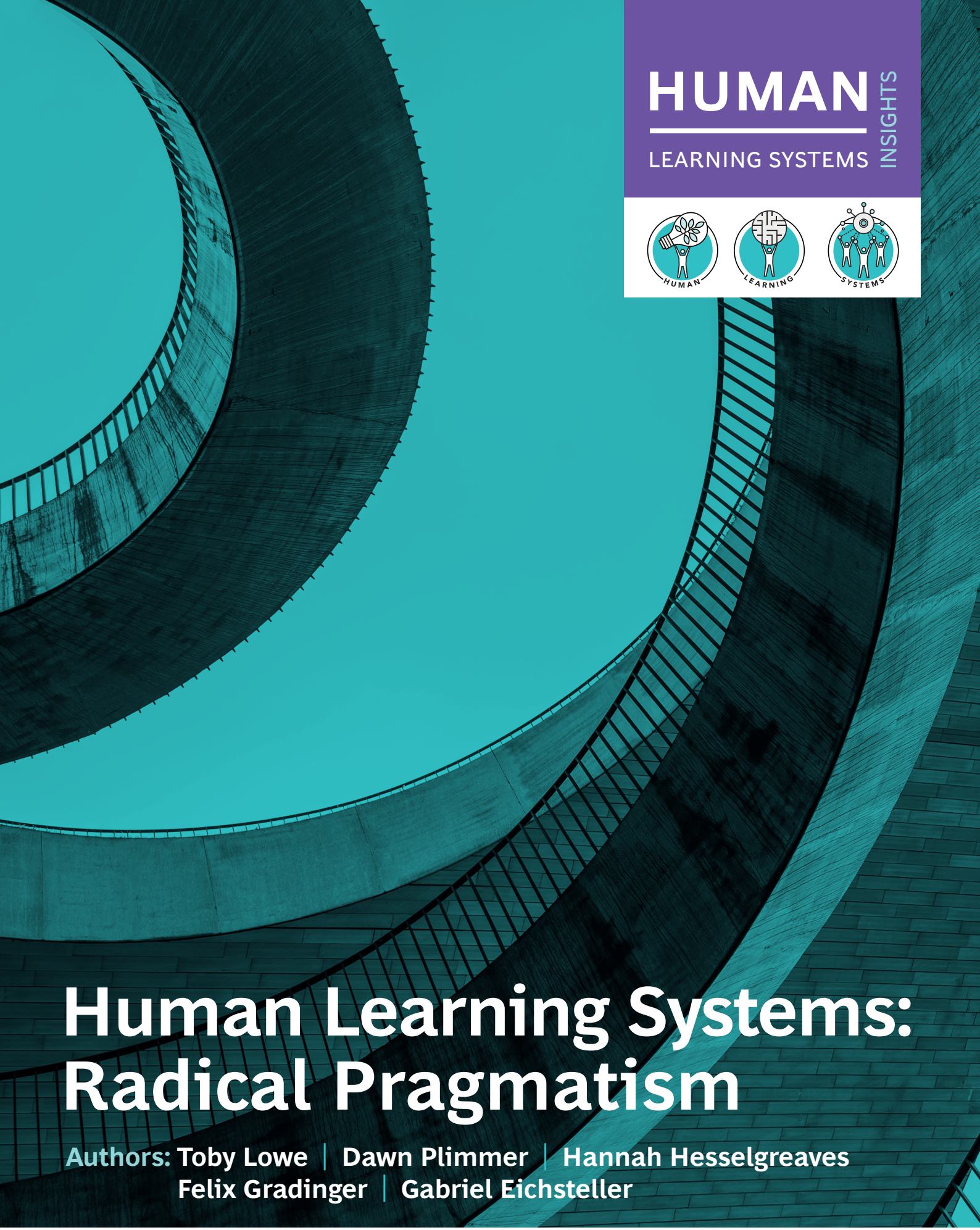
HUMAN
LEARNING SYSTEMS
INSIGHTS



Human Learning Systems: Radical Pragmatism

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Introduction

This report is part of the 2024 *Human Learning Systems Insights* series, created by members of the Human Learning Systems Collaborative.

All these Insights have been created through a programme of action research, drawing on the knowledge and experience of people exploring Human Learning Systems practice in their public management work around the world.

You can find all the examples of practice that underpin these Insights on the Human Learning Systems website.

This piece explores what Human Learning Systems is, and the core principles that underpin it.

Human Learning Systems is… a way to make public service[1] work better for people

How can we rebuild trust in public service, when resources are tight?

What does public service look like, when it is organised to respond to the strengths and needs of the people it serves?

How can we create the radical change in public service that we need, rooted in the practical realities of the day-to-day work?

Human Learning Systems is **a different approach to public management** – how public service is organised, funded and governed – which seeks to answer these questions. It has been created by thousands of public servants around the world experimenting and learning together.

It was created by people who wanted to address the failings of the current way of organising public service, which is called New Public Management. It was created by people who do the work of public service – public-facing workers, managers and leaders, together with their Learning Partners – who wanted to serve the strengths and needs of the people in front of them, rather than look upwards in the hierarchy to be told what to do. It was created by people who were fed up with the waste and inefficiency of working to standardised performance targets, and who knew how resources could be more effectively deployed.

It was created by people who want to constantly learn how to do the work that matters, in the complexity of the real world. It is ultimately about the **locus of control in public service**. Where should responsibility for deciding what happens in public service lie? Currently, those who serve the public spend too much of their time looking upwards - for permission, for "quality" control, for decisions on what to do. Human Learning Systems offers a way to change that. It shifts decision making power about public service into the relationship between workers and citizens[2] and creates the conditions under which those relationships are responsible and accountable. It moves public service **from central control to citizen control**.

[1] We use the term "public service" in this report to mean any activity which supports human freedom and flourishing. See the Introduction to Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World for an explanation of this usage.

[2] We use the term "citizens" not in respect of a particular legal status, but in terms of everyone who can actively participate in the civic life of a place. See https://www.jonalexander.net

In doing so, Human Learning Systems offers everyone involved in public service – from citizens through to policymakers – a new opportunity: to create the conditions which support **human freedom and flourishing**.

What they have discovered is that by changing the way that public service is framed and managed, they are able to help people create better outcomes in their lives, for less money. This is radical change, rooted in the day to day realities of people's lives. It is **radical pragmatism**.

Human Learning Systems is… a continuous action-research process

Human Learning Systems has continuous experimentation and learning at its heart. It is an approach in which **everybody learns**:

- Citizens continuously explore what makes a difference in their lives
- Public-facing workers continuously experiment and explore what help and support citizens need
- Leaders (of all forms and roles) continuously experiment and explore how to create effective learning systems
- Together, we all explore what all of these experiments mean about doing public service and public management differently.

This piece is an attempt to summarise what we have learnt from the latest phase of action research, which has produced 35 new examples of practice – case studies written by people who have been doing the work (and their Learning Partners).

It builds on learning from our previous research phases, which produced:

- A Whole New World (2017) – A report outlining how funders and commissioners respond to complexity
- Exploring the New World (2019) – Practical insights for funding and managing in complexity
- Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World (2021) – An ebook, summarising learning from the first 45 examples of Human Learning Systems practice
- Human Learning Systems: A practical guide for the curious (2022) – a support tool, to help people enact a Human Learning Systems approach.

As a description of ongoing learning work, what is described in this piece is necessarily partial and incomplete. This is our best current knowledge about what Human Learning Systems practice looks like. Every time that people and organisations explore these principles for themselves in their own context, they create new learning. We remain curious and eager to understand what people find!

Human Learning Systems is… a public management paradigm

We think it is helpful to view New Public Management and Human Learning Systems as alternative paradigms for public management, because they have fundamentally different foundational beliefs about how the world works, and therefore fundamentally different management practices that enact and support those beliefs.

We all have choices about the paradigm we use to view the world, and therefore which practices we enact to support our beliefs. New Public Management and Human Learning Systems have fundamentally opposed beliefs about:

- The purpose of public service and public management
- How desirable outcomes are created in people's lives
- How human/worker motivation works
- How quality is created.

And these beliefs translate into different practices for all aspects of public service, and the way it is managed:

- Public-facing service – how it is framed, and undertaken
- Leadership
- Resource allocation (funding/commissioning)
- Learning and evaluation
- Operational management
- Governance and accountability.

