

**HUMAN**  
LEARNING SYSTEMS



# Human Learning Systems: A practical guide for the curious

## CASE STUDY

**Learning as management strategy:  
Gateshead Council**

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## Introduction

This case study is an example of ‘learning as a management strategy’ in practice.

It has been created to illustrate the work in two different ways:

- **The story of the work** to enact learning as a management strategy
- **The illustration of the work** to enact learning as a management strategy **as connected Learning Cycles**. This representation of the work helps connect the case study with the core concepts in the guide.

An illustration of this work as connected Learning Cycles can be found [here](#).

## The story of the work...

### Summary

- Gateshead Council and several its partners including DWP and Citizens Advice Gateshead, ran a series of prototypes to test:
  - a) Liberated methods of engagement and support between caseworkers and citizens
  - b) Learning loops designed to improve methods of operation and systemic adaptations, and to challenge some base assumptions.
- The prototypes had no eligibility criteria and thus the team worked with people with a variety of reasons to engage. The focus was to support people who were not thriving and to do this in a way that was based upon what mattered to them.

- The learning was profound and included three particular shifts in focus which had a bearing on both the systems in place and the thinking within:
  - A shift in focus from assurance to efficacy means caseworkers were trusted to spend money at their discretion, based upon what matters to the citizens they support
  - A shift in focus from enforcement to resolution has led to more holistic solutions to debt and less enforcement via bailiffs (and subsequent crisis)
  - A shift in focus from tenancies to tenants led to fewer evictions of people with multiple and complex needs.

These shifts came about through careful, systematic capturing of the issues when they arose and disseminating them via learning loops, sometimes quite uncomfortably.

### Shifts in focus through learning and experimentation

In order to be confident of being able to yield significant learning from this work, we needed to knowingly do things differently. We created *Community Caseworker* roles and empowered them to build relationships with people (which felt like an odd thing to empower anyone to do, but this is the legacy of the current paradigm). We also gave the teams money to spend and the autonomy to spend it on whatever seemed sensible and practical to both citizen and caseworker (the only rules were “do no harm” and “stay legal”).

This allowed us to learn what good might look like for people in their communities.

We had to ensure that learning was captured and was put to use, i.e. things changed as a result. We wanted stories, but we also wanted to be clear on what they were telling us about how things needed to change. This is where the learning loops came in.

On the basis that the relationship between the citizen and the caseworker was given primacy and all things started there, we created loops that dealt with three types of issue as well as successes:

- **Method issues** – how to do something, e.g. tactics for proactive engagement with someone
- **System issues** – how to make possible something the system prevents us from doing, e.g. how to secure a wheelchair for someone that needs it in minutes/hours rather than weeks/months/never
- **Macro-system issues** – how to get around something we can't do (and set out a strong case for why this needs to change), e.g. a regulatory environment that inclines towards assessment and screening rather than understanding and helping.

As caseworkers began to form relationships and deployed a liberated method that was bespoke to each citizen they helped, we debriefed regularly, usually daily. Debriefs were critical – it is where learning began to crystallise.

Debriefs were semi-structured to elicit three things (we debriefed the debriefs sometimes to get better at them, very meta and almost inception-like!):

- Progress of the citizen against what matters to them – is this working?
- Issues/problems and successes – how do we address system change?
- Caseworker and team welfare – how are you finding this?

Key to the learning loops was the capturing and action upon the issues and successes. The diagrams and templates below show an outline of the learning loops and the ways information was captured at debrief.

Three learning loops; nine conversations

The work in Gateshead has been plugging away at eliciting change through conversations in three places:

- within teams (around methods), within existing services and systems (around processes and roles)
- amongst system leaders and stakeholders (around rules, structures and power).

