From Implicit to Intentional: Advancing Equity in Human Learning Systems

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December 2025

Introduction

Human Learning Systems, like a number of other public service reform big ideas, places relationships at the heart of public service. Inherent in this, but not always articulated, is a commitment to equity. If equity and inclusion are intentionally embedded in relational practice, it can offer a valuable framework to address systemic inequities, (re-)build trust and ensure that public services genuinely reflect and serve the rich diversity of the communities they support.

This report contends that relational public services require more than good intentions to enable and enhance equity: they require frameworks and practices designed to surface, understand and respond to structural barriers and diverse realities.

Therefore, we must pay careful attention to how we can foreground equity, rather than expect it to happen by default.

In this report, we share insights from Human Learning Systems (HLS) practice in how to advance equity, highlighting why this must underpin the inherent purpose of relational public services. By being explicit about equity, we argue that we can create a more positive narrative for the collective benefits of equity.

To make the case for equitable public service and offer practical ideas for addressing inequity, we've interviewed individuals from various HLS projects. We would like to thank the practitioners who generously shared their time, experiences and insights from their work with communities. Their contributions were essential in shaping the findings we share here.

Lola Akindoyin | Hackney Council
Pegs Bailey | TSI Scotland
Dr Dayo Eseonu | Lancaster University
Andy Crosbie | Collective Impact Agency
Zahra Bazarganianpour | Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders
Anna Willow | Barnardo's
Bharti Mistry | Reaching People
Rob Hunter | Reaching People

We would also like to acknowledge Toby Lowe as a foundational contributor whose insights have significantly influenced the wider HLS community.

How we researched these insights

To better understand the extent to which equity might underpin Human Learning Systems, we went through all the latest (2024) Examples of HLS Practice and identified those in which addressing inequity was presented as a key ambition. We recognise that this does not necessarily mean an absence of such concerns in any other HLS examples.

Following this analysis and sense-making, we interviewed people from five of the Examples of Practice who seemed to offer particularly fascinating insights into advancing equity for various disadvantaged groups through an HLS approach. These were:

- **Brent Care Journeys**, a strategic alliance between Barnardo's and Brent Council driven by a determination to address unacceptably entrenched and simultaneously unprecedented challenges faced by care experienced young people in the London borough.

- **Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders**, an initiative experimenting with participative community decision-making to build the power of local communities that are marginalised by existing governance systems.

- **Hackney Council**'s collaboration with **Sport England** to develop a whole system approach to tackling physical activity inequalities in the London borough.

- The **Opportunities Fife Partnership**'s work on No One Left Behind, which co-designed their employability commissioning strategy together with people who had first-hand experience of using employment support services in the Scottish county.

- **Reaching People**, a social prescribing project aimed at reducing the social isolation and marginalisation of older people in two areas of Leicester.

In reviewing the examples of HLS practice, several key insights emerged. These are not fixed solutions or step-by-step instructions, and instead, ingredients practitioners can adapt, reshape and integrate into their own contexts to advance equity more intentionally.

To share these insights with you, we've edited these interviews into a podcast series, which is complemented by an interview with Dr Dayo Eseonu from Lancaster University that further strengthens the case for an equity focus. **Changing the Narrative** explores how Human Learning Systems can enable greater equity in public services. You can listen to all six episodes here.

"If you're going to design a programme, or if you're going to work with people you have to see them in their entirety in order to then respond in a human way in a human, centered and person centered way. But also recognising that inequality has been present in people's lives, in lots of different ways, and how that shows up impacts on how people are able to live and show up today. So there's all of the historic context."
Lola Akindoyin, Hackney Council

