

WHEN INSTITUTIONS BECOME UNREADABLE

Young People and the Hidden Work of Accessing Social Rights

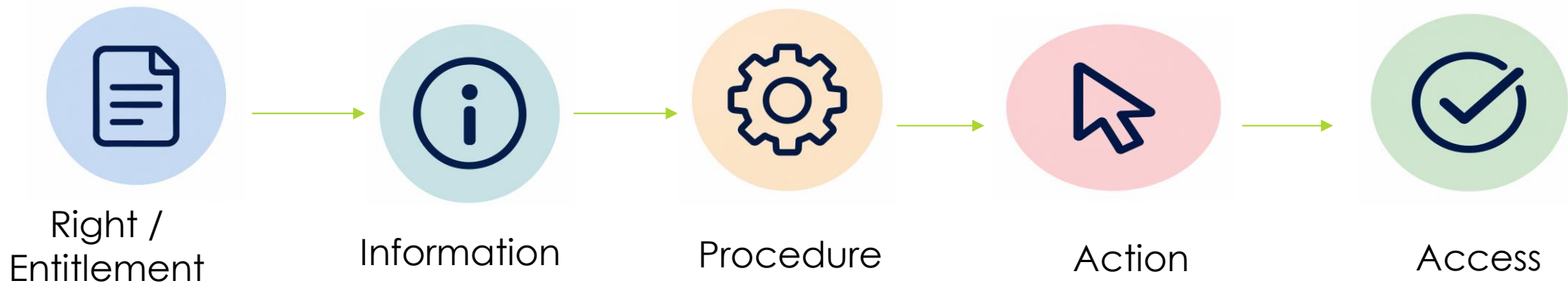
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A RIGHT CAN EXIST...AND STILL BE DIFFICULT TO REACH



What happens between “you are entitled” and “you know what to do next”?

Understanding an institution is not the same as being able to act within it.

WHEN DOES INFORMATION BECOME ACTIONABLE?

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Instead of asking only, "is the information available?", ask a sequence of different questions:

Information
→ interpretation
→ action



Can I find it?



Can I understand it?



Do I know what it means for me?



Do I know what to do next?



Can I continue?

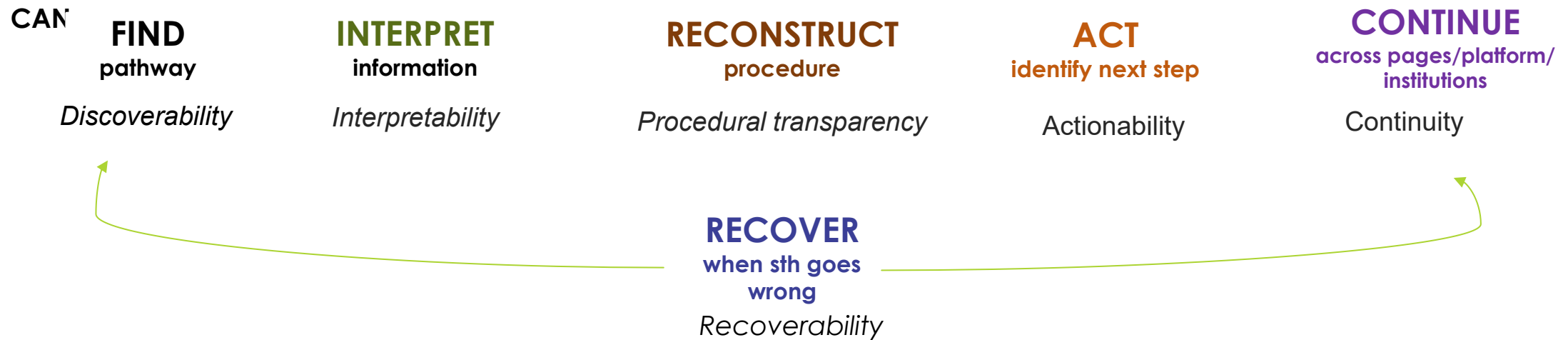
A social right may be formally available, and its information publicly accessible, without the pathway to exercising that right being practically readable.

