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of Probation

# Human Learning Systems and Probation Services: Making desistance real

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# Contents

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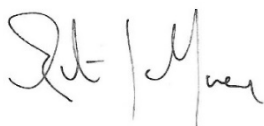
Foreword .....	3
1. Introduction.....	4
2. Applying Human Learning Systems in probation.....	5
2.1 The failings of New Public Management.....	5
2.2 Human Learning Systems .....	7
2.3 The complexity of probation .....	10
2.4 Exploring Human Learning Systems in probation.....	12
3. Conclusion.....	16
References.....	17

## Foreword

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HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Toby Lowe, Kevin Wong and Chris Fox, highlighting the benefits of Human Learning Systems (HLS) as an alternative paradigm for public management and its applicability to the delivery of probation services. Compared to New Public Management, which is the current dominant approach, HLS enables services to respond to the complexity of people's lives and the contexts they operate within. Notably, probation exemplifies the complex conditions recognised by HLS, encompassing compositional, dynamic, experiential, and governance complexity. Furthermore, the application of desistance theory in probation practice supports approaches which are personalised and relational, aligning with the HLS emphasis on bespoke public service provision, built on human relationships that are flexible, responsive, and grounded in care. To implement the HLS principles, attention needs to be given to facilitating supportive and bespoke co-produced approaches, creating continual learning environments, and maximising collaboration and sharing between local and national stakeholders.



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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

# 1. Introduction

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This paper highlights the evidence that the currently dominant approach to public management – New Public Management – is a structural impediment to undertaking effective and efficient public service in general, and probation services in particular. It describes an alternative approach – Human Learning Systems (HLS) – which is a relational approach to public management that enables public service to respond to the complexity of the lives of the people it serves, and the contexts it operates within. As shown, it has an alternative set of foundational beliefs and supporting practices, encompassing the purpose of public service and public management, how desirable outcomes are created in people’s lives, how human/worker motivation is conceived, and how quality is created and demonstrated.

The authors outline the key concepts of an HLS approach, and how it relates to the evidence in the public management of probation services. They use existing evidence to explore the relationship with desistance as a desired (and complex) outcome of probation, and how the lessons of HLS case studies might shape an exploration of alternative approaches to organising, funding and governing probation. Notably, translating desistance theory into probation practice requires a personalised, relational approach which marries perfectly with the HLS emphasis on bespoke public service provision, built on strong human relationships.

## 2. Applying Human Learning Systems in probation

### 2.1 The failings of New Public Management

How public service is managed – how it is organised, funded and governed – is one of the most crucial decisions that leaders of public service take. Currently, almost all public service in the UK is managed under the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm, often known as the ‘3Ms – Markets, Managers and Metrics’ (Ferlie et al., 1996). The NPM paradigm has the foundational beliefs and supporting practices set out in Table 1 (Lowe et al., 2024).

**Table 1: NPS beliefs and practices**

New Public Management	
The purpose of public service and public management	
Beliefs	Practices
<p>The purpose of public service is set by policy makers.</p> <p>The purpose of public management is to enact government policy.</p>	<p><b>Public-facing practice</b></p> <p>It is the job of public-facing workers to enact public policy, as described in their performance targets.</p>
	<p><b>Leadership</b></p> <p>Leadership is hierarchical. It comes with power to, and responsibility for, command.</p> <p>Leaders inspire people to follow a vision and manage resources in alignment with that vision.</p> <p>Leaders are paid more, because of the responsibility they bear.</p>
How desirable outcomes are created in people’s lives	
Beliefs	Practices
<p>Desirable outcomes are complicated to deliver.</p> <p>Outcomes can be delivered for people by teams and organisations who follow best practice, derived from ‘evidence-based policy’.</p>	<p><b>Resource allocation (funding/commissioning)</b></p> <p>It is the role of funders/commissioners to create effective marketplaces for the delivery of desired outcomes, by using evidence to specify desired services, and allocate resources to providers who can deliver the required specifications efficiently.</p>
	<p><b>Learning and evaluation</b></p> <p>The role of learning is to identify ‘best practice’ in any given context.</p>

