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Smith, Mark, Hesselgreaves, Hannah, Charlton, Ron and Wilson, Rob  (2025) New development: The 'liberated method'—a transcendent public service innovation in polycrisis. *Public Money and Management*. ISSN 0954-0962

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2025.2456120>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Published Version

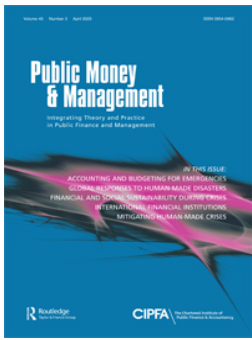
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To cite this article: Mark Smith, Hannah Hesselgreaves, Ron Charlton & Rob Wilson (17 Feb 2025): New development: The ‘liberated method’—a transcendent public service innovation in polycrisis, *Public Money & Management*, DOI: [10.1080/09540962.2025.2456120](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2025.2456120)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2025.2456120>



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Published online: 17 Feb 2025.



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New development: The ‘liberated method’—a transcendent public service innovation in polycrisis

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IMPACT

This article has implications for innovators tackling public service reform in New Public Management contexts. The authors describe a transcendent approach using an innovative relational framing of practice: the ‘liberated method’. This re-frames current orthodoxies, such as referrals (from referrals to ‘pulls’ for specialist support), specialisms (from default specialist referrals to generalists holding and keeping the relationships), and permissions (from defaulting to ‘no’ and resorting to ‘yes’ for services, to just ‘yes’). The effect is that citizens and practitioners have a different experience and generate positive outcomes. This enables relational practice to expand in scope and for public managers to enable improved outcomes and falls in demand. It demonstrates how data on life outcomes and public finances can be used to support the practical potential in public management of a move from rational and transactional services to complex and relational services.

ABSTRACT

Interventions in line with the complexity of people’s lives require a different approach to innovation that orientates problems from the position of citizen’s lives—not the problems’ ‘fit’ with the existing expertise, capacity, and service remit. Many of these problems and crises are wrongly categorised as ‘poverty’, ‘mental health’, ‘health inequalities’, or ‘homelessness’. This article describes the development of the ‘liberated method’ (LM) in public services in Northumbria, UK, as a public service innovation. It contributes to the relational public service literature by drawing in public service innovation theory to express relational practice as novel, implementable, developmental, and demonstrable of public value. Utilizing these theories together enables an analytic take on the Liberated Method as a means of offering transcendent public service reform. The approach demonstrates how embedded evaluative practices enable the planned emergence necessary for services to respond more coherently to life complexity.

KEYWORDS

Complexity; emergence; learning; liberated method (LM); polycrisis; public service innovation; public value; relational public service

Public service innovation in polycrisis

While community, organizational and management responses to burgeoning social need in recent years have been profound, methods of social interventions for responding appropriately to polycrisis require considerable re-thought. These needs are often framed as ‘problems’ and crises, categorised as ‘poverty’, ‘mental health’, ‘health inequalities’, or ‘homelessness’. In fact, all and none are really true. Public services and their innovations are generally designed around these specific, describable problems or observable consequences of them (for example debt, diabetes, violence and crime). The wider system of services that has evolved over the past 80 years is grounded in the idea that services can solve problems. This would mean people with lots of problems need lots of different services and, with rising demand, this strategy is unsustainable.

Part of the intractability may lie in defining problems through the lens of services: if services are the answer, and multiple services are the answer to multiple problems, then the obvious next focus is on relationships between services. However, this remains narrow and has led to efforts to reform public services to frequently focus upon service navigation, and navigation is only one aspect of addressing complexity (French et al., 2023), which is predicated on the

basis that complexity is compositional (lots of factors are cross-boundary and inter-related) (Rhodes, 1997; Osborne, 2010; Hobbs, 2019). Rather, outcomes are emergent properties of complex systems and complexity also refers to the limitations of knowledge mobilization and governance over time, to enable action that accommodates decentralized control, resources and motivations (French et al., 2023; Byrne & Callaghan, 2014), as well as to the unique and varied experiences of individuals.