## LEARNING LOOP ONE: money, coats and caseworker autonomy

**Team Conversation:** Caseworkers were reporting that now their early conversations with the people they were getting to know weren't directed by specific assessments, they were characterised by learning about short-term, urgent needs, often fundamentals such as having no food, heating or power. We'd always ask during debriefs what perfect would look like and the response here was that caseworkers could easily spend small sums of money "getting things straight" so that it become possible in time to focus upon the fundamentals that might help longer term. Being responsive and trusting up front would also help to build trust.

As things stood, they couldn't act immediately. They generally had to ask for permission, and the auditors wanted predetermined rules around this. This didn't work for the caseworkers, they wanted autonomy and to be trusted. Getting a food shop in and getting the house warm, so that focus might turn to why there was no food and heating, seemed crucial if we were ever to build trust and co-produce plans with people.

The solution they wanted to test was to have purchasing cards they could use straight away for a food shop, some heating, basic clothes, etc. We sourced the cards, aligned them to the project's budget, and gave them out.

The question they were then asking in debrief was, "what happens to the

conversations we have with people if we respond readily to the initial issues that are raised?" The learning loop was around learning how to begin to build trust. As we reflected, we realised that this was the same learning loop for the resident – "can I trust this person to listen and act?" So to makes sense of this as a learning loop, we had to involve residents in our learning, not just our doing. This meant telling them that we were trying to learn how to be better at supporting people rather than just doing things and discussing the learning back at the office.

### **Organisational System Conversation:**

Of course, we knew that the auditors would worry. This seemed rather laissez-faire and risky, not to mention open to abuse (here's your own credit card, spend it on things people need...). Caseworkers operating in the statutory services also worried that this would build up an unhealthy dependency and also be unaffordable ("what if we bought everyone coats?"). To address this, without diluting the autonomy needed, we agreed a series of principles in their deployment. These principles were that for each purchase, caseworkers had to consider whether each purchase was Proportionate, Legal, Auditable and Necessary (PLAN). They would discuss this at debrief if need be, but in order to seek advice rather than permission. We agreed to record all of the purchases and ensure each was linked to a case and a worker.

This proved to be very effective. Caseworkers were able to solve pressing issues quickly before working on more sustainable solutions in partnership with citizens and those in their lives. Often, people were entitled to benefits and other forms of support which they were not getting, so working on that early on meant there were more resources to play with. Getting things on an even keel so that more support could be put into place was a very effective way of building trust.

This autonomy also meant that caseworkers could essentially fund creative and idiosyncratic ideas to help people progress. A particular archetype was creating a reason to leave the house. Arranging to meet for a coffee, providing a bus pass to help people to visit places they thought out of reach, even helping buy a simple bicycle to help with travel to work, helping carpet someone's living room, helping with school uniform when embarrassment in old, ill-fitting clothes was materially contributing to no school attendance...these things were low cost and high impact. The PLAN approach worked for people and costs did not spiral. Far from creating an unsustainable system, it helped to reduce demand.

At a system level, the learning questions focused on practical efficacy. Efficacy questions asked whether purchase cards were effective and practical for caseworkers – they were.

**Wider System Conversation:** With a solution in place, there was a need for a more fundamental conversation about autonomy, controls, and trust. We had

our solution in place regarding everyday, tactical spending for caseworkers but suspected this wouldn't be the last time we needed to rethink the issues around control, permission and the general role of leadership. In this example, we did something simple and mitigated any risk after the fact, so we would not be sacrificing critical speed of response and trust-building in the name of trying to prevent unlikely fraud. We didn't abandon such concerns, but agreed to look afterwards at the efficacy of what was done. This moved the leadership role from pre-emptive enforcement to reviewing and learning, whilst also potentially spotting anything untoward (as one leader put it, "No trips to Antigua on there yet"). This rethinking of control is now playing out into issues beyond sundry spending and into areas such as the scope/eligibility and if/when to close cases – thus empowering workers to do great work and equipping leaders to rethink how they interact with caseworkers to make better work possible.

