

**HUMAN**  
LEARNING SYSTEMS



# Human Learning Systems: A practical guide for the curious

## SUMMARY VERSION 1.1

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## Foreword



**Ruth Glassborow**  
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For some time now, Scotland has been building towards empowered communities with the Scottish approach to public services centred on collaboration with citizens. People are at the heart of all we do; from Self-directed Support and Realistic Medicine, to community empowerment. Despite this powerful agenda, we have not consistently turned learning into actions for sustainable change.

The Centre for Public Impact (CPI) has brought together a wealth of emergent thinking around change in a complex system. This thinking resonates strongly with Healthcare Improvement Scotland's (HIS) aim to drive improvement in the complex landscape of health and social care integration in Scotland. HIS first connected with the work on Human Learning Systems (HLS) four years ago through a shared passion for commissioning for outcomes, and our respective work has evolved through collaborative and sustained discussions.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, HIS learned from colleagues across Scotland about the things they did at pace to meet people's health and care needs, and importantly what enabled them to do so. Together with CPI, we identified that a key enabler to driving these improvements was the adoption of a learning approach.

At HIS, learning is at the core of our Quality Management System and we welcome this important development, which we believe is fundamental to our collective next steps towards real improvement – the Human Learning System approach.

This guide is a significant step forward in providing people across health and social care with practical guidance on implementing change that can truly shape a system that actively learns and adapts with our complex world, and creates the conditions for each of us to live our best lives.



## Foreword



**Dee Fraser**  
CEO, Iriss

In Scotland, we have talked for a long time about the change we want to see in social care, social work and health.

The challenge for us now is how do we roll up our sleeves and get on with creating the conditions to enable a new and better way of working to flourish? How do we stop just talking and start actually doing?

Human Learning Systems (HLS) is a critical step to help us practically move from vision to thoughtful action. It enables us to take this step forward by making learning and experimentation – in pursuit of the best for people – the key force driving our work.

For me, HLS combines three really important things. It is solidly grounded in the real world of public service, understanding the complex interplay of complicated organisations, which are faced with great ideas; strained resources; stretched workers and competing priorities. This is no tidy model, it's designed for working in messy, complex systems.

It provides just enough architecture for good work to flourish. Unlike many approaches it doesn't dictate a recipe to follow for 'success'. Instead, it focuses on creating the right conditions for the work.

It is both realistic and hopeful. With a laser focus on accountability to the right people – the people we support – and management for learning, not control, it demonstrates that with perseverance, change is possible.

Human Learning Systems is a highly practical and engaging approach that provides support for everyone who has ever wanted to make social work, social care and health work better for people.

Please read it and please use it. We can't wait to hear about the changes you will lead and the ideas you will make real.

# 1. Introduction

## Welcome!

What brought you here?

We wrote a “how to” guide to Human Learning Systems because we feel like there’s something fundamentally wrong with how we currently plan and organise public service. And we want to help people to choose to do it differently if they want to.

If you feel that too, then you’re in the right place.

First things first – a little background and joining up of dots.

This guide was commissioned by [Healthcare Improvement Scotland](#) (HIS) and [Iriss](#).

Both organisations have been leading improvement across health and social care in Scotland for some time and saw the work being developed around Human Learning Systems as a key jigsaw piece in the journey towards improving the quality of care and support people access across the country.

Healthcare Improvement Scotland have developed a Quality Management System approach that encapsulates Planning for Quality, Quality Control and Quality Improvement. These are centred on a Learning System approach. With the emergence of the integration agenda, HIS have increasingly applied this approach beyond health services and into social care and community capacity.

Iriss have developed their practice and resources to support a knowledge and learning culture across social work and social care in Scotland. With the emergence of the integration agenda their work is reaching and impacting in health and community settings. Iriss help practitioners and organisations to learn and develop their practice; improve organisational culture; and contribute to changing the system.

Scotland has been increasingly developing policy and legislation which puts choice and control in the hands of its citizens. From Self-Directed Support to Realistic Medicine and on to Community Empowerment and Human rights – there is a strong drive to change how people are empowered to take control and set agendas. This applies both in terms of having increased direct control over their own lives and wellbeing, and also in terms of community led models which see citizen voices shaping local and national services, policies and government.

This guide has therefore been created to meet the needs of people in the health and social care system in Scotland as they seek to undertake their own experiments in Learning System based change. In Scotland, Human Learning Systems builds on the empowerment agenda, and on the improvement work HIS and Iriss have been leading over recent years.