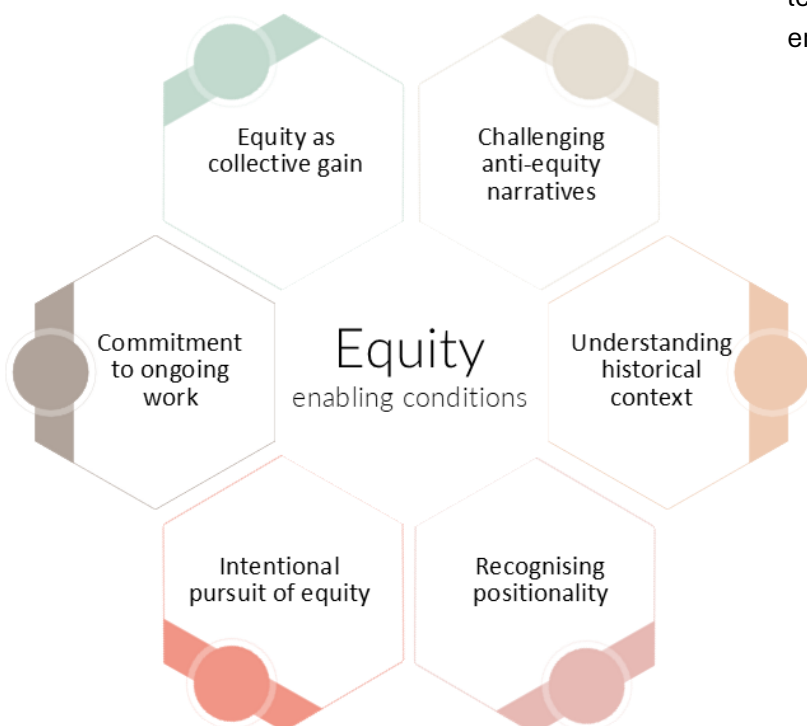# Leading with purpose: Equity as the starting point

One core message across all interviews we undertook was this: While the relational practices central to HLS are well-positioned to promote equity, they do not automatically ensure equitable outcomes. Without explicitly naming and addressing equity, even the most well-intentioned relational work can reproduce existing power imbalances. Equity needs to be an interconnected, embedded consideration throughout. Ensuring equity requires deliberate, intentional practice around a clear purpose, promoting social justice.

Relational practices can only advance equity where they are accompanied by conscious, critical reflections on power, inclusion and agency at all system levels (interpersonal, organisational-structural, local, regional and national).

Without acknowledging and addressing structural barriers, implicit biases and trust deficits, particularly in marginalised communities, public services risk ignoring or reinforcing existing inequalities.

Meaningful equity-centred work requires the following **enabling conditions**:

- **Seeing equity as collective gain:** Equity isn't just about addressing disparities for some, it's about creating a system where everyone benefits from fairness, inclusion and shared power. This connects to the moral purpose of HLS to support human freedom and flourishing and explicitly requires us to create an environment in which those who are marginalised or disadvantaged can enjoy these benefits too. An environment in which everyone can flourish is better for all. The place-based HLS Examples of Practice by Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders, Hackney and Reaching People demonstrate some of the small shifts that can make this possible and lead to a genuine sense of empowerment.

Equity as collective gain

Challenging anti-equity narratives

Commitment to ongoing work

Equity
enabling conditions

Understanding historical context

Intentional pursuit of equity

Recognising positionality

- **Challenging anti-equity narratives:** It is important to name and challenge the narratives that undermine equity (meritocracy myths that deny structural barriers, deficit framings that blame marginalised communities, political and cultural discourses that resist redistribution or shared power). Building shared political education across teams, organisations and communities is critical to counteracting these narratives. We need to explicitly make the case that groups who have been disadvantaged have much to offer that benefits everybody. The HLS practices showed examples of older people's ongoing contribution to their communities when prejudices about old age were addressed; of care experienced young people becoming a movement for change in the care system; of ethnically diverse communities creating new inclusive initiatives to address some of the most entrenched challenges; and of people with lived experience of being unemployed improving employment support. These examples demonstrate that equity is not a zero-sum game and that we need to change the narrative.

- **Understanding historical context**: Without this grounding, there is a risk of overlooking the deep-rooted factors that shape present-day dynamics. Equitable working requires confronting the historical roots of structural inequity. How have colonial legacies and historical narratives around specific social groups shaped today's public services? How do these past injustices continue to influence whose voices are heard or excluded? And how do these historical patterns of marginalisation or harm show up in the present system? The examples we feature here all showed deep awareness of this, recognising that the historical relationships required a lot of work on building relationships and re-building trust.

"Political education is needed and pushing against the weaponisation of equity […] It requires sitting and reasoning together to unpack why people think what they think – that's how you build solidarity."
Dr Dayo Eseonu, Lancaster University

- **Recognising positionality:** Acknowledging our positionality isn't just a personal exercise, it's an important precondition for collective system understanding. Everyone comes to the work with their own identity, shaped by race, gender, class, ability, institutional roles and lived experiences. It's important to reflect on where you sit in relation to power and consider how your social identity affects how you see the system (and how the system sees you). Even the mere act of naming this seemed to send an important message in the practice examples, showing recognition to others and an eagerness to learn from diverse perspectives and experiences. In some cases, such as Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders, this led to fascinating explorations around power, highlighting the importance of equal recognition as a way to ensure everyone feels meaningfully involved.

