BUILDING TRUST
FOR FAIRER HEALTH

Everyone is Different But The Heart Is The Same

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HCT

WE CAN'T FACE COMPLEX CHALLENGES ALONE

Health inequality. Climate change. Food insecurity. None can be solved in isolation, they need collective action.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE WORK

Deep connection is how change begins.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS SPARK HONEST CONVERSATIONS

Honest conversations unlock shared insight.

SHARED INSIGHT LEADS TO SMARTER IDEAS AND COURAGEOUS ACTION

That's how we co-create lasting change.

WHAT IS HCT GLOUCESTERSHIRE?

Healthy Communities Together (HCT) Gloucestershire is a group of people from across Health, Local Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) who came together around a shared belief in the need for a different way to tackle fairer health. Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund in partnership with The King's Fund, the Stewardship Group worked together for four years and discovered that, to solve complex problems like health inequality, we need a fundamentally different way of working together. We created this publication to share what we learnt along the way as a stepping stone for people who recognise these challenges, and are interested in developing better solutions through stronger relationships.

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INTRODUCTION

Our core purpose and the reason we came together as a group is equality in Gloucestershire, or more specifically inequality in health and health outcomes that mean people have disparate experiences, impacts and life chances. We knew that health equity could not be solved by one sector alone, and we had to go on a journey that was both collective and new - something we couldn't yet see happening.

Our guiding light throughout has been "building trust for fairer health" and we have worked deeply over four years on what that could look like in Gloucestershire.

Throughout that time we have seen first hand the extraordinary value of collective working. We have experienced the flow, the exchange of ideas, the building of shared commitment, and can see the possibility of real change.

We recognised that learning was a core part of this work, and so **we are sharing what we've learned as a stepping stone for people who recognise the same challenges and are interested in a different way of working**. It feels important to say that this learning has happened as we have looked back to understand our experience. We did not follow a prescribed path, methodology or toolkit, and this is not presented as one. However, we hope that by sharing it - wherever you find yourself - our learning can fall in step alongside your own curiosity, accompanying you down the paths you are travelling.

For people interested in this journey we are sharing **how we got here, what a more collective way of working could look like, what enables it, and what stands in the way**. We are offering some practices and prompts that have worked for us, our shared hunches about what structures are needed to make this work for the long term, and the questions we are now holding about the future.

We know that inhabiting this way of working will be different for everyone. It's happening in many other places - we've been inspired by those we know about, some of which are referenced here, and of course there are countless others for whom this has always been a part of their community's practice.

We know that everyone's journey is different, that there is no failsafe process, and that our experience is unique to a specific group of people. That's why we're sharing the learning as a kind of 'choose your own adventure', where you can follow your own curiosity and take what you need. Each page has different options for where you might go next depending on where your thinking is right now - feel free to follow or ignore.

So this is not a 'how to' guide, but it might be a 'why to'. It might also be an invitation, a provocation or companion. To borrow one of Myron Rogers' Maxims*: start anywhere, follow everywhere. We hope to see you on the path.

WHY CHANGE? FOUNDATIONS FOR FAIRER HEALTH

HAILES ABBEY

What if there was a different way of tackling fairer health?

We know the current system isn't working for many people. Health outcomes, experiences and life chances are highly dependent on where people live, their income and background. Services face ever greater demand, often coupled with decreasing resources, and a high turnover of staff. Support structures are fraying, people's reserves of energy and money are depleted, and society is experiencing deepening divides.

Most people accept that the wider determinants of health and health equity can't be achieved by one sector alone - they require collaboration across sectors, and this requires trust. But current conditions mean there is an increasing sense of competition for resources, and even more siloed working across all sectors. So what next?

Part of that answer is **a process for visioning the future in a new way**. A community for thinking, relating, and turning up differently that leads to **better ideas, better solutions, and better ways of building things together**. A space for people from all parts of the system to understand and appreciate each other's sectors - our different opportunities and challenges - and to be midwives for a future that combines everyone's insights and wisdom.

At HCT Gloucestershire we have learned that relationships are the work, and that creating spaces and practices to nurture them can have a profound effect across the wider system. These spaces are built on trust, respect and openness. They enable people to learn and put into

practice the skills needed for the sometimes challenging conversations that will help us create that future together: skills like getting comfortable with discomfort, listening rather than rushing to action, and holding space for divergent views.

This is important because we need to have respectful but robust conversations about difference, equality, possibility, resources. We need to talk about what ideas and ways of working we need to let go of, and how to improve the ones we take forward. We must be able to share the big questions we are holding, and the fear, as well as the hope, that all this uncertainty works in us.

Without a good relational foundation for our work, power structures will fill that void and perpetuate inequity and injustice, even when fuelled by goodwill. To push back against those forces, and instead meet the challenges of the present moment with collective vision, solutions, and will, we need to pool our learning about creating those foundations. We hope by sharing our hard-won learning and applied practice we can add another drop to that pool, and be part of a wave of change towards fairer health.

Interested in what steps to the future might look like?

Interested in our journey?

STEPPING STONES TO THE FUTURE

The experience of being in the world right now often feels like a fast flowing river that could sweep you away at any moment. The river is deep, murky, powerful, complex. There is little to hold on to that feels familiar.

How can we possibly find our footing, and create a path towards a more equitable future?

Over the past four years of working with this question, we've learnt about some of the stages this involves. We have a sense of what they feel like, what gets in the way of moving forwards, and what skills, tools or practices might help us shift into a different way of working.

We see them as stepping stones: waypoints that we can build through that river, that give us a place to stand, and to see where we have come from and what we need to do next.

This is not a structure we set out to follow. Rather, like much of our learning, it is something that became visible to us in the 'rear view mirror'. It is not a linear journey - zooming out would reveal a series of loops, criss-crossing each other and showing where we have moved back as often as forwards.

But thinking about the process in this way might help in finding a step that resonates with you. As the Irish idiom has it, they may "give you a place to stand when your feet are sore" - some solid ground where you can recognise your own experience reflected back, or find some useful ideas to take forward with you.

Throughout this publication and on our website we have connected our learning, and our own journey, to these steps. It shows what we were thinking about and doing - and sometimes what we wish we'd known. The steps will look different in each place, but it will always be a long journey, so sharing what we learn could mean fewer people starting from scratch.

HERE'S WHAT IT LOOKED LIKE FOR US:

ROOTS AND READYING – the groundwork and conditions that need to be in place for a different way of working to emerge.

PARTNERSHIP AND PROGRAMME MODE – knowing something else is needed, coming together with a commitment to work differently and getting stuck in old patterns.

SPACES TO CONNECT AND REFLECT – relationships, spaces to connect and learning becoming the work.

SKILLS, STRUCTURES, SUPPORT – developing the skills and support needed to lean into difference, so we can have the challenging conversations that lead to more innovative ideas and actions.

COLLABORATIVE ARCHITECTURE – creating the infrastructure - the governance, fiscal hosting, funding and capacity - for an equitable civil society where communities have power and money to make decisions for themselves.

6, 7, 8...

We imagine that a fully realised vision of a better future might take 10 stepping stones. We have an idea about step 5, but we don't know what the others will be. The whole process is about doing the 'next right thing', while holding this future vision lightly as a north star. We hope that, by sharing our learning, you might be part of building those stepping stones where you are, which will in turn help us build ours.

Interested in how our journey aligned with these steps?

Interested in some practical tools for creating collective spaces?

THE HCT GLOUCESTERSHIRE JOURNEY

Looking back over the past four years, none of us could have predicted where this journey would take us. There are many different stories we could tell about our origins, and how we've got to where we are. This is one of them.

Stepping Stone 1:
Roots and Readying

Healthy Communities Together (HCT) Gloucestershire emerged from years of groundwork by people, communities and organisations across the county.

At Barnwood Trust, early work focused on connection with Gloucestershire County Council on an Asset Based Community Development approach – centred on strengths, not problems. This led to non-agenda-driven spaces like the 2013–18 Stewardship Circles, where people working in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) and statutory sectors explored together open questions like: "How do we create a county where we want to raise children and grow old?"

Meanwhile, relationships between the Local Authority, NHS and VCSE sector were strengthening through social prescribing and shared approaches to prevention and wellbeing, especially through arts, culture and sport. People from different parts of the system were exploring the role of partnership and the negative impact of power differences across sectors, and these conversations helped shape a grant proposal for HCT within Gloucestershire's Integrated Care System Partnership Board (Enabling Active Communities & Individuals).

At the same time, Create Gloucestershire, in partnership with leadership innovation specialists Nowhere, were adapting leadership development work, looking at how to build a culture of collaboration and innovation to support their mission of arts and creativity every day for everyone in Gloucestershire. They noticed that too often leaders 'took up space' rather than 'holding space' for others to shine, and that this model of leadership worked against co-created outcomes. The initial focus was developing the talent of hidden or silent leaders in Gloucestershire and the need for those with influence and power to listen to what enabled and what undermined their path to becoming change makers. To achieve this a 'Sweeper Group' was set up - leaders clearing the path for others - which sparked a broader question: what might this look like across the wider system?

Each partner had their own version of this groundwork. **These outward-facing conversations helped them recognise a shared frustration that, despite lots of investment and effort, health inequalities were not being solved in any meaningful way.** Together this meant we were ready to take the next step…

Stepping Stone 2:
Partnership and Programme Mode

A group of statutory and VCSE leaders – connected through the Enabling Active Communities & Individuals Board – came together around the shared concern of health inequalities in Gloucestershire. A grant from The National Lottery Community Fund gave us space and confidence to explore a different kind of partnership.

