

Embedding Human Learning Systems in the Whole System Approach to Healthy Weight

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Context and Approach:

Systems thinking and specifically Human Learning Systems(HLS) is a new approach to the shared premise that the purpose of public service is to enable the creation of outcomes for the public good

One approach I have been experimenting with involves gathering stories from the population we serve using a systems-thinking methodology called Appreciative Enquiry (AE). By making sense of these stories and recognising patterns within them, we have gained insights into the real drivers of unhealthy lifestyles in our community. Through story-gathering and shared sensemaking activities, we have managed to influence areas beyond our immediate system.

I am spreading the use of story-gathering through as many parts of the NHS as possible. Using what we learn to redesign services and change the relationship between the NHS and those they serve.

Planned Activity:

Research Question: How can story gathering and sharing be used within public services to influence the delivery of services closer to communities?

Research Outputs: I intend to publish a paper outlining the learning from our experiences at CTM. To produce a case study for the HLS website and research community. I would also like to put together an application for a Health and Social Research Fellowship which I would hope would follow on from the end of this fellowship.

Leadership: Collaborate with thought leaders around systems thinking including: Toby Lowe, Gary Wallace, Cormac Russell, Adam Lent, Matt Bell, Simon Sherbersky , John Seddon, Noel Hatch, Beth Underwood

Education/teaching: Continue to participate in Healthy Housing Alliance, Further Together Partnership, 3 communities work, WSA to HW regional work. Design and deliver a ‘Systems Thinking Week’ in CTM.



Progress to date:

Invited by three teams to teach them about HLS and AE

Systems Thinking Week jointly delivered with Beth Underwood took place in January 2025

Feedback was extremely positive and a huge increase in confidence to apply systems thinking tools was measured in the pre-post survey of attendees.

Reflective practice – embedded across the Healthy Weight team at CTM

A sense-making session was held in Treherbert, Rhondda using the results of 77 appreciative enquiries (stories gathered from the local population). Over 30 organisations attended and the system was made visible, with a strong sense of commitment to take a systems approach to supporting the local community to build on the strengths of their community.

Reflections:

- I am working very closely with Beth Underwood and Paul Gimson from CTM. I am looking for opportunities to work with Dee Lowry
- Regular opportunities to reflect on what has worked well and what has not has become a good discipline, encouraged by my mentor. I have also encouraged my own team to ensure they prioritise time for reflection. We are often so busy doing the day job we don't stop to think about whether what we are doing is the right thing for the population we serve.





"In Housing, we sometimes forget that we operate in a bigger system, and it was inspiring to be introduced to new methods which have enhanced our ability to build relationships with our tenants. We are seeing these discussions come to fruition through deeper conversations and the green shoots of success are starting to rise, leading to increased co-production with whole communities. The workshops have been integral to this success, and we are starting to roll this practice out in other communities across Merthyr. I would highly recommend this event to others - If you get the opportunity to work alongside Claire and her team...take it."

Ross Williams Merthyr Valley Homes

5Ds	Purpose
Definition	Define the focus of the inquiry and the projects purpose.
Discovery Questions	Inquire into people's best experiences about the chosen topic
Dream Question	Describe a positive image of the future, encouraging creative thinking.
Design	Develop options for realising the dream vision, or parts of it; generating ideas for possible action.
Delivery	Taking actions from the design stage, implementing changes and learning from experiences of implementation.



'We are absolutely delighted to celebrate the wonderful partnership we've developed with Grow Rhondda. Working alongside such a passionate and community-focused organisation has brought so many enriching experiences to our nursery, particularly for our two-year-olds.'

Edible Playgrounds



From the appreciative enquiry conversations in 2024, the community development officers discovered that tenants were finding it difficult to walk to the nearby high street due to how the area felt, with litter making them feel unsafe. The team also learned that many tenants struggled to access good-quality food in this area. Karl, a Community Development Officer at Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association, supported the tenants in carrying out litter picks around their site and also found a tenant in Dowlais who was a keen gardener. Karl linked in with the Community Development Team, who sourced support from Keep Wales Tidy. They provided funding and guidance to support the tenants and staff in creating a space to grow fruit and vegetables.

Dowlais Stables Community Garden Project