

THE NEW DEAL

DEMOS

PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

A NEW DEMOCRATIC DELIVERY
MODEL TO REBUILD TRUST BETWEEN
STATE AND CITIZEN

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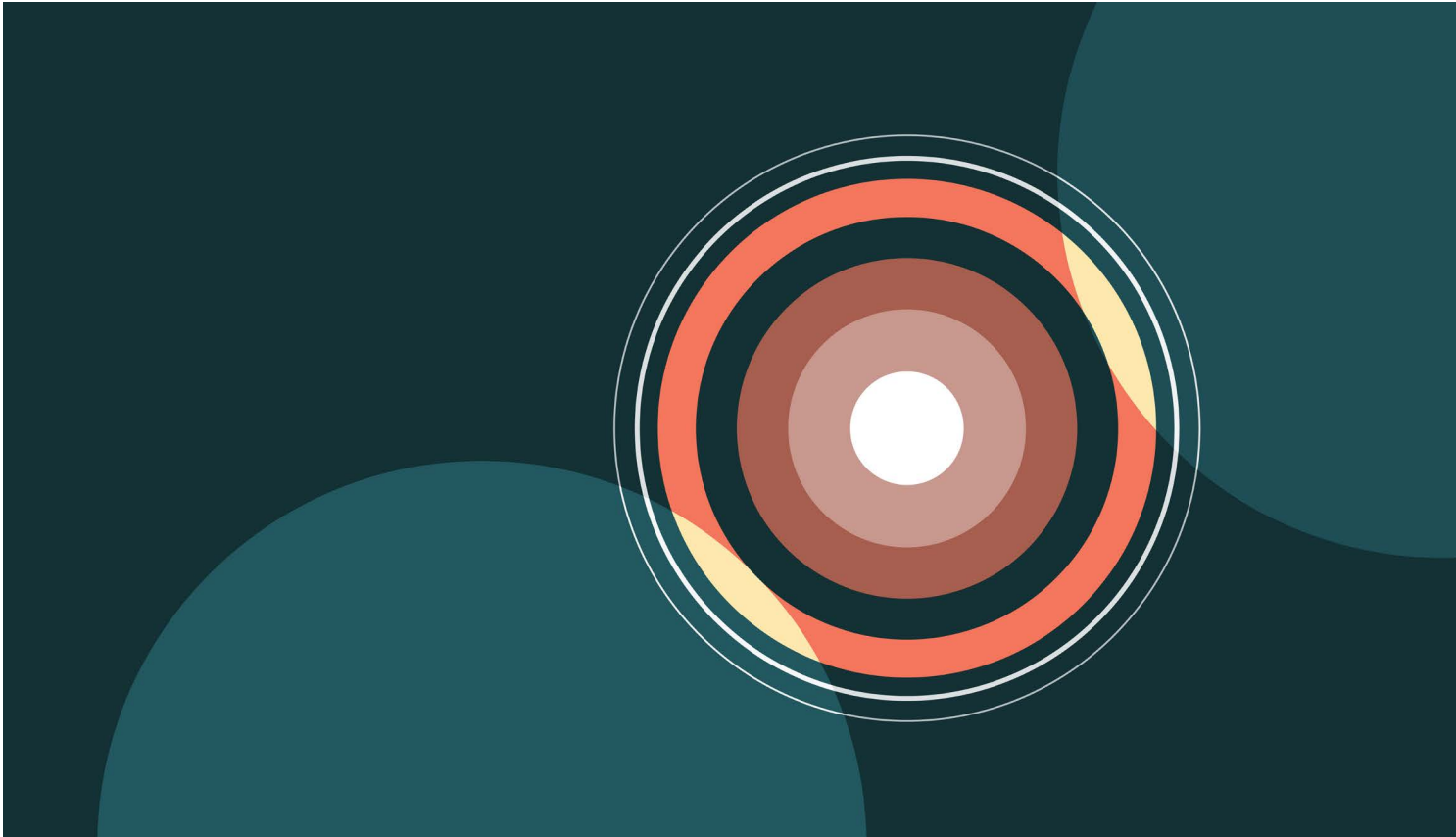
DEMOS

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party think tank. Our mission is an upgraded democracy, with a new deal to mend the broken relationships between the state, institutions, and citizens.