Our premise was that we knew partnership was vital to tackling health inequalities and were excited by the potential. But at the time we didn't quite understand the constraints of each sector, and how deeply the current service delivery frameworks were embedded across the system.

Gloucestershire became one of five national HCT sites, and we formed a collective local Stewardship Group with the starting position that business as usual wasn't working to solve health inequalities. Having tested and dismissed other models of what we might be - a board,

MATSON, GLOUCESTER

a leadership group, a steering committee - we settled on Stewardship Group as it sounded most like the type of space we were trying to develop: creating conditions for resources to be used for the common good. We had a hunch that the common cycle – commissioning/ funding → projects → outputs → evaluation — sometimes created individual or local impact, but often in silos, and it wasn't shifting the broader systems behind inequality. This felt important because we were noticing that pre-determined outputs by funders or commissioners were not enabling the space or freedom for co-creation with communities.

We sensed something deeper was needed – something systemic. We shifted from "reducing health inequalities" to "building trust for fairer health" – a strengths-based phrase that centred trust and placed people inside the work, not outside it.

The Stewardship Group contained a range of different starting points and perspectives. As a group we were still in programme mode - logic models, themed work strands, events. Some people were immersed in delivering programmes, others were more familiar with co-created practice. We found this difference in experience was useful to explore with others, so we tested bringing people together using Open Space events that started with a question – for example around cross-sector issues like food poverty – rather than an agenda. These raised some important questions. Who was responsible for taking action? What was our role? Who were we accountable to?

Holding money in the form of our grant from the National Lottery Community Fund created discomfort. We didn't want to replicate the power dynamics that we hoped to change. The funding couldn't be re-granted and, as an informal group, we didn't have the tools for commissioning and contracting.

Elsewhere similar questions about how to distribute funding differently were being asked. For example in Matson, Create Gloucestershire were testing out a Community Chest, seeded with NHS funding – a model in which funding was available to everyone but owned by no-one, and which understood the importance of trust as a pre-condition for shared and equitable decision making over finances.

We met regularly – monthly in person to start with, then weekly online as we got to know each other and realised how much there was to check in about. At first, these gatherings still assumed the work was 'out there'. Gradually, we saw that the real change was happening 'in here' – in trust, relationships and how we were showing up in the group, our day-to-day jobs and beyond.

Stepping Stone 3:
Spaces to Connect and Reflect

As our relationships grew, we started to notice the programme delivery paradigm we were working from, and recognised the need for this vital but unfamiliar relational practice — how we work, what supports it, and what infrastructure might sustain it. We realised the learning *is* the work. We were not representatives from organisations delivering a project, but people in a system working and aligning together.

To test and share these ideas we initially planned an event on leadership, but co-designing it revealed some underlying assumptions - namely that leadership is usually about the top of a hierarchy, and/or expertise as power. This wasn't the right fit for the collaborative approach to change we wanted to explore. **Instead we arrived at a shared interest in togetherness - the structures that enable us to be together and surprise ourselves with what we can co-create.** The result was Structures of Togetherness, an open space event exploring how people were already working relationally. At the time this was radical - rather than a traditional programme launch event we were holding space for a question. It revealed an appetite for change – and that we weren't alone.

It also raised questions. HCT had carved out its own identity within a system —but how could others take part, especially those with less access, power or autonomy?

Stepping Stone 4:
Skills, Structure, Support

The HCT co-laboratory (co-lab) was born out of this desire to create an intentional, 'supercharged' version of what we'd learned. Co-designed through open roundtables and built on the foundations of earlier work from Create Gloucestershire and Nowhere, it asked: what becomes possible when people committed to fairer health learn and grow together across a system and county?

HCT co-lab brought together people from across sectors to build skills, deepen relationships, and develop confidence in system-wide practice in a way that impacts far beyond those individuals. Learning flows in and out – through participants, mentors, speakers and wider networks – and continues to ripple across Gloucestershire.

Stepping Stone 5:
Collaborative Architecture

As this chapter of HCT comes to an end, we're left with more questions than answers. Inequality is growing. Services are stretched. The system around us feels increasingly fragile.

Yet we've seen what's possible when people keep showing up: collaboration rooted in trust and shared purpose is essential for long-term change.

So now we're asking: what kind of architecture can support a healthier civil society? What roles, resources, structures and spaces help people stay connected and keep learning together?

The seeds of this work already exist across Gloucestershire. The more visible and connected they become, the more likely we are to reach a tipping point – or many small ones – towards a new way of working. Not as isolated individuals or organisations, but as a shared system of care and change.

Interested in what getting ready for cross-sector change looks and feels like?

Interested in what questions we have at the end of this journey?

1 GROUNDWORK: GETTING TO "IF NOT THAT, THEN WHAT?"

The lead-in time for cross-sector change is long.

Really long.

Groundwork - or 'ready-ing' as filmmaker, writer and educator Nora Bateson describes it - is about creating fertile soil, possibility and warmth towards ideas and ways of working that make that change possible.
It is happening in pockets all around us, all the time. Some of it is intentional, with an eye on the horizon. Some of it happens as a result of deep, embedded or embodied practices that are an intrinsic part of how people work.

For us, every time we look back over our collective shoulder we can see tendrils stretching further back into the past - the more we learn about where we're trying to get to, the more we can see its origins in our work as individuals, organisations, partners.

It will look different for each person and place, but we think there are some signs it might be useful to look out for: characteristics that suggest you are ready for something else. It can feel lonely, confusing, destabilising. But it can also be hugely exciting - it means there are probably other people who are also ready to do things differently, and this could be your sign to find them.

So what have we learned about what that looks and feels like?
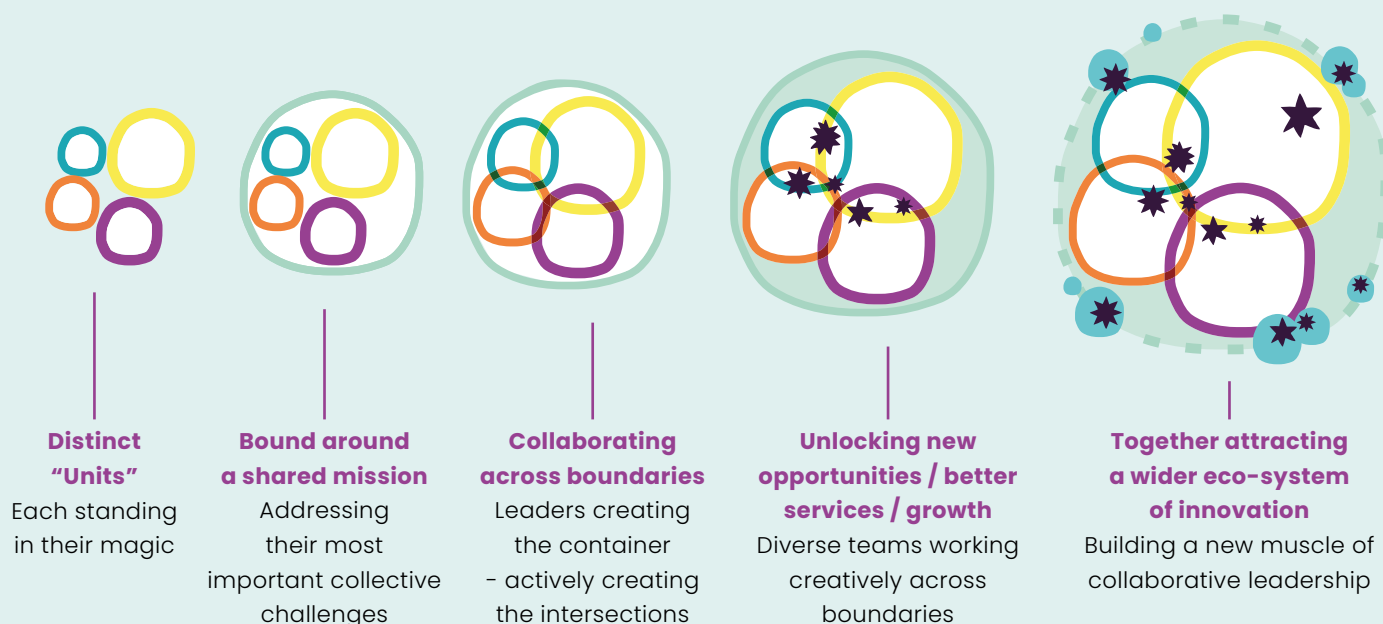
Something has to change

Groundwork often grows from an increasing dissatisfaction with "business as usual". For people working within rigid, hierarchical situations who have invested their time and energy in a way of working that, put simply, isn't working, there might be a gut feeling that something isn't right, while still holding on to the present system because it's known, or safe, or they're just not sure where to start with 'different'.

Others experience friction from the restrictions of roles, organisations or systems that don't allow for different ways of thinking or being. They see the gap between how things are and how they could be, and that - even with the best intentions - we are rarely working to close that gap.

Even the very first step of this - realising that something is broken and has to change - takes time and courage to recognise. We are so caught up in survival mode, as individuals, organisations and societies, that taking time to share these hunches can a) feel like a luxury, and b) make us feel vulnerable, or like we are betraying our work in some way. Acknowledging that we need to let some things go can be painful, particularly when you have had a lot invested in the status quo, and no certain way forwards.

