

Seeing services as systems:

What does it mean to design services wholeheartedly?

A systemic co-inquiry within The Open
University's Tuition Services situation

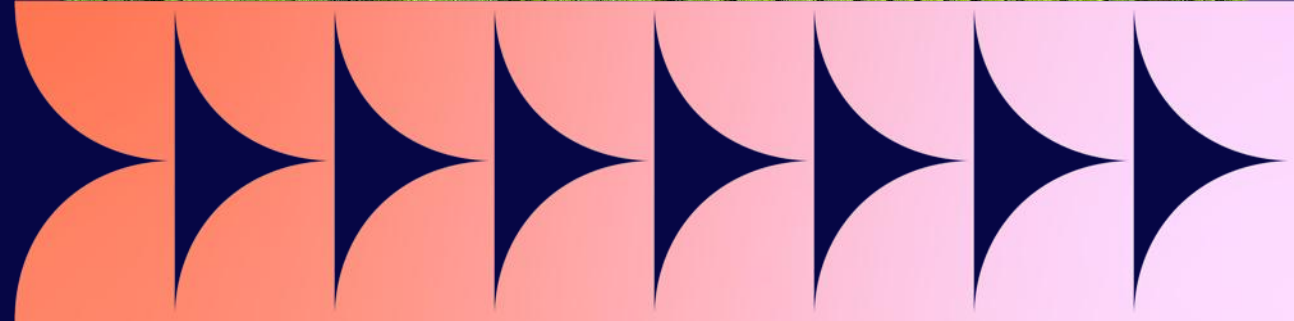
Anne Gambles, Change and Agility Practitioner

Kathryn Myers, Senior Service Designer

With input from:

Rebecca Galley, Director of Student and Academic Services

SCiO SysPrac26 21 September 2026



Three perspectives



Anne Gambles:
Systems Thinking in
Practice (STiP) and
business agility



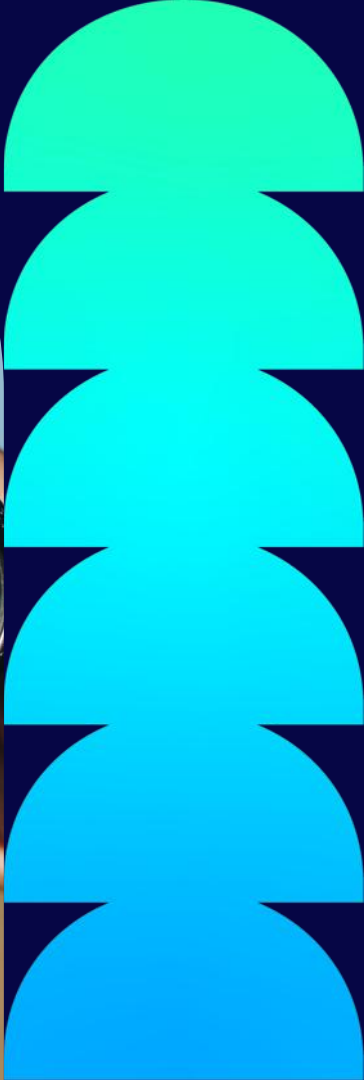
Kathryn Myers:
Service Design,
Systems Thinking in
Practice (STiP) and
visualisation



Rebecca Galley:
Leadership and
stewardship working
within and across a
complex organisational
situation