In turn, we in the [Centre for Public Impact](#) know that the guide will resonate with a wider audience across the globe and we thank our colleagues in Scotland for both the opportunity to join them in their journey and support that change, and welcome their input in helping us lead change in public service across the world.

Next, some definitions:

Whether in a health and social care system or more widely, we use a very broad definition of “public service”. We think that any work that serves the public good (we usually frame this in terms of ‘human freedom and flourishing’) is public service. We don’t believe that public service is a sector. Lots of different types of organisations serve the public good (for example, serving the public good is part of the test of whether an organisation can be a charity or not). This guide is for anyone whose role it is to plan and organise such work.

The task of planning and organising public service is called “public management”. The most common current way of doing

public management is called ‘[New Public Management](#)’ – an approach known for the 3Ms: [Markets, Managers and Metrics](#). [Evidence strongly suggests](#) that if public service wants to support human freedom and flourishing – in other words, if public service wants to help people create good outcomes in their lives – then using the ‘Markets, Managers and Metrics’ approach of New Public Management makes this much harder (and more expensive) than it should be. If you’re reading this, that’s probably been your experience too.

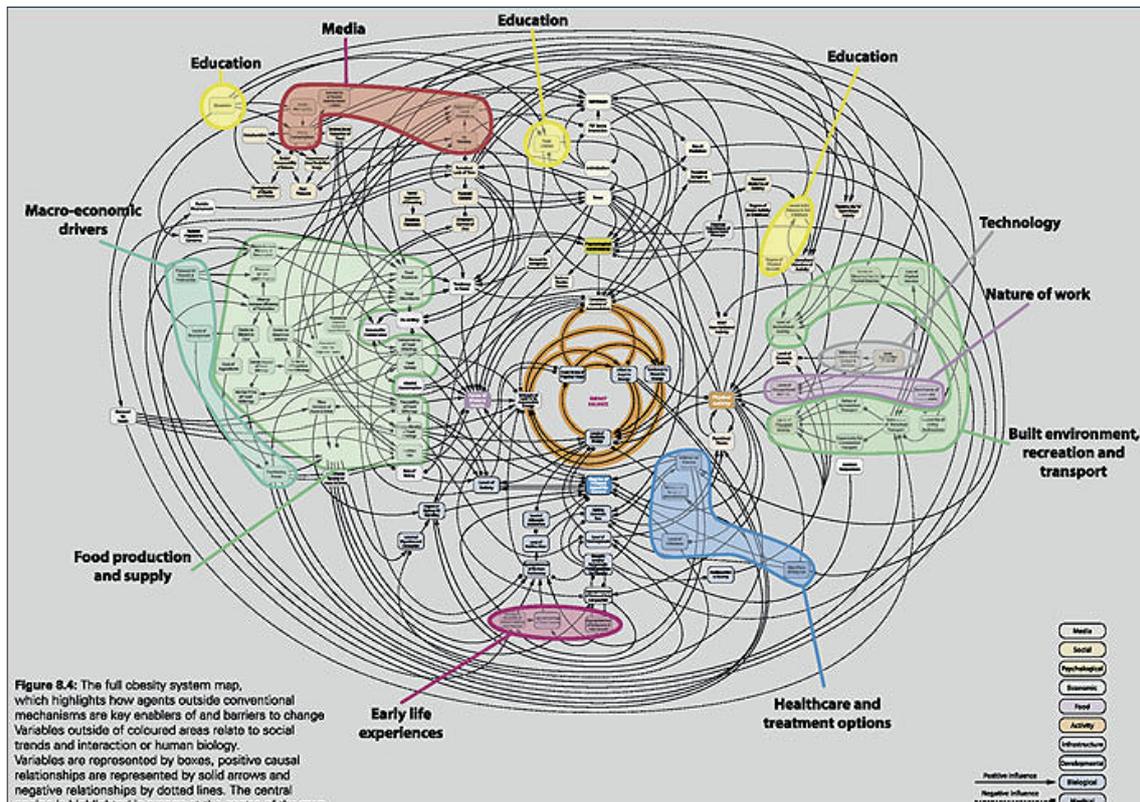
The good news is that those who do the work of organising how public service happens now have a choice about how they do that. The alternative is called ‘[Human Learning Systems](#)’. Just as HIS and Iriss have been putting learning at the centre of change and improvement in the health and social care system in Scotland, this guide is intended to help people to put into practice one of the core elements of a Human Learning Systems approach to public management. - the idea of using ‘[learning as a management strategy](#)’.

