HUMAN LEARNING SYSTEMS

Summary

Over the last six months, Liverpool City Region (LCR) Combined Authority has explored how to commission differently – using the Liverpool City Region (LCR) Assertive Outreach service as a means to undertake this exploration.

In this case study, the Contract and Review Lead reflects on the learning taken from working to implement an HLS approach to contract monitoring and in doing so highlight factors that support or prevent the embedding of an HLS approach.

In particular, this study explores ways in which spaces which enable commissioners and providers to learn together help to build the necessary sense of trust between all the actors in a local system.

LIVING THE NEW WORLD REPORT

Liverpool City Region

| Overview

What is your purpose and how are you using HLS as a frame?

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (CA) was awarded £7.7million to develop a Housing First pilot across the city region. Housing First requires a system change to the current approaches to homelessness and as such, a change in the way in which commissioning of homelessness services is carried out. Therefore, acknowledging this need for change, the CA has embraced Human Learning Systems (HLS) as an approach to commissioning and as a tool with which to understand the current homelessness system and to create change.

Alongside the provision of Housing First funding, the CA was awarded Trailblazer funding. The CA has

no statutory or legal duties around housing and homelessness. The CA has facilitated Trailblazers funding to the Local Authorities, funded from the Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government (MHCLG). The Trailblazer initiative and funding was introduced to support local authorities in the implementation and management of the Homeless Reduction Act. This new legislation required a complete change in approach towards providing homelessness services specifically highlighting the need for delivering upstream prevention services. Using Trailblazer funding, the CA worked alongside the six local authorities of Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens and the Wirral (LAs) to develop Early Intervention and Prevention services alongside a city-region Assertive Outreach service.

The Early Intervention and Prevention teams deliver in their localities, often embedded within the local authority statutory Housing teams. Conversely, the Assertive Outreach service was commissioned regionally with a local homelessness charity acting as the core provider and lead of a multi-disciplinary team including NHS staff and mental health practitioners which would then deliver a service across the six local boroughs. The CA acknowledged that the service would need to be able to adapt to need, respond to changes and differing needs across the city region and recognised the value of commissioning the service using an HLS approach. Working with all the local authorities the CA developed a specification for an Assertive Outreach service that embraced a Human Learning Systems approach. This enabled the development and understanding of Human Learning Systems (HLS) with partner's organisations across the region.

To help navigate and understand the system and support a service that is working across six Local Authorities with various needs and requirements we very quickly understood we would need to employ a Systems Steward – someone who looks after the 'health of the system'. This role is led by the Contract and Review Lead. As the Assertive Outreach service has been designed to be flexible and responsive, adopting a learning approach to contract monitoring has been imperative over the last six months. To do this, the focus of the Contract and the Review Lead has been the following:

- To develop trusting and honest relationships between all actors involved in the commissioning and delivery of the service, particularly amongst the core provider

- To be led by learning rather than influenced by ensuring operational delivery met outcomes

- To increase understanding of HLS and what it means for the commissioner-provider relationship and contract monitoring

- To create space for reflection and learning within the commissioner-provider-delivery team relationships

| Story of Change

What has been your story of change? What did you do?

In developing an HLS approach to commissioning with the Assertive Outreach team, the focus for the Contract and Review Lead has been on increasing the providers understanding of a HLS approach, encouraging the development of a trusting and open commissioner-provider relationship and introducing a learning system within the contract and monitoring process, particularly around the reporting requirements. Specifically, the focus has been on working to encourage an honest response within the commissioner-provider relationship around service delivery so that the role of the Contract and Review Lead can be developed to support the service to adapt and respond to demand within the traditional contract monitoring relationship.

1- Increasing understanding of an HLS approach within the service and wider system

The CA identified as part of the development of Housing First that they were required to develop a commissioning model that was able to identify the wider view, approaches and understand the complexities of the environment homelessness services are delivering in and the wider needs of communities. Rather than develop a specification that stated for the next three years: "you need to deliver these outcomes" the specification needed to allow the provider/commissioner to always evaluate and develop delivery/services to ensure they can respond to the variety of needs demonstrated by the client group, reflect best practice and have a clear learning impact on future delivery and commissioning.

The CA developed a city region commissioning group to look at the development and specification of a city region assertive outreach service that would work together but also look at how we commission and if taking new approaches would increase the effectiveness of future commissioning.

Toby Lowe was invited to deliver a workshop for the group and internal CA staff who were responsible for procurement. A further workshop was also held with external partners, external commissioners including health and the Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government (MHCLG) to develop an understanding of HLS and how the approach could improve outcomes across public services.

Working in this way recognises that outcomes are produced by whole systems rather than individuals, organisations or programmes. Consequently, to improve outcomes, we need to work to create 'healthy' systems in which people can co-ordinate and collaborate more effectively utilising a strengths-based approach. This approach results in better experiences, better outcomes and it has potential to increase collaboration, enable innovation, build employee motivation, and deliver cost savings.

More recently, where the Contract and Review Lead has learnt about successful practices that have been employed by other organisations utilising an HLS approach, she has looked to adopt these practices within the commissioner-provider relationship of the Assertive Outreach service, e.g. implementing a formal sense making session with the frontline delivery team utilising the learning framework model to capture the changes to service demand, adaptations required by the team to ensure effective service provision, to demonstrate support/shared risk taking from the commissioner and to aid the implementation of a learning culture. Where these practices have been adopted successfully, the Contract and Review Lead has made sure to promote these successes in contract monitoring meetings with wider system actors, such as local authorities, to highlight the credibility and understanding of the HLS approach in practice.

2- Building a trusting and open commissioner-provider relationship

In looking to build a trusting and open commissioner-provider relationship, the Contract and Review Lead has sought to understand the system the service is operating in and increase

feedback loops between each actor within the service 'system'. The goal for increasing these feedback loops has been to encourage the provider to shape the service by operational learning and feeding back to the commissioner to help them with the development of local commissioning strategy plans. Practically, this has been carried out through contract monitoring meetings between each actor and the commissioner (or altogether) which have been held more regularly than usual for a commissioner-provider relationship; anywhere between weekly with the provider and monthly with local authorities where the service is delivered. These meetings have been supplemented by regular communication with the provider (service/team managers) and commissioner (contract and monitoring lead) through telephone and email communication.

The new pattern of communication allows a forum for each all the actors to increase their awareness of their role within the system along with providing an opportunity for the Contract and Reviewing Lead/commissioner to lead on building/encouraging a culture of honesty and empathy along with learning by suggesting collective trouble-shooting/risk taking. To build trust with the team and an empathic understanding of the service, the Contract and Monitoring lead has also sought out opportunities to work 'shoulder to shoulder' with the service delivery team, attending early morning outreach regularly (prior Covid-19). This is an unusual practice for a commissioner but has been carried out to demonstrate the willingness of the commissioner to listen, learn and accept part of the risk usually carried wholly by the provider.

3- Introducing a learning system within the contract and monitoring process, particularly around reporting requirements

We have sought to start to create space for learning within the commissioner-provider relationship. At present, this is done by having regular meetings to come together with the three providers management (planning meeting) to discuss learning, challenges, trouble-shoot and plan

next steps for the future. This space allows for 'collective sense-making' through the presence of multiple actors within the system and the opportunity to discuss 'what we are learning and how we can use this to impact effective change.' As an example, this forum has been used to highlight the challenges with the clinical dimension of the service and enable all actors within the system to suggest a solution for change. By having these meetings regularly, it also enforces the idea that all actors in the system have a responsibility for shouldering risk and responsibility helping to emphasise trust/honesty. These meetings have also enabled the commissioner to have an honest understanding of the operational delivery and how the service works within the system of homelessness across the city region.

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The approach taken to contract monitoring has been how can we ensure delivery can respond flexibly, responding to the variety of need present and work in the context of this current need, recognising that issues, challenges and what works to meet those challenges is ever-changing. For the service to deliver it must be able to continually adapt to reflect these changes. We have used monthly and quarterly reporting as an opportunity to develop a meaningful learning culture with the lead provider and a report that offers value to them, as well as the commissioner. This has been developed through a series of collaborative meetings where the commissioner and provider have assessed the MoU, reports to date and worked to create a framework for reporting that acknowledges the core requirements of the contract, the intended design of the service (to

enable flexibility in provision) and the learning culture promoted by HLS.

To ensure that there is engagement from the frontline delivery team as well as the providers management teams, we have completed our first learning framework with the Assertive Outreach delivery team. This experience was effective at collecting insight gathered by the team of their frontline experience of providing the service across the region throughout the last six months, including across the period affected by Covid-19 and this will be incorporated into future reports. It also provided an opportunity for both the commissioner and the lead providers management to demonstrate the value of the HLS approach in practice and for the commissioner provide an opportunity to begin to build a trusting relationship with the frontline staff by demonstrating a willingness to listen to their experience and highlight the value of their expertise within the development of the service. It has been agreed that this practice will be repeated quarterly to encourage a culture of reflection and ensure that the front-line staff are incorporated in service development.

What taking an HLS Approach Requires

What does it require of you and others and how is this different from other approaches?

Across the last six months of implementing a working HLS approach to contract monitoring, we have learnt the following:

- It takes time to build honest, trusting relationships but when opportunities are provided there is a real willingness from each actor within the system to lean in
- Understanding and navigating the system is an ongoing process

Commissioning is often a competitive process; providers delivering within a new model of commissioning of services will always present

challenges. Basing relationships on trust and partnership but more importantly basing development of any service on the expertise and feedback of a provider requires them to feel safe to raise areas of learning without feeling performance managed. We need to ensure we are able to make happen the ability to change to need and demands. Actors understanding of HLS and what it means for them in practice aids the ability of creating trusting, honest relationships. We have found that with a comprehensive understanding and appreciation for the theory, actors are more willing to engage in a different way as they recognise that it is within a learning environment. The willingness of the System Steward to demonstrate this change in behaviour initially is useful for signalling to other actors the commitment to building relationships within the HLS approach.

- The relational foundation of trust is valuable to the development of a learning culture

The traditional relationship of commissioner-provider can hinder the development of a learning culture in so much that providers can feel hesitant to raise challenges around service delivery due to concern that these may be highlighted as performance management issues. Those difficulties are also an issue for the commissioner as well as the provider. Where trusting relationships are built and the goal of HLS understood, learning cultures can flourish which will improve service delivery for individuals.

- To apply learning, actors involved within the commissioner-provider relationship, particularly those within service provision, need to have a level of autonomy within their immediate system to be able to act on observations and solutions highlighted within collective sense-making sessions

Theoretically, the benefit to implementing an HLS approach to commissioning and contract monitoring comes through the collective understanding that with the creation of a learning culture service development is an ongoing process. We have found that the application of learning and therefore effective service development is created when the actors within the service system have a

level of autonomy that enables them to implement learning within their system. Nonetheless, often where there is a barrier for implementation it can present an opportunity to identify another actor within the system which had previously been unacknowledged.

Has HLS enabled you to respond in times of crisis such as COVID-19?

Extraordinary circumstances can provide an opportunity to encourage an HLS approach to contract monitoring or commissioning informally within other services

Extraordinary circumstances such as Covid-19 aid in the removal of barriers to service delivery and improvement which have previously been defined as bureaucratic. Furthermore, it can create an opportunity for the transfer of learning about HLS outside of the immediate service designed with an HLS approach in mind. Specifically, within the CA, the Contract and Review Lead has found that the impact of Covid-19 upon housing and local authorities within the LCR provided a unique opportunity to transfer practices proven to have been successful within the LCR Assertive Outreach service to other services, in particular the Trailblazer Early Intervention and Prevention service.

In terms of specific practices, the Contract and Review Lead found that the pressure placed on the local and housing authorities provided an opportunity for the CA to lean into relationships with these actors and demonstrate a willingness to share responsibility and risk when looking to adapt the service in the face of Covid-19. Practically, this took the shape of coordinating and hosting weekly team meetings for the six different Early Intervention and Prevention (EIP) teams across the region. The focus of these sessions was to create an opportunity for the practitioners to come together to share learning and collectively sense-make about their experiences delivering a service within this new context. These meetings were swiftly

implemented and had a high turnout of the EIP team across the region demonstrating the value the teams found in these sessions. This was actively affirmed by the team who noted their desire to continue these meetings after the easing of lockdown. Reflecting on the impact of these sessions, the creation of a shared space for collective sense-making has aided the development of a learning culture, informally, within this service as well as helping to build honest and trusting relationships within this system. Good practice, and learning from others, has been a strong theme throughout.

In working to develop a learning culture within two services that are contract monitored by the System Steward, it has been useful to compare the factors that aid and hinder the implementation of a learning culture. For more details around this, please see appendices.

| Barriers and Tensions

Across the last six months, working to implement an HLS approach to contract monitoring, we have found the following can act as barriers for implementing practices that reflect HLS:

- **Actors understanding of HLS and what it means in practice for their role and the way in which relationships are developed with other actors**

Though we have sought to inform all actors within the system about the HLS approach and its impact upon the service for the LCR Assertive Outreach service there is definitely work to be done in informing actors on the periphery of the system of the influence and role of HLS within the commissioning of the service. Specifically, there has been limited time to increase understanding of the approach with the local authorities where the service is delivered and as such, change in these relationships towards an HLS has been slow. Responsibility for raising awareness of the approach lies with the CA and will be a focus for the System Steward moving forward.

- **The historic nature of commissioning Homelessness and housing services**

Commissioning homelessness and housing services has become a competitive process over the last two decades, with services being commissioned through a tendering process that emphasises the importance of providers demonstrating their ability to hit objective service outcomes rather than focus upon areas of learning, changing demands, needs and where they sit within the system. The learning aspect of the HLS approach is therefore a challenge to the established culture of commissioning, and it can be difficult to encourage actors to move away from this lens of contract monitoring and therefore build a culture of honesty/shared risk taking between the commissioner and provider.

- **The identification of actors who do not sit directly within the homelessness system but are influential in the system and whose engagement impacts the effective delivery of the service**

The LCR Assertive Outreach service has a clinical dimension within its design and delivery with a nurse practitioner and two CPNs complimenting the outreach workers within the delivery team. This inclusion of healthcare professionals has highlighted a big difference in the way in which housing and healthcare services are commissioned and called attention to the barriers that present themselves to delivery when strategic healthcare actors are not embedded within the commissioner-provider relationship or other feedback loops with which the service is engaged elsewhere ie MDTs etc

| What Next

What will you be doing next to develop your approach, and how will you be using the human learning systems framework as a guide?

Looking ahead, we are looking to develop our approach to contract monitoring by:

- Continuing to demonstrate honesty and integrity within commissioner-provider communication and develop a trusting, collaborative relationship

- Establish a set reporting process that is reflective of a culture of learning whilst valuing data and continues to be developed collaboratively

- Focus upon increasing awareness of contract monitoring in an HLS approach

within peripheral actors in the LCR Assertive Outreach system

- Develop and implement a methodology for identifying more actors within the system in which the LCR Assertive Outreach operates involving strategic and delivery actors as well as clients ie. Service Manager, frontline Outreach workers and service users.

| Appendix

Factors that support the implementation of a learning framework/culture	▪ Logistics of the meetings/sessions where reflection on learning is taking place– if the time works for all, easy access to online platform for meeting ▪ Identity of staff – if they feel like part of a wider team or if they feel separated from this identity ▪ Understanding of HLS and the value of creating a learning environment ▪ Understanding of the value of HLS from the service and team managers ▪ Willingness to try something new and trust the learning process (managers) ▪ Reinforcing the HLS culture within the delivery team from the managers and demonstrating buy in through attendance at collective sense making sessions ▪ Ensure clear understanding of HLS and the goal with all involved ▪ Development of trusting relationships between commissioner-provider and emphasis on shared risk taking/responsibility ▪ Commissioner stepping up to lead on learning/carry the 'load' - demonstrates shared responsibility ▪ Openness – encouragement for honest feedback and everyone having an equal say in development of the process
Factors that hinder the implementation of a learning framework	▪ Competing demands on the time of the team. Whether or not the meeting/session where reflection on learning is taking place is seen as a priority ▪ The creation of a learning environment is not prioritised and therefore implementation has been halted
Factors that enable learning to be utilised for service development	▪ Around implementation of the learning: dependent on the structure and autonomy of the team at a local level ▪ Involvement of leads enables implementation of learning – learn together, don't "report to"