	<p>Learning is undertaken by specific roles, including business analysts and evaluators.</p> <p>Once best practice is known, it is taught to people, and implemented through a set of protocols which everyone must follow, enforced by a set of performance management controls.</p> <p>Evaluation helps decision makers to test which competing policy/practice solutions (i) work best, and offer (ii) 'best value', under which circumstances.</p> <p>Learning creates generalisable knowledge – which can be implemented in other contexts.</p>
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**How human/worker motivation is conceived**

Beliefs	Practices
<p>People are motivated by their own self-interest.</p> <p>They must be incentivised to work for the public good through a system of reward and punishment, or the 'discipline of the market'.</p>	<p><b>Operational Management</b></p> <p>The purpose of management is control.</p> <p>Managers must identify the appropriate standards which enable the purpose of the work to be enacted. They must enforce those standards through performance management.</p> <p>Pay workers in respect of the performance targets they hit.</p>

**How quality is created and demonstrated**

Beliefs	Practices
<p>Quality service comes from adherence to agreed standards.</p> <p>Improvement happens through performance management control, and competition.</p> <p>Quality is demonstrated by inspecting standards rigorously.</p>	<p><b>Governance and accountability</b></p> <p>Governance focuses on (i) compliance with agreed protocols and (ii) achieving predetermined performance metrics.</p> <p>Accountability mechanisms are ways to capture data and reflect on compliance and performance.</p>

We now have over 30 years of evidence to help us understand whether NPM is an effective approach to the organisation, funding and governance of public service. The evidence is neatly summarised by Christopher Hood, one of the foremost public management scholars in the world:

'NPM... was ostensibly intended to create 'a government that works better and costs less'... So what do we have to show for three decades or so of NPM reforms?

The short answer seems to be: higher costs and more complaints.’ (Hood and Dixon, 2015)

The evidence suggests that NPM fails because it undermines public service’s capacity to respond to the complexity of the lives of the people that it serves, and the contexts in which it operates (Lowe and Wilson, 2015). In essence, NPM fails in complex environments because its intellectual foundations are based in Public Choice Theory, which argues that public servants are intrinsically selfish and must be incentivised in order to extrinsically motivate them to operate for the public good (Buchanan and Tullock, 1964). Unfortunately, the reward and punishment mechanisms required to incentivise people cannot effectively respond to the dynamics of complex environments (Melnyka et al., 2014). Instead, the incentivisation mechanisms of NPM result in:

- failure demand – the absence of effective service and waste of public service resource caused by responding to people’s bespoke needs with standardised service responses (Seddon, 2003; Walley et al., 2019; Morris and Walley, 2022)
- corruption of data – target-driven approaches to management cause gaming of performance data and systematic lying, which undermines public service’s capacity to learn and improve (Franco-Santos and Otley, 2018)

The effects of NPM on probation and youth justice services have been specifically studied. The conclusions are remarkably consistent with the evidence of the effects on NPM on the whole of public service:

‘NPM governance has affected front-line management to the detriment of staff and service quality.’ (Wong et al., 2025)

For example, several commenters argue that the criminal justice system in England and Wales has been substantially reshaped by the logics of New Public Management (NPM), particularly since the 1990s, with performance targets, contractualism and economic rationalism reframing organisational purpose and practitioner behaviour. In their account, NPM does not simply introduce new managerial tools; it restructures the epistemology of the system by privileging measurable outputs over professional judgement, relational work, and longer-term rehabilitative goals (Albertson and Fox, 2019 and 2020; Fox and Marsh, 2016). They emphasise, however, that NPM’s influence is uneven and hybridised, interacting with older bureaucratic traditions and newer risk-based approaches, and is frequently resisted or adapted by frontline staff. Their critique aligns with wider discussions of managerialism’s impact on justice institutions, particularly the tendency for targets to distort practice and narrow conceptions of value (see also Garland 2001).

