

DEMOS

THE RESPECT STORY

A POLITICAL NARRATIVE
FOR PUBLIC SERVICE
REFORM

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper makes the case for narrative as a governing tool. It argues that a growing consensus over public service reform that is preventative, more relational, and less shaped by the centralising instincts of Whitehall, is stalling for want of a story.

Its author, **Tom Webb**, has worked in British politics and government for many years, specialising in policy, strategy, and government delivery. He was a Special Adviser to Prime Minister Keir Starmer across health and social care, and science, innovation and technology, and served as the Director of Policy in the years leading up to the 2024 General Election. Prior to that he worked in the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit during the Coalition and Theresa May governments. He is currently a Senior Director at the strategic advisory firm BB Partners, where he advises international NGOs, global campaigns, UK-based charities, and companies working on major social impact challenges.

A political story, Tom argues, is more than a set of slogans. At its most powerful, it provides a shared diagnosis, a theory of change, and, perhaps most importantly, the legitimacy that those who administer the system need to reimagine it. He offers a new version of that story, an offer to voters and public servants to end the fight in public services that hampers delivery by making respect the driving principle for service design and implementation.

This paper is part of Demos's **Powering Public Service Reform** programme which aims to understand and overcome the deep, systemic barriers that hold back genuine reform. Alongside this work on a new narrative for public service reform the programme combines research, convening and policy design across four other workstreams: culture, accountability, funding and, digital enablement. Public Service Reform is central to Demos' wider work to upgrade democracy with a new deal to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen.

This paper is being published at a moment of deep frustration inside and outside of government about how hard it is to drive the meaningful change that voters are demanding and the government has promised. We hope it is a useful contribution to all actors thinking about the next phase of reform.

Polly Curtis

CEO, Demos

INTRODUCTION

For most people, the real test of whether a government is doing its job is simple: can the state get the basics of everyday public services right, from booking a GP appointment to dealing with your child's school or sorting out problems with your housing or council tax. People want to be listened to, to be told the truth, and to be able to access the services they need. Too often in recent years, their experience has been the opposite. People need to chase letters and phone calls, repeat the same story to different professionals and feel pushed through a system that is not listening. At worst, accessing services has become more like a fight - a battleground where citizens are pitched against scarcity, thresholds and rules they never agreed to and barely understand.

These everyday frustrations may seem minor, but together they send a clear message that you are not in control and that no one will pay the price for the stress and time you have wasted. Their cumulative effect becomes government failure; each failed state interaction further eroding trust. For Demos, this is at the heart of the breakdown of the relationship between citizen and state.¹

The current government has rightly promised that this has to change. The 2024 Labour manifesto put reform and change at the heart of its offer. More recently, on public service reform specifically, the 2025 Spending Review set out three core principles: (i) services organised around people's lives, (ii) a shift towards prevention, and (iii) more power for local areas to shape support with their communities. While only a few short paragraphs, ministers have already concretely shown how these principles can be applied in practice including through the NHS 10-Year Plan, changes to children's social care and SEND, the "test, learn and grow" programme, and new devolution deals.

Those principles have long commanded broad support from local service leaders, think tanks and professional bodies as the right direction for public service reform. On paper, then, the argument has been won and progress is being made. But recognition is not the same as adoption. The everyday experience of most people using services still feels very far from that vision.

The problem currently is not a lack of intent, but the difficulty successive governments have had in pushing these principles consistently and hard enough against deep structural incentives and day-to-day pressures. Progress too often sits in isolated pilots and pockets of good practice, rather than a system that actively orients itself around their adoption. The challenge now is to move from broad intellectual consensus into systemic reform. It requires political traction, leadership, institutional incentives and changes to everyday practice, so that the argument runs like the message in a stick of rock, through Whitehall, local government and frontline services.

This paper argues that one of the missing pieces is a political story. A narrative that gives the system a shared diagnosis, a theory of change, that acts as an instruction to reform and gives permission to apply it in different ways in different services and places.

¹ https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Upgrading-Democracy_2025_July.ac_.pdf

That story must be one people recognise from their own lives. It starts with a diagnosis: that public services are too often a fight in which citizens are battling a nonsensical system, in which communities are sidelined, public servants prevented from serving in a way that truly helps people. And it makes an offer: to end the fight between state and citizen and build public services that are on the side of people, invested in their success and helping them get there.

The story promises solutions that are already emerging from this government and from the Prime Minister's own political DNA, rooted in the language of dignity, respect and putting working people in control of their public services. It reflects a wider battleground in contemporary politics – even if different actors talk about it in different ways: rebuilding trust,² putting communities at the heart of decisions,³ giving people more say. It's a recognition that voters increasingly judge politics by whether it shows basic respect for ordinary people.⁴ It offers a way forward for those interested in injecting new momentum into public service reform.

A narrative of this kind does more than communicate a reform agenda. It is the first part of the repair work itself: the means by which the state signals that a new deal between citizen and state is not a slogan but an instruction for how services should be designed and what people should expect, felt in the texture of everyday interactions. It is about a state that listens, treats people fairly and uses public money to actually sort problems out instead of just moving them somewhere else.

A narrative built around 'respect' can provide that missing piece. At its core is a simple idea - the state should be on your side and you should feel it. A system built on respect between state and citizens will both improve outcomes and restore trust.