This paper sets out the need for a new democratic delivery model to power public services that are more preventative, more relational and therefore more effective. It is part of the Demos "New Deal" series, setting out our strategy to tackle the democratic emergency across four pillars: **Everyday Democracy**, **Public Service Reform**, the **Citizen Economy** and **Resilient Information Ecosystems**.

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INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC SERVICES ARE AT THE HEART OF THE DEMOCRATIC DEAL

Elections are fought and won on citizens' experiences of, and expectations about, public services. This is more than ideological wrangling over a small versus a big state. It sits at the heart of the fundamental transaction between citizens and the government that underpins liberal democracy. Citizens use their vote to bestow their political authority on elected officials.¹ In return, they expect a state that operates in their interest, and public services that deliver for them in good times and in bad.

Citizens' experience of public services is the clearest indication they have that this relationship is working. They are the most tangible and frequent medium through which citizens and state interact, from renewing a passport, to calling 999, to the daily school run. These experiences range from the mundane to the profound. At the most acute end of need, the service a citizen receives can make the difference between hunger and good health, and between life and death.

¹ https://sites.exeter.ac.uk/humanrightsanddemocracyforumblog/2024/10/15/representative-democracy-a-conceptual-analysis-by-pasquale-pasquino/#_ftn3

There is a growing crisis of faith in our public services.² Across the system, services that citizens are entitled to now feel rationed, and the pressures driving that scarcity - an ageing population, rising and more complex demand, and constrained public finances - will, if left unaddressed, serve only to worsen our collective experience of the state. No single government caused this systemic crisis, but this one has inherited it and needs to arrest it, urgently.

This is not solely a problem of resources that can be met with more money or more staff. The needs and expectations of citizens have become more complex. The state must now steward and safeguard a society grappling with slow growth, economic inactivity, epistemic insecurity, and a new technological revolution with AI.

Yet despite the changing nature of the challenges it faces, the fundamental structure and operating logic of public services have remained largely static for nearly forty years. British institutions still default to an established but failing blueprint, despite changing needs.

Crucially, while citizens experience many public services on their doorsteps, in the schools, health services and hospitals that serve their unique communities, the conditions under which these services operate are set and shaped far away at the centre of the state, in Whitehall. The funding architecture, accountability mechanisms and operating assumptions that determine how a citizen experiences a service are not in the purview of those with the most experience of delivering it on the frontline. Instead, they are developed and imposed from above by ministerial departments in Whitehall who are themselves beholden to a Treasury characterised by micromanagement, who holds little faith in the objectives or capabilities of other public institutions.

This is why public service reform must address the root of the problem, which sits in Whitehall, rather than the symptoms, which are felt by citizens struggling with intractable public services. It requires tackling the systemic, centrally held constraints that determine what reform can be driven where.

This essay argues that escaping the crisis requires the state to develop a new deal for public services that fundamentally changes how they are controlled. This would be a reimagining of the relationship between the citizens, politicians who shape the state and public servants who administer it; a renegotiation between the centre and the frontline.