## 2. The Key Concepts of Learning as Management Strategy

Learning as Management Strategy comes from one simple truth – that real outcomes in people’s lives aren’t “delivered” by organisations (or by projects, partnerships or programmes, etc). Outcomes are created by the hundreds of different factors in

the unique complex system that is each person’s life. We can see this clearly in the systems map of the outcome of obesity, created by the UK Government Office for Science in 2007.

Figure 1. Systems map of the outcome of obesity



Sturmberg, JP (2018) *Health System Redesign How to Make Health Care Person-Centered, Equitable, and Sustainable*. Springer, Australia. p238

In other words, an outcome is the product of hundreds of different people, organisations, and factors in the world all coming together in a unique and ever changing combination in a particular person’s life. Very few of these

people, organisations or factors are under the control or influence of people who undertake public service. All of this means that you can’t plan to “deliver” an outcome in the same way as you can plan to “deliver” a workshop.

**Figure 2. The management of complexity**

Image credit: Virpi Oinonen [www.businessillustrator.com](http://www.businessillustrator.com)

The reality of creating outcomes in a person's life requires a different approach to planning and organisation. It requires continuous exploration, experimentation and learning. It is this process of continuous exploration that can be planned and organised. And it is this approach to planning and organisation that the guide offers help with.

Because each person's life is a unique, unpredictable and ever changing complex system that creates outcomes (both good and bad), **the work required to create outcomes is a continuous learning process.** It involves public-facing workers creating a learning relationship with the person/people being served, a relationship in which everyone develops an understanding of the elements of that person/people's unique life/lives that currently creates a particular outcome, and together everyone helps to explore and experiment with how that life, embedded

within a whole set of social relationships, might produce different outcomes.

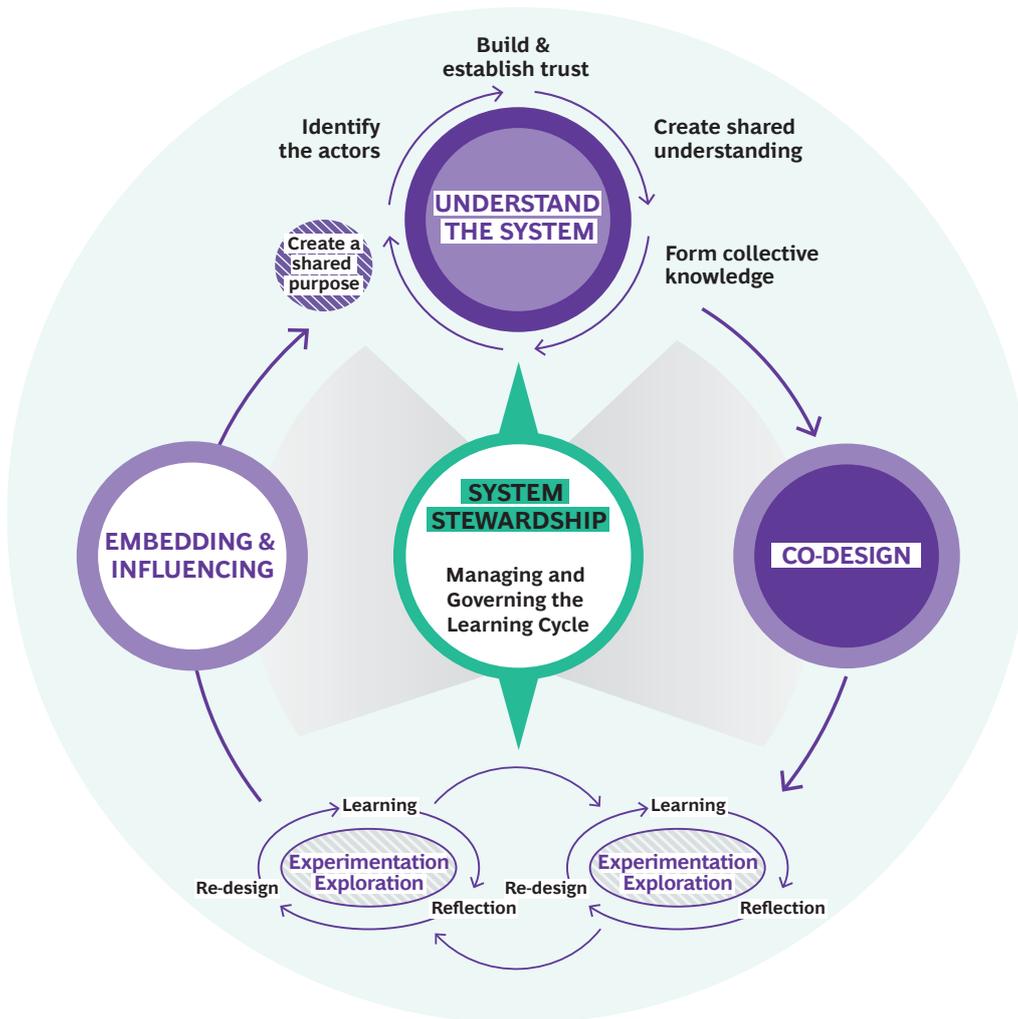
In essence, the message of the guide is as simple as that – plan and organise public service work so that workers can engage with the complexity of people's real lives and, through exploration and experimentation, learn together with those people what will make a positive difference to them.

