

# Charting New Waters



## A learner-centred insight into progression from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications

*May 2026*



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## Introduction

Why does Salford have a very low proportion of people moving from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications?

Over the last year, I have had the privilege of spending time out in communities across Salford, listening directly to young people about their experiences of education, progression and the realities shaping their choices.

This work has been about hearing how young people talk about these issues in their own words, and building a picture of progression barriers grounded not just in systems data, but in lived experience. What follows reflects that learning.

It is grounded in the lived experiences, language, and realities of the young people who we listened to in settings across Salford from colleges and local gateways to youth centres or out in the local community – particularly those who:

- chose not to progress
- dropped out early
- were at risk of dropping out

It quickly became clear that barriers to academic progression go much deeper than just academic achievement. A lot of young people are not rejecting progression - they are struggling to navigate it.

I hope that this report works as a synthesis of real, local insight that will inform local decision-making and action, in order to improve the conditions so that young people can be nurtured into progressing into a better future.

Unlimited Potential thanks all of the local people for their participation, and local organisations for their support. We also thank Salford City Council for commissioning the project, and the Salford Learning City steering group for its oversight and guidance.

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*May 2026*

## Summary

Through learning, Salford wishes to see people growing in confidence, developing their own solutions, and thriving in their daily lives.

Through improved qualifications, Salford wants to have:

- reduction in the attainment gap for both young people and adults
- improvement in household incomes
- reduction in levels of poverty

A key problem is that a very low proportion of people in Salford move from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications. Salford's gap in Level 3 attainment is wider than that of any other area in Greater Manchester. For the proportion of 19-year-olds who gain a Level 3 qualification, Salford is 149<sup>th</sup> out of 150 top-tier local authorities.

The project listened to 217 diverse young people aged 15-19 across Salford, especially in low-wealth neighbourhoods and communities.

So, what is happening? A consistent theme emerged: "It's not that I didn't want to do it – it just didn't work for me."

Young people identified typical 'drop off' points as:

- self-belief and influences – is Level 3 even for me?
- finance - do I stay or do I earn?
- understanding options
- qualifying and practical barriers
- negative early experiences while at college

A lot of young people are not rejecting progression – they are struggling to navigate it. Key insights were:

- this is not primarily an attainment issue
- many learners do not have stability and security
- financial reality is critical
- the transition gap can feel huge
- barriers do not act alone – they stack
- there is proximity to opportunity, but limited access

From what young people said, it is apparent that a more well-rounded and considerate interventions are needed in many cases. Possible interventions are:

1. reframe identity to unlock progression
2. social and peer support for young people
3. financial support that is simple, visible and accessible
4. continuous navigation support for well-informed decisions
5. redesign level 3 provision
6. support for young people who lack parental/carer support

## 1. Salford Learning City

In Salford, we create the conditions for everyone to learn all sorts of things in lots of different ways, at any time of life.



We want people to value their skills and knowledge. We hope that everyone will be passionate and excited about learning.

We want people to follow their curiosity and try new things outside the education system, as well as within. We hope that they will share and challenge ideas and different ways of seeing things.

We wish to see people growing in confidence, developing their own solutions, and thriving in their daily lives.

### Principles:

Salford Learning City is about ...

- people enjoying learning, whoever they are, at any time of life
- people valuing the skills and knowledge that they already have
- people being passionate and excited about learning
- people being curious and imaginative, and trying new things
- people learning in different ways outside the education system, as well as within
- people sharing and challenging ideas and different ways of seeing things
- people growing in confidence and thriving in their daily lives
- people developing their own understandings and solutions

Imagination and creativity are as valuable as reading and maths skills.

Dance and storytelling are as important as maths and science.

## 2. Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications<sup>1</sup>

Level 2 qualifications reflect skills and knowledge that would be ideal at 16 years old. They include: CSE grade 1; GCSE grades 9-4 or A\* to C; intermediate apprenticeship; level 2 awards, certificates and diplomas; music grades 4-5; and O level grades A-C.

Level 3 qualifications reflect skills and knowledge that would be ideal at 18 years old. They include: A and AS level; access to higher education diploma; advanced apprenticeship; applied general; international Baccalaureate diploma; level 3 awards, certificates and diplomas; music grades 6-8; T level; and tech level.