That is the argument.

In this paper I examine why reform stalls (part one), setting out five hurdles the narrative must help overcome. I then make the case for putting respect at the heart of public service design and delivery (part two), defining the agenda and setting out how to put it into practice.

2 <https://www.conservatives.com/news/kemi-rebuilding-trust-speech>

3 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c51nd5719qpo#:~:text=The%20leader%20of%20the%20Liberal,of%20the%20Liberal%20Democrats'%20approach.>

4 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2025/jul/respect-ordinary-people-remains-crucial-test-voters-one-year-election>

PART ONE

WHY REFORM STALLS

END OF THE DEBATE; START OF THE ARGUMENT

The good news is that there is a broad view of what “better” for public services looks like, across frontline leadership, academia, the voluntary sector and many key and influential policy institutions. Looking at the think tank community alone, there is a huge depth of reports and reviews with a clear common thread on public services - from Demos, IPPR and the Fabian Society to JRF, the Social Market Foundation, Policy Exchange, Nesta, New Local and the Institute for Government. Prevention rather than late crisis response; services joined up around people’s lives rather than around institutional boundaries; power pushed closer to communities; frontline workers with more real autonomy; the importance of relationships; and accountability mechanisms that focus less on box-ticking and more on whether services are actually improving people’s lives.

Different organisations emphasise different routes to that destination. Some focus on prevention and relationships, others on local power and devolution, others still on digital and data as tools to remove friction and join services up around people. But broadly speaking a consensus has been building for at least fifteen years that, for the most part, transcends political colours. Indeed it was this intellectual settlement that was reflected in the 2025 Spending Review.

It is also important to be clear about what the reform community has achieved in getting to this point. Fifteen years of local experimentation and analytical work have produced a robust evidence base, a generation of practitioners who know how to work differently, and a set of places (Wigan, Greater Manchester, Gateshead, Leeds, and Camden to name just a few) that have shown at scale what reformed, and more relational, public services looks like in practice. Without that work, this paper would have little to stand on. Reformers are right to feel that the case has been made, the pilots have run, and the evidence is there.

Yet, despite that depth of agreement, the way the system actually behaves has shifted painfully slowly.

The everyday experience of most people using services is still frustrating and fragmented. People struggle to get timely answers and referrals fall between the cracks. Someone with complex needs is passed from service to service, every interaction feeling like a small humiliation and lost time. The reforming initiatives that successfully embed a more preventative, relational approach remain just that - initiatives and pilots that are vulnerable to political whim, funding cuts and that fail to sustain and embed.

The implication is not that the reform community has failed. It is that the work must enter a new stage. Winning an argument inside a community of reformers is not the same as winning it in politics or across the system as a whole. The next task is not to produce more evidence or run more pilots. It is to give the argument a political story and a language that travels beyond those who already believe it, providing the political and institutional infrastructure that will connect the evidence base to how people actually experience the state. The difficulty is that reform keeps colliding with a set of structural hurdles that are remarkably consistent across governments and over time.

What explains the institutional inertia that keeps reform at the margins? How do we move from pilotitis to sustained change? Even as the evidence base grows with each new initiative, this paper argues that a clear political story has to be the key to unlocking change. We identify five hurdles that any such narrative will have to overcome:

1. There is no political constituency for reform
2. Reform often talks in a dialect voters don't speak
3. Politics tends towards short-term, retail levers
4. "Public services" can not be treated as one thing
5. Prevention requires double running

A BRIEF NOTE ON NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

For most of the last forty years, much reform thinking has sat in the shadow of 'New Public Management' - an approach that applied private-sector management techniques to government, emphasising competition, performance targets and efficiency - presented as a way to 'modernise' how the state worked. Supporters can point to real achievements such as helping to drive down waiting times and backlogs in key services, supporting a wholesale modernisation of how services are managed and delivered, and pushing public providers to take costs, performance data and user experience far more seriously than before. Critics will highlight its limitations, including, the way target incentives encouraged gaming; that outsourcing fragmented responsibility and often worked better for simple, contractible services, and a tendency to treat citizens as consumers in quasi-markets, even in cases when people neither switched providers often nor benefited equally from doing so. This paper will not spend time refereeing that debate. The useful lesson here is simply that reform models only really bite when they are anchored in a clear political story about what the state is for, and when that story is allowed to shape how services are designed and run.

The world public services operate in today is more complex and more varied than the one in which NPM took hold. Different services are at very different points in their reform journeys. They face different problems and levels of complexity, and they will need different mixes of tools. Some will continue to rely on elements that look like NPM – clear performance data, sharp transparency, disciplined use of resources. Others will need to lean much more heavily on relational practice, shared power and long-term collaboration. The point is not to pick a single technical template and apply it everywhere. It is to start from the political end – the kind of relationship we want between citizens and the state – and let that dictate the mix of means. Not the other way round.

The reform approach that has been building for the last fifteen years should, in that sense, form a post-NPM settlement. Keep what worked (performance focus, user experience, transparency), and introduce new tools where needed (better approaches for complex cases, greater local flexibility). This paper takes that emerging settlement as its starting point and asks a different question. What kind of political story can carry it through the system?