Institutional readability

Where does information stop becoming action?

* It does not replace existing research on administrative burden, accessibility, plain language, or digital public-service delivery...the question sits within this literature, but zooms in on one particular moment: "Can the information available to a person be translated into a viable next action?"

* 6 dimensions to approach the question:



Readable language ≠ readable institution

Related frameworks: administrative burden (Herd & Moynihan, 2025); digital self-service (Madsen, Lindgren and Melin, 2022) Bhanot & Heller, 2022, Administrativeburden shaped by how rules are communicated (Baekgaard, Doring & Thomsen, 2025).

HOW WE LOOKED FOR UNREADABILITY

OFFICIAL PATHWAY

- ▶ INSTITUTIONAL READABILITY AUDIT of official public-service pathways
 - ▶ Where might the pathway become difficult to read?
- ▶ 3 public-service pathways
- ▶ 6 readability dimensions
- ▶ Predicted friction points

LIVED ENCOUNTER

- ▶ 24 young adults, aged 18–29, purposively recruited through **local employment service**, **university** and **community channels**
- ▶ Two scenario-based tasks per participant
- ▶ Think-aloud observation and task notes
 - not
 - “Do you think this institution is readable?”
 - but
 - “What happens when young people actually try to use it?” (real-life need)

PREDICTED FRICTION ← COMPARE → OBSERVED FRICTION

Employment support · Specialist healthcare · Student financial support†

THREE PATHWAYS, THREE DIFFERENT TESTS OF ACCESS

01 EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT	02 SPECIALIST HEALTHCARE	03 STUDENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT
Where do I start?	How do the steps connect?	Does this apply to me?
Finding the correct institutional gateway	Finding the service sequence	Finding support + interpreting eligibility
PREDICTED FRICTION	PREDICTED FRICTION	PREDICTED FRICTION
DISCOVERABILITY	CONTINUITY	DISCOVERABILITY + INTERPRETABILITY

Predictions established before participant observation

WHERE ACCESS BREAKS DOWN

Three pathways. Three different points of friction.

01 EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT “Where do I actually start?”	02 HEALTHCARE “I understand the pieces, but what comes next?”	03 STUDENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT “Is this actually for someone like me?”
NEED work/training ↓	INFORMATION FOUND family doctor * referral * specialist care ↓	NEED financial difficulty ↓
MULTIPLE PLAUSIBLE SERVICES employment office * training programmes * other initiatives ↓	INDIVIDUAL ELEMENTS UNDERSTOOD “I know what these mean” ↓	SUPPORT * SCHOLARSHIP * LOAN Different schemes * different eligibility rules ↓
UNCERTAIN GATEWAY ↓	UNCERTAIN SEQUENCE ↓	UNCERTAIN FIT ↓
DISCOVERABILITY “I found the service, but I’m not sure if this is where I start.” P 04	CONTINUITY “ So do I go to the specialist now, or do I have to do something else first?” P 07	DISCOVERABILITY + INTERPRETABILITY “How do I know whether this is actually for someone in my situation?” P 11

Information can be available, understandable, ... **and still not be actionable**

WHEN THE PATHWAY STOPS MAKING SENSE

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"I don't know what to do next..."

Breakdown

The pathway becomes unclear

SELF-RECOVERY

- Go back
- Reformulate research
- Compare resources
- Try another route

HUMAN MEDIATION

- Friend
- Family
- Peer
- Someone with experience

DIGITAL MEDIATION

- Search engine
- Online explanation
- AI tool
- Other online resources

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

- Call
- Helpdesk
- Office/in-person employee

Can the pathway resume?

