

HUMAN

LEARNING SYSTEMS



HUMAN

Human Learning Systems:

Public Service for the Real World

SUMMARY REPORT



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Foreword

Olli-Pekka Heinonen

Director General of the International Baccalaureate, previously Director General of the Finnish National Agency for Education

How can governments respond effectively to the complex reality of the world? How can government support people to lead flourishing lives, when each life is different? I have been wrestling with these questions for much of my career.

Almost 30 years ago, as a young minister, I thought that government and governance was about power, and power was about control and having the right answers. As the years have gone by, I have learnt that with the wicked challenges of today, that kind of thinking accelerates negative, not positive outcomes.

In Finland, we have developed an approach to government that we call Humble Government. It says that government does not know best, but that we can learn together with the people we serve, to help each person – and each place – find what is right for them.

If government, and the public service we support, is to work in this way, we need alternative approaches to public management. It all starts by admitting to not knowing the right answers. That is the prerequisite for learning. We will find solutions by trying things out, and changing and developing ourselves in this process of interaction. It is by this never-ending process of learning together that we reach positive outcomes. The world has no shortage of well-written strategies, but the gap between strategy and implementation is huge. It is all about how we value and treat each other as humans, how we understand the systems we are part of, and how we commit ourselves to the shared journey of learning.

I am delighted to have played a part in helping to explore and develop Human Learning Systems (HLS) as such an alternative approach. Our case study explores how government can create better outcomes by supporting actors at local and national system scales to learn together in addressing complex challenges. Government can be humble by optimising for learning, not control.

When contexts keep changing, performance management is always slow to respond. Instead of trying to control “results”, we must strengthen the competence of all actors in the system to be more resilient and adaptive in this time of flux. It can be hard for governments to say that we don’t have all the answers, and to put genuine decision-making power into the hands of the public and the workers who serve them. But brave governments do this. They can use an HLS approach to public management to transform how government and public service works. We have made a good start to our learning process. We did it. You can, too.

Naresh Singh

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It gives me great pleasure to welcome this groundbreaking work, which has the potential to catalyse a transition from the way public service is now managed, commonly known as the New Public Management (NPM), to the approach being called Human Learning Systems (HLS). This transition, in my view, can be of the same order of significance as the other great transitions in public service management from traditional to Weberian (classic public administration) to NPM. It is useful to recall how momentous these transitions were.

Traditionally, the public realm was managed by monarchial dictates and religious doctrine, sprinkled with emotion, sentiment, magic and superstition. This was gradually replaced with Weberian “ideal type” bureaucracy, based on the centrality of the legal rational authority. This concentrated power in the hands of those who controlled the bureaucratic

apparatus of the state. As Weberian public administration hardened and became overly bureaucratic, NPM was introduced to use a more business and market orientation, focusing on managers, markets and metrics. Human wellbeing – what one might expect as the basic purpose of public service – did not seem to matter.

And it now seems the time to herald the transition from NPM to the HLS approach – the subject matter of this book. HLS recognises that outcomes such as improvement in human wellbeing are not produced by managers and their organisations, but rather result from complex adaptive systems which are the communities in which people live. The implication is that each human being is different and through interactions with others and their relationships, individual and collective wellbeing is achieved.

As such, the macro emerges from the micro through facilitation and learning and not through hierarchical control. The most important outcome seems to be the continuous process of learning and adaptation, leading to continual improvements and resilience-building. Fundamental shifts from outcomes-based performance management, for

example, are called for. It is reassuring that the recommendations in the book emerge from concrete case studies rather than theoretical musings.

Desirable as it may seem, this HLS transition or revolution will not be easy. Bureaucracies such as those of governments of OECD countries, including Canada, or of the UN and similar organisations, will feel they are losing control of financial resources and will proclaim the need to be accountable. Underlying all this will be a feeling of a loss of power.

In developing countries such as India, government reflects a mix of traditional public administration and NPM. On the other hand, civil society organisations are very active in communities. This will present opportunities for HLS in the civil society space but challenges in the governmental space. The best chances of HLS success in either OECD or developing countries might be where a marriage between civil society and local government is possible.

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All the learning in this report comes from the incredible work of the practitioners who have been exploring what it means to implement a Human Learning Systems (HLS) approach to public management in practice – too many to list here! Not only have they been doing all this groundbreaking work, they took the time to write case studies of their practice, and to take part in shared sense-making sessions to help us to figure out what it all means. We thank each and every one of them, and their organisations, profusely. Further thanks to the many people who took time to review the drafts of this work. Your feedback has been invaluable.

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Introduction

Introduction

Author: Toby Lowe

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“The world is a complex, interconnected, finite, ecological – social – psychological – economic system. We treat it as if it were not, as if it were divisible, separable, simple, and infinite. Our persistent... problems arise directly from this mismatch.”

(Donella H. Meadows)

If you think that the purpose of public service is to help people create good outcomes in their lives, but you have a nagging feeling that something is fundamentally wrong with how public service works at the moment, then this report is for you.

This report argues that a significant part of the problems experienced by public service are due to the way that *public management* is conceived and done. It has been created by practitioners who have taken that feeling and developed an alternative approach to public management. It represents what we have collectively learnt from nearly 50 case studies of doing public management differently.

“So many people know intuitively that our current accepted ways of working don’t work, but they haven’t previously had any language to

give expression to this.”

(Collective Impact Agency case study)

The document that you are currently reading is our attempt to summarise that learning in a more digestible way. If you find any of the ideas particularly interesting, you can click through to the full version of any of the chapters, by clicking on the chapter heading.

Public management: organising public service

We have a very **broad definition of public service**. In this report, we use public service as a shorthand for those purposeful activities that support human flourishing and freedom. Public service is the organised form of one human being saying to another: “I support your quest to live the good life”. Our definition encompasses “core” public sector services such

as education, welfare provision, and healthcare. It also includes the vast contribution of civil society, from the work of charities and social enterprises to mutual aid groups and community development.

We can see in this definition that public service is found way beyond the boundaries of state provision. This sense of public service lives in social enterprises, mutual aid groups, and charitable action. For us, public service is not defined by “sector”.

All the work of public service requires organisation. Whether undertaken by teachers or refuse collectors, whether in a community centre, cafés or an office, such work needs a sense of shared purpose, and an agreed method by which to achieve that purpose. It requires decisions to be taken regarding resource allocation and the skills and capabilities required to achieve the purpose in practice. It requires people to reflect on how the work is being done, and mechanisms to be put in place to ensure that such work continues to improve and adapt in a changing world.

How this organising work is done

– how shared purpose is created and enacted, how resources are allocated and managed, how improvement and adaptation are enabled – **is the task of “public management”**.

Currently, there is a dominant

paradigm – a mutually supportive set of beliefs and practices – for how public management is done. It is called “New Public Management” (NPM). It was created in the 1980s, and is referred to as the 3Ms – [Markets, Managers and Metrics](#). The problems inherent in this paradigm have become increasingly evident. As we shall argue throughout this report, we think that these problems are so fundamental they point towards the need for paradigm shift, not just making tweaks in practice here and there.

This report argues that **NPM is dehumanising:**

The [logic which underpins NPM](#) is based on the idea that people are fundamentally selfish. It believes that public servants must be “incentivised” to serve the public good through reward and punishment. Consequently, every aspect of public service must be translated into a quantified performance measure, so that managers can know whether each person, team or organisation deserves punishment or reward. And people who ask for help must be assessed to see if they really need it, because they’re probably trying to grab more than their share.

This core belief, and the practices which enact it, encourage standardisation of service: care is standardised into packages or 15-minute chunks of

purchased time, desired “outcomes” are predefined, irrespective of what a particular person needs or wants, and they are measured against standardised metrics and other performance indicators, which focus only on what is measurable, while ignoring the diversity of human experience.

NPM is slow to learn and adapt to a changing world

Because it believes that people are fundamentally selfish, the dominant purpose of management is control. The processes and “impact” of public service are measured in order to control staff via reward and punishment. Assessments are undertaken to measure whether people meet thresholds, not to genuinely understand their lives. Regulators make judgments in order to hand out badges for success, or shame-markers for failure, and to produce league tables that encourage competition between public servants, rather than collaboration.

The unsurprisingly frequent result of continual management attempts to motivate people extrinsically through reward and punishment is a [pathological culture of blame and defensiveness](#). As a result, [performance data is routinely “gamed”](#) (created by those whose job is to produce good-looking data), and so the data is next-to-useless for learning. We have created a system

which [routinely lies to itself](#).

Processes of learning and adaptation are further impeded by the lack of autonomy given to staff. Under NPM, the *de facto* purpose of public sector staff is to hit predefined performance metrics. At best, such performance metrics change quarterly, making public service slow to respond to an ever-changing world. When rapid, unignorable change occurs – like a pandemic – normal performance management processes [have to be turned off](#) because they are useless, and learning mechanisms have to be [invented from scratch](#). Because, in normal times, [learning is a luxury](#).

NPM creates fragmentation

NPM encourages public service fragmentation through two mechanisms. Firstly, it disaggregates public service into component parts, so that it can write manageable contract specifications. Those contracted to deliver public services must be controlled by SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely) targets – because they are selfish – and so each public service must be separated into contracts with particular specifications.

Secondly, because public servants and organisations are forced to compete with one another, it naturally creates a competitive rather than collaborative environment. Organisations become

reluctant to share knowledge and practices. Instead, they seek to create particular intellectual property, as these offer Unique Selling Points that enable them to win the next contract.

NPM is wasteful

Because NPM is dehumanising, slow to learn, and fragmented, it is also massively wasteful. Public service managed using an NPM approach expends a huge amount of resources in not helping people. It wastes time and resources by providing standardised packages that don't meet people's individual needs. It wastes resources assessing people to see if their situation is bad enough to deserve help, and then turning them away until their situation is worse (and therefore more difficult and expensive to help with). It wastes resources by running processes of punishment and reward, through duplication of effort, and by letting people fall through the cracks.

“NPM... was ostensibly intended to create ‘a government that works better and costs less’... So what do we have to show for three decades or so of NPM reforms? The short answer seems to be: higher costs and more complaints.”

(Hood and Dixon, 2015)

The attraction of NPM: a magical fantasy world

NPM has been the dominant paradigm for long enough for its flaws to be clearly evident. They are highlighted in research evidence, and in the experiences of those who have been adopting this approach. Sir Peter Housden, ex-head of the Civil Service in Scotland, wrote in 2016 about [“the unconscionably long death”](#) of NPM and bemoaned the absence of an alternative.

We don't seek to assert that every problem that public service experiences is the fault of NPM. Nor would we say that some of the issues identified above (a focus on control, fragmentation, and being slow to learn) are unique to NPM; these problems loomed large in the previously dominant, patrician version of public administration. Our starting point is that NPM is the currently dominant public management paradigm, so we see these flaws manifest in that approach. And our analysis is that these flaws cannot be solved within NPM, as they are a necessary part of that paradigm's internal logic: [“they're not a bug, they're a feature”](#).

If the evidence and experience of the problems of NPM are so substantial, why has it persisted? Alongside the practical realities of the time it takes

for paradigms to shift, and the support provided to NPM from the broader political shift to neoliberalism, we think one explanation for its persistence is that it offers leaders of all types (e.g. politicians, civil servants, and public service managers) something precious and magical: **the illusion of simplicity and control**.

We see this throughout the evidence on the impact of performance management. A systematic review of research into the effects of target-based performance management systems found that over 80% of studies find evidence of gaming and 74% find evidence of people deliberately lying ([Franco-Santos and Otley, 2018](#)).

“The most salient unintended consequences of directive performance management systems are gaming, information manipulation,

selective attention, illusion of control and relationships transformation.”

(Franco-Santos and Otley, 2018)

NPM encourages managers to create a simplified fantasy world based on thin abstractions – a pale imitation of people's lives. Instead of seeing the whole person, we [substitute proxy indicators](#). Instead of looking at the complex stories of their effects in the world, we look at dashboards and RAG (Red-Amber-Green) ratings. And worse, the data which populates these thin abstractions is produced by people who are [incentivised to lie](#). NPM then pretends that this fantasy world of dashboards and RAG ratings is real, and tells managers that their job is to create change in such data.

a National Health Service (NHS) provider and an NHS commissioner

I was witness to a conversation between a senior manager of commissioning processes for the NHS in the UK, and the finance manager of a large-scale provider of NHS services. The conversation went something like this:

The commissioning manager was outlining how their team was currently

doing lots of work to recalculate how NHS payments were going to work in the future. They were going to try and move away from paying for activity towards paying for outcomes. They were putting lots of effort into finding ways to price different outcomes accurately, so that the providers would be financially incentivised to carry out the most useful health activity. They described how difficult it was proving to do this well.

The finance manager of the NHS provider organisation shrugged and responded: “you do realise that we employ teams of people to create good-looking cost information that make it look like we’re doing what you want? And you know that the costing information that your teams ask for doesn’t reflect the work we have to do

to keep people healthy? So, don’t worry about it, whatever you ask for in future, we’ll find a way to give you the figures you need.”

“Yes”, replied the commissioning manager. “Of course, I know that’s what you do. That’s the game, right?”

At this point, it is important to give some nuance to our claims about “the real world”. The version of reality that public service mostly deals with is socially constructed – it is something we human beings make together, rather than something that simply exists. So, the nuanced version of reality and public service is – **it’s all real**. When a government minister leans on a civil servant to produce data to say that COVID-19 testing targets have been met, that’s the reality for that particular civil servant.

The question we ask from this nuanced perspective is: **whose version of reality has been privileged under NPM?** Our contention is that this abstracted, target-based version of reality has been unnecessarily privileged. The logic of NPM, and how it has infected political discourse and action, privileges this reality. The demands it creates on everyone at

different scales to produce good-looking data has made the game real. But when that happens, we ignore the complex lived reality of the people that public service is supposed to help, and public service becomes less human, less effective, and more wasteful as a result.

It is our claim that public service should instead privilege the complex reality of each member of the public being served. (That’s a bit harder to get into the title of a report, though.) And we can make the choice to put the reality of the public first by choosing to do public management differently.

An alternative: Human Learning Systems

This report offers an alternative paradigm for public management. We call this paradigm Human Learning Systems (HLS). It has been created [over the past five years](#) by a set of

public service workers, managers and leaders and supporting organisations, who were fed up with the relentlessly dehumanising and wasteful effects of NPM and wanted to try something different. This report has been created by an action research process drawing on roughly [50 case studies](#) of HLS practice, mostly from the UK, but also drawing on experience from across the globe.

HLS is based on a different set of fundamental beliefs, and therefore has a different set of mutually supportive management practices.

The HLS approach to public management starts from continuously exploring the messy reality of how the outcomes that matter to each person might be achieved in their unique life context. The job of public management – of organising this work – is to create the conditions whereby the messy reality of public service is made possible in the most efficient and effective way. **It is public service for the real world.**

Human – our moral purpose

HLS is based on the belief that the purpose of public service is to support human freedom and flourishing.

This provides the moral purpose for public service. It also provides a view of what it means to be human

in a public service context. It means that we understand human beings [“intersubjectively”](#) – as people who live in a web of relationships (a “system”) which helps to define who they are. In other words, to understand a human being, you must understand their world.

Learning – our management strategy

If each person sets what matters to them, and each person’s life context is a constantly changing system that is unique to them, how can public service help people to create their own outcomes? This question demonstrates that the task of creating public service outcomes is **complex**.

In [complex environments, learning is the only viable management strategy](#).

Public service must build a learning relationship with the public – a relationship which seeks to understand the detail of each life context, and, together, continuously explores how the patterns of results (“outcomes”) in their “life as system” might change.