Therefore, if probation services are to be evidence-informed, the first and most crucial leadership decision is to explore alternatives to New Public Management.

## 2.2 Human Learning Systems

Based either explicitly or implicitly on a rejection of NPM and an embrace of ideas such as complexity and systems-thinking, many think tanks, academics and practitioners have argued that relational public services are the key to reforming public services. Relational public services are a transformative approach to public service design and delivery that centre on human connection, trust, and shared purpose. They reject target-driven models in favour of approaches that recognise the uniqueness and complexity of people’s lives. At their core, these

services are built upon meaningful, open-system relationships (Wilson et al., 2024) between citizens and public servants – relationships that are flexible, responsive, and grounded in care. Rather than delivering pre-defined solutions, relational services are co-produced with individuals, allowing their strengths, aspirations, and evolving needs to shape the support they receive. They extend beyond one-to-one interactions to nurture the social fabric of communities, strengthening the collective capacity of people and places to support one another. This requires devolved power, low caseloads, shared learning, and a cultural shift towards valuing ongoing human interaction as a key mechanism for achieving positive outcomes.

Such ideas are not new. In 2012, Cooke and Muir (IPPR) were arguing for the 'Relational State', in which human relationships would revolutionise the role of the state. In 2018, Hilary Cottam's influential book *Radical Help* described how we can remake relationships to revolutionise the welfare state. Of the various approaches to relational public services that have been advanced, the most developed, and the one that has been most extensively tested in multiple local public service bodies including multiple local authorities and NHS Trusts, is Human Learning Systems. HLS is an alternative approach to public management which has been developed by public management practitioners and academics through an on-going global action research programme (Lowe et al., 2023; French et al., 2023). Its core principles are designed to respond to the complexity of public service (Lowe, 2023):

- **Human:** the moral purpose of public service is to support human freedom and flourishing
- **Learning:** the management strategy is to enable public servants, and those they serve to continuously experiment and learn together
- **Systems:** the unit of analysis for public service are the systems which create outcomes in people's lives.

HLS is an alternative paradigm for public management, in that it has the alternative set of foundational beliefs and supporting practices set out in Table 2 (Lowe et al., 2024).

**Table 2: HLS beliefs and practices**

Human Learning Systems	
The purpose of public service and public management	
Beliefs	Practices
<p>The purpose of public service is to support human freedom and flourishing.</p> <p>The purpose of public management is to organise public service so that it can support human freedom and flourishing.</p>	<p><b>Public-facing practice</b></p> <p>It is the job of public servants to find out what helps people flourish, and learn how to respond to it.</p>
	<p><b>Leadership</b></p> <p>Leadership is distributed. It can be undertaken by any role.</p> <p>The primary responsibility of leaders is to define and create healthy systems. This includes framing the purpose of work.</p>

## How desirable outcomes are created in people's lives

Beliefs	Practices
<p>Desirable outcomes are emergent properties of complex systems.</p> <p>They are created by residents and workers experimenting together, under the unique conditions in each person/family/community's life, creating 'practice-based evidence'.</p>	<p><b>Resource allocation (funding/commissioning)</b></p> <p>It is the role of funders/commissioners to create effective collaborative learning systems.</p> <p>They allocate resources to people/organisations who will experiment collaboratively, to foster human freedom and flourishing.</p>
	<p><b>Learning and evaluation</b></p> <p>The role of learning is to support continuous improvement.</p> <p>Learning requires: (i) making sense of existing knowledge about a system of interest, from diverse perspectives; and (ii) experimenting to see how that system changes in response to action.</p> <p>Learning is everyone's job, every day.</p> <p>Evaluation supports the continuous learning and improvement of all actors in a system, including '<a href="#">double-loop learning</a>' – learning about learning.</p> <p>Learning creates portable knowledge and skills – which can be further explored in other contexts.</p>