- **Intentional pursuit of equity:** Equity must be intentional at multiple levels - from interpersonal relationships to organisational cultures to policy frameworks. Without an explicit commitment or deliberate design and practices, there is a risk that systems will default to reproducing the status quo. A determination to address structural disadvantages and pursue equity was central to the purpose of the HLS practice examples presented here, whether that was to tackle health inequalities (Hackney), ensure that no one is left behind (Opportunities Fife Partnership), or to change the care system (Brent Care Journeys).

- **Commitment to ongoing work:** Embedding equity is not a one-off project or a checklist to complete, it's a continuous, evolving commitment. It is vital to consider how to sustain this work across leadership changes, funding cycles or shifting political climates, as well as building structures of accountability to ensure equity remains at the centre. Without this commitment, it can easily become extractive and further undermine trust. The HLS examples show it's possible to create sustainability and that communities will have great ideas of how this could evolve, e.g. the young people who were part of Brent Care Journeys created their own movement.

Placing equity at the heart of the work actively shapes who is involved, what priorities are set, and the kinds of changes that become possible. The enabling conditions above describe the stance and commitments that hold this focus in place, even when the work is complex or contested. From this stance, certain patterns begin to emerge across very different contexts — shifts in power, new forms of accountability, and learning processes that centre those most affected. The key insights highlighted below distill these recurring patterns, not as a fixed recipe, but as examples of how equity-led principles can take root in ways that respond to local histories, relationships, and ambitions.

Key Insights across HLS

We've identified several overarching themes and practices that cut across the entire HLS approach. These themes surface continuously, sometimes at multiple stages, sometimes more intensively at particular moments. It's important to remember that systems are dynamic and evolving, so practices and enabling conditions must also shift and evolve over time. In some circumstances, enabling conditions may also become outcomes themselves to work towards.

This image summarises the key insights, and for each insight, we offer descriptions of how this

shows up in practice from the practice examples and the podcast interviews. You can follow the links to listen to the practitioners discuss their take on each theme.

Equity insights

Structural inequities and systemic change 01	**02** **Power dynamics**
Community and lived experience as core 03	**04** **Emergent working and trust building**
08 **Sustainability and capacity-building**	**Emotions and care in the work** 07
06 **Reflective practice and humility**	**Justice in learning conditions** 05

1. Structural inequities and systemic change

"Many older people, the longer they live, internalise much of society's attitudes to them around age, class, race and gender in particular, acting it out as if it were true. This again can undermine human potential and needs to be countered persistently."
Rob Hunter, Reaching People

True equity requires addressing the deep structural roots of inequity, not just surface-level solutions. This includes:

- Seeing communities in their full complexity, avoiding the trap of individualising systemic problems or focusing only on "human-centred" adjustments without broader system shifts.

- Shifting mindsets and narratives within institutions to challenge entrenched biases and design systems that reflect collective, not individual, responsibility.
- Centring equity as a systemic issue, moving beyond isolated programmes to tackle the broader forces driving inequity across institutions and places.

Listen to Lola Akindoyin (Hackney) talking about re-building trust and working with community organisations to leverage their strengths.

Listen to Zahra Bazarganianpour (Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders) about finding ways to work around the system when it can't be improved.

Listen to Pegs Bailey (Opportunities Fife Partnership) sharing how working with trusted community organisations helped reach some of the more marginalised groups.

2. Power dynamics

"It's really important to recognize power dynamics from the outset and where they show up. And also, are they really necessary? So sometimes processes or things are in place, [but] a particular way of working can change, like it can be adaptable. There are a number of things that we did that I think were uncomfortable, but they were also part of being able to test and show that different ways of working are possible."
Lola Akindoyin, Hackney

Power shapes every part of systems, from decision-making to resource flows to whose knowledge is included and valued. Advancing equity requires us to:

- Dismantle exclusionary power structures by creating genuinely inclusive spaces where marginalised voices are centred, not just invited.
- Explore individuals' attitudes to power and control so as to better change the narrative about power from a zero-sum game towards a generative understanding of it.
- Share power intentionally through approaches like the triangle of participation: ensuring strategic leads, professionals and people using or affected by services are engaged together as equals (and effectively enabled to do so!)
- Redistribute power within governance processes, shifting decision-making authority and control to those most impacted by the system.
- Recognise that power shifts are layered; it needs to be considered at mental, structural, individual and collective

levels, and no single actor or institution can address power imbalances on their own.
- Understand that power is dynamic; it can be harnessed, shared or withheld, and there is a need to consciously design conditions that allow for more inclusive, evolving distributions of power.