Systems – our unit of analysis

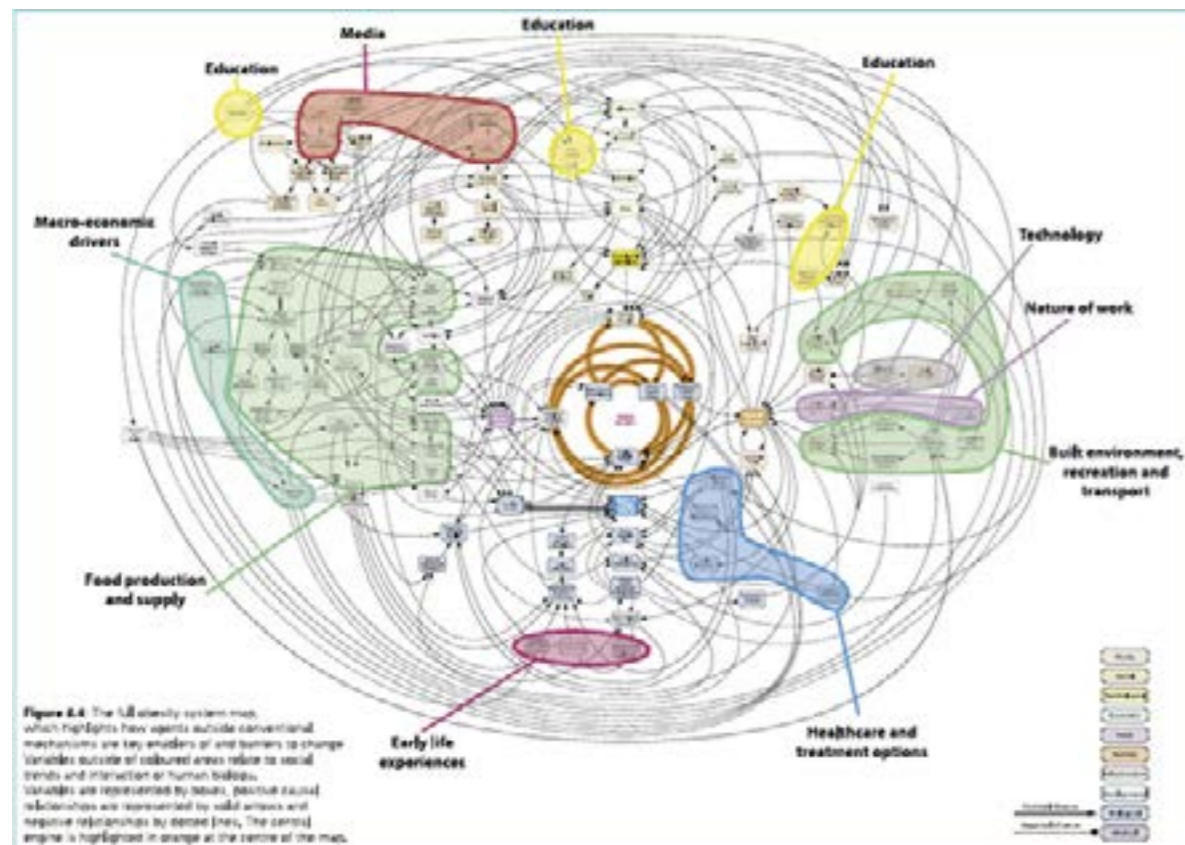
If the purpose of public service is to help people create positive outcomes in their lives, then public service needs to understand how outcomes are made. We believe (with good evidence) that these outcomes in people’s lives are created by the

workings of complex systems. In other words, outcomes are emergent properties of people's lives as systems. Therefore, creating outcomes requires these complex systems to produce different patterns of results, and so these systems become the focus of our purpose and method. (For a full

explanation of what we mean by "systems", see the Systems chapter.)

For example, this is a representation of "the system" (a set of causal relationships between factors), which creates the outcome of obesity (or its absence).

Figure 1: Systems map of obesity.



Sturmburg, JP (2018) *Health System Redesign How to Make Health Care Person-Centered, Equitable, and Sustainable*. Springer, Australia. P238

Systems are therefore the unit of analysis that is most relevant to achieving our moral purpose, and to which our management strategy is applied. Put simply, **if we want good**

outcomes, we need healthy systems – systems in which people collaborate and learn together; because this is how outcomes are made.

Better outcomes, for less money

The really good news about the HLS approach is that, because it roots public service work in the real-life experiences of the people it seeks to support, it is able to address some of the wastefulness of NPM. From what we have seen, it helps to create better outcomes for less money. For example, the [Plymouth Alliance](#) was able to cut the costs of emergency accommodation for homeless families by 50% in less than six months by creating an integrated approach to family support, based on the strengths and needs of those families. Similarly, the use of "Blue Light" (police, ambulance, fire) services was cut significantly, as people's real needs were met before they became emergencies.

From the [Wellbeing Teams](#) case study, we begin to get a measure of the reduction in unplanned service use when people's strengths and needs are met by home care: people supported by Wellbeing Teams services in Thurrock were five times less likely to go into hospital. Staff costs were reduced, too, because staff were happier. Sickness rates for Wellbeing Teams staff were a third of the national average, and staff turnover was five times lower than the national average.

Continuous learning

The HLS approach to public management is being constantly developed by those who are doing it. There is so much that we don't know, as each adoption of the approach is essentially a process of learning how the HLS principles can be applied in a new context. Some areas for further exploration are highlighted in the Further Questions chapter at the end of this report. You will also notice that this report has multiple authors, and that we each have our own perspective on HLS practice. We think this is a good thing.

For those doing the practice now, HLS seems to work to produce better outcomes, for less money, while creating happier and more fulfilled staff. If this sounds like something you'd like to explore further, the following chapters, [particularly chapter 11](#) seek to share what they've learnt

Finally, we should reiterate that this report is a summary of a book. Each chapter title in this report links to a chapter in the book version, which explores the ideas in greater depth, and provides more examples from the case studies that are the backbone of the learning we present here. A full set of references are provided in the book version too.

Chapter 1 The HLS Principles: Human

Human

Authors: Toby Lowe and Gabriel Eichsteller

[Contact the authors](#)

The “Human” of Human Learning Systems (HLS) roots public service in people’s real lives. It gives HLS its sense of moral purpose, and frames how we see and relate to all the people involved in public service – those who provide help, and those who are helped. To see detailed examples of what this means in practice, please read the “Impact on people” section.

This humanity manifests itself in:

How public service sees people:

Public service respects and enables human freedom

As long as one person’s freedom is consistent with similar freedom for others (i.e. it does not cause harm to others), then HLS public service respects the freedom of each person to pursue their own version of the good life. This means that they have the freedom to define what matters to them – what outcomes they want to pursue.

Public service seeks to understand people as whole human beings

A human approach to public service is based on an understanding that each person is at the centre of their own interconnected and interdependent (complex) system. The positive and negative “outcomes” that they experience – having their potential developed, or being in chronic pain – are the patterns of results produced by the system that is their lives. Each person has unique strengths as well as needs, and all these are relevant for helping them to achieve outcomes in their lives.

“In my last year of life, help me live well until I die.”

(Dorset Integrated Case System case study)

The Human element of HLS therefore provides the why of public service (to promote human freedom and flourishing), and provides pointers towards the how – seeing people as fully-rounded human beings, in

the context of webs of relationships. A Human approach to public management is therefore both purpose and (gives pointers towards) method.

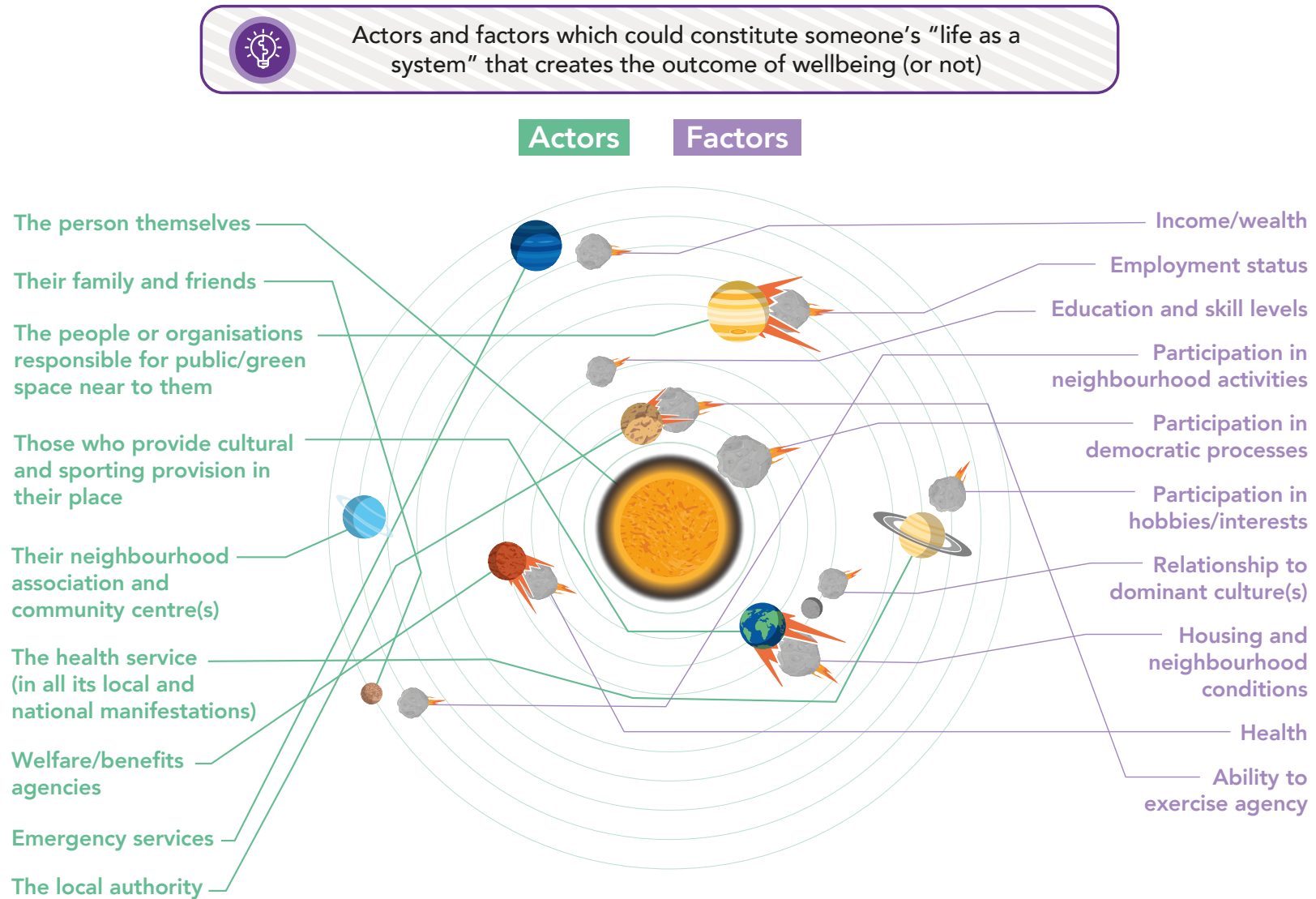
Public service seeks to understand and respond to the diversity of human beings.

It recognises that each person's life is different – their "life as system" is unique. As a result, what public service offers must be bespoke to that person's life and what matters to them.

Therefore, in order to help create good outcomes in people's lives, people using HLS approaches to public management recognise the complexity of all human lives.

One way of understanding the complexity of human beings is to understand that everyone is at the centre of their own unique system of actors (people and organisations) and factors (causal drivers) which are constantly interacting to make an outcome. We can imagine such a system as a solar system, with the person at the centre. The pattern of interactions between all the elements is what we call "an outcome".

Figure 1: A person's life represented in terms of system of actors and factors which create the outcome of wellbeing



How public service engages with people:

Effective public service relies on strong human relationships.

Human public service requires a deep understanding of each person's life context that only comes from having a relationship with them. Further, it recognises that being in an authentic relationship of service to a person is valuable in itself, as it is a means to address many of the challenges with which public service is concerned.

“Even when we get things wrong [in relational practice], the humanity of it helps.”

(Gateshead Council, Director of Public Service Reform)

Where decision-making power sits

One of the key aspects of an HLS approach to public management is that decision-making responsibility should be [“devolved into the work”](#). This means that decisions about the support that public service should offer, and how that support manifests itself, should be taken by the person (or people) being supported. They should do this with the help of a relationship with someone who knows their life context well, and who is able to apply knowledge that is based on learning from other relevant contexts. This is

also described as [“evidence-informed practice”](#).

Trust as the foundation of human public service

Human freedom and flourishing is both purpose and method. Supporting human freedom and flourishing for the public is enabled by supporting the human freedom and flourishing of those whose role is to serve them. This is the revolutionary aspect of HLS public management practice – giving staff the freedom to build authentic human relationships with those they serve, and responding to what those relationships uncover, is the most efficient and effective way for public service to support the creation of desirable outcomes.

“Our Human Learning Systems approach to delivery has many benefits and could be summed up by saying ‘it feels right’. Breaking it down means that we build trust much faster and more meaningfully. This then has an impact on the therapeutic benefits of peer-support as people who trust each other faster have improved wellbeing faster.”

(Moray Wellbeing Hub case study)

The skills and capabilities required for public service

Effective public service relationships require empathy.

To build effective relationships that genuinely understand the life of another person requires empathy. This is a skill that can be cultivated, and a capacity that can be either encouraged or inhibited by management practices. For example, the systematic use of [Appreciative Inquiry](#) as a management tool seems to build empathy effectively.

Chapter 2 The HLS Principles: Learning

Learning

Authors: Toby Lowe and Hannah Hesselgreaves

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Creating outcomes in the real world is complex. What matters to each person is different. And how those outcomes are created is part of the ever-changing, unique web of relationships and factors that make up a person's life as a system. Given this complexity, learning becomes the only viable management strategy.

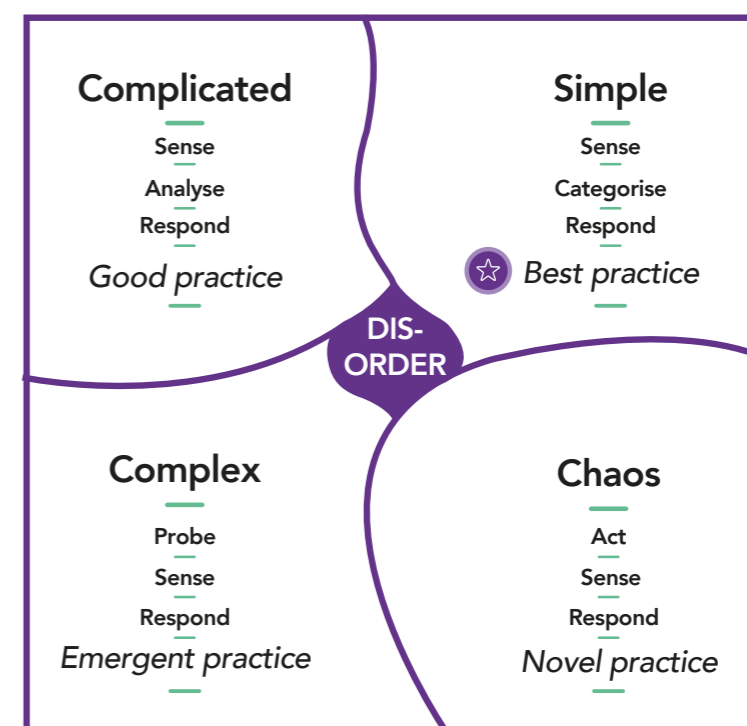
We know from the experience of our own lives, and decades of research into complex systems, that complex systems are context-specific and

dynamic. This means that “what works” in public service in complex environments is:

- Highly localised – what works in one place will not necessarily work in another
- Constantly changing – what works at one point in time won't necessarily work when it is repeated.

This is one of the key points articulated by the [Cynefin framework](#), developed and refined by Dave Snowden:

Figure 1: Cynefin framework, Dave Snowden



How is an outcome created?

An outcome is created by the combination of people and causal factors (a “system”) that make up a person’s life, interacting in a certain way. An “outcome” is what we call the pattern of results of that system at any particular point in time.

The work of purposefully creating a desired outcome is therefore an attempt to get all of those relationships (between people and factors) to combine to produce a different pattern. Learning is required to understand the unique system that is each person’s life: their relationships, their strengths, their needs, the outcomes they prioritise, and how those outcomes are created.