A paradigm is a mutually reinforcing set of beliefs and actions – a different way of seeing the world, and acting in the world. Consequently, each paradigm:

- Asks different questions, based on its fundamental beliefs. For example, New Public Management might ask: "how best can leaders incentivise workers to do what leaders know to be right?" Whereas Human Learning Systems might ask: "how can workers continuously experiment to find out the right thing to do?"
- Interprets evidence differently. Whereas New Public Management treats evidence as "the right answer" which must be implemented everywhere, Human Learning Systems treats evidence as the starting point for the next experiment in a particular context.

Understanding New Public Management and Human Learning Systems as paradigms helps us to understand why it is difficult to:

- "Mix and match" the beliefs and practices of both
- Change just one element of practice – because practices reinforce one another and the beliefs they manifest, it is hard to change one without changing all the others. For example, it is difficult to change public facing work, without changing commissioning (resource allocation) practice. Similarly, it is hard to change how resource allocation happens without also changing how governance and accountability work.

The development of the Human Learning Systems approach gives public managers a choice to make: **through which lens do we want to see the world?** Our choice of paradigm is the most fundamental choice we can make as workers, managers and leaders (even if that choice is currently unconscious). It is the choice for which we must ultimately provide an account: ***why do we choose to manage in one way or another?***

This table explores what those different intertwined beliefs and practices are:

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">New Public Management</th><th colspan="2">Human Learning Systems</th></tr>
<tr><th>Beliefs</th><th>Practices</th><th>Beliefs</th><th>Practices</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">The purpose of public service and public management</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">The purpose of public service is set by policymakers.
The purpose of public management is to enact government policy, and to make public service “efficient” in doing so.</td><td>Public-facing practice
It is the job of public-facing workers to enact public policy, as described in their performance targets.</td><td rowspan="2">The purpose of public service is to support human freedom and flourishing.
The purpose of public management is to organise public service so that it can support human freedom and flourishing.</td><td>Public-facing practice
It is the job of public servants to find out what helps people flourish, and learn how to respond to it.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Leadership
Leadership is hierarchical. It comes with power to, and responsibility for, command.
Leaders inspire people to follow a vision and manage resources in alignment with that vision.
Leaders are paid more, because of the responsibility they bear.</td><td>Leadership
Leadership is distributed. It can be undertaken by any role.
The primary responsibility of leaders is to define and create healthy systems. This includes framing the purpose of work.
The role of policymakers is to create enabling public service infrastructure for human freedom and flourishing, and to take decisions on how this is prioritised.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">How desirable outcomes are created in people’s lives</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Desirable outcomes are complicated to deliver.
Outcomes can be delivered for people by teams and organisations who follow best practice, derived from “evidence-based policy”.</td><td>Resource allocation (funding /commissioning)
It is the role of funders/ commissioners to create effective marketplaces for the delivery of desired outcomes – by using evidence to specify desired services and allocate resources to providers who can deliver the required specifications efficiently.</td><td rowspan="2">Desirable outcomes are emergent properties of complex systems.
They are created by citizens and workers experimenting together under the unique conditions of each person/family/ community’s life, creating “practice-based evidence”.</td><td>Resource allocation (funding / commissioning)
It is the role of funders/ commissioners to create effective collaborative learning systems.
They allocate resources to people/ organisations who will experiment collaboratively to foster human freedom and flourishing.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Learning and evaluation
The role of learning is to identify “best practice” in any given context.
Learning is undertaken by specific roles, including:
• Business analysts
• Evaluators.
Once best practice is known, it is taught to people and implemented through a set of protocols that everyone must follow, enforced by a set of performance management controls.
Evaluation helps decision-makers test which competing policy/practice solutions (i) work best, and (ii) offer “best value”, under which circumstances.
Learning creates generalisable knowledge – which can be implemented in other contexts.</td><td>Learning and evaluation
The role of learning is to support continuous improvement.
Learning requires:
• Making sense of existing knowledge about a system of interest, from diverse perspectives
• Experimenting to see how that system changes in response to action.
Learning is everyone’s job, every day.
Evaluation supports the continuous learning and improvement of all actors in a system, including “double-loop learning” – learning about learning.
Learning creates portable knowledge and skills – which can be further explored in other contexts.</td></tr>
</table>

New Public Management		Human Learning Systems	
Beliefs	**Practices**	**Beliefs**	**Practices**
How human/worker motivation is conceived			
People are motivated by their own self-interest. They must be incentivised to work for the public good through a system of reward and punishment, or the "discipline of the market".	**Operational management** The purpose of management is control. Managers must identify the appropriate standards which enable the purpose of the work to be enacted. They must enforce those standards through performance management. Pay workers in respect of the performance targets they hit.	People work to have autonomy, do what is meaningful to them, and be part of a shared purpose. People work to achieve the public good if given the opportunity to do so.	**Operational management** The purpose of management is to create "healthy systems" (sets of collaborative learning relationships). Pay workers enough to take money off the table as a key concern.
How quality is created and demonstrated			
Beliefs	**Practices**	**Beliefs**	**Practices**
Quality service comes from adherence to agreed standards. Improvement happens through competition and performance management control. Quality is demonstrated by inspecting standards rigorously.	**Governance and accountability** Governance focuses on (i) compliance with agreed protocols and (ii) achieving predetermined performance metrics. Accountability mechanisms are ways to capture data and reflect on compliance and performance.	Quality service comes from continuous experimentation and learning in context. Improvement happens through continuous collaborative experimentation/ exploration. Quality is demonstrated by multi-stakeholder dialogue.	**Governance and accountability** Governance focuses on the health of systems: (i) are they effective learning environments? (ii) are the boundaries of the systems drawn appropriately? and (iii) are all relevant actors able to participate in systems appropriately? Accountability mechanisms are ways to render accounts in respect of these questions, and make sense of these accounts. Governance and accountability mechanisms are themselves subjects of continuous experimentation.

Figure 1. A comparison of Human Learning Systems and New Public Management

What have we learnt about the principles of Human Learning Systems?

This is a top-level summary of what we have learnt from the combined rounds of action research across the last eight years of work. To delve into the detail of these points, please refer to the previous publications, and the detailed insight pieces which accompany this summary. We will also shortly publish a "methods" piece, where you will find a full account of how we approached the process of action research.

It is also important to say that not every example embodies all of these principles in the same way. We have learnt different aspects of the principles from different examples. This summary attempts to combine all of the lessons from the different examples into a coherent whole.

Human

One of the key differences between Human Learning Systems and New Public Management is that Human Learning Systems has an explicit moral purpose (whereas New Public Management purports to be purpose-neutral).

Human Learning Systems asserts that the purpose of public service is to support **human freedom and flourishing**.

We have learnt the following about what that means in practice:

Human Freedom

Our learning about how public service supports human freedom begins with reflections on *agency*.

Agency

At the core of human freedom is the idea of agency – that we are able to decide for ourselves what is important to us, and have the capacity to act meaningfully on those decisions. This applies to citizens, the public-facing workers who serve them, and managers and leaders.

In order to respect this agency, public service cannot work to ***predetermined outcomes*** or other performance indicators. When outcomes are set in advance by policy, or by performance management mechanisms (such as Payment by Results), they undermine people's freedom – their ability to decide for themselves what is important to them, and for that to change over time. Human Learning Systems enables public service to create genuine outcomes – the things that matter uniquely to each person.

Instead, human freedom requires that citizens have the agency to explore the personal and unique things which matter to them. In other words, to respect human freedom, public service must be **bespoke** to each person/family/community being served.

The Human approach to public service recognises that human agency is not just something that people do or do not have. Our capacity to make decisions for ourselves, and act upon those decisions, exists in a system – within a set of personal and structural relationships. For some people, the structural conditions around their lives mean that they struggle to meaningfully

access their own agency – they require care and support to make and enact decisions. This can be a permanent condition for people, or it can be one that changes over time. The learning which Changing Futures Northumbria has drawn from recovery communities is notable in this respect.

Supporting human freedom requires recognising the inequalities of power that can exist around choice and participation, and addressing them so that people can exercise meaningful agency.

Relevant examples of practice which explore 'human freedom':

- Brent Care Journeys
- Changing Futures Northumbria
- Social Prescribing and Marginalised Older People project, Leicester
- Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance.

Devolved power

For agency to be realised, actual power – including most significantly the power to spend money – must be devolved into the relationship between worker and citizen. This can manifest in different ways: in personal budgets (which are genuinely controlled by citizens themselves), through self-directed support, or by devolved budgets for workers and citizens to allocate together.

The principle is clear – to respect human freedom requires decision-making rights over resource allocation to be placed into the hands of those who have the greatest knowledge about the work and its context: citizens themselves, and those who have a strong relationship with them. This is the essence of the Human approach to public service – liberated workers supporting liberated citizens.