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<sup>1</sup> H.M. Government (2026) What qualification levels mean - <https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels>

### 3. The problem<sup>2</sup>

A very low proportion of people in Salford move from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications. Salford's gap in Level 3 attainment is wider than that of any other area in Greater Manchester.

Despite a large and growing proportion of jobs now requiring skills at Level 3 and above, there has been a further drop in the proportion of 19-year-olds in Salford who gain a Level 3 qualification. Summer 2022 attainment data placed Salford 149<sup>th</sup> out of 150 top-tier local authorities against this key performance indicator. The gap between Salford's performance and the England average is almost three times wider than for any other district in Greater Manchester.



There has also been a decline in participation in Level 3 learning by adults, despite the 'Free Courses for Jobs' offer. Combined, this risks cutting off large numbers of local people, particularly young people, from the good jobs and career opportunities now being created at scale by employers in Salford and across Greater Manchester.

### 4. Context

The objectives of the Salford Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2028<sup>3</sup> are:

1. Young people in Salford achieving and progressing in their careers.
2. More adults in Salford entering and staying in good work.
3. More working residents progressing in their careers.
4. Employers in Salford better able to access and develop skills for growth.

The Salford Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2028 identifies a number of common themes that span most, if not all, areas of the strategy:

- The importance of lifelong learning in enabling working age residents from all walks of life to maximise their potential.
- The need for many interventions to focus in Salford's deprived areas, where need is highest and opportunities at their lowest.

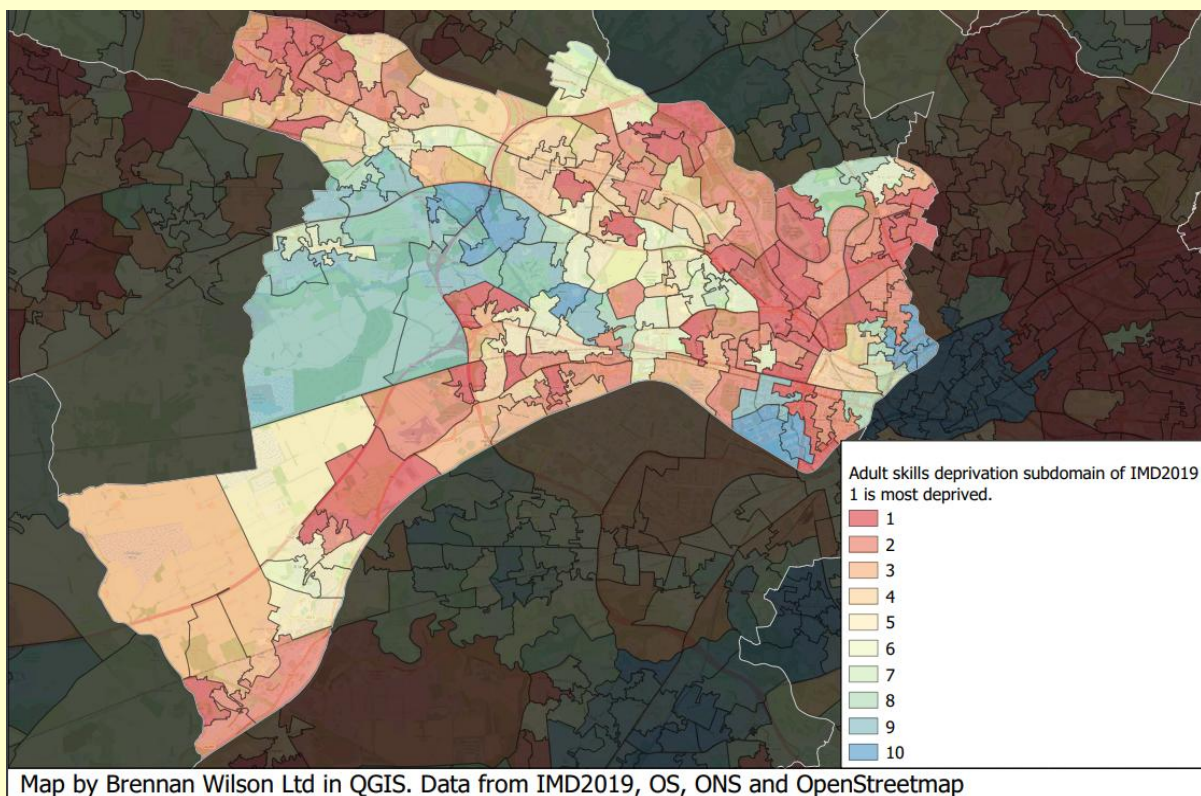
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<sup>2</sup> Think (May 2023) Think Employment and Skills Strategy: Insight Report. <https://think.uk.com/case-study/salford-employment-and-skills-strategy-2023-28/>

