



# Systems stewardship in practice:

## What it is and how to get started

Working collaboratively doesn't happen by accident. It requires us to fundamentally rethink relationships, behaviours and ways of working. Systems stewards help enable this by supporting and modelling collaboration across traditional boundaries to nurture 'healthy' systems.

In this resource we explain what system stewardship is and why it's important, drawing on guidance and examples of practice from across the [Human Learning Systems](#) (HLS) network.

### What is systems stewardship?

One of the first steps to effective collaboration is to recognise that outcomes are created by interaction of lots of different actors and factors in our lives. Whether we're seeking to improve mental health, reduce health inequalities or enable better early years outcomes, none of these issues can be addressed by single projects, services or organisations working alone - these outcomes emerge from complex systems.

The case for collaboration is clear. Next is the question of *how* we can make collaboration a reality when the systems we're part of are often siloed, competitive and fragmented. To improve outcomes, we need to focus on how we can nurture *healthier* systems – systems in which people collaborate and learn together in a way that addresses typical power imbalances.

But healthy systems don't develop by accident – it takes purposeful work. This is where system stewardship comes in. Systems stewardship is the act of purposefully nurturing a healthy system. This involves helping people achieve together what they can't alone through making best use of collective relationships, insights and resources.

Playing this role – focusing on and nurturing what we can achieve collectively – represents a significant shift from traditional organisation-centric practice. Stewards model more collaborative ways of working to show what different can look like, and help create the conditions (both relational and structural) for others to adopt these new practices.

*“As a steward, it's about growing the total net resource, not just focusing on your own organisation. Sometimes that means stepping back and seeing who else can help...”*

– Lela Kogbara, Black Thrive

*“Often it's actually doing the really basic stuff that needs to be done. It's kind of quiet but it's what you bring to that. You need to remember that even though you're doing those things that have to be done, a lot of it*

***is about changing hearts and minds and behaviours. It's often about the attitude that you bring to it."***

– Amanda Kilroy, CoLab Exeter

There's no single 'how to' guide for being a systems steward as the practice is all about working in a context-specific way. But there are some common core features that are distinct from traditional ways of working, and a growing number of examples of organisations and partnerships in places across the UK that are adopting these practices.

## Features of systems stewardship

Systems stewardship typically involves the following features, many of which are interconnected.

### Fostering trusting relationships

*Creating understanding and empathy as a foundation for collaboration.*

While structural changes like collaborative governance and aligned resources can be important enablers of a healthy system, these only enable meaningful change when based on fundamental shifts in our relationships and behaviours. This requires moving beyond organisation-focused, siloed and competitive behaviours and connecting at a more human level – focusing on our intrinsic motivation to do the best we can for the people we seek to serve, and the goals we have in common.

Systems stewards are natural connectors and conveners – this work is often about putting people in touch with others who have shared ambitions, helping people navigate the system, and creating opportunities for people to develop empathy through seeing things from each other's perspectives. This helps create a web of connections beyond organisational boundaries and a foundation of trusted relationships which are essential for enabling collaboration and learning together.

***"We try to stay human in all of our conversations, even when it's really difficult and we want to go back to being more rigid in our role as commissioner or our role as provider. If we can always focus on being human then we have much more positive and encouraging conversations and I think that can be where we can create change. Go after it with a cup of tea and a chat first. Allow people to really share what it is that they're potentially frustrated with but go at it in a human way."***

– Alex Palmer, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

### Bringing people together around a common purpose

*Convening people to build collective understanding of the system, our interdependent roles within it, and how we can make best use of collective insight and resources.*

This activity can range from identifying a collective ambition and long term plans that partners will work together on for years, through to smaller scale convenings on specific

topical issues. One of the key features is bridging across and connecting different parts of the system that often don't come together, enabling new insights and opportunities to surface.

***“[We work to] surface awareness of there being a system and the importance of people understanding their own role in relation to others.”***

– Julian Penton, Hartlepower

***“We do convening around different topics. Sometimes that will come from an issue that we've seen around the system that we think needs addressing to serve children and young people better, and sometimes it's because another organisation asks us to do it. We like to start with a blank piece of paper wherever possible, so that everyone in the room gets to shape it from the beginning.”***

– Cate Newnes Smith, Surrey Youth Focus

## Deep listening

*Putting ongoing listening at the heart of how we work, particularly listening deeply to the people we support.*

This involves moving away from standardised support that treats everyone as a problem to be fixed, to starting with a much deeper understanding of what's going on in people's lives and what matters to them. Listening isn't a one-off consultation exercise, but a continuous process that is embedded in everything we do. Stewards help engage people in and embed listening practices.

***“One of the key elements of being a systems steward is being able to engage in continuous, deep listening that involves a span of people. It's really been about listening on lots of different levels, and hearing and responding to that. Often it's about how you listen in different formats by convening different spaces where people really feel like they're welcome, and they're included, and they're meant to be there and they can participate.”***

– Amanda Kilroy, CoLab Exeter

***“We decided to listen to what people were telling us and respond in a collective way. We were not trying to solve problems in a linear way. We were listening to lived experience, understanding the whole panoply of things that create value for people. Through the experience of doing this, everyone realised it was a much more sensible, human way of working.”***

– Gary Wallace, Plymouth City Council

## Enabling learning

*Creating a learning culture that enables ongoing exploration and adaptation.*

Working in complexity requires constant exploration and problem solving. Rather than sticking to a rigid plan, we need to be constantly reflecting and adapting based on what we're learning and the changing context around us. System stewards help create a learning culture and the infrastructure to support this. This includes convening reflective spaces to bring different perspectives together and enable collective problem solving, and helping coordinate 'experiments' that enable partners to test and embed new ways of working.