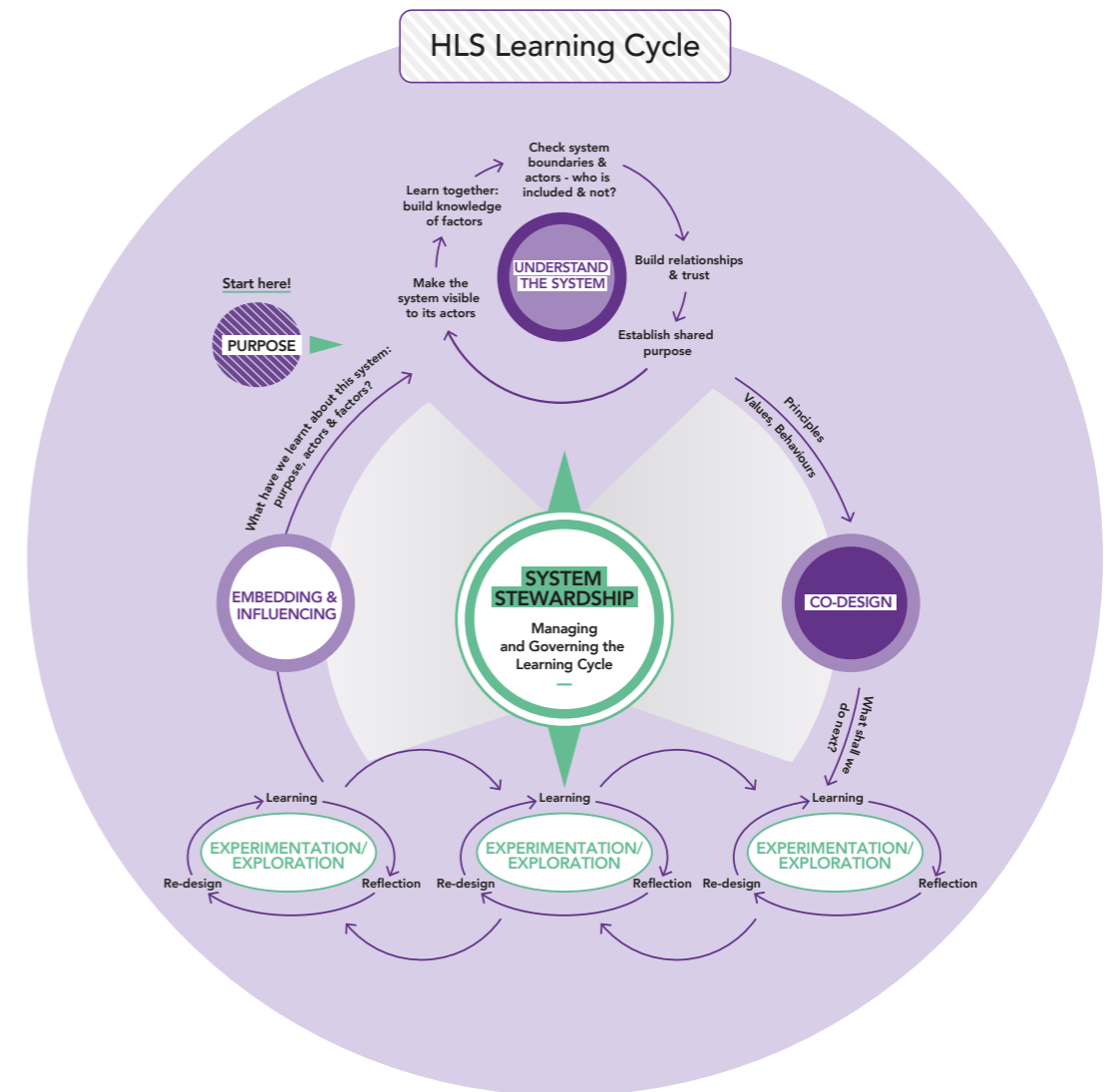
Experimentation is required to explore how public service can respond to all of those things, and how different people and organisations can collaborate in conditions where nothing is static or reliable.

From a management perspective, this is the reality of how an outcome is made. Outcomes cannot be purchased or “delivered”, they have to be explored. If we care about outcomes, then the purpose of our management practice is to enable this learning and exploration to happen effectively.

Enacting this learning strategy is done by creating and following a Learning Cycle, which looks something like this:

This strategy is a different version

Figure 2: The HLS Learning Cycle



of strategic planning: it is not about implementing an evidence-based programme and expecting it to work because it has been shown to work before. Learning as management strategy assumes that outcomes are neither predictable nor certain, and that approaches should be emergent and constantly renegotiated with all the actors involved. The focus of management practice is therefore creating the conditions (infrastructure,

processes, practices, cultures) for learning, rather than performance management and control.

The characteristics of a learning strategy include learning in every interaction: everyone’s job entails learning all the time. This consistent and ongoing curiosity and openness to change requires significant effort and energy. The payoff is public service which meets the unique strengths and needs of each person and adapts

quickly to an ever-changing world. A learning strategy cultivates curiosity, encourages interrogation of the status quo, and identifies and challenges injustice.

The emergence of new ideas that are generated by people learning continuously together in every part of their practice, creates bespoke responses that can rapidly adapt. This strategy can change not just the practices of people but also the organisational and service environment, and it can do so before practices become entrenched or inefficient. A learning strategy allows practitioners and managers to notice more quickly when this is even happening.

Scaling the capacity to learn, not what is learnt

One of the key characteristics of learning as a management strategy is that when it comes to thinking about “scaling”, then what is scaled is the capacity to learn, rather than what has been learnt in any given context. Because each time and place is different, “what works” is the capacity for each place to learn.

“Let’s forget scaling.”

(Olli-Pekka Heinonen, director general of EDUFI, the Finnish National Agency for Education)

Measurement

Learning as management strategy requires and enables a different role for measurement. [Measurement is incredibly useful as a tool for learning in public service](#) – it can help us to overcome our cognitive biases and, when done well, provides good data from which people can develop important understandings about how systems are functioning.

However, measurement can only play this role when we free it from [a crucial problem that bedevils NPM](#): NPM forces us to treat what we measure as if those measurements were an adequate substitute for real life. You hear this in demands to create “measurable change” – as if measurable were a synonym for “real”. This is not the case.

Real change is experienced in someone’s life. This can be change in tangible things, or intangible: how they see the world, or change in their feelings. Real change is as much someone finding forgiveness as it is their finding a job. All these things (tangible and intangible) are measurable (with different degrees of difficulty and effort). But the measures are an abstraction. They are a simplification of the complex, multifaceted nature of real life into a data point. The measures are a pauperised, context-free, superficial substitute for reality.

HLS frees measurement from the cage imposed on it by NPM. Because HLS doesn’t need measures to be the basis for performance management – for reward or punishment, to motivate workers extrinsically, or to “incentivise” the public to achieve their goals – it can do the job that we need it to do: to help us learn and improve.

Chapter 3 The HLS Principles: Systems

Systems

Authors: Toby Lowe and Max French

[Contact the authors](#)

Where and how do managers apply the human, learning-focused principles that we have described? They are applied to Systems. A Systems perspective is essential for enabling and enacting Human Learning approaches, because complex systems produce the outcomes we care about.

Our key finding is that **healthy systems produce better outcomes**. A healthy system is one in which actors learn together and act collaboratively in order to achieve human freedom and flourishing.

The focus on systems means that HLS draws on traditions from the worlds of [systems thinking](#) and [complexity theory](#). This gives some key foundational ideas and frameworks with which to understand the world.

Whenever we talk about “a system”, we are referring to a representation of a set of relationships in the world that interact to make things happen.

We can describe these as relationships

between *actors* (people, organisations, etc) or *factors* (structural aspects of people’s lives, such as technology, ethnicity or poverty). When we talk about “a system”, we are therefore talking about a created thing – a representation that is made by human beings in order to try and make sense of the complex web of interactions that is really happening in the world. A system is always “the map, not the territory”.

How we construct “a system” is therefore always a function of the question: “how useful is this map to help us navigate the world?”

For people who use an HLS approach to public management, the question of how to construct “a system” (deciding what the boundaries of it are, and which actors or factors to include) is always related to the question: **what are the actors and factors that create an outcome in this person’s life?**

We have found that it is useful to create the following views of “system” at different scales, in order

to understand the task of enabling systems to produce better outcomes in people's lives:

- [Person's life as system](#)
- [Team/organisations as system](#)
- [Place as system](#)
- [Country as system.](#)

At each of these scales, systems produce better outcomes when they are "healthy". So what does a healthy system look like?

Healthy systems are learning systems

The most obvious aspect of healthy systems that we see from across the range of case studies is that healthy systems are learning systems. In other words, they are systems in which the actors continuously learn together about the ways in which that system operates.

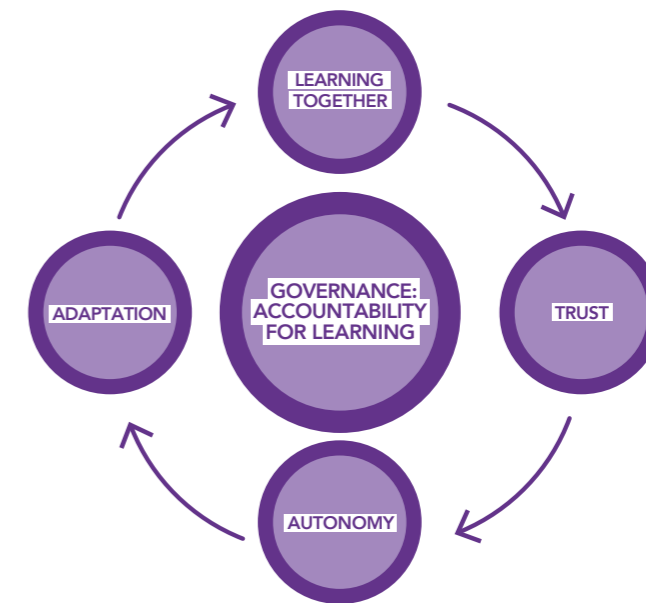
"Some of the wicked problems are so [complex], that usual management approaches don't solve these problems. We need everyone in the system, whom the problem concerns, to be part of the solvers. As we don't know all the answers, we have learnt to fail and take new direction... There is a need to reinforce the system's ability to learn together."

(EDUFI Innovation Centre Evaluation)

Healthy systems cultivate and make use of trust

If learning and collaborating together are the key features of healthy systems, we can easily see why trust is such a crucial asset for such systems. We have seen from the [Human](#) chapter that a virtuous circle exists between learning together and trust. Learning together helps build trust, and trust helps people to learn more effectively – as they are willing to be more honest, and more open to changing together.

Figure 1: A virtuous cycle of learning together and trust



Healthy systems are diverse systems

As we have seen from the [Human](#) chapter, understanding the diversity of human experience is crucial for enabling effective outcomes – because outcomes, and how they are created, look and feel different in each person's life. Consequently, the systems of interest by which outcomes are produced must reflect that diversity of experience and perspective.

Healthy systems address inequalities of power

We also see from the case study work that tackling power inequalities is a necessary part of enabling the diversity, and therefore health, of systems. Genuine participation of diverse voices in a system requires addressing the structural power inequalities which have meant that some voices are unreasonably valued over others.

How does a system become "healthy"?

The most important lesson from across our case studies is that it is very rare for healthy systems to develop spontaneously. In all the circumstances we have encountered, creating healthy systems requires **purposeful work**.

Borrowing the language of the Institute for Government, we have come to call the purposeful work of creating healthy systems "[System Stewardship](#)". The case studies themselves use many different variants of this language. Some explicitly describe themselves as [Systems Stewards](#). Others call themselves "systems servant", "systems noticer" or "orchestrator of the ecosystem". The role of Systems Steward also contains strong connections to the role of Systems Convenor, as articulated by the Wenger-Trayners.

Chapter 4 The HLS Principles: Relationship between H, L and S

Relationship between “Human”, “Learning” and “Systems”

Author: Toby Lowe

[Contact the author](#)

The Human, Learning and Systems elements of HLS provide different, but interdependent, parts of HLS as a whole public management paradigm.

Human provides the moral purpose of public service work – an answer to the question: why does any of this matter? We care about this, because we care about human freedom and flourishing.

Learning is the meta-strategy for management. We apply this strategy at all system scales, in order to achieve the purpose of human freedom and flourishing.

Systems provide the unit of analysis. Systems produce the outcomes in people’s lives that matter. So, we apply our management strategy to achieve our purpose by helping to create healthy systems.

These elements come together to form a coherent whole in this way:

We believe that the purpose of public service is to promote human freedom and flourishing. Because we recognise and respect their freedom, each person gets to choose what “flourishing” means for them (so long as it is compatible with flourishing for others). We call the choices they make about what flourishing means for them the “outcomes” that public service seeks to help develop in the world.

These outcomes are not “delivered” by public service. Rather, the outcomes emerge (or not) as a result of the ongoing interactions between all the relationships and causal factors in that person’s life. This requires public service to see each person as being at the centre of their own unique system of relationships and causal factors.

The most effective and efficient way for public service to understand and respond to the unique and ever-changing nature of the complex systems that create outcomes in people's lives is to adopt learning as both meta-strategy and management practice. Workers must develop learning relationships with those they serve, relationships that enable them both to see and understand each person's "life as system". It is the job of this learning relationship to understand the ever-changing detail of each person's life context, and to explore ways to intervene in this system in order to produce desirable patterns of results ("outcomes") more frequently.

It is the job of public management practice to enable this learning relationship between those who work in public service and the people they support. It can learn to do this by treating all system scales as complex systems, which can be stewarded towards learning and adaptation, through resource allocation, governance and capacity planning, activities that are focused on enabling learning and adaptation.

Chapter 5 Principles into action: How change happens: Purposefully adopting an HLS approach

Purposefully adopting an HLS approach

Authors: Toby Lowe and Hannah Hesslegreaves

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Adopting an HLS approach represents a paradigm shift in public management – it is change in both the foundational beliefs that underpin management practice, and the practices, processes and cultures that enact and reinforce those beliefs.

There is a significant implication for viewing public management as a paradigm. It means that you can't just change *some of* the practices of NPM. Because each practice is mutually reinforcing, and justified by foundational beliefs, you can't change one thing without the necessity of changing the things which are dependent on it, and on which it depends. For example, within an NPM frame, you can't simply decide to change the purpose of measurement to focus it on learning. Within an NPM frame, measurement is required to know whom to reward and whom to punish (has this person/team/organisation met their targets or not?). So, if you change the purpose of measurement, performance

management systems become inoperable. And if you can't reward or punish people, how will they be incentivised to do the right thing? And how will we know whom to choose among the competitors for contracts, if we can't compare their performance?

This can feel like a very daunting prospect! The good news is that this paradigm shift can be enacted at lots of scales, and that change in one system creates ripples which can provoke potential change in other areas. And the change that you seek is an example of itself – it is enacted by adopting the learning strategy that you're trying to create. So, by taking a learning approach to your management practice, you bring about the change you're trying to create.

But how does such paradigm shift happen?

The challenge when thinking about how to purposefully pursue this kind of change is that it is, by definition, emergent. Any change you seek will

be subject to interaction with other things that are happening in the world, and any changes you make will have unexpected consequences. That's just what it means to work in complex environments (aka "the real world").

"Emergent strategy is about shifting the way we see and feel the world and each other. If we begin to understand ourselves as practice ground for transformation, we can transform the world"

(adrienne maree brown, **Emergent Strategy**)

So, how do you purposefully pursue emergent change?

From the experience of those who have undertaken these journeys, we can see that the large-scale change goals they set are at the level of principles or high-level goals, e.g. we want to treat everyone as fully-rounded human beings, and we will optimise for learning rather than control. We want trusted relationships between actors in our system, which provide bespoke service for those who are being served. These principles are the kinds of high-level change goals which seem to work.

Pursuing these kind of high-level goals **requires a process of learning**

and exploration. For example, what would it mean in our context to treat everyone as a fully-rounded human being, and to optimise our management processes for learning?

Developing an HLS approach to public management is therefore an example of itself. If you want to adopt an HLS approach, it requires you to adopt learning as both your management strategy and your approach to change.