The transactional nature of public service has become increasingly deeply embedded in public service logics (Osborne, 2020) and has driven a response which foregrounds technocratic solutions (French et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2024; Lapsley & Miller, 2024). However, relational approaches to public service have become increasingly explicit in innovation discourse (Muir & Parker, 2014; Cottam, 2018; Glover, 2023; Lowe et al., 2020a; Lowe et al., 2020b; 2021; Baines et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024; Bartels et al., 2024). From a sociological perspective, they refer to the human, experiential reality, and dynamism of social relations in context, and include the interpersonal, material, and ideological aspects of social order (Donati, 2011). Bartels and Turnbull (2020) adopt this sociological perspective to reference a ‘relational turn’ in public administration generally, citing ontological, praxis and

methodological units of analysis as elements of evolution which support a trend towards accepting human interaction, interdependence, and emergence. From a psychological perspective, relationality would be viewed as 'intersubjectivity' (Crossley, 1996): humans are understood to be living in a system of relationships that helps define who they are. It implies that to understand people, their world must be understood, including their other relationships. These two perspectives assist us in explaining relational public service as both a public management 'turn' and as an approach to personal change which changes the requirements of services.

Relational interventions and innovations that are in line with the complexity that's presented experientially (in peoples' lives—both citizens and practitioners), and methodologically (in innovating across institutional boundaries: spatial and/or agency) require a *transcendent* approach to public services. Therefore, we need a different approach to innovation that conceives of their purpose from the position of people's lives, not from the 'fit' between people's problems and the existing expertise, capacity, and remit of public services (Blum et al., 2012; Whaites et al., 2015; Mayne et al., 2020).

Public service innovation is defined by Chen et al. (2020) as 'the development and implementation of a novel idea by a PSO (public service organization) to create or improve public value within an ecosystem' (p. 1677) placing emphasis on novelty, public value, development and implementation. This is in line with, and more comprehensive than, many definitions of public service innovation, which largely focus on novelty and adoption (Rogers, 2003; Bhatti et al., 2011; De Vries et al., 2016). We use Chen's definition in this article to examine the tenets of the 'liberated method' (LM) as a relational approach to public service innovation.

One of the challenges relational approaches and methods face is thriving and sustaining in a technocratic environment. The LM offers a new lens to examine these challenges. The LM is a 'bespoke by default' approach to public service that promotes the migration of extrinsic resources to intrinsic resources, and to actively create the conditions most likely to enable people to access their own internal capacity to thrive. The method has three elements to it: high support coupled with high challenge to create movement towards the accessibility of agency; a learning programme wrapped around the casework, supported by low caseloads to ensure suitable capacity to develop understanding; and a combination of rules and principles to provide safe but flexible shape to the support and decisions around it.

We now examine the LM, funded by a UK government programme called Changing Futures Northumbria (CFN), as a public service innovation: transcendent in novelty terms, method-driven in implementation terms, relational in public value terms, and personally transformational and analytical in development terms.

Novelty—Transcendent relational public service

Polycrises are each uniquely configured and comprise their own specific and specifically changing blend of problems and struggles. The notion of polycrisis is transcendent of a summation of observable elements, and those elements extend beyond an assemblage of disciplines and

departments that make up the gamete of public services; they often include subtle and highly contextual and bespoke facets to a comparable or greater degree than those facets that have services and disciplines traditionally in place to address them. Navigating between these resources in the hope they will combine to be enough fails to address the transcendent nature of polycrisis (Morin et al., 1999; Klein et al., 2023): both in terms of the range of elements and how they relate to each other.

The development and iteration of the LM work has highlighted that transcendent phenomena need transcendent approaches and methods to be effective. The LM works outwards from an understanding of personal contexts by concerning itself with 'what matters?' as opposed to asserting 'what works', and there lies its novelty. It takes context as its starting point—not the deployment of existing services and resources. It is essentially agnostic of what resources are available when considering what needs to be done. The service and system proposition becomes about mobilizing the necessary support and expertise in each and every case: thus becoming 'bespoke by default'.