Risk questions were key to the broad system questions. They were around tracking spend (can we readily articulate what we are spending? Yes) and asking whether such ready empowerment leads to solutions that are hastily formed because money is available now rather than working things out over time. The PLAN approach was under scrutiny and was deemed effective at avoiding, as one manager put it, "throwing money at problems".

## LEARNING LOOP TWO: debt as a signal to help, not as a reason to call the bailiff...

**Team Conversation:** Caseworkers who were speaking to people who owed significant council tax arrears knew that: a) the vast majority of people who owed significant sums couldn't pay it off (as opposed to wilfully choosing not to pay); and b) had many other problems in their lives. Despite this, the job of the frontline in council tax was to process demands and collect owed funds, through increasingly punitive measures culminating in a bailiff visit. This never made things better. The staff were keen to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem for people and asked, "what if we asked people how they were and tried to help them out with whatever was going on in their lives, getting whatever help from elsewhere we can?"

A small team were allowed to do this, and debriefs happened daily to help us understand what to do and what needed some attention. They demonstrated that an early way of building trust was to remove the threat of the bailiff. Not with conditions attached, but simply to acknowledge that when people have no means of paying, interventions from bailiffs (which incidentally add more to the amount owed) are simply making things worse. Wilful non-payment that's more akin to tax-avoidance is perhaps worthy of such a response, but not poverty or bad luck from unavoidable events. As a team, we provided a countermeasure, which was essentially the director of the experiment saying that he'd keep the bailiffs at bay for this work whilst talking to those who run the system about what needed to be done and why.

**Organisational System Conversation:** Those responsible for collecting council tax were naturally nervous about removing potential methods of collection. They were quite reasonably of the view that they had a duty to collect as much money as possible. The conversation turned to that of purpose. Why are we doing this? The purpose of collection was very much central to that function, but the overriding purpose of helping people to thrive was, in some cases, at odds with this. So we had to demonstrate that the bailiff approach was not a very effective one for helping people such that they might one day pay their council tax. We couldn't find any instances where it was part of a longer-term solution. People that had been served with bailiff visits almost always presented to other parts of the council and partner organisations for help. This was key to changing some leadership thinking, i.e. it didn't work very well and it was a headwind. The other element of this learning loop was exploring the notion that building relationships with people who owed large sums, and providing practical help, would more likely lead to someone who ended up paying and, more importantly, thriving. The Team were able to show the system leadership that this method was more effective, most of the time, in helping people out of poverty and towards a form of stability. Interestingly, morale and commitment to the purpose went up. Bailiffs were used far less frequently as a result, with their deployment reducing by three-quarters.

**Wider System Conversation:** The countermeasure whereby the prototype director provided air cover for the team to stop bailiffs being used could not last forever. The policy that he was shielding the team from was the Debt Recovery Policy. This contained various means of focus on debt recovery rather than cause, including the practice of not allowing people to move from one council property to another if rent arrears were owed. The general principle

of considering the “can’t pay vs. won’t pay” context for any given debt was introduced to the policy, thus making it more likely that people were helped out of debt rather than plunged further into it. This in turn allowed us to show that specific knowledge around such tools as Debt Relief Orders was valuable and predictably useful on a frequent basis, which changed the configuration of frontline times to include people from Citizens Advice who were impartial experts in such support.

### LEARNING LOOP THREE: a shift in focus from *tenancies to tenants* and a reduction in evictions of people with multiple and complex needs

**Team Conversation:** Sometimes we would encounter people who were ‘difficult tenants’ – significant rent arrears, poor property condition, anti-social behaviour, no desire to engage with the council as a landlord or as a means of support more generally... lots of violations of tenancy agreements and therefore lots of ground to evict. These assessments were legally and technically accurate – we were often within our rights to evict in order to provide homes for those willing to be ‘better tenants’ and who were less of a threat to the condition of the asset. During our area based prototype, we rarely saw any exploration of the context of this behaviour. When the team began to work with people who were in this position and learned about their lives, there were always one or all of: health problems (including mental health), domestic abuse, substance misuse and interaction with the criminal justice system as victims and/or perpetrators.

