



Methods for Change

**The Change
Points Toolkit:
A method to design
interventions that unlock
sustainable practices**

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The Change Points Toolkit



Change Points is a workshop process that enables participants without prior social science training to develop creative sustainability interventions that use ideas from social practice theories. Rather than focussing on individual behaviours or technological innovations, Change Points aids workshop participants to explore forms of intervention that engage with the social and material dimensions of everyday life. The Change Points approach and workshop methodology was developed with a range of government, NGO and business stakeholders in order to assist them in bringing social practice theories to their analysis of sustainability challenges. It aids the reimagination of complex social and environmental challenges, and enables the recognition of how diverse everyday practices relate to wider social, cultural, infrastructural and environmental conditions. The toolkit was created to offer a **new way of thinking** through patterns of consumption, how they emerge, and how they may be changed.

As a workshop process, Change Points is deliberately provocative. Participants work through a co-design process that questions the assumptions that underpin existing strategies to encourage sustainable consumption. Change Points invokes conversations that enable participants to extend the breadth of research, strategy and intervention design. This approach is useful for any organisation that deals with social and environmental challenges that intersect with everyday practices and behaviours. The workshops work best when they include participants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and sectors, including government departments, NGOs, activist groups and the general public.



How does the Change Points Toolkit create or contribute to change?

Change Points workshops impact on professional practices involved in the design and planning of initiatives (for example: policy research; policy design; behavioural intervention design; changing socio-technical systems). The workshops are designed to start different conversations about planning and data management, helping people in professional settings to realise the limits and possibilities of the evidence that they gather. Change can be observed in the workshops as a direct consequence of the method taken. Participants are encouraged to re-think the research that they use to provide evidence for action, which will then also help to design more meaningful interventions.

Change Points also helps participants to think differently about the ways in which research contributes to sustainability. The combination of practice-oriented thinking with design-focussed ideas shifts the focus from thinking critically about what has been done to date, towards thinking about how a sustainable future can be created (see Hoolohan & Browne, 2020).

What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

The Change Points Toolkit emerged from a series of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded projects conducted in collaboration with partners in a range of sectors including government, NGOs and businesses. The Change Points toolkit takes its conceptual basis from social practice theory and ties into a broader network of relational and design theories and methods. This approach encourages a focus on socially shared practices – routine patterns of action – rather than on individuals and their behaviour. This gives different insights into how what we do is shaped by social relationships, the materiality of the world around us, forms of knowledge, cultural meanings and more. Research partners identified that, while they understood the value of social theory in helping to ‘reframe’ understandings of social and environmental problems, academic research on these topics often had less to say about how to bring this type of social science thinking into policy research, policy design, interventions, and other types of professional practice. It is this challenge that the Change Points Toolkit seeks to address: to identify a way for non-academic researchers and practitioners to apply sensitivities that social scientists working with practice theories take for granted. Insights from design studies vitally contributed to the development of the toolkit, to make concepts from a complex strand of social theory practicable for intervention planning.



Why might I want to use the Change Points Toolkit?

Systemic thinking: The workshops encourage participants to reflect on what has been done before to tackle a particular issue, in order to identify approaches that grasp the complexity of social practices and the complex web of actors and circumstances that are involved. In this way, participants can recognise limitations to interventions made in the past and identify ideas that have been excluded from intervention so far.

A shift in professional practice: Change Points aims to enable departure from familiar education or incentive-oriented forms of intervention to engage in the cultural, material and political fabric that holds unsustainable consumption in place. Questions provided in the toolkit are carefully and intentionally worded to stop people from having conventional conversations and to encourage reflection on ordinary day-to-day practices such as eating, hygiene or going to work. For example, participants are prompted to explore how factors such as time and infrastructures (rather than attitudes and desires) shape what people do on a day-to-day basis. Participants are also prompted consider who or what influences peoples' behaviour, and also whether existing interventions have unintentional impacts based on gender or other inequalities.

A Change Points workshop pushes participants to work outside their professional habits by going beyond tested approaches to innovate new approaches to mobilise change. People who design sustainability initiatives as part of their profession benefit from Change Points as habitual ways of using data and developing intervention are challenged. In this way, Change Points workshops prompt professionals to critically reflect on their professional practice and to strengthen their creative potential to develop avenues for intervention.

Workshop format: Alongside the facilitator, who is working committedly with the toolkit, a functional Change Points workshop has one or more groups of between five and eight participants. The group is required to shift into a different way of working, learning to trust the process and each other in order to talk openly about a problem. It is therefore necessary for (a) the facilitator to have a strong understanding of the *concept* of Change Points and its **focus on practices rather than individual action** and (b) **the workshop to take at least a full day or a succession of meetings over more than one day.**

Workshop Participants: Whilst Change Points workshops can meaningfully enhance conversations in existing workgroups, it can also be a useful tool to bring together participants from different industry or work areas, or those who are not used to routinely working with each other. It can also be helpful if there are attendees from groups that are associated with work in the problem area but are typically excluded from policy conversations. Participants are usually chosen by the organisations taking part in the workshop, rather than by the facilitator. To develop the ideas discussed in 'developing plans for change', which is explored below, it is important to include participants who know which actions are within the possibilities and capacity of the organisation(s) involved.



