



Summary

Learning is at the heart of everything we do at Save the Children UK. Over the last two years, we've started to develop a more systemic approach to learning which we believe will enable us to harness the collective power of the work we do to end child poverty in the UK. To help us do this, we've co-produced and piloted a learning framework which aims to make our learning practice intentional, drive continuous improvement, enable us to collaborate inclusively and build an equitable learning environment for our teams, partners and communities. This developmental work aligns closely to a Human Learning Systems approach and has informed key decisions relating to our new strategy. In doing so, it's laid the groundwork for 'learning' to play a central role in helping us to deliver our mission.

Learning to Learn – Save the Children UK

| Overview and history

In the UK, Save the Children works to make sure families have the money, services and power to end child poverty. We do this by helping to build communities of people who care about children, listen to what's important to them, and work together to make things better.

Over the last five years, 'UK Impact', the department which leads this work, has transitioned towards a strategy focused on enabling communities to drive change locally, while also playing a convening role with regional and national decision-makers. We work in close partnership with all those stakeholders to ensure that national change is driven by a diversity of insight from those local communities across the UK – children, young people, families, and partners.

This approach relies on devolving power and decision-making to communities and the teams working alongside them. Over time, this highly localised, place-based approach has resulted in a diverse set of practices, systems and approaches, all designed to respond to the specificity of local need and context. A number of standalone initiatives were set up to support learning and development within and across these teams, including a structured programme to learn about place-based change, and an informal network for place-based leads. There was clearly a desire to learn from one another, but we found that our structure, governance and the drive for localisation consistently incentivised and prioritised highly devolved ways of working. While this approach aligned with our strategic goals, it also meant that teams struggled to find the



time to connect with one another, share learning or invest time in understanding approaches those others had taken. While there was some organic collaboration, as well as those discrete learning initiatives and projects, these weren't systematic or wholly inclusive. The learning that we did was predominantly relational, located in individual teams, and usually mediated by the networks people happened to be operating in.

This often resulted in siloed working, with teams tackling very similar problems in isolation and groups unintentionally holding on to valuable learning and insight. There was no role or team that had sufficient information to look at the whole picture of our work, see the gaps, and identify opportunities to do things differently, or more effectively. As well as the inefficiencies this brought, it stymied our ability to play the convener role where we might otherwise connect insight across different local contexts, and from this help to build a richer picture child poverty in the UK or identify and diffuse emerging solutions

There was a clear opportunity to bridge learning across these different contexts, teams, and learning styles to help us work more effectively and with greater impact.

While we recognised some of these problems, we weren't confident of the best approach to address this problem. So, our journey began with a workshop we commissioned in 2023 that introduced the concept of learning as a system – one that consciously organised itself to capture learning and use insights to further its mission. From this, we started to think about learning through the spaces in which it was enabled, the systems and processes that support it, the behaviours and culture we embodied and the methods and tools that support best practice.

At the same time, our UK Impact department had commenced a process to inform the development of our new strategy for 2025-2030, meaning there was fertile ground to influence and embed new ways of thinking and working. But moving towards this way of working required a significant shift, and a specific set of skills. So, at the start of 2024, we designed and recruited for a new Senior Learning Facilitator role to help lead this change.

This 12-month, fixed term role was housed in our cross-cutting UK Evidence and Learning Team but operated across the whole department. We wanted the role to lead this change, but with a light hand, enabling colleagues to learn more effectively through a process of connecting, facilitating, developing, coaching, supporting and nudging our practice. The outcomes the role was working towards were framed around our whole strategy: understanding and mapping our system, co-designing strategies at different scales, building expertise and confidence, using our learning to influence, and integrating learning into our emerging 2025-30 strategy.

| Story of Change - *The Learning Cycle Method to Designing a Learning System*

The Senior Learning Facilitator role began with a preliminary review of established learning theories and frameworks prevalent in the impact and public sectors. In the world of social impact, where change is complex, learning as a concept is both broad and multifaceted. It can have several different definitions and can hold different meanings for each individual. The critical questions we set out to address were how do we approach learning effectively, and how do we implement it with purpose, in the specific context of Save the Children's work in the UK?

Understanding what drives learning for our work with communities



To explore this further, we started the project with a listening exercise and initiated a dialogue with colleagues across the department by asking: “What does learning mean to you, and what opportunities and challenges related to learning have you faced at work?”

This exercise provided valuable insights into the unique context of learning in the UK Impact department of Save the Children UK (SCUK) – revealing the values and principles driving it, as well as the various scales at which learning occurs – with communities, with partners, in a place, in a country, across countries, and more. Alongside, we conducted a stakeholder mapping to understand the ecosystem. The listening exercise highlighted interdependencies with other organisational functions such as program management, knowledge management, skill development, monitoring, and evaluation.

