



SUMMARY

Each year the Scottish Borders Local Action Group (LAG) works with local community members and organisations to improve life in the Borders. Each year is separate and standalone piece of work that influences the following year.

This is the third year of our HLS related experiments on how best to use grant funding to achieve maximum impact with our communities.

Community Led Local Development in the Scottish Borders

| Overview and history

Describe your context and the work that your organisation/partnership does.

The Scottish Borders Local Action Group covers the Borders Council region and is made up of volunteers from third sector, private businesses and public bodies who want to improve life in the Borders.

The LAG receives funding from Scottish Govt Rural Policy team to spend on locally identified priorities. The LAG usually chooses to spend the money received on funding a Youth-LAG and running a grant scheme for local groups to apply for.

The grant scheme in FY 2023-24 decided to give out grants of max £20k to groups with projects relating to Net Zero, Social Inclusion or Poverty Alleviation. A similar smaller grant scheme is run by the Youth LAG who give out grants directly to help young people.



Do use the language of ‘Human Learning Systems’ to describe your approach? If not, what other language do you use?

For the first two programmes RCTC and CLLD 2022-23 we used HLS language throughout and made applicants aware this was an HLS focused programme.. However feedback from applicants, esp those seldom heard in society, was that making HLS and it’s language centre stage was disempowering and provided another hurdle for the most challenged.

As a result, whilst we still mention to applicants HLS and provide links to the site, it’s now a much more low key “if you’re interested”. We have found the people and organisations we work with generally support HLS aims but don’t necessarily want to engage that much.

Programme finishes in March 2024, so only limited feedback on this so far, but initial feedback seems to indicate applicant preference for the newest approach.

Internally staff/LAG members use HLS to describe approach. Amongst the staff team HLS language is used without challenge; though the concept took a while to be appreciated.

| HLS Approach

| Human

What is ‘Human’ about how you work ?

The Borders LAG and staff are dedicated to improving lives of fellow Borderers; the challenge has always been identifying how this is best done. The LAG chooses to tackle this challenge not by deciding what needs to be done but by offering local residents (and anyone working in the Borders) an opportunity to put forward their ideas for priorities and then later to request funding to carry out their self-identified priorities. For the main grant scheme, applications must support and benefit communities rather than just an individual. For the Youth grant scheme young people can either apply for their own personal needs or for youth needs generally.

The LAG is open to all and actively encourages membership from seldom heard from or under-represented groups. We ask all applicants for their feedback and experience at all stages of the process and where practical co-design the process with potential users.



| Learning

How have you enacted Learning as a management strategy ?

Our journey started with the LEADER EU programme; whilst the funding helped the Borders, everyone consulted (applicants, staff, decision makers & the general public) all agreed the system was hugely challenging and way too bureaucratic. The demand for evidence and meeting oftentimes irrelevant targets hindered understanding the impact of the funding. It disadvantaged those most in need and gave funding to those with the most resources.

We set out in FY 2020-21 to create a new system that was easy to apply for and directed funds to meet local needs; we've had good success and continue to working towards this goal.

To improve life in the Borders, the LAG and staff need to understand the current and future needs of 100,000+ people scattered across 1800+ square miles, their needs as community members as well as individuals, each community's needs, their ability and capacity to work together and undertake projects, their dreams and aspirations, how individual community organisations work and how they inter-relate to each other, UK and Scottish Govt priorities and funding and potential opportunities for the Borders. This isn't close to a full list but gives a hint at the complexity faced.

We have so much to learn, that Learning is centred in our approach. Each year we revise our approach based on the last years learning and try new ideas to develop CLLD further and enhance life for Borderers. We try and involve everyone in the layers of learning we develop; from community members, through local applicant organisations, staff and LAG members, to senior management in local public organisations and national Government.

Across the various horizontal and vertical levels of learning we've had mixed success. Most success at a Tactical level with strong horizontal learning, development and co-operation. At the Strategic level there's been positive engagement with Govt though not as much as hoped. The greatest challenge in disseminating learning has been at the Operational level with little engagement at a public sector senior management level.

| Systems

What is the 'system' that you have worked with/brought together?

The system of interest's purpose is to improve life for local Borders residents by distributing Scottish Government funding in the most impactful and user-friendly way possible.

The centre of the system is the Local Action Group (LAG) who make decisions on how to spend the funds. The LAG is made up of a changing group of local individuals and organisations who volunteer to be on it. Some organisations like the local Third Sector Interface and the Council have been members for 20+ years (though individual representatives change). Other organisations or individuals choose to stay for only 1 funding cycle (FY).



Recruitment to the LAG is always open and the LAG seeks to actively recruit people from those under-represented on the LAG. At the moment (Feb 2024) the LAG consists of 1 Individual, 5 third sector organisations, 1 private sector and 3 public sector organisations.