Overview of the Change Points method (adapted from The Change Points Toolkit)

Before the workshop commences a 'challenge' needs to be identified, one where everyday routines contribute to social and environmental crises, and the following process is undertaken.

I. Visioning Phase

Activity 1. Problem Scoping: The first step is to develop shared understanding of the problem and a vision for the future that all participants are invested in achieving. The facilitator guides participants to consider the various ways in which their problem is connected to present consumption-production systems and to outline the nature and the extent of change needed.

II. Expanding understanding

Three separate exercises are then used to explore the diverse and relational qualities of the problem at hand. Participants are guided in exploring the connections between personal practices and wider cultural, political and technological developments.

Activity 2. Understand relations: Sequences of everyday activity which lead to sustainability problems are charted through different spaces and times to reveal the connections between peoples' routines, the actions of others, and wider cultural, political, and technological factors. These are used to identify potential spaces for intervention, called Change Points.

Activity 3. Recognising diversity: Identify variations in everyday practices related, for example, to working situation, household structure, gender, or physical ability, and consider how and why these variations occur to identify possibilities for intervention and also to recognise potentially vulnerable practitioners.

Activity 4. Mapping influences: Participants map the network of social and material elements that enable (un)sustainable practices to persist, and consider the distributed agencies and responsibilities involved in maintaining this network to establish opportunities for intervention.

III. Developing a Plan for Change

Activity 5. Reframing: Here the materials from previous exercises are revisited to identify ambitious new avenues for intervention. Workshop participants identify where priorities lie and the scope of intervention within their organisation(s). In this step lots of working ideas are developed and filtered down to identify key ideas that participants are committed to.

Activity 6. Pragmatic planning: Prepare ideas for implementation by establishing constructive and coherent project plans and methods for actions to be taken.



Examples of using the Change Points Toolkit in social science research

Unflushables Workshop

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The Unflushables workshop was a two-day design-based workshop with 30 different multi-sectoral actors – from water and sewerage companies, government agencies, consumer goods manufacturers etc – to work out a 5-year plan on action on the issues of ‘unflushables’. The aim of this workshop was to establish an action plan to eradicate “unflushables” - products such as plastic waste that often cause problems in sewer systems after being disposed of via the toilet. The workshop was sponsored by Anglian Water and was connected to a wider body of academic research by the project team.

The Unflushables Change Points workshop led to development of a far-reaching agenda of a few big ideas for eradicating unflushables in the next five years that focussed on redesigning policy, redesigning bathrooms and changing social and cultural conceptions. For example, plans were established on how to design school bathrooms to accommodate

a different form of waste disposal effectively at the stage of early practice formation at schools. Plans on how to break taboos about incontinence as a problem of not only women but also men were also made. The workshops demonstrated to the participants that the location of ‘change’ is not just with households or consumer practices; and the responsibility for change is not only held in the remit of water and sewerage companies. Throughout the workshop process participants realised that the responsibilities for changing the socio-material systems that lead to products being flushed down the toilet is distributed across a wide set of stakeholders and actors; and that systems change requires the coordinated efforts and commitments for change across this set of stakeholders.



Where else could the Change Points Toolkit be used?

The Change Points toolkit is useful for anyone interested in understanding the complexities and patterns in everyday life or sustainable consumption, how these practices emerge, and how they may be changed. It may be particularly useful in situations where there are 'attitude behaviour' gaps observed in pro-environmental behaviour, or in situations where the range of existing interventions does not bring about the scale of behaviour change expected. It is also useful for exploring complex systems such as systems of sustainable consumption and production, and in contexts where 'user behaviour' is stated as important but not well understood. The approach has found to be useful in the following settings, with the best workshops bring new combinations of these stakeholders together:

1. Government and government agencies
2. Non-governmental organisations and the third sector
3. Businesses including SMEs and larger companies
4. Citizens groups and community organisations

Top tips

1. Trust the toolkit. The questions in the toolkit have been carefully worked and selected to encourage practice- and design-oriented discussions.
2. Bring post-its. Change points is a massive post-it fest. It generates masses of post-it notes. While you are at it, think creatively with coloured pens, flip charts and other stationary.
3. Invite people with different types of expertise and backgrounds.
4. Allow at least one full day for the workshop. Establishing radically different ways of thinking and discussing takes time.
5. Revisit different parts of the workshop to help further refine aspects of your policy research, policy design, or intervention approach further.



Further reading

- Change Points Website
- Hoolohan, C. et al. (2018). Change Points: A toolkit for designing interventions that unlock unsustainable practices
- Browne, A. et al. (2020). 'Unflushables 2030? Mapping Change Points for Intervention for Sewer Blockages'
- Watson, M. et al. (2020). Challenges and opportunities for re-framing resource use policy with practice theories: The Change Points approach
- Hoolohan, C., & Browne, A.L. (2020). Design thinking for practice-based intervention: Co-producing the change points toolkit to unlock (un)sustainable practices

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