

Making Missions Possible with Systems Thinking

Simon MacCormac and Chris Abbott

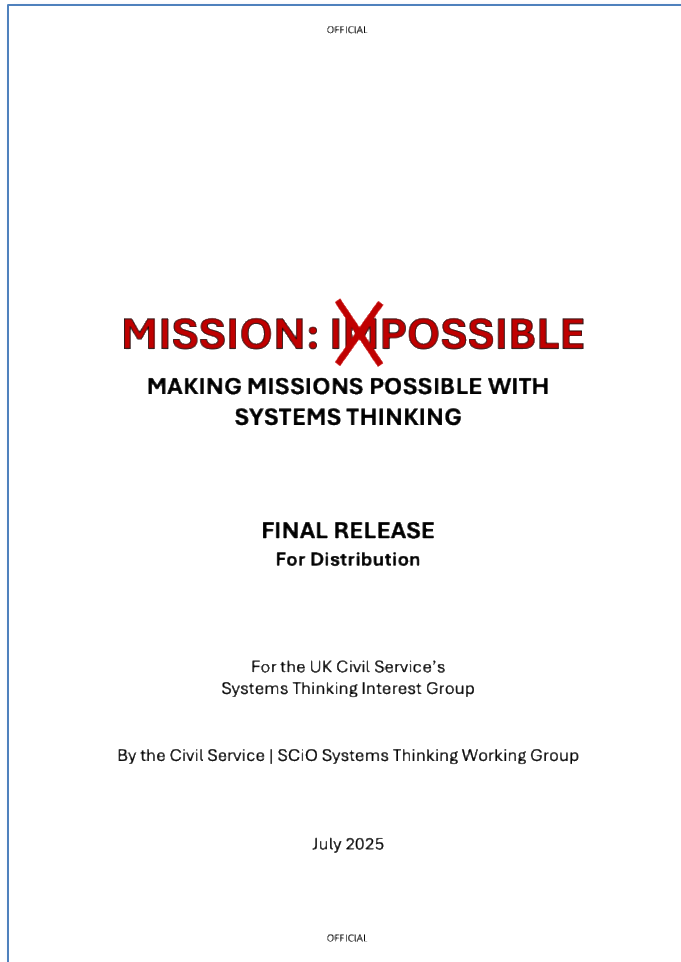
Talk and Reflection (Interview)

Hub Theatre
Day Two (10:55 – 11:20)



Scan the QR code to learn more about SCiO membership, subscribe to our newsletter and access SCiO resources.

STWG missions paper: “Leadership: *find a parade and march in front of it!*”



Purpose:

- **Demonstrate the relevance (necessity) of systems thinking** for tackling the Government’s five stated missions
- **Engage the wider government community** by showing how ST can enable mission-driven work
- **Make our thinking visible and relevant**—inviting collaboration through short courses, STWG resources, a “Think Tank” and advisory support
- **Position the STWG as an active, trusted resource**, encouraging organic adoption of ST across and between departments

Format

- Series of **short snippets**, visual metaphor and arguments
- Sections argued **inductively**—NOT deductively
- Hopefully in **plain English**—avoiding systems speak and jargon
- Intended to **be bold** and **invite questions and interest**
- Ending in a **call to action**: give us a call; we’re here to help!

Executive summary & five missions

Successfully achieving missions requires applying systems thinking approaches because missions present complex systems challenges.

The UK government has launched five major missions under its *Plan for Change*.

But, unlike traditional projects focused on achieving specific, concrete objectives, missions require a systems approach to tackling long-term, complex challenges:

systems problems require systems approaches!

The UK Government's five missions (outlined in: '*Plan for Change*', December 2024)

1) Kickstart economic growth

to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7 – with good jobs and productivity growth in every part of the country making everyone, not just a few, better off.

2) Make Britain a clean energy superpower

to cut bills, create jobs and deliver security with cheaper, zero-carbon electricity by 2030, accelerating to net zero.

3) Take back our streets

by halving serious violent crime and raising confidence in the police and criminal justice system to its highest levels.

4) Break down barriers to opportunity

by reforming our childcare and education systems, to make sure there is no class ceiling on the ambitions of young people in Britain.

5) Build an NHS fit for the future

that is there when people need it; with fewer lives lost to the biggest killers; in a fairer Britain, where everyone lives well for longer.