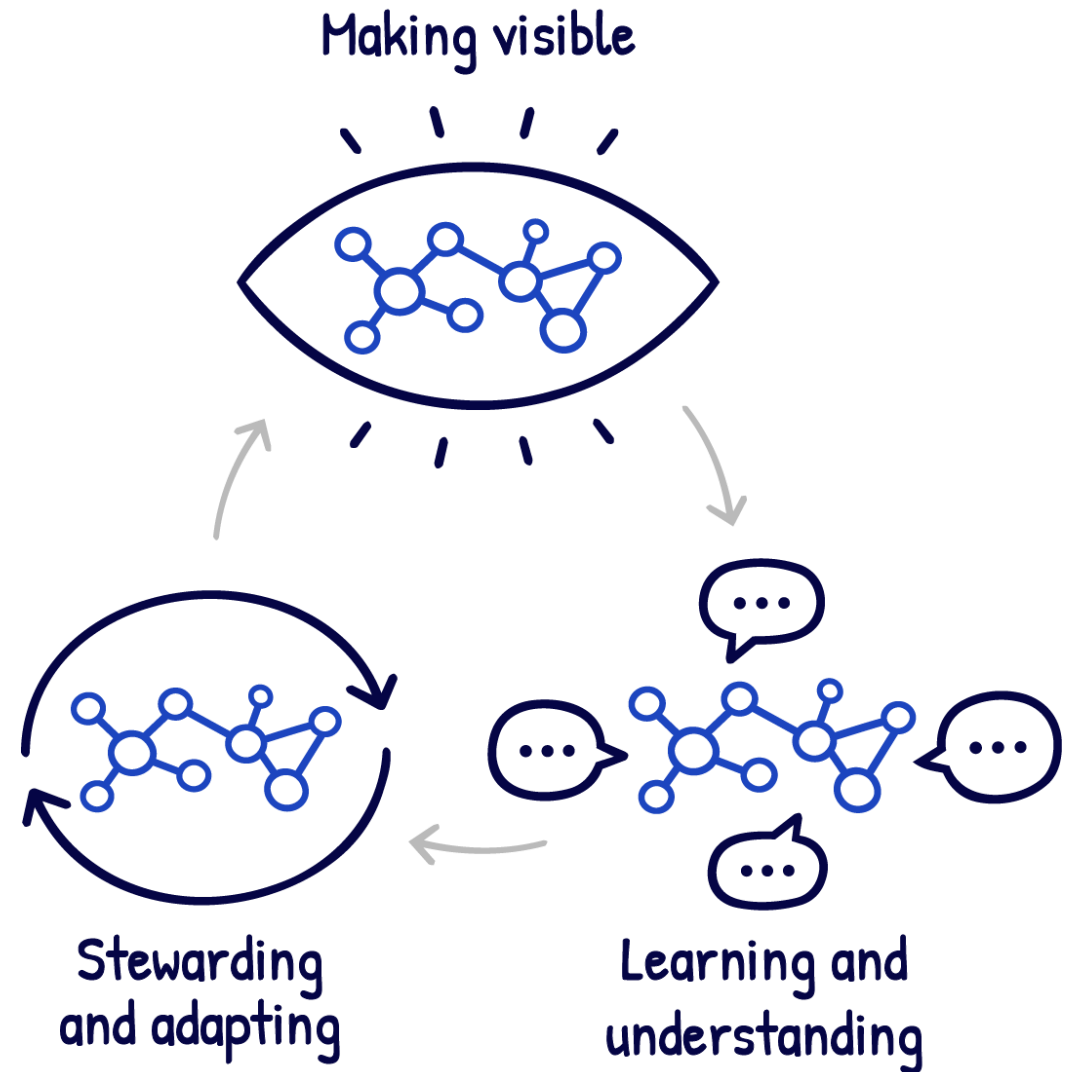
Our goal

To better understand a
complex service and
make it more visible



Our journey:

From making a service visible, to creating spaces where different understandings can meet, to creating conditions for learning, stewardship and adaptation in pursuit of meaningful outcomes.



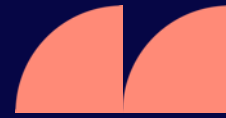
The Tuition Services situation

Leadership and stewardship perspective on working within and across a complex organisational situation



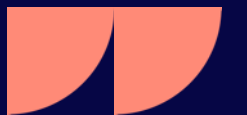
Rebecca Galley

Director of Student and Academic Services,
The Open University



At the Open University around 4,000 tutors support over 111,000 students to learn. Organising and delivering Tuition is a complex activity spanning academic and professional services cultures.

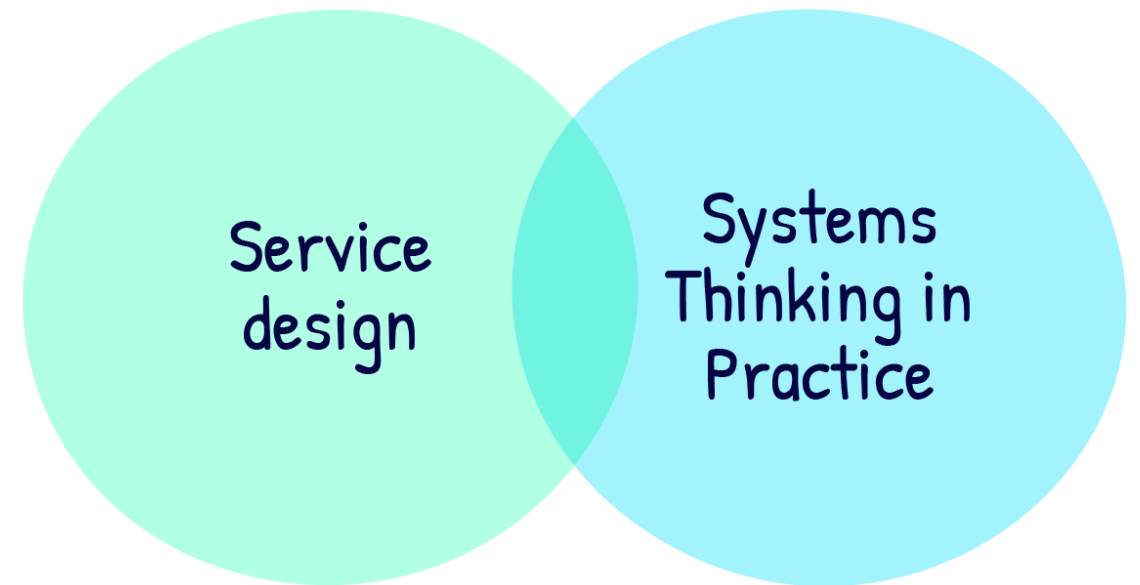
Taking a systems approach allows us to explore the different and sometimes conflicting assumptions we hold about its purpose, value to students and outcomes, that may prevent us from delivering coherent support.