## 2.1 Learning Cycles

The guide offers a way to structure that learning process, so that you can plan and organise it. We call it a Learning Cycle. We hope it's helpful to you. You may well find your own version of it. Or you may discover a completely different way to plan and organise your learning processes. Whatever works for you.

Our version of a Learning Cycle looks like this:

Figure 3. HLS Learning Cycle



A Learning Cycle has five elements or phases of work:

- Understand the System (that produces the outcome you're looking for)
- Co-Design of experiments/explorations (to get that system to produce different outcomes)
- Experimentation/exploration
- Embedding & influencing (from the results of the explorations/experiments)
- Managing and governing Learning Cycles (System Stewardship)

## 2.2 System Scales

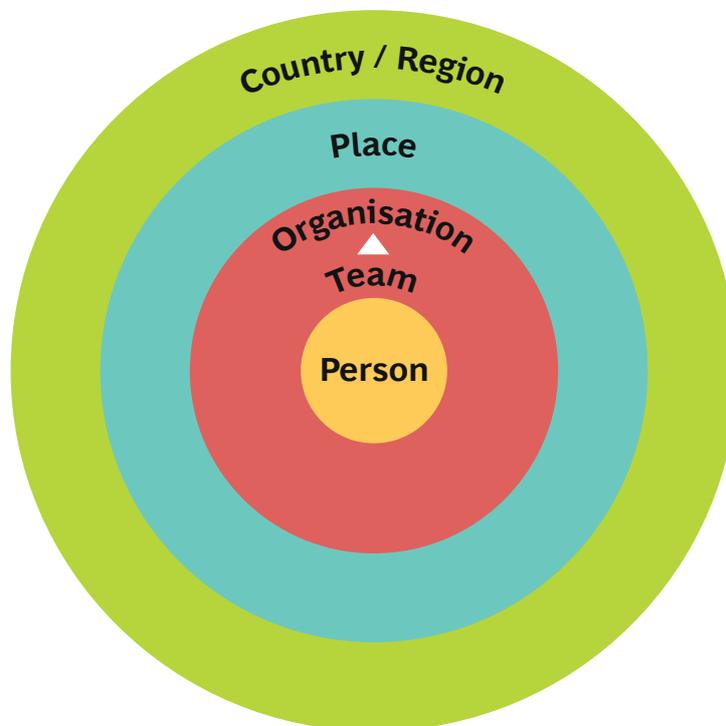
The systems that create outcomes can be defined and recognised at many different scales. On a personal level, we can see our lives as a system which creates both good and bad outcomes (made up of the people and organisations we interact with, and the causal forces that impact on us and them).

At the level of place (e.g. a town or city), we can see that we could recognise and define a system as a set of people and organisations who work in that place, and whose actions combine to create a particular outcome.

These two versions of a “system” can both exist simultaneously – we’re just looking at them at different scales. HLS has identified five different system scales at which it seems to be helpful to create Learning Cycles (there may be others, and their “order” may be different in different contexts):

- A person’s life as system (Person/ Practitioner scale)
- A team as a system (Team scale)
- An organisation as system (Organisation scale)
- A place as a system (Place scale)
- A region/country as a system (Region/ Country scale)