<sup>3</sup> Partners in Salford (2023) Salford Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2028. <https://www.partnersinsalford.org/media/mu3ko4i5/salford-employment-and-skills-strategy-2023-to-2028.pdf>

- Improving the connection between employers and education and training providers, to equip more local people with the skills that employers seek now and in future.
- Good work is central to the city's future growth – built on fair pay, job security, effective employee voice, development opportunities and a good work-life balance.
- Environmental challenges will, over time, require an adaptation to learning, particularly within occupations where new regulation and technology will require new skill sets.

The geographical areas of Salford that are most affected are:



The number of adults with qualifications at Level 3 or above is important to Salford because:

- **Economic Growth:** Higher qualification levels often correlate with better job opportunities and higher wages. This can lead to a more prosperous local economy.
- **Attracting Businesses:** Companies are more likely to invest in areas with a skilled workforce, as it ensures they have access to the talent needed for their operations.
- **Innovation and Productivity:** A well-educated population can drive innovation and improve productivity, contributing to the overall competitiveness of the city.
- **Social Benefits:** Higher education levels can lead to improved health outcomes, greater civic engagement, and reduced crime rates.

- Quality of Life: Areas with higher educational attainment often have better public services, amenities, and overall quality of life.

## 5. Desired outcomes

Through improved qualifications, Salford wants to have:

- reduction in the attainment gap for both young people and adults
- improvement in household incomes
- reduction in levels of poverty

## 6. The approach

The project started with this problem statement:

“A very low proportion of people in Salford move from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications. Salford’s gap in Level 3 attainment is wider than that of any other area in Greater Manchester.”

Following an equality impact assessment at the very start, the project followed these initial stages of innovation:

### Rethinking:

1. reframe the problem to change the narrative
2. generate and prioritise ideas – with local people relevant to the issue
3. inspire and mobilise people – local people set the agenda

The project sought the perspectives of local people – particularly those who do not seek a Level 3 qualification either as a young person or as an adult. Engagement focussed particularly in low-wealth neighbourhoods and communities across Salford.

This went far beyond a handful of formal focus groups in schools. It involved meeting 217 young people aged 15–19 where they are – not only in schools, colleges and alternative provision, but also in local shops, on high streets, in neighbourhoods, outside trade stores, and while waiting with mates outside college. Some conversations were structured, many were informal, and often the richest insight came in the moments that did not feel like ‘research’ at all.

Due to the nature of the engagement and aiding conversations, demographic data was not intensely captured. However, the project engaged a diverse range of 217 young people, including those with neurodiversity, with English as a second language, and of different faiths, genders and differing levels of multiple disadvantage.

## 7. What is happening?

Across Salford, progression is not failing at a single point – it is breaking down across a journey for many young people. Young people are not simply 'choosing not to continue', but are struggling to navigate a system that often feels to them:

- unclear
- financially risky when considering Level 3
- emotionally demanding with a reduction in support
- not built around their lives and family expectations

From listening to young people, a consistent theme emerged:

"It's not that I didn't want to do it – it just didn't work for me."

To get close to the reality of learners, it is useful to map out the typical 'drop off' points that they identified.

### **Pre-decision – is Level 3 even for me?**

**Risk: high**

For many young people, the decision is made before options are properly explored. Many of them reflected their thought process when making that decision:

- "Level 3 is too smart for me." or "It's not for people like me."
- "I was just happy to pass Level 2."
- "MATHS!"

This made it clear that identity and negative self-belief can hugely impact a young person's pride in their actual attainment and future options. Overwhelmingly, local norms influence expectations, and young people are strongly influenced by what others are doing in their local areas or what parents or carers did. It is also clear that there is a lack of visible progression pathways within certain communities.