Seeing services as systems

Service design gives us methods for understanding experiences and shaping better services.

Systems Thinking in Practice (STiP) offers ways of exploring complexity, relationships, organisational learning and purposeful action.



Our co-inquiry question:

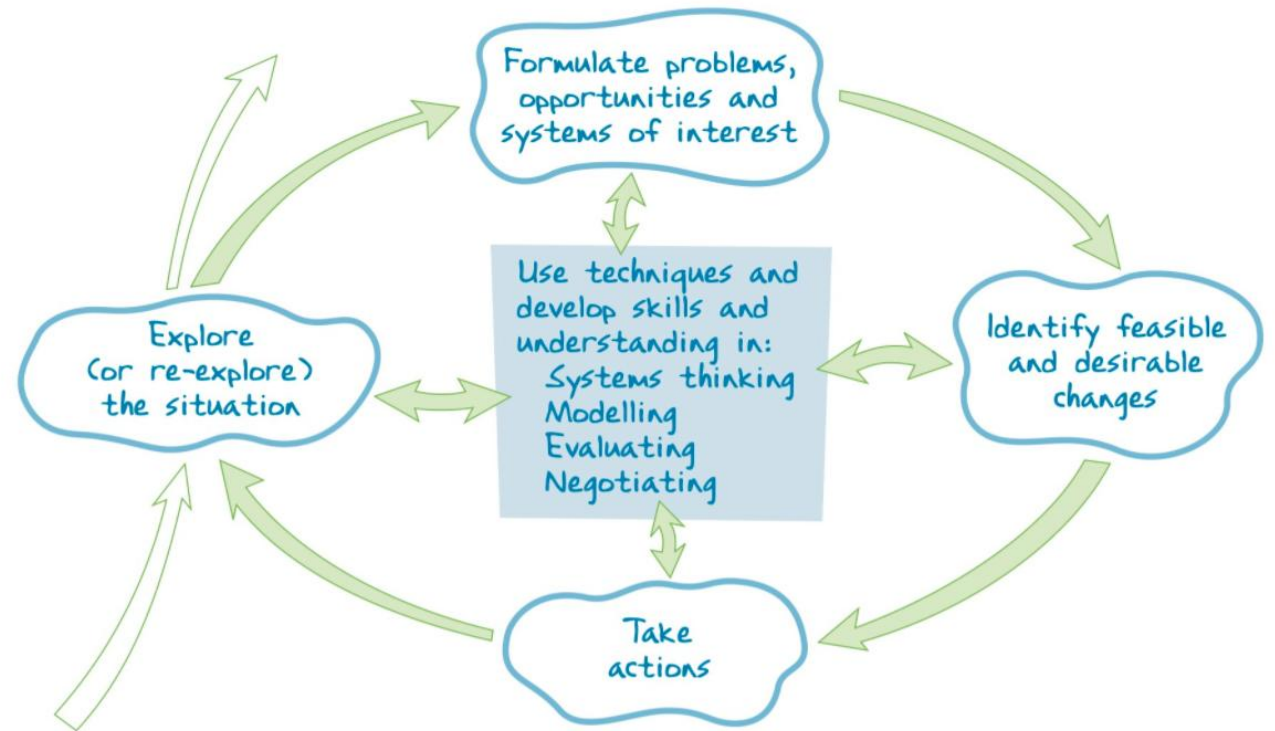
What becomes possible when the two are brought together?

Our systemic co-inquiry and working hypothesis



The role of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM)

To help us understand how different stakeholders understand the service, its purposes, boundaries and relationships.



Our working hypothesis

*Wholehearted service design is the capability to **see, learn about, steward and continually adapt** services as systems, while remaining focused on the outcomes they exist to achieve.*