HURDLE ONE

THERE IS NO POLITICAL CONSTITUENCY FOR REFORM

Most political arguments work because they have a clear group of people whose lives they improve in a tangible way. Tax cuts have a constituency. Pay rises for nurses have a constituency. Building a new hospital or a GP surgery has a constituency. By contrast, many core ideas of public service reform - integrating services, greater professional agency for the frontline, shared outcomes across agencies - rarely come with an obvious, organised group of beneficiaries who will fight for them.

The people who would gain most are often those who feel most pushed around by the system. People juggling multiple low-paid jobs, carers, families in and out of contact with social services, people with long-term health conditions or unstable housing. They are unlikely to form a lobby in favour of relational practice.

The costs of reform, by contrast, can be immediate and not always welcome, including institutional disruption, professional anxiety, and potentially short-term performance dips as systems change. There can also be short-term costs for the public. People who have learned to navigate the current system have to relearn how it works, and some who benefit from its existing inequities may feel they have something to lose. The political reward structure has always been tilted against reform. The costs arrive quickly and noisily. The benefits arrive slowly and quietly.

This is not primarily a question of political will. It is more about a structural feature of how public service reform works. It helps explain why, across governments of different parties and eras, the same pattern repeats. Reform is championed in opposition, announced in government, and then steadily squeezed by more urgent and more visible demands. Unless it is reframed and articulated in terms of the beneficiaries - those whose lives will improve - it will keep losing out.

That means talking much more concretely about the changes people would notice in their own lives: shorter waits, fewer hand-offs, one clear point of contact, problems sorted earlier rather than allowed to drift, and services that actually listen and explain. For a long time, everyday dealings have far too often felt like a fight with the state, with people pushed to battle their way through the system. Framing reform in terms of making the state feel on your side in those moments, not as another round of abstract restructuring or new initiatives will help people recognise that they stand to gain directly if it works.

HURDLE TWO

REFORM OFTEN TALKS IN A DIALECT VOTERS DON'T SPEAK

Even where reform has a strong case, the language used makes it impossible to land. Words like "liberated", "relational practice", "co-production", and "human-centred" carry real meaning inside the system. To many outside it, they sound like jargon. For politicians trying to speak to voters who already feel looked down on by "the system", that is at best meaningless and, at worst, toxic. When the case for reform is made mainly in that dialect, the audience shrinks to those who already agree: reformers talk to each other; ministers understandably ask how it translates into something they can explain on a doorstep; and officials are left with a story they cannot easily translate into day-to-day decisions.

Meanwhile, normal people talk in very different terms. They want to 'not have to chase all the time', 'get a straight answer', 'get everything sorted, not just bit by bit', and 'only have to tell their story once'. As long as the reform conversation stays in one language and people's

experience is described in another, reform will struggle to earn political room, however strong the evidence.

The challenge, then, is to find a narrative that works in both directions. It needs to be clear and concrete enough that people can recognise their own experience in it, and precise enough that politicians and officials can use it to guide what they say and do. It should give them a way of talking about reform that connects with voters, and it should send a clear signal about what is expected.

HURDLE THREE

POLITICS TENDS TOWARDS SHORT-TERM, RETAIL LEVERS

Governments work under constant pressure to show quick, visible results. Voters are rightly impatient for progress, and the media expects a daily diet of announcements. The old No10 “grid” model of lining up one announcement a day, and blowing items off when something noisier appears, has long come under fire for exactly this reason. As former Tony Blair and Keir Starmer adviser Peter Hyman has argued - it produces outputs that are “too short term, too tactical and too reactive”.⁵ Rightly, it has been reported that No10 has begun to adapt how it thinks about communications, adapting the process to tell narratives over longer periods of time.⁶

In recent years, reform efforts have often leaned on a familiar set of levers, such as digital projects, civil service efficiency programmes and structural reorganisations. All three matter and can improve how existing systems are organised and delivered. During the coalition years, austerity provided a stark example of how a simple political story about “living within our means” guided difficult decisions on spending and public services, whether or not one agreed with the goal. But when reform keeps returning to these visible “means”, without a clear account of the underlying political goal, it limits how far the wider system can actually change.

Digital, data and AI-driven services are now fundamental to how the state works, and will be central to any serious reform in the years ahead. Few people want to go back to paper forms. However, the government’s own State of digital government review at the start of 2025 warned of a “digital veneer”.⁷ Better front-ends on top of fragmented processes risk wasting money if digitisation is not accompanied by deeper redesign.

Civil service cuts and efficiency drives are similar. There is a legitimate public expectation for governments to use resources well, and waste should always be challenged. But experience from repeated reform attempts is that salami-slicing staff without changing what governments are trying to do tends to hollow out the analytical and cross-cutting capacity reform needs, while leaving the core structures, targets and management routines in place.

Structural reorganisations follow the same pattern. In probation, for example, the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms and subsequent unification repeatedly redrew organisational boundaries and lines of accountability, but official evaluations and inspectorates found limited impact on reoffending outcomes, alongside significant disruption to local partnerships and professional relationships during the transitions.⁸ New structures are sometimes necessary, however, on their own they risk rearranging responsibilities around an unchanged model, rather than changing how people experience support.