In particular, young people from homes where English is a second language are often trying to translate pathways they themselves do not understand to parents who have traditional expectations for that young person's future.

These circumstances lead to really capable young people removing themselves from progression too early. Many of them did not feel well supported in understanding what their options were and what it all really meant.

## Do I stay or do I earn?

**Risk: high**

This is often the most decisive moment for young people on the edge. Financial motivation is hugely influential for young people at this point in their life. Many reflected that growing demands to support at home meant that they often had an element of pressure when making the final call.

Some typical reflections were:

- "There was a job there that I got offered."
- "I just wanted to start making money."
- "I was told to start earning instead [of wasting my time]."

There was clearly a real immediate financial pressure or desire for many young people. Whilst the employment options available to them often felt strong ("retail, logistics, manual labour"), they did not offer any long-term prospects. There was also a tangible fear of failure at the next level and the cost of that. If young people were already being advised to start earning, it felt like too much of a risk to go with their heart for progress, even if they wanted to, because there was no guarantee that they would succeed. At this point, many learners decide to drop out entirely.

## Understanding options

**Risk: medium**

Even when young people were open to continuing, many of them faced further barriers when navigating their options. What was often reflected was:

- "No one explained the options properly."
- "I didn't know what a T Level was."
- "I just followed what my mates were doing."



Young people are often met with fragmented careers and progression guidance and advice, and feel that they are being left alone to make a huge decision. Many young people have very limited parental support, with many parents wanting to help but not understanding the system and feeling too unfamiliar to do so. Finally, many learners feel that there is very little clarity. Pathways appear to be far too complex, and the learner needs much more support to make a final decision. Otherwise, they might well make misinformed or default decisions as a result.

## Enrolment

**Risk: high**

Even those who finally make the decision to progress then face further barriers. Some of the key barriers that came up at later stages of decision making and enrolment were:

- “I had to retake maths – that put me off.”
- “Travel was too long and too expensive.”
- “I didn’t get the grades I thought I needed.”

GCSE English and Maths are huge structural barriers to progression. Many young people are refused access until they pass Maths or are made to sit it again and again until they pass. There are also transport and geographical challenges, especially in places where travel is cross-boundary or might appear simple, but includes multiple modes of transport or long walks to transport links, such as Cadishead, Irlam, Little Hulton and Walkden. Even where the journey was not a problem, cost was, with many young people highlighting the cost of daily travel or simply not being able to afford it every day. There were also ‘hidden costs’ of progression beyond travel, such as food, lunch, clothes, socialising, etc.

### Early experience

**Risk: medium**

The first 6-8 weeks is absolutely crucial for most learners. Many who had negative experiences within that period often decided to leave the course. Some of the key insights were:

- “It’s a massive jump up from Level 2.”
- “You’re just expected to get on with it.”
- “I fell behind straight away and they don’t really chase you.”



Many young people faced increased independence when they reached Level 3 but did not have sufficient transition support to now understand how to learn or to succeed in a more independent learning environment. There was a clear reduction in structure compared to school or Level 3. This often led to rapid disengagement and early withdrawal.

For those who stay beyond that initial transition period, external pressures can often build. For many young people, these became the reason that they did not progress:

- “I needed to pick up more hours to help at home.”
- “There’s too much going on at home.”
- “I just stopped going.”

As the learners get older, financial strain and pressures can increase and they often begin to take on more caring or providing responsibilities within the home. The cost of juggling these alongside Level 3 often leads to mental health struggles, which many young people sourced as the cause of their mid-course drop-out, often without formal withdrawal.

## 8. Key insights

A lot of young people are not rejecting progression – they are struggling to navigate it.

### **This is not primarily an attainment issue**

At first, it is easy to assume that a lot of young people do not progress because they are not ready academically. But what we heard from young people was something different. Most learners have the capability to progress. The barriers are often psychological, social, structural and practical, rather than academic.

This risk is that solutions such as tutoring or prep are designed without addressing barriers of confidence, identity or self-belief.