2 <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/british-social-attitudes-41-five-years-unprecedented-challenges>

PUBLIC SERVICES TODAY

A RESULT OF A POLITICS OF METRICS AND A LOGIC OF EXTRACTING EFFICIENCY

Our political parties have retreated from ideological visions for public services in favour of digestible metrics that can be communicated instantly. Gone are the frameworks of previous eras: Blair's Third Way,³ or the implications for services from Thatcher's agencification. The Conservatives' Big Society was arguably the last time a government advanced a governing theory with enough intellectual depth to genuinely reshape the state. Yet whatever the intention behind it, the Big Society came to be seen as little more than an intellectual veneer for a smaller, less centralised state, with its community-led elements never receiving the funding they would have needed to take up the slack. Since then manifesto commitments have narrowed to statistics: slashed NHS waiting lists, police officers on the street, pounds invested in education. Take Labour's 2024 manifesto, statistics and metrics are emblazoned across pages, before the reader even reaches the contents page.⁴

The result is that routine interactions with public services, the hours waited in A&E, the time it takes for the police to respond, become the definitive measure of whether government is delivering. This is a test successive governments have invited upon themselves by trading deep ideological frameworks for shallow quantifiable commitments.

In light of this vacuum of political ideology, our public services have become shaped by twin legacies of previous public service reform movements. The first, 'New Public Management' (NPM), is typically defined by its focus on performance measures, output controls, competition, and pursuit of productive efficiency.⁵ The second, austerity, is a governing logic defined by the extraction of savings from the state to reduce the national deficit (and in time, national debt).

Individually each has its place. NPM brought a degree of governability and efficiency to a fragmented and unreceptive public sector.⁶ Austerity prioritised fiscal probity and sustainability during a period of economic instability that we've never really escaped from.

However, in the absence of a guiding political vision that prioritises citizen outcomes, the centre of government has repurposed targets and standardised procedures to extract savings from services, a logic not unlike that of private equity in the wider economy. This is not bureaucratic overreach but the result of a vacuum of political vision. Deciding what should be provided, to whom, and on what grounds is a question of allocative efficiency: a political judgement about how to distribute finite resources between competing citizen needs. In the absence of a political framework, officials have prioritised the pursuit of productive efficiency: how to deliver a given output at the lowest possible cost. The result is that the means have quietly displaced the end; efficiency for its own sake. Without a political vision to guide their application, these models have ceased to be tools in service of a goal and become the goal in themselves.

3 <https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111blair.html>

4 <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf>

5 C, Hood, Public Administration Vol. 69 Spring 1991 (3-19)

6 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/news/2025/dec/hundred-origin-stories-unfinished-history-relational-public-services>

The consequence of this governing cocktail has been twofold. Alongside the fiscal extraction driven by austerity, NPM, by its nature, has also extracted agency from those on the frontline, removing their ability to innovate or bear risk, as any deviation from standard process is defined as failure. As noted by arch trouble shooter Baroness Casey, this has helped foster a sense of learned helplessness across our civil service and public services.⁷

The original promise of NPM was never fulfilled. Citizens were promised choice; a say in which services they engaged with and how. That choice was meant to reward effective performers and pressure struggling ones into reform, a market discipline that would drive quality. But austerity suborned the principles; mechanisms built to expand choice and drive improvement were repurposed to drive cost reduction. Citizens have been left with public services that have fallen ever further behind the quality of service they now take for granted in the private sector.

In this, citizens' expectations have been toyed with. They were promised choice, competition and private sector service from the state, their expectations raised just as their digital lives got slicker. Then austerity whipped this away, breaking the model and the promise of better services citizens had been told to expect.

The result is a set of public services still cast in the image of those shaped by a political ideology appropriate for the 1990s, but hollowed out by the routine pursuit of efficiency over outcome and manned by public servants aware of the growing crisis, but disempowered to drive reform they know is needed.

This is a state that, having lost the capability to improve outcomes, extracts savings and agency from the services citizens depend on, and calls it reform.

7 <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/news/article/baroness-casey-warns-of-learned-helplessness-in-civil-service>

THE DEMOCRATIC DOOM LOOP IN ACTION

It is not only citizens who must suffer the consequences of poor public services. Public servants themselves battle with a system that does not trust their expertise or experience. Social workers, teachers and police officers spend their days immersed in the complex worlds of the people who need their services. Many have deep professional insight and years of training. Yet when it comes to meeting need, process and technocracy take over: rigid pathways, one-size-fits-all solutions, and commissioning arrangements that make even a phone call to a colleague in another service difficult.