5 <https://peterhyman21.substack.com/p/revealed-how-the-no-10-grid-strangles>

6 <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/london-playbook/london-playbook-pm-lam-fisted/>

7 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-digital-government-review/state-of-digital-government-review>

8 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Transforming-rehabilitation.pdf>

The result is that these visible levers can end up substituting for deeper reform. You can make a badly designed system more efficient with better technology, leaner staffing or a new structure, and still fail to change what actually happens in people's lives. Unless the harder-to-measure forms of reform are given comparable weight in funding, inspection and accountability - and turned into things that can be talked about as clearly as an app launch or a headcount cut - politics will keep reaching for what it can see and count, rather than changing how it actually treats people.

HURDLE FOUR

"PUBLIC SERVICES" ARE NOT ONE THING

In some respect the phrase "public service reform" does political damage by lumping together systems that work in very different ways, serve different people, go wrong in different ways, and need different fixes.

At one end sit high-volume transactional services: tax collection, benefits administration, passports, driving licences, much of routine NHS contact. These are services most people use briefly and episodically. When they work, they are quick, predictable and largely unmemorable. When they fail, the failure tends to be about speed, clarity, unnecessary complexity or bureaucratic logic that defies common sense. In 2022-23, DWP's own analysis estimated that 43% of call time on its in-house benefit lines was avoidable - equivalent to 31.6 million minutes of wasted citizen time.⁹ Similarly in 2023-24, 72% of calls to HMRC were classified as being caused by the department's own errors, delays or poor communications.¹⁰

At the other end sit services supporting people through complex and often long-term vulnerability: children's social care, mental health, addiction, domestic abuse, homelessness, serious youth violence, dementia, long-term disability management. For these services, the challenge is in many ways very different. Government data from the Changing Futures programme found that an estimated 363,000 people in England are affected by severe multiple disadvantage, with 83% of those supported by the programme experiencing four or more forms of disadvantage.¹¹ These are people for whom separate services designed around single presenting problems are structurally inadequate.

Research consistently finds that services dealing with multiple disadvantage remain siloed across substance use, mental health, homelessness and offending, with fragmentation at the root of poor responses to multiple needs. National estimates for adults experiencing severe multiple disadvantages suggest that the most vulnerable people in this position cost the state around five times more than the average citizen each year, largely through repeated, reactive use of emergency, health, housing and criminal justice services.¹²

For these services, the answer is not faster processing or a better app. It is a professional who knows you, has time for you, and operates in a system that rewards long-term outcomes rather than short-term outputs.

⁹ <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/dwp-customer-service.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/taxpayers-let-down-by-poor-hmrc-customer-service/#:~:text=HMRC%20has%20estimated%20that%2072,65%25%20in%202018%2D19.>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-changing-futures-programme/changing-futures-infographics-text-version#:~:text=and%20multiple%20disadvantage-,Content%20from%20the%20infographic%20'Understanding%20multiple%20disadvantage',people%20answered%20a%20particular%20question>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changing-futures-changing-systems-for-adults-experiencing-multiple-disadvantage/changing-futures-changing-systems-to-support-adults-experiencing-multiple-disadvantage>

After 15 years of going backwards, almost every major service area now needs reform, but not all in the same way. Some of the problems are essentially technical and can be fixed through clearer processes, better technology and standard solutions. Others are adaptive and complex, rooted in behaviour, relationships and power, where progress depends on people working differently together. The point is not to impose a single template, but to organise different approaches under a broad political diagnosis and story about what needs to change. That shared argument can set the overall direction, clarify the problems the system is meant to solve, and give services a theory of change to work from that leaves room for different models and methods in different places.

HURDLE FIVE

PREVENTION REQUIRES DOUBLE RUNNING

Finally, one of the hardest truths about shifting from late intervention to prevention is that you have to run the old and the new systems side by side for a while. You cannot simply switch off crisis services on Monday and hope that early help will have reduced demand by Friday. That means, in the short term, costs can go up before they come down, and leaders have to justify investing in support that will only show full benefits years down the line.

For a system that is still recovering from fifteen years of increasing demand and constrained funding, that is a brutal ask. The fiscal space for double-running is tight, and the money, people, and management attention needed to design and implement new models at the same time is thin. The result is that prevention is often talked about but rarely funded at the scale or for the duration needed to change patterns of demand. It becomes a pilot or a marginal programme, rather than the organising logic of the system.

This paper is not pretending to have a full solution to that dilemma. Others, including Demos, have suggested options such as a dedicated prevention budget line - Preventative Departmental Expenditure Limits (PDEL) - new fiscal rules and stronger cross-government commitments to early action. The point here is simpler. That any approach has to acknowledge the difficulty of double running, accept that building a more preventative system will take time, and start creating the conditions now – financial, institutional and political – for that shift to stick.

In practice, that means using the run up to the next Spending Review to build momentum for joint bids and shared programmes that cut across departments. It can draw on examples the government has already put in place, such as the National Plan to End Homelessness backed by £3.5 billion over three years and involving multiple departments and local partners.¹³ Without that, the default will remain firefighting, and the people who pay the price will be those whose opportunities are already most constrained.