In this way, we can see that Human Learning Systems has a strong connection with the "Citizens story", highlighted by Jon Alexander. When we suggest that the purpose of public service is human freedom and flourishing, we articulate a desire for participatory democracy, and active citizenship.

This sense of liberation is not always easy for workers. It breaks down the comforts of highly demarcated role boundaries and cherished professional identities. It removes the certainty of saying "my job is to do X and not Y". This kind of freedom can be frightening for some workers. This fear can be mitigated, in many cases, by leaders who provide structured learning environments. In this way, workers can feel safety and comfort in the processes by which they continuously learn and improve.

Relevant examples of practice which explore "devolving power":

- Changing Futures Northumbria
- Systems Innovation and Experimentation Fund
- Thurrock Complex Housing Intervention Programme.

Human flourishing

Human Learning Systems helps public service to recognise that human flourishing is **complex**. In this context, the three most significant components of the complexity of human flourishing (French et al 2023) are that it is:

- Unique to each person
- Created by lots of different interdependent factors, in unpredictable ways
- Dynamic (it changes over time).

Unique flourishing

The complexity of human life means that no two people experience the "same" thing in the same way. What counts as wellbeing for me is almost certainly not wellbeing for you. Unless public service is able to recognise and respond to this complexity, it cannot support equity in human flourishing.

The uniqueness of human flourishing is connected to the argument about freedom that we explored above. Unless people are free to define for themselves what counts as flourishing, public service cannot respond to that complexity. This further reinforces the Human Learning Systems insistence that public service is **bespoke** to each person, family or community being served. Unless public service is bespoke, it cannot respond effectively to the unique life circumstances of each person it serves.

Relational Public Service

The uniqueness of human flourishing also requires a relational approach to public service. Public service cannot understand, and respond to, the complexity of flourishing in someone's life without having a meaningful human relationship with them. It is within effective public service relationships that the ability to make meaningful choices exists – both for citizens and workers.

Human Learning Systems can offer useful insights into the nature of Relational Public Service, by helping us to understand the difference between *open-system* relationships and *closed-system* relationships. This provides a more conceptually coherent way of describing the difference that people have previously called "whole person" (open-system) relationships and "transactional" (closed-system) relationships. The previous definition runs into problems because transactions are not *different* from relationships, they are *types* of relationship.

Both open and closed system relationships are necessary for public service, but are appropriate in different contexts.

A more open system relationship is appropriate when the desired purpose:	A more closed system relationship is appropriate when the desired purpose:
may change over time	is fixed and stable
may differ between contexts – in space and time	is achieved in the same way for everyone, across time
is determined by the person/people themselves ("what matters to them")	can be easily standardised for everybody
can be achieved using anything relevant about the person	is attempted using only predefined parameters
Example: supporting someone to lead a thriving life	Example: enabling people to renew their vehicle tax quickly and easily

A final point we make about open and closed systems, and the different dimensions of those, is that we would not frame open and closed systems as binaries, but rather as scales. We believe that systems can be more or less open, on the different dimensions. For example, the boundaries and scope of a relationship might be quite closed, but the capacity to decide what information is relevant to that relationship might be quite open.

A human, relational approach to public service seeks to create:

- Guaranteed care relationships – public service provides a supportive, constructive relationship for people when others cannot or will not (for whatever reason) care for them
- Universal community relationship infrastructure – developing care capacity within communities, so that no matter what community you identify with, it should have the capacity to offer care.

Relational Public Service is significant because it requires public service to be *organised around* meaningful relationships between actors in a system which creates human flourishing. This means:

- Devolved power
- Participatory, coproduction processes
- Bespoke public service provision in which each person/family/community being served has their unique strengths and needs recognised and met
- Prioritising time for building and maintaining relationships
- Purposefully building relationships of trust
- Low caseloads for workers, so that they have the time to build meaningful relationships
- Using data for learning, and building learning relationships
- Looser professional role boundaries and identities
- Attending to worker strengths and needs, and enabling supportive relationships between workers.

Relevant examples of practice which explore Relational Public Service:

- Changing Futures Northumbria
- Fife – No One Left Behind
- Fife Mental Health & Wellbeing
- Plymouth Family Hubs.

Multifaceted, interdependent flourishing

Human flourishing is very rarely based on one thing – because we experience our lives as *whole systems*. Our experience of being in our families affects how we show up at work. Our health affects our leisure time. Our experience at work affects how we feel about ourselves.

Therefore, in order to respond to the multifaceted, interdependent nature of human flourishing, public service must be able to understand this multiplicity of interdependent factors (to the limited extent that this is possible), and provide a coordinated response.

This is not simply about integrating or joining-up existing services. Providing a whole person response requires repurposing services around people's strengths and needs. This means having generalist, "whole-life" relationship-focused roles, supported by specialist provision. It requires enabling different sets of public service worker

expertise to experiment collaboratively, based on the unique situations they encounter in every person, family or community life-context.

Relevant examples of practice which further explore multiple and interdependent factors of flourishing:

- Barking & Dagenham
- Brent Care Journeys
- Changing Futures Northumbria
- Liverpool City Region
- Thurrock Complex Housing Intervention Programme.

Dynamic flourishing

The complex nature of human flourishing means that not only is it multifaceted, but that it changes over time. The dynamic nature of human flourishing has two aspects:

- What counts as flourishing for the person/family/community may change over time
- How that flourishing is created may change over time – what worked at one point might not work in the future.

This explains the importance of Learning as a Management Strategy. Public service cannot effectively support human flourishing when it is organised around predetermined outcomes or programme delivery processes that are fixed by Key Performance Indicators. When public service is seen as a fixed pathway, or a programme to be delivered, it fails to support the dynamic nature of human flourishing.

Instead, by framing every act of public service as action research, and repurposing management to focus on the organisation of effective collaborative learning environments, Human Learning Systems enables a dynamic response to the ever-changing nature of human flourishing.

Relevant examples of practice which explore dynamic flourishing further:

- Barking & Dagenham
- Changing Futures Northumbria
- MERAKI – The Ministry of Citizen Participation, Mexico.

It is more cost-effective to work in a Human way

A frequent point of discussion around the Human Learning Systems approach is the issue of resources: **does it cost more or less to work in this way?**

People are concerned about this question because in many parts of the world political choices mean that money for public service is tight. People are also motivated to ask this question because bespoke, human provision sounds expensive.

Fortunately, we now have significant evidence to answer this question. We can demonstrate that it is significantly more cost-effective to work in a “Human” way than to provide services using a New Public Management approach . This is particularly the case for those who currently need public service the most – those who have complex challenges in their lives which they cannot currently resolve for themselves. The figures for these cases are startling – an average drop in public service use of approximately £50,000 per person per year (significantly more in the case of the very highest intensity users of public service).

How might these savings translate to a national scale? If we use the UK Government's figures (363,000 people) for people experiencing "severe and multiple disadvantage" (people experiencing at least three of these problems: homelessness, mental ill-health, substance misuse and violence and abuse), and multiply by the average cost saving for people fitting this definition, we would create a saving of over **£18 billion for England alone**, simply in respect of those currently needing the most public service help. There is no exactly equivalent figure for numbers of people in Scotland. The closest equivalent research identifies 28,000 people who experience two of three of homeless, substance misuse and offending. **Therefore, the equivalent Scottish saving figure is £1.4 billion**.

If we include all of those people who experience severe disadvantage – those who experience any of the above list of problems, **the cost savings for England (586,000 people) and Scotland (128,000 people) combined would be over £37 billion.**

These figures do not include any of the savings from prevention of people becoming multiply disadvantaged, nor from the improvements arising from supporting everyone more effectively. This fits entirely with the broader evidence about the wastefulness of New Public Management.

This enables us to reformulate the question asked above: **can we afford to keep wasting resources using standardised, target-driven approaches to public service?**

What it adds up to: "Human" public service provision:

The Human aspect of Human Learning Systems provides a set of principles which can be used to reflect on the organisation of public service work. They do not determine exactly how to organise work, but rather suggest starting points for experiments on how to organise work differently – in the event that answers to the questions below are 'no':

- Do you enable each person you serve to determine what is important to them (in relationship with those who serve them)? A 'no' would look like: our work is focused on hitting predetermined targets.
- Do citizens and workers have devolved power and budgets, so they can act on what matters to them? A 'no' would look like: any spending has to be approved by a manager/committee.
- Are workers liberated to provide bespoke responses to people's strengths and needs? A 'no' would look like: workers' actions are determined by pre-existing pathways, task specifications, or professional identities.
- Is their work organised to enable meaningful relationships to flourish? A 'no' would look like: workers have high caseloads, or have predetermined time slots to engage with people; workers do not have dedicated time to build relationships with the other workers who also serve the people they serve; citizens do not have consistent contact with a single person; your primary interface with the people you serve is a filtering mechanism which turns people away who do not meet your criteria.