However, the full system encompasses those that live in and care about the Borders and want to improve life here. Realistically apart from social media or other engagement, this is centred around LAG members and staff and their networks of connections.

| Governance/Accountability

How is this work being governed? How have your governance or accountability processes changed to work in a Human Learning Systems way?

There is a dual system of governance in place. The LAG has responsibility for using the Govt funding responsibly and making decisions on how to use it. The Council as Accountable Body has the legal duty to ensure the funds are administered to meet statutory duties whilst implementing the LAG's decisions.

I Story of Change

How did you go about adopting an HLS approach ? What was the spark for change ?

Our journey started with the LEADER EU programme; whilst the funding helped the Borders, everyone consulted (applicants, staff, decision makers & the general public) all agreed the system was hugely challenging and way too bureaucratic. The demand for evidence and meeting oftentimes irrelevant targets hindered understanding the impact of the funding. It disadvantaged those most in need and gave funding to those with the most resources.

We set out in FY 2020-21 to create a new approach that better distributed Govt funding. A system that was easy to apply for and directed funds to meet local needs; we're still working towards this.

Initially this wasn't linked to HLS but Gary White, who had recently become LAG Chair, introduced the HLS concept to LAG members and staff. He convinced those involved to try an HLS based approach which led to the first year of experimentation (RCTC scheme). Whilst Gary left the LAG after 18months, the HLS approach has continued.

The process was hugely aided by Karen McNeil, then of Health Improvement Scotland and her introduction to Toby Lowe and CPI.



| Barriers and Tensions

What difficulties did you encounter? How did you respond to them?

Process Cheese -any new idea faces resistance to implementation. As a relatively new concept HLS was not instantly accepted by some, particularly those in more senior management positions used to a more target driven approach. However due to the nature of the funding, an initial experiment went ahead and its success has allowed the experiments to continue and grow.

Fear of Failure –“This is not a failure, it’s a learning point” was a mantra repeated frequently especially during the early days of year 1 of the experiment. Staff and groups were used to a grant experience of “You must be 100% successful in delivery”. It took LAG staff months to be able to accept that when something went wrong, that wasn’t a problem/a failure. We learn, we resolve, we adapt and move on took a while to embed as a way of working. Funded organisations also initially had a lot of suspicion based on past grant experience that we were waiting to leap on their mistakes. Once everyone began to see this as a genuine attempt at learning and project delivery partnership, we were able to move forward.

Plans are great till they meet reality -Some part of everything we tried and did hasn’t worked at all, hasn’t worked slightly or has worked in some unexpected way or had an unanticipated impact. As a result we’ve learned a lot and made multiple revisions to what we do. Things are closer to our goals but we expect much more learning, growth and adaption to come.

| Enablers

What were the factors/conditions which enabled you to adopt an HLS approach?

People:

- LAG Chair Gary White (original instigator)
- Health Improvement Scotland (esp Karen and Des)
- CPI esp Toby Lowe
- Celtic Connections HLS Grant group

| TopTips

What are your ‘top tips’ that you think others might find interesting?

Keep going, there are ways, they’re just not obvious yet...



I Your important artefacts

What 'artefacts' have you created that help you to work in this way?

- A job description for a manager/leader who is acting as a Systems Steward
- A job description and person specification for recruiting public facing workers who work in a relational, flexible way with the people they are helping
- Tender documents/Request for Proposals for funding/commissioning for learning
- An example of a report to a commissioner or funder based on accountability for learning rather than targets
- Strategy documents for areas of practice which are working in a Human Learning Systems way
- A 'business case' for resources to work in a Human Learning Systems way
- Terms of reference and processes for governance/accountability mechanisms which govern learning processes

A lot of documents but not sure what would be most relevant. We have three years of different grant documents and guidance -RCTC 2021-22, CLLD 2022-23 with CLLD 2023-24 just completing. These include HIS Case Study, Legacy docs, Presentations, Webinar notes/scripts etc.

I What have you achieved ?

What has adopting and HLS approach enabled you to do?

Judging by ongoing feedback process, HLS has led us to create an easier to use grant process that has led to enhanced impacts and outcomes for people in the Borders.

It has allowed us to get a better understanding of the complexity of individual and organisational needs in the Borders and to look for solutions to these challenges.

Cut delivery/administration costs whilst maintaining audit/statutory requirements and giving applicants/service users a better experience.

None of the above are completed works, they're still in progress.

I What next?

What is the next challenge for this work ?

The grant is an annual grant given by Scot Govt to distribute. Each year we try different approaches and experiments, we will continue to develop ways to encourage, facilitate and support community development and projects that enhance the Borders and life here. Each year brings new needs and new challenges to be met with each individual and organisation we deal with.