Key messages (and sections)

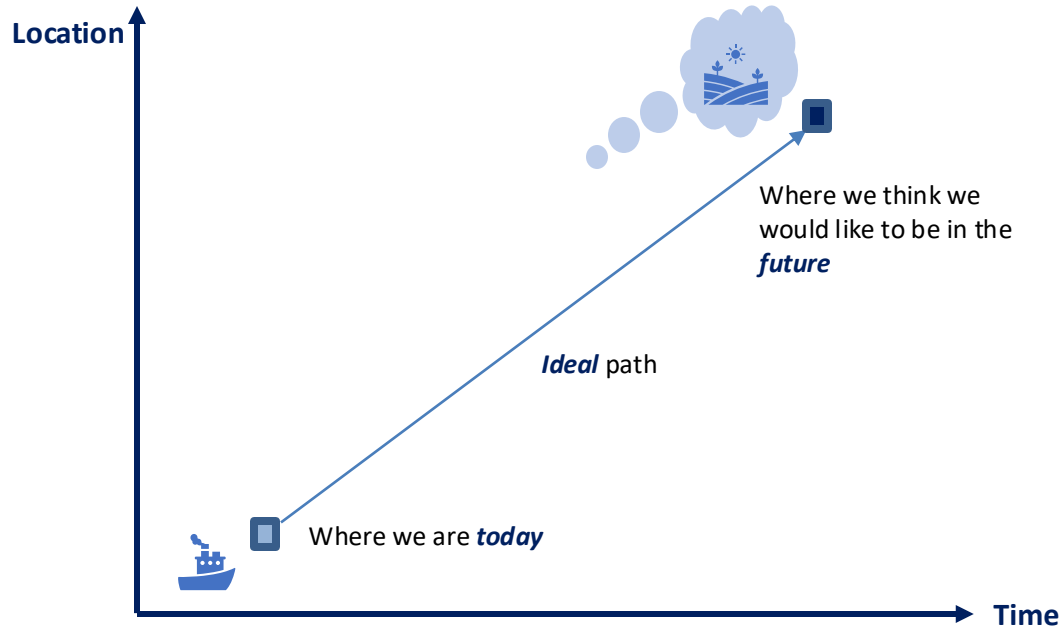
1. **Systems thinking is necessary for mission success**, providing a framework to manage complexity, integrate diverse stakeholders, and adapt to developing challenges
2. **Missions and projects differ in scope**, purpose, and execution, with missions providing a broad, long-term vision that integrates multiple projects, while projects deliver specific, time-bound outcomes within the mission's framework
3. **“Navigating in the fog with a flotilla” serves as a metaphor for institutionalising missions with systems thinking**, emphasising coordinated adaptability, collective progress, and resilience in uncertainty
4. **Systems thinking** extends the moonshot's *Systems Engineering* and *Systems Analysis* rooted approach to achieving mission success, **providing a more complete perspective** that accounts for dynamic interactions, feedback loops, and emergent complexities within mission-driven initiatives.
5. **Proven systems thinking approaches can enhance** the planning, coordination, and **successful delivery of the** UK government's **five stated missions**
6. **The STWG can play a key role** in helping the government apply systems thinking to advance its five missions

Metaphor: Navigating in the Fog

- Flotilla navigating uncertain waters = missions
- Requires coordination, adaptability, and trust
- Multiple vessels (stakeholders) moving together
- Course corrections as visibility improves

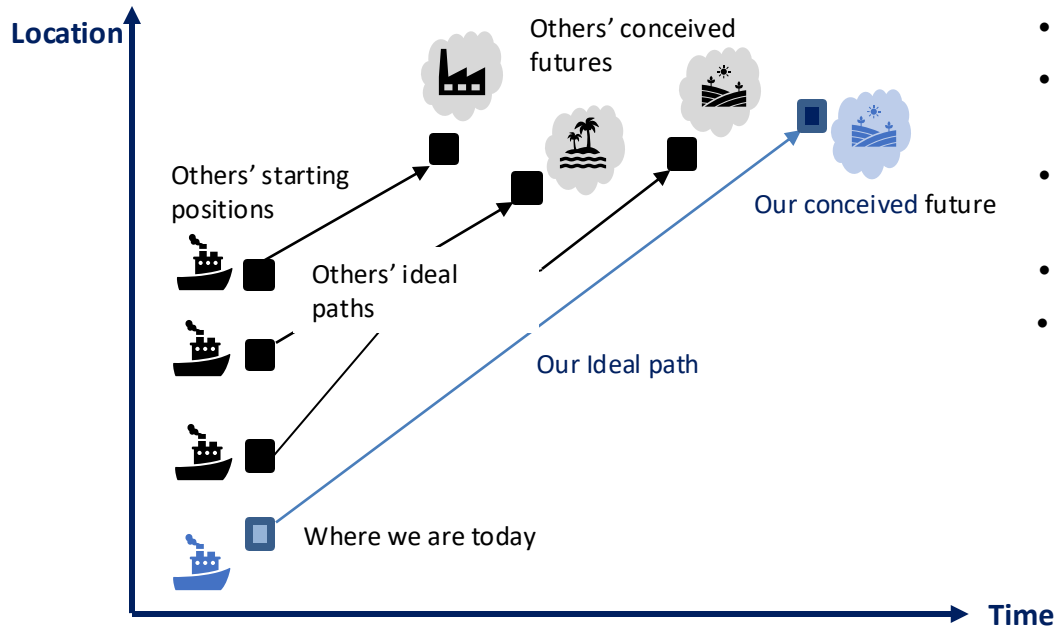
Missions involve achieving an overarching perceived goal ...