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-plan-to-halve-rough-sleeping-and-prevent-homelessness>

AN INSTRUCTION TO REFORM: GETTING CHANGE INTO THE SYSTEM

It is important to be clear about where the government sits in this picture. This government is genuinely trying to reform public services, not simply to hold the line:

- The **10-Year Health Plan** promises to deliver on changes people have been talking about for more than a decade: shifting care from hospital to community, from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention,¹⁴ while halving the number of NHS targets¹⁵ and reforming the GP contract so the system can act on those priorities.
- In **children's services**, it has promised the biggest overhaul of children's social care in a generation, with a clear focus on earlier help so more children can be safely raised at home rather than going into care.¹⁶ Current reform programmes, including the expansion of Family Hubs,¹⁷ push in the same direction: more early help, more support wrapped around families, and fewer last-minute crises.
- In **local growth and regeneration**, the devolution programme, and the government's lauded Pride in Place agenda is expanding the role of mayors and combined authorities, giving places more of the tools and fiscal flexibility they need to shape their own futures.

Across these areas, government has also started to build in a more "test and learn" approach, backing pilots and local experiments that can be scaled when they work, rather than assuming that one model can simply be rolled out from the centre. Recent pooled-budget pilots in five areas – for example on SEND in the Liverpool City Region and adolescent mental health in the Black Country – are one illustration of this shift.¹⁸

Taken together, whatever your political starting point, this is not the behaviour of a government uninterested in reform. The direction of travel is broadly right, even if different parts of the system are moving under different theories of change. The problem is that the system has not yet reshaped itself around that direction. Change across Whitehall still moves slowly. Responsibility for cross-cutting reform is blurred, and shared outcomes and pooled budgets remain the exception rather than the norm. Without accompanying changes to incentives, capabilities and culture at the centre, even well-intentioned reforms will struggle to add up to system-wide change.

A clear narrative can help bridge that gap, but it plays a different role for different audiences. For public servants, a shared story about what the state is trying to do can restore agency. It signals that they are expected to use their professional judgement, work across silos and solve problems, rather than simply follow procedures that treat them as rule-enforcers. For people using services, the same story has to rebuild trust that the system is on their side and sees them as a person, not as a case to be pushed through a faceless process. A powerful narrative can do both at once.

14 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6888a0b1a11f859994409147/fit-for-the-future-10-year-health-plan-for-england.pdf>

15 <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2025/01/hundreds-of-thousands-of-patients-to-get-faster-access-to-nhs-care-as-targets-halved-under-new-guidance/#:~:text=The%20NHS%20will%20focus%20on,within%2018%20weeks%20next%20year.>

16 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/biggest-overhaul-in-a-generation-to-childrens-social-care>

17 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-revives-family-services-supporting-500000-more-kids#:~:text=That's%20why%2C%20as%20part%20of,evidence%2Dbased%20guidance%20within%20seconds.>

18 <https://www.localgov.co.uk/Government-announces-five-pooled-budgets-pilots/64059>

PART TWO

A NEW POLITICAL NARRATIVE

PUTTING RESPECT AT THE HEART OF PUBLIC SERVICES

The political narrative for public service reform should not be a technical argument. It should be rooted in people's experience. Specifically, it should begin with a widely recognised feeling, that things are being done to you, not with you. That public services often don't treat you like an individual, with unique experiences and strengths.

This sits in stark contrast to what people increasingly expect from the rest of their lives. In most other services, people are used to having at least some say - choosing between options, changing bookings, seeing what is happening with a transaction, and complaining in ways that appear to make a difference. Surveys in the UK¹⁹ and internationally²⁰ suggest that only a minority of people think public services improve when they complain, and they place a high value on services that listen, respond and give them more of a say in what happens to them. The benchmark for "good service" is now set as much by basic experiences in shops, banks and online platforms. For example, if you get weight loss drugs online, you can have access to both a customer services team and a doctor via the same app. Both respond immediately or hand you over to another team based on your experience. It offers a seamless customer journey.

Relational approaches to public services offer one route out of this trap. Evidence from numerous leading councils, international examples (notably Buurtzorg's neighbourhood nursing model in the Netherlands, and Scandinavian models of more integrated, family-focused services) and other relational pilots shows that when services are built around ongoing relationships, with trust, continuity and flexibility, people gain more control and confidence, outcomes improve, and demand on crisis services falls. When professionals are allowed to work with people on their goals, rather than just process them through standard transactions, the state behaves more like the best of the private and civil society sector - responsive, transparent, and focused on actually helping people.

Against that backdrop, the core question for a new politics of public service reform is straightforward: how can the state give people real control and agency in their dealings with it, and spread the kind of relational services that evidence shows work better? Keir Starmer's language of "dignity and respect... working people in control of their public services"²¹ already points towards an answer. The next sections set out how that political story - the Respect Agenda - can be given practical content and turned into a governing framework.

RESPECT AS A FRAME

It is easy to get hung up on reform labels. Whether "respect" turns out to be the enduring name for this argument is not important. Indeed agendas are often named in retrospect. What matters up front is the substance. For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to have a shorthand for the bundle of ideas about how the state should treat people and how power should shift, and the

19 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/trustinggovernmentuk/2023>

20 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/government-at-a-glance-2025_70e14c6c/full-report/drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions_fe2b7742.html

21 <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/pm-keir-starmer-s-speech-at-labour-party-conference-2025/#:~:text=Decisions%20%E2%80%93%20that%20will%20not%20always,Thank%20you%2C%20conference%E2%80%A6>

“Respect Agenda” does that well enough. Importantly, it also feels politically authentic, growing out of existing instincts and language.