This means no pathways, protocols or eligibility criteria or anything that is standardized. Design features that are predicated on efficiency are forsaken in deference to those predicated on *efficacy* and *understanding*: the pre-occupations are what matters, and iterating responses to it. This produces observations and learning that allow for approaches to emerge by design. By working outwards from context, we can ascertain what might be possible without any institutional change through the pursuit of activity that is system agnostic. The novelty, in essence, is that the LM is focused upon purpose, context, efficacy and iteration as opposed to compliance, existing provision, efficiency and survival. Figure 1 illustrates the differences between services that are specialist-driven and require navigation to and through their qualifying procedures, and services that are generalist-driven and require a relationship with a citizen to foreground need and to agree purpose together. The former 'pixelates' people and their problems, the latter absorbs variety through relationships.

Implementation—The LM as a relationally applied practice

The LM was named by public servants and peer support workers for whom the ability to absorb variety is central. Nuance and context are valuable when working with citizens on what matters to them, with no weighting or preference given to concerns that match the professions or provisions on offer. The ability for public servants to work with people on what matters, no matter what it is, was liberating. Workers using the LM have no fixed pathways or protocols but, instead, have iteratively developed into three rules and five principles. Caseworkers are able to work in any way they see fit, based within the three rules which are absolutes and the five guiding principles (see Figure 2). This is akin to Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy which is based on using discretion to address the welfare policy implementation gap (Lipsky, 2010; Evans, 2016).

Caseworkers have access to a budget and have small caseloads. They work closely and often start at points of extreme crisis and high need. The LM is designed to help

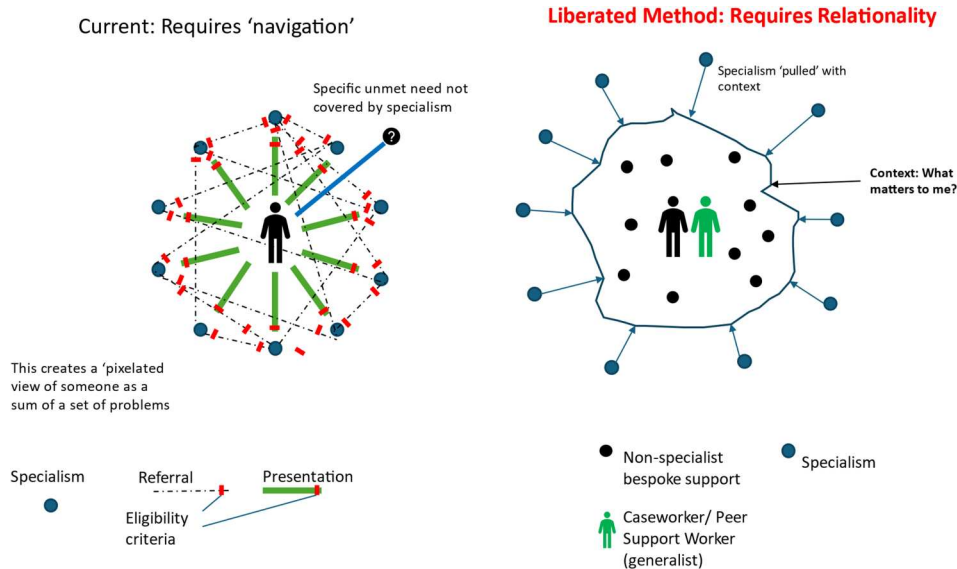


Figure 1. Comparison of current service provision and transcendent relational public service.

citizens develop the relationships in their lives that they need to thrive. For people with acute needs and chaotic circumstances, this relationship might need to be with the state for a time, with resources and power to move on issues such as housing and healthcare. As they become more stable and confident, their own inherent agency comes to the fore and those providing support through the LM become less involved. What is critical is that this method is designed with the goal of eliciting people's own agency to take over. When one designs for agency, the nature of interventions is different from professional, transactional services. They might have many similar actions and skillsets within them, but the pattern of interventions stem from creating a trusting and yet intentionally temporary relationship.