Part 1: **Making visible**

Part 2: **Learning and understanding**

Part 3: **Stewarding and adapting**

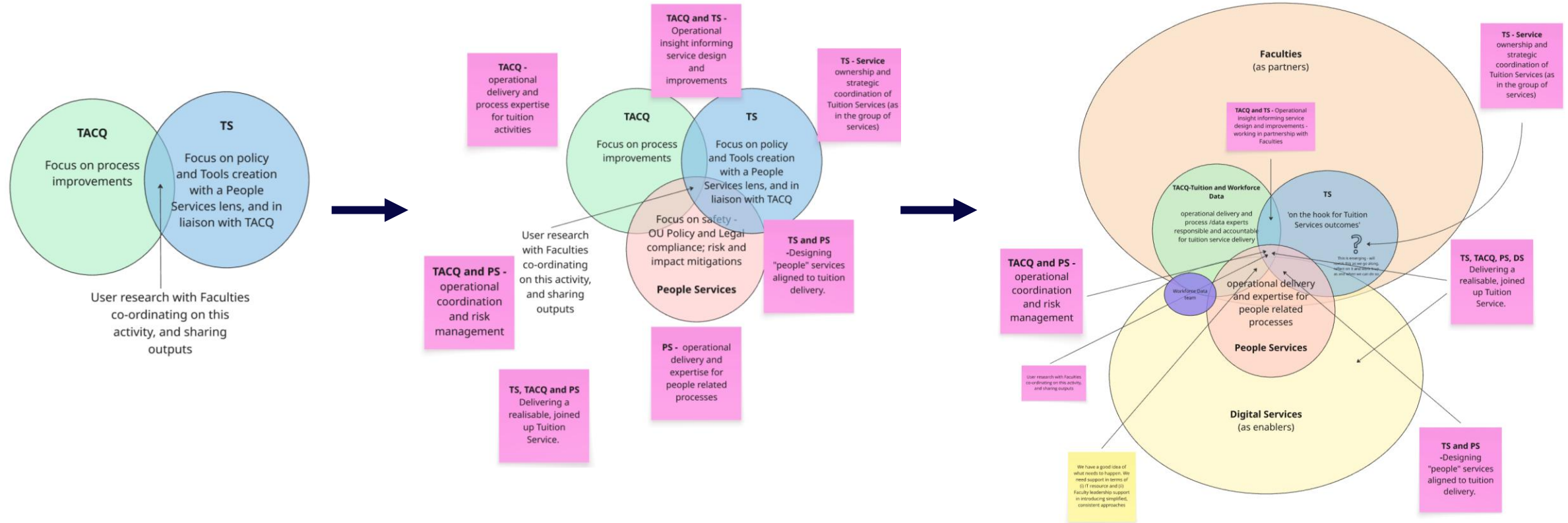
Part one: Making visible



2.1

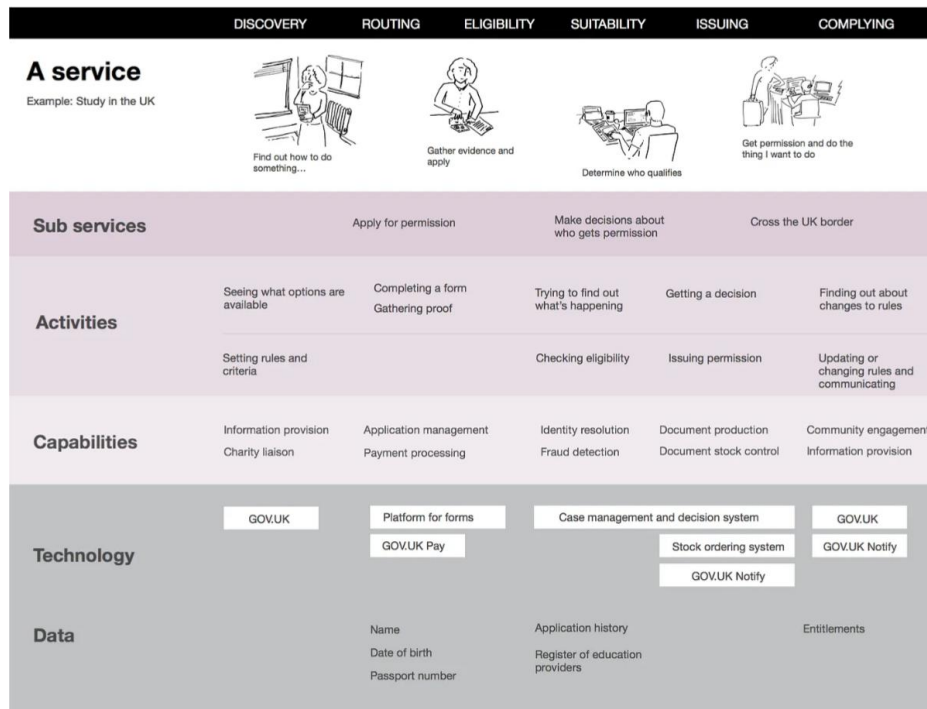
Early visualisations of the Tuition Services situation

Inter-relationships between teams, showing main focuses and overlaps



Making the service visible

Kate Tarling's Services Taxonomy:

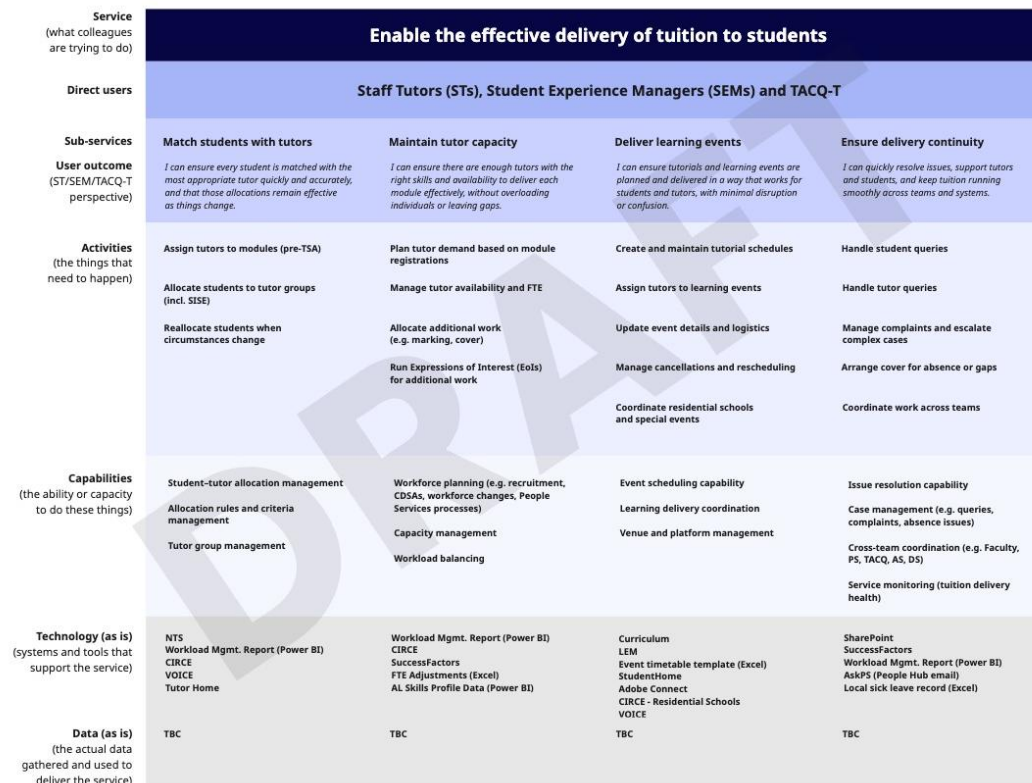


A service showing all the different parts. Content shown here is for illustration only. Sketches by [Ayesha Moarif](#)

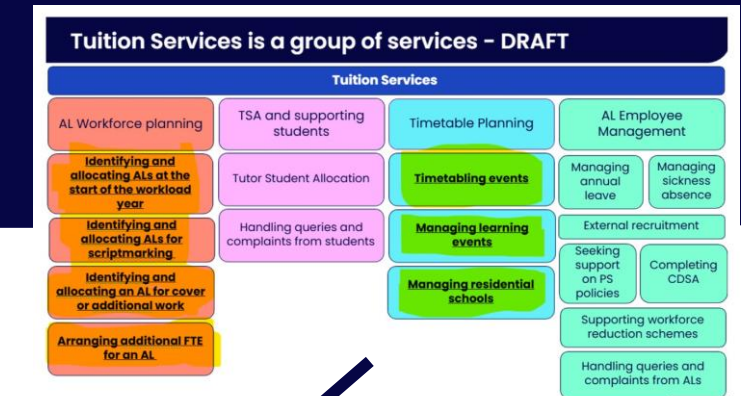
Extract taken from [A common language to understand services](#) by Kate Tarling.

Our emerging service model:

A high-level view of Tuition Services intended to create a shared understanding rather than describe detailed processes or systems.
Tuition Services coordinates the people, processes and capabilities needed to ensure tuition can be delivered consistently, effectively and at scale.



Very early visualisation of the service model



From Tarling's Taxonomy to boundary object

- › Developing a **shared language** for discussing Tuition Services
- › Enabling **dialogue**
- › Revealing differences, including **richer understandings of 'we'**
 - Creating **shared reference points**, 'we' might mean one or more of:
 - A service
 - A team
 - A community of practice
 - The organisation (The Open University)
- › Helping people **compare understandings**