Recovery

Access is achieved

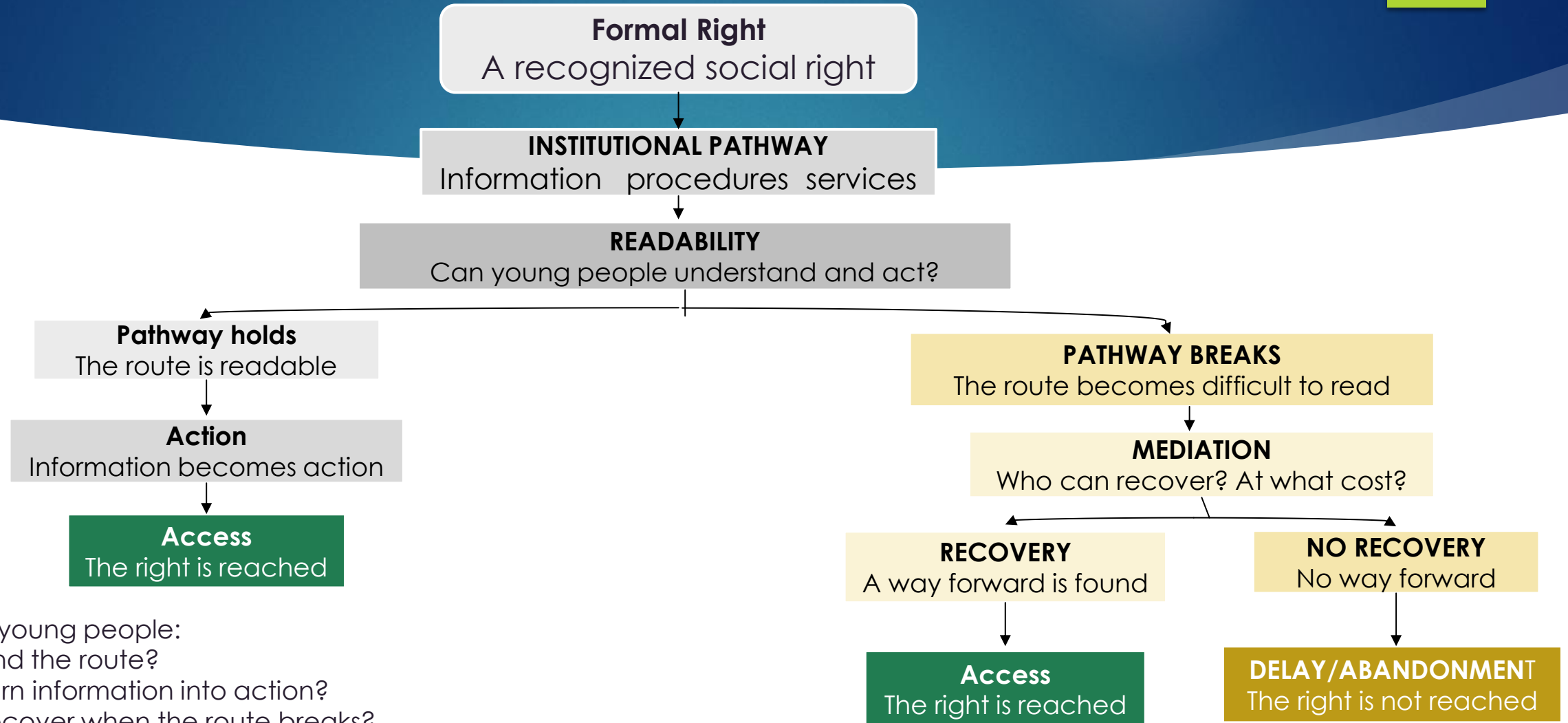
NO RECOVERY

Delay Dependency Abandonment

Formal access may be individual, Practical access may be mediated

Who makes the institution reliable when the institution itself does not?

FROM FORMAL RIGHTS TO REACHABLE RIGHTS



Can young people:

- find the route?
- turn information into action?
- recover when the route breaks?

What does access mean if the young person cannot reliably work out the route from entitlement to action?

Access is not only a property of a right. It is also a property of the route to that right.

A SMALL QUESTION, A LARGER CONVERSATION

When all the information is there, can the person still work out what to do next?



“What do I do next?”



A right can exist on paper.



A service can exist online.



Information can be publicly available.



And yet **the route to that right** may still be difficult to read.

A QUESTION FOR YOUR CONTEXT

Where does the route to a right become difficult to read?



Can you read the institution?

docs.google.com

*Optional audience reflection
Not part of the research study.*

**A right is not fully accessible
if its route cannot be read.**

References

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