### **Many learners do not have stability and security**

Despite the reality for many young people, a lot of Level 3 provision is built around an 'ideal learner' and assumes:

- stable home environments with supportive and informed parents
- financial security
- ability to travel
- confidence to seek help



### **Financial reality is critical**

For many learners in Salford, this is not a theoretical decision about the future and sometimes the system can assume it to be so. Young people ask themselves a very immediate question: "Can I afford to stay in education?"

The reality is often that they need money coming in. When college does not pay, they often have examples of jobs that will. There was a running joke of "I'd rather work in McDonald's", but the truth was that they would rather do anything as long as it meant they could earn money more quickly. What needs to be considered is that when young people say they cannot afford college, they consider transport, food, clothes, contributing at home. Even when support, such as bursaries, exist:

- It is often not understood by those who need it most.
- It comes too late and is not guaranteed, so is too much of a 'risk' to bank on it.

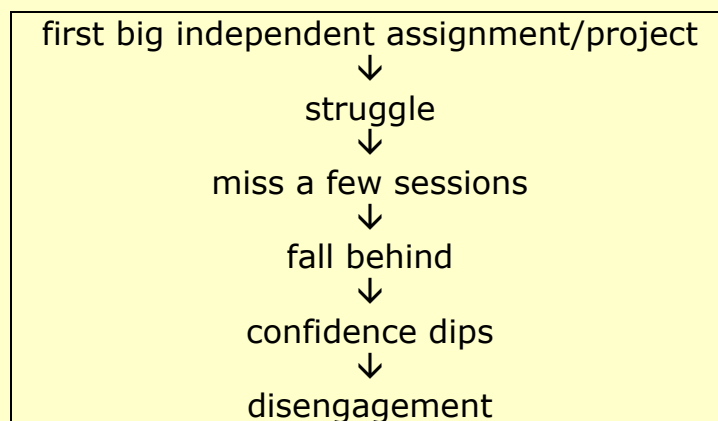
The key risk is of talking about raising aspirations without addressing the reality that for some learners, progression and aspiration feel restricted.

## The transition gap can feel huge

On paper, Level 2 to Level 3 looks like a natural step. In reality, young people experience a jump in independence, a drop in support and a rise in pressure. It is a completely different environment where young people raised: "At Level 2, they help you way more" or "Now, you're just expected to get on with it". Many reflected that the key differences were in a loss of structure, less checking in, bigger independent projects and more independent study.

For some learners, this independence is hugely welcomed and positive. For others – especially those who lack strong support networks outside of study – it can feel like being dropped into something with no safety net.

And the timing matters:



By the time support kicks in, the young people have often already checked out.

## Barriers do not act alone – they stack

A really strong pattern is that dropout is rarely about one thing. It is much more likely to be lots of manageable problems that become unmanageable together. For example:

Travel is long, someone is late. They miss part of their lesson and therefore do not understand the work. Their first assignment goes badly and their confidence drops. At the same time, they have pressure at home to start working more hours, so their attendance slips further and they fall so far behind that they eventually stop going.

This seemed to be a really common journey for many young people. They reflected that:

- "It just got too much."
- "Everything added up."

A lot of interventions that young people had experienced tackled problems in isolation rather than individual plans that consider the compounding pressures surrounding a young learner's life.

### **There is proximity to opportunity, but limited access**

As part of this work, there was a strong interest in understanding whether there was anything distinctly Salfordian about the barriers young people face when progressing from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications.

What became clear through conversations across Salford was a recurring tension between proximity to opportunity and access to it. Young people across the city can physically see the growth and regeneration happening around them – the 'new' Salford, new developments, growing industries and expanding opportunities – but many still feel disconnected from it.

For some, these opportunities are visible but do not feel not reachable: close enough to see, but not designed for 'people like me'. Many young people spoke about not fully understanding what careers or pathways now exist within their own city, how to access them, and whether they would realistically belong in those spaces.



In this sense, the challenge is not simply a lack of opportunity, but a lack of connection between young people and the opportunities developing around them.

## **9. Conclusions**

From what young people said, it is apparent that a more well-rounded and considerate interventions are needed in many cases. Possible interventions are:

### **1. Reframe identity to unlock progression**

*Supporting young people with confidence and self-belief.*

If learners see Level 3 as something realistic for people like them, in spaces where they belong, and can see themselves succeeding, then more young people with clear capability will choose to progress. This is a simple intervention that could be tested through:

- Stories and relatable role models shared with children and parents/carers from primary education onwards.