**The real value was
in the conversations
it enabled**

Part two: Learning and understanding



2.2

Creating spaces where different understandings meet

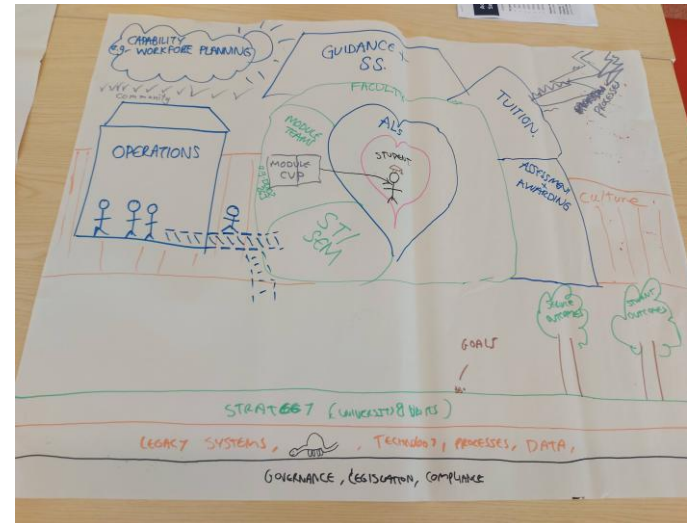
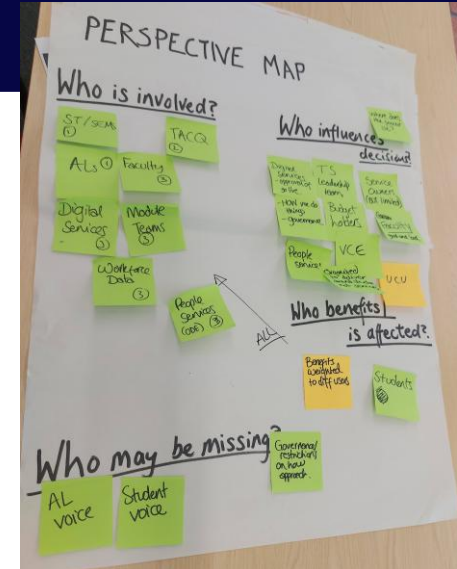
What does it mean to design a good service?

- › What makes a service good for the people who use it?
- › Whose experiences and perspectives are we learning from?

How did the visuals/models as frameworks create a space for different understandings to meet?

- ▶ Whose perspectives are represented? Whose are missing?
- ▶ What conversations became possible?
- ▶ How did different understandings create opportunities for learning?

Perspective
map and rich
picture from
Tuition Services
team away day



The 15 principles of good service design

A good service:

- 1 Is easy to find
- 2 Enables a user to complete the outcome they set out to
- 3 Clearly explains its purpose
- 4 Sets the expectations a user has of it
- 5 Works in a way that's familiar
- 6 Requires no prior knowledge to use
- 7 Is agnostic of organisational structures
- 8 Requires the minimum possible steps to complete
- 9 Is consistent throughout
- 10 Has no dead ends
- 11 Is usable by everyone, equally
- 12 Encourages the right behaviours from users and staff
- 13 Responds to change quickly
- 14 Clearly explain why a decision has been made
- 15 Makes it easy to get human assistance

Extract from *Good Services: How to design services that work* by Lou Downe. Poster designed by **Daly & Lyon**.

Different stakeholders hold different understandings of a service

Progress can depend on creating spaces for those perspectives to meet, be explored and developed together.

We've become increasingly interested in:

- › Multiple perspectives
- › Conversational spaces
- › Sense-making together
- › Richer understandings of 'we'

Lou Downe's perspective helps keep our attention on people, experiences and outcomes throughout

Service design is
10% design
90% creating the
conditions for
design to happen

Extract from Good Services: How to design services that work by Lou Downe

Extracts from *Good Services: How to design services that work* by Lou Downe. Posters designed by [Daly & Lyon](#).

~~It depends~~

A good service
is good for

Your users

Your staff

Your organisation

The world

Extract from Good Services: How to design services that work by Lou Downe

Part three: Stewarding and adapting

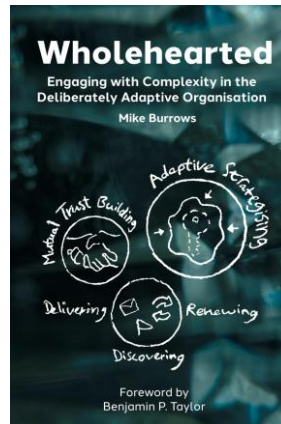


2.3

Organising for outcomes

Mike Burrows' Wholehearted perspective:

- › Invites us to consider how services and organisations **learn, adapt and renew** themselves through dialogue, participation and ongoing inquiry
- › Encourages us to focus less on designing services as static structures, and more on **services as continually evolving systems**



Wholehearted: Engaging with Complexity in the Deliberately Adaptive Organisation
by Mike Burrows.

Organising for outcomes may require creating conditions that enable people and organisations to continually learn about, steward and adapt services as systems.

What are we beginning to learn?



