



SUMMARY

Gateshead Council has been experimenting with Public Service Reform prototypes since 2018, with its inaugural experiment focussing upon the use of council tax arrears as a signal of people requiring more holistic and bespoke support through relational approaches to public service. This case study follows on, to describe subsequent prototypes and how learning from this work has led to the development of the “Liberated Method” and the ongoing Changing Futures Northumbria programme which has a broader geographical footprint and wider set of partners and stakeholders.

| Overview and history

Describe your context and the work that your organisation/partnership does.

Gateshead Council’s Public Service Reform work has developed a series of prototypes to experiment with the creation of a bespoke public service response to the needs of citizens. Following on from the Council Tax arrears prototype in 2018, a project was developed based within libraries and schools within the Bensham area of Gateshead in 2019. This prototype aimed to use signals, such as individuals seeking assistance with job search or struggling to pay sundry debts, as a way of identifying residents that might need additional support.

Learning from these early prototypes led to the creation of the “Liberated Method” which is focussed on freeing up the creativity and compassion of front-line caseworkers, delivering more focussed and effective support by co-creating solutions and approaches with citizens, and building towards sustainable outcomes that stand a greater chance of reducing demand into services into multiple services, this reducing costs and by being more effective, reducing inequality.

This approach has broadened beyond the initial Gateshead focussed prototypes in a regional programme. Changing Futures Northumbria (CFN) is a collaboration across six local authority areas (Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Sunderland and South Tyneside) and includes many partners including voluntary and community sector, probation, police and CCGs/ Foundation trusts. The programme was awarded funding in July 2021 to initially run for three years, which was extended until 2025. The purpose of the programme was to influence change at three levels:



To base work around each person's understanding of 'what matters to me?' by building trusting relationships between caseworkers and citizens.

To develop a learning infrastructure to understand learning from using the "Liberated Method".

To influence macro-level change by sharing learning with a reference group of senior leaders regionally and beyond.

Four 'touchpoints' were developed that were based in places where people with a series of interlocking difficulties were likely to show up:

- A homelessness 'walk-in' centre in Gateshead (run by Oasis Community Housing, a third sector organisation and member of the CFN partnership)
- An alcohol care team – Sunderland and South Tyneside Hospitals
- Support for Women who have suffered abuse – Fulfilling Lives, Newcastle
- Accident and Emergency – Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Gateshead*

(*Not part of the original design, but their observations of the impact on the work via the other touchpoints on some of their 'frequent flyers' was so profound that they pulled upon us to get involved, so we designed a touchpoint with them – an example of how sharing learning can help proliferation)

Do use the language of 'Human Learning Systems' to describe your approach? If not, what other language do you use?

CFN uses the language of the "Liberated Method" to describe the bespoke approach to the work, and 'Relational Public Services' to describe the ethos it appears to be developing and the movement it appears to be helping to build. 'HLS is not used by anyone in the programme to deploy the method, but the approach of interlocking learning cycles is very much inspired by it.

HLS does provide a framework for rethinking how we do public management which compliments and has a mutually reinforcing relationship with the 'Liberated Method', which is a relational approach to public service. The "Liberated Method" identifies 2 rules and 5 principles:

The rules are black and white, offer no ambiguity and are not for debate. The principles guide the work and there is room for interpretation, and by don't of that, iteration.

The rules:

- Do no harm (citizens, caseworkers, anyone)
- Stay within the law

The principles:

- Understand not assess
- Citizen/ caseworker relationship sets the scope
- Decisions made in the work
- Pull for help (not refer and close)
- No time limit – it takes as long as it takes



The early form of these principles came from Vanguard Consulting and their eponymous method, which also seeks to develop method from a series of principles and rules working to both create boundaries and iterate using flexibilities. The Vanguard Method's interplay's of rules and principles is one of the key inspirations for the 'Liberated Method', which as we will see, also draws upon learnings from the recovery community as well as evaluative practices and the world of complexity. This fusion of approaches enables bespoke by default working that works towards building a citizens accessible agency whilst iterating the work in almost real time. It is this combination of novel approaches that secure public and individual value and have learning built in that make the "Liberated Method" apart from those influencing factors whilst standing on their shoulders.

The built-in approach to learning through learning cycles that connect practice, system drivers, levers and theory meant that pooled observations and iterations led to the establishment of a third rule: Agree and iterate purpose with each citizen. This rule emerged when we could see how those people who agreed any purpose at all up front, even a very short term one, were more likely to take responsibility and access their own agency when things stabilised than those that were supported out of crisis with no stated aim, the latter group being reluctant to take any control and more likely to depend upon extrinsic support indefinitely.

| HLS Approach

| Human

What is 'Human' about how you work ?

The 'Liberated Method' outlined above emphasises the commitment to a bespoke service. The first principle identifies that standardised assessment criteria can fail to identify the range of support that an individual might need or create barriers to accessing help. Although touchpoints are based within a certain locality and aligned to a specific need, CFN do not employ an eligibility criterion. Through building relationships with citizens, caseworkers develop an understanding of what is important to the citizen, and this guides the work. This means that decisions must be made in the work. Standardised policies and procedures are not in place (save for those relating to statutory, non removable elements such as safeguarding referrals and for anything that threatens the rules of stay legal and do no harm), instead decision-making is devolved so that caseworkers can respond to citizen needs.

This also involves a discretionary budget which caseworkers can use to assist citizens. When the requirement for additional support is identified, caseworkers remain alongside citizens rather than referring and closing cases. Likewise, there is not an arbitrary measure applied in terms of how long the caseworker and citizen may work together.



| Learning

How have you enacted Learning as a management strategy ?

Learning was designed into the CFN programme in order to explore the practice of employing the 'Liberated Method'. A dedicated learning team was embedded in the programme to capture learning and evidence for change. Early on in the programme, learning infrastructure was made explicit which outlined the various learning cycles which would support the development of the practice of the 'Liberated Method' and synthesis of learning from across the touchpoints to develop a compelling case for change. Weekly touchpoint debriefs are a space for caseworkers to reflect on their practice in order to consider method issues as well as identify cross-cutting themes.

Whilst the separate learning team was a development in as much as it sought to build learning in specifically and visibly, it still 'othered' the learning somewhat from the caseworkers and the work. We saw issues of translation and bias in what the learning team were focussing upon and interpreting and moved to adapt this into building more evaluative practices into the work itself through case review, group supervision and 1:1s. The governance of the programme also adapted to create forums for learning to apply to system drivers and theory as well as practice as illustrated below.

	Practice	Iteration	Systems and Drivers	Evidence and Theory
Who	Caseworkers	Ops Leads Data Lead	Data Lead Core Group	Core Group CoP
How/What source	Journals Reflective practice Learning events	Journals Pattern spotting/# Learning events	Journals Patterns and models	Burning platform Research Engagement/outreach
When	Case Reviews 1:1 supervision Peer support	Journal Review Case Review Group supervision	Team meetings	Conferences, workshops and events
Why	- Support work with clients - Embed a learning culture - Develop practice	- Developing roles - Iterating methodology	- Influencing leaders' - Decision-making - Unblocking - Policies and Procedures - Recruitment - Resources	- Proliferating relational public services - Making this normal
Product	Reflective notes input into journals – providing context	Patterns and explanatory models – providing conversationally generated outcomes	Burning platform Measures frameworks – providing conceptual criticality at scale	Publications Groundswell – providing persistence

A separate piece of work also sought to demonstrate the impact of the approach upon those who had complex combinations of difficulties relative to the substantive public service ecosystem. The 'Burning Platform' project involved a detailed exploration of a small number of cases to first identify the extent and cost of interactions that each citizen had prior to their engagement with CFN and contrast this with the support (and cost) after this point to make a compelling argument about the state of the current system and how the 'Liberated Method' not only has a positive impact at the individual level, but can also lead to cost savings.

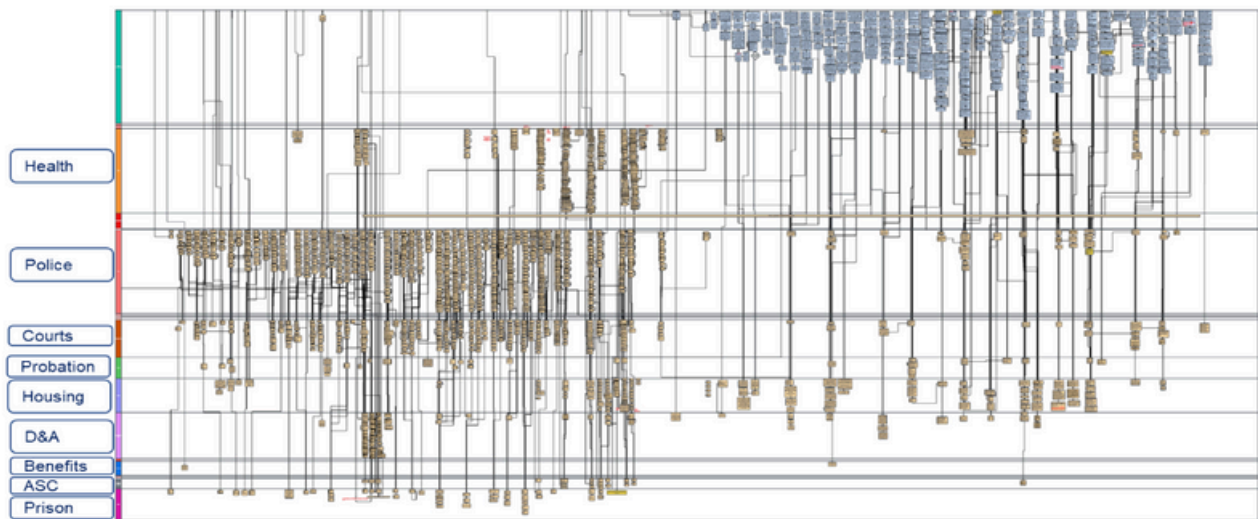


Figure x: The total costs of the citizen's public service iteration pre and post CFN involvement.

| Systems

What is the 'system' that you have worked with/brought together?

CFN has worked across many system scales. At an individual level, the 'Liberated Method' focuses on what matters to the citizen. At a team level, learning infrastructure supported the development of the practice of the 'Liberated Method', how this was experienced by caseworkers and how it impacted upon staff morale. At a regional level, CFN sought to identify blockages in the local system that had a negative impact on citizens in order to apply counter measures and ultimately influence change through the engagement of a reference group of influential senior leaders. At a national/unboundaried level, CFN sought to question and integrate the thinking and theory around public services, complexity and evaluation where the observations drive us to do so.

This triggered enquiries into specific system issues in order to understand how they might be changed. Finally at a macro-level, the programme aimed to gather a body of evidence to understand what the 'Liberated Method' is, how and why it works. The latter stages of the programme have seen an increasing focus on how this work helps to develop the emerging praxis of relational, context informed public services and the tactics and methods of moving towards them and away from New Public Management framings.



| Governance/Accountability

How is this work being governed? How have your governance or accountability processes changed to work in a Human Learning Systems way?

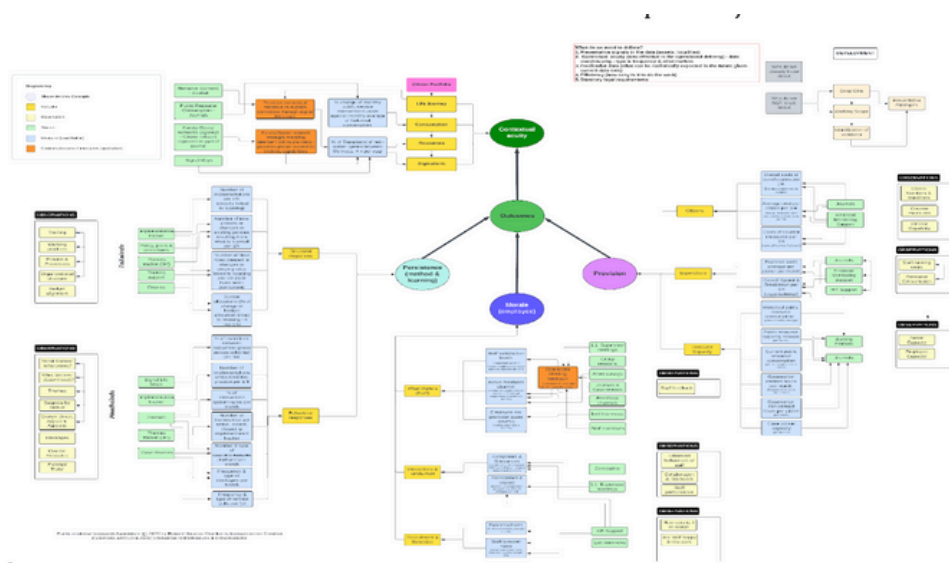
Rather than traditional KPIs, the programme enacted learning as a meta-strategy identifying four measures in the work that provided focus for ongoing learning:

- Citizen impact – person shaped measures and signals in the work with citizens
- Efficiency – what helps or hinders the work?
- System resources – financial analysis of interventions
- Morale – exploration of how it feels to work in this way.

These have iterated as a measures framework, populated by learning rather than accounts of activity. This has paralleled a developing digital platform which means citizens can populate the system to keep records of their learning, activity and other observations. They are not in service of performance indicators, rather the indicators are a product of what is being learned and some relational enquires.

By using measures to learn and improve, not to 'keep score', we are compelled to describe outcomes in terms of the contextual acuity that citizens have (what's going on in their lives?), the persistence of what we did and learned, the morale of those doing this work and the provision that it required. This allows an understanding of impact and learning equally, and allows the scale of that learning to be right sized naturally. A summary of the emerging framework is given below.

Learning in relation to these measures was captured from caseworker debrief meetings to understand issues and opportunities for change. The strategy also influenced the way that interactions with citizens were recorded. Caseworkers completed a journal of their activity with a focus on this being used for learning rather than performance management purposes.





CFN also made a conscious decision to avoid having a static board. Instead, an experimental governance approach was favoured, with ongoing learning shared with partners and inviting individuals into the work to convene around specific issues.

The management of the programme was a board of three who dealt with strategy and direction, with a wider 'core group' managing operations, iterating learning and structural frameworks and liaising with partners.

I Story of Change

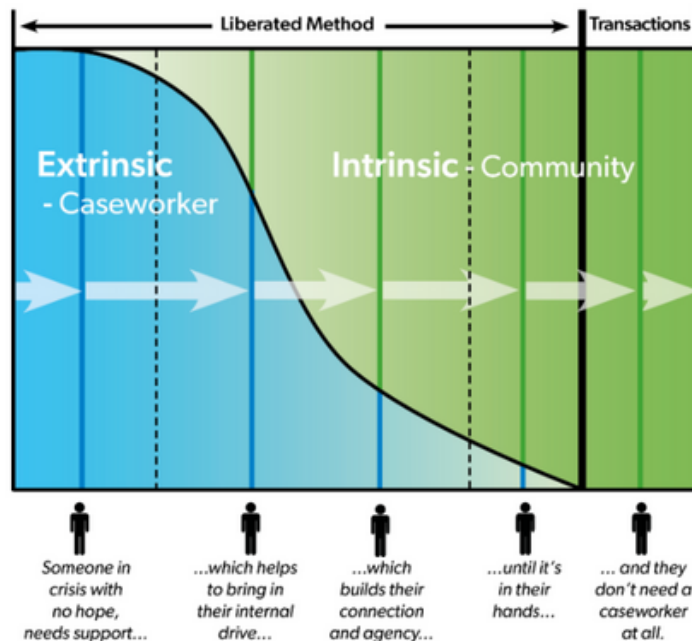
How did you go about adopting an HLS approach ? What was the spark for change ?

After the initial success of the council tax prototype, further prototypes working with homeless people and also with libraries in Bensham, Gateshead were rolled out in order to use more and different signals, such as seeking employment support, as a way to identify citizens that might need further support. This prototype was then broadened out to schools within the area. The work quickly gathered momentum and the team found that they were receiving many referrals of citizens and families in need of support. Learning from the work helped to develop an understanding about the different needs that citizens had and the support that was available to meet these needs.

For example, citizens' low level needs were often resolved with a simple transactional interaction, whereas when citizens had multiple and complex needs they were often allocated more intensive support, for example a social worker. The learning from the Bensham prototype indicated that citizens that had emergent issues (e.g. council tax arrears or difficulty accessing employment benefits) or escalating issues (when these issues were starting to worsen) appeared to be outside of the eligibility criteria for support services and therefore the team began to work with these individuals. As the prototype progressed, the team also received referrals from statutory services as it was recognised that citizens that had complex needs also required a more bespoke service than these providers were able to offer.

From this experience, this bespoke way of working was developed into the 'Liberated Method'. After the Bensham prototype there was the question of how this approach might be scalable. The CFN programme was identified as a way to explore this question.

Over the course of CFN, there has been an ongoing iteration of the understanding of the 'Liberated Method' through a cycle of learning and adaptation. One significant development identifies two broad areas of activity (Extrinsic and Intrinsic). Extrinsic support and resources consist of caseworker led practical support to remove barriers for the individual and to also build trust. Intrinsic resources relate to the citizen's own capacity and agency, something which also extends to small groups and communities (i.e. there is collective, intrinsic capacity to help each other thrive). The key here is that the extrinsic support is context informed and bespoke by default, and it is consciously working on both pragmatic short term solutions and inducing citizens to access their intrinsic power by helping them to better understand and articulate what matters to them. If the aim is to induce intrinsic, you do extrinsic differently. It's not the same old service offers with different measures. It's a move from transactions to relationships and from standard to bespoke.



The learning from CFN identified the potential for citizens to become caught in an extrinsic loop of dependency. Instead, a relationship based on high support, high challenge can help citizens to transition from acute to less acute and to start to build in some of the intrinsic work.

| Barriers and Tensions

What difficulties did you encounter? How did you respond to them?

There has been some reticence experienced externally in relation to the 'Liberated Method', particularly related to risk and dependency. The 'Liberated Method' emphasises the relationship between caseworker and citizen and calls for a generalist role which interacts with the citizen on a human level to support with what matters to them. This challenged the traditional notion of standardisation and specialisation and there was some defensiveness around those who were operating in this way. Additionally, this meant that caseworkers often came across blockages in the system which created challenges to supporting citizens.

There were also tensions around enacting learning as a management strategy, whilst also balancing a need to evidence the approach. The Burning Platform project aimed to address this concern by demonstrating both the experience of the individual as well as making a compelling case for the potential financial implications of a different approach.

Finally, as CFN was a learning programme, there were a lot of uncertainties, for example how the 'Liberated Method' would work and what would be the experience for caseworkers and citizens. The lack of policies and procedures felt exposing at times and required support to create safety to experiment (within the boundaries of the 2 rules, 5 principles). There were some challenges along the way that tested the method and there was a need to iterate and adapt.



| Enablers

What were the factors/conditions which enabled you to adopt an HLS approach?

Although there was some external scepticism, there were also groups that understood the need for a more bespoke approach, particularly those that had experienced public services before it had become professionalised. There was also curiosity within Gateshead Council about the possibility of the approach and resources were provided to enable this to be explored further. As the programme has matured, the positive impact of the 'Liberated Method' for citizens can be demonstrated, attracting external interest and building confidence in the work.

The growing interest in this work and the learning therefrom has build credibility and curiosity nationally and internationally, which provides some comfort for those with instinctive rather than material or specific doubts. Learning programmes are perhaps cut some early slack because there is humility about what is not known and positivity around learning as a purpose, but this can pale of the learning doesn't stimulate or positively provoke. The key factor that has sustained this work is a good flow of profound learning and adaptation, and a grounding in rigorous comparison to existing theories and practice. The Burning Platform, with a focus on consumption and upon understanding the why as well as the what of performance has been particularly helpful in bringing people towards this work with curiosity rather than ire.

The design of the programme was purposeful to enable experimentation with the 'Liberated Method'. Caseworkers with diverse backgrounds were asked to bring their knowledge but not their role, to facilitate a generalist and relational approach. This diversity created many different perspectives and lenses to examine the work which enhanced learning. Low caseloads provided an opportunity for caseworkers to build relationships with citizens and a lack of KPIs or onerous paperwork meant they could focus on what was important to the individual. This also reinforced the CFN as a learning organisation. Regular caseworker debriefs provided an opportunity for caseworkers to explore their practice. Supervisors provided coaching to support caseworkers, who knew the citizen best, to make decisions. Across the programme, there was an openness to adapt in relation to learning. For example, one of the principles 'citizen sets the scope' was amended to 'citizen/ caseworker relationship sets the scope' to reflect learning about the potential for citizens to get stuck in an extrinsic loop.

| TopTips

What are your 'top tips' that you think others might find interesting?

The extent to which the value adding activities that emerge from the 'Liberated Method' are agnostic of the system means that a lot of headway can be made without setting up some kind of deep rooted system change exercise. Based upon a study of three cases, just over half of the caseworker activity was 'system agnostic' (52%), whilst just under half (45%) related to accessing the system but were not directly useful (i.e. a referral to/pull for a specialist) whilst 7% were direct, discernibly helpful activities that helped the citizen that were 'of the system' (such as providing housing, social care, medical treatment). This means there's a lot you can do 'on Monday'. It helps to remind people of this, and that the answers don't all require massive, daunting 'hard' system change.



The combination of caseworkers with a professional background and peer support workers as a pair with a shared caseload is a combination of perspectives that provides helpful from deep crisis (high support, lower challenge) to emergence into self (high support high challenge) and then actualisation (mostly intrinsic capability, with specific, contextualised extrinsic support and challenge)

A preliminary and low resolution analysis of caseworker bureaucracy shows a vast reduction in paperwork that services the system compared to that experienced by those coming from 'professional' backgrounds. This is partially offset by the journaling which all caseworkers have to do, but these notes are for the workers, not the system, which makes them richer in content and easier to frame learning around. It's these journals that help us, amongst other things, to understand the extent of system agnostic/adjacent/direct activity. Basically, journaling is vital to iteration at an individual, team and system level. The emerging digital platform, and its ability to synthesise and help us to sense-make is bringing some scalable factors to these relational approaches that are heavy in quantitative data.

I Your important artefacts

What 'artefacts' have you created that help you to work in this way?

- See attached 'The 'Liberated Method': Rethinking Public Service'
- The artefacts on the blog section of the website, the papers and BP

I What have you achieved ?

What has adopting and HLS approach enabled you to do?

There are many case studies demonstrating the impact of the 'Liberated Method' for citizens (see 'The 'Liberated Method': Rethinking Public Service paper) The approach helps citizens to build resilience, described as putting props in place to stabilise the individual. Whilst this is in place, the individual can hollow out underneath (build resilience) so that they can maintain equilibrium when forces are applied (when there are challenges).

The work has also enabled an exploration of the drivers in public service systems that lead to the pattern of consumption and failure shown in the Burning Platform. The de-facto purpose has been revealed to be to create and maintain a defensible position, and we must find intervention and iteration methods and tactics that can work with this prevailing mindset, such that it might be changed to one that focussed upon helping people develop the relationships they need to thrive.

The CFN programme has provided an opportunity to test out the 'Liberated Method' and develop the approach. There has been a fundamental shift away from thinking of the work solely as system change, with the realisation that a lot of the work is actually system agnostic. The team started to focus on 'what can we do on Monday?' identifying that a relational, liberated approach can actually create substantial change. Learning is ongoing, as the team continue to test out and iterate the approach.



| What next?

What is the next challenge for this work ?

The next large-scale challenge is to explore how relational public services can be operated and migrated towards 'in the wild', without the safe space of external, specific learning funding.

The studying of people's history and trajectory of consumption has helped us to see that there is an observable internal consistency to the current NPM approach that needs tackling wholesale if the move to relational public services can happen. This is one of the more profound takeaways from the CFN work. These 'horcruxes' must all be tackled in one place if anything is to sustainably change at a level of principle and paradigm, doing some of them well is not enough; enough will be left of the existing thinking to essentially kill this movement or resign it to prototypes forever. A key challenge. Is to refine this analysis, but CFN can show that these horcruxes are in broad terms...:

- **Commissioning** – we must move from commissioning to an up-front spec to building in learning and iteration round contextual learning. If we can design in this sort of work and get these kind of results, the old thinking and drivers will wane.
- **How we use data and measures** – NPM keeps score, it doesn't use knowledge to learn and improve. The data belongs to leaders only, whereas CFN has the right data throughout the programme; in the work, at the board, with partners and most importantly, with citizens. Their life map drives everything in the work.
- **How we lead** – leadership needs to move from a command and control mindset to a learning and iterative one where the role of leadership is to act on the system rather than to micro manage people and budgets. This is a strong theme of the systems thinking world, with the likes of Deming, Ohno, Sedona, Senge all espousing this critical requirement for change over many decades. It holds true still, but needs to be accompanied by an acceptance that the system does not drive all of the performance, and this is not a system change proposition to the extent as classical systems thinking would have us believe....
- **How we do change** – The axiomatic relationship between thinking, system and performance is long tested and holds when the value work itself is reasonably agnostic of context (even if the stakes are not). Fixing a washing machine has a potentially huge variation in implications for the owner (critical for some, inconvenient for others) but the value work of fixing it is broadly the same. Where the value work itself depends on context and requires a relationship to get right, the system change methods of change find it hard to land a blow. When we liberate the method, the value work can be seen in proportion across the archetypes of system direct, adjacent and agnostic. CFN showed that around half of the value work was agnostic of the system and thus requires minimal system change to introduce it; we can start on Monday. How we do change does not have to solely build upon system conditions, points of leverage and changed management thinking, which makes it easier to start, to learn and to do change better.
- **Evaluation** – NPM has a closed approach to evaluation whereby it's a subset of learning. Closed questions, often connected to the sensibilities of a commissioner, done after the fact, extractively by a third party with academic/professional credibility but no contextual skin in the game...we find what we seek rather than understanding fully what there is to learn. A movement to relational working is a movement away from evaluation and towards evaluative practices in the work, constantly innovating, iterating... To move to relational public services from NPM is to understand that evaluation and learning are the same thing.



Moving towards relational approaches has to mean making the public sector work this way – a big ask. The rewards are huge, but it's likely to be generational effort. That said, if we adopt the adage that whilst we overestimate what we can do in a year, we underestimate what we could do in five years, there is scope for massive reform.

Doing this work in the wild means having a method. The Burning Platform gives confidence that the tactic of focussing a small number of high consumers will yield orthodox savings and powerful new learning. This needs to be done in the wild to hit all of the horcruxes, but also in multiple places to create a landscape of practice that self accelerates and builds confidence for those looking on. Gateshead is seeking to apply relational approaches to the Top100 consumers in the borough as part of the council's reform programme, although clearly they need partners involved. They are in discussion with MHCLG about CFN having continuation of resources to bring this about, although this is in the balance. Doncaster Council are considering the same, with others such as Sunderland Health Care Alliance also considering the same.

The HLS collaboration has an opportunity to build upon this and other learning to steward that landscape of practice as a cogent learning vehicle. Our thoughts were that an Institute for Prevention and Reform or something similarly titled might be created within the public and academic sectors initially to create some intervention, co-design and learning capacity to proliferate what has been an incredible journey towards the development of truly relational public service.