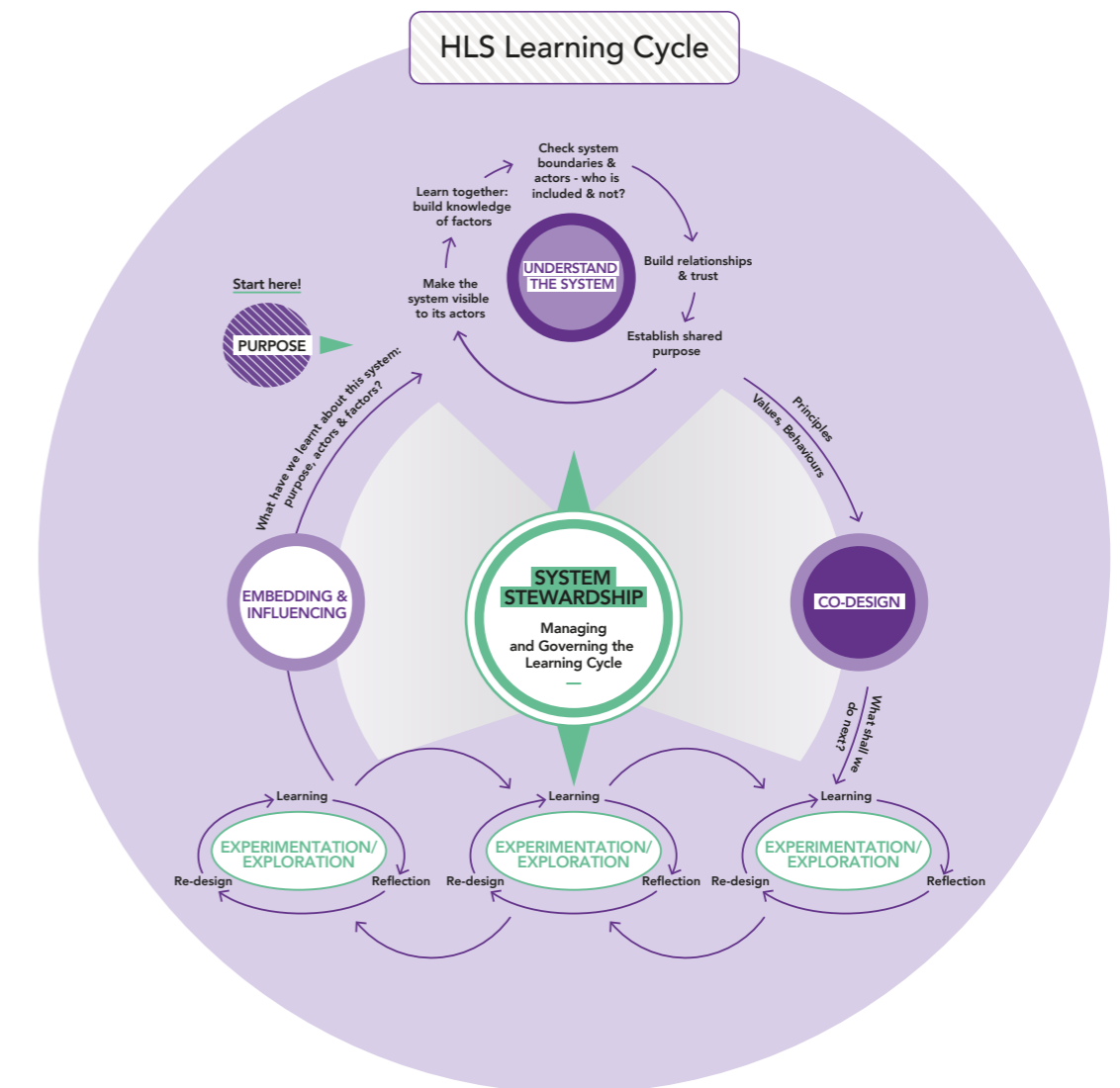
"The Experimentation programme and each of its experiment stories has been on a journey of its own, with things done differently throughout. However, doing things differently only becomes significant when considered in relation to previous operating practices, cultures, and norms, as well as their transformation, i.e. the big trajectory."

(**EDUFI case study**)

A guide for your learning journey

This is our current best understanding as to the directions that a learning journey is likely to take – a journey that enables you to find what works in your context. It is a representation of a Learning Cycle for a system.

Figure 1: The HLS Learning Cycle



This diagram is a model of a journey, and **like all models, it is wrong.**

The danger with a representation like this is that it disaggregates and sequences practices that are usually interdependent, messy and fractal. But, despite being wrong, we think it may be useful because:

1. For those who are comforted by having a picture of the overall approach, this provides comfort.

It is a "**certainty artefact**" – something deliberately created to provide a sense of security in an uncertain environment. The uncertainty of working in complexity is challenging, particularly for personality types who like certainty. For the person who needs to see what the plan looks like, this provides the shape of a plan.

2. It provides a useful set of reference points for those following similar learning journeys. The identified elements of this journey are those that others have found useful. They may well be useful for you, too. And if they are likely to be useful, you can allocate resources and schedule workload so as to enable these things to happen.

Where/how do I start to create change?

Dissonance is the energy for change – find it

The generalisable experience from across many of the HLS case studies is that dissonance and dissatisfaction provide the starting energy for change. Who else is feeling dissatisfied with how things currently work?

Validate, amplify and make sense of that dissonance

Once you have found others who are experiencing dissonance, how can you collectively validate and make sense of that dissonance? Creating platforms in which people can express [countercultural “heretical” perspectives](#) can be useful in this respect. This helps to create a sense of collective bravery in your context.

Learning is the strategy, experimentation/exploration is the method

As we have explored above, adopting an HLS approach is an example of itself. People learn their way to HLS practice.

Be infectious

If you’re doing something different, others will be curious. You can develop that curiosity into being an ally by creating opportunities to share your experiences across organisational boundaries. Think of this as growing a network of allies by infecting people with your experiences. Remember – there is little value in trying to convince people. If what you’re doing is interesting and useful, others will likely find it so, too. All you need to do is share generously.

Make the money behave differently

As described above, in order to make lasting change in the public management paradigm in your context, you will at some point have to change the structural processes by which resources are allocated and accounted for; at some point, you will have to make the money behave differently.

Chapter 6 Principles into action: How change happens: Enacting learning as management strategy

Enacting learning as management strategy

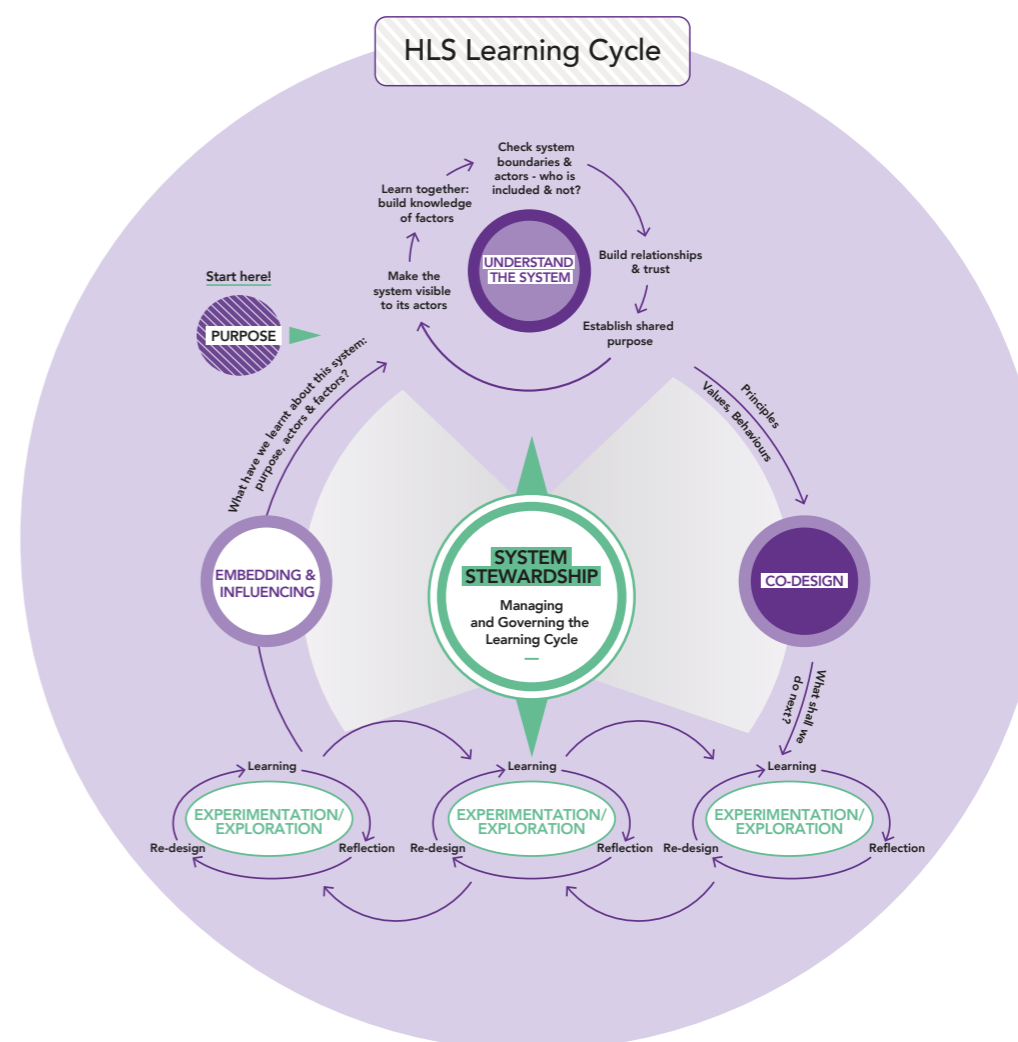
Author: Toby Lowe

[Contact the author](#)

What does it take to enact the kind of learning-based management strategy that we have outlined? This section will explore what we have learnt from

across the case studies about the ways to enact the principles of an HLS approach, using the Learning Cycle model.

Figure 1: The HLS Learning Cycle



Purpose

The act of defining the purpose of a system enables the initial boundaries of a system of interest to be drawn, and thus the actors within that system to be provisionally identified. A purpose is usefully defined in this way: the purpose of System X is to enable (a particular aspect of) human flourishing for group Y in place Z. For example, the [Plymouth Alliance](#) identified and created a system of interest whose purpose was helping people with multiple and complex needs to live the lives they would want to lead.

Understand the system

“Understanding the system” is partly a process of gathering together existing knowledge – what is known about this aspect of human flourishing in this place? And who are the people/organisations who have that knowledge? It is also a process of action inquiry – a process of building relationships and trust (coming from learning together) and developing shared purpose among those people and organisations. Through this learning process, the actors in the system come to consciously see and understand it as a system.

This shared common understanding of a system can then be used to build a sense of shared purpose for that system – moving from the *de facto* purpose given by whoever acted as a

Systems Steward, to a sense of shared purpose articulated by all the actors involved. This sense of shared purpose provides the guiding star for all those working in the system – it enables people within it to ask the question: if this thing that I am doing, does it help to achieve our purpose? If so, how does it do that?

How is this shared purpose operationalised, so that it can function effectively as a way to prioritise and coordinate action? In the case of the [Plymouth Alliance](#) and the [Dorset Integrated Care System](#) this shared purpose was articulated as a set of guiding principles. In Plymouth’s case, these principles then manifest themselves in the governance mechanisms for the Alliance, and serve as the basis for collective reflection and decision-making. A published set of principles served a similar purpose in the GreaterSport work:

“People could see that the core team were being true to principles set out in the beginning, therefore it was useful to have a list of guiding principles which were being checked against.”

(GreaterSport case study)

Codesign

Once shared principles have been agreed, the next question in the

Learning Cycle is: **how shall we enact our principles? This question is answered by a process of codesign.** Because actors recognise they are part of a complex system, they also recognise that they must find the right ways to enact their principles. A crucial difference between the learning approach in HLS and other contexts in which codesign might be applied is therefore that what is being codesigned are not programmes to be delivered. What is being designed are the processes of action research that people refer to as “experimentation” or “exploration”. In other words, **it is the learning process that is being codesigned.**

Exploration and experimentation

Exploration and experimentation are at the heart of the learning cycle. It is by conducting explorations and experiments that people find “what works” in that particular time and place. It is important to note that the goal of this action inquiry is not necessarily to mimic the methodology and approaches of the natural sciences. Natural science experiments require controlled conditions which almost certainly don’t exist in complex, real-world environments. People conducting “experiments” did not try and artificially recreate these controlled conditions in their action research. The language of “explorations”

therefore seems equally applicable. When conducting an exploration in a complex, ever-shifting landscape, those undertaking exploratory action develop fast-paced feedback and reflection loops, asking the question: **what happens if we try this?**

“To test new ways of working, we listen to people to identify the right problem and create an autonomous, curious and learning environment where prototyping something different is possible and meaningful. Through consistent reflection, we listen to what the ‘doing’ is showing us and either run with it and continue or fail quickly to try something else.”

(Mayday Trust case study)

The action research process of undertaking experiments/explorations in systems is necessary for developing the bespoke responses that a human approach to public management entails.

Embedding and influencing:

What was learnt from the explorations and experiments – both from those that were “successful” and those that “failed” – must then be translated into adaptation of behaviours, practices and structures within the system. Furthermore, some learning from

these experiments will require action at larger-system scales (e.g. organisation, place, country), and so learning from one scale must be connected to the Learning Cycle of the scale above.

Through this process of learning and adaptation, the system has changed. And therefore, the cycle begins again with "Understanding the System".

Chapter 7

Principles into action: How change happens: Enacting learning as strategy at different system scales

Enacting a learning strategy at different system scales

Author: Toby Lowe

[Contact the author](#)

System scales

We have seen that the way to enact learning as strategy is to undertake a Learning Cycle for any given system. We will now explore how the Learning Cycles operate at different system scales, and how the Learning Cycles at these different scales relate to one another.

From the work of the case studies we can identify [four scales of viewing a system](#) at which this type of learning strategy is developed and implemented:

- [Person's life as system](#)
- [Team/organisation as system](#)
- [Place as system](#)
- [Country as system.](#)

In most situations, this requires thinking across two system scales – where the job of the Learning Cycle at the

larger scale is to create the enabling environment for a Learning Cycle to successfully operate at the scale below. At each scale above the “life as system”, we can therefore see two sets of practice:

1. Undertaking the learning cycle at a particular system scale:
 - How can we learn from the patterns in the system below?
 - How can we enable that learning cycle to function effectively?
2. Managing and governing (“stewarding”) [[link to Systems chapter](#)] that learning cycle – planning and allocating the resources, and checking whether it is working appropriately.

We will explore the first of those practices in this section, and the second in the following one [[link](#)].

Public management through a learning lens

When we look at the [case studies](#) and explore the “enablers” of learning-based public service practice, we see that for public managers to pursue learning as a strategy, it requires the practices, processes and cultures of public management practice to be aligned to enable this.

This means that at all system scales larger than “person as system”, enacting a learning strategy means the content of the Learning Cycle that people are experimenting with is public management practice.

People are experimenting with [alternative versions of public management practices](#) such as evaluation, contracting and performance management. From the experiences described in the case studies, it does not seem possible to graft a learning approach onto contracting or performance measurement and management processes which focus on hitting predefined service specifications, or other forms of target.

“To do things in a different way which prioritises human relationships, potential, learning and empowerment requires rethinking how we do

everything in the organisation, which is sometimes challenging and exhausting. It also requires that we explain why we need to do things differently to stakeholders – funders, commissioners and others who may not share or be familiar with our approach and may not recognise the value of it.”

(Lighthouse case study)

Adopting a learning strategy at each system scale

We can see how learning as strategy was enacted at each of the different scales by exploring our [case studies](#).

People’s lives as system

Throughout the cases, we see examples of public-facing practitioners seeing each person’s life that they serve as a complex system. In the [Mayday Trust](#) and [Wellbeing Teams](#) cases, for example, the job of their street-level practitioners is to build a relationship with the person they support; the practitioner and the person/people they were supporting then learn together as they go around the learning cycle. They understand that person’s “life as system”, to see what patterns they can find. The worker and citizen codesign and undertake experiments and

explorations in that system to see how those patterns can be changed. And they embed the learning from those experiments as changes in behaviour and structures of that “life as system”. And those changes lead to the learning cycle starting again.