- Are workers able to respond to the strengths and needs of the whole person? Are they able to connect and coordinate with other workers who fill in aspects of support that they cannot provide? A 'no' would look like: managers set the scope for a worker's role. Workers do not have time to meet other workers who support those they serve.

Learning

Public service should be a process of ongoing exploration and learning: workers and citizens exploring and learning together, responding to people's unique lives and the ever-changing world. Learning is the management strategy, so that the primary task of managers and leaders is to create effective learning environments that enable this adaptation.

Learning and liberation

Human Learning Systems practice supports people to explore what flourishing looks like in their own lives. It encourages people to take charge of their own learning – citizens, public-facing workers and managers.

The Human Learning Systems approach seeks inspiration from Paulo Freire – rigorous inquiry about ourselves and our contexts sets us free:

> "For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other." (Freire1993, p.72)

> "If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed." (Freire)

Learning in a complex system

Human Learning Systems begins by recognising that desirable public service outcomes are created by complex systems, which are by nature beyond any actor's control, and produce unpredictable outcomes. Therefore, complex systems cannot be controlled to produce desirable outcomes. It is impossible for managers to have enough knowledge about the unique complex systems of each resident for them to effectively control the actions of workers – through mechanisms such as performance targets.

The logic of control does not work to produce desirable outcomes in complex systems.

This is increasingly recognised by leaders and managers in the highest performing companies in the world. This is the conclusion of a Delphi study, on the future of performance management, undertaken with business leaders in 2014:

> "We are no longer certain that we can adequately define the measures and targets, especially in a volatile environment, to assess managers without constraining the speed of decision making and action that we now need to be successful." (Melnyk, et al (2014)

Instead, complex systems produce desirable outcomes when they are created as **learning systems**. Therefore, if we want public service to create desirable outcomes, **the fundamental task of management is to create learning**

systems – systems in which the actors can understand the patterns of the system as it currently exists, and undertake experiments/explorations to see how those patterns change in response to different purposeful actions.

Put simply, if we truly care about creating outcomes in the world, then **we need to change our management approach from control to learning**.

Turning a complex system into a learning system entails:

- Enabling the actors in that system to collectively make sense of knowledge about how that system behaves, from different perspectives
- Experimenting together to create new context-specific knowledge.

Learning as a Management Strategy

Learning as a Management Strategy is the way in which Human Learning Systems responds to the reality of seeking to create positive outcomes in complexity. It offers a fundamental change to the purpose and focus of management. It highlights that **the primary task of managing is organising continuous collaborative "action research"**.

Organising for learning – in the public-facing work

Organising for learning starts by framing public-facing work as action research. This is about moving public service out of a "delivery mindset" into an action research mindset. In a Human Learning Systems approach, every act of public service is an act of action research – an "experiment" co-created between a public-facing worker and the person/people they are supporting.

Relevant examples of practice which further explore learning in the public-facing work:

- Barking & Dagenham
- Changing Futures Northumbria
- Plymouth Family Hubs.

Addressing the coproduction/delivery mindset contradiction

In this way, we address the paradox of seeking to undertake coproduction under New Public Management. We have known for the best part of 20 years that coproduced public services are more effective. But we have sought to enact coproduction within a broader delivery mindset for public service – one in which senior leaders control public service by having "a grip" on activity through tightly defined and rigorously enforced performance metrics.

The logic of coproduction, and the logic of "delivery" are fundamentally contradictory. If public service is something that is *delivered* to people, it cannot also be effectively coproduced.

New Public Management has attempted to resolve the contradiction by putting coproduction into the early phase of service development. Service specifications can be coproduced, and then enacted through a delivery mindset. But this fails to capture the full benefits of coproduction because it does not live up to the principles of freedom and flourishing outlined above. It negates individual freedom, as it is still one set of people deciding what another set of people should receive. And it fails to respond to the dynamic nature of human flourishing. By the time service specifications have been set and enacted, strengths and needs may well have changed.

Learning as a Management Strategy resolves this contradiction by framing coproduction as an act of enquiry which takes place in every public service interaction. What is coproduced is not a programme to be delivered, but rather a shared enquiry to be undertaken.

Relevant examples of practice which explore continuous coproduction further:

- Changing Futures Northumbria
- Fife – No One Left Behind
- Social Prescribing and Marginalised Older People project, Leicester.

Organising for learning – in the task of management

In Learning as a Management Strategy, creating effective collaborative learning environments becomes the primary task of managers. This means:

- Running team meetings as learning environments – sense-making to spot patterns which can be identified in the results of the continuous experimentation in the day-to-day work
- Prioritising time for reflective learning and sense-making – experiments do not become learning without allowing time for individual and collective reflection. There is a magnificent quote from the Sunderland Primary Care example which is useful here: "the way you prioritise learning is by prioritising learning"
- Creating experiments which change Business as Usual, as a result of the patterns observed in systems. For learning to happen, opportunities to try learning out need to be created in the work.
- Connecting learning across contexts – ensuring that learning from one context is accessible to everyone who needs to respond to it.

Relevant examples of practice which further explore organising for learning:

- Active Cornwall
- Barking & Dagenham
- Changing Futures Northumbria
- Czechia Child Protection Services
- Sunderland Primary Care.

Learning is a culture, not just a process

As well as a *management* task, of coordinating resources and creating appropriate structures and processes for collaborative learning, there is also a *leadership* task, of helping to set a culture and expectation that "learning is everyone's job – every day". This was one of the key patterns identified by the collective sense-making exercise undertaken by all the authors of the latest round of examples of practice.

This was described in the examples as creating learning rituals – which nicely captures the cultural aspect of what could otherwise be thought of simply as a process. This practice is underpinned by the value of curiosity. As the examples' authors identified:

> "Learning not just an artefact; learning is a way of being – a certain mindset, how you show up to the work; more invisible effect; activating curiosity – deeply engaging with your environment." (Notes from sense-making session)

This is true whether you are a public-facing worker seeking to understand what will help a particular resident achieve what matters to them, or an organisational director trying to understand the dynamics of how your directorate works.

A crucial aspect of the desired learning culture is that it is a "positive error culture" (Gigerenzer

2014). The working culture (the expectations people have about "how things happen here") must enable people to talk openly about their mistakes and uncertainty. We have observed how organisations can build positive error cultures, by creating Learning Communities. (See also Wilson et al, 2023).

Relevant examples of practice which explore learning cultures further:

- Barking & Dagenham
- Healthy Communities Together Gloucester
- Plymouth Family Hubs
- Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance.

Learning is a participation sport

"Everybody learns" was also expressed in terms of learning being an active, *participatory process*. Too often in organisations or partnerships learning is created by one set of people and *reported* to another. We know this is not a very effective way to create change.

Obviously, it is not possible to have everyone in an organisation participate in every inquiry. Instead, an effective strategy seems to involve defining an inquiry within a "system of interest" (Jackson, 2018) such that it starts with a clear purpose, involves a bounded set of actors, and the scope of the inquiries is agreed with them. We will explore this further in the "system" section below.

When the actors in an experiment/exploration learn something, rather than reporting that learning to others as recommendations or conclusions, the findings are taken to others with the following questions: can you help make sense of these findings in your context? What do these findings mean for you?

In this way, learning is seen as a participation sport, rather than one which is undertaken by a few, and observed by many. Think of it as a Park Run, rather than the Olympics.

Relevant examples of practice which further explore learning as a participatory endeavour:

- Czechia Child Protection Services
- Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders
- Healthy Communities Together Gloucestershire
- Sunderland Primary Care.

Learning Cycles

The Learning Cycle is a framework by which to create a complex system as a learning system. It offers a quasi-process map as a way to help people understand and organise a set of activities that:

- Identify the purpose of a system of interest (Jackson 2018)
- Understand the System – by identifying the actors (people/organisations) and factors (causal drivers) which comprise that system, and hence call it into being as a mental model of a set of relationships in the world. When the actors reflect on the factors, they then create shared knowledge (theory) about how that system behaves
- Codesign experiments/explorations – the shared process of designing actions which change the pattern of results created, and the learning processes around those actions
- Undertake those experiments/explorations – running those action research processes, spotting patterns in the results, and theorising from those patterns
- Embed and influence – turning the learning from those experiments and explorations into Business as Usual (for areas that you can control), and influencing others (where you cannot).

