comprehensive way that transcends conventional public health methods. They are particularly useful in contexts dominated by adaptive feedback, changing landscape and multi-objective trade-offs.

Systems thinking can facilitate decision-making and help to identify where to target interventions to maximise their potential for effectiveness or understand how prevention research may help change the existing system.

As UK Preventive Research Partnership (UKPRP) consortia, we have been illustrating how areas not traditionally associated with health can influence and prioritise public health and prevention, creating the conditions for healthy and fulfilled lives.

We recognise that the funder ecosystem is complex and that there are cross-government financing barriers. On the other hand, we also recognise that there is a role for funders to play in investing in approaches that accelerate systems-level outcomes and practice-level change.

We wish that funders feel more able to incorporate systems approaches in the suite of tools that can help to achieve their missions on prevention research, driving more impactful and sustainable societal change.

To accomplish that, we propose seven **short-term** actions:

1. To increase the visibility of systems thinking and systems science in the design of funding calls through broadening panel and board memberships and reviewer registers with experienced systems researchers.
2. To develop together with the research community a set of standards that reviewers and panels can refer to assess systems-based applications more confidently and fairly.

3. To work with policymakers to explain the opportunities and value of systems approaches in prevention research, informed by policy value narrative (problem → systems insight → recommended leverage points → signs of change) produced together with the research community.
4. To fund (or joint-fund when feasible) interactive sandpits, team-formation and application-development awards to develop cross-disciplinary novel systems-level projects that can address multi-layered public health challenges and systems-level outcomes.
5. To support leadership and community building on systems thinking, building and improving on the UK Preventive Research Partnership (UKPRP) model.
6. To provide, with the support of the research community when relevant, mechanisms to improve the quality of systems-based applications, such as pre-application clinics, worked examples of strong impactful systems proposals and response-mode pre-award support.
7. To adopt funding models that recognise that systems approaches are inherently complex, iterative and evolving, and that allow applications and projects to properly articulate the use of systems thinking and approaches in the study design.

We also propose three **long-term** actions for funders to consider:

1. To commit to the development of funding systems and mechanisms for systems innovation in prevention across the four nations, for example, similarly to the Technology Missions Fund.
2. To develop a multidisciplinary skills programme for those who use or want to use systems approaches and to build leadership capabilities to deliver systems-driven outcomes.
3. To consistently collect data on the use and application of system methods in submitted impact evaluation applications.

We hope that the funders will join our call to leverage on the value and use of systems approaches for decision-making and for shifting the dial on key complex issues of improving health and reducing health inequalities in our communities.

This document can be accessed at <https://ukprp.org/prevention-research-network/systems-thinking-complex-systems/> or using the QR code below.