'Collective Impact theory claims that a learning culture is an environment where trust, openness, and risk-taking are encouraged, enabling stakeholders to engage in meaningful and reflective dialogue.' Cultivating such a culture requires a mindset shift in ways of working, and collective effort to create a learning system that works best for all. Beyond merely identifying learning needs, our listening exercise served as the foundation for a collaborative path to designing a learning framework tailored to UK Impact.

Through analysis of the responses, we identified four core principles that underpin learning at UK Impact:

Making Learning Intentional – Colleagues expressed a strong desire for deliberate collective reflection and learning. Many noted that currently, knowledge of each other's work happens by chance rather than by design. While acknowledging the widespread sharing of knowledge across multiple platforms, participants observed that this information isn't utilised systematically or effectively. The challenge lies in developing intentional, systematic approaches to learning that enhance our relevance and impact.

Driving Continuous Learning – Respondents emphasised the importance of process in learning and how learning would lead to growth and change. Key questions that required reflection were: How do we transition from learning to prove to learning to improve? How can we create a direct link between learning, action, and ultimate impact? What processes would facilitate this connection?

Inclusive Collaboration - Another challenge identified was the perception of working in silos. Colleagues expressed a need for shared spaces where everyone could collectively reflect and exchange ideas. In order to understand and validate interactions and relationships in the ecosystem, we conducted a collaborative mapping exercise that revealed that approximately two-thirds of staff within the department were already collaborating with multiple colleagues across roughly 12 groups or projects. Visualising this network of connections—especially for senior leadership—built trust and reinforced the value of pursuing collaborative learning in a more inclusive manner.

Equitable Learning Environment – Concerns emerged about how to ensure we designed a learning system that accommodates a diverse workforce. Questions surfaced around ensuring flexibility in knowledge-sharing methods and accommodating different learning styles and preferences.

Designing the learning practice collaboratively

We leveraged multiple communication channels and presented at various meetings to raise awareness about the role of learning within a social impact organisation. These engagements offered further insights into the diverse learning needs of stakeholders in Save the Children's ecosystem. Among the core principles, creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment proved to be the most challenging - and also the area where we received the most feedback in our efforts to get it right. For example, during a meeting designed to explore the value of learning, we found it difficult to engage the entire audience in an activity focused on various



learning models. While time constraints are always a factor in such sessions, it was clear that understanding your audience is key. To foster an equitable and inclusive learning space, we need to offer multiple modes of representation and expression. Whether the setting is online or in person, it's important to remember that everyone absorbs, processes and communicates information differently. In any learning space, it's essential to be mindful of these differences and adapt accordingly.

Another major outcome that emerged from the communication activities across the department was identifying learning enthusiasts within the system. Apart from the Senior Learning Facilitator and the Evidence & Learning team, these individuals formed the inner circle who would advocate for the value of learning. These learning champions also helped in capturing the best practices of learning in current projects and identifying potential pilot projects. The objective of the pilot was to pick out best practices from external evidence and select the most promising ones for pilot implementation. We conducted extensive desk research examining learning practices best suited for social impact organisations and collective impact initiatives (in alignment with SCUK's broader strategy), focusing specifically on approaches that embodied our core values of intentionality, continuity, inclusivity, and equity. For example, we adapted practices from models such as the lighthouse framework by FSG, continuous improvement, lean, universal learning design and more. However, arriving at this involved multiple cycles of iteration and refinement especially as we aimed to build a strategy for learning informed both by theoretical frameworks and practical experiences.

Capturing the essence of learning through various exploratory trials

During the pilot phase, we implemented various learning practices across multiple programs at UK Impact. To ensure comprehensive relevance, we deliberately included projects of varying scales and contexts:

- Learning across two place-based projects funded by the same donor - Tower Hamlets, a borough in London and Glasgow, a port city in Scotland
- Learning in a short-term cross-departmental project that was covering 17 areas, 27 partners with a reach of 3585 children.
- Learning with partners for an innovation project in Northern Ireland
- Learning with parent champions and partners in Manchester
- Learning in a cross-functional collaboration bringing together operations, media, and policy teams to improve school attendance
- Learning Network of professionals working in place-based change across the UK covering 9 events, 354 speakers with a cumulative reach of 1232 participants.

In collaboration with project leads, we documented existing learning practices and, in selected projects, introduced innovative approaches. We captured the most effective methods in detailed case studies.

From this collection of best practices, we identified common minimum practices under each core value – enhancing learning's intentionality, continuity, inclusivity, and equity. This synthesis culminated in our "Learning to Learn" framework—a standardised, replicable model that facilitates the adoption of effective learning practices across Save the Children's programs.