However it means that you can be open to the possibility of something else - we are often so invested in knowing the answers, in proving that our way is right, that **acknowledging that a new or different approach has value can be a quietly radical and revolutionary starting point.**

PRINCIPLES OF THRIVING ECOSYSTEMS*

Distinct "Units"
Each standing in their magic

Bound around a shared mission
Addressing their most important collective challenges

Collaborating across boundaries
Leaders creating the container – actively creating the intersections

Unlocking new opportunities / better services / growth
Diverse teams working creatively across boundaries

Together attracting a wider eco-system of innovation
Building a new muscle of collaborative leadership

We didn't have this language at the time, but having been introduced to Nowhere's 'Principles of Thriving Ecosystems' (see image), it's clear that groundwork happens in that first "Distinct Units" phase. Everyone is siloed, self-contained - but feeling the discomfort of that, and longing for something "not like this".

Groundwork includes people and organisations in those "Units" trying to do things differently, but within their own spheres or sectors. There might be experiments, like Barnwood's Stewardship Circles, that are starting to create a path to the next stage, and building the foundations for collaboration around a shared mission.

Once you realise the importance of this stage, it makes sense to look for ways of nourishing it - preparing the ground for change, rather than trying to create a rigid plan towards a distant and uncontrollable end goal.

Groundwork creates the conditions for a tipping point where you are collectively asking: If not that, then what? Coming together around that question was the origin of HCT Gloucestershire. But how we worked with that question produced some of the stickiest moments, and deepest learning. It involved complexity, both/and rather than either/or thinking, and working with polarities - all of which we learned on the fly.

Interested in why complexity thinking matters?

Interested in how we learned and what frameworks helped?

*adapted from © Principles of Thriving Ecosystems (now-here.com) permission for non-commercial use granted

1 ARE YOU EXPERIENCING THE SYMPTOMS OF COMPLEXITY?

OR: TRYING TO BUILD A ROAD UNDERWATER

Do any of these sound familiar?

Work feels like running a marathon but staying in the same place

You know things need to change, but there's no time or space to practise different ways of thinking

You never seem to have the right tools or roles for the job at hand

You're being asked to deliver specific outcomes, but you know you don't have that type of control over people's lives

Work seems full of unsolvable problems

If those ring true, it's highly likely you're experiencing a case of complexity.

Why is it important to recognise this? So that we can pick the right tools for the job. The story being told around us every day is that change is linear (input - process - output) and attributable. We use projects, programmes, control methods, exception reports, and evaluation. These can be really helpful if you need an output, like a new member of staff or a building, but they do not work in complexity. So if you are trying to create specific outcomes like health, or wealth, or stronger communities, you will most likely keep failing no matter how hard you try.

It's like you've been trying to build a road that will get you to the future, but you're not getting anywhere. At the start you think you just have the wrong tools for the job: plans, permissions, engineers, diggers and way markers. Then you look around and realise you're actually underwater. No wonder your tools weren't working! No wonder you can't build a road. What if you could put your tools down and look closely at the water around you? How would you choose to move forwards? Who and what do you need

alongside you? Once you know you are swimming in the ocean, you can choose a different approach entirely.

So when we are approaching social change in any sphere, be it inequality, injustice, racism, human rights or climate change, it is useful to name this as complexity. Complex problems are different from complicated ones. **There is no direct cause and effect. Instead we need to hold different truths, or 'polarities', alongside each other in equilibrium and navigate between them.**

When we do this, we can start to put both/and thinking into action: the work we've been doing is valuable and necessary AND it needs to change. Once we identify the challenges we are facing as multi-faceted, interwoven, non-attributable, non-biddable, systemic, we can choose the right tools, and stop digging holes that keep filling with water. And if you feel like you're now at sea in an inflatable flamingo don't worry - the tools are reassuringly human.

Interested in what our collective spaces look like?

Interested in convening and learning roles that support those spaces?

2 LEARNING IS THE WORK: FRAMEWORKS THAT HAVE HELPED US LEARN

For HCT Gloucestershire, Stepping Stone 2 was initially characterised by rejection and "not that" language. A desire to rip up the rulebook and reinvent from the ground up. But certainty doesn't rush in to fill the void, and in the absence of answers it is all too easy to fall back into old habits. The Stewardship Group knew that it didn't want to replicate the problem it was trying to solve, but much of our first 18 months looked like slightly different versions of what came before.

Moving forwards requires acceptance that you don't know the answer, and that having an answer might be the wrong way of thinking about the work. A significant moment for us was a shift from a negative framing of what we were doing - "not business as usual, not linear, not a programme" - to a positive frame: learning is the work.

This didn't happen overnight, or on our own. It was the result of a lot of struggling with discomfort, and collaboration, learning and reflection with brilliant people including Hannah Hesselgreaves at Northumbria University, Dawn Plimmer at Collaborate CIC, Myron E. Rogers, and Toby Lindsay who was our embedded learning partner from the Kings Fund. We also learned from Bill Sharpe's 3 Horizons thinking, and Nora Bateson's ideas around warm data. Connecting with the work and ideas of others has given us a way of talking about what we are doing, what matters, and where we might be heading off the path. We have held these lightly, taking what we needed rather than buying into them wholesale. But some have become our touchstones, and we hope by sharing these here you can find something that resonates, and can be a welcome companion on your path.

Myron's Maxims

Somewhere around our transition to Stepping Stone 3 we were introduced to systems change consultant Myron E. Rogers. Myron gently challenged some assumptions we were making: we were planning a gathering around the theme of leadership, but came to realise the interest underpinning it was really about different ways of being together. Since that point Myron's six maxims for the leadership of change have become guiding principles, and ways of reflecting on the dynamics of how we work together across our systems.

Those who do the work do the change - we learnt that HCT wasn't about making the change, it was about being the change. The practice of seeing each other regularly, holding a space for questions and answers, learning and unlearning, discomfort and inquiry, was unusual in system life, and for us to make that change we needed to show up together.

Real change happens in real work - for us this means that building relationships isn't an end in itself - it is the work. It's what we do in our day-to-day, and how it is different as a result of our time together, that matters.

Start anywhere, follow everywhere - it can be easy to get stuck because you want to have everything perfectly planned before you start. Recognising we don't have the answers freed us up to think differently, and follow our curiosity and energy.

The process you use to get to the future is the future you get - the people involved in planning an experience will create it for people who look like them. The way it feels to create something is how the end product will feel. If we want a future built on trusting relationships, then how we get there has to model that future.

People own what they help create - collaboration, co-production, co-creation - these have become our watchwords for how we imagine a different future that everyone has a stake in.

Connect the system to more of itself - from HCT's earliest days gathering has been a fundamental practice, and the thing people value most is always the relationships and connections they come away with.

Three Horizons

Bill Sharpe's Three Horizons framework is a way of thinking about and planning for a vision of the future, and recognising how every system has different phases happening at the same time. We have used it to examine the tensions between different ways of working, to name the difficulty of moving out of 'business as usual', and to notice 'pockets of the future in the present': glimpses of Horizon 3 that give us hope and inspiration.
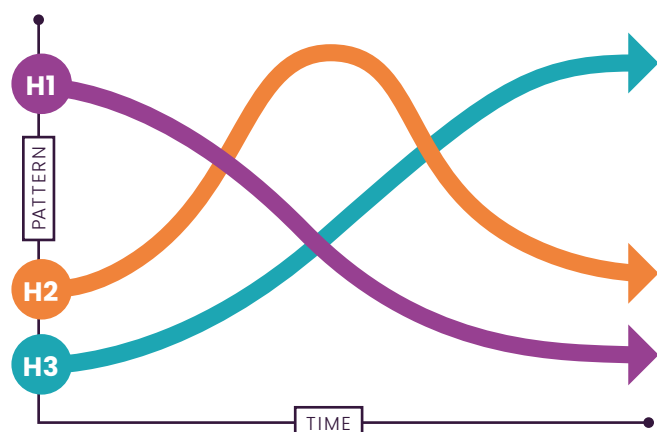
Horizon 1 (H1) represents the current system, or the paradigm of 'business as usual'.
Horizon 2 (H2) represents innovations which, if appropriately developed, can help bring about a different system. Often it shows up as 'glimpses' of the future in the here-and-now.
Horizon 3 (H3) represents the desired future system.

Referring back to Three Horizons helps us focus on learning, discovery, not knowing. It gives us language for recognising the gap between how things are described compared to how they function, or "H1 posing as H3". And it helps us call out behaviours without shaming the person, e.g. 'should' is probably H1, and if you are being prescriptive you are not in H3. Most importantly perhaps it reminds us that all horizons are part of innovation, and that we should recognise what is valuable in H1 and H2 while reaching for H3.

Human Learning Systems

About 18 months in we encountered Human Learning Systems (HLS) through our work with Northumbria University and Collaborate CIC, and it gave us a new framework for thinking about our purpose and process, as well as inspiration from other places that are committed to an HLS approach.

HLS is an approach to public management, I.e. how public service is organised, governed and funded. An alternative to the traditional New Public Management paradigm, HLS is designed to support human flourishing, and to work effectively in complexity. You can find many ways in to learning about HLS on the website **humanlearning.systems**

The lightbulb moment came from the gentle prompt: have you thought about learning *being* the work, rather than working and *then* learning? This principle, which is at the heart of HLS, gave us a positive language to replace the negative lexicon described above, moving from 'counter-cultural' and 'not outputs based' to 'learning as our core strategy'.

