POLICY LAB

Healthy System Indicators

An approach to stewarding system health

This guide introduces you to the Health System indicators, a prototype tool developed by Policy Lab to help communities of policy professionals co-diagnose policy systems they may be working in, and identify how to make changes and move towards healthier systems.

This guide:
- Introduces you to the Healthy System Indicators
- Explains the when, why and how of the Healthy Systems Indicators
- Provides suggestions for first steps using the Healthy System Indicators
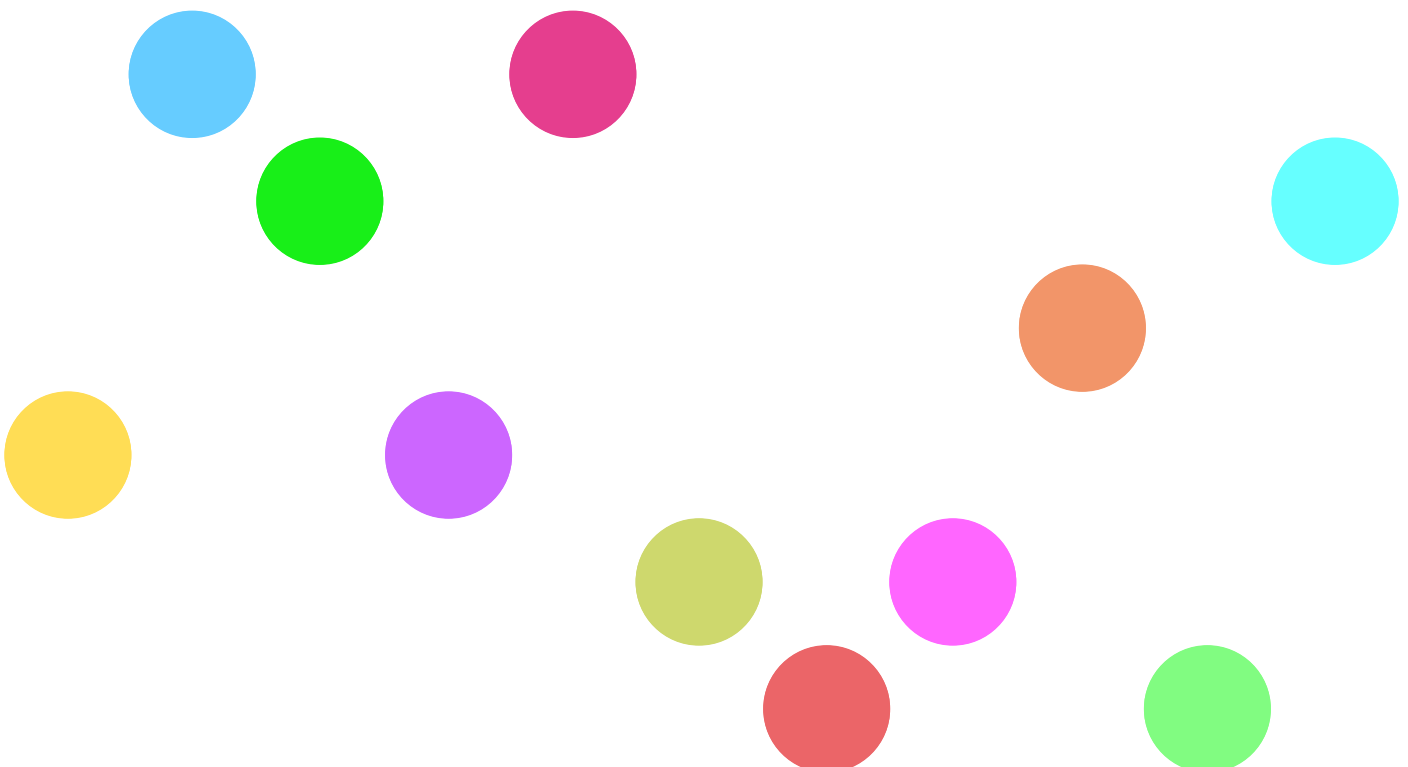
What are the Healthy System Indicators?

The Healthy System Indicators are:

A clear definition of the issue, locally/nationally understood across all partners, and co-created with people with lived experience.

A clear understanding of local need, that has been assessed, understood and is regularly updated.

Clear outcomes set by and accountable to people with lived experience.

Shared understanding of what success looks like across all partners.

Shared responsibility for the goal and outcomes, with common goals that all partners are working towards.

The right people around the table, with partners creating the strategy, planning together and committed to joint planning and working.

Working in partnership, with clear lines of communication and being 'on the same side' as people you are serving.

Strong systems leadership and appropriate accountability structures in place.

A common approach to data sharing so that people working in the system have a consistent understanding of how data is shared, and data is stored and acted on appropriately.

A learning culture in which partners feel safe to suggest and try new things, collectively learning from new experiences, mistakes and next practice.

A workforce that is responsive to relational injury and where trauma informed ways of working are the norm.*

This is a non-exhaustive list based on our own experience. You may have your own suggestions for other Indicators that are context or subject matter specific.

When to use Healthy System Indicators?

Most obviously, the Indicators are appropriate when working in complex policy systems. Ball (2023)[1] has outlined a list of characteristics which can help diagnose if you are working on policy in a complex system:

- **Ill-defined:** defining the nature, scale and scope of the problem is tricky and contested
- **Untraceable:** it is difficult to understand or agree the root cause of the problem
- **Intractable:** the problem has been, and still is, resistant to solutions
- **Interconnected:** the problem is interlinked with other problems
- **Non-linear:** The problem is complex and won't yield to simple cause-and-effect logic
- **Unpredictable:** The outcome of efforts to address the problem cannot be reliably forecast
- **Unsolved:** No single solution exists and the problem requires experimentation
- **Multifaceted:** The problem defies the efforts of a single person, organisation, or sector

The Indicators may be used in any policy area and at any level of governance (local, national, international, internal-to-government, external-to-government and so on). They were conceived in a Policy Lab project which had both significant local and national dimensions. From this project there is evidence the Indicators can unify actors across geographical and policy silos, build stronger relationships, and create higher levels of trust and flexibility in policy and service design and delivery.

[1]Ball, Nigel (2023) correspondence with Policy Lab

Why use Healthy System Indicators?

According to the UK government's Policy Profession Unit there are three strands that make up policy: strategy, democracy and delivery. The Healthy Systems Indicators provide a potential framework for strategy and present a different way of delivering policy at a national and local level. Many policy professionals and stakeholders increasingly see their domains as complex policy systems, where single interventions may have limited or even unintended effects. The Indicators articulate a shared understanding and common language of system health.
In summary, the Indicators provide a novel and innovative way of aiding policy development and delivery, not because they materialise new policy ideas, but because they interrogate – and ultimately could improve - the very structures by which policy relates to delivery and citizens.

Ultimately, healthier systems can lead to more effective policy and service delivery and better outcomes for citizens.

How do the Healthy System Indicators work?

The essence of the Healthy System Indicators is that they enable productive and equitable dialogue between actors in a policy system about the health of that system, and how to improve it. In practice, this might take a number of forms. Below are some use cases of how this might look in practice, focusing in particular where the initiative starts at the local level and then at the national government level:

For local areas:
A local area systems leader (for example a commissioner or senior local authority officer) might use the Healthy System Indicators to:
- Bring local actors together around a shared language and common goals, building relationships and improving connections across individual department or organisational silos. The Indicators can be a framework to coalesce around.
- Use them to shape day-to-day relationships and working patterns with national government. They can draw on the Indicators to frame discussions and interactions in work that involves national government partners.
- Explore how the Indicators may influence local strategy and policy delivery, over time moving to re-orientate and redesign services around cultivating holistic outcomes and a healthy system.

For national government:
- The Healthy Systems Indicators could work as a tool for local and national government to focus around. Here a policy team or cross-government unit would use the Healthy System Indicators to frame the relationship between central and local government; a relationship that is two-way and responsive.
- The Indicators could be promoted to local leaders as guidance which can be used to self-assess system health and identify opportunities for improvement.
- The Indicators could inform the way that national government works across silos. For example, policy teams focussed on shared complex issues could use the Indicators to convene around and work towards. This would cultivate a different approach to policymaking and delivery - which would assume a systems approach: ensuring that funding, policy delivery, programmes of work and so on cultivate good systems health.

First steps using the Healthy System Indiactors

Based on Policy Lab's recent practice, a starting point would be to start by gathering a small group of interested and relevant stakeholders to:

Stage 1:

Diagnose your system (30 mins)
Use the diagnosis list developed by Ball (page 2 of this document) to work out if your policy area fits these descriptors. Put each of the eight diagnosis points on a post-it and then list reasons or examples of how your policy area matches the descriptions. Work together as a team to build collective understanding.

Identify your system stakeholders (30 mins)
Together with your group, brainstorm different stakeholders in your system. A helpful set of categories to use are: national government, local government, service delivery partners and users/citizens. Think broadly first and avoid getting caught up with defining boundaries which will often be blurry. The important thing is to identify key stakeholders as a starting point.
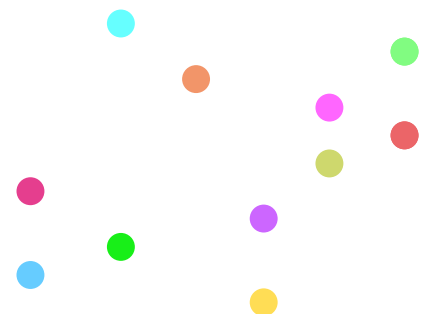
Stage 2:

Test the Healthy System Indicators (90 mins – 2 hours)
Next, bring together a group of 5-8 cross-system stakeholders (including at local and national levels as appropriate) to explore how the Indicators can be used to shape strategic decisions. First read through and discuss with your team/ key groups the Healthy System Indicators. Next, decide if there are any other features of your healthy system that might need representation (adding to the list of indicators). Then, discuss possible proxies for all indicators including any that you have added.

As part of this, it may be helpful to test the indicators out. You might, for example, bring a fictional event or challenging scenario to the table. Together with your cross-system stakeholder group, you could explore how local and national government would respond. It is likely to be helpful to write down what actions might be taken, shaped by the indicators. Afterwards, debrief by considering if and how the indicators might lead to different steps being taken across your systems.

If you are interested in using the Healthy System Indicators and would like some help to get started, Policy Lab is able to help advise and run a *'Half Day Workshop in a Box'* to diagnose your system, identify system stakeholders and use the Healthy System Indicators to improve the health of your system. Contact Policy Lab on: team@policylab.gov.uk