Public value—Demonstrating the social benefits of relational practice

Public value is a combined public view of what is regarded as valuable (Talbot, 2006) and provides managers with a sense of how their innovations contribute to the common good (Moore, 1995). In public organizations, this can include outcome achievement, trust and legitimacy of a public organization, service delivery quality and efficiency. It is found in the relationship between individuals and society and enacted as a cultural and organizing principle for individual public servants to pursue innovations, and for citizens, its seen as a democratic right (Coats & Passmore, 2008). Coats and Passmore (2008) describe a dynamic between how public value is legitimated, produced and measured.

The public value of the LM is legitimated in its purpose of iterating relational service that simultaneously improves lives and services and is created through the implementation of the method itself to access active agency and service reform that transcends the pixelated version of service 'deliverology' under New Public Management. How these are demonstrated and measured requires equal levels of innovation. We take each in turn here using the story of 'Brian' (see Figure 3). Brian is an LM client, who has given permission for his story to be told.

Brian's starting point was that he was being pulled along by his caseworkers (all extrinsic, no intrinsic support) because there was a significant risk that he could die. The caseworkers worked on his accommodation and his treatment but encouraged him to think beyond his predicament and agree a purpose and, as such, his interests and strengths emerged, thus bringing in some of the 'green' in Figure 4. He 'moved right' fairly quickly, activating personal agency. This reflects the notion of public value as recognizing 'the full roundedness of ... Human qualities and experiences' described by Stoker (2006, p. 47), and our 'evolved and contradictory human nature' (Talbot, 2006, p. 3). The public value in this relationship grew in depth and efficacy and demonstrated a relational reflexivity that grew the 'relational goods' within the caseworker/citizen dynamic (Donati, 2011).

In service reform terms, the LM has built data demonstrating a 'burning platform' of service consumption (Figure 6), illustrating a change in the trajectory of costs that results from the LM. By focusing casework interactions and relationships on these leading measures, public value of the relational approach offered by the LM become apparent. Such turnarounds happen when contextual extrinsic support gives way to intrinsic agency and capability. In tandem, prevention of service consumption is implied, offering the potential for efficacy and efficiency for all parties. Public value experts have lamented the hampering effect of the lack of both a cumulative body of empirical research on public value (Hartley et al., 2017) and a comprehensive reform agenda that allows public value and its management to provide consistent governance in British public service (Van der Zwet & Connolly, 2021).

The disconnect between the leading measures derived from the relationship and the historical consumption of services was stark. From Brian's account and a major data trawl, we know that he consumed a minimum of £2 million worth of public services in recent years: mostly the health and criminal justice systems. Brian had over 3,000 interactions with services in 14 years but remained fundamentally misunderstood. This is possible because, as well as having consent to compile historical

The rules:

1. Stay legal: flexibility does not mean impunity, we respect and observe legal boundaries.
2. Do no harm: This applies to the citizen, the caseworker or anyone else. Imperfect solutions to problems are better than ones that cause harm to others.
3. Agree purpose: Upon commencement of an LM intervention, the caseworker and citizen must agree why they agree to work together. It doesn't matter what they agree, provided there is a purpose. This is reviewed near constantly but provides focus for the work.

The principles:

1. Understand, not assess: Do not use standardized assessments to establish what to do, instead we understand citizens, their context and aspirations. This is not a rule because the law may dictate an assessment, but this is not done in isolation.
2. Citizen and caseworker set the scope: The LM allows the pursuit of any (legal and safe) activity if the citizen and caseworker consider it helpful and congruent with the agreed purpose. This prevents the work being constrained by existing service boundaries. The teams have access to funds to allow for this.
3. Decisions made in the work: Those who do the work make decisions about it. The role of leadership is to create the conditions for good decisions to be made.
4. Pull for help (or refer and hold): Instead of referring citizens on between multiple professions, none of whom have context, those with required specific skills and/or resources are 'pulled' to the person. If this is not possible, a referral is made, but the caseworker 'holds' the case rather than refer it and drop it.
5. No time limits: This is an especially liberating element of this method. Things take as long as they take. Variation is predictable, and so we design a method that doesn't fail to absorb it. Fixed arbitrary timescales for work are not included in this work.