While we wouldn't describe ourselves as an HLS programme, in engaging with it we have discovered a different way of thinking about our relationship to the systems - and the humans - around us. It enabled us to value the questions and the process of not knowing instead of always reaching for answers and action. And it helped us recognise that the problems we are grappling with are complex in nature and therefore can't be solved or controlled as a Theory of Change might assume. Instead they need to be approached with both/ and thinking that embraces complexity, and works with opposing dynamics, or 'polarities'. Translating this into practice became a building block of Stepping Stone 3.

You can deep dive into our HLS Case Study at
www.humanlearning.systems/uploads/ HealthyCommunitiesTogetherGloucestershire.pdf

Interested in polarity mapping to help with both/ and thinking?

Interested in what this led to us learning about money?

2 MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

Money is needed, but it's not neutral - it can disrupt and divide. This is the hard truth we run into every time we move from thoughts into action. Making decisions about money has been complicated, confounding and sometimes confrontational. That's why we're spending some time digging down into what that has meant for us, in the hope that it resonates with others, and can open up a wider honest conversation around how we manage this together.

Our partnership was interested to think about systemic changes and the profoundly different relationships, behaviours and collaborations we believe lead towards fairer health. We resisted doing change in a way that felt received: project or programme structures, steering groups, 'prove it' projects or work. The terms of our funding also did not allow onward granting, which was a useful guardrail around the pit of traditional funder/ funded relationships.

But we still fell in some (money) pits.

Every time the allocation of funds came up, amongst ourselves and in the system, we struggled. We wrestled with questions about legitimacy and transparency, from ourselves and from the VCSE sector - who were we to hold these funds when organisations were failing and in dire need of money? We struggled with being an un-constituted organisation and agreeing what our shared accountability and governance should look like. It was hard to sit in the unknowingness of not having the answers, and to focus on relationships, when the world expects familiar solutions, quick fixes and funding.

Relational work to build trust and shared meaning is often invisible and intangible - it can feel like people are 'just' talking and nothing is happening. We were keenly aware of the pressure to be seen to be doing, so our early decisions around money were not always strategic.

At the same time our funder had a stake in the work. This was more flexible territory than their 'norm' but still we felt the pull of 'knowing and showing', and their need for certainty and clarity was hard to reconcile with our emergent sense that if we kept doing the same we would get the same, which wasn't good enough - 'business as usual' led to health inequalities worsening not improving.

Once we realised that learning was the work, it gave us a new language and framework for understanding how money was - and wasn't - working.

We spent more time focusing on the role money was playing - how it was creating disturbance and discomfort, how it was disrupting and making people compete. We realised the starting point for many of these conversations - between us, with voluntary and statutory sectors, with funders - was scarcity. **With scarcity as the overarching story, having and spending money could be a way of enacting power, and reinforcing us/them barriers that worked against trust rather than helping to build it.**

This is hardly surprising. When funded organisations are struggling to keep the lights on, and funders and commissioners are facing increasing need and demand, slowing down to work out what really needs funding in order to make long-term change feels like a luxury. But if we don't think differently about money, the most likely scenario is that we will keep exploiting dwindling resources to prop up a broken system.

GLOUCESTER DOCKS

We wouldn't have got where we are without a learning focus and pain points around money. Working through difficult situations and having learning conversations gave us the confidence to commit to focusing on building relationships instead of projects.

It was through this process that we realised we were learning about the shared governance of funds across a system that usually relies on top-down and tightly controlled commissioning and granting processes. This led us to think about what needed to happen differently, and for partners like Create Gloucestershire to explore Community Chest models. According to Elinor Ostrom's work outlined in her book *Governing The Commons*, shared assets are most effectively managed by the people who benefit from them. Learning from this wisdom, groups like Culture Matson collaborate to share funds in a Community Chest using high trust principles, supported with capacity-building to create their own processes for distributing funding collaboratively not competitively.

So what does all this mean for what next? With all these systemic pressures around money, it can feel impossible to imagine a world of mutually beneficial resource management. Top-down commissioning structures often prioritise administrative efficiency and replicability.

In comparison, alliance models like The Plymouth Alliance have moved from a single lead provider to a group sharing the risk and rewards of a commission, and are more aligned with responsive, community-centred approaches.

But there are pockets of possibility all around, particularly at a community level. There are mutual aid models in Gloucestershire like The Long Table, Makers and Menders and Fair Shares. The gift economy, where the currencies of exchange are gratitude and reciprocity, happens on a neighbourhood level all the time, and is intrinsic to Indigenous and ecological wisdom, as Robin Wall Kimmerer describes in her book *The Serviceberry*.

Here in Gloucestershire, a next step is thinking about what infrastructure is needed for money to flow freely to those who need it, in a way that is high trust and also safe for funders. It needs to understand that money is needed but not neutral, and not to perpetuate 'power over' hierarchies. Again we are back to the 'not that' language. But some organisations are already testing out models for fiscal hosting and Community Chests, using the principle of the Commons, and as we start to build Stepping Stone 5, we are already thinking imaginatively about what that looks like where we live.

3 PRACTISING TOGETHERNESS: SPACES TO CONNECT

GLOUCESTER DOCKS

Once we understood that learning was the work, we were able to look in the rear view mirror and see that we had been expecting the answers to be 'out there' (what do we as a group do about inequalities?), when in fact they were 'in here' (this space has been and is the work, and it has changed how we behave in the world in our own work). To quote another of Myron's Maxims: the people who do the work do the change. HCT wasn't about making the change, it was about being the change. We learnt that the practice of seeing each other regularly, holding a space for questions and answers, learning and unlearning, discomfort and enquiry, was unusual in system life.

It was a gift we were uncertain we deserved, but we had learnt nonetheless that the time commitment was a price worth paying for stronger relational fabric in daily collaborative systems life and work. Why? Simply that **better conversations lead to better thinking, understanding and decisions, which lead to better action and outcomes.**

The systemic learning for health equality is, of course, that not paying attention to humanity is - by definition - dehumanising, and no movement towards social justice will ever take root and thrive from that place. If we can't practise togetherness, how can we hope to change the systems that seek to make the changes?

So how do we practise togetherness? Here's what we've learned:

It's personal - it's about an opportunity to connect as human beings, beyond organisational roles and agendas. It allows people to understand each other's experiences at a deeper level. It can be uncomfortable and vulnerable, and also full of joy, warmth and deep connection. It's also experiential - you can't learn it from a slide, a publication or website. You have to try it for yourself and see what works for you.

Relationships are the work - and this work is undervalued in lots of the systems we're part of, compared to more recognisable projects and outputs. But creating intentional spaces for relationship-building has profound effects on those systems through how we show up in our day-to-day work.

It needs structure - we call this our 'structures of togetherness': an intentional and mindful practice of creating and nurturing non-agenda driven spaces where the learning is the work. They enable us to test our thinking and draw on the ideas of insights of different people, enabling new ideas to emerge and work to happen differently in our day-to-day. In our case that also included convening, a role we understand as different to facilitation or chairing, which supports the group to use tools like check-in and re-storying, and is explored in depth in the next section. Regularity has also been important, a rhythm that turns a new practice into a habit. For us that was an hour online every week over four years, plus one day face-to-face a month, but it could show up in much smaller ways in people's lives and work.

It takes time and practise - building relationships is time-consuming and needs long-term commitment to build trust, for ideas to breathe, for situations to play out and be reflected on. That has enabled people to practise the skills of unknowing, discomfort, holding back from action, and both/and rather than either/or thinking. We recognise that having the autonomy to commit that time is a privilege, and time is a commodity that many frontline organisations don't have right now, so it affects who can take part. We need to intentionally create this opportunity for others - this became a driving force behind HCT co-lab.

Spaces aren't neutral - there are power dynamics at play in every gathering. For relational spaces to be equitable and nourishing, careful and intentional inclusion of diversity of experience, background and sector is vital. Having a combination of statutory and voluntary sector folks in the group was central to making this practice work - over time we were able to see things from each other's point of view without having to argue for or defend our own, and see more of the bigger system-wide picture, both its challenges and opportunities. But across most of the 5 HCT sites there was a higher turnover of people from the statutory sector, meaning that opportunities for learning and continuity can get lost. Looking ahead, local government and NHS restructuring will affect existing partnerships and networks further, so working out what this means for structures of togetherness is vital.

> We've learnt that these spaces empower us to be curious and hold big questions until the answers emerge. But crucially these relationships, practices and spaces ripple outwards, seeding a different way of working that enables better thinking and more collaboration. We noticed that if two or more members of the Stewardship Group were in other spaces together they could support a shift in thinking or action. So cumulatively these practices help people to move in the same direction, and - we hope - towards a tipping point of change in the system.

Interested in what roles help create a space like this?

Interested in moving from a bonding space to a bridging space?

3 CONVENING AND LEARNING: ROLES FOR RELATIONAL WORKING

In 2023 Jo Underwood took on the role of Convenor, having started fairly early on as an NHS member of the Stewardship Group. This was a new role for the group, which had previously been supported by a programme manager. Here she reflects on what convening has been like for her, including what she had to unlearn, and what the role means in practice. This isn't a how-to guide for convening - context is everything. But here's what it entailed for Jo.