Listen to Anna Willow (Brent Care Journeys) about creating power groups to engage people around issues that matter to them.

Listen to Andy Crosbie (Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders) about resisting falling into the traditional power roles.

"If the people in power put their power aside and become a human being, just a human being - not with their titles and things - then definitely the world would be a better place to live in."
Zahra Bazarganianpour, Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders

3. Community and lived experience as core

"If you get those three perspectives (lived experience, direct practice, strategic leadership) in the room, there's an uplifting of the whole, which I think is really beneficial."

Pegs Bailey, Opportunities Fife Partnership

Community knowledge and lived experience are not just helpful inputs, they are core assets for systems change. Implementing an equitable approach requires:

- Valuing lived experience as central to diagnosing and reshaping systems.
- An explicit and meaningful co-production approach instead of virtue-signalling consultations or limited involvement opportunities.
- Removing barriers to participation through targeted outreach, inclusive design and resource redistribution.
- Empowering communities to lead the work, shifting not only engagement but real decision-making power and resource control into the hands of the community.
- Building community confidence and ownership, so that the system increasingly reflects the aspirations, needs and leadership of those it serves.

Listen to Andy Crosbie (Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders) about centring communities and lived experience in decision-making.

Listen to Lola Akindoyin talking about changing outcomes recording in response to what community organisations felt was going to be meaningful.

Listen to Bharti Mistry's example of the transformative impact on a woman with a disability who was previously excluded and is now a community leader.

4. Emergent working and trust building

"[Equity] does not happen without significant trust. And that doesn't happen without time and relationship building. So those things are all important. But the other thing that actually came out when we did some work around co-production and the qualities that support it. Is around the importance of balancing the messiness with action. So it's also not a good idea to get stuck in the relationship building space. It's really important for people to see that. You know, decisions are being made. Momentum is being kept. What the next step on the journey is, and where that's going to go. Kind of, you know, it's like it's like having the map, you know a rough sense of where you're heading, and you know markers along the way, because because it can feel quite messy and quite uncertain at times. I think, having those markers helps everybody to feel kind of like, it's worth their time. And also safe."

Pegs Bailey, Opportunities Fife Partnership

In complex systems, certainty is rare and fixed plans can become barriers. Effectively considering equity within the work requires:

- Starting without a fixed agenda, allowing community voices to shape direction as understanding evolves.
- Embracing vulnerability, acknowledging you don't always know the right answer, but committing to learning and adaptation without sacrificing trust.
- Investing in trust over time by demonstrating meaningful progress,

even when outcomes are uncertain - this is particularly important for communities who have experienced histories of exclusion or harm.

🎧 **Listen to Pegs Bailey (Opportunities Fife Partnership) sharing how they ran their engagement events with minimal structure to maximise opportunities for people with lived experience to set the agenda.**

🎧 **Listen to Bharti Mistry (Reaching People) emphasising the importance of being consistently there and learning from people in the community.**

🎧 **Listen to Anna Willow (Brent Care Journeys) highlighting the importance of growing initiatives from the ground up.**

5. Justice in learning conditions

"There has been a little bit of a tension around learning, almost as if it is a bit of a luxury to stop and reflect. But actually I feel that the really important thing about the learning elements of of this work is the fact that when you do that deep reflection with others, that it does really help to highlight where things need to change. And if we remain focused in this very action-oriented delivery, delivery, delivery way, it doesn't allow us to stop and really be thinking about 'how well is this working'? And crucially, in relation to equity, 'who is this working for?'"

Lola Akindoyin, Hackney

🎧 **Listen to Rob Hunter (Reaching People) explaining how their work helped services and communities not just interpret one another but understanding each other better.**

🎧 **Listen to Pegs Bailey (Opportunities Fife Partnership) emphasising the importance of creating an empowering learning space.**

Creating equitable learning systems means addressing who defines knowledge and who benefits from learning. It's important to:

- Design intentional learning conditions that surface and challenge epistemic injustices - situations where certain ways of knowing or experiencing the world are devalued or excluded.
- Embed reflective learning from community input and practitioner experience, ensuring that learning does not become extractive or harmful, especially to those with lived experience.
- Redistribute power in learning processes, so the act of learning itself becomes a site of equity, not a reinforcement of hierarchy.