Figure 2. Liberated Method rules and principles.

consumption data for people for whom the ecosystem of public services has largely failed, the relationship brings out the stories and experiences. This demonstrates how public services, as public goods, can be managed more appropriately to *create* value, not just to measure it. This may serve to reduce consumption as a valued outcome but may also serve to increase trust in public services' ability to provide quality and better experiences. Indeed, Meynhardt (2009) proposed that 'Public value is about values characterizing the relationship between an individual and "society", defining the quality of this relationship' (p. 212).

Development—Planned emergence

Core to the LM is the understanding that relationships are a far more effective and versatile basis for achieving value than the deployment of services. They are also more likely to yield learning that allows practice to iterate by design. The LM includes a commitment to constant iteration and learning through the deployment of evaluative practices. These include case reviews, group and one-to-one

supervision which explore the progress of citizens and the experiences of caseworkers, all of whom use journals to capture events, feelings and learning. This focus has enabled us to grow and learn, and for citizens to see a high chance of more profound benefits from this method. This creates a learning organization, with caseworkers and leadership all collectively sense-making across innovation spaces (see Figure 7).

The learning programme has developed a design to enable further innovation, as an example of planned emergence (Grant, 2003). For example, the programme team were able to respond to challenges from those defending standardized solutions that this creates a dependency. It does, but not necessarily an unhealthy one. When someone is in crisis and has no one, it is likely that building trust and being supportive during the extrinsic phase creates a dependency. But this dependency can be effective in moving out of crisis and can be surmounted when moving towards thriving. This dynamic movement between extrinsic and intrinsic resources and its mechanisms were possible to demonstrate through longitudinal data collection and sense-making with those closest to the work.

Brian was in crisis, with no connections, no network, no hope. He was alcohol dependant and frequently attending accident and emergency (A&E) (the most frequent A&E attendee at the local hospital, averaging a visit every 1.5 days). He was offending and had a history of arrests and imprisonment spanning 14 years.

Brian was also homeless and was attending a homelessness walk-in centre that provided support, advice, food and a network of sorts, but not a home or a place to sleep. It was here that Brian become known to the Changing Future Northumbria (CFN) team, ostensibly as a homeless man but with a myriad of less visible things that mattered more than this presenting issue.

Figure 3. Story of needing transcendent help.

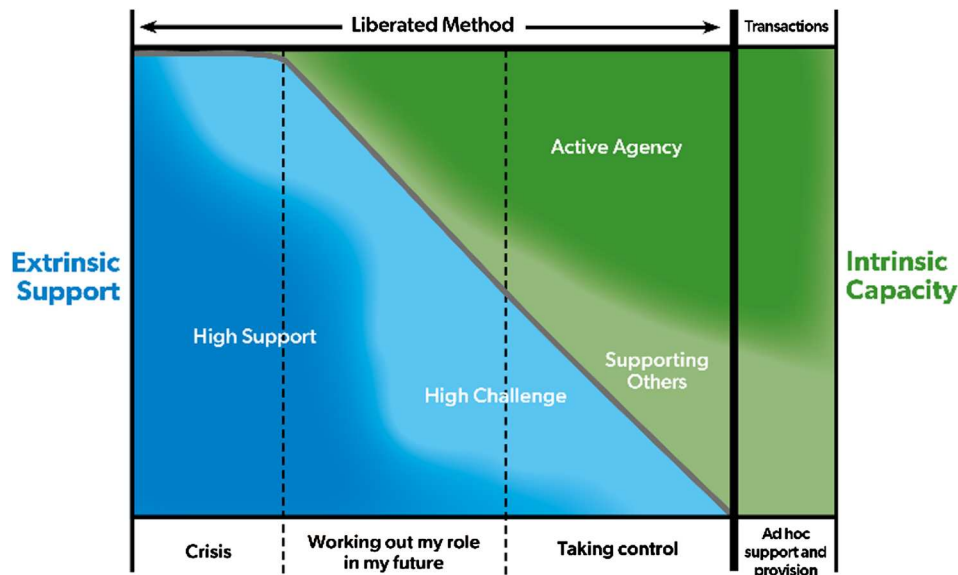


Figure 4. Using high support and high challenge to activate agency.