## How human/worker motivation is conceived

Beliefs	Practices
<p>People work to have autonomy, do what is meaningful to them, and be part of a shared purpose.</p> <p>People work to achieve the public good if given the opportunity to do so.</p>	<p><b>Operational Management</b></p> <p>The purpose of management is to create 'healthy systems' (sets of collaborative learning relationships).</p> <p>Pay workers enough to take money off the table as a key concern.</p>

## How quality is created and demonstrated

Beliefs	Practices
<p>Quality service comes from continuous experimentation and learning in context.</p>	<p><b>Governance and accountability</b></p> <p>Governance focuses on the health of systems: (i) are they effective learning environments?; (ii) are the boundaries of the systems drawn appropriately?; (iii) are</p>

<p>Improvement happens through continuous collaborative experimentation/exploration.</p> <p>Quality is demonstrated by multi-stakeholder dialogue.</p>	<p>all relevant actors able to participate in systems appropriately?</p> <p>Accountability mechanisms are ways to render accounts in respect of these questions, and make sense of these accounts.</p> <p>Governance and accountability mechanisms are themselves subjects of continuous experimentation.</p>
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The principles and practices of HLS have been created by the action research undertaken by over 70 public service organisations around the world, which have produced over 80 [case studies](#). From this action research, the following effects of working in an HLS way have been observed (Lowe and Hesselgreaves, 2024):

- improved human flourishing (outcomes for those using public service)
- reduced costs
- more effective response to complexity
- radical systems change.

We would therefore contend that HLS represents a plausible candidate for exploring alternatives to NPM in probation.

### 2.3 The complexity of probation

We need to address the question of why probation is a potentially appropriate area of public service in which to experiment with HLS. The answer to this question lies in the *complexity* of probation. As described above, HLS was created as a response to the failure of NPM to effectively manage public service in situations of complexity. Because public service now focusses on the *outcomes* it helps to create (Heinrich, 2002; Lowe, 2013; Cook, 2017; Borgonovi et al., 2018), we can focus our understanding of complexity in respect of how outcomes are created. In public service terms, there are four relevant domains of complexity which underpin the Complexity-Theory of Outcome Creation (French et al., 2023):

- **compositional complexity:** outcomes arise from the interdependent action of a multiplicity of causal factors
- **dynamic complexity:** the systems which create outcomes are in constant flux
- **experiential complexity:** each person experiences an outcome differently, and therefore outcomes (and the way in which they are created) are unique to each person
- **governance complexity:** the systems which create outcomes contain actors and causal drivers which are beyond the governance control of any actor (or combination of actors).

As set out below, probation exemplifies these complex conditions.

**Compositional complexity:** if we frame the desired outcome of probation in terms of desistance from crime, desistance theory helps illustrate that there are many interdependent factors which either support or frustrate this outcome (McNeill, 2009; Phillips, 2017). Recent research on desistance theory consolidates earlier insights about ageing, agency and social bonds, while pushing towards more relational and structural sophistication – trends that emphasise the compatibility of desistance thinking with relational public services. For example, Weaver (2019) emphasises desistance as a non-linear, contingent process involving interaction between changing identities, social relations and institutional contexts, rather than a simple

'event' of stopping offending. Building on the distinction between act-, identity- and relational/tertiary desistance, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) have highlighted both the 'pains of desistance' – stigma, precarity, and strained relationships – and the centrality of recognition and belonging in enabling durable crime cessation (McNeill and Schinkel, 2024). Narrative and lived-experience studies show how people leaving prison craft and revise 'desistance stories' that oscillate between tragedy, irony, romance and comedy, underscoring the fragility and reversibility of change (Villman, 2024).

Overall, the latest thinking frames desistance as a multi-level, relational and often structurally constrained process, requiring attention not only to individual motivation and change, but also to punishment, welfare, housing, labour markets and community institutions that shape whether attempts to 'go straight' can realistically be sustained.

**Dynamic Complexity:** the systems which support desistance in people's lives are constantly changing. At a personal scale, the social relationships and forces which either support or frustrate desistance are constantly changing (Villman, 2024). At an organisational scale, the way in which the probation service is organised is constantly changing, in ways which significantly impact on the ability of probation to provide an effective desistance response (Baines et al., 2022).

