Provocation paper: transforming public services through relational change

We're at a critical point in UK public services, where we have broad understanding of how to do things better… but the more we push, the more it doesn't happen. It's fine to ask for leaders who find they have the capability and the context to 'do better'. But if we want more sustainable and effective services, we need to think carefully about why it hasn't happened yet – and change our approach and even our identity as those who believe in and what to support better public services…

Relational public services work: but usually only in a short-term, local 'bubble'.

We know that 'relational public services' work. That when we really listen to citizens and enable people to help themselves, to work together, and to meet the needs of other people appropriately, we get better outcomes and lower costs.

We also know that it's hard, and that take-up and potential of relational services is often limited – and curtailed – by systemic challenges. The question now is not whether these services work, or that we should be advocating for them, but how to move from the current fragmented system to one where relational approaches are embedded – at scale – and sustainable. Some of the issues include:

- Structural barriers: public services are dominated by vertical hierarchies and vertical accountability, making collaboration across boundaries difficult. Siloed responsibilities lead to disjointed services and missed opportunities for holistic solutions.
- Misaligned incentives: metrics prioritise short-term outputs, failing to capture the long-term value of relational approaches. So resources are often directed toward acute, reactive interventions rather than preventative, relational methods.
- Governance complexity: accountability is fragmented, with no shared responsibility for outcomes across organisations, while centralised control mechanisms discourage local innovation and adaptability.

The temptation then is to simply advocate for the above to change – but that's a bit like helping someone play better tennis by saying 'be more like Djokovic'. It could actually be counter-productive. Why? Because of cultural and identity challenges: professionals often identify strongly with their specific roles, creating resistance to cross-boundary collaboration. And leadership often focuses on maintaining control rather than enabling adaptation, limiting the potential for systemic change. Both get their identity from their role in the current system.

Shooting ourselves in the foot

Those who currently advocate for relational public services tend to end up locking in to a role which systematically undermines their chances of real success. There is a choice of default roles:

- Overloaded hero – taking on the poisoned chalice of developing relational services in your zone of influence while protecting that zone from the rest of the system. This delivers results, while you are around and capable, but isolates the rest of the system from learning, while allowing them to benefit if you succeed – taking the credit – or to scapegoat you if you fail. When you eventually leave, or quite likely burn out, things go back to the status quo ante.
- Ignored victim – which comes in three flavours:
    - telling people the right way to do things, but being ignored; this offers a reassuring stasis with a feeling of reassurance without being challenged.
    - being a passionate campaigner – vociferously advocating for change – which generates push-back from the system, and can come at a price.
    - researching and spreading the word, without actually creating an impact.

In each of these roles, the ultimate goal is not reached, those who hope for a better approach have to settle for a psychological pay-off rather than actually delivering real results – they can be confirmed in their righteousness. This is not to criticise those who want better – of which I am one. It is to bring a psychological and a systemic perspective to bear, which shows us why – not always, and not every time, but predictably and with great reliability, things don't really change despite a lot of work and a lot of noise over more than twenty years. We know the conditions for generating polarisation that is ultimately sterile, and that in fact makes real change less likely.

Appreciating the dilemna

It is easy to see the room for services to be improved – any form of 'back to the floor' or mystery shopping or engagement with citizens and boundary staff will come up with many possibilities. And the vast majority of 'managers' and politicians and other leaders of public services are neither stupid nor malevolent. So why do things not change? Those who want change don't ask ourselves this question enough, and we are too easily contented with answers which comport with our own 'radical' and superior identity. In reality:

- the challenges of creating coherence, integration, legibility, accountability, and visibility of how money is spent and authority is exercised across complex public services are very real. And identity is formed by identification with role in managing this.
- because accountability works vertically in this system – all the way to the Secretary of State in the case of the NHS – managers have to face and negotiate with this vertical, budget, boundary, and silo-based accountability. Accountability to actual results in citizens' lives are a direct threat to this.
- most managers understand all too well the pain points, complexities, and failures in their services – all the more for services like social care and health which are so important in people's lives. They have to develop some kind of psychological defences to continue to try to manage the best – or a feasible – balance of adaptation to meeting citizen requirements (which given the constraints of services, silos etc usually directly drives costs in this model), and their reporting accountabilities. It's excruciating, and the more you care, the more it hurts.