More than evidencing, it changed the LM. The LM initially had two rules, with 'agree purpose' resulting from case review. The segue from extrinsic support being the dominant element to the supporting element for any given citizen can be difficult. For some, it happens naturally and there is no obvious point where this occurs. For others, the process of creating new relationships with caseworkers to move away from crisis creates a temporary stability that requires specific effort to phase out when things are calmer. This is a form of inertia which might well be called the 'extrinsic loop', where people are nervous about taking over the reins or are relatively comfortable in an unsustainable situation and aren't drawn to accessing their intrinsic capacity to change things. The addition of 'agree purpose' was identified from case reviews where this oscillation was noticed, and in cases where purpose was agreed, this inertia was reduced.

Furthermore, it is apparent from studying citizen's histories of interaction that the drivers behind standardized public interventions were, superordinately, to create and maintain a defensible position for whatever services are consumed at the time. This allows an assessment of the drivers that were at play when an absence of support, or misdirected/unsuitable support, led to more suffering and resources consumption through repeated presentations. This enables the logical drivers behind the public service orthodoxy to be expressed as cost and consumption drivers in a way that wouldn't ever be possible without understanding history and, as such, creates public value in making us less likely to be doomed to repeat it. [Figure 8](#) is an illustration of how a developmental approach to public service innovation illuminates hidden mechanisms, and this understanding can be used to subvert standardization.

Discussion and conclusion

An ambitious and less well-known transcendent version of reform is that which attends to re-purposing and re-functioning—not just reforming—and it must surpass what currently exists. When we aim for relationality in public services as part of their design, the acute problems of those

deemed to be 'complex' or to have 'multiple and complex needs' become dissolved rather than solved. For example, for such people, efforts to reform services that might help them and to address rising demand is often framed as a 'navigation' problem, i.e. how can we help people access the services they need? System navigation aims to reduce barriers to facilitate access to continuous care, but systematic reviews are inconclusive (Teggart et al., 2023) despite continued investment in link workers and community support workers.

Navigationally-framed problem-solving is neither complexity-informed (problems cannot be 'solved'), nor transcendent (processes and pathways maintain existing structures, not disrupt them). However, when human experience is foregrounded as a shared prospect (MacMurray, 1961), with freedom to serve as core to public service (O'Neill, 2002), relationships become the mechanism for change as well as the outcome of change, and relational public services can be realized in ontological and methodological terms (Clark et al., 2014).

Public service innovation is often initiated in the context of an 'interface' between a public sector organization and its stakeholders (Benner & Tushman, 2015; Lusch & Nambisan, 2015; Chen et al., 2020). Therefore, the endeavour to implement is inherently based on relationships and is partially reflected in the current understanding of differences between New Public Management and New Public Governance. The LM offers a means of implementing relational public service. This implementation is not of a service, a process, or even a practice in service organizations. Rather, it is an approach to fostering relationships in a way that is efficacious, context informed, and transparent. In the field of implementation science, these are all areas of importance: establishing that the LM is practised in the way it was designed to do and establishes provisional theories in the work; accounts for contextual variety in how it is implemented on a case-by-case basis with each encounter to optimise efficacy; and recorded, discussed and critiqued on an on-going basis to produce high-quality and emergent information about the lives of clients, and the method itself. Therefore, the implementation of relational public service through a

By building a relationship and attending to what mattered, however well these things did or didn't relate to existing service provision, the leading measures that helped guide the work and understand its value emerged. What mattered was stopping drinking, reconnecting with family, creative outlets, friendship and somewhere to live.

With an 80% reduction in consumption in 18 months (and falling), Brian also became sober, happier, free and helping others. Barely 1% of interactions with Brian previously related to his creative and connective opportunities; most were keeping him alive and reacting to alcohol-induced offending.

Figure 5. A story of transcendent help as public value.