**Experiential complexity:** desistance theory emphasises that desistance from crime is a unique and personalised experience for each person who undertakes this journey (Maruna and Mann, 2019). The meaning of desistance will be different for each person (for example, for some it means totally abstaining from criminal behaviour and building a new life; for others, it means significantly reducing their criminal activity – in either frequency, gravity or both). Furthermore, the precise combination of factors which contribute to desistance will be different in each person's life. For example, for some people desistance requires strong family ties, while for others, it will require a complete disconnection from family.

**Governance complexity:** the actors who contribute to a person desisting from crime are beyond the governance control of any organisation or combination of organisations. These range from a person's family and friendship relationships, through to their relationships with a variety of public service organisations – including benefits agencies, Local Authorities, and health services, as well as the probation system. It is impossible to 'govern' the behaviour of all of these actors so that they are all making positive contributions to a person's desistance. McNeill (2009: 28) argues that desistance thinking suggests that, when it comes to rehabilitation, 'one-size-fits-all processes and interventions will not work'.

In summary, the complexity of achieving desistance as a desired outcome and the continuing search for effective management systems to 'operationalise' desistance thinking indicates that probation would be a suitable context in which to explore an HLS approach, given its track record of supporting better outcomes in complex environments.

We will now use existing evidence to explore what an HLS approach to probation might look like.

## 2.4 Exploring Human Learning Systems in probation

### Human

What would a 'Human' approach to probation entail – one in which the moral purpose was to create human freedom and flourishing? The *desistance* framing is useful here, because it enables a focus on positive outcomes for both the person who has previously exhibited offending behaviour, and society at large. Desistance implies personalised approaches are required where tailored life plans, that recognise an offender's assets as well as their criminogenic risk factors, are central (McNeill, 2009). This requires new approaches to assessment and sentence planning, new training for staff, and rethinking the language of practice (McNeill et al., 2012).

Translating desistance theory into probation practice requires a personalised, relational approach (Baines et al., 2022) which marries perfectly with the HLS emphasis on bespoke public service provision, built on strong human relationships (Lowe et al., 2024). We can see this kind of relational, strengths-based approach to probation exemplified in the 'My Direction' pilot (Baines et al., 2022) and explored by Fox et al. (2014) in their work on *Personalisation in the criminal justice system*.

Probably the most challenging shift is around a different approach to risk, an area that was explored by Baines et al. (2022) in their pilot of a more co-created and strengths-based approach to designing probation supervision. As they note, a particular challenge in their pilot was how to manage risk. Practitioners in their pilot sometimes struggled with the need to strike a balance between promoting goods while managing risk (see also Kemshall, 2021). The issue was further recognised by Ward et al. in their discussion of a 'Good Lives' approach to rehabilitation:

'Simply seeking to the increase of the well-being of an offender without regard for his level of risk may result in a happy but dangerous individual. Alternatively, attempting to manage an offender's risk without concern for goods promotion or well-being could lead to rather punitive practices and a disengaged and hostile client.' (Ward et al., 2007: 92-3)

In a parallel project to the pilot run by Baines et al. and working with the same organisation, Wong and colleagues sought to develop a different risk management model more attuned to a strengths-based approach. The *Enablers of Change* (EoC) model was a needs and risk management approach that tried to move probation beyond a narrow, deficit-focused 'risk of reoffending' lens by integrating aspects of Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR), the Good Lives Model and desistance principles into a single assessment and sentence-planning tool. In practice, EoC structured assessment around risks, needs, strengths and protective factors, linking these to stages of desistance and human/social capital, and used a co-produced interview process so that supervisees actively shaped the analysis of risk and the resulting plan, rather than having their risk scored numerically, behind closed doors.