6. Reflective practice and humility

"For me it's not just helping the worker to see the individual in the broader context of their own humanity and their own system, but it's helping their work with the individual to help the individual themselves to learn from experience. Reflexive practice is often the exclusive domain of professionals. But I think what Bharti is often doing is asking this group of volunteers 'what are we learning from our experience?' So it's seeing the people that we're working with as humans, as learners, with capability."

Rob Hunter, Reaching People

🎧 [Listen to Pegs Bailey (Opportunities Fife Partnership) unpacking why reflective practice was important.](#)

🎧 [Listen to Andy Crosbie (Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders) explaining how challenging it could be for some bridgebuilders to unlearn their professional background and show up as a human.](#)

🎧 [Listen to Anna Willow (Brent Care Journeys) talking about humility in getting things wrong.](#)

Equitable working requires critical self-awareness and openness, especially for professionals and leaders in the system. This involves:

- Supporting reflective practice so practitioners can unlearn harmful professional norms and re-centre authenticity and humanity in their roles.
- Balancing accountability with humility, recognising you don't have all the answers and being willing to uncover and question long-held assumptions.
- Valuing lived experience alongside formal expertise, and creating space for people to show up as whole, complex human beings - not just as "professionals" or "service users".

7. Emotions and care in the work

"I think the route into equity here in all of this, it's about emotion, which connects to like the human way of doing things. There's no way we can be more equitable if we don't understand what other people are going through, what they're feeling. And we can't actually engage in a human way with what other people are feeling if we don't also start by being honest about what it is that we're feeling."

Andy Crosbie, Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders

Equity working is emotional working; the human dimensions of joy, care and connection cannot be neglected. To sustain meaningful participation, what's needed is:

- Joyful, holistic approaches that make room for fun, laughter and celebration, recognising that they are essential to human flourishing, not optional extras.
- Connection and care embedded in practices, ensuring people feel safe, supported and able to show up in ways that are vulnerable and authentic and to contribute meaningfully.
- Mutual care that includes both caring for others and caring for ourselves, to avoid burnout and support long-term resilience.

🎧 **Listen to Bharti Mistry (Reaching People) describing the emotional impact of including a woman in a wheelchair.**

🎧 **Listen to Anna Willow (Brent Care Journeys) detailing the external group support that enabled them to care.**

🎧 **Listen to Andy Crosbie (Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders) explaining the need to be human and emotionally connected.**

8. Sustainability and capacity building

"If we're building and facilitating this as a way of working across systems across a local area or within a programme of work, I think that's one of the ways of mitigating, you know, having endings that then end up having really significant ramifications on the work. So in a way, my role is to help build those relationships in lots of other places and across different parts of the system and with different people, so that the work can continue regardless of who's actually in the room."

Lola Akindoyin, Hackney

Equity-focused systems need to be designed for long-term sustainability, not just short-term interventions. This means:

- Prioritising community ownership and capacity building, enabling communities to help themselves without being handicapped or overburdened by system structures.
- Designing for sustainability, working in a way that could make external support or interventions redundant, as communities strengthen their own capabilities.
- Factoring time and funding for relationship building and capacity building into programmes and funding priorities.

🎧 **Listen to Bharti Mistry (Reaching People) describing how she ensured sustainability.**

🎧 **Listen to Pegs Bailey (Opportunities Fife Partnership) talking about system stewardship.**

🎧 **Listen to Lola Akindoyin (Hackney) highlighting the importance of creating sustainability by not just focussing on relationships between individuals but weaving these into cultures of connection**.

Equity in Action

Equity only becomes meaningful when it is lived out in everyday practice. This section explores what that could look like, not as a theoretical framework, but as something tangible and real. The examples that follow illustrate a range of approaches already being used across different contexts and levels of the system, demonstrating how equity can take root in distinct contexts, shaped by relationships, histories and ambitions.

These examples are drawn from a broad body of practice and learning. They are not presented as definitive models to replicate, but as prompts and starting points. You may find some ideas that resonate and others that spark new directions. The important thing is to begin — to adapt, test, and learn what embedding equity means in your own setting.