Consider a child and their family seeking support from a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. The child has been referred for OCD and anxiety. Exploring what this means in daily life, the family describe black mould in their flat so severe that it is impossible to keep fresh food in the kitchen, because it degrades so quickly. The skilled mental health professionals try every avenue to flag the urgency of the housing need across multiple services. Their skill and compassion are dwarfed by the reality of the child's living situation. The family remain trapped in a catch-22 of deteriorating physical and mental health and scarce income spent on food that spoils before it can be eaten, while service after service fails to meet their needs.

A family failed by a fragmented system, a constituent who cannot get a GP appointment, a parent worn down by the fight for support for their child, draws a reasonable conclusion: that the state does not work for them and is not on their side.

This fragmentation is not, at root, a failure of join-up between frontline services. It is the downstream consequence of a state that has prioritised the convenience of its central institutions, namely those found in Whitehall, over citizen outcomes.

The zero-sum nature of spending reviews actively disincentivises institutions from working together or pooling resources behind shared goals, because every pound directed towards a joint outcome is a pound surrendered in a bilateral competition for funds. The mental health professional cannot get the housing team to act not because either lacks the will, but because the system that shapes their priorities has prioritised neatness and clear institutional boundaries over their interests.

That arrangement corrodes trust. A disillusioned public, in turn, grants no government the sustained mandate that serious reform requires, and so decline continues, deepening the disillusionment that began the cycle. This plays out within services as well - as trust between citizens and public servants is eroded, it makes it harder to solve problems together and improve outcomes, further eroding trust.

This is the democratic doomloop in action.

Public service reform in the context of the democratic doom loop is not just about efficiency, productivity or capacity and demand equations. It is about fundamentally demonstrating that elected governments can still design, deliver and reform public services in the interest of citizens. If the government wants to renew citizens' faith in democracy, improving their experience of public services is the single biggest stride it can take.



ESCAPING THE DOOM LOOP: **A NEW DEAL FOR PUBLIC SERVICES**

When trust is at rock bottom we need to rebuild the relationships that sustain our democracy - those between state and citizen, institutions and citizens and between citizens.

This is what Demos is calling the New Deal: The new deal asks something of us all, and is built through collaboration, restoring trust by improving everyday life for all citizens. As trust grows, people re-engage in democracy, enabling the government to become more resilient and innovative. Working collaboratively, the government creates fresh solutions and ensures all key players influencing society and the economy contribute responsibly. This is how the hope loop starts.

And there are green shoots. From public officials to academics to community actors, there is a community battling to inject vision, strategy and energy into the system in service of citizens. They are developing public services with different animating principles at their heart. Placing a greater emphasis on public services that drive better outcomes for the citizen, rather than those that are focused on meeting intangible output targets set by a remote centre.

Communities of relational practitioners have sprung up across different institutions across the country, from Camden to Wigan and are increasingly seen as the future of public services. These institutions are championing relational models that treat citizens as partners rather than cases to be processed and then closed; preventative approaches that build resilience by supporting before need has become acute and the citizen is suffering; and digitally enabled services that use technology to free professionals up to better support around people's lives, rather than just secure efficiencies.

These approaches are forming a blueprint for how a modern state can deliver better outcomes for citizens by giving greater agency to those at the front line. And the methodologies and animating principles of these cohorts are slowly seeding thinking in Westminster. The cabinet office's Test, Learn and Grow programme is leading the way.

Meanwhile at the centre the Civil Service is in the foothills of a once in a generation review, being steered by a Cabinet Secretary that has published her objectives to the general public centred around building a more impactful Whitehall.⁸ This is a once in a generation opportunity for reform. Politically, the conversation concerning fiscal devolution has finally transitioned from 'should we?' to 'how do we?', with the chancellor due to set a roadmap for greater fiscal powers to be devolved to those who best understand the needs of local citizens and communities. Specific programmes from Pride in Place, to Test, Learn and Grow, to the Office for the Impact Economy offer a glimpse of a state that meets citizens where they are in ways that work for them. These are all indications that the centre is waking up to the need to make a break from its delivery approach of the past.