Adopting the Learning to Learn framework within the organisation

This bottom-up development of best practice has laid the groundwork for us to apply a more systematic approach across our work, with a greater focus on structured top-down implementation.





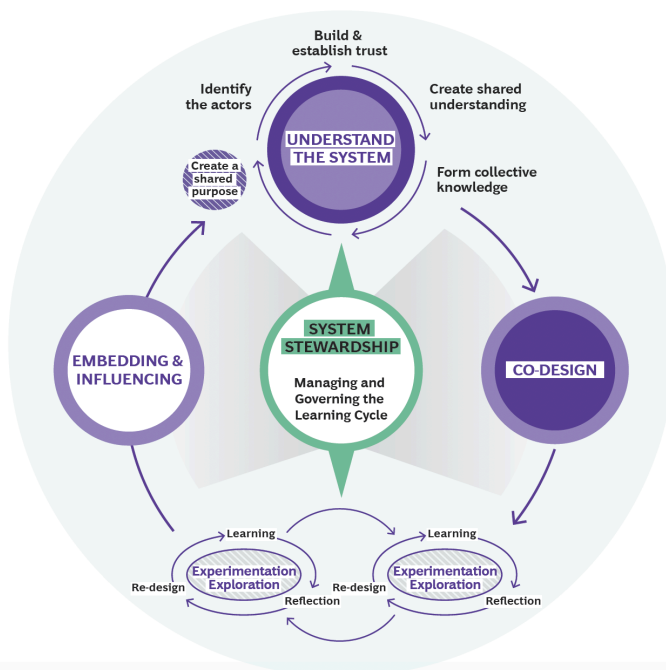
We've developed accessible guidance resources with supplementary content facilitating easy adoption of learning practices.

We've incorporated steps from our co-designed learning framework directly into the project management system, which is in the process of being integrated across the department. We accomplished this by establishing specific tasks for conducting learning reviews, generating comprehensive learning reports, and mandating reference to insights from previous projects before launching new initiatives.

We've also started to address the challenge of measuring the impact of learning initiatives. We deployed human centric design to explore how learning leads to impact at every level of our work. The exercise generated several options, such as capturing stories of change across the organisation and measuring impact on community-level outcomes through feedback as perceived by participating partners and parents. By sharing case studies of best practices, we were able to provide examples of how learning can significantly enhance program impact. These practices will inform the ongoing development and application of our impact frameworks for the new strategy period.

The Learning to Learn framework designed through the HLS Learning Cycle approach is available for reference in the artefacts linked at the end of this document.

Reflecting on taking a HLS approach to design



While the framework draws from multiple evidence-based methodologies like human centric design, learning in collective impact, systems practice, and others - the approach used to collaboratively develop a learning framework for SCUK's work in the UK closely aligns with the Human Learning Systems (HLS) Learning Cycle. The HLS methodology emerged as a particularly relevant model to understand and further guide our approach to learning, given SCUK's focus on system-wide learning initiatives.

As illustrated in the diagram, we started by understanding the system, identifying the underlying core principles that drive learning. Then we proceeded to the method of co-design by building trust and collaboration with a group of learning enthusiasts within the system who, along with the learning team, acted as the system stewards who managed and governed the approach. The learning

framework was shaped through a series of simple, tangible steps that were drawn from common minimum practices - synthesised from best practices identified through pilots. Alongside this, we contextualised these practices with wider evidence bases to ensure relevance.

The pilots at various system scales helped us understand how learning unfolds at each level, which would inform the next phase - to strengthen the transfer of learning across levels. In the final stage of embedding & influencing, we integrated the learning practices into the project management system and utilised a variety of communication channels to promote adoption and scale awareness.



| Moving to a Human Learning System Approach

Following this programme of change and the development of these principles and model of learning, we've arrived at a set of practices which are increasingly aligned with the ideas that underpin Human Learning Systems.

Our strategy and ethos at SCUK is closely aligned with the moral purpose of HLS to enable human freedom and flourishing. Through our work we aim to shift power, resources and orient services to the needs of families and local communities.

Our Learning to Learn framework positions inclusivity and equity as a central component to the design and implementation of our strategies and projects. It encourages us to design objectives for learning from the bottom up, oriented around the system of actors and factors which create outcomes. It centres people, human relationships and the spaces in which we navigate those relationships at the heart of our practice.

Our mode of thinking about learning has started to shift towards a way of being. We think about learning not just as something to be produced at the end of a project, but as a continuous, reflective cycle oriented around taking action. We encourage teams to adopt a mindset of curiosity and explore the root causes of what's happening on the surface.

At a strategic level, the department has produced a new UK Framework, which now includes learning as one of five drivers of change to achieve our mission. This has been designed to frame our strategies and approach to change in each of the four nations of the UK from 2025 to 2030. Our new structure which has been developed to deliver that strategy includes a standalone Impact and Learning team, with a set of roles whose purpose is to facilitate and lead an ongoing cycle of learning, improvement and problem solving at different system scales, strengthening our ability to drive impact through our strategies.