- Visible “people like me” progression campaigns, in formats that resonate with young people.
- Peer ambassadors and alumni networks who paint a real picture of a Level 3 learner and their experiences.
- Optional pathways clearly explained to young people during secondary education, using relatable case studies (including those who overcame barriers).
- Direct links with employers in local growth industries to show to where Level 3 can lead.

## 2. Social and peer support for young people

*Recognising that progression decisions are as much social as individual.*

Progression support should focus not only on individuals, but also on the wider peer and social environment around them. This could be tested through:

- Accredited peer mentors and career buddies (from alumni and existing student networks) for young people in secondary education, during transition and in college.
- Collective engagement of friendship and peer groups of young people.

## 3. Financial support that is simple, visible and accessible

*Reducing the financial pressure to leave education early.*

If financial barriers are reduced at the moment when learners are deciding what to do next, then more will opt for Level 3 over immediate work. The spring/summer decision point is often where education is losing to short-term income and it is creating uncertain futures for young people.

Support needs to be easy to understand, accessible, timely, and well communicated. This could be tested through:

- Upfront travel support (rather than reimbursement).
- Highly visible ‘earn and learn’ models, apprenticeships, paid internships, part-time work opportunities and bursaries.

## 4. Continuous navigation support for well-informed decisions

*Helping young people and families understand pathways.*

If learners (and their parents/carers) get sustained support to understand progression routes, then fewer young people will end up on poor-fit pathways or disengage through confusion. This could be tested through:

- Simpler and more visual information about pathways to progression.
- A clear transition programme for all young people transferring from school to college, including intensive, proactive support during the first three months in college.

- Active engagement of parents/carers in progression conversations.

## 5. Redesign Level 3 provision

*Designing around real lives rather than 'ideal' learners.*

There is a strong case for designing provision around the reality of learners' lives rather than around assumptions of stability. This could be tested through:

- No requirement for a maths qualification to start in college, unless it is absolutely essential for a course.
- Redesign Level 3 provision (including flexibility around attendance, pacing and support), assuming learners lack stability and security.

## 6. Support for young people who lack parental/carer support

*Recognising unequal access to guidance and stability.*

Young carers, young people in care, care-experienced young people and young people in unstable home environments need particular support to navigate their progression, rather than doing it largely alone. This could be tested through:

- No requirement to repeatedly self-identify in order to access support.
- Prioritise digital and mental well-being support.
- Strong peer and adult support, especially during transition periods.

## 10. Adolescent brains

Historically, education and other systems for young people have been designed by adults, often from an adult perspective.

We need to reimagine adolescence, by understanding, nurturing and celebrating this unique phase of life, and avoid the risks of society demonising young people.

For a truly learner-centred approach to progression from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications, therefore, any approach or design needs to start from an understanding of the high level of plasticity and social focus of adolescent brains. Key aspects are<sup>4</sup>:

- Transformation: Adolescence is a period of intense brain remodelling, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for planning, decision-making and self-control.



<sup>4</sup> Blakemore S.-J. (2018), *The Secret Life of the Teenage Brain*

- Mismatch: Increased reward-seeking, risk-taking and emotional reactivity, due to the limbic system (emotional/reward centre) maturing faster than the prefrontal cortex (control centre).
- Peer influence and risk: Young people are hypersensitive to social exclusion and peer influence, causing them to take nearly three times more risks when with friends than alone.
- Plasticity and potential: The 'plastic' (flexible) nature of the teenage brain offers a unique, prime window for learning and creativity, not just vulnerability.
- Mental health implications: Many mental illnesses (such as depression and schizophrenia) begin during these formative years, making it a critical time for support.

## 11. Next steps

For 'the system' to constructively respond to the emerging agenda and priorities created by local people, it could take a view towards the subsequent stages of innovation:

### Innovating:

4. nurture co-production of solutions – through collaborative learning and reflection with professionals
5. proof of concept (testing and development of solution)
6. make the case – together, present idea/proposal to senior decision-makers and system leaders

### Spreading:

7. deliver and implement the solution – with system support
8. grow and spread the solution into the 'mainstream'
9. change system conditions – including strategy, policy and enabling structures