Consider a simple metaphor for a mission: undertaking a journey by sea – getting from where we are now to some conception of where we would like to get to later



... in collaboration with others – each with their own ‘baggage’

But, we are collaborating with others to undertake the journey

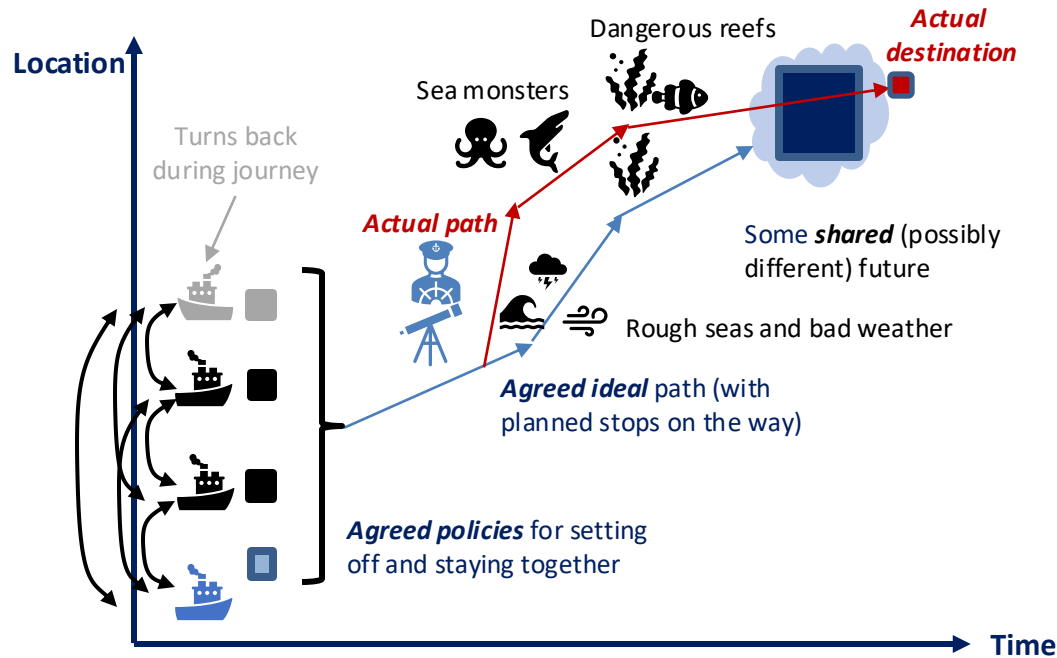


Our collaborative partners will typically have:

- Different **starting points**
 - Different **opinions** on where they want to go and when they want to arrive
 - Different **expectations** of what they will want to do when they arrive
 - Different **views** on how best to get there
 - Differences in **power** and capabilities to act
- based on the levels at which they operate (below deck, on deck, on the bridge or in the crow's nest), all of which need to be somehow **accommodated** to achieve **shared goals**

Even assuming that we can find suitable accommodations, our journey is still at risk from multiple uncertainties

Uncontrollable and unforeseen circumstances will likely cause us to deviate from our ideal path



Avoiding obstacles, overcoming challenges, and dealing with negative externalities (which often build on each other through network effects) all make the journey more complex. Some may even turn back - taking key resources with them

And this is made more difficult by the need to constantly relate to, assist and negotiate with our partners

... and the fact that we are drawing the map as we go!

Institutionalising Systems Thinking

- Embed systemic inquiry & learning into governance
- Foster collaboration across sectors & silos
- Design viable institutions that adapt & co-create
- Adopt multiple systems methods (SSM, SD, VSM, CSH)

**Reality and reflections—Interview with
Chris Abbott (from DEFRA)**

Thank you!