The new examples have helped us to update and iterate the Learning Cycle framework from the versions published in previous reports.

Figure 2. A Learning Cycle

In previous iterations of Human Learning Systems research, we have been able to identify Learning Cycles as patterns which retrospectively describe how people have organised their work. In this latest round of examples, we have seen that people and organisations are increasingly using Learning Cycles to explicitly frame and manage their work.

Developing the capacity for managers to undertake Learning Cycles, and connect them across different system scales is a key capability for organisations/partnerships. This becomes a key feature of organisational development and human resources in a Human Learning Systems approach.

The Learning Cycle framework is a *quasi*-process map, rather than an actual process map, for two reasons. Firstly, because the reality of doing this work is always messier than a linear process can describe. Secondly, because if you treat a Learning Cycle simply as a process to follow, it is much less likely to enable you to create the learning system you are aiming for. This is because a learning system depends as much on the creation of learning relationships as it does on following a particular process. We hope that this framework gives useful shape to the work, without overly prescribing how these learning relationships will develop.

Learning and data

Some people have seen Human Learning Systems' critique of "management by targets", and conclude that the Human Learning Systems approach is not in favour of using measurement and data.

We can helpfully correct this misunderstanding. Human Learning Systems requires a systematic and rigorous approach to the use of measurement and data. Data is more important in a Human Learning Systems approach, not less.

A Human Learning Systems approach makes systematic use of data to:

- Understand the System – data is required in order to understand
  - the actors involved in a system, and their relationships
  - the factors of a system, and their relationships
- The results of experiments and explorations – designing what data needs to be collected in order to understand how experiments are going is one of the most crucial aspects of a Learning Cycle.

A Human Learning Systems approach enables data to perform its function – supporting continuous performance improvement. It does this by removing the corrupting effects of performance management from the way in which data is used. As the economist Charles Goodhart famously said: "when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure". Human Learning Systems addresses this problem, which lies at the heart of the problem that New Public Management faces in its use of data.

Relevant examples of practice which further explore using data for learning:

- Active Cornwall
- Barking & Dagenham
- Climate KIC
- Czechia Child Protection Services
- Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders
- Healthy Communities Together Gloucestershire
- Healthcare Improvement Scotland
- MERAKI – The Ministry of Citizen Participation, Mexico
- North Edinburgh Support Service (NESSie)
- Scottish Borders.

Learning, governance and accountability

We offer the following definitions of governance and accountability. Governance is the process of asking: "Is what is happening what we intended to happen? And have all the relevant people been involved in making this decision? Accountability is the process of rendering an account of what has happened, and why, in relation to what was intended – so that governance can be undertaken.

For a Human Learning Systems approach to be undertaken comprehensively, it is important that it creates change in how governance and accountability happen. This is necessary, firstly because our current governance and accountability processes – which are focused on compliance and performance management – are fundamentally broken.

Within New Public Management **we do not currently have accountability, we have accountability theatre**, in which everyone's job is to produce good-looking data. This corrupts the data that organisations need to learn and improve. We know this, because it is what the evidence overwhelmingly says. A systematic review of target-based performance management studies from 2018 – which looked at research from across public, private and voluntary sectors – revealed that over 80% of research studies find evidence of gaming [the deliberate manipulation of data to make it look good] and 74% find evidence of people deliberately lying (Franco-Santos and Otley, 2018).

It is important to take a minute to understand the significance of this finding. **If we use targets** – either process targets or outcome targets – **to govern the work and hold people accountable, we cannot trust the data that is produced**.

The second reason that change to governance and accountability mechanisms is required is that this is a key part of paradigm shift. If change in the public-facing work, or resource allocation mechanisms, or how meetings are organised, is not accompanied by change in how governance and accountability are undertaken, eventually the public-facing (and other) changes will be undermined.

Often, when people talk about "the system" undermining change efforts, it is our broken governance and accountability processes which stymie those efforts. The good news is that we can choose to do governance and accountability differently. As we have highlighted in previous reports, and is brilliantly illustrated in Dan Honig's latest book 'Mission Driven Bureaucrats' (Honig, 2024), people have changed what is governed, the form of accountability conversations, and the direction of accountability.

Changing what is governed

In a Human Learning Systems approach, the intentions that are governed are our intentions to continuously learn and improve. Instead of intending to comply with a programme process or hit predetermined "results", the focus of our intention switches **to accounting for learning effectively and authentically, in respect of our purpose**.

The governance questions that Human Learning Systems asks are:

- What have you learnt (in respect of our purpose)?
- How have you learnt it (in terms of rigorous, authentic learning processes, and the participation of all relevant actors)?
- Have you changed practice on the basis of what you learnt?
- Have all the relevant people been involved in making this decision?"

Changing the form of accountability conversations

Rendering accounts of what and how we have learnt, and what we have changed as a result requires a different form of accountability conversation from the currently dominant one. In our current approach, accountability frequently becomes shortened to "counting".

In a Human Learning Systems approach, accountability requires dialogue between those rendering an account and those receiving it. This conversation is required in order that sense-making can occur – rendering an account *meaningful* in terms of the contexts of both the giver and receiver of the account.

Changing the direction of accountability conversations

In current accountability relationships, the direction of accountability is most predominantly "upward" – because accountability is in the service of the logic of control. Principals (those with more power) hold agents (those with less power) accountable for acting according to the interests of principals. This means that accountability is essentially about junior people reporting their actions to senior people, to make sure their seniors are happy.

Human Learning Systems approaches to accountability add further dimensions to accountability conversations. As well as "upward" accountability conversations, Human Learning Systems approaches support more generally "outward" accountability conversations. These include peer-to-peer conversations, in which peers render accounts of their work to one another so they can learn and improve – and with those being served.

Addressing the accountability contradiction of New Public Management

Once more, this addresses a key contradiction in New Public Management, which would like to hold people accountable for producing desired results (outcomes) in the world. But this is impossible, because in a complex system we cannot robustly and rigorously identify which actions led to the creation of particular outcomes. And because it is impossible, whenever people try to do it the result is gaming (Lowe & Wilson, 2015).

On the other hand, it is possible to hold people accountable for complying with particular processes. But when we do this, it does not create the outcomes we desire in the world, because in a complex system even tiny (potentially unmeasurable) changes to input variables lead to the creation of vastly different outcomes. So, being compliant with agreed processes (even "best practice") leads to perverse incentives and undesirable outcomes (Van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002). This is because our process interacts with a different set of real-world conditions from those it was designed for.

In summary, New Public Management is trapped in a terrible paradox. When we try to control what we really want to produce (outcomes), we get gaming. When we actually control what we can control (processes), we get perverse incentives and undesirable outcomes. **Complexity breaks New Public Management**. Whenever we recognise a challenge as complex, the logic of control fails.

Experiments with governance and accountability processes

The final aspect of the relationship between learning and governance/accountability which we can highlight from this round of examples is that governance and accountability processes are themselves subject to experimentation and learning. In fact, we can express this with greater strength. The primary duty of those with governance responsibilities is to experiment with ways of undertaking governance and accountability. The fundamental duty of those

with governance responsibilities is to ask: "how should we govern this work, in order to best enable it to achieve its purpose?"

Relevant examples of practice which explore governance and accountability further:

- Barking & Dagenham
- Brent Care Journeys
- Changing Futures Northumbria
- Fife – No One Left Behind
- Hackney Physical Activity
- Healthcare Improvement Scotland
- Liverpool City Region
- MERAKI – The Ministry of Citizen Participation, Mexico
- Systems Innovation and Experimentation Fund.

Funding for learning

The current round of examples also highlights another key aspect of management practice – how resource allocation functions. This applies particularly to the accountability arrangements associated with funding – under what terms are people/organisations allocated resources to do their work?

A Human Learning Systems approach focuses the resource allocation conversation on collaborative experimentation and learning. People and organisations are provided with resources on the basis that they will experiment and learn to achieve purpose.

We have seen this principle operate in all sorts of funding contexts – from service commissioning in the UK through to national and international funding programmes, from both charitable foundations and government.

This approach to resource allocation enables people and organisations to be effective in complex environments. It enables work to adapt to the bespoke requirements of human freedom and flourishing, and to remain effective even when the world dramatically changes. It is notable, for example, how learning-based approaches to funding enabled rapid responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of funding in this way are remarkable – better outcomes (in terms of the effects on citizens' lives) for much less money.