While learning has often been de-prioritised in the past, or seen as an add-on, there is a growing consensus among colleagues for the value of a systematic learning approach. The co-development of case studies and tangible examples of learning practice has helped to demonstrate its value and provides encouragement and inspiration for colleagues.

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| What Next?

Alongside our efforts to embed these practices through our new strategies, structure, processes and ways of working, there remain some key challenges and opportunities for us to address.

We need to develop a more refined and intentional approach to connecting learning up across different system scales, which remains relatively relational and opportunistic. We need to develop our understanding of



the role of learning in a Collective Impact context, which looks at the system as a set of organisations (including communities, partners, policy makers), and the ways in which learning can facilitate and strengthen these relationships, partnerships and interactions. And we need to develop our ability to articulate the role of learning in driving impact. This will mean building and using a holistic impact framework – one that enables us to articulate and drive improvement in our ways of working and our ability to affect social change.

| Barriers and Tensions

Communicating theory: Continuous improvement requires learning, learning requires change and change rears resistance. Any successful change management program requires a shared vision and effective communication. One challenge we experienced in this journey was how to convey and communicate the theoretical ideas behind the shift in practice we wanted to achieve. We found that talking in the abstract about learning systems, frameworks or theory was often off-putting for colleagues, or difficult to access, particularly in a broader culture which places a strong and primary emphasis on the value of practice experience. So, we increasingly shifted to a more conscious approach where we avoided labelling the work or centring theory. When producing case studies, we would then subsequently contextualise practice in the theoretical framework, so this could be better understood post-hoc.

Translating desire for learning into action: There were both failed and successful attempts in achieving participation in learning spaces. Often burdened by pressures of operational deliverables, teams keep learning for the closure phase of a project which ends up being an evaluation activity rather than a continuous learning approach. In one case example, we were able to partially overcome this tendency through early efforts to bring senior stakeholders on board with the value and purpose of the learning approach, meaning they acted as learning champions through the course of the project.

Effective knowledge management infrastructure: One of the key challenges as highlighted by the team was the lack of a one-stop-shop for all knowledge held by UK Impact. The current knowledge management system (KMS) was challenging to streamline due to lack of standardisation in naming and filing. Moreover, it is not uniformly accessed or utilised by all users, and it requires considerable investment in time and effort from all teams to organise documents and data. Learning becomes efficient and effective with the presence of a seamless platform that allows access to knowledge acquired and built by the organisation.

Change during periods of uncertainty: The timing of the project was both a barrier and enabler at the same time as SCUK was in the process of adopting a new strategy. While it helped us shape the role of learning in the new strategy, there were instances when we had to be cautious not to overwhelm teams with many new changes.

| Enablers

The outsider, stewardship role: The external recruitment of a fixed term role to help lead the change enabled the individual to play a systems steward role – they were able to bring a neutral, outsider perspective to help the department to understand the nuances and challenges of the shift we were trying to make.



Consistent gathering of feedback and actioning on the feedback: The significance of the principles of inclusiveness and facilitating an equitable learning environment and how to do it right was something that we refined over multiple iterations and feedback collected from all stakeholders

Collaborative design: Identifying learning enthusiasts in the system is a critical element to ensure adoption of the practice. These individuals along with the Senior Learning Facilitator play the role of system stewards in driving and governing the entire approach. It's also important to recognise, tap into and build on the innate desire that all colleagues have to learn and improve.

Mapping and visualising intangible concepts: Visualising the constellation of connections was effective in showcasing successful collaboration in the department.

| Top Tips

- The work requires an unrelenting optimism and belief in the value of learning as a strategy. This shift in culture is not easy and takes time. It's important to find learning enthusiasts and bring them on board to help drive the change through their networks.
- The work requires dedicated leadership capacity and expertise. The drive for change, new practices and ways of work is far more effective when led by an individual with specific and protected responsibility to step outside of the day to day.
- Get stuck into direct project work – test and fail to understand what works, what doesn't and why that's the case. This helps to build ownership, as well as ensuring the practice feels relevant. It reduces the risk of the approach becoming abstract.
- Continually explore and work towards changes in practice that can be integrated into wider systemic practice or strategic decisions.

| Artefacts

- Learning to Learn Framework
- Learning to Learn case study - Northern Ireland
- Job Description - Senior Learning Facilitator



| Authors & Acknowledgements

The approach was developed and the framework co-created with a wide range of colleagues, including those leading and working in our communities, members of our Learning Network and many other colleagues who share our passion for learning. We're very grateful for the input of every individual who helped to shape and strengthen the work.

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