Given this, confronting leaders, managers, and politicians with the inadequacies of front-line services is likely to have one of these sorts of effects:

- Creating an enemy – telling some they are wrong about their life's work might turn them steadfastly against you an everything you stand for – so the good ideas don't get adopted.
- Breaking psychological defences – exposing people anew to the pains they see and to a certain extent have to avoid, without giving them the ability to address them,
- Winning one more person to 'our side' – more polarisation, without shifting the course of the war. Often this means getting short-term backing that is:
  - either genuine, but lacking in full understanding of the complexities to be dealt with.
  - or a 'poisoned chalice': 'well, ok, if you take accountability for managing this and insulate me and the organisation form any negative consequences…

In these circumstances, it's easy to see why bubbles of relational public services can arise, and can 'prove the case' within their own scope, but are treated a foreign objects, isolated and if possible removed by the 'organisational immune system'. What's necessary is first to win trust and prove results for relational public services and then create approaches which can interface with traditional ways of working in a manageable way – otherwise we are stripping managers of their identity and safety and pushing them into double binds, with predictable results.

How to shift from current systems to relational public services

To actually move toward relational public services requires practical steps that focus on evolution and reshaping of professional and therefore personal identities. The goal is not to demand change but to create conditions where change is possible and desirable to those who need to change. The risk here is of falling back into 'if people would just' statements – always an effective means of change. We need to step back from any advocacy that locks us into identities as 'campaigners', 'rebels', 'activists' – though they all have their place and time – and focus on practical actions:

- Redesign governance – the goal is to move from centralised control to enabling local autonomy, ensuring that accountability aligns with shared outcomes. The way to do this is to create governance frameworks that balance vertical oversight (which provides assurance) with horizontal collaboration, supporting local problem-solving.
- Build incremental pathways – start with small, targeted initiatives that demonstrate the benefits of relational approaches. Resist the urge to let them be sealed off from the rest of the organisation. Success in these areas can build momentum for broader adoption, but only if we create mechanisms for iterative learning and adaptation, allowing services to evolve based on what works in practice.
- Reshaping professional roles: support professionals to see their roles as part of a wider system, focusing on shared outcomes rather than isolated tasks. Develop leadership programs that build the capacity to manage complexity and foster collaboration.
- Embedding relational practices: integrate co-design with citizens into service planning, ensuring that solutions reflect lived experiences. Provide frontline workers with autonomy to make decisions, supported by training and peer learning.
- Sustaining change: focus on metrics that reflect relational outcomes, such as trust, well-being, and long-term efficiency. Use examples of successful relational services to build confidence and demonstrate viability.

Most importantly, managers and leaders need to be supported both to increase their capability to manage the complexity and potential paradoxes of blending horizontal and vertical accountability, and given practical ways to enable relational services without having to create a counter-productive 'firewall' for safety.

The provocation

Rather than demanding quick systemic change, a practical path forward needs incremental steps that build trust, reshape professional and managerial identities, demonstrate, reinforce, scale, and embed the tangible benefits of relational approaches, and prove how they can be integrated with existing structures in sustainable ways. Through careful governance, sustained learning, and a commitment to practical progress, relational public services can move from the margins to the mainstream.

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Created for the panel discussion at the Systems Innovation conference on 14 February 2025 – link.redquadrant.com/SIpublicservicessystemsthinking2025 - and follow-up discussion on summary paper of the conference link.redquadrant.com/SIpublicservicesystemsthinkingpaper2025

Footnote – notes on the missing middle

In the interests of brevity, I have omitted many potentially important and interesting sections from this document, principally:

- Acknowledging the good work of very many people who have brought us to this point, with these possibilities, who have proven the case for relational public services on the ground and who continue to work to provide pragmatic and effective transition routes.
- Providing the evidence of the effectiveness of 'relational approaches', and enumerating the movements, people, and places who have demonstrated this.
- Giving the examples of the self-limiting nature of much of the current approach, including analysing the instincts and leadership style of the current government.
- Tracing the history – both constructive and self-limiting – of the ideas and thinking and vehicles that have shaped this debate to date.
- Providing the theory and analysis to back up the current barriers to change, why they are barriers, and the recommendations to overcome them.

These omissions risk the argument being undermined by various objections, and also risk those involved in this process feeling attacked. However, I hope the result is a more manageable document which will provoke some much-needed debate.