Any funder can make the choice to fund for learning. Any funder can switch from funding mechanisms which distort practice and corrupt data to ones which promote the continuous collaborative experimentation and learning that creates real outcomes in the world. We know this from the examples we describe below. They have done so in local and national government contexts, from small-scale charitable foundations through to the large-scale global development activity. It is a practical choice that any funder gets to make.

If you are a funder and would like help exploring how to fund for learning, the Centre for Public Impact, Europe is developing an action-learning programme to enable funders to experiment with this approach.

Relevant examples of practice which explore funding for learning further:

- Barking & Dagenham
- Brent Care Journeys
- Hackney Physical Activity
- Liverpool City Region
- Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance
- Systems Innovation & Experimentation Fund
- Young People Cornwall.

Learning relationships and trust

Before we leave the Learning section, it is worth highlighting the importance of *learning relationships* to Learning as a Management Strategy. We touched on this previously, when we highlighted that learning is a culture which can be created, not just a process to be undertaken.

In this section, we want to highlight two additional aspects – that the foundations of learning for Human Learning Systems are learning relationships. Individual citizens and workers can reflect for themselves on their lives and practices, but the learning in Human Learning Systems has an inescapable relational quality – people need to experiment and learn together.

One of the key elements of successful learning relationships that has been repeatedly highlighted across the examples is the role of *trust*. It is obvious that trust is an enabler of learning – because it takes trust for people to reveal crucial details about their lives to one another. Without this depth of knowledge, experiments and learning can be superficial.

We have also found that trust is a consequence of learning together. Even in previously low-trust environments, the practice of learning together has built trust between different system actors. This creates a virtuous cycle, in which learning together builds trust, creating the space for autonomous, devolved action. These autonomous actions create adaptations in practice, which can become the focus of shared learning.

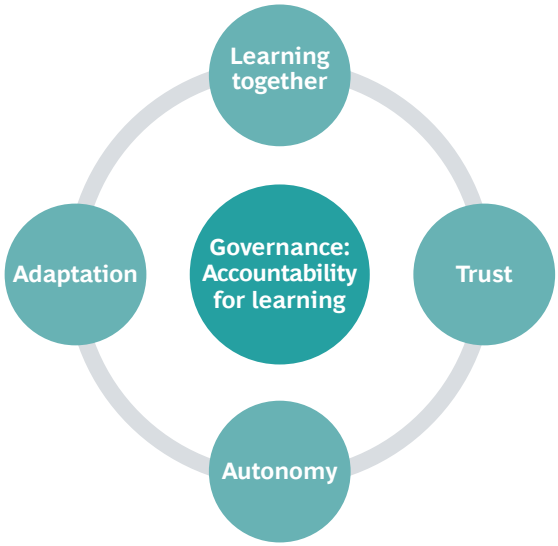

Figure 3. Learning and trust

Relevant examples of practice which explore learning relationships further:

- Czechia Child Protection Services
- Healthy Communities Together Gloucester
- Mitwirkung
- North Edinburgh Support Service (NESSie).

What does this add up to?

Learning as a Management Strategy offers principles and suggests practices by which learning can become the focus of the work of organising public service.

Suggested Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- Frame people's work in terms of Learning Cycles – from public-facing workers through to those who govern the work
- Make the creation of structured learning spaces the primary task of managers at all levels. These spaces should enable sense-making of the experiments conducted by workers in those teams.

- Prioritise time for individual and collective learning, and building learning relationships
- Equip all workers with the capabilities to create and manage Learning Cycles
- Fund/commission explicitly for collaborative learning
- Govern for learning, and experiment with governance and accountability practices that work in context
- Use data for learning and improvement, rather than for performance management
- Use information systems which enable effective organisation of data, and track the progression of Learning Cycles
- Focus leadership roles on the task of building collaborative learning cultures and infrastructure.

Don't:

- Manage using performance targets – they will create perverse incentives and corrupt the data required for learning
- Try to bolt learning onto people's existing day jobs – learning *is* the work
- Make learning the responsibility of specific roles – e.g. business analysts, insights teams, or evaluators. *Everybody learns*.

Systems

The Human Learning Systems approach is part of the complex systems landscape. Its core proposition is that the outcomes that public service seeks to create are generated by **complex systems**.

Complex Systems

Outcomes relating to human flourishing emerge from the ongoing and unpredictable interaction of many different actors and factors, not from the activity of single services or organisations. It is these relationships and interactions between actors and factors that make up a 'system', in the Human Learning Systems approach.

As soon as we recognise that outcomes are created by complex systems, we are obliged to manage public service differently. This is because to recognise a challenge as complex is not just to say that it is "difficult". As soon as we recognise that the outcome we seek is created by a complex system, we must respond to the challenges of the four dimensions of outcome-complexity outlined by (French et al 2023):

Compositional complexity – outcomes in people's lives are created by many different interdependent factors. It is impossible to isolate any of the factors in a system and say that it "caused" the outcome. For example, the outcome of obesity is created by this whole (most likely incomplete) representation of a system:

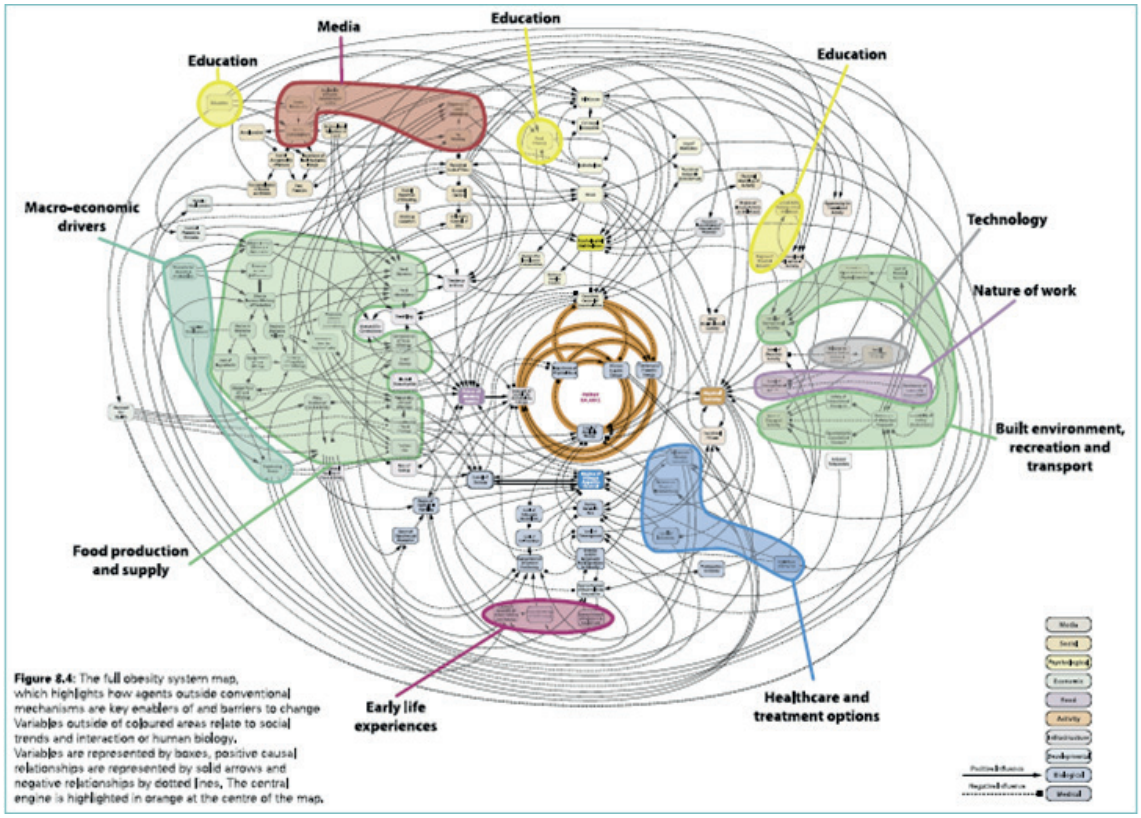

Figure 4. A systems map of obesity – from Vandenbroeck, Goossens, and Clemens (2007)

Experiential complexity – each person's life as a complex system that creates outcomes is unique, because each person experiences outcomes differently. For example, what counts as "wellbeing" for me may not be wellbeing for you. And how wellbeing is created for me, will likely be different than for you.