Formative evaluation showed that this approach could still support robust risk assessment while changing the tone of supervision – generating richer information about offending and risk, encouraging greater honesty, and supporting more individualised, strengths-based risk management and planning (Wong and Horan, 2019; Horan, Wong and Szifris, 2019). Wong and Horan (2021a and b) have subsequently generalised this argument, suggesting that tools like EoC show how needs assessment and sentence planning can transcend a narrow public protection function and become the main mechanism for engaging people with convictions in

managing their own risks and change process. Other researchers have also developed approaches to managing risk in the criminal justice system based on strengths, agency, desistance theory and positive psychology; for example, the COMPASS (COMpassionate Positive Applied Strengths-based Solutions) model (Durkin, 2025).

These developments and others (such as the development and implementation in the UK of AssetPlus and the ARMS Active Risk Management System) have (since 2022) informed the development and testing by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) of ARNS, a needs and risk assessment system incorporating strengths and protective factors (Wong, Phillips and Roberts, 2025). However, it should be noted that the evidence review commissioned by HMPPS to support the development of ARNS identified that securing the intended benefits of ARNS (such as more transparent and collaborative assessment; improved efficiency and quality of assessment; improved practitioner satisfaction) required sufficient investment in appropriate training, supportive supervision, and a recognition that embedding a new complex system into an already complex system under duress is likely to induce practitioner responses ranging from enthusiasm to weary dismay – all of which need careful management.

The personalised, relational approach demanded by desistance theory has been difficult to implement under an NPM paradigm, precisely because it is 'not readily translated into straightforward prescriptions for practice' (McNeill and Weaver, 2010) and therefore it makes it challenging for managers to control/guide workers into effective desistance practice. However, this problem does not arise under an HLS approach where the role of public workers is framed so that they are responsible for forming effective human relationships with those they work with, precisely because they are required to explore what works to achieve desistance in the unique context of that person's life. In HLS, public service is not something which is delivered to a person (via a set of standardised protocols); every act of public service is an act of co-produced action research through which the worker and the service recipient explore together how to achieve their desired purpose (in this case, desistance).

## **Learning**

On the basis that every act of public service is an act of action research, HLS adopts a 'Learning as Management Strategy' approach. This means that the purpose of management changes from seeking to control worker behaviour, to creating the conditions in which workers and those they are working with can experiment and learn effectively together. Existing research evidence once more helps us to identify what this approach can look like in a probation context. Wong et al. (2025) identified four areas of management practice which are effective at supporting improvement in probation services, and each of these has a strong learning component:

- clinical supervision – in the context of service user experience of trauma affecting frontline practitioners, staff need space to consider the impact of this, in order for their practice to become 'trauma informed' and support their wellbeing
- reflective practice – in the context of staff developing 'professional curiosity' and experience, dedicated time to reflect on case management enables these skills to be developed. It should be noted that implementation of the HMPPS SEEDS2 (Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision) training programme supporting the development of reflective practice and relational practice has been hampered by systemic issues: high caseloads, time constraints, and competing organisational demands, with tensions between 'SEEDS2's relational ethos and the bureaucratic, performance-driven structure of probation work' (Phillips et al., 2025:2)

- senior practitioner – in the context of a gap in workforce practice wisdom, a senior practitioner role provides access to experience and support for less inexperienced practitioners
- self-managing teams – in the context of over-extended frontline management, practitioners self-organise in teams to share case management responsibility and support each other to cope with large caseloads.

Once more, learning practices are undermined by the control-based mechanisms of NPM. In particular, Wong et al. (2025) identified that 'conflict between reflective practice and management oversight is clear' (see also Ball, Moore and Buckley, 2024). Under an HLS approach, not only is there no conflict between reflective practice and management practice, creating the conditions for reflective practice is instead demanded of managers. Further examples of 'Learning as Management Strategy' that probation can draw on from the HLS case studies include:

- Organising team meetings as sense-making environments ([Changing Futures Northumbria](#), [North Edinburgh Support Services](#), [Wellbeing Teams](#)) – in which team members debrief on the experiments/explorations that they have co-created with those they are working with, and seek to make sense of the data that those experiments/explorations are creating.
- Organising directorate/organisation scale meetings as sense-making environments ([Changing Futures Northumbria](#), [Sobell House Hospice](#), [Vinarice Prison](#))
- Changing the relationship between national and local actors ([Finnish National Agency for Education](#)) – so that the role of national scale actors is to support local experimentation with effective practice.