Start with reflection, not action

Before getting started on your work, pause to reflect on how you can best surface equity aspects relevant to your current context? Whose perspectives and lived experiences might not be seen and heard? Where might your team or organisation be overlooking power, inclusion or structural barriers?

You can deepen this reflection by using structured tools — for example, a visual map of who currently shapes decisions, and an exploration of which perspectives are absent and why. Create informal, low-barrier spaces where people can share experiences on their own terms, in settings where they feel at ease. Partner with community-led groups to help interpret what you're hearing, ensuring these insights highlight not just individual stories but recurring patterns and systemic barriers.

"It is easy for all concerned to get sucked into the action trap, particularly when under pressure to meet numerical targets."

Rob Hunter, Reaching People

"Some people have very action-oriented ways of working and view time for reflection, learning and to build relationships as a luxury. [...] And if we remain focused in this very action-oriented way - like delivery, delivery, delivery - it actually doesn't allow us to stop and really be thinking about: Well, how well is this working? And crucially in relation to equity, who is this working for?"

Lola Akindoyin, Hackney

"Start messy. If the structure allows, make space to bring diverse perspectives together in your first 'how are we going to do this' conversation. If you host it in a way that's messy and vulnerable, good things can happen – but they take time."

Pegs Bailey, Opportunities Fife Partnership

Give it time

Systems change is complex and non-linear, so you won't necessarily see results quickly. Take time for relationship-building, trust development and iterative adaptation. When you're not being extractive but committed to co-production principles that centre minority perspectives that often get left out of decision-making processes, things will take longer but be much more rigorous and meaningful. That doesn't mean not doing anything, because often your actions can help build trust. Finding simple, human solutions that show sincerity and an eagerness to address system barriers is critical.

This can mean using the early months to work alongside community members on priorities they choose, even if they seem small in scale – like moving a meeting to a neutral space, changing an application process, or fixing a practical barrier that people have raised. Such visible shifts demonstrate follow-through while bigger change is still emerging. Some groups build "learning seasons" into the year, periods where the only goal is to explore, experiment and reflect together, so that action grows directly out of the relationships and insights formed.

"It took a few years before some of the main actors and our key collaborators - our young people who had lived experience - began to truly believe that we were going to do things, and we were going to change."

Anna Willow, Brent Care Journeys

"Trusting relationships don't happen overnight. We had to keep showing up, having difficult conversations, and being willing to adapt. It's about investing in relationships even when there's nothing immediate to show for it."

Lola Akindoyin, Hackney

"The gift of time was important. There wasn't a requirement to have a fully worked-out plan in three months – it was: explore, build relationships, trust the process."

Andy Crosbie, Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders

Contextualise, don't copy

Remember that what works in one context may not work in another, so make sure you consider the local conditions, histories, relationships and dynamics. You can, of course, take inspiration from elsewhere and figure out together with everyone involved what an intentional focus on equity could look like here, with the people in this community, at this moment.

In practice, this means approaching the work as *place-based* and iterative:

- **Start with local insight-building**, using *up-to-date, localised surveys* or short listening exercises to understand the area's specific conditions, then *cross-compare* this with national data or benchmarks. This helps you spot what's unique or disproportionate in your local

context, rather than recycling only generic information.

- **Blend quantitative and qualitative insight**, numbers show patterns, but stories reveal meaning. Create spaces for residents to share lived experiences that can sit alongside the data.

- **Use asset-based community development (ABCD)** approaches to map and build on the strengths that already exist — for example, community groups, informal leaders, or existing neighbourhood initiatives. These can help contextualise quantitative data and highlight where energy already sits.

This kind of grounding ensures local plans grow from lived realities rather than assumptions.

"There were lots of statistics about the prevalence of particular health conditions, or about people's economic situation and poverty. […] But actually, it's only by really being willing to get into further detail and to connect at a very granular community level, where you begin to build up a better picture."

Lola Akindoyin, Hackney

"We realised solutions must be rooted in each community's unique history and cultural dynamics."

Rob Hunter, Reaching People

"Local plans must be informed by local people's experiences. National policies often fail because they're not grounded in what communities actually need."

Pegs Bailey, Opportunities Fife Partnership

Create enabling conditions

Don't just focus on doing new things, but on creating the conditions that allow equitable practices to become embedded. Think about how funding priorities, governance processes or accountability mechanisms can be adjusted to support long-term equity shifts.

The following are practical steps that can be taken to achieve this:

- **Shift focus from activity to environment.** Meaningful change isn't just about doing new things, it's about shaping the environment where equitable practice can genuinely take hold. This often means looking at the systems around your work: how funding, governance and accountability can shift to better support fairness and inclusion over time.

- **Bring in voices from across the system.** Invite people from different levels, delivery teams, managers, funders, community partners, to reflect together on what shifts are needed in their own roles or ways of working. Change is more sustainable when everyone can see their part in it.

- **Include community perspectives with care.** Involving community champions or residents in conversations helps connect lived experience with decision-making. Their role isn't to represent everyone, but to help the system stay grounded in real experiences and priorities that might otherwise be missed.

- **Pay attention to who's in the room — and who isn't.** At a strategic level, notice which voices are underrepresented in planning or governance spaces, and think about how to make participation easier for them. Sometimes this means adapting where, when and how meetings happen, or rethinking recruitment and outreach processes.

- **Stay flexible in how you work together.** There's no single "right" format. You might try holding conversations in more neutral or informal spaces, adjusting meeting times, or introducing simple ground rules to make sure everyone has space to speak. Small shifts like these can make a big difference to who feels comfortable contributing.

- **Show care through visible actions.** Even when gestures seem small — like offering applications in multiple languages or formats, bringing people together around hot food or actively addressing barriers to involvement such as providing childcare provisions — they can signal openness and build trust.

- **Use enabling conditions as a reflection tool.** The conditions that support equity can also help you see where you are in your journey. What's still aspirational, what's starting to take shape, and what's bec**oming part of everyday practice. Reflection on thes**e shifts can help teams celebrate progress and spot where to deepen the work next.

"We invited people to apply in their own language. We also invited people to apply through spoken form rather than written form if they wanted. Nobody took us up on those offers - everyone applied in writing and in English - but a number of people said that just putting the offer out there showed people we were thinking about them and doing things differently. That removed some of those barriers."

Andy Crosbie, Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders

"I was fortunate to have senior leadership that allowed us to bring our youth collaborators into those board meetings. So we were integrated when we were presenting, and we were looking for accountability and governance. We were all there. We were all presenting work as equals. [...] But I also wanted to question what room are we in? How does that make these young people feel? [...] Sometimes, I was saying: 'Let's do this in Nando's. Let's do this where the people who are most disempowered in this structure feel the most comfortable. Let's upend how this whole relationship is weighted.'"

Anna Willow, Brent Care Journeys

"Ground rules like 'everyone speaks once before speaking twice' stopped dominant voices overshadowing others."

Pegs Bailey, Opportunities Fife Partnership

Hold space for learning and unlearning

Equity-centred work requires continuous learning and unlearning. That means resisting existing patterns of behaviour and questioning existing structures and processes. It's important that you look for what you can learn in these situations, so approach mistakes with humility and curiosity, not defensiveness. These can be built in the following ways:

- **Build learning into the rhythm of the work.** Set aside deliberate time and space for reflection rather than treating learning as something that happens on the side. This could mean regular team sessions, reflective check-ins, or short learning 'seasons' where the focus is on pausing, reviewing and adapting.

- **Keep track of what's shifting.** Simple tools like learning logs can help teams notice and document what they're learning that feels new or challenging, what's making them uncomfortable, and what they want to change as a result. Revisiting these logs over time helps people see where reflection has led to tangible shifts in practice or relationships.

- **Learn together, not alone.** Creating *co-learning spaces* — like communities of practice or cross-team reflection groups — allows people to share what they're experimenting with and learn from others working in similar ways. These spaces reinforce that learning is collective, not individual.

- **Reframe mistakes as learning opportunities.** When things don't go to plan, treat them as valuable information rather than failure. Being transparent about missteps and inviting feedback from colleagues or community members can deepen trust and lead to better, more equitable ways of working.

- **Resource and structure the learning space.** If possible, involve external facilitators to hold these spaces with care and neutrality. Where that isn't feasible, rotate the chairing role so everyone has the chance to guide reflection and challenge norms — helping to disrupt hierarchies and share responsibility for learning.

- **Create brave, not just safe, spaces.** True equity work involves discomfort. Aim to build environments where people feel respected and able to bring their full selves, while also being willing to name tensions, challenge assumptions and explore vulnerability. These are the conditions where genuine unlearning can happen.

"The learning part shows up in the way we do things, and that everyone in the room is enabled to do things-there's no strategy you have to fit into, it's about experimenting. With Zahra and the other Bridgebuilders, they've tried things, seen what works, and if things don't work, that's fine. Even if things

do work, they may have a time limit and need to evolve."