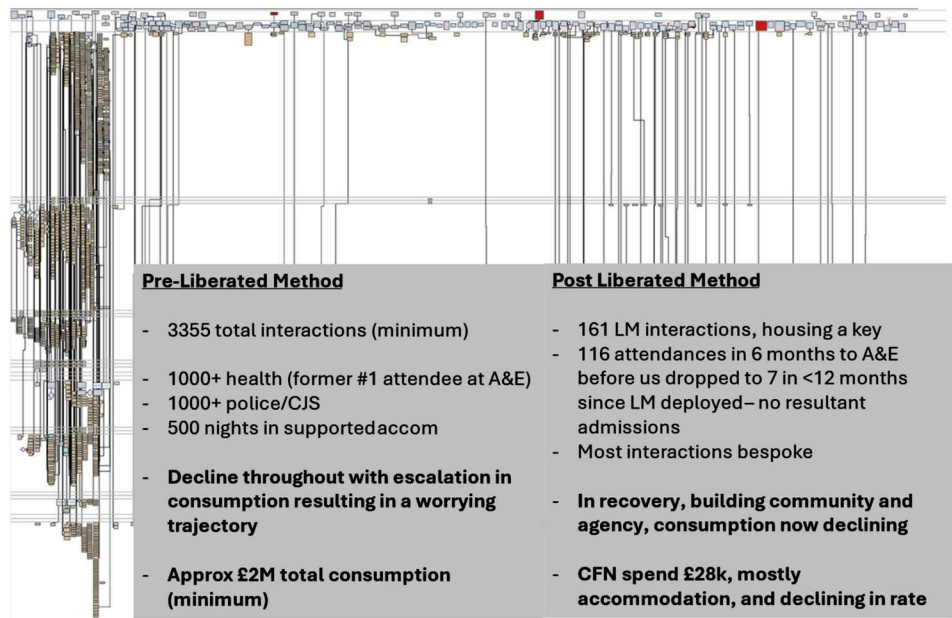


Figure 6. 'Burning platform' of service consumption.

	Practice	Iteration	Systems and Drivers	Evidence and Theory
Who	Caseworkers	Ops Leads Data Lead	Data Lead Core Group	Core Group Community of Practice
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support work with clients • Embed a learning culture • Develop practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing roles • Iterating methodology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencing leaders • Decision-making • Unblocking • Policies and Procedures • Recruitment • Resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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

Figure 7. An embedded learning programme.