Context is key

We were a group of in-system leaders exploring something alt-system. Statutory and VCSE, county-wide not neighbourhood-based, non-constituted but responsible for a grant via a fiscal host. Eventually, we realised our best work came from not pinning things down. We called this a warm holding space – a place to sit with questions while waiting for answers to arrive. My own background? An NHS general manager who could run a hospital or a change programme - solidly "New Public Manager" territory. But I am also a business owner, volunteer, Trustee, freelancer, home educator… A lot of different hats, which all show up in this role.

Polarities (both/and thinking)

Convening this space meant holding opposites: grant manager *and* holder of a fluid space of enquiry. I've never danced between roles like this before and it was hard a lot of the time. This type of "all-in" leadership required my own version of radical pragmatism: just the right mix of piracy (unfettered experimentation) and guardrails (the values and principles which demarcate this from chaos).

Leadership, Disney princess style

It's taken a while to accept my role as a leadership one, largely because the predominant 'figurehead' archetype can make leadership a hard word to embody softly. Luckily some kick-ass Disney princesses have trodden this ground before, and their wisdom has popped up along the way:

Let it go – Like Elsa, this is about releasing control, abandoning "shoulds," and trusting in the purpose and process. Magic comes in that kind of surrender, but it can hurt!

Do the next right thing – Like Anna in Frozen II, change in complexity is not linear, there is trust and boldness involved in taking the next possible step without knowing where it's leading.

This is not who you are – I know who you are – Moana's moment with Te Fiti reminds me: see the human in everyone and give myself that grace too. To be in these spaces needs humanity and humility. Our group constantly had to confront and unpick our assumptions about each other. Over time, the layers drop away.

Learning, not proving

Convening meant protecting non-agenda-driven spaces. We weren't here to showcase polished outputs, we were here to learn. That meant asking more questions than we could answer, looping back to the same conversations, sitting with not-knowing, and letting insights emerge over time.

It might sound hazy but there's something serious here: power. The moment we say we know, we reinforce hierarchies and a productivity paradigm that perpetuates injustice. If we'd started with outcomes, KPIs, and proving impact, we'd have missed the deeper shifts.

This is not about doing nothing, this is about working hard to create a space that can hold uncertainty, discomfort, emergence because we think that's where new answers come up. This is not a 'job done' kind of job… and that is the work.

Convening in practice

So that's how it was for me. How did the group experience this in practice?

Naming and clarifying: noticing the dynamics that were happening within the group

Uncovering the why: exploring the how and why behind decisions, what they meant and how they were grounded in people's own assumptions

Holding to account: reminding people of their responsibilities

(Re)-storying: reminding people of the context and why the work matters, holding continuity, shaping understanding, ensuring people didn't have the same conversation over and over. This takes time, but it means that no one gets left out when there is a different 'deck of cards' or group of people at each meeting. This is critical in collaborative action as people have multiple commitments and may not be able to show up at every meeting

Holding process not outcomes: letting go of *what* and instead focusing on the *how*

Glimpses: noticing shifts in people, language, ideas, and "pockets of the future found in the present"

Subjective not objective: bringing my own knowledge and perspective rather than being an objective or neutral outsider

Being human: attending to personal and interpersonal dynamics with care and kindness

Holding the tension between the luxury of time and the ability to sit in discomfort versus action

Encouraging people when it was not a natural space to play

Asking questions and not knowing: empowering people to be curious and not have the answers

Supporting others to step up and step in

Evaluation or learning?

Traditional evaluation methods are built for fixed plans and predictable outcomes. They ask, "Did it work?" and "Was it value for money?"—assuming that change is simple, linear, and measurable. But when it comes to complex social issues, change is messy, unpredictable, and deeply human. In these situations, much of the important information is not available through fixed data points, but - like Nora Bateson's concept of 'warm data' - is alive in our relationships and interactions with the world around us.

Rather than employing an evaluator to measure success, HCT Gloucestershire introduced an independent Learning Partner. For the last 15 months of the initiative, Mel Scaffold worked in an embedded way alongside the Stewardship Group, listening, asking questions, and supporting reflection as things unfolded. The role was less about collecting evidence and more about creating the conditions for reflective learning. Rather than holding up an evaluation 'mirror' - showing a fixed reflection of what had already happened - the learning partner role could be more like a lantern - illuminating what was emerging, what might need attention, and how this could influence the road ahead.

As well as making learning visible and alive, this also highlighted how other types of evaluation were experienced as extractive, flattening insight and lived experience, and creating a sense of being studied like an experiment in a petri dish. The group noticed how this had the effect of separating them from the rest of the system at the very time when they were seeking to create more connection.

The Learning Partner worked closely with the Convenor, including monthly sessions for reflection and sense-making. Together these roles created a learning environment, recognising that change happens through relationships and curiosity not control and measurement. They realised that in fast-paced work environments, previous insights can get lost, and people can need guidance back to the things they had already learned. Keeping the wisdom warm makes a difference, and it needs people and resources to make this happen. We have a hunch that versions of these roles are a vital part of building the next step.

PURTON HULKS

3 TOOLS FOR COLLECTIVE SPACES

Spaces to connect differently have been at the core of re-thinking how we work together. Being non-agenda-driven and light on structure have been important principles. But sometimes we need tools to set the tone, help manage tricky dynamics, or invite more people in.

Here are a few of the low tech, high engagement tools that have been useful to us at different scales. We have strongly resisted buying in to any single methodology, preferring to mix and match, and find our own way. As with all the learning we're sharing, we encourage you to find things that resonate, take what you need and make it your own.

Check-in

Check-in is a small but powerful practice for better collaborative working in meetings. It's quite different to introducing yourself by sharing your name and the organisation you work for.

It's about setting up the space for a good conversation. It allows people to have a voice straightaway, can balance the mood, and can help to set aside power dynamics or hierarchies.

It can take a bit of getting used to, especially if you usually crack on with the task in hand. However, it's worth it if you want to focus on building strong, resilient relationships over time.

A good check-in question will depend on how well you know each other and what you want to do with your time. It should be something everyone can answer easily, especially if you don't know each other well or there are strong or quiet voices in the room. It should create the conditions for good conversation, build common ground, and not reinforce division.

An easy question for a new group might be 'what is your favourite weather?' While a group that has built trust and is happy to share a bit more might respond well to 'what is your best learning from a mistake this year?'

Check-in is complemented with other tools for convening like re-storying, which you can find out about in the Convening and Learning section. There are lots of great resources for check-ins online, and you can find some of our favourite questions on page 25.

Polarity Mapping

It's easy to say that complexity requires both/and instead of either/or thinking, but it can be really hard to do that in practice. Instead of choosing one horizon, how do you hold both and live in the territory between them? Toby Lindsay at The King's Fund introduced us to Polarity Mapping, a process that any individual, team or group can use to work on unsolvable problems, name the dynamics that are in tension with each other, and come up with a plan to create equilibrium between them.

For us that included:

There is value in the current system AND things need to change

Relationships/learning AND building/doing

Prevention AND cure
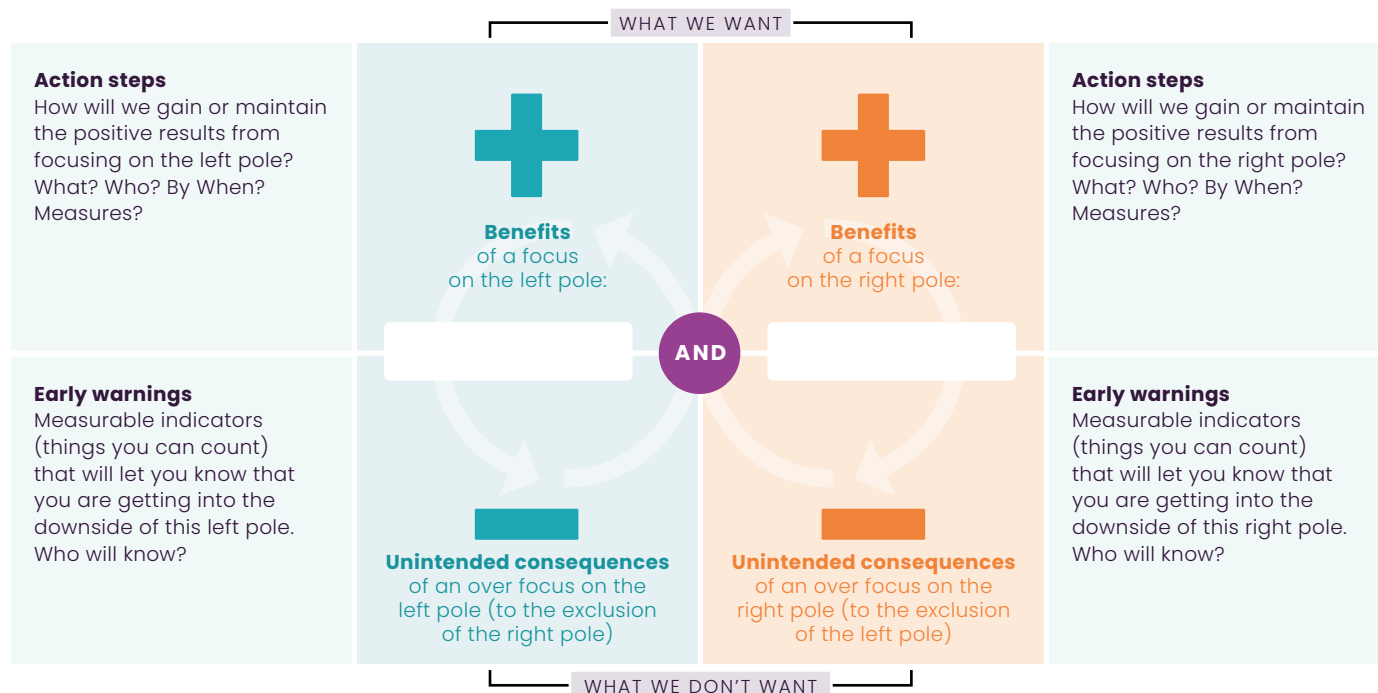
Guardrails (safety, governance) AND piracy (enquiry, open learning, working outside the system)

We used Polarity Mapping to develop a new way of thinking about governance for the HCT Co-Lab, and also arranged an open workshop where people could try it out with their own challenges.