Andy Crosbie, Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders

"There's a lot of work that needs to happen beforehand, but also when we're bringing people together, you might spend at least half of the session creating the conditions where people feel safe, respected, able to come as their whole self - professionals feel able to let down some of their barriers. There's vulnerability there, too, when we talk about equity."

Pegs Bailey, Opportunities Fife Partnership

Centre collective gain

Keep sight of the bigger picture: prioritising better outcomes for those most marginalised within society creates systems that work better for everyone. Frame equity as a collective good, not a zero-sum game. Equity practices can harness the resourcefulness and strengths of people who currently feel their contributions aren't valued, but whose active involvement can improve everybody's circumstances. Some practical guides to implementing this:

- **Frame equity as a collective benefit, not a zero-sum game.** Equity work isn't about taking from one group to give to another, it's about improving systems so that they work better for everyone. Political narratives sometimes position equity as divisive, but in practice,

inclusive design and decision-making strengthen outcomes across the board.

- **Recognise that marginalisation is systemic, not individual.** Inequality doesn't come from personal failure but from the design of the systems around us. Use tools like system mapping to understand where barriers are being created and what needs to shift upstream to make things fairer downstream, whether that's funding models, service pathways or decision-making rules.

- **Work collectively, not in isolation.** Look outward to see who else is trying to create similar change. Collaboration helps align efforts toward a shared goal rather than duplicating or competing. Where you have influence or reach, use it to *platform others* - spotlight local innovations, share learning publicly, and celebrate different approaches that move the field forward.

- **Value every perspective in the system.** Bringing together lived experience, direct practice and strategic leadership creates a fuller picture of what equitable systems can look like. When these perspectives sit alongside one another, each strengthens the other, leading to better insights and greater confidence for those whose voices are often marginalised.

- **Create spaces that emphasise mutual benefit.** When people can see that their participation contributes to something bigger — that their experiences can help shape change beyond their own circumstances — they're more likely to stay engaged and hopeful. These shared

spaces of purpose and progress are where collective energy builds.

"By being in that space, in our experience, people can feel empowered to understand what the existing challenges are, but also to see. if it's done well, how their experiences are going to benefit other people or benefit changes to the system. That grows their confidence in their voice as well."

Pegs Bailey, Opportunities Fife Partnership

"It seems to me that particular politicians have weaponised the fight for equity as a zero sum game, that if somebody benefits, then I lose some of my privilege. And then, people are like: 'Well, I don't have any privilege, because I'm working class'. An equity focus is not divisive in itself. If we can ensure that those who were worst affected are included in the process, that benefits everybody. If we have an equity lens, it's not a lose-lose situation. We all win, we all get the benefit of better designed services."

Dr Dayo Eseonu, Lancaster University

Find out more

Listen to our podcast

Changing the Narrative is our six-episode podcast series featuring people involved in the examples of HLS practice, who offer further nuance, inspiration and practical ideas for how you can advance equity within your context.

- **Episode 1**: To start things off, we're talking with Dr Dayo Eseonu from Lancaster University about what equity means, why we need to tell a different story about equity and how intentional Human Learning Systems practice can advance it.

- **Episode 2:** In our second episode, we're talking with Andy Crosbie and Zahra Bazarganianpour from Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders about leveraging community power.

- **Episode 3:** For our third episode, we're speaking with Pegs Bailey from Opportunities Fife Partnership in Scotland about their co-production work on employability.

- **Episode 4:** Our fourth episode features Anna Willow describing Brent Care Journeys, a collaboration between Barnardo's and Brent Council to infuse the care system with relationships.

- **Episode 5:** Our interview guest in this episode is Lola Akindoyin from Hackney Council's work with Sport England on tackling health inequalities.

- **Episode 6:** Our final episode takes us to Leicester, with a conversation with Bharti Mistry and Rob Hunter on their social prescribing project, Reaching People.

Read more

You can also read their examples of HLS practice here:

- Brent Care Journeys

- Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders

- Hackney Council's collaboration with Sport England

- No One Left Behind

- Reaching People

If you found this report helpful and are interested in working with us or others to test these insights in your place or system, please get in touch at gabriel@thempra.org.uk and enquiries@collaboratecic.com.

For more details on **Human Learning Systems**, please read Human Learning Systems: Radical Pragmatism.

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