

STRATEGIC REVIEW

Towards a Relational State

What the relational public services movement needs next, and how funders can help it grow.

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Foreword

Leaving care rarely means facing one neatly defined need. A young person may need a home, work, confidence and relationships they can rely on. The same is true for people leaving prison, escaping abuse or rebuilding their lives in a new country. What often matters most is not whether support exists, but whether someone takes the time to understand their life as a whole and stays alongside them when progress is uneven.

Over 20 years in the charity sector in service delivery and advocacy organisations, as well as the Henry Smith Foundation, I have seen this relational quality in the strongest organisations. They earn trust, adapt as circumstances change and connect support around what matters to each person. They see people not as collections of needs, but as individuals with strengths, relationships and resources of their own.

This is about more than kindness or good communication. Relationships are one of the main ways change happens. They allow people to speak honestly, help practitioners understand what is really going on and make it possible for support to remain useful when life does not follow a predictable path.

Yet many public services struggle to work in this way. Standardised processes, clear responsibilities and common measures can provide consistency and accountability. But applied too rigidly, they leave little room for continuity, professional judgement or responses shaped around the person. People are passed between services, repeatedly asked to tell their story or helped with one part of their life while the wider causes of difficulty remain untouched.

Relational public services offer a different approach. They organise services around relationships as a mechanism of change, giving people greater continuity, practitioners more freedom to exercise judgement, communities more power and institutions more capacity to learn and adapt.

The task now is to help relational approaches travel further: outward to organisations already working relationally, upward into policy and funding institutions, and inward through stronger evidence, shared learning and coordination. I'd like to thank Polly, Marc and Nigel for this important contribution which puts relationships in their rightful place at the centre of service design.

Public services are under immense pressure. Reform cannot be only about structures, targets or efficiency. It must also attend to the quality of the relationships through which people experience support and change becomes possible.

Anand Shukla

Chief Executive, Henry Smith Foundation

Executive Summary

This report is a landscape review of Relational Public Services (RPS), written for funders, policymakers, practitioners and others interested in the future of public services. It maps the ideas, organisations and initiatives shaping the field, makes the case for greater investment in its collective development, and provides a primer for future work. Its purpose is not to prescribe a single model, but to establish a shared understanding of the field, identify the conditions that could help it develop, and provide a basis for further collaboration and action.

Public services are being asked to respond to problems that cannot be solved by the status quo. Chronic ill health, long-term unemployment, loneliness and community decline all require services that can understand people in context, build trust over time, and work with the assets that already exist in communities.

UK public services remain shaped by centralisation and New Public Management (NPM): models that prioritise standardisation, targets, and transactional delivery. While these approaches improved consistency and accountability, they are poorly suited to today's most pressing challenges - complex, interdependent "wicked problems" such as chronic ill health, family breakdown, and long-term unemployment. Many organisations whose impact depends on trust, continuity, and human connection are working despite the system rather than with it.

This creates a strategic opportunity. A growing policy movement - Relational Public Services (RPS) - is attempting to redesign public services around relationships, trust, and community capacity. Funders are well-positioned to develop this movement and to shape the wider system in which their grantees operate.

What are Relational Public Services?

Relational Public Services (RPS) is an emerging field that places human relationships at the centre of public service design and delivery. Rather than treating relationships as a byproduct of good services, it understands them as a primary mechanism through which change happens.

Whether thinking about relational practice, community power or systems change, six core principles define this approach:

- **Person-centred orientation:** recognising citizens as complex, unique human beings within their full life contexts, rather than as "cases", "diagnoses" or sets of eligibility criteria
- **Power:** redistributing agency from institutions to individuals and from the state to communities, moving from "doing to" towards "doing with" and, where possible, "doing by"
- **Learning:** treating learning as an ongoing, embedded practice and asking "what works, for whom, in this context?"

- **Collaboration:** moving beyond consultation towards sustained cooperation and shared decision-making between individuals, communities, professionals and institutions
- **Prevention:** investing in relationships, support and community capacity before people reach crisis, and understanding prevention as a function of social infrastructure
- **Flexible structure:** giving practitioners and communities room to respond to people and circumstances, within clear values, purposeful boundaries and long-term commitments

These principles describe public services that start with what matters to people, share power and responsibility, learn and adapt, work across boundaries, build capacity before crisis, and create the conditions for sustained relational work.

The State of the Field

RPS is not a fringe idea. It is supported by a strong intellectual base at UCL, Northumbria University, and major think tanks; a dense practitioner ecosystem spanning local authorities, consultancies, and community organisations; and growing policy traction, including programmes such as Test, Learn and Grow and elements of devolution policy.

However, the field faces structural constraints:

- **Scaling:** Relational approaches remain concentrated in localised “bright spots”
- **Fragmentation:** Multiple frameworks and actors operate without shared infrastructure
- **Legibility and narrative:** The field lacks a unified story and struggles to translate its insights into forms that influence central government

These challenges reflect a deeper tension: relational approaches resist standardisation and quantification, yet these are precisely what large public systems require.

Strategic Opportunities

The central finding of this review is that the RPS field has strong foundations but limited reach. It needs to extend outward to the wider universe of relational practice, upward into the institutions that shape funding and policy, and inward through stronger coordination, shared evidence and field infrastructure.

The next stage is to turn these directions into a practical programme for the field. This means connecting frontline practitioners and community organisations to wider networks of learning and support; strengthening the evidence, narratives and policy partnerships that can move relational approaches into the mainstream; and developing shared infrastructure that can coordinate learning, build workforce capability and articulate collective priorities.

It also means creating the conditions for relational work to endure, such as with longer-term funding, more relational forms of commissioning and accountability, and space for local experimentation. These opportunities offer a route from a strong but diffuse field towards one with broader participation, greater institutional influence and a stronger collective capacity to learn and act.

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Introduction

This report provides a landscape review of the Relational Public Services field. It is designed to help practitioners, government and funders better understand both the theory and practice of relational approaches, so that they might be able to consider their role in developing the reach and impact of RPS. The report draws on an extensive review of literature and initiatives, alongside targeted interviews with leading academics, practitioners, and public sector figures.

The report is organised into four main sections:

1. It defines RPS, examining the challenges it responds to, its core conceptual frameworks, and its underlying principles.
2. It explores how RPS operates in practice, mapping key organisations, areas of intervention, and illustrative case studies.
3. It analyses how the field is developing, including its approaches to training, research, partnerships, and policy engagement.
4. It synthesises the key findings, identifying what enables and what constrains the wider adoption of RPS.

2 What are Relational Public Services?

This section sets out the history, theory and intellectual frameworks used in and by the Relational Public Services movement. It aims to be a useful primer for those new to the field, introducing the key concepts, debates and language used by practitioners.

What is it responding to?

Relational approaches to public life are not new. Long before the modern welfare state, communities organised mutual aid, practitioners built trust with those they served, and local institutions operated through sustained human connection. The settlement movement, early social work, community development and youth work were all founded on the primacy of relationships¹. Today's Relational Public Services movement has not invented these practices. It is a response to their systematic marginalisation by two successive waves of state design.

The first is the post-war welfare state. Since 1945, the state has become a major instrument of standardisation and centralisation of public service delivery². This was a deliberate and often well-intentioned feature of the British welfare state, seeking to overcome unequal access and quality. But over time, power and responsibility were progressively drawn upward into administrative structures and away from local citizens and communities. Officials and experts were assumed to know best, while service users were cast as passive recipients of centrally designed provision. The result was a system that became increasingly hierarchical, unresponsive, and poorly equipped to adapt to the circumstances of individual people and places.

The second is the rise of New Public Management. By the 1980s, these failures had become politically acute. New Public Management emerged as a direct response, importing business-inspired techniques of specialisation, competition and target-driven performance in order to impose discipline, drive up quality and give citizens, recast as consumers, a means of redress against poor quality services³. These were not trivial achievements. But the cure carried its own pathologies. Frontline workers were increasingly governed by targets and compliance frameworks that left little room for judgement or relationships. Citizens became units within a system of abstracted goals: a different kind of object, but an object nonetheless.

¹ *A Hundred Origin Stories: An Unfinished History of Relational Public Services*, Simon Parker, Becca Dove and Benjamin Taylor, UCL Policy Lab, 2025.

² *Delivering the UK Welfare State*, Eleanor Carter and Michael Gibson, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 213–222, 2025.

³ *New Development: Relational Public Services—Reform and Research Agenda*, Rob Wilson, Max French, Hannah Hesselgreaves, Toby Lowe and Mark Smith, *Public Money & Management*, vol. 44, no. 6, pp. 553–558, 2024.

Both policy models, centralising and transactional, culminate today in a state that struggles to respond to complexity⁴. The problems the state most needs to address are complex, in that they have a multitude of interconnected root causes: chronic illness, long-term unemployment, family breakdown, crime, low social cohesion and more. These issues cut across organisational boundaries, change over time, and each intervention risks creating new unforeseen effects elsewhere in the system. They cannot be fixed by traditional top-down and siloed policy models.

“New public management only survives by externalising complexity. For any given role, you make the complex reality of actual life someone else’s problem. If you’re a public service worker and you’re dealing with the complexity of someone’s life in front of you and you’re having to hit certain performance targets, what you do is you take the complexity of that person’s life and you push it out of the frame and say, I can only work with you on this, this, and this.”

— Toby Lowe, Professor, Manchester Metropolitan University

The Ambition of RPS

The case for relational public services starts from a simple claim: human relationships are not just a nice-to-have within good public services, but one of their primary mechanisms⁵. Designs that strip relationships out in pursuit of efficiency, consistency or control can end up undermining the outcomes they are trying to achieve.

The intellectual foundations of this claim have been built gradually, and from multiple directions: community development, social work reform, neighbourhood health, relational welfare, community power, devolution, systems thinking and public administration. Over time, these traditions have converged around a shared view that the quality of relationships between citizens and practitioners, between communities and institutions, and between different parts of the system, is central to whether public services work.

The claims to increased effectiveness of RPS approaches rest on five distinct but mutually reinforcing arguments.

Demand. Transactional services are largely reactive: they respond to need once it has become acute, measurable and eligible. Relational services intervene earlier, address underlying causes

⁴ *Human Learning Systems: Radical Pragmatism*, Toby Lowe, Dawn Plimmer, Hannah Hesselgreaves, Felix Gradingner and Gabriel Eichsteller, Centre for Public Impact, Policy Evaluation and Research Unit and Civinet, p. 12, 2024.

⁵ *Policy Priorities to Support Relational Public Services*, Chris Fox and Hannah Hesselgreaves, with contributors, Policy Evaluation and Research Unit, Manchester Metropolitan University, p. 4, 2025.

rather than presenting symptoms, and maintain connection over time, reducing future demand on expensive acute provision⁶.

Complexity. The problems that public services most struggle with, such as chronic illness, long-term unemployment, family breakdown, or poor mental health, are not linear. Relational approaches treat learning, adaptation and context-sensitivity as core features of delivery⁷.

Assets. Relational models mobilise the resources that already exist within communities: local knowledge, informal networks, voluntary effort, family capacity and civic infrastructure⁸.

Legitimacy and cooperation. Services that people experience as doing with them rather than to them generate greater trust. Trust, in turn, generates cooperation⁹.

Workforce. Transactional models can demoralise frontline workers. Relational models restore professional judgement and human connection to frontline roles¹⁰.

These arguments constitute a substantive claim that relational approaches offer a more effective approach than dominant delivery modes, grounded in a more accurate account of how change happens in people's lives.

That case needs to be made carefully. New Public Management was itself a response to real failures: inefficiency, unaccountable bureaucracy, inconsistent quality and producer capture. The RPS movement is most credible when it takes these risks seriously, not as reasons to abandon the agenda, but as design constraints that any serious programme of reform must work within.

⁶ *The Community Paradigm: Why Public Services Need Radical Change and How It Can Be Achieved*, Adam Lent and Jessica Studdert, New Local, p. 11, 2019.

⁷ *Human Learning Systems: Radical Pragmatism*, Toby Lowe, Dawn Plimmer, Hannah Hesselgreaves, Felix Grading and Gabriel Eichsteller, Centre for Public Impact, Policy Evaluation and Research Unit and Civinet, p. 12, 2024.

⁸ *The Community Paradigm: Why Public Services Need Radical Change and How It Can Be Achieved*, Adam Lent and Jessica Studdert, New Local, p. 39, 2019.

⁹ *Relational State Capacity: Conceiving of Relationships as a Core Component of Society's Ability to Achieve Collective Ends*, Dan Honig, Mekhala Krishnamurthy and Rahul Karnamadakala Sharma, SNF Agora Working Paper 01, Johns Hopkins University, 2025.

¹⁰ *Mission Driven Bureaucrats: Empowering People to Help Government Do Better*, Dan Honig, Oxford University Press, 2024.

Frameworks for Relational Services

The theoretical work outlined above has been essential in developing a broader and conceptually coherent framework. We believe RPS has roots in three distinct but related traditions: relational practice, community power, and systems change. The recent flagship report ‘Policy Priorities to Support Relational Public Services’¹¹, co-authored by a number of leading players in the movement, reflects consensus across the community and emphasises that relational approaches “extend beyond one-to-one interactions to nurture the social fabric of communities, strengthening the collective capacity of people.”¹²

Domains	Core claim	Primary ideas
Relational Practice	The quality of the relationship between a practitioner and a person is not just a pleasant by-product of good service: it is the primary mechanism through which meaningful change happens.	Seeing the ‘whole person’; resisting the bureaucratic tendency to “caseify” people; shifting from bureaucratic language towards vocabularies of reciprocity, kindness, trust, vulnerability and safety.
Community Power	Genuine, lasting solutions to complex social problems are not delivered to communities by external agencies. They are generated within and by communities.	Asset-based approaches; identifying and mobilising collective resources such as skills, associations, spaces, institutions and social capital; place-based working; devolving more power and funding locally.
Systems change	Many public problems cannot be fixed by improving individual services in isolation. They require changes to conditions, relationships, rules and mindsets.	Liberated professionals can exercise judgement, build relationships and respond to complexity; relational governance is embedded.

¹¹ *Policy Priorities to Support Relational Public Services*, Chris Fox and Hannah Hesselgreaves, with contributors, Policy Evaluation and Research Unit, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2025.

¹² Ibid.

Case Study 1: Shared Lives

Shared Lives is a community-based social care model in which an adult who needs support is matched with an approved Shared Lives carer, who then shares their home, family and community life with that person. The matching process is highly personalised: both parties must agree before any arrangement begins, and the quality of the relationship is treated as the primary mechanism of support rather than a by-product of it.

The model operates at three levels: live-in arrangements; day support; and short breaks and respite. Carers are self-employed, recruited and trained by one of 153 regulated local schemes across the UK, and supported by the national body Shared Lives Plus. In 2024–25, the number of Shared Lives carers reached 10,406, a 13% increase over four years¹³.

Shared Lives generates compelling evidence: the Care Quality Commission rates 96% of Shared Lives schemes as good or outstanding, the highest rating of any regulated social care service¹⁴. Shared Lives is typically £30,000 per year lower cost per person for people with learning disabilities compared to residential alternatives¹⁵. If all areas of the country matched those with the highest rates of Shared Lives use, over 30,000 people would benefit, generating direct cost savings of well over £100m per year.

Shared Lives embodies all three pillars of RPS: relational practice at its core; community power through carers drawn from within communities and mobilising existing assets; and systems change by directly challenging the commissioning logic of institutional social care.

¹³ *The UK State of Shared Lives 2024–25 Report*, Shared Lives Plus, 2026.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *What Is Shared Lives Care?*, Shared Lives Plus, undated, accessed July 2026.

Six Core Principles

Across all three operating approaches, six principles are shared. The boxes below set out each principle in detail.

1. Person-centred orientation

What it means

RPS shifts from viewing citizens through the lens of “cases,” “diagnoses,” or “eligibility criteria” towards recognising them as complex, unique human beings within their full life contexts.

In practice

Practitioners ask “what matters to you?” rather than beginning with a predetermined service pathway. Language shifts away from bureaucratic categories towards vocabularies of trust, dignity, reciprocity and agency.

2. Power

What it means

Relational services redistribute agency from institutions to individuals, and from the state to communities. They move from “doing to” towards “doing with” and, where possible, “doing by”.

In practice

Citizens, communities and frontline workers are involved in design, delivery and evaluation. Power is devolved through funding, governance, ownership or rights, and success is measured partly through people’s sense of control and ownership.

3. Learning

What it means

RPS treats learning as an ongoing, embedded practice. Services ask “what works, for whom, in this context?” rather than assuming that predefined outputs can capture success.

In practice

Teams use reflection, feedback, case studies, ethnography and narrative evidence to understand what is happening. Frontline insight flows upwards into strategy and policy, not only downwards from managers to staff.

4. Collaboration

What it means

Collaboration goes beyond consultation. It requires sustained cooperation and shared decision-making between individuals, communities, professionals and institutions.

In practice

Public services work across organisational silos, sharing risk and responsibility. Governance structures bring together local government, the NHS, VCSE organisations, community groups and residents around shared problems.

5. Prevention

What it means

Relational services invest in relationships, support and community capacity before people reach crisis. Prevention is understood as a function of social infrastructure, not only earlier professional intervention.

In practice

Funding and delivery shift towards long-term wellbeing, early support, community spaces, voluntary organisations and neighbourhood assets. Services measure demand reduction and resilience alongside short-term activity.

6. Flexible Structure

What it means

Relational approaches require flexibility, but not formlessness. They need clear values, long-term commitments and purposeful boundaries to avoid drift or harm.

In practice

Frontline workers are freed from excessive specification, but operate within clear ethical and professional frameworks. Funding and commissioning move towards longer-term partnerships that create the conditions for sustained relational work.

Case Study 2: Fleetwood Thrive

Fleetwood is a significantly deprived seaside community in Lancashire with 28,595 registered patients across three GP practices. The population faces persistently poor health outcomes: anxiety and depression affect 25% of adults (more than twice the England average) and the town has twice the Lancashire average unemployment rate in younger age groups¹⁶.

Historically, services operated in silos, struggling to address the overlapping and intergenerational nature of poor health, unemployment and poor housing simultaneously.

Rather than scaling up conventional clinical or statutory provision, a local GP progressively developed an integrated neighbourhood model now known as the Fleetwood Thrive initiative. According to Adam Lent, three principles stand out in the initiative: deep understanding (taking the time to understand a person), versatile response (developing bespoke response) and collaborative delivery (working closely with the person, their network and wider community assets)¹⁷.

What makes Fleetwood distinctive (“light years ahead of anywhere else” in the words of Adam Lent) is that individual clinical work is completely interwoven with community-run provision. The hospital itself is community-owned. A young person’s mental health support might include clinical therapy, but it is fundamentally linked to a community-run youth centre and peer groups.

The results have been striking. The Thrive network reported a 59% reduction in A&E attendances for children with mental health needs within two years of launch¹⁸ and a 67% decrease in antisocial behaviour incidents in one of the poorest wards in Fleetwood¹⁹.

Fleetwood illustrates all three thematic families of RPS working in concert: relational practice at the individual level; asset-based and place-based community power; and systems change that challenges the conventional NHS “factory” model.

¹⁶ *Working Together to Improve Health in Fleetwood*, NHS England, 2023.

¹⁷ *Thriving Not Surviving! How a Town in North-West England Cut Child Mental Health Referrals by 50% in Just One Year*, Adam Lent, LinkedIn, 2024.

¹⁸ *NHS Director in Fleetwood to See How Mental Health Initiatives Are Helping Children and Young People to Thrive*, Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board, 2025.

¹⁹ *A Shared Heart: The Story of Fleetwood’s Community Health Hub*, Adam Lent, The King’s Fund, 2026.

3 The RPS Ecosystem

This mapping of the RPS ecosystem is not an exhaustive account. The RPS ecosystem is wide, and its roots in community practice mean that the organisations consciously identifying with the movement represent only a fraction of the relational work actually happening. This ecosystem is mature and contains strong ideas, credible practice and influential actors. However, it lacks a shared mechanism for accumulating learning, coordinating influence or connecting the visible RPS movement to the wider universe of relational practice. This is why field-building is now the central strategic task.

Layer	Role in the field	Illustrative actors
Academic Institutions	Develop the conceptual architecture of RPS, strengthen the evidence base, and test claims through empirical research.	Relational Public Services Coalition; Relational State Capacity Programme; Human Learning Systems Coalition; Government Outcomes Lab
Think tanks and policy organisations	Translate relational ideas into public policy arguments, reform agendas and narratives capable of influencing national debate.	Demos; UCL Policy Lab; New Local; Locality; Institute for Government; IPPR; Future Governance Forum
Specialist consultancies and intermediaries	Help local authorities, NHS bodies, commissioners and civil society organisations apply relational principles in practice.	Community Catalysts; Collaborate CIC; Power to Change; IMPOWER; PPL; Mutual Ventures; Question Factory

Local and national public service innovators	Test relational approaches in statutory systems, place-based reform, social care, employment, health, youth justice and community power.	Gateshead; Camden; Wigan; Plymouth; Greater Manchester; Grimsby; Test Valley; Test, Learn and Grow
Practitioner organisations	Deliver relational work directly with individuals and communities, often outside the formal RPS movement.	Camerados; Ambition Lawrence Weston; Kirklees Better Outcomes Partnership; community anchors and local charities
Hybrid and field-building organisations	Convene, evidence and scale relational practice across sectors.	The Relationships Project; Kinship Works; Place Matters

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Field Building

This section documents the main ways in which the field is seeking to develop itself and its impact. It covers training, evidence-gathering, influencing and networks, and policy change.

Training

Training is widely viewed as essential to Relational Public Services for two reasons. First, it helps enact a cultural shift away from conventional top-down NPM policy approaches. Second, it helps ensure the quality of the change. While RPS presupposes humans' natural instincts for relationships, it recognises that doing so effectively in a public service setting requires learned skills and intentionality: active listening, empathy, and conflict resolution.

Case Study 3: The Wigan Deal - Training for a Relational Culture

Under Donna Hall's leadership, Wigan Council recognised that many staff were deeply habituated to command and control, rules-driven delivery and saw residents through the lens of eligibility, risk and compliance. Training was therefore used explicitly to "strip out" those assumptions and give people permission and confidence to move beyond a tick-box culture into more human, responsive ways of working.

Central to this effort was a programme of "Deal training" and the BeWigan experience, which invited staff to reflect on their values and everyday behaviours, and to practise "different conversations" with residents: open, exploratory, asset-based, focused on what matters to people rather than on service processes²⁰. A flagship element is the BeWigan Experience: an interactive programme built around behaviours of "Be Positive, Be Accountable, Be Courageous, Be Kind."²¹

In parallel, Hall and colleagues invested in ethnography-style training for social care staff and partners. Practitioners were taught how to listen, spend time in neighbourhoods, and notice the hidden assets and informal supports that never appear on a referral form²².

Over time, these training offers were woven into recruitment, performance and day-to-day supervision, so that skills like active listening, empathy, strengths-based questioning and conflict resolution became organisational expectations rather than optional extras. In this way, Wigan shows how training can both catalyse and sustain a system-wide shift towards relational public services.

²⁰ *How Wigan Drove Change by Putting People First*, Emma Sisk, Apolitical, 2020.

²¹ *BeWigan Behaviours*, Wigan Council, undated, accessed July 2026.

²² *Deal Training*, Wigan Council, 2018.

Research and Evidence

Research is generally used in four ways within RPS: conceptual development and policy design; innovation; evidence generation; and learning. Think tanks and academics help RPS systematise its insights and articulate a different policy paradigm. Research can also explore “frontier questions”, including the role of artificial intelligence and technology in relational systems. It is also vital for validating relational approaches and making them legible and credible to sceptical stakeholders, including central government and the Treasury. For example, Dan Honig’s Relational State Capacity programme is helping to develop the empirical basis for understanding citizen-state relationships as a component of state capacity.

Influence and Partnerships

RPS’s movement could be described as a highly networked but unstructured field. There are partnerships running across sectors: academic institutions collaborating with local authorities; consultancies working alongside community organisations and micro-enterprises; and think tanks partnering to advance relational ideas within national policy debates. One striking example of cross-collaboration is the Human Learning Systems (HLS) experiment, which brought together Gateshead Council, scholars from Northumbria University Business School, Community Catalysts, UCL Policy Lab, and Demos. Influence tends to be distributed rather than centrally coordinated, with agenda-setting emerging from multiple nodes across the ecosystem.

Case Study 4: Human Learning Systems in Gateshead

Collaborate CIC and the Centre for Public Impact worked together to redesign how an entire local authority thinks about performance, commissioning and frontline practice. Gateshead became a large-scale test bed for moving away from New Public Management and towards a learning-centred, relational model: instead of specifying services through detailed contracts and targets, the council and its partners focused on understanding people’s real lives, supporting frontline teams to learn in context, and changing system rules that blocked relational work.

Northumbria academics documented and theorised these changes, while Collaborate CIC and CPI acted as practice partners, helping translate HLS principles into concrete changes in commissioning, data use and governance.

The result was not just a local reform but a shared body of frameworks, case studies and language that now shapes HLS thinking across the wider RPS ecosystem²³.

²³ *Human Learning Systems: A Practical Guide for the Curious—Learning as Management Strategy: Gateshead Council*, Mark Smith, Centre for Public Impact, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and Iriss, 2022.

Policy Engagement

RPS policy engagement is ongoing, but fragmented. The field includes well-established policy actors, such as Demos, the UCL Policy Lab, and New Local, as well as local authorities with links to civil servants, MPs, and central government. RPS has achieved some policy influence, most notably in relation to the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, the Pride in Place Fund, and Test, Learn and Grow.

However, this influence is typically indirect. Despite these tensions, there is broad consensus that policy engagement is essential if relational approaches are to move from the margins into mainstream public service systems. As Alex Fox, CEO of Community Catalysts, puts it, the goal of policy engagement and research is to shift the “Overton window in public services” and “make these ideas feel normal and accessible.”

Case Study 5: Test, Learn and Grow

A flagship example of policy engagement within RPS, the government’s Test, Learn and Grow programme is a £100m Cabinet Office reform initiative started by Georgia Gould, previously Parliamentary Secretary in the Cabinet Office. It deploys cross-government “innovation squads” into ten local areas to work with councils, frontline workers and communities on problems like family hubs, temporary accommodation and neighbourhood health²⁴.

Rather than imposing centrally designed solutions, the programme explicitly adopts a relational, “test and learn” approach: central officials, local authorities and VCSE partners co-design small-scale interventions, iteratively adapt them based on feedback, and use the learning to inform wider system change back in Whitehall.

This makes Test, Learn and Grow both a vehicle for mainstreaming relational ideas inside central government, and a concrete example of the RPS principles of liberated professionals, collaboration across levels, prevention and place-based working being written into a national reform programme.

²⁴ *Communities Across the Country to Benefit from ‘Innovation Squads’ to Re-build Public Services*, Cabinet Office, GOV.UK, 2025.

5 Strengths, Tensions and Challenges

This section looks forward at how the field is likely to develop in the years to come, grounded in our assessment of its strengths, tensions and challenges.

Strengths

The RPS field has three major strengths. It is practitioner-led, giving it credibility and proximity to the realities of service delivery. It is unusually collaborative, with dense relationships between researchers, local authorities, consultancies, community organisations and think tanks. And it has a strong culture of experimentation, with many actors already testing new forms of commissioning, governance, training and frontline practice.

These strengths mean the field does not need to be created from scratch. The task is to extend, connect and institutionalise what already exists. But doing so requires confronting a set of unresolved tensions.

Areas of Tension and Challenge

Funding: quality, not quantity

In a financially constrained context, a notable strength of RPS is that it does not simply call for increased funding. Most interviewees focused instead on funding strategy: resources should provide citizens and frontline practitioners with the time, flexibility, and confidence to implement relational approaches effectively. However, as Alex Fox highlights, there is a “big gap in the funding landscape” for “next-level work”, i.e. the transition from small-scale pilots to fully scaled and embedded approaches.

Policy engagement: to work against, or to work within?

Policy engagement is one of the most contested areas within RPS. Some actors are deeply embedded in policy networks; others feel that the system works against relational approaches. Some argue that RPS must better “meet policymakers where they are.” Others view the current system as fundamentally incompatible with relational approaches.

Accountability: flexibility versus clarity

Because relational approaches rely on trust, distributed decision-making and context-sensitive judgement, conventional accountability mechanisms are poorly suited to capturing what relational work produces. Yet the absence of robust accountability structures carries real risks.

The field needs forms of accountability that preserve flexibility while providing clarity, rigour and challenge.

Research approach

RPS is well-supported by a strong research ecosystem, but tensions remain around evidence. Qualitative insights, ethnographies and practice-based learning do not align neatly with the expectations of central government and the Treasury.

Scaling, fragmentation and narrative

RPS consistently struggles to scale beyond localised bright spots. The field remains structurally fragmented, with multiple models and initiatives operating without shared infrastructure. It also lacks a clear overarching narrative, making it harder to create system-wide discourse or influence mainstream public service reform.

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Conclusion: What the Field Needs Next

The picture that emerges from this review is of a field with intellectual depth, a dynamic core of practitioners, and growing policy influence.

The field's next phase depends on progress in three directions. Outward, the networks that exist serve the core well but extend only weakly into the larger universe of organisations already doing relational work. Upward, the movement has achieved real but indirect policy influence, but has not yet secured sustained institutional commitment. Inward, the field is highly collaborative, but collaboration is not the same as coordination. There is no shared infrastructure capable of accumulating learning, setting collective priorities, or presenting a unified account of what relational public services are and what they have achieved.

This creates a significant opportunity for the field. Relational approaches offer a way to make public services more human, more adaptive and more effective in the face of complex social challenges. The next phase of field-building should focus on the conditions that allow this potential to spread. This includes connecting people and practice, building shared learning, strengthening evidence and narrative, and supporting the long-term shift towards a more relational state.

Over the next six months, the Henry Smith Foundation will work with partners across the field to explore these opportunities and understand where it can make the most useful contribution.

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AI Use Statement

Generative AI tools were used in a limited way to support brainstorming, drafting and editing during the preparation of this report. The research, analysis, judgements, recommendations and final text are the work of the authors.

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