Organisation as system

To enable this way of working for their street-level practitioners, each of the organisations above experimented with or explored the creation of new management practices, which created both the enabling conditions and constraints to support and provide boundaries to the learning cycles of their street-level practitioners. The organisations enacted a learning strategy by reframing the job of street-level practitioners. They no longer seek to deliver a prescribed service. Instead, they form relationships and in those relationships explore and experiment with what will make a difference.

For example, [Wellbeing Teams](#) developed a “self-managing teams” approach, modelled on the [Buurtzorg example](#) of neighbourhood-based home care in the Netherlands. Their management practices – their resource planning and allocation mechanisms, role descriptions, information systems and improvement feedback loops, training and skills development, etc – were all created to enable effective learning relationships between the

care workers and those they served. And all these mechanisms, processes and artefacts were themselves experiments – they were produced and iterated by experimentation at the organisational level.

“Place as system” (see also [Place chapter](#))

At the Place scale, we can see two different facets of experimenting with “place as system”. Partly we see this in the community development practices of case studies such as [Help on Your Doorstep](#), [Moray Wellbeing Hub](#) and [Plymouth Octopus Project \(POP\)](#).

We see in the examples of [Aberlour](#), [Collective Impact Agency](#), [Liverpool City Region Combined Authority](#), [Plymouth Alliance](#), [POP](#), and [South Tyneside Alliance](#) what it looks like to enact a learning strategy which creates the public management practices – system convening, resource allocation, creation of learning spaces, governing, skills and capacity planning – that enable a learning strategy to be enacted at the smaller scale.

The learning journey at this scale created new commissioning mechanisms – [which commissioned for healthy systems](#) – for learning and collaboration rather than (made-up) “results”. Furthermore, it created the spaces to learn from the activity at the scale of “lives as systems”.

Countries as systems

From the work of [EDUFI](#), [FCDO](#) and [Healthcare Improvement Scotland](#), we can see what it means to enact learning as strategy at the level of national government.

These organisations used their learning journey to experiment with public management practice that supports learning strategies at the level of “place as system”. For example, they developed a Learning Partner role – part system convener, part learning support – to support learning at local levels. They also developed resource allocation and evaluation approaches which supported the implementation of learning strategies at the “place as system” scale. They developed cross-place learning infrastructure which enabled learning to spread between places. This infrastructure enabled the higher-scale systems to spot patterns and themes across places, patterns

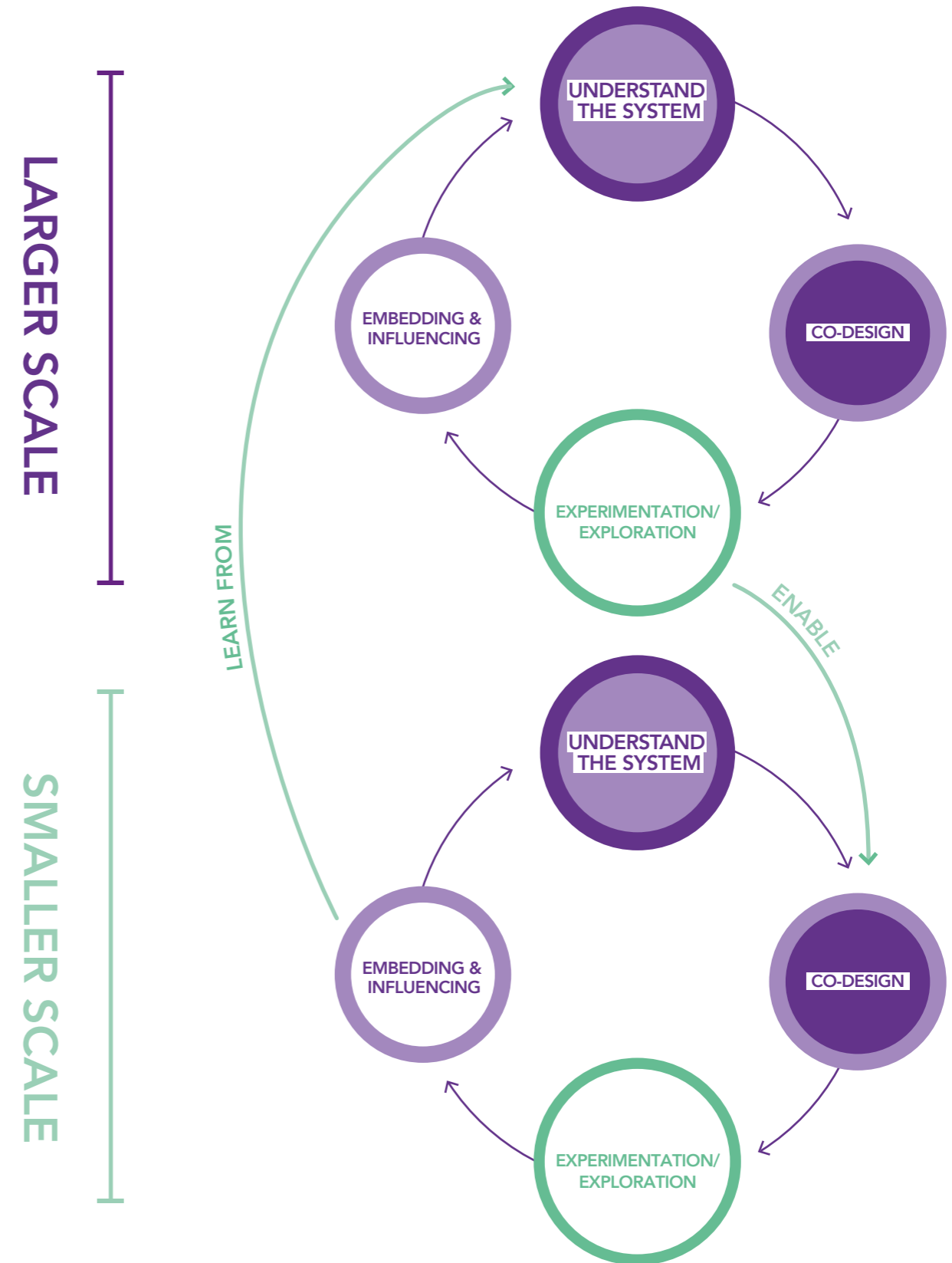
which require changes to the roles and structures that exist within systems at different scales.

Relationship between system scales: creating the enabling conditions and constraints, and enacting structural change

It is not possible to manage and govern how a learning cycle operates, and to enact necessary changes on the basis of what is learnt, solely at one system scale.

Any two adjoining scales can form dyads – a pair of system scales where the job of the larger scale is to explore the public management practices which enable learning at the smaller scale, and to enact and coordinate learning from that scale.

Figure 1: A dyad (pair) of Learning Cycles



Horizontal learning at each scale of system

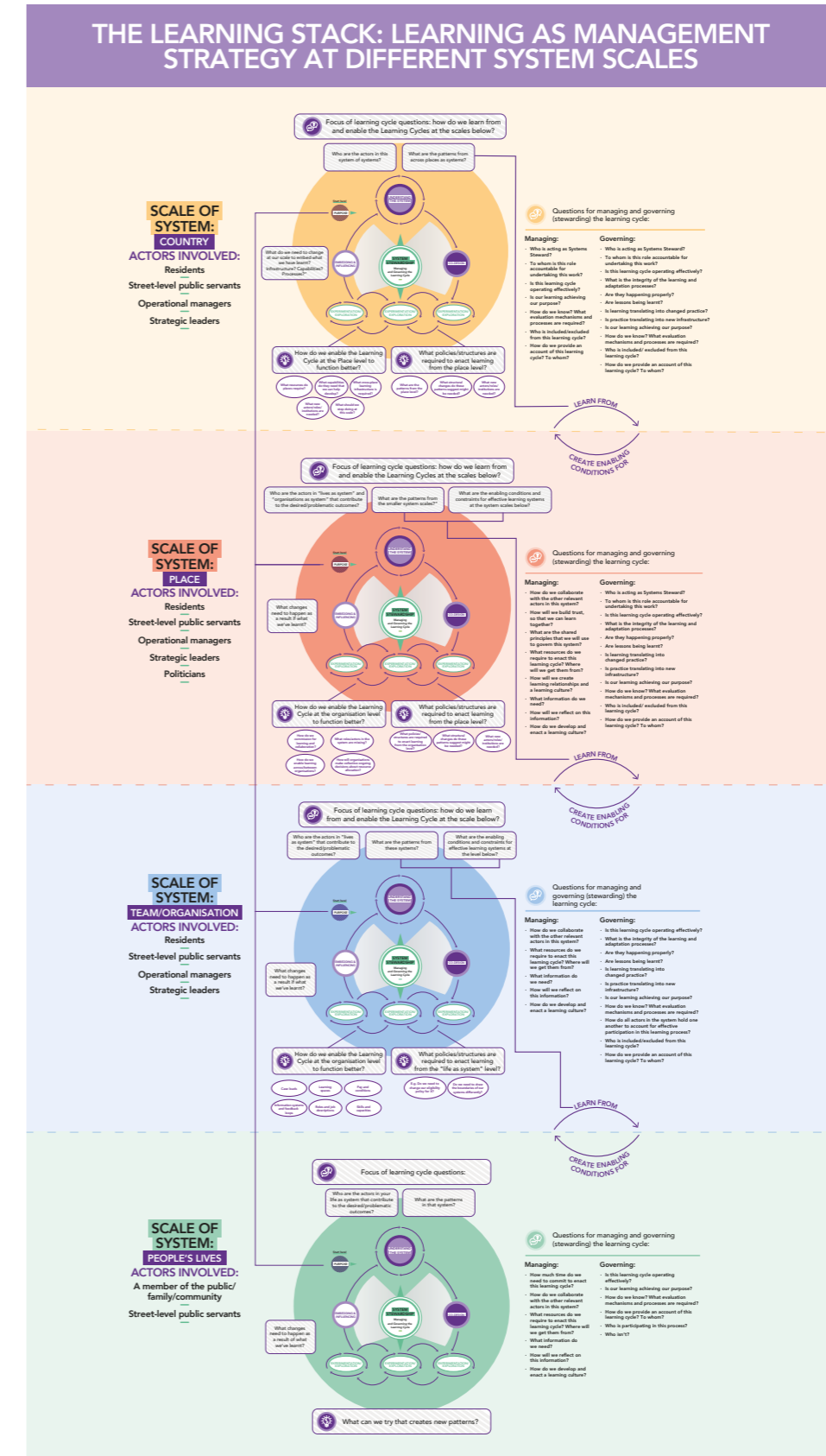
This representation of scales of systems is a simplification. It represents a “vertical slice” of a set of relationships that also have horizontal (and diagonal) components. We can begin to represent the horizontal aspects of the relationship between learning systems in this way. This is a way to begin to represent the horizontal “spreading” of learning between different systems at the same scale.

Devolved power

The relationship between the different system scales highlights a fundamental point about power in an HLS version of public management. In an HLS approach, power is devolved into the work – into the relationship between the public and the workers who serve them. The purpose of all the other management layers is to enable that relationship to function well.

This is the foundation of the claim that HLS makes – to be public service for the real world. It is public service grounded in the real lives of those it seeks to serve.

Figure 2: “The Learning Stack” – Learning Cycles at different system scales



Managing and governing a learning strategy

Author: Toby Lowe

[Contact the author](#)

Chapter 8 Principles into action: How change happens: Managing and governing a learning strategy

In the previous chapter, we explored the content of a Learning Cycle at different system scales – what it is that they need to learn about. In this chapter, we will explore what is required to manage and govern a Learning Cycle. We call the process of managing and governing a Learning Cycle “System Stewardship”.

The task of managers is to ensure the conditions for the HLS learning cycle to operate effectively and authentically by establishing a culture in which failure is discussable, and by changing the structural drivers (funding, commissioning, and measures of performance) to support learning explicitly and directly. These are the things for which managers are responsible. They no longer account for the impossible task of “delivering outcomes”, but for creating the conditions for learning, and ultimately purposeful change and continuous public service improvement.

In general, these are the management challenges of creating the

characteristics of “healthy systems” described in the [Systems](#) chapter.

Managing

Reflecting on system boundaries

In our definition of “[systems](#)” we outlined the necessity of drawing boundaries around a system of interest (in order to get useful work done) and the artificial nature of those boundaries.

One of the important roles that a Systems Steward seems to play to create healthy systems is to continually reflect on where the system boundaries have been drawn. This reflection not only includes the formal mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of system boundaries (e.g. which organisations are on distribution lists and get invited to meetings), but also addresses the inequalities that can prevent genuine participation (a person/organisation may be invited to a meeting, but has their perspective been properly heard?).

Ensuring diverse voices are heard

The case studies highlight a broad range of ways in which diversity of voices in systems is actively promoted. [Lighthouse](#) emphasise this point when articulating their systems change work – they seek other perspectives than their own. [Plymouth Octopus](#) actively work to promote diversity in neighbourhood networks; [Surrey Youth Focus](#) does something similar for youth participation. The common practice across all of these case studies is that these Systems Stewards actively go looking for under-represented voices and perspectives that are seldom-heard within the conversations that have traditionally taken place in those contexts.

Addressing power inequalities

Work that addresses power inequalities can be seen in the work of the Lankelly Chase Foundation. Their system convening work, and exploration of the legitimacy conditions for Systems Stewards, contains much useful practice – including participatory grant-making.

“We needed to create the conditions for better quality engagement and dialogue. Firstly, the way we have traditional conversations often doesn’t tap into the full

potential of people’s diverse experiences, talents and gifts. Secondly, difference cannot be neatly integrated on the terms of those doing the including – that is, without any social conflict or significant change in structures or power relations.”

(Lankelly Chase Foundation case study)

Creating learning infrastructure

If learning is to occur across a system, information must be shared across and between organisations, and different actors from across the system need to be able to make sense of that information together, in order to make it meaningful. Therefore, a key management task is to create learning infrastructure: information systems which enable information sharing, and learning spaces which enable shared sense-making. We can see this example at a national scale in the [EDUFI](#) case study, in which they created the infrastructure for learning between the different localities they supported.

There is an important role here to explore how the “digital transformation” work that many public services are undertaking connects with HLS. At its best, this digital transformation work shares

some underlying ideas and practices (for example, [Human-Centred Design](#)). However, we have seen too much digital transformation which seeks to turn relational services into transactional ones, in the mistaken belief that this form of standardisation will reduce costs.

Build a learning culture and learning relationships

Management has a key role in building a learning culture. Firstly, it can signal the importance of learning – through all its communications and processes. Secondly, it can role-model learning approaches – the management process should itself be a process of learning and experimentation.

Skills and capacity building

Managing a learning cycle also means ensuring that staff have the skills and capabilities required to learn together. We have seen system leadership training deployed as a useful capability building mechanism. For example, the [Plymouth Alliance](#) used [the Leadership Centre’s programme](#) and others have used [this one from The Staff College](#). The [Collective Leadership for Scotland](#) case study describes how they developed their own programme for leaders to develop a learning culture – “a spirit of inquiry” – by helping them to create their own “action inquiry” processes.

Management can support staff to develop the habits of curiosity and openness through various forms of coaching and capacity-building. For example, [EDUFI](#) used a coaching process to support public officials to shift from being an “expert who knows the answers” to a person who inspires curiosity.

“Public officials are not any more the “experts sitting in the room”, and their role becomes to encourage people to share, learn and contribute – in a way, they become system experts. There is a need for switching from operator with pre-settled answers to an inspirer engaging in teamwork. They are expected to question their own identity and role within the system.”

(EDUFI case study)

Governing

Creating effective governance arrangements for the Learning Cycle may be the most important long-term role that a Systems Steward plays, as it is the governance arrangements that ensure accountability, equity and alignment with purpose.

Key questions that governance arrangements wrestle with are:

- Who gets to decide what

appropriate learning practices look like?

- How will organisations hold one another accountable for following agreed principles and values?
- What legal and organisational structures are required to underpin governance processes?

This form of governance is what ensures that the Learning Cycle keeps functioning to achieve its purpose – learning how best to enable human freedom and flourishing. We see these governance processes being developed at place level in the [Plymouth Alliance](#), which has created an Alliance Leadership Team to create peer-to-peer accountability and mass participation “Big Buzz” events to enable accountability conversations between residents and other system actors. At a national level, we see the [EDUFI case study](#) create forms of “multi-stakeholder dialogue” as governance mechanisms.