But these green shoots do not amount to a true reform programme. For them to take root and spread the state must prioritise reform measures that can shift our institutions towards meeting four conditions:

1. Public Service Reform must be driven by a political vision that goes beyond efficiency to citizen experience.
2. The state must be multimodal and multipolar.
3. The state has the capability to deploy public service reforms at scale.
4. The distance (both geographic and institutional) between policy and delivery of public services must be reduced.

8 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69d4f73840178298997ef099/CabinetSecretaryObjectives-2026_27.pdf

CONDITION 1

PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM MUST BE DRIVEN BY A POLITICAL VISION THAT GOES BEYOND EFFICIENCY TO CITIZEN EXPERIENCE

The role of the public servant is to operationalise a political vision set out by elected officials. For those operating on the front line, such as nurses or teachers, this manifests as delivering support directly to members of the public. For others it is public administration; the work needed to translate the political vision into terms that can guide and set the terms for these front line practitioners. Regardless of their specific role, it is not for the public servant to develop their own framework for surfacing and making trade offs at scale. That is a political task which citizens have delegated to their elected officials.

Any movement to reform public services must be underpinned and driven by a clear, well articulated political vision for how the state should deploy its finite resources to serve citizens' needs. Without this animating political vision, officials in Whitehall will default to the pursuit of efficiency for the state, over outcomes for citizens. Demos has offered one version of this - The Respect Story.⁹

CONDITION 2

THE STATE MUST BE MULTIMODAL AND MULTIPOLAR SO IT CAN SERVICE CITIZENS WHERE THEY ARE AND IN WAYS THAT WORK FOR THEM

The debate about public service reform too often reverts to unhelpful binaries. Proponents of NPM, targets, and accountability are pitted against relational reformers championing place-based solutions and outcomes over outputs. Each camp is currently prosecuting the case for a governing logic that works well in some contexts but poorly in others. Both groups risk failing citizens.

To prioritise citizen outcomes over institutional convenience, we need a multimodal and multipolar state. Multimodal means it meets them where they are in whatever guise secures the best outcomes for them. Multipolar means that its administrative architecture, from its funding rules to accountability mechanisms to analytical lenses, do not default to a single logic or penalise the others.

This is not uncharted ground for public institutions. There are already numerous examples of public institutions orientating themselves this way. Local authorities such as Wigan, Ealing and Camden deliver for citizens in vastly different ways across their portfolios, and their institutional architecture and cultures give teams the agency to deliver differently depending on what the task demands. They are an example of the multimodal and multipolar state in action: able to be transactional where that serves citizens, and relational where it does not.

⁹ <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-respect-story-a-political-narrative-for-public-service-reform/> Webb 2026

The problem is that Whitehall warily accommodates rather than champions these bureaucratic pioneers. The centre still considers variation as something to be corrected rather than an indication of local insight being deployed in the citizen interest. In a world of devolution and growing complexity, places like Wigan, Ealing and Camden should not be treated as exceptions that need to constantly justify themselves to other parts of the system. They should be considered a blueprint for what future public services can, and should, look like. Meeting this condition requires Whitehall itself to become comfortable operating in different ways, and comfortable letting others do the same.