There are some great explainer articles online, but a Polarity Map looks like this.

WHAT WE WANT

Action steps
How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on the left pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

Benefits
of a focus
on the left pole:

Benefits
of a focus
on the right pole:

Action steps
How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on the right pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

AND

Early warnings
Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this left pole. Who will know?

Unintended consequences
of an over focus on the left pole (to the exclusion of the right pole)

Unintended consequences
of an over focus on the right pole (to the exclusion of the left pole)

Early warnings
Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this right pole. Who will know?

WHAT WE DON'T WANT

You start by naming the outcome you want (at the top) and what you don't want (at the bottom) - say healthier communities versus a health crisis. You name the two opposing dynamics in tension with each other, make one the left pole (say preventative care) and the other the right pole (say curative or reactive care). For each of those poles, you work out the **benefits** of focusing on it, and the **unintended consequences** of over-focusing on it at the exclusion of the other pole. This puts you in a different frame of mind than thinking about 'pros and cons'. Then you can add in **action steps** you'll take to get or maintain the benefits, and **early warning signs** of a pull too far in one direction.

You could do this on a piece of paper, but we found that creating a map on the floor and getting people to inhabit each of those spaces and work out what it felt like to them was an effective way to develop more understanding of each other's points of view.

Open Space

When we started using Open Space at our bigger gatherings very few attendees had experienced it before. It's now a much more commonly used tool across Gloucestershire, but the words 'Open Space' can be used to mean different things. This is what it means to us.

Open Space meetings are interactive and inclusive events where participants set the agenda. Creating parallel working sessions around a central theme, people work through complex issues and often arrive at practical solutions. The real opportunity of Open Space is that everyone who comes takes responsibility for making

the solutions happen. So one important thing to remember is you can't control the outcome.

Open Space works best when:

There is a real, complex and urgent issue to be explored

There are diverse people and points of view

People really care and are invested in the conversation, which leads to real responsibility

To create an Open Space gathering you need:

A diverse group of people

A space big enough to hold multiple conversations at the same time

A compelling question or theme that people will want to explore

Someone to introduce how it works and lead on gathering questions/topics

A way of gathering questions/topics so people can see when and where conversations will take place

A copy of the Open Space principles

Time - usually between 3 hours and 1-2 days, though you could use the principles for a shorter meeting

TEWKESBURY ABBEY

How it works:

Once you have gathered people around a central theme, invite them to come up with their own related questions they would like to explore. These questions become the agenda for the day, with those people hosting conversations around them. People choose when and where those conversations will take place, and find a way of sharing that information - usually by sticking their questions to a wall with the time and place written on them. There can be several conversations taking place at the same time. Everyone is free to move around those conversations, following the **Open Space principles and law**:

Whoever comes are the right people

Whenever it starts is the right time

When it's over it's over

Whatever happens is the only thing that can happen

The Law of Mobility - if people find themselves in a situation where they aren't learning or contributing, it is time for them to move on

Everyone is in charge of their own time, and their own learning. Ideally there should be a way of recording any key ideas or action points at each conversation. At the end of the gathering it's a good idea to bring everyone together and offer the opportunity to share a closing word. That's it! It's a great way of generating energy, ideas and ownership of an issue. Be prepared to think about where that momentum goes afterwards.

Open Space Technology was created by Harrison Owen. You can find resources and guides at openspaceworld.org

Interested in more questions that have worked well for us?

Interested in why complexity matters?

3 CHECK-IN QUESTIONS: A COMPENDIUM OF CURIOSITY

Every HCT meeting now begins with a check-in. It took a while to adjust to this practice, but it has fundamentally changed how we are together, and in our meetings with other partners. They are the first step in creating the conditions for purposeful dialogue so it's important to ensure the question works with the meeting purpose and doesn't exclude anyone.

Here is a selection of the questions we've used that have led to us seeing each other in a different light. You can find more at hctgloucestershire.co.uk

CHECK-INS FOR NEW GROUPS:

Two words to describe how you are arriving today

What was the soundtrack to your morning?

What things make life easier?

What is your favourite place in the county where you live?

Cats or dogs?

Which are more numerous on the planet: wheels or doors?

Spring, Summer, Autumn or Winter?

What will you be working on today?

CHECK-INS FOR GROUPS WHO KNOW EACH OTHER A BIT MORE:

What calls you to the work you do?

What's your superpower?

What is your most embarrassing injury?

Who was your most influential teacher?

What do you need right now?

What makes you angry?

If you could invent a public holiday, what would it be for and why?

If you could try anything (without any consequences), what would it be?

Interested in small ways to try working differently?

Interested in why these practices are important?

4 CO-CREATION, CONTROL AND SMALL WAYS OF SLOWING DOWN

> **There is wisdom in slowing down because that shift in motion might allow us to notice a different path hiding in the obviousness of the familiar.**
>
> Dr Bayo Akomolafe

We are all subject to control in some form. It can be a friend of safety and productivity and an antidote to chaos. But it can also get in the way – either because there is too much, and that dictates the pace and outputs, or because there is too little, which can limit our agency, purpose and creativity.

We've noticed it's counter-cultural to slow down and create different spaces – where control of outputs moves aside for the group to discover well-crafted and co-created solutions over time.

Yet nothing we are sharing here would have been possible if we'd started with or pre-defined outcomes. This was easy to say and hard to do. It is reassuring for everyone when there is a focus on a fixed point and a sense of motion towards it, and it is not comfortable to push back against "getting what we always got". It felt at times like we weren't doing work.

Yet work doesn't stop when you are in relationship and collaboration with others. If the spaces are held well - prioritising equity, trust, and reflection - the work can take on new forms that are both unexpected and purposeful.

Agency is a key element in co-production and co-creation. To reference another of Myron's Maxims, people own what they help create. The "co-" terms have become buzzwords that can sadly be used to imply inclusion of those with less control, to a process or product they had very little influence over. In our experience co-creation is messy, emergent, loop-y and needs to be held well. It starts with an intention rather than an end in mind and requires trust and a lot of time.

Co-production requires everyone involved to acknowledge the power they have, to commit to releasing their control over outcomes, and instead commit to the process.

It's hard, but worth it. Co-production creates things you couldn't have anticipated when you set out, such as our weekly Stewardship Group sessions. Whilst looking elsewhere for answers we created something we really valued, so we asked: **(how) can more people access this kind of relational space?**

The HCT co-lab grew out of this enquiry, rather than being designed to meet a fixed brief. It ran alongside other questions about who leaders were and what they needed, and many conversations with our communities including at our event Structures of Togetherness. Along the way the concept of a co-lab emerged, as did a lot of learning about trust and governance in co-design (another Maxim: the process you use to get to the future is the future you get), as opposed to commissioning.

This means that the HCT co-lab is both a valuable experience and place of learning (a laboratory, if you like) and one of a number of possible experiments on the theme of individuals' capacity to work collectively.

Similarly we see our experience of HCT as just that: our experience. There's no 'one size fits all': every group co-creates these spaces differently, shaped by their own context, members and needs, and every iteration is the product of that group.

We tried not to control the idea of replicability: not to see our version as the prototype, rolling it out as 'the answer' for all. Rather, we hoped to create conditions where people have a glimpse of relational spaces, and seek ways to create and experiment with them, to iterate and regenerate in a multitude of ways because they want to. It's more than a hunch: we know Barnwood Trust's Stewardship Circles laid the ground for our HCT experience, so we trust that HCT has seeded something - we just won't know what until we look back from where we arrive next.

What if I don't have the control to give away?

Having time and autonomy to commit to co-production with HCT was a privilege most of us don't have. Here are some ideas for how you can let go of control in small ways in your day job:

Schedule *purely* relational time: commit to conversations where the only goal is connection.

By this we mean your only agenda is knowing someone better. A more radical option might be holding yourself accountable for doing this: Jo aimed to spend a quarter of her working hours in 'relationship-focussed' activities, and agreed that objective with her boss.

Experiment with check-in: introduce a simple practice to open meetings and build trust.

Pick a meeting that feels safe - a team meeting or community forum - and introduce a check-in question. Be prepared to explain what it is and why, and for it to feel weird at first. Feel free to share our check-in resource and see if it changes the way you meet together over time. It took us about six months to remember to use check-ins, and at least six more for it to feel normal!