In conference speeches and major addresses, Keir Starmer has described the experience of people “disrespected by the state”, setting out a goal of “a land of dignity and respect... everyone seen... everyone valued... working people in control of their public services.” In his politics, respect is not a matter of courtesy alone. It is inseparable from control. Specifically he’s talked about this in context of people who do essential, hands-on work are too often disrespected and shut out of decisions that affect their lives, with little standing or voice. The same thread runs through his account of institutional failure. Hillsborough, the Post Office Horizon scandal, Windrush, infected blood. In each case, ordinary people were not only mistreated, but they were stripped of control over what happened next. They were denied information, shut out of processes, forced to fight for years just to be heard. The state and big institutions behaved as if the truth belonged to them, not to the people whose lives were being affected.

In this sense, the broad appeal of the Respect Agenda is that it proposes a genuine rewriting of the relationship between state and citizen. One that shifts real power and control to people and communities, and in doing so addresses a set of deeper questions. Who holds control in the relationship between state and citizen? Does the system treat people as partners with agency, or as problems to be managed? Does it share information and decisions or keeps them behind closed doors? Does it assume people are capable of making choices, or design every interaction to minimise their room for manoeuvre?

As a political argument across the spectrum, polling underlines how strongly this agenda resonates with people’s lived experience. A study from last year by King’s College London, Ipsos and the LSE found that belief that public services are ready to listen to complaints has almost halved in two decades. It also found that record numbers of people now feel they have little influence over what happens to them – with that sense of powerlessness particularly acute among Reform UK supporters and non-voters.²² Those voters are being courted by Reform promising a “culture shift in local government...putting residents first”,²³ and by Conservatives talking about restoring “trust, honesty and decency” in institutions.²⁴

The Respect Agenda cuts across voters groups because it speaks directly to the shared experience of not being listened to or in control, and offers a way of rebuilding public services so that they are clearly on people’s side.

The central focus of empowerment and control within the Respect Agenda also shows how it develops rather than rejects an earlier phase of reform that was often framed around providers, performance and choice. New Labour’s market-oriented changes brought in more diverse providers, clearer standards and greater choice for many service users. Important ways of driving improvement and giving people some real decisions over where and how they received care. What this agenda adds is a stronger emphasis on everyday voice, dignity and shared control over how services are designed and run, so that people are not only choosing between options but helping to shape the options in the first place.

That makes respect, understood as a combination of dignity, honesty and agency, a natural organising frame for public service reform. It is emotionally intelligible and it feels authentic both to the current political project and to what people say they want from the state - fairness, the opportunity to realise their aspirations, and services that are clearly on their side. Finally it also offers a patriotic way to renew a core British story about fairness, decency and everyone getting a fair say.

22 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/big-decline-in-belief-public-services-are-listening-as-reform-uk-becomes-magnet-for-those-who-feel-powerless>

23 <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2186870/nigel-farage-slams-old-parties>

24 <https://www.conservatives.com/news/kemi-speaks-at-conference-day-1>

DEFINING THE RESPECT AGENDA

At the heart of the Respect Agenda is the idea that the state should treat every person it serves as someone whose time, judgement and choices matter. It should organise services so that people have real control over the decisions that shape their lives, rather than having those decisions imposed on them. That proposition has three important features.

First, it is fundamentally about power. A service can be courteous and still leave people feeling powerless if it never offers a choice, never explains options, and never shares information. Respect, in this frame, means designing systems so that people can understand what is happening, influence it, and make decisions where it is reasonable for them to do so.

Second, it is comparative. People know what it feels like to have some control in other parts of their lives, whether that's changing a booking, choosing between options or tracking progress. They can see the gap between that and public services that communicate in one-way letters, offer no meaningful choice of time or place, and provide no visibility of what is happening behind the scenes. The Respect Agenda starts from the claim that the state should not offer less control than people experience elsewhere.

Third, it is relational. Control is not exercised in a vacuum. It depends on relationships in which people trust that the information they are given is honest, that professionals are on their side, and that if they speak up they will be heard rather than punished. The way to give people more control in public services is therefore to build relationships that support shared decision-making, not to treat "choice" as a transactional gesture.

A NEW DEAL FOR PUBLIC SERVICES: BUILT ON RESPECT

Respect is useful because it can be used to communicate about very different services without becoming vague. It helps make sense of reforms already underway and points to what should come next, while still recognising that not all services are the same and that "respect" looks different in transactional and relational settings.

In high-transaction services such as DWP, HMRC, passport processing and routine NHS administration, respect is mainly about efficiency, dignity and clear rules. Most people want these services to be almost invisible, but often the process design treats people's time and competence casually, with complicated forms and inaccessible digital systems. Some of this friction is deliberate, justified in the name of protecting public money. The language of 'respect' enables government to communicate about reform of transactional services in a way that holds both the offer to citizens who are time poor and need efficiency, and also the requirements for due diligence to treat public money with respect.

In services dealing with complex vulnerability, such as children's social care, mental health, homelessness, and long-term conditions, respect works differently. Here the core issue is the quality and continuity of relationships. The language of respect enables a conversation with the public and the system about the value of a professional who knows you, has time, has enough autonomy to respond to your real situation rather than just a checklist, and works in a system that values long-term outcomes over short-term throughput.

Across all these domains, the organising test is the same. Respect is not a slogan added after the fact, it is the lens through which reforms should be communicated about, designed and judged. In transactional services, that means processes that treat people's time and competence as if they matter and use technology to make clarity and control the default. In relational services, it means structures and accountability that actively back long-term, human relationships rather than squeezing them out in favour of throughput. In both, the questions are whether

this gives people more real control and voice, whether it treats their time and contribution with dignity, and whether it builds relationships that actually help people change their lives.

A NEW DEAL BETWEEN NATIONAL AND LOCAL: BUILT ON RESPECT

A serious Respect Agenda cannot be delivered from Whitehall alone - and 'respect' sends a clear political instruction as to the expectations of how the centre should work with local government, commissioners and front line services.

If respect is about relationships, and relationships are inherently local and specific, then the way the state is organised has to change. Power has to move away from the centre because there is no way to run genuinely relational, tailored services from a distant headquarters. Instead, a new deal founded on respect between national and local means enables a more muscular centre that sets clear national minimum standards, tracks the data, and steps in when standards are not being met.

Devolution in this sense is not a constitutional hobby-horse. It is a tangible expression of respect and an acknowledgement that the people who live and work in a place know more about its needs and assets than officials in a distant department. It trusts local leaders and, crucially, local citizens, with the power to shape services in ways that fit local realities. It allows innovation and learning, rather than attempting to impose one model everywhere.

For the centre, this implies a different role. Rather than specifying in detail how services should be organised in every area, central government should set clear outcomes, uphold rights and basic entitlements, and ensure fair funding. It also needs a small set of honest, short- and medium-term well-chosen outputs and experience measures, so that ministers and officials can see whether places are on track and act quickly if they are not, whether through supporting improvement or direct intervention. The political narrative reform built on, then, is not only about how frontline staff treat people. It is about how the national state treats local institutions, and whether it trusts them enough to let them do their job.

HOW DATA AND AI MAKE RESPECT POSSIBLE

There is an obvious challenge to a relational, locally driven model of services: scale. How can a modern state serving tens of millions of people offer anything other than a standardised, impersonal experience? How can it "see" individuals within huge systems? The answer lies in how technology is used. For years, digital reform in government has been framed as an efficiency exercise, moving services online to save money. A Respect Agenda instead asks how technology can support better treatment of citizens and frontline staff, and make the everyday experience of the state feel more on your side. The purpose of data and AI in public services should be to make it easier to exercise judgement, share information and resolve problems fairly. That has a number of aspects.

First, good data and interoperability make joining up around a person possible. If health, housing, schools and social care can see the same core information about a family, with proper safeguards, they do not have to ask the same questions again and again, and they can coordinate support rather than working at cross-purposes. AI tools can help spot patterns and risks earlier, so that help is offered before crisis hits, rather than after.

Second, automation of routine tasks can free up professional time. If a social worker spends half their week on paperwork, or a GP spends hours wrestling with referrals and forms, then the most precious resource in the system, skilled human attention, is being wasted. Well-designed AI systems can take on some of that burden, allowing professionals to spend more time in direct contact with people, listening, explaining, exercising judgement.

Third, digital interfaces can give citizens more control over straightforward interactions. The ability to book and change appointments, track progress on a case, see what information the state holds, or upload documents directly, can all reduce friction and uncertainty. If designed with respect, these systems should be clear, accessible and responsive, and should make it easy to escalate to a human being when needed.

It is worth acknowledging that there is a risk in technology stripping away friction that has quietly rationed demand without the system being ready for what follows. Tom Loosemore, one of the architects of the Government Digital Service,²⁵ has recently argued that many public services still rely on confusing forms, slow processes and long waits to keep a lid on demand. Early deployments of AI assistants handling millions of citizen queries, and AI in GP back-office systems, suggest that once barriers fall, contact with services can rise quickly rather than stay flat. The only durable response is the one this paper argues for - to redesign services around genuine citizen need, not institutional convenience, so that when demand rises, what people encounter is a system that works with them rather than one that tries to manage them away.

The crucial point is that technology is not neutral. It can be used to deepen respect, by making services more responsive, more joined up, more honest, or to hollow it out, by creating rigid systems that people are forced to fit into. A Respect Agenda has to be explicit about which path it is choosing.

FROM POLITICAL STORY TO GOVERNING FRAMEWORK: ROLE FOR A NEW CHARTER

If respect is the political story, the task is to turn it into a clear instruction to the system. That means getting it written into plans and budgets, built into policy from the outset, and carried through the wider ecosystem of public bodies, businesses and civil society. History suggests that when governments are explicit about what is needed, systems do shift. Public Service Agreements in the 2000s, and later the Coalition's Programme for Government, each gave a clear line of sight from a political project to priorities, metrics and day-to-day decisions, whatever one thinks of their goals.

A Respect Agenda needs a similar line of sight, but with a different kind of signal, not only what to deliver, but what the system should be like and how it should feel to use. Success should not just be measured on whether waiting times fall or claims are processed, but whether people feel listened to, helped and in control. Rather than designing a full framework now, one practical way to start would be a short Respect Charter, a small set of promises that translate the argument into expectations for behaviour and design, and that could be developed over time into a more formal framework. A charter is only one option, and there may be better vehicles, but the core task is ultimately an act of external and internal communication that tells the system, in plain terms, how it is expected to change.

As an example it could look like this:

- 1. Your time will not be wasted.** Processes are designed on the assumption that your time is valuable, using data, digital tools and AI to remove avoidable friction so human time can be spent where it really counts.
- 2. You will have real control over key decisions.** Wherever it makes sense, you are offered meaningful options and involved in decisions - in health, education, welfare and housing - rather than simply being informed of what has been decided elsewhere.

25 https://www.linkedin.com/posts/tomloosemore_many-public-services-rely-on-friction-to-activity-7430177328124751872-WdOG/

- 3. Services will join up around you.** When your needs span multiple services, you do not have to act as the go-between; information is shared responsibly, and one part of the system takes responsibility for coordinating a coherent response.
- 4. You will get help early, not only when things reach crisis point.** You will be offered help early, not only when things reach crisis point, so problems are tackled before they become emergencies.
- 5. You will get honest answers and clear reasons.** When decisions are made about you, you will be told what is happening, why it is happening, and who is responsible - and services will be honest and correct course when they get it wrong.

Taken together, these promises describe the kind of new deal this paper argues for. They point to services that give people more control, behave more like the best relational models seen in places such as Wigan and Greater Manchester, and deliver better outcomes as a result. They are not a delivery plan. They are the governing expectations that any delivery plan on waiting times, employment support, children's social care or neighbourhood policing should be judged against. The question then is how do you move from islands of good practice that already embody these promises to a system where they are the norm?

WHAT HAS TO CHANGE

For this narrative to become real, three sets of changes are needed in how services are held to account, in where power sits, and in what is expected of the system's culture.

- 1. Change what success looks like.** At present, many services are judged primarily on process measures such as how many forms are processed, how many people are seen, or whether certain boxes are ticked. Complaints and user feedback are often treated as a nuisance, not as core data. A Respect Agenda would build measures of experience and relationship into the heart of accountability. It would ask, explicitly, whether people felt listened to, whether they understood decisions, whether they were bounced around. Regulators and inspectors would be expected to look not only at formal compliance, but at whether the promises of a respect agenda are visible in practice, with particular attention to how those with the least power - people on low incomes, disabled people, children in the care system - experience services.
- 2. Move power closer to people.** This means a decisive shift towards devolution and neighbourhood-level working. It means trusting mayors, councils and local partnerships with real control over how services are organised, within clear national entitlements. The government should continue its current moves on devolution, neighbourhood services and Pride in Place, giving them more weight and consistency. At the same time, the centre must still guard against people being let down by poor services. It should guarantee fair funding, clear minimum standards and timely support or intervention when things go wrong, so local flexibility does not turn into a postcode lottery.
- 3. Align culture with the Respect Charter.** The culture has to move with the story. If the Respect Charter is the citizen-facing expression of that story, then the way leaders manage, the way staff are treated and the way citizens are expected to engage all need to point in the same direction. Frontline staff need the space and backing to act in line with these promises – to listen, explain, join up and tell the truth even when it is uncomfortable – rather than feeling that every instinct to do so cuts across what the system really rewards.

Seen this way, the Charter is one part of a wider three-way new deal between the centre, citizens and the people who deliver services. The centre's side is to match the rhetoric of respect with fair conditions and real professional autonomy, and to protect relational and preventative work from being crowded out by short-term pressures. The workforce's side is to use that autonomy in the spirit of the charter: exercising judgement rather than hiding behind process, being honest when things go wrong, and working across organisational boundaries rather than retreating into silos. The citizen's side is to engage actively rather than passively, support early help when it is offered, and use the rights the charter creates to hold services to account.

For that culture to take hold, the signals from the centre have to change. Leaders need to model honesty and openness, including about failure, rather than defaulting to blame. National bodies need to stop pulling what Demos has called the "human handbrake" – sending mixed messages that talk about trust and discretion while imposing crude targets, zero-tolerance regimes and knee-jerk reactions to local problems. Without that alignment, the language of respect will ring hollow and the Charter will read like a poster on the wall. With it, the story of respect can start to function as a shared understanding of what the state is for and how it should behave.

CONCLUSION

THE RELATIONSHIP IS THE REFORM

Public service reform advocates have spent fifteen years being right and achieving too little. The expert consensus is not the problem. The problem is that the consensus has never been given a story.

That story starts with a promise to end the fight in public services, to replace it with respect and to operationalise reform in relentless pursuit of that.

The Respect Agenda does not offer an easy answer to that breakdown. Rebuilding the relationship between the state and the citizen takes time and sustained effort. Importantly it has to be communicated - explained in plain language, repeated over time, and linked to concrete changes that people can actually see. That means ministers using it to frame their priorities, departments using it to shape policy documents, and local leaders using it to describe what is changing on the ground. Only if the story is carried through communication as well as practice will people start to believe that the relationship is really shifting.

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