2.4

Our emerging insights



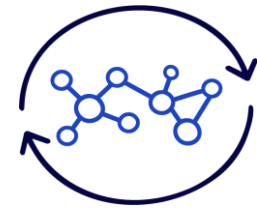
Making visible

Blending Service Design and STiP can help make services more visible and understandable by enabling conversations that otherwise might not happen



Learning and understanding

Progress often depends on creating spaces where different perspectives on services can meet, be explored and developed together



Stewarding and adapting

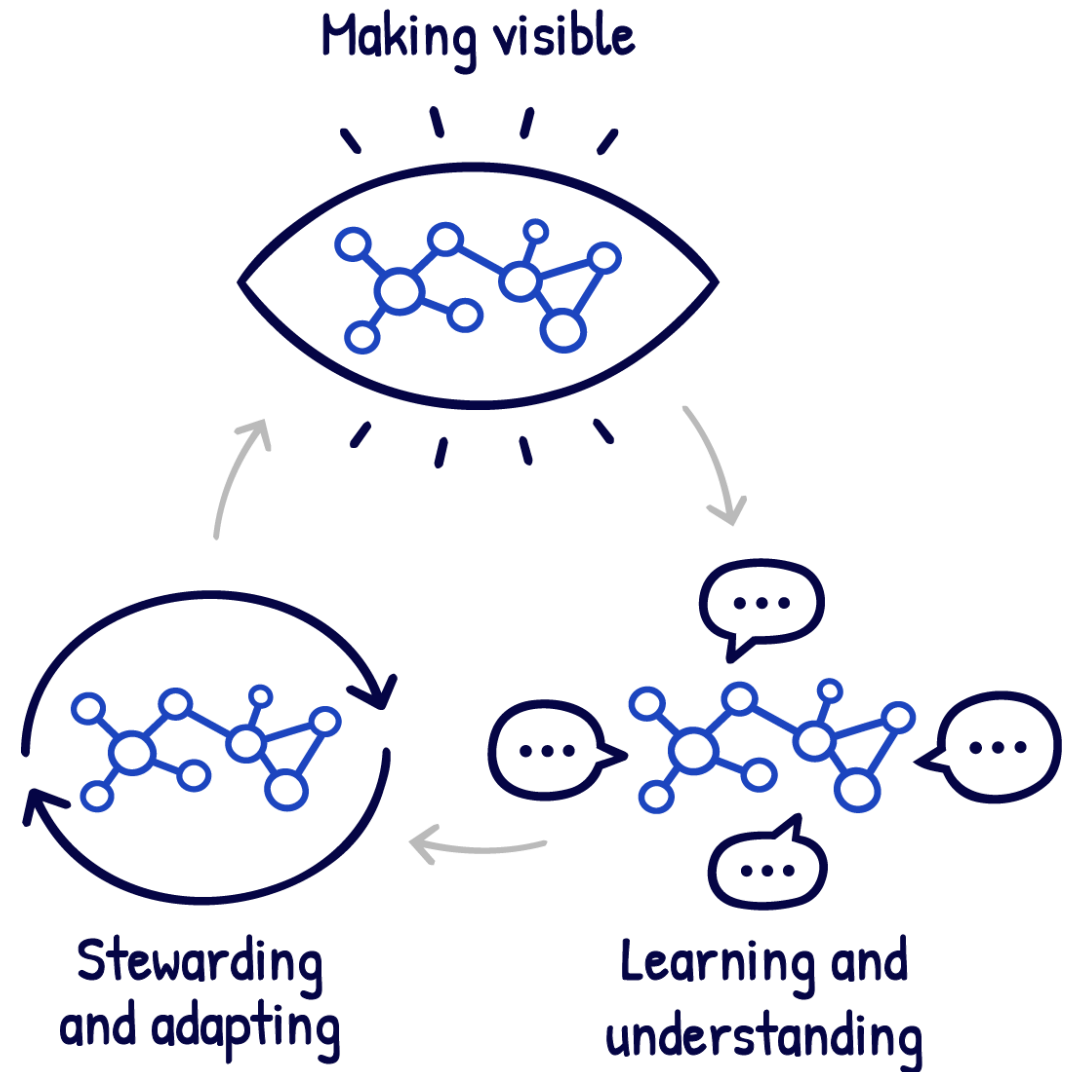
Organising for outcomes may require creating conditions that enable people and organisations to continually learn about, steward and adapt services as systems