Negotiate a non-action period: agree to meet several times without assigning tasks — just explore ideas.
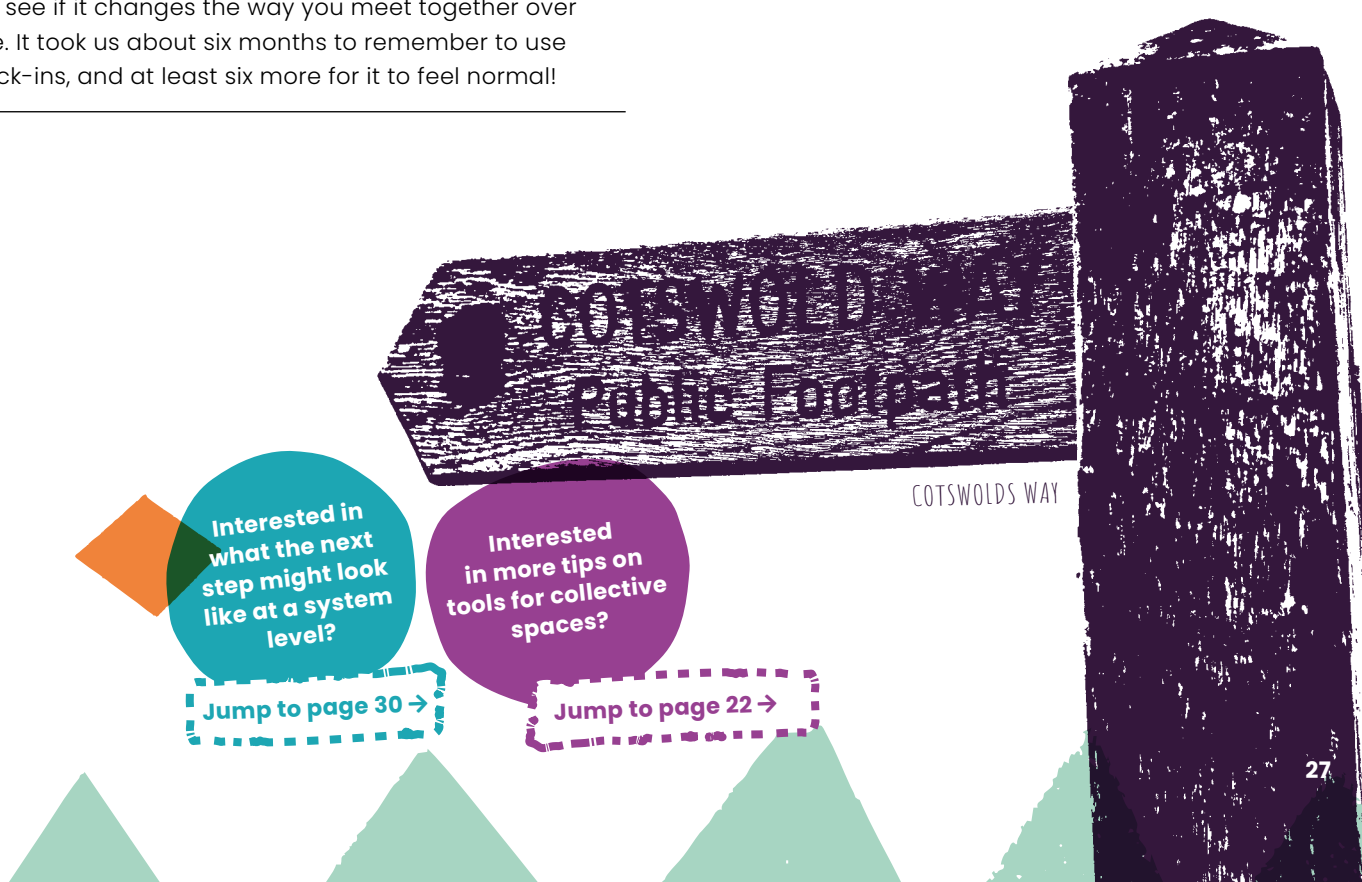
Whether it's with an existing partnership or a new collaboration, see if you can agree to a number of meetings where you won't agree on actions. For as long as you can (and then just one more…) 'just' talk about the questions, concerns and ideas that come up. Make some notes after the first conversation about how it felt and what you think the work should be but keep them to yourself. Continue talking until your non-action deadline and then start the work. Look back at your notes and compare your expectations with what happened.

Practise 'not knowing': resist fixing the problem.

If there's a problem to be fixed and you usually sort it out, try not knowing the answer*. Chat to others to explore it - ask what they would do. Approach it from upside down and back to front but try really hard to experience what it feels like not to know. Then see what (else) you find out.

We've tried all of the above and if you think you'll find them awkward or difficult, we've got the t-shirt! We think the means justify the end, but we admit it takes courage to have a go. So try one - there are more people than you think in Gloucestershire and the wider world who have your back.

try this at home with questions such as 'have you seen my keys?', and 'what's for tea?'

COTSWOLDS WAY

Interested in what the next step might look like at a system level?

Interested in more tips on tools for collective spaces?

HCT CO-LAB: FROM BONDING TO BRIDGING

Relational practice was always in the background of HCT, but came to the fore over time as we realised the importance of equitable and creative collaboration in creating fairer health. We went from monthly meetings to weekly check-ins, enjoying the chance to understand different perspectives and viewpoints. Holding the question 'who are we to benefit from this space?', the group began thinking about how we might seed these practices in a non-prescriptive, equitable way.

Building on learning from the group, and models like Barnwood's Stewardship Circles and Create Gloucestershire and Nowhere's Catalyst programme, the idea of a relational and experiential working laboratory took shape. Over the course of two years the HCT co-laboratory, or 'co-lab' was co-created with a range of partners, aiming to offer a 'supercharged' intentional version of HCT's relational practices, along with elements that weren't part of the Stewardship Group's foundations.

The HCT co-lab invited people to explore **the 'why' of relational practice: we need better tools and approaches to actively lean in to difference so that new solutions can emerge. We need to learn how to hold the - sometimes uncomfortable and difficult - conversations that are necessary to disrupt the status quo and find a different way forward.**

If Stepping Stone 3 is characterised by better relationships, safe spaces and emergence, Stepping Stone 4 focuses more on an explicit intention to develop strong structures and skills for navigating the unknown, and ensuring that everyone is committed to working through challenges towards a shared goal. It recognises safety is not an end in itself, but a necessary condition of change. It moves from **bonding** (safe spaces that focus on what unites us) to **bridging** (brave spaces that welcome difference and surface the tensions we would usually shy away from). It's about ensuring that people are signed up for a journey of discovery. One that might

be tense, exhilarating and exciting, where they won't know the answers, and that requires bravery and humility. Only then can they build a container that will be robust enough to support them on that journey.

Why is this important? HCT learned that, without a shared commitment to, and skills for, a change process, the dynamics of money and power will always exert themselves. They can disrupt, cause hurt, and reinforce inequality and competition. To mitigate this we need a 'structure of togetherness' that is strong enough to hold discomfort, stuck-ness and strong emotional responses, using the heat generated to forge something new. A space for creative tension, not personal conflict..

HCT co-lab, run by Create Gloucestershire (CG) and Nowhere, responded to this need. It was designed as an experiment to take a specific skills development approach from the private sector and adapt the content and delivery to the voluntary, community, public and civil society sectors. Its structure included:

Targeted recruitment through trusted networks - rather than a completely open call, participants were invited through the Stewardship Group's database and existing networks to ensure cross-sector representation. The invitation framed the programme as exploring "new ways of working together for fairer health in Gloucestershire," helping to attract people curious about the long-term impact of relational practice.

A learning agreement at the start - outlining what was being asked of participants and what CG and Nowhere, as facilitators, committed in return. This included an explicit focus on what we all needed to learn together, and how we would support each other in that process.

An inclusion lens throughout - with detailed discussions about individual learning needs, which were woven into the co-design and delivery of the programme. Support was shaped around participants as people, not roles.

Processes and tools introduced with care - 'micro skills' development around gathering, facilitating and giving feedback, and tools like Constellations, were brought in only after trust had started to build, and used to explore different perspectives and surface systemic patterns. Sessions were supported by a specialist facilitator, with space for 1:1 or small group conversations where needed to debrief issues that had come up in the session. Group members have already identified this as a key motivator for change.

Co-ownership of structure and content - the first phase focused on shared skills development, before moving to Open Space gatherings where participants shaped the agenda. Lightning Talks and peer-led sessions allowed people to follow their curiosity and build shared momentum.

Tailored support - participants could access mentoring, coaching, peer exchange or shadowing, depending on their needs and interests. These 3.5 hour exchanges often drew on pro bono contributions from Gloucestershire-based networks, with costs covered where needed.

Ongoing systemic practice - the work didn't end in the room. Participants helped develop tools to support this like a reflective journal, collaboration cards, conversational badges and an e-appreciation card to stay connected and carry forward learning as the first HCT co-lab alumni group.

An Artist in Residence - artist Lucy J Turner worked alongside the group, reflecting their experiences back to them through creative practice. Art became a hopeful gesture and a mirror for the emotional and relational depth of the work.

Governance

The Stewardship Group were keen to ensure they didn't replicate the funder/funded power dynamic, wanting to develop the work in a spirit of trust, openness and learning. At the same time they recognised the need for guardrails to ensure shared ownership and the safety of both Create Gloucestershire as Lead Partner, and the HCT co-lab participants. A traditional commissioning process would have used a partnership agreement (e.g. contract or Memorandum of Understanding). Instead HCT created a Polarity Map to help navigate between these opposing forces.