Accountability

Creating mechanisms to govern Learning Cycles requires rethinking the nature of accountability. The good news is that this is work we knew we had to do, because the evidence shows that [target-based performance accountability mechanisms](#) fail in complex environments. We can see examples of shifts in our

understanding of accountability in different case studies: shifts in terms of the nature of accountability, the focus of accountability, and who gets to participate in accountability conversations.

The nature of accountability: accountability in dialogue

One of the ways in which accountability has been rethought, so that it actually works in complex environments, is by switching to a form of accountability that exists as a dialogue between stakeholders, rather than as a reporting or inspection process. We see this particularly in the [EDUFI case study](#), where Innovation Centre staff developed multi-stakeholder dialogue as a mechanism both to reflect on the progress of work at local level and to explore the effectiveness of local-national relationships. This accords with the “Humble Government” approach that is being developed across the Finnish state:

“Autonomy must therefore come with accountability through a commitment to continuous dialogue that creates feedback-loops and ensures learning and improvement when needed.”

(Annala et al, 2021 – Humble Government: How to Realize Ambitious Reforms Prudently)

Crucially, this form of accountability in dialogue seems to be underpinned by a switch from the idea of “holding to account”, in which the person providing the account is assumed to be extrinsically motivated, to “helping to account”, in which the accountability process is part of a person’s (or organisation’s) ongoing reflective practice. This switch would therefore seem to require the purposeful creation of a broader reality in which the actors involved in a system are trustworthy (i.e. those who are deemed untrustworthy are excluded from the public service system).

Accountability for learning

The [FCDO case study](#) shifts the focus of accountability from “results” to learning. The [FCDO](#) adaptive management processes use “sentinel” (proxy) indicators, gathered by independent evaluators, to help the partners in the work to understand how effectively their systems are operating as learning systems.

Distributed accountability

As well as shifting the focus of accountability, the case studies are also shifting the direction in which it operates. As in the [FCDO](#) example above, the [Plymouth Alliance](#) and [Wellbeing Teams](#) studies use horizontal – peer-to-peer – accountability in which peers seek accountability conversations from one another. This can also be seen in the [Empowerment](#) case study.

The range of mechanisms by which accountability and governance of learning strategies can work is an area for significant further exploration in HLS research.

Chapter 9 Principles into action: How change happens: HLS methods and tools

Human Learning Systems practices

Author: Melissa Hawkins

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What kinds of practices does an HLS approach require? We have frequently heard this question from practitioners. As a core component of the HLS approach is prioritising learning and using [learning as a management strategy](#), we think the answer to these questions lies in considering how learning can be best supported in practice.

This section explores methods used by different case studies that have created time and space for learning at three levels: individual, organisational and cross-organisational. All three levels are useful for creating opportunities for growth and development. The methods outlined here have, in different ways, supported those working and managing in complex organisations.

Individual learning opportunities

Learning at the personal level can foster curiosity, engagement, and

[intrinsic motivation](#), which then in turn contributes to organisational development. Opportunities for individual learning incorporate personal learning journeys through attending educational courses, continuing professional development, and self-directed learning practices such as journals and blogs.

Examples include Plymouth City Council contracting with [The Leadership Centre](#), who facilitated an inclusive programme of system leadership training for staff at all levels. This enabled systems thinking to be embedded into various workstreams and collaborations, such as the Plymouth Alliance. The CEO and colleagues of [Empowerment](#) are undertaking the MA in Social Pedagogy Leadership at the University of Central Lancashire and are using the ideas of social pedagogy to redesign their mission and vision:

“Social Pedagogy gave me (the CEO of the charity) a language and a pathway to journey alongside colleagues at Empowerment to change the conversation.”

(Mike Crowther, CEO Empowerment)

Organisational learning opportunities

Opportunities at the organisational level enable colleagues and members of a community to learn with one another, and include groups and the use of frameworks and methodologies, such as action research and action learning. For example, [Lankelly Chase](#) has been developing a strategy for [action inquiry](#) for several years now to enhance their work in systems change.

Methods to support continuous learning can be helpful, as the time between event and reflection is significantly shortened. This can mean avoiding falling into the trap of retrospective coherence, the attempt to reduce complex and messy situations into simple ones, which are therefore easier to manage. In his work on sense-making using the [Cynefin Framework](#), David Snowden suggested that [innovation teams](#) should be deployed during the

COVID-19 crisis. Change is often rapid and unpredictable to capture novel learning synchronously. This approach, which could be considered a “rapid learning environment” (RLE), is used by [Chris Bolton](#) and the Audit Wales team.

Cross-organisational learning opportunities

Cross-organisational learning enables learning to occur between people who do not know each other, by attending events and the formation of learning groups which span organisational and place-based boundaries.

Numerous online events and conferences – past, present and future – have enabled people from across the world to participate. These include a series of [webinars](#) on the development of the HLS approach during COVID-19, organised by Northumbria University and included partners’ participation across the HLS collaborative. The [Losing Control Network](#), [IVAR](#) and [Next Stage Radicals](#) are currently running regular community of practice groups and peer support and learning groups for those involved in public services, all of which offer regular time and space rather than a simple one-off event.

Roles and responsibilities

As well as the many methods to choose from when seeking to learn and to change practice, what also needs consideration are the different roles and responsibilities people can play as part of this change. We have noticed a range of roles that can support learning at both an internal and external organisational level, which can be labelled as “learning champion”, “curator of learning”, [learning partner](#), “thinking partner”, consultant, researcher or educationalist. [See here](#) for further details on methods and roles.

There are numerous benefits in using the methods outlined above to encourage and support learning. However, there are also a number of caveats which must also be taken into account. The methods outlined may work in some contexts and not in others, and are not intended to be copy-and-pasted, they are not shortcuts or panaceas for success. What is intended is that this provides a starting-point for critical reflection and engagement with how learning can be supported for all those within an organisation and/or place.

Chapter 10

Case Studies

Case studies

How have we learnt about the HLS approach? We have developed our understanding by learning alongside the organisations who are exploring it in practice. 29 case studies, ranging from local voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) through to the departments of national governments, have been created especially for this report. A summary of these can be found [here](#). Full descriptions of all of the HLS case studies, including the 19 produced previously, can be found [here](#).

Chapter 11

HLS at different system scales: People's lives as systems: Impacts for people and place

HLS Impacts for people and place

Authors: Andy Brogan, Jeremy Cox and Mark Smith

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The impact of HLS starts in the experiences of real people, and as we understand their stories, we see that outcomes are highly contextual and individual.

People can experience public services as hard to access, bureaucratic, slow, time-consuming... When they come into contact with services run along HLS lines, the impact is very different...

"It's the first time we felt anyone listened."

"He no longer felt like a piece of meat, but that people really cared about him as a person."

"When you asked me how I was, I realised no-one had done that for two years. After that, things got better."

(From Saskie Dorman, of Dorset Health and Social Care)

To understand the impact of HLS for citizens, it is important to consider the crucial part played by the **"bespoke-by-design"** approach to understanding

outcomes and designing services – putting the **Human** in HLS.

"Paul had pain from a recently diagnosed, advanced cancer. The pain was severe, and it was suggested he would need to come into hospital to manage his pain, although he preferred to stay at home. Taking a bespoke-by-design approach, his support and pain relief was structured to work at home, and to ensure that he and his wife felt fully supported. This all happened within a few hours of the first call to the hospice – a timely response which prevented a hospital admission and potentially a very difficult end-of-life journey. Paul was able to remain at home until he died some weeks later. The time and space to respond in such an agile way was created by keeping the diaries of key team members relatively free of fixed commitments – the team

had learned that to properly meet the needs of people, rapid, customised responses were regularly needed.”

(From Saskie Dorman, of Dorset Health and Social Care)

This overtly person-centric approach to service design relies on **a foundation of shared sense-making and pattern-spotting that starts with the person, their context and their aspirations** and moves towards some kind of positive action, sometimes even a solution. This pattern-spotting then drives alignment of policies, structures and organisational systems – a structured discipline for **Learning** from what matters to individual citizens that is another HLS hallmark.

People feel their own outcomes, not population measures

The impact of HLS for people is best understood “front to back”, from the perspective of the outcomes that really matter to individual citizens. What matters to people is real, what systems “want” to see is conceptualised. Starting with what’s real is always more likely to work.

This stands in contrast to the “back-to-front” approach we typically see in our organisations and across public policymaking – working from desirable

population measures to policies, targets, service specifications, and upward reporting regimes.

When services start with desirable population outcomes and try to apply them to individuals, it creates problems:

“Karen’s [not her real name] youngest son was autistic, and her daughter was going through a tough time at school. For Karen, quitting smoking would have to wait, despite the prompts that the computer system was throwing up for the health professionals to take action.”

“Terry [not his real name] wanted to learn how better to manage his money by having someone he trusted to help him with his day-to-day spending, which he knew was impulsive and driven by boredom. The established practice meant setting up a formal appointeeship that released his money in batches many days apart, and reduced his contact with a trusted caseworker. This played into his impulsiveness and boredom and led to more debt.”

(From Mark Smith, of Gateshead Council)

The value of any impact exists only in the experiences of real, individual people. Everything must anchor to these experiences or risk “the faulty test paradox”. When we realise that the real purpose of a benefits system for many citizens is to help them to get off benefits, it would be a faulty test to ask if we had improved our ability to pay their claims within centrally-defined target processing times. **When we look at testing the impact of an HLS approach, then we have to begin with the questions about the experiences and stories of citizens, in their terms, as individuals.**

For real people in their real lives, what matters always means what matters to this person or these people, in this place and at this time. At the right moment, getting into employment can be an amazing outcome. At the wrong moment, it can be the unwelcome pressure that leads someone out of recovery and back onto the street. In the middle of a troubled night, a little attention can be a welcome reminder that someone cares. In the middle of a good book and a place of calm contentment, it can be an annoying interruption. Quitting the smoking cessation programme can be a sign that someone needs help to persevere, or it can be a sign that they are taking charge of their priorities and ensuring

that what really matters is what they’re really focused on.

The great convention historically governing the design of public services is that standard work works. It does not. The functional mindset is tempted to segment people – to bundle them up as being alike – and then to treat them as alike, too. This is problematic for multiple reasons:

- It reduces complex, whole people to their category. They become their condition or classification, or whichever one of them is more visible to the eyes of the system, and this introduces multiple forms of harm – including avoidable cost.
- Worse still, they become one of their conditions, whichever one stirs the most action in the system. For example, someone suffering with mental health problems who drinks is seen as a drinker, and you can’t pass go with mental health services until you stop drinking. In this particular example, “Double Diagnosis” is a predictable single-loop response.
- It ignores the unique context and strengths of people, reducing the possibility of these being part of their support story.
- It ignores the fact that outcomes are always person-shaped,

building an evaluation system that hardwires (institutionalises) the faulty test problem, where we evaluate success in terms that are irrelevant to the people we are trying to serve.

“A lady who was encountered by virtue of her rent arrears was able, when asked what mattered to her, to talk about her abusive relationship, protecting her child and trying to forge a new life. After months of support, which included freezing the debt, they were safe, she was working and the child was settled into a new school. Her benefits were also finally accurate, and she was able to plan ahead for the first time in years. Her debt was broadly the same and thus the support was deemed to have been ineffective by the functionally-focused parts of the system.”

(From Mark Smith, of Gateshead Council)

Why do these problems arise? In complex systems, standardised and functionalised organisational processes create friction between people, organisations and citizens, because they stop services from understanding

and responding to the particular needs, strengths and situations of individual citizens.

“An experienced physio arrived at the Emergency Department with a badly twisted ankle. She thought it might be broken, but knew if it was not, she would be able to go home and treat the soft tissue injury herself. The best way to proceed was to have an X-Ray to rule a break in or out and go from there. The nurse practitioner who saw the physio wanted to manipulate the injured ankle because the hospital IT system governed the diagnostic process, and she had to follow the scripts. An argument ensued – ‘I need to know what pathway to put you down’ versus ‘you are not manipulating my ankle when we don’t know whether it’s broken or not’. Standardisation had literally been written into the IT system and was making it harder for two intelligent clinical practitioners to make an informed decision based on the particular context in front of them.”

(This is a personal experience of Jeremy’s with a family member)

Problems and aspirations “in common”

People also exist in relation to each other, and their experiences are entwined, so understanding impact also means seeing people’s stories in the context of their relevant “problems-in-common” and “aspirations-in-common”.

Problems/aspirations-in-common are key to spotting patterns and building capability to tackle the headwinds, and this is enriched further by strengthening the tailwinds around meeting people’s overall purpose of a good life, rather than just an improved one. This means understanding and responding to aspirations and strengths, whether in common or unique. This often requires lateral thinking and the creation of new networks and relationships. As capacity and resourcefulness builds, increased dynamism and resourcefulness is observed in communities as we collectively become better at helping to make more new things happen that people are interested in pursuing.

Working on the notion of problems/aspirations-in-common can never work without the base unit of understanding a person’s context and what matters to them, and this is agnostic of place

– it is true everywhere. If we knew this of every person, the right blend of common and bespoke solutions would emerge, notwithstanding other system and resource limitations.

“Experience to date in Gateshead tells us that each time we work to a ‘person-sets-boundary’ principle, a bespoke combination of any or all of intervening, supporting and transacting occurs. Some actions we take are common and others are rare. This helps us to create collective/local capacity for the common ones such as parks, job clubs, mutual aid etc. Knowing which things were idiosyncratic, and how often something idiosyncratic was needed to have a positive impact, helps us to make the case for population outcomes as the dominant planning mechanism being unhelpful.”

(From Mark Smith, of Gateshead Council)

The more we work bespoke-by-design, in context, and learn to see problems and aspirations in-common, the more able we are to spot patterns – characteristics of the sorts of

interventions, transactions and support that enable positive change and stories to emerge. Understanding aspirations-in-common helps us to hone methods around creative thinking and spotting or creating opportunities to thrive at a level beyond that achieved by solving problems.

This creates a bridge that allows us to work in ways that are simultaneously bespoke and scalable, with pattern-spotting always driving us back to context, and complementary action happening in lockstep at the citizen and system level. If everything is 'bespoke by design' we can connect to patterns in a systematic way and dynamically adjust policy and processes, and better target resources and interventions.

We have created a virtuous cycle of effective action that moves from context, to patterns, and back to context:

1. Start bespoke

When we work case by case, person by person to a bespoke-by-design and "person-sets-boundary" principle, we generate better outcomes for citizens and more efficient working methods.

2. Respond to the problems – and aspirations – in-common

As we continue to work in our new person-centred way, we build up experience and see patterns of issues, aspirations, strengths and actions emerging – these lead us to create resources, policies and systems that are common, and some that are less frequent.

3. Signals in the aggregate

With action happening off the back of the patterns we have seen emerging from our work in context, we can review the aggregate data for signals.

4. Back to context

We follow these new clues from the aggregate back into context, making sense alongside citizens and colleagues to understand what is needed to make sense of, and respond to, the signal through bespoke-by-design action.

In contrast to their typical experience, the impact for citizens of HLS-informed services is that they now experience more humane, more empathetic, more responsive, and more effective services. Services that are much more likely to do the things that really matter to individuals, and to affect the wider structures that impact the problems they have in common with other citizens.

Chapter 12 HLS and organisations: Implications for Workforce Recruitment and Selection

Implications for workforce recruitment and selection

Authors: Helen Sanderson, Brendan Hill and Gabriel Eichsteller

[Contact the authors](#)

HLS offers new opportunities for recruiting a workforce that can meaningfully respond to the complex challenges of the 21st century. With its focus on recognising individuals as whole human beings, creating a learning culture that fosters ongoing experimentation and innovation, and applying a systems perspective, the HLS approach emphasises very different qualities in the workforce to those typically examined in recruitment and selection processes. Recruiting your workforce in an HLS-informed way is therefore not just about changing a few interview questions or the recruitment format – it starts from greater clarity about your organisation's identity. What are its purpose and values? How does it conceptualise people, both its workers and the people it serves? And how are these ideas about human nature reflected in its structures, processes and culture?

Drawing on the case study of Wellbeing Teams and their approach to values-based recruitment, we share

10 principles that we think are critical to examine in this respect, in the hope that they provide inspiration, enable you to reflect critically, and spark your own ideas for humanising your HR processes.

Key features for recruitment in an HLS organisation

The 10 key features we are using and refining at Wellbeing Teams differ from a more typical approach in four respects:

1. Relation to purpose: The purpose of recruitment is not only to find the best person for us but also to ensure we are the right fit for you. It's about mutual fit and sharing the same values that we both demonstrate throughout the recruitment process.

2. Who is involved: We think that everyone is a recruiter, and we pay attention to that (not in a typical "bonus if you refer a friend" way). In each team, there is someone who has a specific role around recruitment. Coproduction matters to us, and we

therefore involve a coproduction partner, who has lived experience and can bring a valuable perspective to the recruitment process.

3. How recruitment takes place:

We want to see how people interact, because teamwork is crucial. We want to see how people bring their whole selves to the recruitment experience and get to know them over a few hours.

4. What is seen as success: You are likely to spend more time with your work colleagues than your family, and your physical and mental health will be significantly impacted by your work. We invite people to invest time and energy in our recruitment process (while still being efficient) and to create continuity of relationships, so that recruitment, induction and learning activities are seamlessly connected (see our chapter on HLS and Learning & Development).

Check out the [blog by Wellbeing Teams founder Helen Sanderson](#) for an in-depth exploration of how this works in practice.

Rethinking the workforce from a systems perspective

HLS offers the opportunity to go one step further in how we think about recruitment beyond organisational boundaries. After all, if we truly want

to put individuals and communities at the heart of health and social care, then we should think systemically and focus on how we can collectively and collaboratively support human flourishing. This poses questions about how we can recruit a workforce that benefits the wider system, at a time when health and social care are under increasing pressure to provide services in a very challenging recruitment market. There are significant problems not only in recruitment but retention, too, particularly in what are seen as key “professions”, such as nursing and social work. It is crucial to recognise that the workforce challenge is about more than just what we do, it’s about how we think. So, what if we designed a health and social care system around human connection and put people, communities and their relationships at the heart? What would that mean for our workforce? Read our [full chapter](#) for some radical ideas on how HLS could help us re-examine workforce-related issues from a systems perspective.

Chapter 13

HLS and organisations: Implications for Organisational Learning & Development

Implications for organisational learning & development

Authors: Brendan Hill, Helen Sanderson and Gabriel Eichsteller

[Contact the authors](#)

HLS can help emphasise the systemic connections between recruitment, induction, probation and continuous professional development. We therefore need a radical rethink of the role of Learning and Development along with a focus on the organisational conditions that help cultivate and grow an HLS culture. The key starting-point for an HLS approach to learning and development is a deeper examination of your organisation's purpose and values and what these say about how you view your workforce. If you believe that you've recruited the kinds of people who share your purpose and values ([more about how to achieve this in our chapter here](#)), then it's essential to create an enriched learning environment that seeks to bring out the best in everybody, allows all people in your organisation to flourish, and helps ensure that the system serves the people and communities. We also

need to critically examine the purpose of Learning and Development itself, the extent to which it functions in order to perpetuate the status quo or to enable systems transformation.

Here are the features of what we think an HLS approach to Learning and Development looks like.

The 12 features of an HLS approach to Learning and Development

1. Understand the capacities needed to achieve the organisation's (system's or team's) purpose, live its values, and meet legal and regulatory requirements. Have a clear, shared understanding of the roles required to deliver this.
2. The capabilities are taught through induction and probation, and people are supported to demonstrate their confidence and competence in the capabilities

- and living the values of the organisation/system.
3. Focus on performance (seeing changes in how people deliver their role) not on just achieving learning outcomes. Include both hard skills and soft skills, and taking a relational approach – for example, being able to complete an assessment accurately, do this with empathy and compassion, and show up for meetings well prepared and with empathy and compassion.
 4. Focus on “whole person”, including wellbeing, and their growth and development not just work and career aspirations.
 5. After probation, growth, development and performance goals are set by the person (in collaboration with their manager, colleagues and people who use the service where possible).
 6. People are supported to find their best way to achieve their growth and development goals. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach.
 7. There is a wide range of curated learning and development opportunities available for people to use to help them achieve their goals, including coaching within the role, communities of practice, deliberate practice, and feedback.
 8. Seeing the day-to-day work as the best opportunity to develop and grow and improve through coaching, feedback and deliberate practice.
 9. There is a proactive programme of development opportunities in areas where the whole system/organisation wants to grow, e.g. in resilience, relationship-centred practice, wellbeing.
 10. Resources (e.g. budgets) are devolved as close to teams as possible, supporting local decision-making.
 11. Learning and development opportunities are offered to everyone who has a role across the system, within a community. This fosters relationship-building between professionals, deepens their insights into each other’s contribution and highlights the resourcefulness and diversity of expertise within the system.
 12. Success is seen as improvements in performance in relation to roles: people growing in their abilities (in the areas that matter to them, as defined by them and their team, including the views of the people they serve), and the whole organisation/system developing in ways that support their purpose and reflect their values.

In our [full chapter](#) we offer a few examples of how organisations can create opportunities within their local system to learn together and build collective responsibility for the ecosystem of which they’re part. Drawing on insights from Wellbeing Teams (see more in [Helen Sanderson’s blog](#)), we explore how HLS can also help you take a fresh look at how your organisation creates learning spaces that enable all team members to develop their whole selves.

Chapter 14

HLS at different system scales: Organisations as systems: Experimenting and learning during a crisis: A voluntary sector perspective

Experimenting and learning during a crisis: a voluntary sector perspective

Author: Dr Vita Terry

[Contact the author](#)

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, the scale and pace of the unprecedented changes has had a significant impact on the way we work and our home life. Since the start of lockdown in March 2020, we have drawn on the HLS case studies and talked to voluntary sector leaders and heard from them about the tremendous challenges and pressures the sector has faced, including service provision being overwhelmed, rapid adaptation to remote working, and some organisations facing closure.

These precarious times have created mounting pressures, huge challenges, and uncertainty for the voluntary sector. That said, there is an opportunity to explore and adopt new and differing ways of working and not simply to revert to how things have always been done. This chapter illustrates different examples of how the pandemic has created conditions for VSOs to adopt HLS practices, including:

- Collaborative relationships:** Growing emphasis on working together to respond quickly to the changing needs and growing demands of individuals and communities. A sense of urgency, more accessible communication, and less bureaucratic red tape has enabled different individuals, organisations and sectors to be brought together to support collective decision-making processes. [There is growing recognition of the value of drawing in varied expertise and knowledge.](#) In turn, this has built rapport, a shared sense of purpose, and trusting relationships, which, in some cases, have begun to address traditional power dynamics and challenge old practices.
- Adaptation and experimentation:** The pandemic created conditions for being more experimental and testing assumptions that have previously influenced a

certain way of doing things within organisations. It has provided a unique opportunity to trial new ways of working and to experiment and learn, and there has been an emphasis on “collective bravery” to take more risks.

- **Distributed leadership:** Leaders have taken on huge responsibilities, regularly making tough decisions to look after the safety and welfare of their workforce and service users, as well as living through a pandemic themselves. There has been a shift towards leaders giving up power and control by delegating roles and responsibilities. Staff are being trusted to do what is best for the people accessing services by using creative approaches or making rapid decisions, rather than seeking permission from senior management. In turn, this has raised team morale, built relationships, and increased job satisfaction.
- **Being human and working with emotions in voluntary sector organisations:** We are all feeling the emotional demands of living through a pandemic, and, due to the blurring of home and work life, it is not easy to compartmentalise work. [Staff are feeling exhausted, sensitive and receptive to tensions](#) that might normally have been

brushed off. This can have a knock-on effect by creating uncomfortable and tense work dynamics. Leaders have adopted different practices to address this, such as: offering additional coaching or support sessions; building self-care into the working day; weekly online “coffee mornings”; and offering extended annual leave. Many leaders have also adopted a more human approach with their staff.

‘I am managing more with honesty, sharing more about myself, rather than managing from a distance and being cold. I am trying to create a family, to let people be emotional and honest.’

(IVAR, 2021)

There is no one-size-fits-all to supporting the emotional wellbeing of a workforce, and what is required for one organisation might be different to another. A good first step is to bring people together to have regular and transparent conversations about what does and does not work for them as this will also change over time and organisation will need to keep learning about how to support staff wellbeing.

We saw the immediate responses to

the pandemic was to pull together, but there is a risk that old behaviours will come back and organisations will revert to a self-preservation mode. The pandemic has provided a unique opportunity for learning new ways of working, and demonstrates the importance of consolidating this learning as we move past COVID-19 and into the future.

Some key learning points to think about in the future are:

- How decision-making spaces can continue to be accessible and available to different stakeholders, to draw in varied expertise and knowledge to respond to complex needs
- To learn together as a way of building trusting relationships and tackling competitive behaviour
- Finally, to acknowledge and address the emotional demands from working in this way, particularly during a pandemic, and to embed reflective and supportive practices to prevent burnout.

Chapter 15

HLS at different system scales: Places as systems

HLS and place: transforming local systems

Author: Dawn Plimmer

[Contact the author](#)

“Systems” is arguably the least well developed and understood feature of HLS. Systems are beyond the control of any one organisation, and the mindsets and structures that shape our day-to-day work are overwhelmingly organisational rather than systems-focused.

But systems matter. Outcomes in people’s lives emerge from complex systems. And so, while developing human and learning practice within organisations is necessary for HLS practice, it is not sufficient. This chapter explores how HLS practice can reach its potential through a focus on nurturing collaborative systems approaches at a local level.

Why place matters

In situations of complexity, decisions are often made best based on an understanding of local context. To enable “whole person” human approaches, we need to understand the range of factors that impact on an individual – to identify underlying challenges and uncover opportunities, assets and actors in a local place that

can be part of developing solutions.

Enabling a “whole person” approach that is responsive to their particular context requires:

1. *Local actors working together to understand, support and enable people in a connected, holistic, human way.* This requires practitioners working on the ground to have the autonomy to work in a relational way and provide support tailored to the specific context, working in partnership with the people and communities they are supporting. Support is joined up and draws on all of the available resources and assets in a place.

Key features of these approaches include: drawing on local identity as a sense of purpose, understanding what matters in people’s lives through deep listening, mobilising communities through building agency and connection, and developing more connected strengths-based support.

2. *Places need to purposefully create a “healthy system” to enable this practice to thrive:*
- To create the conditions for organisations to work together effectively in a human and context-led way as the norm
 - To look across a place to identify and address the patterns that impact multiple people, and develop collective responses.

Developing healthy systems

To enable a shift from standardised and siloed to human and context-led support requires fundamentally shifting how local systems work. While there is no one model of, or route to, creating a healthy system, the conditions below are important enablers.

- **Shared purpose and principles:** partners in a place are aligned around a common purpose that cuts across and provides the motivation for their work.
- **Trusting relationships:** people and organisations are connected with others and develop honest authentic relationships as a foundation for working together.
- **Collaborative behaviours:** people across the system value collaboration, and work in a connected way.

- **Sharing power:** actions are taken to address imbalances of power and gain diverse perspectives. Decisions are devolved as close to the ground as possible to enable locally responsive solutions.
- **Systems infrastructure:** processes and structures shift from an organisational to systems focus to enable collaborative approaches, e.g. workforce, commissioning, governance and data.
- **Enabling leadership:** leaders see their role as creating enabling conditions for collaborative approaches.
- **Learning and insight:** there is a learning culture focused on experimentation, convening and collective sense-making as a driver of improvement and building trust.
- **Embedding and influencing:** people and partners are motivated to improve, embed and influence for the adoption of these practices more widely.

Looking across the HLS case studies, one of the most exciting features is the diversity of starting-points in different places. In some cases, systems change is driven by people and organisations who are in positions of formal authority (for example, public service directors or commissioners). In other cases, change

is being led by those who don't occupy formal positions of power, and in fact, their lack of formal authority means they are better able to question and disrupt how things are done across the system (for example, local charities).

Rather than size, sector, or how long an actor has worked in a place, the key “ingredient” or source of legitimacy that marks an organisation or individual's ability to drive change was the ability to bridge the gap between the “old” world and the “new” – being trusted within the establishment (based on relationships, authenticity, credibility) as a foundation for introducing, testing and embedding HLS thinking and practice. This System Stewardship role – bridging between and connecting many different perspectives and actors – is crucial. Recognising the value of and resourcing this function is key to enabling the development of healthy systems and, in turn, more human support.

HLS and place – the next frontier

There are two key priorities to amplify the potential explored in this chapter:

- Translating human learning practice beyond single organisations and across local systems – to enable a connected response that mobilises the contribution of local people and assets
- Exploring opportunities to embed HLS across a place as a whole (beyond traditional service silos).

Chapter 16 HLS at different system scales: Countries as systems: National-level working: Humble Government

HLS and national government: Humble Government

Author: Toby Lowe

[Contact the author](#)

HLS has previously been developed from the [real-world experience of undertaking public service](#). This has given us a range of experiences and understanding about an alternative approach to public management at personal and local scales. For this report, we have therefore purposefully sought out new case studies which help us to begin to understand what HLS public management practice at the national scale looks like.

As we have seen, HLS requires a learning strategy to be enacted at different system scales. Keeping with our commitment to root HLS practice in the real-world experience of the public, this starts with a Learning Cycle at the level of “person’s life as system” – in public service terms, the relationship between a worker and those they are supporting. And then, each higher scale undertakes a Learning Cycle in which they (a) learn from and (b) learn to enable the Learning Cycles of the scale below.

Humble Government

Learning as the meta-strategy for government has a transformative effect on the way that government sees its role, and the type of policymaking it seeks to do. Applying an HLS approach at national level means that a government cannot claim that it knows, in advance, what will work to support the freedom and flourishing of all the people it serves. Instead (using the language of the Finnish Government) it adopts the position of “**Humble Government**”:

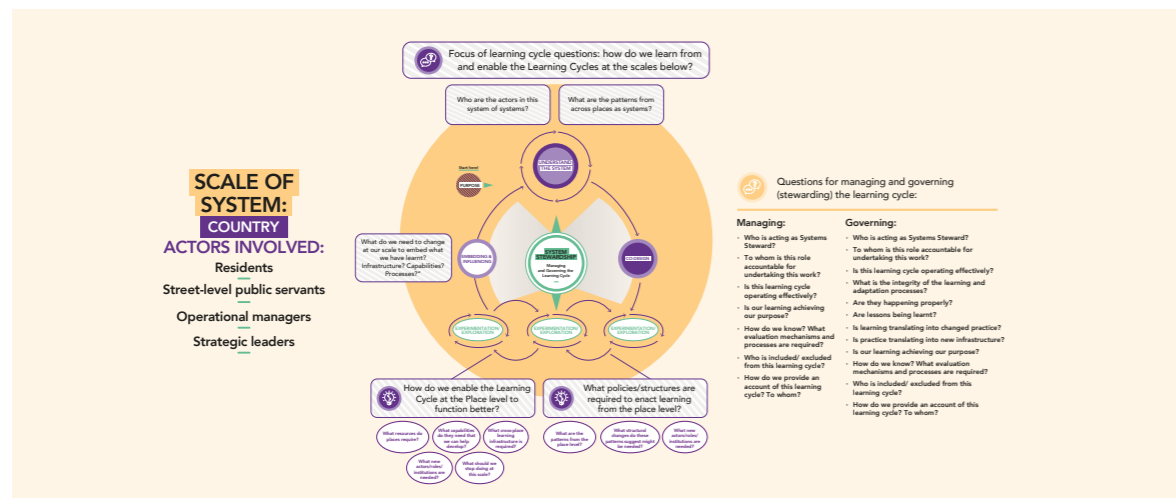
“In today’s increasingly complex operating environment, familiar policy approaches often have unpredictable outcomes, which hamper the achievement of transformative political goals. To achieve its goals, the government has therefore pledged itself to reform its decision-making by promoting continuous learning, new forms

of interaction with stakeholders and long-term policymaking through improved collaboration with parliament.”

(Annala et al, 2021, Humble Government: How to Realize Ambitious Reforms Prudently)

From our case, at a national scale, enacting this Humble Government learning strategy looks like this:

Figure 1: The Learning Cycle at the scale of country as system



There seem to be three key roles that are played when enacting an HLS approach at national level:

1. Supporting places to learn
2. Supporting learning across places
3. Learning from places (and enacting required structural change).

1. Supporting places to learn

National-level actors support places to learn in three ways: by signalling the value of learning, acting as a Learning Partner, and by creating the structural conditions for learning:

a) Signalling the value of learning

One of the important roles that a larger-scale system can play in supporting learning at smaller system scales is signalling the value of learning. This is particularly the case if the smaller system scales exist in a dependent relationship with the larger – i.e. if they depend on the larger scale for resources.

b) Acting as a Learning Partner to places

From the work of the [EDUFI](#) Innovation Centre, we can see a clear role for central government in supporting

the development and functioning of effective learning systems at the place level. Elsewhere in this book, we have referred to this kind of role as a [Learning Partner](#). In essence, the Learning Partner role seeks to support actors in a system in their journey around the Learning Cycle.

In order to create healthy place-based learning systems, they aimed to:

- Build learning relationships – characterised by humility, empathy and trust
- Cultivate learning attitudes – e.g. positive error culture, dealing with uncertainty.

The Learning Partner role therefore undertook hands-on activity at the level of place in order to enable the effective development and functioning of learning systems at that scale.

c) Creating the structural conditions for learning

Some of the conditions which are necessary for effective place-based learning systems to function are set at the national level. Drawing on the case studies and other work, we can see different aspects of how national-level actors create the conditions for effective learning systems to operate at local scales.

Funding for learning

In order to create enabling conditions for learning approaches to public management at place level, one of the most crucial roles that national-level actors can play is providing funding for activities in a way which promotes learning. We saw this explicitly in the [FCDO](#) case study, in which programmes were funded and contracted in ways that explicitly promoted learning and adaptation.

Rethinking accountability and evaluation

To create enabling conditions for learning as public management strategy at place level, central governments have changed the purpose and focus of accountability and evaluation. This includes a shift from “holding to account” to “helping to account” and a shift towards accountability for learning.

Connecting the local to the national

An interesting aspect of how the [EDUFI](#) team described their work was the creation of “intimacy” between the national and local scales. They described a previous problem of a lack of connection and understanding between national- and local-level actors, which meant that actors at the two scales did not understand one another’s purpose and roles,

and consequently found effective collaboration difficult.

2. National learning infrastructure – supporting learning across places

The second key role that we see national-level actors play in enabling a learning strategy is to create learning infrastructure which enables learning between places. In the [EDUFI](#) case study, Innovation Centre staff created learning spaces where learning from different places was shared between actors. They found that this enabled a mechanism of spreading learning between places (as opposed to a “scaling” approach which seeks to simply implement “what works” from one place in another place). A similar role was played by [Healthcare Improvement Scotland](#) staff in their case study.

3. Learning from smaller-scale systems (and enacting required structural change)

Some of the learning and adaptation which comes from place-scale systems requires action at a national level. For example, it is much harder for local public service systems to enact a learning approach to public management if national regulation regimes still use traditional (broken) versions of accountability for results or predefined versions of “best practice”. Consequently, when knowledge about the problems of regulation regimes is shared by place- or organisational-scale systems, it requires national-scale systems to [experiment with different approaches to regulation](#).

Chapter 17 HLS themes: Funding and commissioning in complexity

Funding and commissioning in complexity

Authors: Melissa Hawkins, Dawn Plimmer, Jeremy Cox and Vita Terry

[Contact the authors](#)

Emerging as an alternative to NPM, the HLS approach has been shaped, and is continually evolving, based on the work of many people innovating in the public and third sectors. We outline the benefits and implications of taking an HLS approach. While acknowledging that there are differences between funding and commissioning processes, we have found significant similarities and opportunities for shared learning. Therefore, we draw on examples from and make recommendations for both funding and commissioning practice.

Taking an HLS approach to funding and commissioning

Adopting HLS approaches requires a mindset that embraces complexity. This includes recognising that:

- Outcomes emerge from complex systems, and therefore that individual people or organisations cannot and should not be held accountable for outcomes
- Complex systems can't be controlled
- Change and adaptation are

inevitable and desirable when working in complex systems.

How can funders and commissioners use HLS to inform their practice? Here is a summary of examples and ideas:

Fund and commission for relational bespoke support

Nurturing trusting relationships at all levels, between citizens and providers, between different organisations, and between funders and funded, leads to improved outcomes. Micromanaging outcomes does not. Taking an HLS approach means that funding is treated as a relational process and that policies and processes support this. The relationship between funders and commissioners and funded organisations are prioritised over a transactional approach where services are “purchased”.

Flexible support based on trusting relationships is a key foundation for working in a human way. Funders and commissioners therefore need to prioritise funding organisations that:

- Build effective relationships with

those they serve

- Understand and respond to the strengths and needs of each person
- Act collaboratively with others to do so.

Fund and commission for learning

Learning is the strategy for achieving purposeful change in complex systems, and this requires significant shifts in mindset and practice, including proactively building a learning culture and aligning organisational systems and structures to enable it to flourish – encouraging curiosity and creating psychological safety through developing a “positive error culture”.

If funders and commissioners are serious about taking an HLS approach, they need to work in a way that prioritises learning, not control, at three levels:

1. Giving the space for learning and incentivising grantees to learn – this includes a role for experimentation
2. Learning alongside grantees/ delivery organisations
3. Reflecting on, and continually learning about, how to improve their own practice.

Fund and commission for collaborative systemic approaches

Systems are the set of relationships and interactions that combine to produce outcomes in people’s lives. A healthy system is one that produces better outcomes based on collaboration, learning, and shifting power.

If funders and commissioners are to take an HLS approach, this requires them to consider how to realign their funding based on the recognition that systems (not projects or organisations) create outcomes, and explore what role they can play in contributing to and nurturing healthy systems.

This requires funders and commissioners to be seen as part of the system, with shared responsibility for systems change. The role moves from “performance or grant manager” to recognising that they have active roles to play in creating and enabling transformation.

HLS can be an enabler for change

There have been innovations which have happened during COVID-19 that we can learn from, for example in reducing overly bureaucratic procedures, thinking creatively, and collaborating. Funders and commissioners have a crucial role to play in ensuring we do not retrench

back to traditional forms of control and restarting policies and practices that experience has shown us are neither necessary nor useful.

Funders and commissioners who already take a HLS approach have found that this has supported them through the crisis by:

- The values placed on relationships and trust already developed over a number of years that have enabled adaptation to sudden change
- To continue to make time for learning has supported the difficult times as well, so less likely to retrench back to “old ways of working” when the crisis has passed
- Acting as a Systems Steward to connect organisations, communities and places has supported funded organisations to adapt and respond to the communities they serve.

Chapter 18

HLS themes: Systems leadership in HLS

Leadership Implications

Author: Jeff Masters

[Contact the author](#)

Core to the HLS approach is the understanding that – in contexts of complexity – population outcomes are the product of systems, not individual organisations, programmes or projects. To create repeatable, sustainable changes in outcomes in relation to complex problems like substance misuse, domestic abuse or homelessness requires changes in the relevant system conditions. But who will lead this change?

Drawing on examples from the case studies, we argue that the kind of leadership required to create change in complex systems can come from

anywhere and anyone, although the roles they play might be quite different. In a matrix, we set out the nature of these contributions, looking from the perspectives of people with more or less authority within their organisations and across a local system. While these roles may differ, they are complementary. Systems change is the ultimate team sport, and for new models of practice like HLS to take root and thrive in healthy local systems, it will require brave and generous leadership with many playing their part.

Chapter 19

HLS themes: Human Learning Systems meets social pedagogy

Human Learning Systems meets social pedagogy

Authors: Lowis Charfe and Gabriel Eichsteller

[Contact the authors](#)

In this chapter, we explain the key synergies between social pedagogy and HLS and how a social pedagogical perspective can help develop healthier systems, learning cultures, and relational practice that benefit us all. We outline how the theories and principles used in social pedagogical practice can bring to life each aspect of HLS as an organisational framework, as they offer navigation points to help guide and develop our direct practice within complex environments.

Well-established as a profession in its own right in many European and Latin American countries, social pedagogy offers a holistic way of working with children, young people and adults to support their wellbeing, learning and social inclusion. At the heart of social pedagogy lies a belief that each person deserves to be treated with dignity and possesses unique inner resources and potential, which we can help them unfold. To do so requires meaningful and authentic relationships that enable us to recognise a person's

potential, their qualities, strengths and interests, and to create learning situations in which people can experience their resourcefulness and develop new abilities. Examining each HLS component, we explore how social pedagogy can help navigate complexity and uncertainty in the "everyday" work of public service.

Human

Central to a social pedagogical perspective is the [Diamond Model](#). It conveys our philosophical stance that each person is unique and inherently valuable, which encapsulates the Human in HLS. The model highlights the overarching aims of nurturing wellbeing and happiness, holistic learning, and empowering relationships. It is our role to connect to people's "inner diamond" and to ensure that this positive perspective is at the heart of our practice. Concepts such as the [3 Ps](#) emphasise the importance of combining the professional and the personal elements

of our relationships, while leaving out the private aspects of ourselves. This can help us be authentic in our encounters with others, human to human. It is a valuable reflective

framework for helping us to navigate the important boundaries within our human relationships when working in the public sector.

Figure 1: The Diamond Model in social pedagogy



Learning

Learning is central to social pedagogy practice and this is what sets it apart from other ways of working within the public sector. Social pedagogy frames our role as creating an environment (within direct practice and within organisations) where people feel encouraged to learn in their own ways and draw on their creative potential.

The [Learning Zone Model](#) can help us recognise the link between wellbeing and learning, and how we can encourage people to step out of their comfort zone and into their learning zone. Learning can only take place when people are without fear of traumatic experiences that would move them into their panic zone. [Multiple Intelligences Theory](#) enables us to

think about learning more inclusively and recognise every person's learning potential and the many different ways in which intelligence and creativity manifest themselves. In effective organisational cultures, these differences are seen as strengths.

Systems

Given its concern with social justice, social pedagogical practice requires us to focus on structural aspects and the systems perpetuating social inequalities. It is therefore of importance to engage with systems and actively collaborate to collectively address structural oppression and social justice issues. With regard to the systems within public service organisations, and irrespective of our role within these, we need to create spaces for learning and reflection

(head), for building relationships (heart), and for experimentation and development (hands).

Individual strengths and unique potential can only unfold when the environment supports this, and it is only collectively – by establishing moral leadership and cultivating systems that place relationships at the centre – that we can achieve a healthier system for everyone.

Chapter 20

HLS themes: Public management paradigms

Public management paradigms

Authors: Toby Lowe and Richard Norman

[Contact the authors](#)

In this section, we will explore the idea of public management paradigms, and evidence about the effectiveness of New Public Management (NPM), which has been a dominant paradigm since the 1980s. As a paradigm, NPM is a set of beliefs and practices which are mutually reinforcing and internally coherent.

[Public Choice Theory](#) is a major intellectual foundation for NPM and contributes these ideas:

- That outcomes in people's lives are commodities that can be specified and purchased through market mechanisms
- That public servants cannot be trusted because, like everyone else, they are self-interested, rational utility-maximisers who (if left unchecked) will use public resources for their own ends rather than creating positive outcomes in people's lives.

From these beliefs have come these prescriptions for the practice of public management:

- Research "what works" and particularly what is "best practice" in public service
- Specify through contracts and targets what is required for the delivery of "best practice" performance
- Create performance systems which use incentives and punishments to control delivery of contracted tasks and outcomes
- Use competition to incentivise public servants and others to "deliver" at the cheapest possible price.

HLS has different fundamental beliefs about how public management can create outcomes:

- Outcomes are "[emergent properties of complex systems](#)"
- They are different for each person who experiences them (e.g. my wellbeing is different to yours)
- They are made by hundreds of different factors interacting together in a system

- They are dynamic – what makes an outcome changes from place to place and time to time, so “what works” today in this place won’t necessarily work tomorrow in a different place
- They are beyond the control of any one of the actors in those systems.

What evidence is there to support NPM’s foundational beliefs? And what is the evidence about what happens when NPM is implemented?

Evidence

Research into the implementation of the NPM approach has [uncovered very significant problems](#). The divergence between the claims of NPM to provide a better way to do public management and the reality of its multiple failures has led to the production of a number of [books and articles](#) exploring why it is still used, when it creates such significant problems.

“‘New public management’... was ostensibly intended to create ‘a government that works better and costs less’... So what do we have to show for three decades or so of ‘NPM reforms? The short answer seems to be: higher costs and more complaints.”

(Hood and Dixon, 2015)

Key problems with NPM’s fundamental beliefs and practices, which have been highlighted by the research evidence, include:

- Outcomes aren’t delivered by organisations, [they are emergent properties of complex systems](#).
- [NPM incentivises “gaming”](#) – the purposeful manipulation of data about impact in order to retain funding.
- Public servants, like many other workers, are motivated by having [Mastery, Autonomy and Purpose](#) rather than being naturally extrinsically motivated.
- Motivation isn’t hardwired and immutable – it can be undermined by systems that emphasise extrinsic rewards. People who were intrinsically motivated to do something become [extrinsically motivated](#) (will only do something if the appropriate rewards or punishments are in place) when they are placed within an extrinsic motivation context
- Using measurement for accountability [distorts and corrupts the processes](#) that are being monitored.

Chapter 21 HLS themes: About this report: how this report was made

Our method – how the report was made

Backstory

We have been seeking to develop complexity-informed public management approaches for the past five years (and more). Each organisation has its own version of this story. You can see some of these different stories here.

This report is the third in a series in which we have sought to articulate our growing knowledge about complexity-informed public management practice. The first two reports are:

[A Whole New World – Funding and Commissioning in Complexity \(2017\)](#)

[Exploring the new world: practical insights for funding, commissioning and managing in complexity \(2019\)](#)

We have drawn on the insights and knowledge from both of these reports for this work.

Method: coproducing a report

Invitations to produce case studies

Each of the organisations in the core group is part of a network of public and voluntary sector organisations who

have been seeking to adopt a HLS approach to public management. Each organisation in the core group invited the organisations they know best to write their own case studies, reflecting on their HLS practice. To support this process, we created a template that would help writers structure their reflections.

Producing the case studies

The group issued invitations to 49 different organisations. Of these, 35 organisations responded saying that they would like to write a case study. And 29 went on to write a study for this report. For two of these studies, the Centre for Public Impact have undertaken research with the organisations, to support the production of the case study: the Foreign & Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) of the UK Government, and the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI).

Sense-making and report-writing

- The report authors (“we”) developed an analysis template, and analysed the case studies we were each connected to

- We gave each case study to the author of a different case study, along with the analysis template – and asked the case study authors to analyse that study
- We invited all the case study authors to share their analyses with one another at a “sense-making” session. This was a process of sharing what each practitioner had seen in the other studies, and then identifying patterns among the findings of these analyses
- Following this “shared sense-making”, we invited organisations to review and revise their case studies
- We collated their sense-making and our own analysis to write this report
- Each author wrote drafts of their own chapters
- We shared our drafts with one another to check for commonalities and tensions
- We shared our draft chapters with external reviewers
- We edited and revised the chapters to produce final text.

Chapter 22 Further questions & get involved

Further questions

As we have highlighted throughout this report, we are only at the beginning of understanding HLS as an alternative approach to public management. In some respects, this is a continuous learning process – each time someone implements the HLS principles in a new context, we learn more about what HLS practice looks like.

Looking at the case studies, and what we have learnt from them, has created a number of questions which we will seek to explore. Some of this may come from further examination and analysis of existing case studies. Some may require learning which comes from new case studies.

You can find a list of these questions [here](#).

Get involved

If this report has resonated for you, and you would like to start exploring HLS in your context, you can:

Find more information (resources, contacts etc) at www.humanlearning.systems

Join the HLS Community – to connect with others, share your experiences and/or ask for [help](#).



Human Learning Systems:

Public Service for the Real World

SUMMARY REPORT

Join the conversation

Join the HLS Community – to connect with others, share your experiences and/or ask for help.



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