System stewards often help enable connect learning from different parts of a system, for example, ensuring a flow of insight between practitioners and strategic decision-making forums so that insight informs decisions, and decision makers can help address system-wide barriers.

***“Stewardship requires us to change our minds everyday.”***

– Lela Kogbara, Black Thrive

***“The point about learning through listening is that the process of doing it is as important as the stories we hear. The first thing we do is go into a system and teach everybody to do appreciative inquiry. Everybody from the chief executive to the lowest paid worker, to people with lived experience are paired up together. So they witness things together... The process of groups of people listening and learning together creates empathy and empathy is a really key thing in building trust.”***

– Gary Wallace, Plymouth City Council

## Paying attention to power dynamics

*Addressing power imbalances to increase the voice and agency of those who are least heard.*

One of the most fundamental shifts required to create healthier systems is a move towards more equal power dynamics. People and communities, and the people that directly support them, need far more voice and agency if systems are to serve them better.

Systems stewardship is about stepping into your power. Whether you're a commissioner or a charity, it's about making the most of the power and legitimacy you *do* have to address power imbalances in the system. This means helping increase the voice and agency of those who hold least power, and harnessing the collective power of people and organisations across a system to create change together. Stewards need to use power in a conscious way to challenge existing power dynamics – how can you play an enabling role rather than consolidating power in your role as steward?

*“[We] amplify the voices of those who haven't had a voice or don't see themselves as able to connect to the system. We have got the ear of the system, and we can help bring some of those voices to it. And also be a translator between the different actors.”*

– Lela Kogbara, Black Thrive

*“One of the interesting things we've done is to invite people into a different relationship through the way we behave. We invited our funder, for example, to have a different relationship with us by being really open about all the mistakes we're making, all the risks we're carrying and all the issues that have cropped up. At each meeting we have with our public sector funder, we put it all on the table, and what we're trying to do is invite them into the collective, into that shared purpose.”*

– Andrew Church, CHS Group charity

## Examples of systems stewardship in practice

A system stewardship role can be played by a range of people, organisations or groups. Sometimes funders and commissioners are best placed as they hold the resource and convening power, while in other cases civil society organisations are better able to play this role - to bridge between formal services and local communities, and to question and disrupt the way things are done. The most important question is who is trusted and seen as legitimate by other local actors. Overtime, the goal is that more and more actors across a system adopt stewardship practices and behaviours.

Examples include:

### *Local authorities*

- Plymouth City Council. Plays a stewardship role to foster collaboration and help shape Plymouth as a place, as well as enable more collaborative commissioning approaches. Read more in this [case study](#) and this [blog](#).
- Liverpool City Region Combined Authority has adopted a Human Learning Systems approach to commissioning its homelessness assertive outreach service, including reframing a contract management role into a systems stewardship role to help build relationships and enable learning. Read more in this [case study](#) and watch [this webinar](#).

### *Civil society organisations*

The following local civil society organisations are adopting a systems stewardship approach to their work: [Black Thrive](#), [CHS Group](#) housing charity, [CoLab Exeter](#), [Hartlepower](#), [Surrey Youth Focus](#).

You can learn more about the stewardship practice of these organisations in [this webinar](#).

## Cross-sector partnerships

[Gloucestershire Healthier Communities Together](#) is an example of a cross-sector stewardship group bringing together health, local authority and civil society partners to collectively act of stewards of the health and care system.

## Tips for getting started

- Assess the health of your system. How might you start a conversation with others in the system to explore your collective understanding? You may find tools like [Lankelly Chase's system behaviours](#) or this [systems maturity model](#) helpful.
- Explore your own power and legitimacy. Do you have the legitimacy to act as system steward? How can you make the most of the power you do have to create change by modelling and enabling a more collaborative approach?
- Be human. Connect with both your allies and sceptics. Ideally informally over a cup of tea and cake! Find ways to understand each other's motivations, constraints and contexts.
- Create a coalition for change. Who are those people across your system who want to do things differently and can be part of forging a more collaborative approach? What frustrations do you have in common that you can work together to address?
- Make the most of your convening power. Bring people together for a different kind of conversation. Shake up the normal dynamics to focus on what you can achieve together and to centre the voices and experiences of the people you support.
- Listen. Seek opportunities to deeply and continuously listen to people across the system, including the people you support. Ask what matters to people in their lives (beyond a service lens) to uncover new insights and use listening as a shared experience to develop empathy.
- Experiment. Where can you start testing something different, even if on a small scale? E.g. approaching a challenge more collaboratively with partners, shifting normal meeting structures and dynamics to centre relationships more, creating space for practitioners to reflect on their learning and test new ways of doing things.

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With thanks to all of the individuals and organisations featured in this resource who have generously shared their learning.

For more on systems stewardship, see:

Chapter 3 Systems and Chapter 15: HLS and Place: Transforming Local Systems in [Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World](#) (2021).

Toby Lowe, Max French, Melissa Hawkins, Hannah Hesselgreaves & Rob Wilson (2021) [New development: Responding to complexity in public services—the human learning systems approach](#), Public Money & Management, 41:7, 573-576.

