

Human Learning Systems: Funding & Commissioning

This Resource Deck is designed for those interested in adopting HLS approaches to funding and commissioning



Introduction

Human Learning Systems is a response to complexity which requires letting go of the illusion of control.

Over the past few decades, funding and commissioning has been dominated by a focus on standardised support, ensuring compliance and creating competition between organisations.

But this hinders, rather than enables the bespoke, flexible and joined up approaches that often make the most difference for people and communities.

In this resource we share insights, examples and resources to help funders and commissioners identify ways to enable more human, flexible and collaborative approaches.

The content of this resource is based on Chapter 17 of the [HLS e-book](#), 'Funding & commissioning in complexity' (p339 - p360) written by Melissa Hawkins, Dawn Plimmer, Jeremy Cox & Vita Terry.



**Find the chapter
here**

Human (1/2)

Funders and commissioners can help enable flexible, bespoke 'human' support that responds to an individual's specific circumstances by:

1. Funding/commissioning relational support

Flexible support based on trusting relationships is an important foundation for working in a human way. Funders and commissioners should aim to support organisations that:

- Build effective relationships with those they serve;
- Understand and respond to the strengths and needs of each person; and
- Act collaboratively with others to do so.

"We start by developing relationships with partners so they in turn can build relationships with the young people they're supporting. Relationships based on trust are essential."

[Blagrove Trust, Exploring the New World, 2019](#)

"[Building relationships] was necessary, given the previously competitive nature of relationships in a market approach to tendering. We were consciously acknowledging the mistakes of the past whilst also sharing the context of those mistakes and at the same time trying to build empathy and understanding, so we could move forward together."

[Plymouth Alliance Case Study](#)

2. Adopting a relational funding & commissioning approach

Nurturing trusting relationships at all levels (between citizens and providers, between organisations, and between funders and funded) leads to improved outcomes. Micromanaging outcomes does not. Taking an HLS approach involves making funding a relational process, with policies and processes that support this.

To adopt a relational approach that encourages and embraces diversity requires funders and commissioners to critically examine who has access to funding, funding criteria and who makes decisions.

Human (2/2)

3. Enabling flexibility

To provide human support, organisations must have the autonomy to respond to whatever strengths and needs they uncover in their relationship with the person they are supporting.

Funding needs to be managed in a way that reinforces flexibility. This means no rigid targets, because these can never respond to the variety of people's context.

"Applications are now worked up in a more complexity friendly way... The process aims to be more flexible, and tailored to the needs of the applicant, using conversations to build a relationship and respond as quickly as possible to a grant request if appropriate. This more intuitive approach places greater trust on Grant Managers' judgements, having recognised that this is a key part of the process in terms of building relationships."

[The Tudor Trust Case Study](#)



4. Taking a long-term perspective

Funded organisations are often held to account for the impossible - improving outcomes over which they have little control in a short space of time. Funders need to invest for the long term, enabling organisations to develop trust and relationships both with the individuals they support and with other key stakeholders in the system.

Learning

If funders and commissioners are serious about taking an HLS approach, they need to work in a way that prioritises learning, not control, at three levels:

1. **Create the space for, and incentivise, funded organisations to learn.** This requires a shift in the focus of performance management from compliance and “proving” impact to enabling learning and improvement.
2. **Learn with and alongside funded organisations.** Creating opportunities for shared learning and sense-making can support funders, commissioners and funded organisations to build understanding, take more systemic approaches and improve practice together.
3. **Reflect, learn and continually improve their own practice.** As well as supporting funded organisations to learn, funders and commissioners should prioritise and plan for their own learning to maximise the impact funding has.

Lankelly Chase uses various methods: *“Reflective practice to learn about ourselves and the work... Systems Coaching to understand the systems (or nested systems) we were part of and our shared purpose... Deep Democracy to have better dialogue, build trust, make decisions based on collective insights and address conflict.”*

“We recognise that changing complex systems requires the ability to adapt and change because the context which enables interventions to ‘work’ is constantly changing. ‘What works’ is the continuous process of listening, learning and adapting.”

[The Lankelly Chase Foundation Case Study](#)

[Commissioners at Plymouth Alliance](#) ran a large-scale learning event where citizens and organisations in Plymouth came and told their stories, which enabled commissioners to understand what wasn’t working and reimagine their approach.

Systems (1/2)

Funders and commissioners need to recognise that in complex contexts, systems (not projects or organisations) create outcomes.

Funders and commissioners should see themselves as part of the system, with shared responsibility for systems change. The role of funder and commissioner moves from ensuring compliance as “grant manager” to recognising that they have active roles to play in contributing to and nurturing healthy systems.



Key questions to ask:

- Which people/organisations are part of the systems which produce the outcomes I care about?
- How can I convene the system to help it understand itself better?
- How can I allocate, distribute and manage resources to build trust and understanding as a key asset across the system?
- How can I enable collaboration between actors?

Systems (2/2)

In some cases, funders and commissioners may want to take on a systems stewardship role, actively taking responsibility for improving the health of the system and nurturing collaborative system approaches.

"As we do that, the emerging question seems to be not so much, 'how do we play the role of Systems Steward?' but 'what is Tudor's role within the funding sector?', and in relation to our grant-making, 'how do we support organisations to play their part effectively in their respective ecosystems?' In posing questions in this way, it feels that Tudor then is not so much a 'Systems Steward' as a 'system servant'."

[The Tudor Trust Case Study](#)

Liverpool City Region redesigned their Contract and Review Lead role as a 'Systems Steward' – responsible for developing trusting relationships (between providers and between commissioners and providers), creating spaces for reflection and learning, being led by learning not operational outcome targets, working shoulder-to-shoulder with providers to understand issues on the ground, modelling behaviour, and enabling autonomy for providers.

[Liverpool City Case Study](#)

In other cases, funders and commissioners are not always best placed to play this role – other actors may be better connected, more trusted, and closer to the issues, and may already be playing a stewardship role.

Resources

If you're a commissioner,
join the [HLS Practical
Learning Community for
Local Authorities](#)

If you're a funder, join the [Losing
Control in Funding](#) group to connect
with peers to learn & share about
approaches to shifting power

Reports and webinars

- [A Whole New World: Funding and Commissioning in Complexity](#) (Annabel Davidson Knight, Toby Lowe, Marion Brossard, Julie Wilson)
- [Exploring the New World: Practical insights for Funding, Commissioning and Managing in Complexity](#) (Toby Lowe, Dawn Plimmer)
- [Trust, power and collaboration: Human Learning Systems approaches in voluntary and community organisations](#) (Vita Terry, Charlotte Pace, Ben Cairns)
- [HLS online webinar series: Webinar A: The Plymouth Alliance. \(2020, May 12\)](#)
- [Collaborative Workshop on commissioning in complexity \(Plymouth\)](#)

Want to read another Case Study?

- Find out how [POP](#) revitalised the relationships between community organisations as a network weaver