Figure 4. HLS System Scales

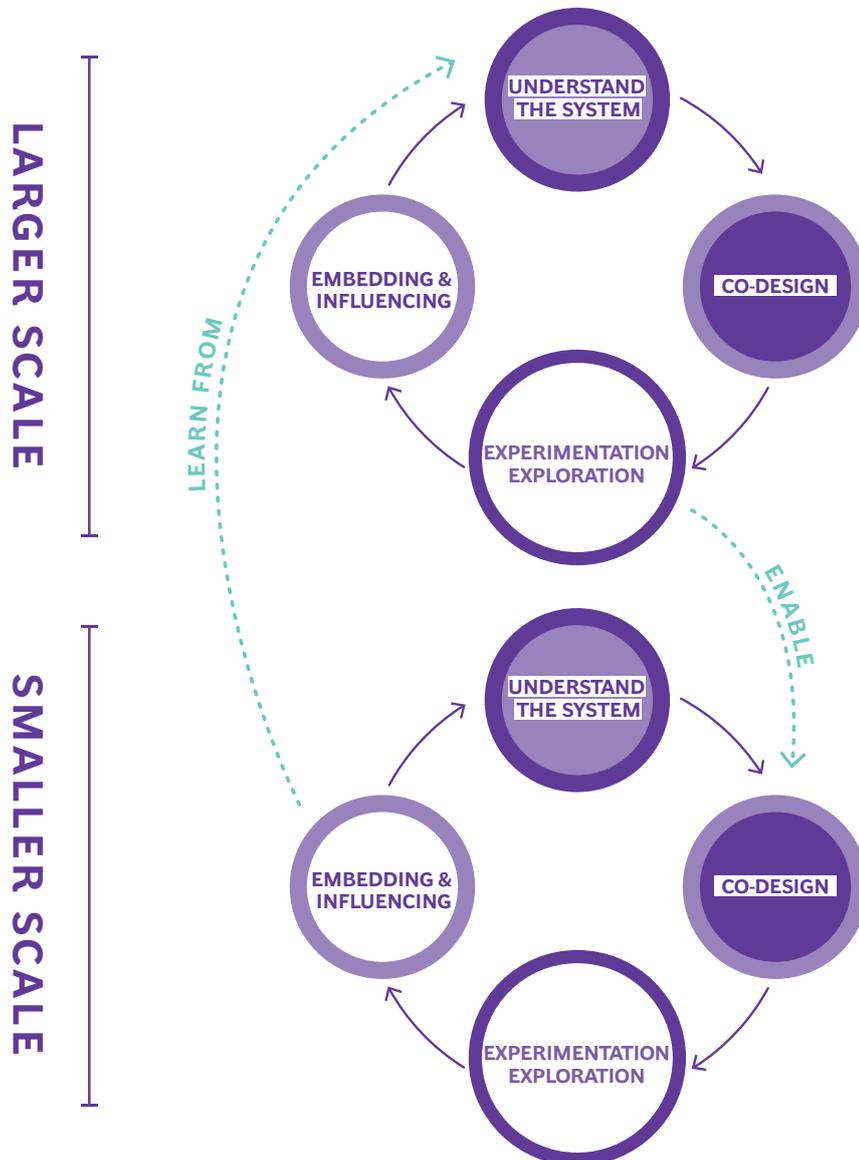


### 2.3 Connected Learning Cycles across different system scales

People can create Learning Cycles at any of the scales described above (Figure 4).. But Learning as Management Strategy really starts to help enable fundamental change when people connect the Learning Cycles at different scales to build a continuous learning approach from the ground up.

Learning as Management Strategy works most completely when managers create connected Learning Cycles – vertically across different system scales, and horizontally to other Learning Cycles at the same scale. Vertically connected Learning Cycles look like this:

Figure 5. Connected Learning Cycles



The Learning Cycles at different system scales are connected by two questions:

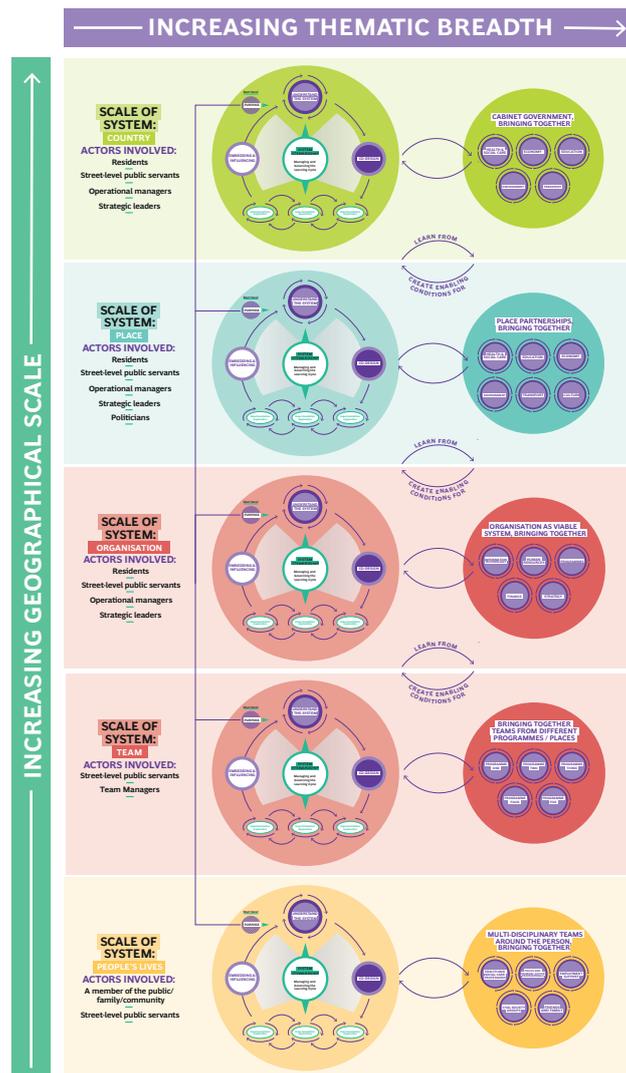
- What can the Learning Cycle at the larger scale **learn from** the patterns of results of the experiments at the scale below?
- How can the Learning Cycle at the larger scale **enable** the Learning Cycle at the scale below? (What are the “enablers” to be nurtured and the barriers to be identified and removed?)

As you will see from the above, the connections between Learning Cycles at

different scales are **built from the ground up**. This is crucial. It is this “ground up” quality which enables real outcomes to be created in people’s lives, because it is only within each person’s life as a unique complex system that outcomes are made.

The range of different system scales which can be connected will look different in different contexts. Within the context of a single country, the maximum range could look something like this – connecting public-facing workers through to national decision-makers in a continuous “learning stack”.

Figure 6. Horizontal and vertical connections



Creating connected Learning Cycles at these different system scales involves the following focuses:

### **2.3.1 Person/Practitioner Scale**

If you're a public-facing worker, your management task is to plan and organise your work so that you can build a continuous learning relationship with the people you serve, and explore how to achieve positive outcomes together.

### **2.3.2 Team Scale**

If you're a manager of a team of these workers, your job is to ensure that all of the workers in the team have the capacity and skills to run their work in this way, and that you are creating appropriate sense-making spaces, processes and culture to enable the patterns from across all of these experiments and explorations to be noticed and understood.

### **2.3.3 Organisation Scale**

If you're the leader of an organisation who employs teams of such workers, your job is to structure the organisation, and ensure that all the teams and functions of the organisation have the spaces, processes, capacity and skills to continuously learn together. In this way, the organisation is able to spot patterns that emerge both from the work and the wider world. It can use that knowledge to inform experimentation which enables it to adapt to the ever changing world.

### **2.3.4 Place Scale**

If you have a leadership role in your place, your job is to help plan and organise so that the different organisations that serve people to create positive outcomes can continuously learn together and adapt to the ever changing world. You will be responsible for ensuring that partnership mechanisms at a place scale are focused on learning and adaptation – convening and running Learning Cycles that bring together knowledge from different organisations, and which experiment with ways of allocating and governing resources to enable organisations to continuously experiment and learn together.

### **2.3.5 Region/Country Scale**

If you have a leadership role at a national/regional level your job is to help plan and organise so that different places can continuously learn together and adapt to the ever changing world. You will be responsible for ensuring that places are able to learn from one another – convening and running Learning Cycles which bring together knowledge from different places. The Learning Cycles will enable experimentation with ways of allocating and governing resources to enable organisations to continuously experiment and learn together, and to provide an account of their actions to one another, and to you.

## 3. Creating Learning Cycles – where do I start?

If you want to begin to enact learning as management strategy, where can you start?

There seem to be three guiding principles to help get you going:

- a. Start where you are
- b. Connect with other system scales
- c. It will be messier than you plan for, and that's okay.

### 3.1 Start from where you are

As you have seen from the previous discussion about system scales, you can create a Learning Cycle within any management context – whether you're a public-facing worker planning and organising your work, or whether you're a strategic commissioner helping to coordinate the work of different places or organisations.

This means that you can start wherever you are. Bring together the different people/ organisations in your context and begin to reframe the work as learning and exploration, rather than “delivery”. If you're curious about doing things differently, it is likely that others will be too. Find them.

### 3.2 Connect with other system scales

If you're a public-facing worker, find the manager who is curious about framing their work as a Learning Cycle, and connect your Learning Cycles together in the learning from/enabling way described above.

If you work at higher system scales, and are bringing together teams, organisations or places to learn collaboratively, make sure you're connected to (learning from and enabling) Learning Cycles on the ground. It is dangerous for managers who are disconnected from the work to experiment without involving those who work on the ground, because you will end up experimenting with things that don't come from the work of creating outcomes in people's lives.

### 3.3 The messiness of Learning Cycles

The Learning Cycle that you plan will not be the Learning Cycle that you end up running. As soldiers are fond of saying: “no plan survives first contact with the enemy”. Or, as Mike Tyson succinctly put it: “everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth”.

The messy difference between your plan for a Learning Cycle and how it actually operates in practice reflects the reality of working in complex systems. Don't let fear of the mess prevent you from starting. You cannot plan, and then undertake, the “perfect” Learning Cycle, so don't become paralysed with worry about whether your plan is perfect.

When thinking about planning to start a Learning Cycle, there are two ways that the actual process of creating connected Learning Cycles is likely to be messier than these diagrams suggest:

- The different elements of the cycle may happen concurrently, or in overlapping ways – they may well not follow a neat progression from one to another
- You might well be starting to create change at an organisation, place or region/country scale, rather than on the ground.

Take this messiness as read. Nevertheless, we think it may be useful for you to have thought about the different elements of a Learning Cycle, and understand the connections between them, and we think that you will be able to create a version of this which works for you (or the organisations you support).

The key to accepting the messiness of the reality of Learning Cycles seems to be:

- To make sure each element of the Learning Cycle has its own rapid sense-making and reflection points, so that your understanding of what is happening is continually updated
- To have timely reviews of the whole Learning Cycle plan, so that it can adapt as it goes
- To develop your own capacity for judgement as to when one element of a Learning Cycle can pass to another. And whilst you develop the experience to make this kind of judgement, borrow from the experience of others by using Learning Partners, or other critical friends.

### 3.4 Get to grips with the key concepts

Before you begin, it's worth taking time to understand some of the key concepts of the HLS approach. Chapters [1](#) through to [8](#) of this free ebook should help.

(It's a couple of hours of reading time.)

Alternatively [this video](#) gives a good overview of the key concepts.

### 3.5 Conditions and entry points for starting a Learning Cycle

[Chapter 5](#) of the free ebook HLS: Public Service for the Real World explored how the conditions required for starting your own exploration/experiment with HLS practice – of enacting Learning as Management Strategy. It has a range of useful information about the required mindsets and roles that are useful for starting to work in this way. We won't repeat all of that advice here.

Here, we will explore the greater detail from the attached case studies about what is needed to begin your experiment/exploration.

#### 3.5.1 What do you need in order to begin a Learning Cycle?

##### 3.5.1.1 Public-facing practitioner roles who frame/will frame their work as Learning Cycles

The best news about HLS practice is that its foundation is built on people who are already doing this work – those with public-facing roles. Unless there are public-facing workers who are already framing their work as learning with those they serve, or who are willing to try that out, then you won't get very far.

We can see, for example, that the whole HLS experiment in Gateshead began with a worker in the Council Tax Debt Recovery team who wanted to explore building learning relationships with those in council tax debt, rather than making enforcement orders against them. It was his desire for change which helped to create a much larger change.

### 3.5.1.2 A manager who will enact learning as management strategy

The other key role required for an HLS experiment to get off the ground is a manager who is willing to frame the work of management as a Learning Cycle, learning from and enabling the work of those on the ground. Enacting Learning as Management Strategy requires managers who are prepared to work in this way.

In terms of our framework, we can see that the minimum requirements to make an HLS experiment viable are connected Learning Cycles across the person/practitioner and team system scales. Even if this is all you have, you can make a start.

### 3.5.1.3 To be rigorous with your learning

From our case studies, the other prerequisite that we can identify for a successful HLS experiment/exploration is that you are rigorous with your learning approach. In essence, the greater your learning rigour, the more convincing a case you can build for the way of working among those not initially involved. For example, in the Gateshead case study, rigorous analysis of the case-by-case costs and effects of the existing council tax debt enforcement processes, together

with a comparison with the experimental approaches developed by the team, were crucial in bringing others on board.