## Systems

Treating systems as the unit of analysis is challenging for public services to enact effectively, because to be effective, this systems thinking needs to be enacted across multiple system scales (Lowe et al., 2021). Similarly to the levels within the social-ecological framework (Kemshall and McCartan, 2022), it starts with framing a 'system' as the set of relationships which create/frustrate the desired outcome, which are unique to the person themselves, and moving 'up' system scales (see Figure 1) to:

- the teams that support the person
- the organisations which are made up of teams
- the places that are made up of organisations
- the countries that are made up of places.

At each of these system scales, the question to be asked is: "are they 'healthy'?" (Lowe et al., 2021). In other words, do the relationships between the actors enable the continuous, collaborative learning and adaptation by which positive outcomes are created?

**Figure 1: System scales which create outcomes**



Learning from HLS case studies indicates the following may be important for creating 'healthy systems' in the probation landscape:

- **Funding for learning** ([Plymouth Alliance](#), [Swedish International Development Agency/Climate KIC](#)) – collaborative learning is enabled by actors in a system being explicitly funded to learn together. In other words, the basis of funding agreements for organisations is that they learn and adapt collaboratively, rather than being funded to deliver prescribed programmes, or to deliver pre-defined 'results' data.
- **Governing for learning** ([Plymouth Alliance](#), [Finnish National Agency for Education](#)) – changing the focus of governance and accountability so that the core governance questions that actors in a system ask one another are (forms of): "What have you learnt? How have you learnt it? How has your practice changed on the basis of what you have learnt?" These governance questions apply in all governance contexts: from staff performance management and appraisal, through to contract management and programme scrutiny. It is also crucial that these questions *replace* existing governance and accountability questions, rather than *supplement* them. Unless existing governance mechanisms are replaced, the corruption of data and defensive practices that they encourage will undermine new ways of working.

Experimenting with how probation services are funded and governed is a significant challenge, but one which is perfectly possible, given the appropriate will to improve outcomes, and attention to the evidence on reduced costs. This type of experimentation is being undertaken in other sectors across local and national scales in the UK and beyond.

### 3. Conclusion

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The evidence on the negative effects of NPM, including its failure to account for complex lives and conditions, suggests that probation would benefit from exploring alternative public management approaches which enable it to respond more effectively to the desistance outcomes it seeks. HLS, with its emphasis on bespoke, personalised public service, enabled by Learning as a Management Strategy applied at all system scales, seems to provide an excellent context in which to make desistance theory a reality in the probation service. Experiments in recent years with approaches that involve co-creation and are more strengths-based have shown some promise, although the evidence base is still limited.

There are already some projects, programmes and initiatives in the probation sector in England and Wales that embody aspects of relational practice. For example, in addition to ARNS and SEEDS2 (see above), HMPPS has been running a project to define strengths-based practice and to make it more central in commissioned services (Best and Bridgland, 2025). Furthermore, aspects of relational practice can be seen in Women's Centres (Pemberton, Holdsworth and Mackenzie, 2024) and in Approved Premises (Wakeling, Fitzalan Howard and Barnett, 2026), in restorative justice (Marder, 2020) and trauma-informed (Petrillo and Bradley, 2022) approaches, and in the Enhanced Case Management (ECM) for children and young people as adapted for adult probation. Moving forward, HLS, as a fully-developed model, has the potential to accelerate the adoption of approaches that are relational, strengths-based and that operationalise important aspects of desistance theory.

An approach based on HLS would require collaboration between local and national actors to experiment with personalised, strengths-based practice in probation work, supported by team and senior leaders trained in pattern spotting and creating effective learning environments, and matched by experiments with funding and governing the work on the basis of collaborative learning.

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