Dynamic complexity – complex systems change all the time. What worked to create an outcome for me at one point in time, may not work in the future. What "failed" previously may work now. Tiny (potentially unmeasurable) changes in complex systems can lead to hugely different outcomes.

Governance complexity – none of the actors in a complex system control the patterns of results that it creates, because no one is in control of all the different interdependent actors and factors. The logic of control does not work reliably to create desired outcomes.

These dimensions of complexity combine to create the following challenges for public service:

- There is no reliable way to specify in advance "what works" to create an outcome in a complex system. Therefore, the idea of "best practice" does not function in complex systems. It is

impossible to specify a programme delivery protocol, and make people comply with it, in order to create desirable outcomes.

- There is no reliable way to identify which intervention "caused" an outcome in a complex system, as it is impossible to generate a robust counterfactual (what would have happened in the absence of an intervention). Consequently, it is impossible to reliably undertake Payment by Results, or any other form of outcomes-based performance management.
- Public service must be able to understand and respond to the unique nature of each person's life as a complex system. It must be able to understand what matters uniquely to that person (at a particular time) and the unique ways in which "what matters" to that person can be created in the world. In the language of complexity, public service must be able to respond to variety in demand.
- If it is to help create desired outcomes, public service must be able to coordinate effective support across a wide range of interdependent factors in a complex system. Siloed responses will not enable outcomes to be created.

When we recognise that the outcomes we seek are complex, it changes our obligations as managers and leaders. What counts as **rigorous** working changes. How we **learn** changes. What counts as **effective strategy** changes. We must think and act differently if we are to succeed in complex environments.

When is an outcome complex?

Are some outcomes complicated rather than complex (and therefore not subject to the rigours of working in complexity, as outlined above)? It is possible to narrow desirable outcomes to the point whereby the systems that create them have few enough variables which are under our control. For example, if we say that a desirable outcome is **"we want to give this patient the best chance of surviving this operation"**, then we can create protocols for counting surgical instruments in and out of operating theatres, minimising the chance that they will be left inside patients.

However, outcomes like this are both very narrowly drawn and rare in public service. Notice the key thing about this example – the person receiving service is tightly controlled. As soon as we introduce factors in the system that are beyond our control to manage (like people who are not sedated or strapped down), the logic of control fails.

It is also worth noticing how the logic of control responds to this situation – by seeking to bring citizens under management control. We can notice the insidious spread of sanctions and "non-compliant" notices. These are attempts to bring citizens under New Public Management's logic of control. We can see these authoritarian measures for what they are – the failure of the logic of control to respond effectively to complexity.

Learning as the response to complexity

How do we face the rigours of working in complexity? What is the required strategy? Dave Snowden's Cynefin research is very helpful in answering this question.

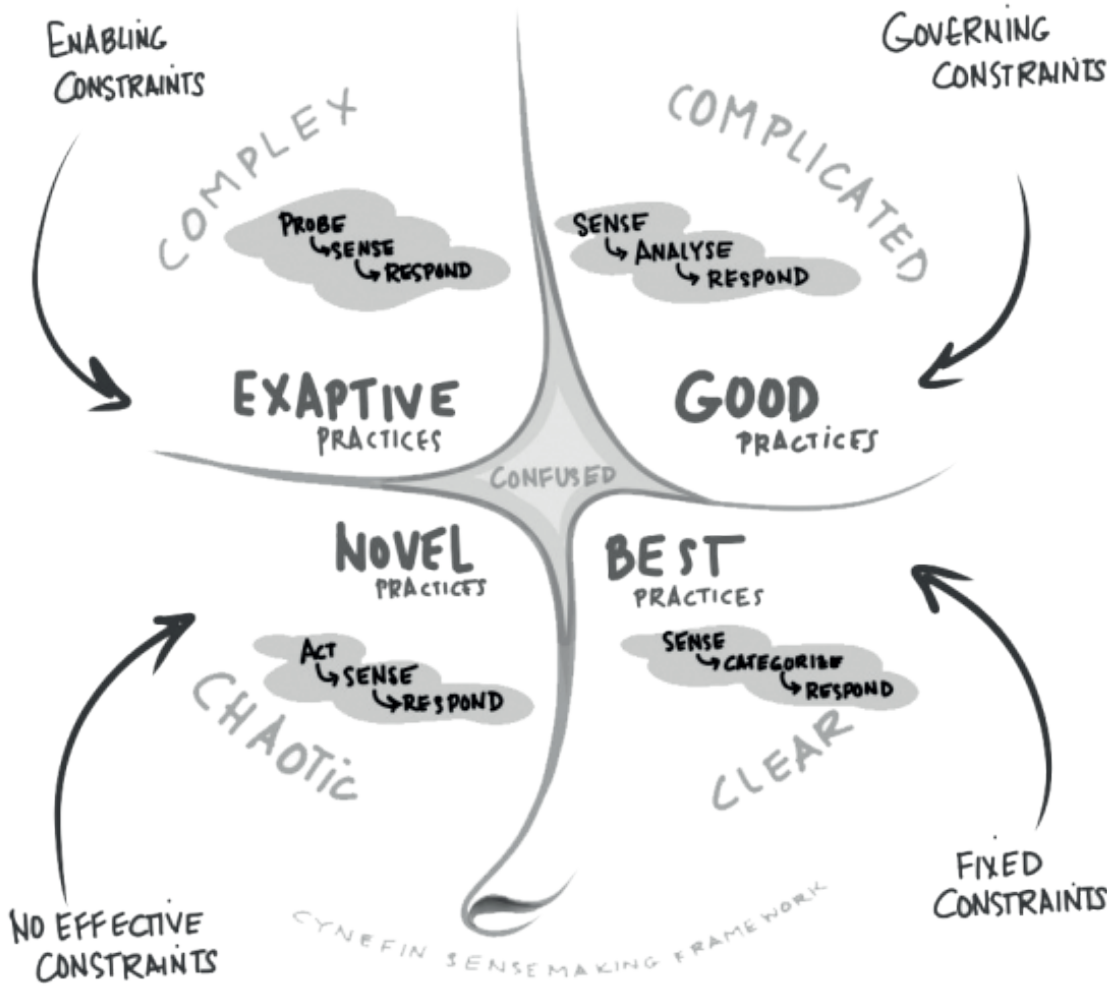

Figure 5. Cynefin framework

In a complex domain, the appropriate strategy is a learning strategy. In short, the way to enable complex systems to produce desired outcomes is to turn them into **learning systems.** This is why we have outlined Learning as a Management Strategy as the core Human Learning Systems response.

Bringing a 'systems' lens to Human Learning Systems

Human Learning Systems also draws on systems thinking, and is part of the "soft systems" tradition (Jackson 2018). In this tradition, systems are not predefined things which exist in the world, they are shared mental models of relationships that exist in

the world. We create a "system of interest" (Jackson 2018) when we identify a purpose we want to achieve in the world, and the set of relationships which help to achieve or frustrate this purpose. This act of system creation is the act of building a shared mental model of a useful set of relationships in the world.

Hence, the Learning Cycle begins by identifying "purpose". When people have named the purpose they are intending to create (e.g. "we want older people in Place X to lead thriving lives"), then they begin to identify and "understand" the system which supports or frustrates this purpose. Who are the actors? What are the factors? What shared knowledge do those actors create when they reflect on those factors together?

'Whole life' systems

We have established that human flourishing requires a coordinated "whole life" response and a focus on systems as learning systems. Bringing a systems lens to public service can deepen understanding of how to enable coordinated support and a learning approach for people, and embed this in a sustainable way.

Taking a systems lens requires fundamentally shifting thinking and practice to centre relationships and contextual understanding, 'see' systems, and work with interconnections and patterns. This need for a more ecological and relational mindset is powerfully summed up by anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson (1972): "the major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think."

To enable human freedom and flourishing, public service must be able to understand and respond to the unique nature of each person's life as a complex system. Responding to the unique nature of each person's life as a complex system requires a collaborative response. Public service must be able to coordinate effective support across a wide range of interdependent factors in a complex system if it is to help create desired outcomes. Siloed responses will not enable desired outcomes to be created.

However, collaboration isn't enough. We need to take a systems lens to acknowledge and nurture the underlying conditions that enable human freedom and flourishing. 'Healthy systems' are those that have the conditions in place for people to work and learn together in ways that mean positive outcomes are more likely to emerge. Characteristics of healthy systems include common purpose, trusting relationships, diverse perspectives, aligned resources, a learning culture, and shared power. Having these kinds of conditions in place and at multiple system scales (not only in the relationship between citizen and worker) makes it easier to support human freedom and flourishing, and to embed this practice as the norm rather than exception.