Closing thoughts



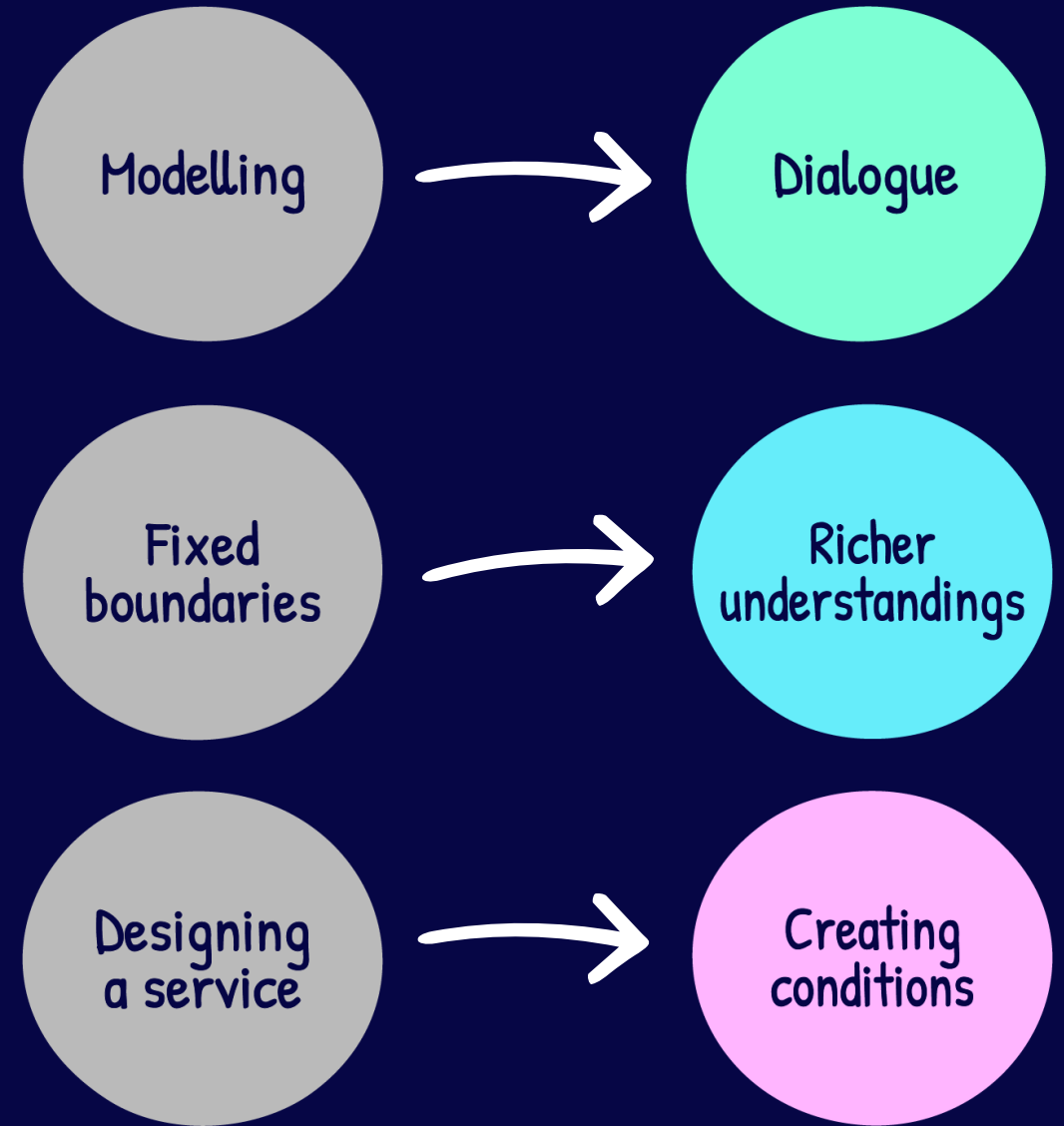
Returning to our journey:

From making a service visible, to creating spaces where different understandings can meet, to creating conditions for learning, stewardship and adaptation in pursuit of meaningful outcomes.



As our inquiry evolved, our attention shifted from:

- › Modelling towards dialogue
- › Fixed boundaries towards richer and more varied understandings of who “we” are
- › Designing a service towards creating conditions for ongoing learning and adaptation



**Organising for
outcomes depends
on more than
defining or
designing services**

Our co-inquiry continues...

**How might we create
the conditions that
help people and
organisations
continually see, learn
about, steward and
adapt services as
systems?**

Thank you

References, notes and materials

Burrows, M. (2025) Wholehearted: Engaging with complexity in the deliberately adaptive organisation. Agendashift Press

Burrows, M. (2026). Introducing the Deliberately Adaptive Organisation.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUJzwueRL0U&feature=youtu.be>

Lou Downe, The School of Good Services. <https://good.services/about>

Tarling, K. (2017). A common language to understand services. <https://medium.com/leading-service-design/a-common-language-to-understand-services-ada407c100df>

STiP is both (i) the namesake of a successful postgraduate programme pioneered by the Open University since 2010, and (ii) more recently, part of the lingua franca of an emergent quasi-professionalised community of systems thinking practitioners (STPs)

Three principles of STiP (based on 3 activities of a STiP heuristic developed at the OU) include: (i) relational thinking in practice (understanding interrelationships); (ii) perspectives thinking in practice (engaging with multiple perspectives); and (iii) adaptive thinking in practice (reflecting on boundary judgements) (Reynolds, 2024).... [**Systems Thinking Principles for Making Change**](#). *Systems*, 12(10), article no. 437.

[OpenLearn Systems Thinking Hub](#)

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