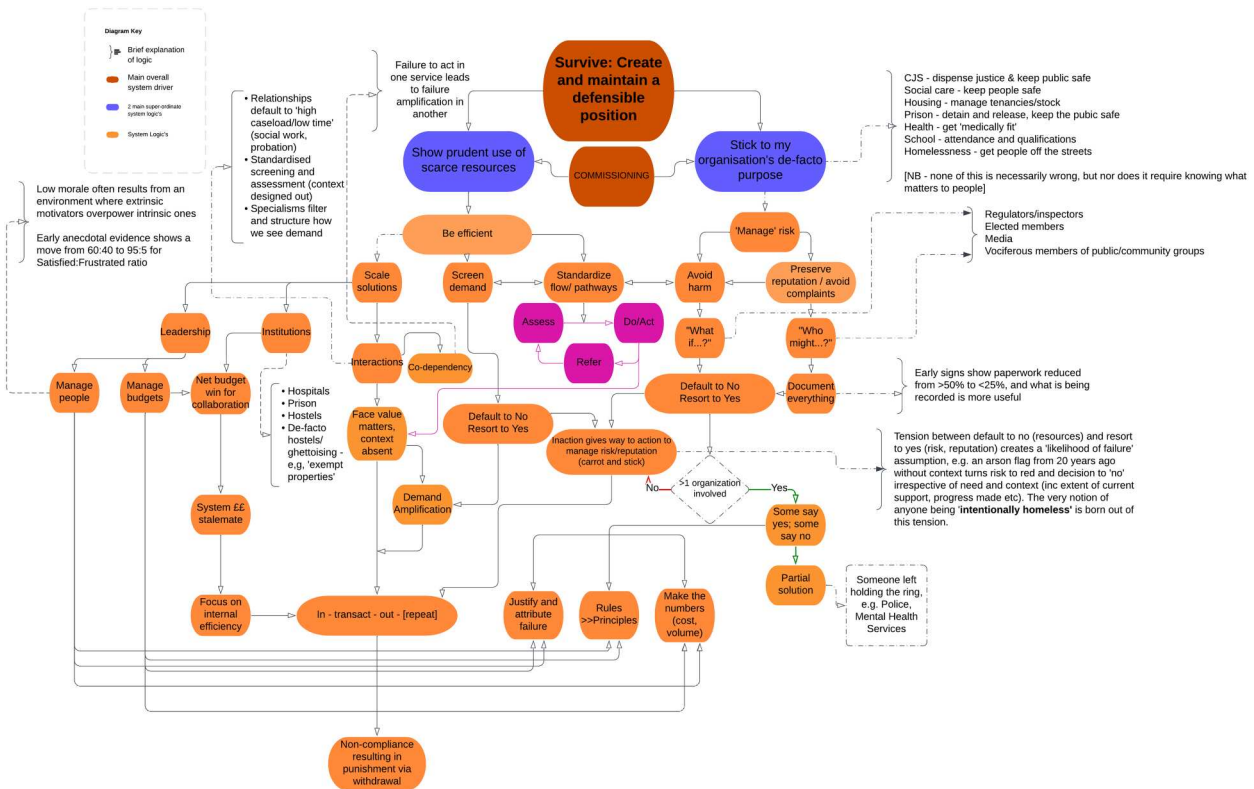


Figure 8. Drivers of standardization in public service.

method of rules and principles enables the LM to address the handicaps that method-agnostic public service reform cannot because of its applied nature and rigorous learning framework.

Change at the relational level, we argue, provides truer public value. For over 100 years, people in the recovery community have transformed themselves from destitution and destructive behaviour to thriving citizens contributing to their communities. When we compare what building relationships and community achieves compared to a service delivery mindset, it teaches us that it's impossible to be efficient if we're not effective. Public services are under constant pressure to transform and redesign services to find efficiencies yet this has not driven notable reform that gazes on the reality of complex lives. When efficacy becomes the focus instead, better results are possible (genuine personal change through relationships) for less money. Adopting a public value framing over a value-for-money framing accommodates an ability for public services to choose their public value and the 'measure' of it and, in the case of liberated public service, to use discretion to serve the needs of relationships (Moore, 2014; Brodtkin, 2012).

As well as applying 'development' to the emergent nature of outcomes (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014), it crucially applies to the development of innovation practices. Without an appreciation of this and the role of individuals' agency in outcome creation, we remain in a transactional frame of reference where individuals are recipients of innovation, rather than innovation that absorbs the relationships between stakeholders: policy-makers, managers, service providers and the public (Chen et al., 2020). As such, development can be captured and theorized to provide iterative opportunities for innovation. Building learning capacity for this capturing, learning, and theorizing may be

a route from developing methods to changing landscapes and practice, and even service systems (Lowe et al., 2020b; Hesselgreaves et al., 2021).

To work holistically, default to yes, and broaden the scope of support, there are some other key changes that must accompany the operational ones, including:

- A movement away from performative, transactional and inward-focused leadership to purpose-driven, citizen-centred approaches.
- The ability for resources to be designed or pooled around issues in a way that transcends organizations as required if prevention is ever going to be designed into public services.
- Commissioning learning, development and innovation, rather than services bound by pre-determined outcomes.
- Governance that fashions how we learn and iterate, requiring different efforts, attention, and data.

This article examines the LM as a public service innovation: transcendent in moving from system navigation to context-rich, relationship-centred decisions that optimise specialisms; relational in the mechanism for change as well as relationships being an outcome itself; where public value is more focused on effectiveness than efficiency, where the measurement of value can be negotiated and agreed by relationships; and where development is as much about the emergent nature of outcomes as it is about the production of innovation.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Mark Joyce, Francis Donnelly, and the Changing Futures Northumbria team for their support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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