“Rigorous” will mean different things depending on your context, and the types of methods you employ, but it is safe to say that the following are necessary:

- Mixed methods approaches – you will need the skills to be able to capture and analyse both quantitative and qualitative data – particularly, narrative-based methods, such as Appreciative Inquiry
- Good data collection and storage – you will need to capture data from as many perspectives as are required by your system, and that data needs to be stored in such a way that makes it accessible to any who need it (and not accessible to those who must not see it – your research ethics are crucial, because they are the basis of trust)
- Transparent analytical processes – the ability to show your working to others
- Shared sense-making – involving others in drawing meaning from data
- Willingness to recognise the value of information in different formats
- Capacity to capture and interpret complex information for different stakeholder information needs (technical, descriptive, concise) and learning styles.

## 4. The paradox of the guide: planning for emergence

The guide is designed to help you think about, and plan, a process of enacting Learning as Management Strategy. In some respects, this is a paradox – we are trying to help you plan activities that will create emergent results.

Partly, this represents a mindset shift – a shift which embraces the complex reality of how outcomes are actually made. It involves letting go of the pretence that outcomes in people’s lives can be “delivered”, and that the delivery of such outcomes can be planned using KPIs and other traditional management tools. We know this is not the case.

We think that the guide is useful for a different type of planning – designing the ways in which people can explore and learn together the bespoke ways in which outcomes are uniquely created in each and every person’s particular life circumstances. It is these learning processes, practices and cultures which can be planned, managed and nurtured. We hope that the guide helps you to make useful plans concerning:

- The overall shape of the work – helping you to recognise whether you have all the required elements
- The roles which will be required to make this process work – who needs to do what type of work
- The skills, capabilities and tools that will be helpful – so that you can be as prepared as possible.

We think the guide can help you to create connected Learning Cycles as **the architecture of emergence** – the things you can plan and put in place to enable desired outcomes to emerge.

### 4.1 A word on mindsets

In one respect, a “how to” guide is an attempt to turn the ideas and practices of the HLS approach to public management into a process that can be undertaken by any public manager. This is in itself a kind of trap.

**You cannot enact an HLS approach simply by following a set of processes.**

HLS requires a mindset and culture shift. It depends on nurturing intangible qualities such as empathy and trust. It requires humanising all aspects of public service workplaces.

This mindset shift happens most powerfully in the day-to-day conversations we have in our work – with our colleagues and with those whom we serve. For example, if you’re a commissioner and you create the kinds of shared learning processes outlined in this guide, but you’re still having conversations with providers about checking whether they’ve hit predefined programme delivery specifications, then something has gone wrong.

From a number of Human Learning case studies, we've seen how [genuinely exploring and learning together builds trust](#). This trust creates the space for different types of conversation, and builds the confidence to experiment with new ways of doing things. How can you reframe the day-to-day conversations you have in order to develop the curiosity that enables learning together?

The guide asks a series of questions designed to help you to nurture conversations which are rooted in the complexity of real life – to explore how the HLS public management principles could manifest in your context. It offers some pointers for how to systematically create the conditions whereby those conversations become normal and routine. You must discover what those look like, in your context, for yourselves.

## 5. Next steps – download the full guide

If this summary has been all the information you need to begin your experiment, go for it! (And we'd love to hear how it goes).

If you want more detailed information about the work required to undertake the different elements of Learning Cycles, at each of the different system scales, there is more detail in the full “how to” guide [here](#), together with connections to a range of different tools and methods that different organisations have used. You will also find a couple of detailed case studies, showing how the connected Learning Cycle approach has worked in practice.

### 5.1 If you need more help

Hopefully, the full guide gives you a sense of how you could enact Learning as Management Strategy within your own context. However, if you feel like you need further help and support to do this, then you have different available options:

- Engage a [Learning Partner](#) – a Learning Partner can help organisations (or programmes, partnerships, etc) to explore how to enact Learning Cycles in your context, and connect you with examples of people and organisations who have done this. You can find a range of potential Learning Partners [here](#).
- Join a Learning Community/Community of Practice – there are a range of different peer learning groups exploring HLS approaches.
  - If you are in Scotland, in mid-2022 Healthcare Improvement Scotland, iriss and the Centre for Public Impact will be jointly developing a Learning Community for Scottish organisations who want to experiment with Learning Cycles. More details will be available [here](#).
  - You can search for Communities of Practice using [this map](#) (selecting Community of Practice under the Type filter)
  - If you are in the UK, you can join or start a [Learning Community, supported by Collaborate CIC](#).
  - If you would like to join an international HLS Community of Practice, you can find different options [here](#), depending on whether you are ready to establish your own [Learning Cycles](#), or are just curious to [make sense of how others have done it](#).

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