Relevant examples of practice include Gloucestershire Healthier Communities Together. They describe their focus on "paradigm-shifting, systemic changes and the profoundly different relationships, behaviours and collaborations we believe lead towards 'fairer health'." Similarly, Gateshead Community Builders see their work as "fundamentally about how to organise differently – how we might rewrite, reinvent or reimagine rules, norms and laws of organising, governance, and asset flows" as a way to build community power.

Linked to the welcoming of diverse perspectives and sharing power, it is important that in focusing on the unique nature of people's lives, we do not ignore systemic oppression that creates inequitable patterns in outcomes, for example, based on racism, classism and ableism. Brent Care Journeys has an intentional focus on "Transparency about who is powerful and who has been disempowered; bravery around how to disrupt and redress that." This both helps enable individual young people (especially those who are least heard) to experience more meaningful relationships, and embeds deep change through the creation of structures and ways of working across Brent that give more power and agency to care-experienced young people.

Systems stewardship

Systems stewardship is the work of purposefully nurturing healthier systems that enable better outcomes. In current public service, we are far more likely to encounter unhealthy systems, characterised by siloes, competition and power imbalances, than healthy ones.

Systems stewards nurture healthier systems by bringing together actors to see themselves as a system, build trusting relationships, share power and learn and act together. This helps make best use of collective relationships, insights and resources to achieve shared goals. The Learning Cycle described earlier in this piece is a (quasi) process map which systems stewards can use to frame the task of creating and stewarding healthy systems.

Liverpool City Region describe their role as steward in helping bring together different actors working on homelessness to enable collective problem solving:

> "We play a key role in bringing, enabling and facilitating conversations with various partners trying to find solutions for individuals that will provide a meaningful outcome… We try to facilitate the conversation to identify what will work and how we will face the challenges of these blockages [in the system]."

The work of systems stewardship can be undertaken by a single person, or distributed amongst many people. The key point about the location of systems stewardship is that they should be seen as legitimate convenors in respect of that system of interest. System stewards typically act as a 'bridge' between different groups of actors, including those who have formal and informal power. Stewards must have legitimacy among these different actors, and the ability to convene, translate, and enable collective learning across traditional boundaries.

Working in a complexity-informed way requires challenging dominant and embedded ways of working and thinking. Systems stewards typically model and seek to spread such mindsets and behaviours, including the ability to embrace discomfort and ambiguity, patience and persistence, collaboration, curiosity and self-reflection.

This is not easy work – being attentive to the needs and priorities of diverse actors, bridging between different perspectives, judging when to step in and step back, seeking to rebalance power, taking action that runs against the grain of accepted ways of doing things. Discussions between systems stewards are increasingly emphasising the personal toll this work can take. It is

emotional work that typically involves personal change – the constant questioning of your beliefs, the power you hold, the role you should be playing. This requires a lot of resilience. Stewards need to pay attention to looking after themselves, and peer support can play an invaluable role in helping provide the practical and emotional support this work requires.

Relevant examples of practice which explore systems stewardship further:

- Liverpool City Region
- Hackney Physical Activity
- Surrey Youth Focus
- Gloucestershire Healthier Communities Together
- Mitwirkung
- Thurrock Complex Housing Intervention Programme
- Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance

You can learn more about system stewardship in this resource (due to be updated January 2025).

System scales

Understanding that "a system" is a created mental model, rather than something which exists in the world, is particularly helpful because it enables us to recognise that the systems of interest we care about operate at many different scales, and with many different functions.

When we begin to apply Human Learning Systems at multiple system scales, it becomes more possible to develop effective relationships between citizen and worker to enable human freedom and flourishing. The nature of this work means it will never be easy, but it can be easier when the contexts in which we operate enable rather than constrain. Embedding Human Learning Systems at multiple system scales also makes it more likely that this practice will be sustained as it is less vulnerable to ways of working 'snapping back' to the default when the context changes.

In previous Human Learning Systems research we have identified the idea of "system scales" – that systems can be identified as different spatial scales:

- The scale of the person being served – how someone's life as system creates/ frustrates desirable outcomes
- The teams of workers who support those people
- Organisations – as systems made up of teams of workers
- Places – as systems made up of people and organisations
- Countries – as systems made up of people and places.

Figure 6. System scales

Each of these scales of systems of interest can be useful in different contexts – public-facing workers will want to understand the lives of the people they serve. Team and organisation leaders will want to understand their teams/organisations as systems, etc. In each of these cases we remember that the system that is created is a mental model, not the set of relationships that exist in the world. The map is not the territory, it helps us to understand and navigate the territory. And in our framing, it helps us to create the right experiments to enable us to change the territory in purposeful ways.

Systems at these different scales can be connected when the Learning Cycles at each scale are connected, so that the learning from the experiments/explorations at the "smaller" scale feeds into the process of "Understanding the System" at the larger scale. This process is described in more detail in Human Learning systems: Practical Guide for the Curious.

From the latest round of examples of practice, we now see the Human Learning Systems approach operating at all of these system scales.

Relevant examples of practice which further explore system scales:

- Changing Futures Northumbria
- Czechia Child Protection Services
- MERAKI – The Ministry of Citizen Participation, Mexico
- Thurrock Complex Housing Intervention Programme.

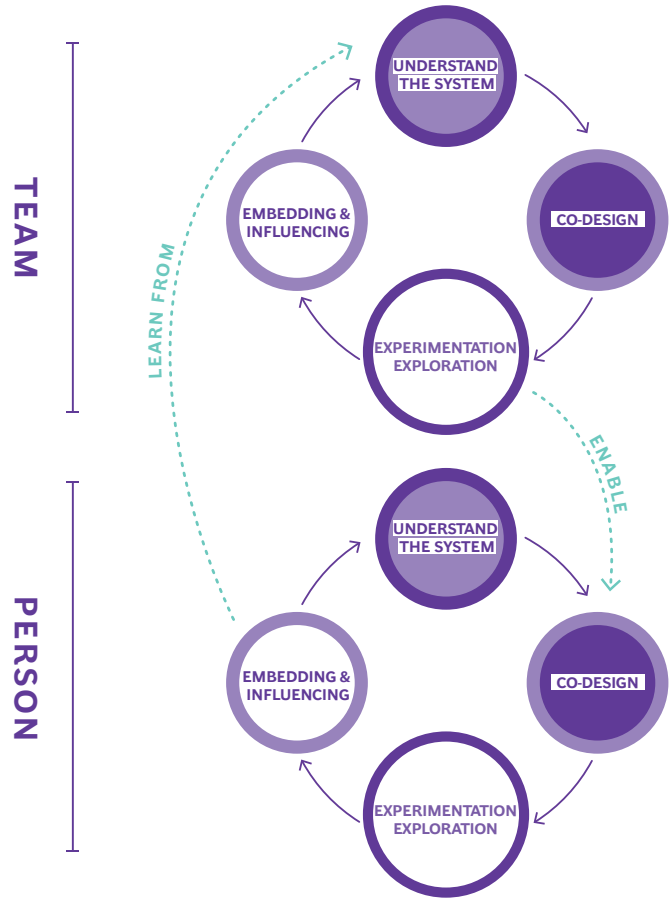

Figure 7. Connected Learning Cycles at different system scales

What next? Experimenting with the Human Learning Systems approach

If you're curious about trying the Human Learning Systems approach in your context, then there are many sources of help and support which may be of use. Similarly, if you've already started on this journey, and would like to connect and share with others, then members of Human Learning Systems Collaborative can almost certainly help. Places and organisations which are currently undertaking explorations of Human Learning Systems include:

- Doncaster Council (and partners) – Thrive Programme, a whole place change programme
- North Lanarkshire Health & Social Care Partnership
- Plymouth Council
- Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance

As we described at the beginning of this piece, Human Learning Systems is a continuous action research process. This means you cannot simply implement a Human Learning Systems approach, you have to experiment with it. In this document, we have laid out the key principles and supporting practices of Human Learning Systems. Our question to you would be: how might the Human Learning Systems principles manifest themselves in your context? What are the practices that you create for yourselves to create healthy learning systems in your contexts?

To help you with this process, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and iriss commissioned a Practical Guide to exploring Learning as a Management Strategy. You can download and read it for free. There are also many other resources at www.humanlearning.systems.

If you would like help with your exploration, from either a Learning Partner to support you on your journey or by connecting you into a community of practice of other action learners, get in touch at enquiries@humanlearning.systems.

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