

What does a place-based approach to Human Learning Systems look like?

Practical insights from pioneering places

The need for reform in public services has never been stronger or more urgent. Since taking office the Government has committed to three core reform principles and launched several major programmes to bring them into practice: integrating services around people's lives, prioritising prevention over crisis response, and devolving power to local areas in partnership with communities and civil society.

From Local Government Reorganisation to Test Learn and Grow, we are being presented with an unmissable opportunity to radically re-shape the way that services are delivered. Places that have embedded Human Learning Systems approaches to public service can provide rich learning for how to deliver against this potential.

This means change doesn't have to be from a standing start. A quietly radical shift in public service purpose and practice has been happening across the UK over a number of years. Human Learning Systems (HLS) approaches offer ways to make public services more responsive to individual needs, enable improvement through continuous learning and adaptation, and foster system leadership.

As HLS practice has matured, whole-place approaches have started to come to the fore. At Collaborate, we see this as an exciting frontier for public service reform - shifting from pockets of innovation, to embedding HLS as a foundation for wide-scale, long-term systems change that helps people and places flourish.

At an event earlier this year, we invited four place-shapers to explore how we can take an intentional place-based approach to HLS and what roles different system actors can play. We heard from practitioners working at very different levels – from the hyperlocal to the regional - about how they're bringing HLS to life in their places.

Community level

Fozia Haider of [Gateshead Community Bridge Builders](#) told us 'We are working to build power and capacity at the heart of communities. We want local people to have the opportunities, skills and confidence to engage in making decisions that will improve their lives now and in the future. And to do that, we're building new participative models of community decision-making and supporting local people to feel confident enough to be part of them.'

The team is made up of people from diverse backgrounds who have lived experience of working with marginalised communities, enabling them to initiate conversations and build trusting relationships. For example, we heard how the Women's Health Cafe project has enabled women from a South Asian background to understand the health system and explore things that really matter to them about their health, overcoming language barriers, and building their communication skills.

For Gateshead Community Bridge Builders a place-based approach to HLS is all about fostering equitable relationships. They believe empowered communities are essential for a healthy society but there is a real risk of harm being done by asking people from marginalised communities to step into existing decision-making spaces without honouring their experience and their difference:

'It's not about having a seat at the table, it's about building a new table and part of building a new table is looking at the way decisions are made and the way power is exercised.'

Meaningful change can't be achieved by working alone, so working with other organisations and with communities, is at the heart of what they do. They have seen how working in the way they do has "opened doors, opened conversations and opened hearts and minds". What they need from others is honesty, transparency and the intention to make change happen, and for commitment to sustaining the work through longer term funding.

Connecting the connectors

Next, we heard from Matt Bell of [Plymouth Octopus Project](#) (POP) who had many similar perspectives to GCB but described his work as sitting at a level of organisation above, as a coordinator and convenor of a network of over 380 grassroots organisations. He spoke with joy of the diversity of people involved in the network and emphasised that when communities come together, they come together out of passion, love, and care but that the importance of community-led change and community power is often undervalued and underestimated.

Plymouth is a city with a powerful track record of implementing HLS approaches in different parts of the system, and has been selected by the Government to take part in the new Test, Learn, Grow programme.

But at the city scale it can still be hard for people in the community, and the grassroots sector, to make their voices heard. Matt told us how POP works to surface grassroots voices at the city scale by holding and hosting conversations as a system convener, and linking in hyper local experiences to the broader issues the city faces. This is one way that people and community organisations can collectively work and influence together in service of creating a more just and regenerative future for the city.

In a similar way to GCB, he spoke about how real change happens through trust, with relationships, and with people doing what they love. He emphasised that the change starts with us - that we can't create new patterns in the world without exploring our personal patterns of thought and behaviour. POP's challenge: how do we genuinely see, hear and value community voices without accidentally crushing the very things that make it powerful? We've all got a role to play - how do we support each other to step into our power and also to step back and create space for others.

Embedding relational working in formal structures

City of Doncaster Council's *Thrive* programme sits at a more formal level but shares many of the same values. Chief Executive Damian Allen described how the council are ensuring relational and collaborative practice is woven into every part of their system. He introduced [Team Doncaster](#) – a way of embedding an ethos of collaboration, progress and positivity through a sense of membership open to everybody who wants to make a positive difference to people in their place no matter what formal role that they play.

The Team Doncaster Executive provides formal governance and accountability. Chaired by the City of Doncaster Mayor, it brings together the community voluntary sector, the private and the public sector to create a whole system, whole place, whole person approach with wellbeing at its heart.

It's not just about strategies; it's about changing how people work, learn and lead. Thrive is built on HLS principles, especially learning cycles - trying things, reflecting, adapting. John Glee, Head of Policy Insight and Change at Doncaster Council talked us through the details of the approach in practice. He described how they've developed a 'learning portfolio' of different learning cycles, experiments, and things that practitioners across the council and the Team Doncaster Partnership want to do differently. The learning that's emerging is important but so is the process itself - the learning journey that colleagues go through and the difference they feel and see in their own work.

Creating the enabling conditions

Finally, Adrian Dougherty from the North East Combined Authority (NECA) offered us a helpful perspective from the regional level. As a Combined Authority, NECA primarily works through partners and with their constituent local authorities, rather than delivering services themselves. As such, their role is more focused on creating the enabling conditions for their member councils. However, Adrian explained how the principles behind HLS resonate with their strategy and inform how they engage with partners to steward the place-based system that develops and delivers public service reform initiatives.

Interestingly, the combined authority also has the power to act as a bridge between local places and national policy – Adrian views their 'big win' as their ability to influence what's happening at the centre.

Key takeaways

Perhaps unsurprisingly the difference between our speakers was mostly in terms of scale and structure. Gateshead is hyperlocal, lived-experience-led. Doncaster is structured and strategic. Plymouth acts as a bridge between the two. NECA operates through influence rather than delivery.

However, there were many things in common including:

- A recognition that power needs to be shared, not hoarded, and a belief that decision-making should sit closer to the people it affects

- A commitment to relationships over transactions, with an emphasis on bridging, convening and translating
- A shared sense that learning is ongoing—not something to be done at the end of a project
- An acknowledgement that we *are* the system - and change needs to start with us.

How to apply what we heard

Bringing these perspectives together offers insights into how we can realise the full potential of HLS by centering place as an intentional focus for HLS work (and wider public service reform initiatives) from the start through the following approaches.

- Applying HLS in a way that **reaches beyond typical boundaries** – even if you're starting small, design your approach in a way that spans organisational and service boundaries. Involve others in co-design and delivery to build relationships and the collective ownership that will help enable and sustain the approach.
- Looking **beyond a service lens** – systems don't just contain institutions and organisations – they are made up of people who organise themselves in all kinds of ways. Our lives are shaped by the communities, geography, culture, economy and built environment in which we live. We need to start with a deep understanding of context and develop approaches that are attuned to local assets and barriers if we are to create the conditions that enable people to flourish.
- **Examining where power lies** and working to address systemic inequalities.
- Positioning your work as part of a **wider movement for change locally** – whatever 'scale' of place you're working at, examine what conditions exist locally that can support your work, what conditions you might need to help build, and how you can connect with allies working at multiple scales to learn and influence together.

By building on the learning of those who have taken a whole-place approach to Human Learning Systems we can seize the opportunity presented by the government's reform and reorganisation agenda and truly create the conditions for places and their people to flourish.