Eviction, unless it materially contributed to the safety and welfare of others, was potentially likely to create more demand into other parts of the system, including the council. By exploring

the context of the people who were at risk of eviction, the team started to ask a powerful question in their debriefs: “Just because we can [evict], does it mean we should?”

As Director, I was asked to intervene to prevent evictions where the team felt that this would make things harder to resolve longer term and where preventing it would not harm anyone else. If I could do this, the caseworkers would be able to use that as a way of creating a potentially less fraught and uncertain dynamic for the citizen and it would become easier to think longer term. So again, it was about providing air cover so the caseworkers could build relationships and build from there.

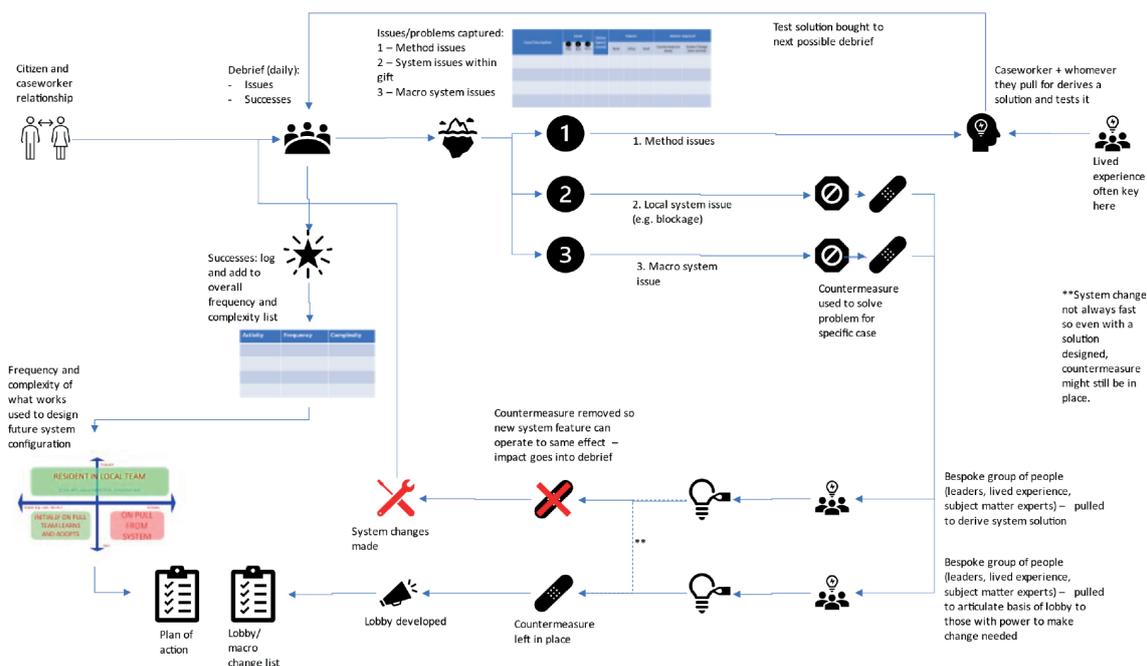
#### **Organisational System Conversation:**

This was awkward. Some of the people we were seeking to exempt from eviction had behaved really poorly. There was plausible reason to evict, and legally it was a solid course of action to take. I was basically asking senior housing colleagues to let people off and hope we could sort it out. It was hard for them to agree to this when I could not make any promises that it would work. This was, after all, a learning loop.

We were able to show in some cases that the removal of the threat of eviction was a motivator for relationship building with caseworkers. When this happened, we saw people turn things around, particularly as the caseworker was well placed then to support them in tackling issues around benefits, training, finding work, building relationships with family and community and whatever else our bespoke approach could yield. In other cases, it didn't work and the evictions took place as the citizen in question was not yet ready to engage. We would not drop their case and we'd often secure other accommodation in the private rented sector and continue or work. It provided sufficient curiosity to add the "just because we can, does it mean we should?" question to the eviction process. Seeking context rather than simply making a case for eviction has become the substantive method.