From Convenor to Catalyst

HCT co-lab describes the role participants might take in the system as a 'Catalyst'. Built on similar foundations to the Convenor role within the HCT Stewardship Group, the Catalyst is more explicitly focused on sensing, surfacing and holding discomfort within a group in order to enable something new to emerge. They aim to hold a collective vision that is greater than the issues of any one individual in the room, and convene spaces with enough safety for the boldness and challenge of change. In order to do this, there needs to be a mandate and commitment from everyone to be part of that process and lean in to difference and not knowing if things get uncomfortable. That's when transformation becomes possible.

What else?

HCT co-lab is one version of what Stepping Stone 4 might look like, but it is by no means the only version. In this first iteration participants were not wrestling with questions of how to distribute resources, or structure their own governance. In addition to spaces to connect, and skills and agreement to have hard conversations, we need infrastructure to enable the ideas that emerge. Which brings us to Stepping Stone 5...

KINGSHOLM

- KINGSHOLM, GLOUCESTER

5 COLLABORATIVE ARCHITECTURE: SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR A HEALTHIER CIVIL SOCIETY

HCT Gloucestershire did not set out to do collaborative governance. Being an un-constituted organisation and agreeing what our shared accountability and governance should look like gave rise to some of our deepest struggles. But, as the work progressed, it became evident that working in a radically different way requires more than the trust and relationships we build in our collective spaces. We also need collaborative infrastructure, or architecture. We need connected ways of working that enable ideas emerging from those space to flourish - aligned systems that create a framework for civil society to thrive.

In understanding and exploring this next step we need exactly the right mix of what we call radical piracy (experimental thinking, fast acting, pushing back against the status quo) and robust, transparent and proportional guardrails (grounded stewardship and governance that holds fast to equity and builds trust across different parts of the system).

These are some of the ingredients we believe will be essential for building Stepping Stone 5:

Gathering, skills and spaces

Multiple spaces to connect, skills and bravery to be together differently, people who hold different roles in the system that enable people to gather, learn and put ideas into action. All of the things we have learned from Stepping Stones 3 and 4 need to be created intentionally, collaboratively and equitably.

Independent capacity and resource in the system

It costs money and time to pay for Convenors, Catalysts, Learning Partners, skills development, and regular and ad-hoc collective spaces or 'bumping points' where better conversations happen. This resourcing needs governance, access and transparency - things that HCT Gloucestershire didn't have the structure or capability to provide. It needs to be both independent - not beholden to an individual organisation's agenda or priorities - and community centred.

So where that money comes from matters...

Aligned and flexible funding

While HCT Gloucestershire benefitted from relatively flexible funding, there is still a big stretch between the majority of funding streams and the truly open, trust-based funding that enables long-term thinking and innovation.

As Elinor Ostrom described in her book *Governing the Commons*, people manage resource and shared assets most effectively when they are in control of them. Inability to do onward-granting, hard deadlines for activity, monthly spend monitoring - restrictions like these prevent people from feeling a sense of empowerment and ownership, and mean people's most ambitious and potentially impactful ideas can't be realised.

Trust-based and relational funding approaches, promoted by IVAR and put into action by Gloucestershire funders including HCT partner Barnwood Trust, challenge the assumption that trust and impact are incompatible.

Fiscal hosting

So how can that funding flow in a way that is equitable and accessible?

It's a challenge for communities: if you're doing good work, but aren't or don't want to be a constituted organisation, it's hard to get funded. Accessing pockets of money is often about who you know, and the relative privilege you have in being confident or connected enough to ask.

It's a challenge for funders: it is hard to get money directly to communities in a way that is efficient, inclusive and safe.

What is needed for a high-trust, minimum-bureaucracy infrastructure that gets money where it needs to go? Fiscal hosting is one answer. It exists in many places, helping the flow of funding but often in a way that is reactive and small-scale. It includes the type of role Barnwood Trust has played for HCT Gloucestershire: holding money, cash-flowing, contracting - providing all the legal safeguarding necessary to give a funder confidence in resourcing an un-constituted group.

It needs organisations large and resilient enough to manage the financial risk, and strong enough to hold funds safely without controlling the work, with relationships grounded in mutual trust and accountability. HCT partners including Create Gloucestershire have been exploring what this looks like at a community level with a Community Chest model based on the principles of Elinor Ostrom.

Shared functions

It has long been recognised that, particularly within the VCSE sector, there is a lot of duplication of necessary 'back office' functions - things every organisation needs, but that are inefficient to run for smaller companies, like HR and IT. Support solutions that work at a county-wide level, that are sensitive to the specificities of place, would not only save critical time and money, but also foster more collaborative working and shared learning.

Right now we are laying the foundations of this stepping stone. Some ideas are being tested out, or already happening in different places across the county. Others are still at a head-scratching design stage. We know that part of the engine for driving this forwards is an ongoing commitment from people across the system to keep thinking differently together, and holding spaces for questions until the answers emerge.

Our final thoughts are those questions we are currently holding.

Interested in origins and how we got to this point?

Interested in what we learned about how money disrupts?

5 LEARNING TO END

What happens when a project or partnership ends? We've all known the moment a programme concludes not with a celebration or a sense of completion, but with a sudden silence — the rug pulled from under our feet as funding runs out, meetings stop, and people move on. The work that felt alive just weeks earlier risks being frozen in time or quietly lost.

Once we realised HCT Gloucestershire wouldn't work as a traditional programme, there was no place for a fixed delivery plan or a tidy package of outputs. Instead, we tried to build a practice – one rooted in our shared spaces and day-to-day work. Something that could be lived, not just reported on. We hoped this would avoid the usual ending pitfalls by embedding new ways of working into our own systems, and by seeding connections and collectives – like the HCT co-lab – that could carry the work forward in new forms.

At the time of writing, the HCT Stewardship group has not yet had the chance to create a formal ending. But as it draws close we are recognising the different journeys each person in the group has been on. Individual learning will diverge, and we will not all end in the same place.

In HCT co-Lab, the ending was deliberately designed. The final celebration for the first cohort was not about closing something down, but about naming what had grown — in individuals, in relationships, in practice. That experience made something clear: whatever our hopes for sustaining this work into the future, we need to tend to endings.

We didn't set out to do relational work, or start with a contract and structure for how this would work. The HCT Stewardship Group became a kind of 'first pancake' - our best attempt with the ingredients we had at the time that we could learn from and improve on. We've learned that if we take that work seriously, we also need to learn how to end well. That doesn't mean drawing a line or tying everything up neatly. It might simply mean making space – to harvest learning, to honour our individual experiences, to work out what we each want to carry forward, and what we leave behind. Not closure, but compost.

Because endings, done with care, don't stop the work. They feed what comes next.

LOWER SLAUGHTER

5 CHANGING THE STORY, HOLDING THE QUESTIONS

> **We can't solve the challenges we face from within the story that created them.** Jon Alexander, Co-Founder of the New Citizenship project

What stories do we need to change in order to face the challenges ahead?

One is about certainty. At a time when the speed of the river around us feels overwhelming, people are desperate for safety and certainty about the steps ahead. **What if instead we could tell a story about safe uncertainty - a way of being together grounded in trust, where people have the space and support to sit with questions until the answers emerge?**

Another is about our systems. With health and social care, or civil society, we often think of systems as groups of organisations trying to work together to achieve some shared goals, though often with very different agendas and objectives. Another common story is that those systems are broken. But **what if we think of a system as a set of living, shifting, interdependent relationships between people, processes and planet? Ones that constantly change in response to each other, and understand learning as something valuable and alive?**

These are some of the stories that have changed for us over the last four years. It has involved letting go of some deep habits, having awkward conversations, trying, failing and trying again. But it has led to a profound change in how we think about what we are here to do, and how we can work and learn together.

As this chapter comes to an end we are looking ahead with the belief that the people and connections we have invested in will generate elegant new solutions to address health inequalities, and that these in turn will be a stimulus for others. We are continuing to lean in to sitting in discomfort, not-knowing, and asking the questions that will be part of building the next step. So for everyone who is interested in co-creating 'what next?', we leave you with some of the questions we are holding, and invite you to fill the space that comes after with your own enquiry:

How do we create dynamic structures with distributed power? We leaned away from traditional programme frameworks in an attempt not to replicate the problem we were trying to overcome, but we need to recognise that structures are both resisted and needed.

How do we manage the both/and of doing the urgent work, and creating space to come out of crisis response mode?

How else can we seed new collectives in a way that foregrounds equity and justice, while not trying to replicate something that was specific to us?

What else could collaborative architecture look like?

How can we ensure learning sustains when people move on?

What happens to momentum when the structure - the capacity, the resource, the convenor - steps away?

How can we all get better at nourishing the conditions for change rather than trying to control outcomes?

Who else?

THE NEXT STEP...

**An invitation: build on these steps
and fill this space with your own enquiry.**

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Published: June 2025

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With thanks to:
The Barnwood Trust for fiscal hosting, and Ruth Bamford, Hannah Hesselgreaves, Andy Kitt, Toby Lindsay, Dawn Plimmer, Myron E. Rogers and many other people who have been part of this journey.

Designed by: Jolly Good Show (jollygoodshow.org)
Site build by: Licorne Agency (licorne.agency)
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Find out more:
including an appendix of the people and ideas that have inspired us at hctgloucestershire.co.uk

Healthy Communities Together Gloucestershire was one of five sites funded by the National Lottery Community Fund in partnership with The King's Fund to develop effective and sustainable partnership working between the Voluntary and Community Sector, the National Health Service and local authorities to improve the health and wellbeing of local communities.

HCT Gloucestershire was funded by The National Lottery Community Fund in partnership with The King's Fund: