



Relational Public Service

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Introduction

This report is part of the 2024 *Human Learning Systems Insights* series, created by members of the [Human Learning Systems Collaborative](#).

All these Insights have been created through a programme of action research, drawing on the knowledge and experience of people exploring Human Learning Systems practice in their public management work around the world.

You can find all the examples of practice that underpin these Insights on the [Human Learning Systems website](#).

Human Learning Systems and Relational Public Service

This piece explores the contribution that Human Learning Systems makes to the idea of Relational Public Service, which emerged in the 2010's through work such as Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)'s [Relational State](#), and has been taken up recently by the [Relationships Project](#), [Demos](#) and public management academics (see [Bartels, 2020](#), [Wilson et al, 2024](#) and [Koen et al, 2024](#)).

We will explore this contribution by analysing the 35 new examples of Human Learning Systems practice, created by those undertaking this radical transformation of public management, and drawing on the learning captured in existing Human Learning Systems publications, such as [Public Service for the Real World](#).

The paper seeks to make a theoretical contribution to help develop ideas of Relational Public Service, drawn from the experience of those undertaking this work in practice. We offer it as the basis for further conversation, and research.

What we mean by Relational Public Service

There are many different ways that people have approached the meaning of 'Relational' in 'Relational Public Service'. One of the common ways in which people have explored this idea is by contrasting "relational" practice with "transactional" practice, as we can see in the title of the recent Demos report "The Social State: From Transactional to Relational Public Services", and the Relationships Project 'Case Maker' which states "There is the difference between a relationship and a transaction."

We want to offer a different perspective. Whilst posing the opposition between "relational" and "transactional" is prima facie helpful (people "get it") it also creates conceptual problems. This is because "a relationship" cannot be opposed to "a transaction", because **a transaction is a type of relationship**. We can see this clearly because the phrase "a transactional relationship" makes perfect sense (and is in common usage). A relationship is simply the way things are connected to one another – this connection can be via a transaction, or it can be something deeper.

There is clear rhetorical value in framing relationships as distinct from transactions. This framing enables people to grasp that we have neglected particular types of relationship in our recent public service and public management – those which are not transactional. In order to enable Relational Public Service to be most useful as a concept, we can use the understanding that transactions are types of relationships, and that non-transactional relationships have been neglected in public service, to ask the question: “**what kind of relationship is at the heart of ‘Relational Public Service’?**”

From the existing definitions, we know part of the answer to that question: it is a relationship which *isn't a transaction*. We will explore the public service and management practice of those using a Human Learning Systems approach to help explore what that desired quality of relationship is.

We believe that it is possible to better understand the types of relationships which underpin Relational Public Service by looking at this question through the lens of complexity and complex systems, drawing on learning from the Human Learning Systems approach to public management. We believe that the complex systems lens is appropriate because it provides a rigorous way of exploring the relationships which create the outcomes that public service seeks.

The core principle of Relational Public Service: relating to the whole person

If we look at the [Human Learning Systems examples of practice](#), we see a strong pattern which helps us to identify a type

of relationship that is different from a transactional relationship: it is a relationship which has within its potential scope any aspect of a person's life. In other words, it is a relationship between “whole” people – one in which any aspect of a person's context is potentially relevant to the public service relationship – rather than defining the terms of the relationship via predetermined roles, or aspects of people's lives.

We can see this principle of “whole person” relationships in different aspects of Human Learning Systems inspired public service.

[In the relationship between worker and resident](#)

When we look at the relational practice of those undertaking public service within the Human Learning Systems approach, we repeatedly find that the desired quality of relationship between all the actors involved is one in which a person fully recognises the humanity of another. In other words, they recognise the intrinsic value of another human being, on their own terms.

For example, the [Leicester](#) approach to social prescribing for older people describes their work like this:

“Our key approach... is to attempt to build a relationship with them [older people], to demonstrate that they count for something – as a human being, not a health or poverty statistic, but as someone with a past, a present and a future. Relationship-building is central to this task... Our stance is that few people in their daily lives get sufficient and regular undivided attention.”

And the [MERAKI](#) team described its work in helping establish a Ministry of Citizen Participation in the Mexican State of Jalisco in the following way:

“At the Ministry of Citizen Participation, the MERAKI Team focuses on building authentic and trust-based relationships with the people they serve, recognising these connections as fundamental to creating a positive impact... The MERAKI Team believes in a government that views neither its employees as mere human resources nor its citizens as simple statistics. They strive to create an environment where everyone feels valued and heard, fostering genuine and meaningful citizen participation.”

We see the same in the [Mitwirkung](#) project in Germany:

“We need to be human, and speak and act as humans, relate to each other as humans and have true and honest conversations. This requires working on our mindsets (as a form of inner work) and working with the actual, existing people (rather than our constructions of people).”

Three things stand out about these extracts from the work. Firstly, the idea of the “human” connection is contrasted with seeing people in respect of particular, predetermined indicators. There is a recognition that the abstraction inherent in “measuring” a person removes important information on which an “authentic” human relationship depends. When you measure a person, you see them through the lens of your measurement device, rather than as a person on their own terms.

The relationship is valuable in itself

Secondly, part of the recognition of whole person relationships is the recognition within Relational Public Service that relationships are a crucial part of what public service offers to people. Relationships are a necessary part of what helps people to flourish. This is expressed in how [Changing Futures Northumbria](#) articulates its offer to those it supports, in terms of:

**“Somewhere to live
Something to do
Someone to love.”**

This highlights the importance of the idea of public service offering a [guaranteed care relationship](#). The guarantee that Relational Public Service offers is a relationship with those who (for whatever reason) are cut off from the family and community relationships which would otherwise sustain them.

In the relationship between workers

We notice that relationships are not only a valued public service offer, they are also valuable because they enable effective public service. We can see this in the [Queensland State Government](#) example, in which nurturing effective relationships between workers was a core part of the work to develop more effective collaboration across Government:

“The [Governance] Model is based on the understanding that relationships, in and of themselves, are a resource that requires articulation, support and purposeful work. Relationships rarely develop spontaneously across vertical and horizontal structural boundaries – accordingly, the Model seeks to deliberately disrupt these relational barriers.” ([Queensland State Government](#))

Seeing the quality of relationships between workers as a “resource” to be nurtured also helps public service organisations to address the time and capacity issues associated with relational working.

We can also notice the same “whole person” quality of relationship applies as much to the relationship between public service workers as it does to the relationship between workers and those they serve:

“We care about each other as people – seeing the person over their role.”
([Vital Signs](#))

“When we’re in HCT [Healthy Communities Together], over time, we are there as our whole selves and we begin to see the value this brings to our work. We notice this because in the beginning we weren’t; we were the representatives of our respective organisations and sectors.” ([Healthy Communities Together Gloucestershire](#))

The transformation of the quality of relationships between workers was also expressed in terms of the creation of adult to adult relationships between workers, where previously the relationship had been parent to child ([Liverpool City Region](#)).

A framework to understand Relational Public Service

Having identified this core principle, we can begin to explore the different aspects of whole person relationships, through an important concept in complexity theory – the idea of [open \(as opposed to closed\) systems](#). We argue that the difference between a whole person relationship and a transactional relationship can be described as the difference between an “open-system relationship” and a “closed-system relationship”.

Public service relationships as open and closed systems

An open system is a process that exchanges material, energy, people, capital or information with its environment, or a system in which the boundaries of the system are either unclear or porous. The way a human body works is an excellent example of an open system.

By contrast, closed systems have strong boundaries – they do not exchange material with anything beyond those boundaries. For example, scientists often seek to create closed systems when they undertake experiments, to limit the factors that can affect the results of that experiment.

We think that an open-system relationship is a useful way to describe the qualities of public service relationship described above, in a more conceptually useful way than seeking to contrast transactions and relationships.

A transactional public service relationship is a closed system. The terms of that relationship are predetermined and fixed, and nothing outside of that system counts within the relationship. When you complete your vehicle tax form online, it is a closed system. A resident's interaction with that public service is defined by the forms on the webpage. When it asks you for your licence plate number, you cannot enter information about your shoe size. When it asks for your bank details, you cannot start to tell it about your relationship with your mother. The terms of that interaction are set. No other information is deemed valid.

The relationships described by the Human Learning Systems programmes above are often more open systems. Any aspect of a person's life is permitted to be a meaningful part of that relationship. As the [Leicester social prescribing example](#) described, it is a relationship:

“...with them [older people], to demonstrate that they count for something – as a human being, not a health or poverty statistic, but as someone with a past, a present and a future.”

The neutral nature of the open/closed system description also helps us remember that neither open nor closed systems are “better” than another. Open-system relationships are appropriate for some public service relationships; closed-system relationships are appropriate for others.

Framing open and closed system relationships

We offer this open/closed system framing to understand key dimensions of public service relationships, to see if it enables us to better understand the different aspects of Relational Public Service.

Dimension of open/closed systems	Manifestation in more open systems	Manifestation in more closed systems
Purpose, boundaries and scope of relationship.	The purpose of the relationship (what people are trying to achieve) is open. E.g. the relationship might be about helping someone to find a job, or improving their health, or both. Any potential system actor may be relevant as part of the relationship – friends, family, workers from different organisations. Any aspect of people's lives is potentially within scope of the public service relationship.	The purpose of the relationship is given, and fixed. E.g. the purpose of the relationship is about helping someone to find a job. Anything which does not relate to this is out of scope. Who is allowed to be in the relationship is predetermined and fixed. The scope of the relationship is limited to predetermined aspects of people's lives/roles
Relationship context – the scope and meaning of information in the relationship.	The context for understanding people is open: - Any information is potentially relevant - The meaning of information is co-constructed and reconstructed by the people within the relationship.	The context for understanding people is closed: - Only predetermined types and forms of information are relevant. - The meaning of those pieces of information (how they are to be interpreted) is predetermined. E.g. a performance target – hitting the target is a good thing, missing it is a bad thing
What is exchanged in the relationship?	Any potentially relevant thing may be part of the relationship exchange. E.g. trust, respect, affection, information.	Only things that are determined by the given purpose and predefined contextual information are part of the relationship exchange. The things exchanged are based on standardised, predetermined provisions. E.g. requesting/providing information to an online portal, a chemist supplying a prescription or a surgeon undertaking an operation.
What are the desired qualities of the relationship?	- Unique - Organic - Empathetic - Sustained Applicable to both open/closed: - Fair - Trusting - Reciprocal - Reliable	- Standardised - Largely fixed - Efficient - Time bound
Meta dimensions		
Reflexivity in the relationship	Any of the above may change over time, through a process of reflection, learning and adaptation.	All of the above are resistant to being changed by a relationship with the public, and/or the management of them is resistant to change as a result of their relationship with the public.
Power in the relationship	All of the actors in the relationship have the power to determine/change any of the above dimensions.	Only some of the actors in the relationship are able to determine/change the dimensions above.

A final point we make about open and closed systems, and their different dimensions, is that we would not frame open and closed systems as binaries, but rather as scales. We believe that systems can be more or less open, on the different dimensions. For example, the boundaries and scope of a relationship might be quite closed, but the capacity to decide what information is relevant to that relationship might be quite open.

This also leads us to a more practical point – any public service relationship can be more or less open or closed, depending on the purpose of that relationship. We should not think that some roles or public service identities are naturally closed and some are naturally open. Reflexivity about the open and closed dimensions of the relationship may be useful for all public service relationships.

We will now explore each of these dimensions in turn, drawing on the Human Learning Systems examples of practice. As an approach to designing and managing public service which enables public service to work in the complexity of real lives, we will use these examples to illustrate an **open systems approach to Relational Public Service**.

Purpose, boundaries and scope

We have seen that an open-system relational approach makes anything about a person and their context *potentially* valid for public service work. The challenge therefore is to turn this potentially infinite purpose and scope for public service into work that is capable of being undertaken meaningfully, by actual human beings – those with finite knowledge and resources! (In some respects, this is a manifestation of the classic

systems thinking “boundary” problem: that, ultimately, everything in the universe is connected to everything else. So where should we draw the boundaries of a system in order to get useful work done?)

What matters to those being served

At a fundamental level, one of the most important lessons from the world of Human Learning Systems is that the work is bounded by *what matters to those being served*. The boundaries of the “system of interest” ([Jackson 2018](#)) are created by a purpose defined in terms of what matters to the people at the sharp end of the work.

“To base work around each person’s understanding of ‘what matters to me?’ by building trusting relationships between caseworkers and citizens... Through building relationships with citizens, caseworkers develop an understanding of what is important to the citizen, and this guides the work.” ([Changing Futures Northumbria](#))

“CHIP [Complex Housing Intervention Programme] adopts a bespoke engagement approach which is person-centric and is about building relationships from which previously alienated individuals can start to trust that workers want to act in their interests – ‘What do you want from us?’ The focus being ‘Their needs, not ours.’” (Source: CHIP colleague). [[CHIP](#)]

This highlights the crucial role of agency in open-system public service relationships. It requires agency for people to decide what matters for themselves, and where the boundaries of the work should lie.

In some cases, people are able to express this agency, for themselves, at the outset of the work:

“We have worked with a variety of people on reviewing their lives. Often they have started by being dismissive: my life’s just ordinary, not interesting. Our stance, though, is that ‘there is no such thing as an ordinary life’. With gentle encouragement, often from their peers, they put their toe in the water, sometimes holding boundaries – ‘I’m happy to explore anything but not my relationship with my son’ – and often become excited by their reflections and the sharing/ contrasting with those of others.” ([Social Prescribing and Marginalised Older People project, Leicester](#))

In other contexts, part of the work is to help activate people’s agency, and help people to grow their sense of what is possible for themselves:

“While some older people may only need to be given information or signposting, those more marginalised, we find, need ‘connecting to themselves’ if they are to sustain any connection to external activity... The Human in HLS does not only mean the worker engaging with them as whole human beings – not simply as someone in poverty, as a defaulter, as someone with a housing problem – but, and of course only with their consent, as someone with an inner life whose, for example, hindering thought patterns and low self-regard may sabotage any connections but also as a person who has many strengths which might be reclaimed and built on in the pursuit of a ‘bigger’ life. Not what’s the matter with them but what matters to them, not what’s wrong with them but what happened to them. What is their unique story?” ([Social Prescribing and Marginalised Older People project, Leicester](#))

This sense of “activating agency” can be seen in the learning that Changing Futures Northumbria was able to create, by reflecting on the patterns they saw in the people they supported. The combination of “[high support](#)” and “[high challenge](#)” activated the agency of those they were supporting.

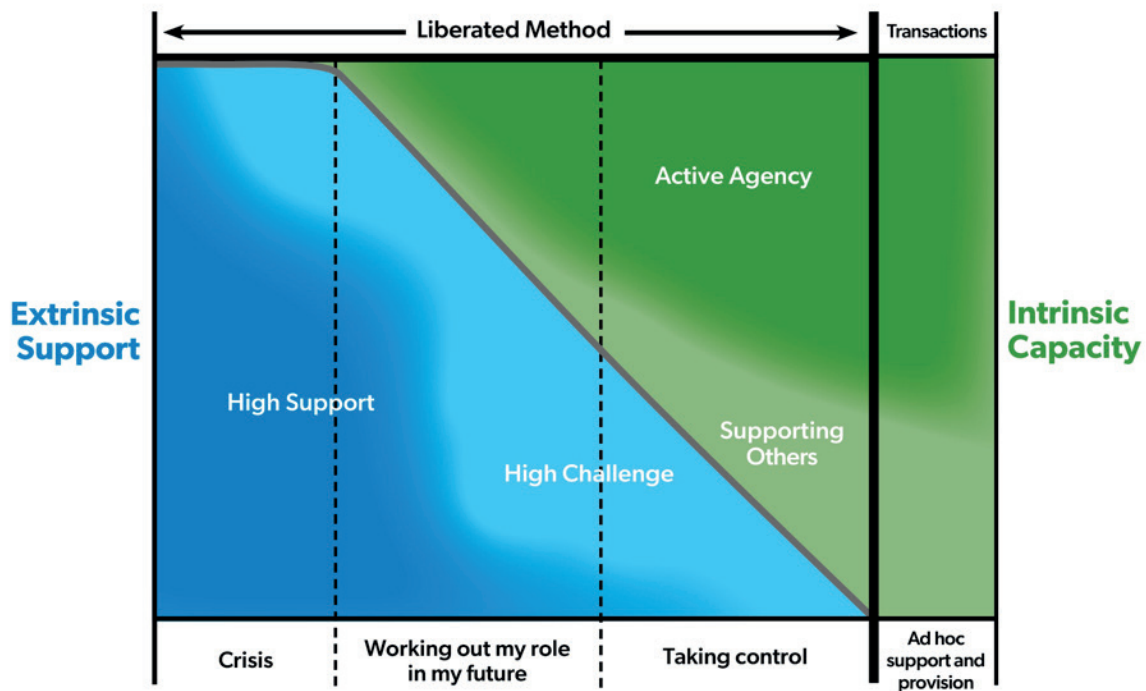


Figure 1. [Rethinking Public Service, Changing Futures Northumbria](#)

In these cases, the task of creating boundaries for the purpose and scope of the work is not as simple as asking people what matters to them. It is a process of dialogue, in a relationship of trust, **in which workers and residents set the boundaries of their work together**. This is the principle which [Changing Futures Northumbria](#) evolved. Interestingly, when they started their work, they began with the principle that the person themselves should set the boundaries for the work. However, they evolved away from that principle, because they felt the expertise those workers brought to the conversation about what might be helpful for people to explore in their lives added useful content to that dialogue. This is similar to the approach developed by Brent Care Journeys:

“This meant that we were quickly able to deconstruct binary service roles of provider and user, instead embracing and involving a range of experts as collaborators. Such freedom permitted various encounters and tailored interactions according to people’s unique lives and experiences, within their unique network of complex relationships to others and to services.”

([Brent Care Journeys](#))

Context

The framing of open and closed systems relationships also helps us to recognise that Relational Public Service is not just concerned with human relationships. It is also about seeing people and issues in context. It is concerned with relationality, not just human relationships.

There are two aspects of “context” that we think are significant here.

1. Relationships exist in a context

Our expectations for how we understand what is going to happen in a relationship are created by the narrative context in which that relationship sits. As Jerome Bruner, eminent social psychologist, brilliantly described: “[in the Post Office, we behave post office.](#)”

The setting of a relationship and the norms surrounding it frame a set of understandings and behaviours. For example, in a gynaecologists’ room, or a sexual health clinic, a set of behaviours occurs which would not be considered a normal part of a public service.

From our perspective, the key point about context here is informed consent. All the parties in the relationship must understand the expectations set by context, and have the potential to enter into dialogue about any aspect of it. A survivor of sexual violence, for example, might want to have a different dialogue about the practices in a gynaecologists’ room, or sexual health clinic, from other people.

2. How much context is relevant for the purpose of that relationship?

The second consideration is how much context is brought into the relationship itself. We believe that this question highlights two facets of Relational Public Service, which:

- Seeks to understand people in context – for example, when exploring someone’s health, it is important to understand the social determinants of health. And more specifically, it is not enough to understand the social determinants of health *generally*

(e.g. at a population level), it is important to understand how the different social determinants of health show up *in this person’s life*.

- Cares about people’s relationships *with one another*, not just with public service – Relational Public Service seeks to support [universal community relationship infrastructure](#) within all communities.

The language of “systems” provides us with a head start in understanding relationality – because the purpose of systems thinking is to help understand the interactions *between* things.

Once more, Human Learning Systems provides a practical way into this, as it views each person’s life as a complex system which can create (or not) a thriving life for that person (the outcomes that the person seeks). Human Learning Systems seeks to understand a person’s life as a system in terms of both the actors in that system (people/organisations) and the factors in that system (the causal drivers). When actors in a system reflect together on the factors, and from that shared knowledge begin to experiment in that system, the relationality in each unique complex system can be understood (at least partially). They come to deeply understand that particular context, and with that contextual understanding are able to influence the systems actors *and* factors.

We can see the need for public service to understand context in people’s lives manifest in a number of the examples of practice:

“Our approach would be centred on developing relationships within the community and Council, developing a deep insight of the impact of contextual factors and ensuring that we were not bringing a deficit mindset to asset and strengths based work.” ([Hackney Physical Activity](#))

“This means that no two people’s journeys to work will ever be the same, and we needed to commission services in ways which enable them to be reflective, adapt and flex to the individual and the context... How services are delivered is just as important as what they offer, when it comes to the experiences of the people they support.” ([Fife – No One Left Behind](#))

The [Systems Innovation and Experimentation Fund](#) developed a core principle for their work around understanding context: “We strive for context awareness of the experiment or applicant.”

It is important to remember that both open and closed systems encourage thinking about relationality. In a closed system, the amount of context that is relevant is limited, prescribed in advance, and this judgement is made by people who are not part of that relationship. Whereas in an open system, any aspect of a context is potentially relevant, the people involved in the relationship get to decide what is and is not relevant, and can revise their judgement when necessary.

Therefore, the open/closed system distinction becomes a way of asking:

- How much context is relevant to the purpose of the relationship?
- Who gets to decide what context is relevant?
- At what point in the process is the decision about using contextual information made?

From the experience of those undertaking open-system relational working, a greater understanding of context may be helpful to improve the efficacy of some closed-system relationships. For example, when discussing potential medication options for a patient, it could be helpful for the doctor to understand any aspect of that person’s life that may interfere with their ability to take that medication regularly.

Creating meaning through sense-making

In open systems, the meaning of data that is gathered is not fixed or predetermined. Instead sense-making activities turn data into meaning, by looking at data from a range of different perspectives.

We can see this approach in [Barking and Dagenham](#):

“We utilised our Borough Data Explorer and other research techniques to extract valuable insights related to the evolving COVID-19 situation from national databases. These insights served as a foundation for informed decision-making, allowing us to share these insights to partners to address emerging challenges promptly. This data was used continuously through mapping workshops, facilitated discussions, focus groups and more.”

The co-construction of meaning from data is also enabled by making use of qualitative – particularly narrative – data, because qualitative data is capable of bringing more contextual information than quantitative. Barking and Dagenham[link] provide an interesting example of this:

“To further our insights and gather qualitative data from people with lived experience of social isolation that are hardest to reach, Sally led a series of nine different listening groups with existing community groups to ensure that diverse voices were heard. This inclusive approach captured the nuances of the community’s experiences and provided a comprehensive understanding of how residents were supported, what barriers they experience and how they were able to overcome isolation and chronic loneliness.”

What is exchanged?

In an open-system relationship, participants can potentially exchange anything which is relevant to the purpose of that relationship. One of the key elements exchanged in both closed and open relationships is trust. The exchange of trust may show up in different ways, however. In closed relationships, trust generates the ability for each actor to reciprocate fairly and reliably within the confines of the parameters set. In open relationships, trust enables undefined, and potentially yet unknown, exchanges in the dynamic endeavour agreed together. So what actors are being trusted to do can be slightly different. In the open relationships described below, trust is used to explore, not to deliver:

“To base work around each person’s understanding of ‘what matters to me?’ by building trusting relationships between caseworkers and citizens.” ([Changing Futures Northumbria](#))

“Over time we have become individuals to each other, and that in turn has grown our understanding of and trust for one another. I’m writing this paragraph on Valentine’s Day where our weekly meeting check-in question was “how do people show they love you: what’s your love language?” I’m not sure of any other meeting I’ve been to that would start that way! We laugh, we worry, we rant, we share, we dream together, and you can’t do that if you show up behind a mask.” ([Healthy Communities Together Gloucester](#))

Trust is simply one example of the range of things that may be part of the relational exchange in an open-system relationship. Other examples include vulnerability ([Ways to Wellness](#)), respect ([Czechia](#)), and compassion ([Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders](#)).

Qualities of relationships

What are the different qualities of relationships which are desirable in open and closed systems?

The excellent work in this area undertaken by [The Relationships Project](#) helps us to

begin to answer this question (if we translate their “transaction/relationship” framing into an open/closed systems one). We think that this translation is appropriate, given the simple/complex framing that they have offered for the distinction between transactional and relational.

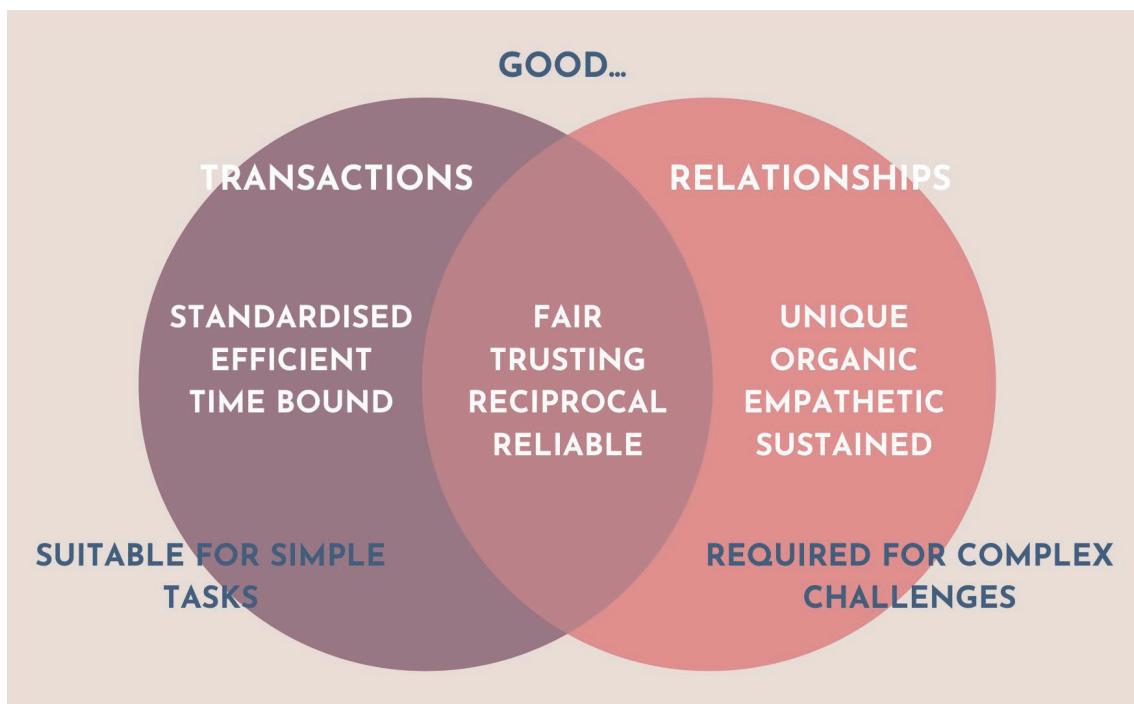


Figure 2. [Transactions and relationships](#)

One interesting point to note about this analysis is that there are qualities of relationship which apply to both open and closed systems, and those which apply specifically to one or the other.

The evidence from Human Learning Systems examples would add “**curiosity**” to the list of desired relationship qualities for open systems. For example, [Ways to Wellness](#) highlights “being curious about what we see” as a desired quality.

Meta dimensions

In addition to the above substantive dimensions of open and closed systems relationships, we think that there are two meta dimensions. These are dimensions which are the means by which the answers to the questions posed by the other dimensions are answered.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity as a dimension of public service relationships speaks to how change in those relationships happens. The dimension of reflexivity takes the curiosity introduced above and concerns itself with the role of learning and adaptation in open/closed system relationships. Open-system relationships are **learning relationships**. That is to say, the participants in those relationships are continuously experimenting and learning together about how the dimensions of the relationship might change: what the boundaries/scope of the relationship are, what context is relevant, what is exchanged in the relationships, and what the desired qualities of that relationship are.

This is partly about developing the **culture of learning between people**:

“We set out to create a very different space, one which made room for the people in the room to bring in how they were feeling, what worried them, what they cared about and hoped for. Participants told us that the informality of the space was important, as it made room to chat, as was meeting face-to-face. They found the space both safe and effective at fostering better relationships...”

The people I work with are not just colleagues – they are a family at work. Work can’t be ‘just a job’ otherwise I’d pack my bags... While these were fundamentally learning spaces, our experience has taught us that if you care about deep learning, you have to begin by focusing on the human. Deep learning is uncomfortable because it takes you out of your comfort zone. The only way to enable people to step into this discomfort is to help them to feel valued and valuable, and to support the building of trust between the people going through the learning process together.” ([Sunderland Primary Care](#))

“For practitioners the learning approach is about supporting people to become reflective practitioners. Rather than moving too quickly into action/response, we are supporting people to slow down and take time to reflect on what they have heard and consider different perspectives and ways of conceptualising it.” ([Plymouth Family Hubs](#))

It is partly about ensuring that the terms of the relationship are themselves continually adapted:

“We are gathering narrative data such as presenting issues, barriers etc, and using these findings at our meetings to prepare for the upcoming months. So far this has allowed us to add resources and capacity to issues around low income and poverty, social isolation and living with parents that misuse substance and alcohol. We have been able to challenge the parameters of personal health budgets around gym memberships and similar activity.” ([Young People Cornwall](#))

“What made this fund different?.. Learning and adaptation. We understand that activities focused on connection can produce unexpected outcomes and that trust takes time to build with people. This funding programme will adopt a flexible approach that will embed learning and adaptation at its core. Fund recipients will be part a learning group, who will convene regularly, supported by a facilitator to share learning and collect impact as we go.”

([Barking and Dagenham](#))

Power

The dimension of power in public service relationships concerns who gets to make change in the different dimensions. Open-system relationships require that all the participants in the relationship can change the dimensions of that open system: purpose, scope and boundaries of the relationship, the meaning of information, what is exchanged, and the qualities desired in the relationship.

Enabling all those in a public service relationship to have this power means these kinds of questions get asked:

“As systems stewards, we try to learn from experience how to do it differently next time. New questions arise:

- How can we successfully facilitate a dialogue between people who experience poverty, and those who don't – without shaming those who are much more vulnerable in this context?
- How can we facilitate participation in hierarchical contexts without exposing people to strong power imbalance?

- Who should be involved in decision making when conceptualising an event?”
([Mitwirkung](#))

A key to enabling all actors within open-system relationships to exercise power (and therefore agency) about the terms of those relationships is the notion of devolved power. We will explore this as a requirement of open-system relationships in the section below)

Transition between open and closed systems

A further key question explored by power as a meta dimension of open/closed systems relationships is the **transition between open and closed system relationships** in public service. Some open/closed system relationships are completely separate – as in the example of paying our vehicle tax.

There are times when open and closed systems are more closely related. For example, if we require a surgical operation as part of public service which is supporting our wellbeing, this will involve both open and closed system relationships. The relationship may well have begun with a General Practitioner or other [allied health professional](#), in which the conversation about my health and wellbeing was initially open. If that conversation reveals that I need a hip replacement, at some point this will become a closed-system relationship (in which I am lying sedated on an operating table).

We think that the interesting point here is that the meta dimension of power in an open-system relationship is the mechanism by which an open system can be legitimately

closed. We must **consent** to move from an open system to a closed-system relationship which is appropriate to our needs. In doing so, we agree with terms of closure, in the relational dimensions outlined above: purpose/boundaries/scope, context and meaning, and what is exchanged.

The power to open and close public service relationships must also be dynamic and mutual. The consent which closes a public service relationship must also be able to open it up again: for the purpose/boundaries/scope, context and meaning, what is exchanged, and its desired qualities.

Requirements of open-system relationships

Human Learning Systems tends to support the development of more open-system relationships in public service. We will now explore what the new examples of Human Learning Systems practice tell us about how these can be effectively created. We will explore this question using the dimensions outlined above – what have we learnt about what is required for open-system relationships in those dimensions?

Purpose, boundaries and scope

Primary organisation around people, rather than “services”

If we want to undertake public service in this relational open-system way, the Human Learning Systems examples of practice help us to understand what that requires, in terms of how we organise public service – in other words, how we do public management.

Enabling public service to be relational is not just about making particular services more “person-centred”. This is still a closed-system approach (albeit a broadly framed closed system). If we take (for example) a Drug and Alcohol service, and ask how it can be more person-centred, we will come up with some very necessary and important improvements to that service. We will likely improve access and opening times, and we may expand the range of treatment options that are available to different groups of people.

An open-system approach instead starts with people, rather than with services. As Mark Smith, Director of Public Service Reform at Gateshead Council, and architect of the Changing Futures Northumbria programme and the Liberated Method highlights – “if you start with services, you get services. If you start with people, you get solutions.”

This requires a much more fundamental reorganisation of public service. It starts by creating and organising the work of a set of people who do not view people through a particular lens (e.g. “you have a drug/alcohol problem”). It develops a public service workforce whose job is to build learning relationships with people – to learn someone’s context, and to learn together what may be required to help them achieve what matters to them.

This requires, at least in part, moving away from discrete public *services* to a flexible notion of *public service* – organised in response to the strengths and needs of people. As the Changing Futures Northumbria programme highlights, specialisms (such as expertise with drug and alcohol problems)

are absolutely required as part of this. But they can be “secondary” services (in the same way that secondary services exist in healthcare), supporting (and pulled into) primary relationships where the specialism is centred around knowledge of the person and their context.

What does this primary organisation around people entail? Again, we can explore these elements by looking at the Human Learning Systems examples:

Bespoke public service

In order to be organised to serve people, public service must be organised to provide bespoke responses to the unique purpose each resident brings to the work – **what matters to them**. Each person’s context is different, what matters to them is different, and how what matters is created in their life is different.

“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.”
([Changing Futures Northumbria](#))

“We also had to be realistic about how and where our work could sit within the context of lives and our local system, bringing humility and empathy to our relationships... The bespoke nature of our approach has been a key aspect in driving our work forward, and we’ve been proactive in our approach to seeking and building relationships with a range of people.”
([Hackney Physical Activity](#))

Meaning and context

Relationships as a means to understand context

Using relationships to understand context is one of the core planks of the Liberated Method, as developed by [Changing Futures Northumbria](#):

“Through building relationships with citizens, caseworkers develop an understanding of what is important to the citizen, and this guides the work.”

The work of [Thurrock Complex Housing Intervention Programme](#), partly inspired by the Changing Futures Northumbria work, uses the same principle. In order to do this, it requires the management of the work to prioritise relationship-building.

Prioritising relationship-building

Prioritising relationship-building requires that managers signal the importance of working relationships, and enable workers to have the time in their allotted workload to make this real.

“It was a lightbulb moment – how many meetings do we go to where we haven’t built the relationships and nothing happens? We aren’t spending and investing the time in building trusted relationships.” ([Surrey Youth Focus](#))

Low caseloads

For public-facing workers, the prioritisation of relationships translates into a requirement for low caseloads. This is perhaps the single most significant factor in whether a relational approach will be possible. In order to understand each of the unique contexts of those they serve, public-facing workers need to have low caseloads

“Low caseloads provided an opportunity for caseworkers to build relationships with citizens.” ([Changing Futures Northumbria](#))

“Low” means different things in different contexts. For the most complex cases, caseloads of 1-3 people simultaneously have been shown to work ([Changing Futures Northumbria](#)). In less complex cases, caseloads can be as high as 5-10. The low caseload also signifies the commitment to time in sense-making work in order to examine, reflect on, and get peer support around individual cases, and the iteration of the practice.

Using data for learning, not performance management

The use of data for performance management – i.e. management by targets – prevents a flexible understanding of context, and the shared construction of meaning by actors in a relationship. Targets use quantitative data in which meaning has been predefined. For example, if you have been set a target to undertake 90% of initial assessments of people within 28 days, hitting that target is automatically good, not meeting that target is automatically bad. The meaning of the measured data is already decided, because it is used for the purpose of reward and punishment.

Understanding and creating meaning in context requires using data for a different purpose. Data requires sense-making, in order that actors in a system can understand that system effectively, and consequently to adapt as necessary:

“Finally, the centring around learning as a core strategy has given us permission to not know the answers and that has been incredibly liberating. Structurally it has moved us away from a programme/workstream way of organising ourselves to a more organic but intentionally coproduced approach. This allows us to be iterative (not linear) and to tolerate those moments when we revisit our intentions, re-frame what we are doing and discover what we want to do next based on a learning focus rather than target-fixation.” ([Healthy Communities Together Gloucestershire](#))

“This [Human Learning Systems] approach has worked particularly well with our voluntary sector partners. But it has also raised challenges with those who are more comfortable with control and uncomfortable with ambiguity, with the use of KPIs seen as indicators of success and without needing to engage in what we have learned and why that’s important.” ([Hackney Physical Activity](#))

What is exchanged?

Opening up of professional identities

In order for all parties in a relationship to explore what may be exchanged in a relationship, the terms of that relationship cannot be entirely decided by predefined professional identities or roles.

“We invited the participants to get involved, starting by talking in groups about our individual experiences with poverty or wealth. This allowed people to open up and share their own stories, thus completely changing the space. When one professional shared her own experience as a welfare recipient, this allowed us to leave the sphere of detached professionalism.” ([Mitwirkung](#))

This can entail people operating beyond the limits of their professional boundaries, and can create uncomfortable situations in which people’s professional training clashes with what is required to create genuine outcomes in the moment.

This discomfort requires a managerial response, so that people can work through their discomfort, identifying why those roles and professional identities were created,

and the aspects which are important for the particular context.

Attending to the strengths and needs of those who serve, as well those who are served

This last point requires further elaboration. Working in an open-system way is not easy – when the scope of work is potentially limitless, how can workers successfully create appropriate boundaries?

This was experienced by a range of the Human Learning Systems examples of practice:

“The lack of policies and procedures felt exposing at times and required support to create safety to experiment (within the boundaries of the... rules [and] principles). There were some challenges along the way that tested the method and there was a need to iterate and adapt.” ([Changing Futures Northumbria](#))

“The truth is that this autonomy was initially debilitating for probably all but one of the Bridgebuilders – and as we noted above, the more professional experience a person had had, the more they struggled stepping into this very different space.” ([Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders](#))

Part of the successful organisational response was to create learning environments which were bespoke to the needs of the workers, and which were structured so that people could find certainty in their collaborative learning processes ([Changing Futures Northumbria](#)).

The recognition by workers of one another’s humanity also supported this strengths-based process:

“We care about each other as people – seeing the person over their role. We encourage seeing people in their context, recognising what’s happening in the real world. ([Vital Signs](#)).

“Through this process, we have uncovered the values that should underpin and inform our next steps to change ideas. We have realised that we are all humans, with a shared belief that services should be delivered from a human perspective... While there may not be one definitive solution, we understand that each person's life is complex and unique.” ([Fife Mental Health & Wellbeing](#))

This final point underlines and reinforces the idea that Relational Public Service requires open system relationships between workers, as much as it requires them between workers and those they serve.

“The focus has been strongly on building relationships between professionals, eliminating the need for onward referrals, a focus on solutions not services, devolving power and decision making downwards to create a ‘distributed leadership approach.’” ([Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance](#))

“I think there's a real sense of personal connection there along with professional connection. And I think gives us an opportunity to bang heads about other things. I walk into the NESSie CEO meeting, and I can hug every single one of them. There's not many places that I can walk in, and that happens.” ([North Edinburgh Support Services](#))

Quality of relationships

The Human Learning Systems examples of practice have some useful reflections on how the desired qualities of relationships can be created, particularly trust.

Trust can be purposefully built

Some commentators think that trust is simply an [outcome of a well-functioning system](#), and therefore it is not appropriate to seek to build trust as a mechanism to enable change. The evidence from a Human Learning Systems approach suggests that trust can be purposefully built:

“We invested A LOT of time and key support personnel to help build trust – fortnightly meetings as a minimum. We ran focused team days and specialised workshops like The Money Workshop to help the people really get to know one another, how they were alike and how they differed.” ([Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders](#))

“Key principles: taking time to build trust; focusing on creating authentic and meaningful connections between individuals. Encouraging open communication, active listening, and fostering a sense of belonging.” ([Barking & Dagenham](#))

“The workshops are intended to allow learning across all levels of hierarchy, departments, and districts, thereby opening new spaces that enable us to share ideas, to share failures and to build trust.” ([Mitwirkung](#))

Some of the examples, [MERAKI](#) among them, used specific communication methods such as [Nonviolent Communication](#) and [other psychological tools](#) as ways to build trust.

A more nuanced position on trust is therefore that it can be purposefully built, but that increased trust itself is not sufficient to create [healthy, learning systems](#).

Learning together builds trust

One of the ways in which people explicitly build trust is to create shared learning processes:

“The learning process itself was the source of the trust and in fact improved relationships.”
([Czechia Child Protection Services](#))

Reflexivity

Commitment to ongoing collaborative learning

As highlighted previously, the desired relationships for Relational Public Service are *learning relationships*. In other words, the relationship seeks to:

- Explore the appropriate boundaries of the open system
- Understand that system, as framed
- Experiment together to see how that system can produce a different pattern of results.

Doing this requires organising for ongoing collective learning about how to achieve our purpose (learning with, from, and about each other) rather than for “results”.

It requires changing:

- Resource allocation processes (such as funding, commissioning) – so that what is being funded is learning ([Systems Innovation](#)

[and Experimentation Fund](#), [Barking & Dagenham](#), [Liverpool City Region](#), [Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance](#)) Weekly meeting practices – so that team meeting spaces are learning environments ([Changing Futures Northumbria](#), [Active Cornwall](#), [Healthy Communities Together Gloucestershire](#), [Czechia Child Protection Services](#)).

- [Governance and accountability](#) processes – so that what is being governed and accounted for is people’s ability to learn collaboratively.

Power

As highlighted above, enabling all actors in a relationship to determine whether the substantive dimensions of that relationship are open or closed requires decision-making power to be devolved into those relationships.

Devolved power (particularly budgets)

Providing bespoke service requires freedom from standardised targets, and budgets which can only be spent on pre-approved things. In other words, it requires those who have the relationships to have devolved power to respond effectively to whatever they find in those relationships:

“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... This also involves a discretionary budget which caseworkers can use to assist citizens... and a lack of KPIs or onerous paperwork meant they could focus on what was important to the individual.”
([Changing Futures Northumbria](#))

“[Our purpose was] to reimagine traditional funding approaches by shifting the focus towards distributive power, participatory decision-making, and, above all, learning.” ([Systems Innovation and Experimentation Fund](#))

“One example of this is the work with North Lanarkshire, whereby HIS helped to develop learning cycles to inform system change. Through this work there was a recognition of the need for autonomy to be able to act upon learning.” (Healthcare Improvement Scotland)

Participatory, coproduction processes

Devolving power is one aspect of enabling all participants in a relationship to be able to open/close the dimensions of that relationship. It also requires effective coproduction processes ([levels 4 and 5 of this scale](#)) to enable that power to be meaningfully exercised.

We can see this, for example, if the way that [Changing Futures Northumbria](#) uses dialogue to enable workers and residents to jointly set, and change, the scope of work. [Fife – No One Left Behind](#) also offers a reflection on this point:

“Coproduction activity was shaped intentionally to establish the relationships and conditions necessary to enable authentic and non-judgemental participation conducive to eliciting values and insights from experience and informing an ongoing process of learning... It was essential that everyone felt comfortable and safe enough to share their experiences without the fear of being judged, criticised, or blamed.”

Conclusion

We think it is helpful to understand Relational Public Service through the lens of open and closed systems because it helps us to identify which type of relationship is useful for achieving outcomes that have particular characteristics.

A more open system relationship is appropriate when the desired purpose:	A more closed system relationship is appropriate when the desired purpose:
may change over time	is fixed and stable
may differ between contexts – in space and time	is achieved in the same way for everyone, across time
is determined by the person/people themselves (“what matters to them”)	can be easily standardised for everybody
can be achieved using anything relevant about the person	is attempted using only predefined parameters
Example: supporting someone to lead a thriving life	Example: enabling people to renew their vehicle tax quickly and easily

The Human Learning Systems examples of practice help us to understand what is required to create and enact open-system public service relationships. We are required to do public management fundamentally differently, from the perspective of a whole person. This seems to entail:

Requirement for more open systems public service	Detail
<i>Purpose, boundaries and scope of relationships</i>	
Bespoke provision	A commitment to understanding the unique context of each person, and responding flexibly to that
<i>Meaning and context</i>	
Prioritising relationship-building	Relationship-building is signalled by managers/leaders as useful, and this time is protected
Low caseloads	Caseloads which enable people to maintain rich relationships with those they serve and to protect learning time
Using data for learning	Data is used for learning and improvement, not performance management
<i>What is exchanged?</i>	
Opening professional identities	Seeing the worker as a whole person, not just a person occupying a predefined role
Attending to worker strengths and needs	Supporting workers to deal with the discomfort of open-system relationships
Supporting relationships between workers	Giving time and space to enable workers to support one another
<i>Quality of Relationships</i>	
Trust	Trust can be purposefully built
Learning & trust	Learning together builds trust
<i>Reflexivity</i>	
Learning relationships	Organising for continuous learning, in resource allocation, meeting spaces and governance and accountability mechanisms
<i>Power</i>	
Devolved power	Liberated public-facing workers, who have freedom and responsibility to make decisions in the work, and to spend resource in line with their judgements
Participatory, coproduction processes	Participatory coproduction processes enable people to exercise agency meaningfully



What next? Experimenting with the Human Learning Systems approach

If you're curious about trying the Human Learning Systems approach in your context, then there are many sources of help and support which may be of use. Similarly, if you've already started on this journey, and would like to connect and share with others, then members of [Human Learning Systems Collaborative](#) can almost certainly help. Places and organisations which are currently undertaking explorations of Human Learning Systems include:

- Doncaster Council (and partners) – [Thrive Programme, a whole place change programme](#)
- North Lanarkshire Health & Social Care Partnership
- Plymouth Council
- Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance

As we described at the beginning of this piece, Human Learning Systems is a continuous action research process. This means you cannot simply *implement* a Human Learning Systems approach, you have to experiment with it. In this document, we have laid out the key principles and supporting practices of Human Learning Systems. Our question to you would be: how might the Human Learning Systems principles manifest themselves in your context? What are the practices that you create for yourselves to create healthy learning systems in your contexts?

To help you with this process, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and [iriss](#) commissioned a [Practical Guide](#) to exploring Learning as a Management Strategy. You can download and read it for free. There are also many other resources at www.humanlearning.systems.

If you would like help with your exploration, from either a [Learning Partner](#) to support you on your journey or by connecting you into a community of practice of other action learners, get in touch at enquiries@humanlearning.systems.

Relevant examples of practice:

The following examples of practice provide further illustration of the points raised in this piece.

[Active Cornwall](#)

[Barking and Dagenham](#)

[Brent Care Journeys](#)

[Changing Futures Northumbria](#)

[Czechia Child Protection Services](#)

[Diabetes UK](#)

[Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders](#)

[Hackney Physical Activity](#)

[Health Communities Together Gloucestershire](#)

[Healthcare Improvement Scotland](#)

[Impro Consult](#)

[Liverpool City Region](#)

[Meraki – The Ministry of Citizen Participation, Mexico](#)

[Mitwirkung](#)

[North Edinburgh Support Services \(NESSie\)](#)

[Plymouth Family Hubs](#)

[Scottish Borders](#)

[Social Prescribing and Marginalised Older People project Leicester](#)

[Sunderland Primary Care Network](#)

[Systems Innovation and Experimentation Fund](#)

[Thurrock Integrated Care Alliance](#)

[Ways to Wellness](#)

[Young People Cornwall](#)



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