**Wider System Conversation:** This has led to a broader question being asked about supporting people in situations that are more likely to lead to unstable tenancies. Leaving prison, leaving care and leaving the armed forces are three particular transitional archetypes that show some correlation with future instability and volatile tenancies (and ultimately homelessness). Not only do these archetypes remind us that context should always feature when addressing the eviction question, but they show us that there are some opportunities to get very upstream of this situation so we will ultimately find ourselves talking far less about eviction. Work is now ongoing to learn how to best support people in these transitions, long before eviction ever becomes a possibility because we know that by then, we've failed.

## LEARNING LOOPS – SUMMARY: where learning points emerge from and what happens to them



## NEXT STEPS: download the full guide

If this case study and the [illustration](#) of this case study as a connected learning cycle have been all the information you need to begin your experiment, go for it! (And we'd love to hear how it goes).

If you want more detailed information about the work required to undertake the different

elements of Learning Cycles, at each of the different system scales, there is more detail in the full "how to" guide [here](#), together with connections to a range of different tools and methods that different organisations have used. If you are looking for a summary version of the guide, you can find that [here](#).

**TOOLS:**

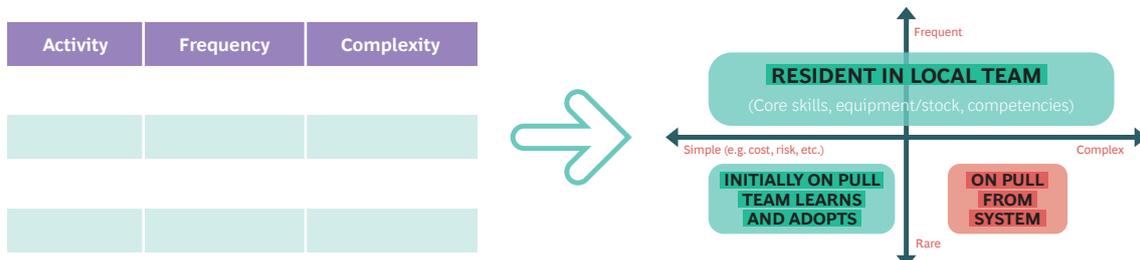
**Debriefing template for issues**

At each debrief, anything the caseworkers were unable to do, or were struggling with, would be recorded on this template. Each issue was discussed to determine whether it was a method issue that needed figuring out or some expertise (type 1), a system rule or property that was in the way, e.g. eligibility criteria, job role, system rules, etc (type 2), or something that was more fundamental like a law, national policy or regulatory issue (type 3). An owner in the team would be assigned, who wasn't always the person the raised it and was often the team coordinator. Type two issues were usually in the gift of someone in the system locally, so they were identified, recorded here and they would be pulled to this work to explore the issue and derive an alternative to test or simply change. They would also unblock the issue for the case in hand if possible. Macro issues were identified and ultimately collated as issues for wider lobbying. Often, a temporary fix or countermeasure would have to be employed, as well as the aspiration for system change, and these would be recorded too. This approach help the work to build up a good record of the points of leverage in the system that would allow for permanent positive change.

Issue description	Level			Status (open/ closed)	Owner			Action required	
	1 Ind	2 Sys	3 Macro		Team	L'ship	Govt	Countermeasure (now)	System change (new normal)

**Debriefing template for value work/successes**

Where things were effective, they were simply written down. Everything from the simplicity of driving a van to the complexity of a medical diagnosis. Each time that thing happened in the team, it was recorded and “five-bar-gates” counted how frequently this was done. By adding a judgement around the complexity of each task, we could plot them all on a matrix that shows which skills and activities are needed locally in front-facing teams and which ones should be central to the system and available to all teams when they pull for them. This allows the configuration of teams to be developed “ground up” from work that is liberated to work on what matters.



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