CONDITION 3

THE STATE NEEDS THE CAPABILITY TO DEPLOY PUBLIC SERVICE REFORMS AT SCALE SO IT CAN MEET THE URGENCY OF THE MOMENT

During the 2025 Spending Review there was a vision taking shape for the future of public services. The government promised to put three principles at heart of public sector reform:

“To integrate services, so that they are organised around people’s lives;

“To improve long-term outcomes for people through a focus on prevention, relying less on expensive crisis management; and

“To devolve power to local areas that understand the needs of their communities best, with services that are designed with and for people, in partnership with civil society and the impact economy.”¹⁰

The government has publicly committed to the pursuit of these principles. Yet relational and innovative approaches remain confined to pilots and discrete programmes, often known for how they differ from usual practice rather than by the outcomes they are securing for citizens. This is pilotitis, a condition in which central institutions require such a high bar of evidence before adoption, that reforms fail to scale and wither on the vine before they can drive systemic change. At its root is a public sector that has little tolerance for risk. This is typified in HM Treasury’s approach to approving business cases and evaluating proposals; often requiring a burden of evidence that slows down innovation to a crawl whilst restricting the application of innovation to specific, small scale pockets of the system.

The solution is bureaucratic bravery rather than empowered enablement. Whilst it is vital that the viability of reforms are considered carefully, reflection and evaluation cannot become unconsidered risk aversion and institutional sclerosis. We are in a democratic emergency and there is an ever growing opportunity cost, realised in diminishing trust in democratic institutions, to not reforming public services. It’s instructive to consider that if the Beveridge Report were published today, it would be unlikely to survive contact with the current HM Treasury.

10 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html>, Spending Review, 2025

CONDITION 4

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN POLICY AND DELIVERY OF PUBLIC SERVICES MUST BE REDUCED TO CREATE A MORE RESPONSIVE STATE

We must move beyond a model in which the policy that determines the shape and delivery model of public services is defined in Whitehall, while delivery is carried out elsewhere. The distance between policy design and the lived experience and expertise of those delivering services has become too wide. The rationale for Thatcher's agencification was clear at the time, allowing specialism to develop without ministerial meddling. But this separation has led to policy officials shaping services they have never delivered, and delivery officials unable to translate their hard-won frontline expertise into service improvements. Citizens are left to suffer through public services that have not been designed around them.

By narrowing the distance - both geographic and institutional - between policymakers and the frontline practitioners, services can become more responsive to citizen experience and more agile in adopting arrangements that genuinely secure better outcomes for citizens, instead of being driven by assumptions (sometimes evidence led) in Whitehall.

A state that properly harnesses the expertise of both those who design and those who deliver is better able to showcase the positive impact of public services on citizen's lives and begin the journey out of the democratic doom loop.

THE NEW DEAL FOR PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM: A STARTING POINT

We urgently need reform across many of our public services. Under the current arrangement, too much power over meaningful reform remains the remit of policy officials sitting in Whitehall. To achieve the reforms necessary to arrest the crisis in confidence in our public services, we have to fundamentally reimagine the system as it currently delivers for people. Such a reimagining must start at the centre of the state, it must look to the institutions of Whitehall. By reforming Whitehall, to give greater energy and agency to those on the front line, we can move beyond a world of singular, disconnected reform programmes, to one in which all public servants, regardless of where they operate, have a meaningful role to play in shaping the services of the future.

Meeting these four conditions requires reimagining how our state works, and a new delivery model for public services. To realise this vision of a more effective, relational and preventative state, we must first establish the terms of a New Deal for Public Services, placing the four conditions set out above at the heart of that endeavour.

HM TREASURY REFORM: THE BEDROCK OF A NEW DEAL FOR PUBLIC SERVICES

It will require concerted effort across multiple arenas to realise the reform necessary. While there are green shoots of reform across our public services, our research shows that Whitehall, rather than incubating them, too often dampens ambition and introduces friction.^{11,12}

Much of this essay has laid the current malaise in our public services at the foot of those operating in Whitehall. It has made the case that without a systemic change to how the centre of our state operates, there will be limited oxygen for meaningful reform of our public services. Securing public service reform in aid of rebuilding the public's faith in government to deliver entails casting a spotlight on institutions that are far removed from citizens in the heart of Whitehall.

One compelling starting point is HM Treasury.

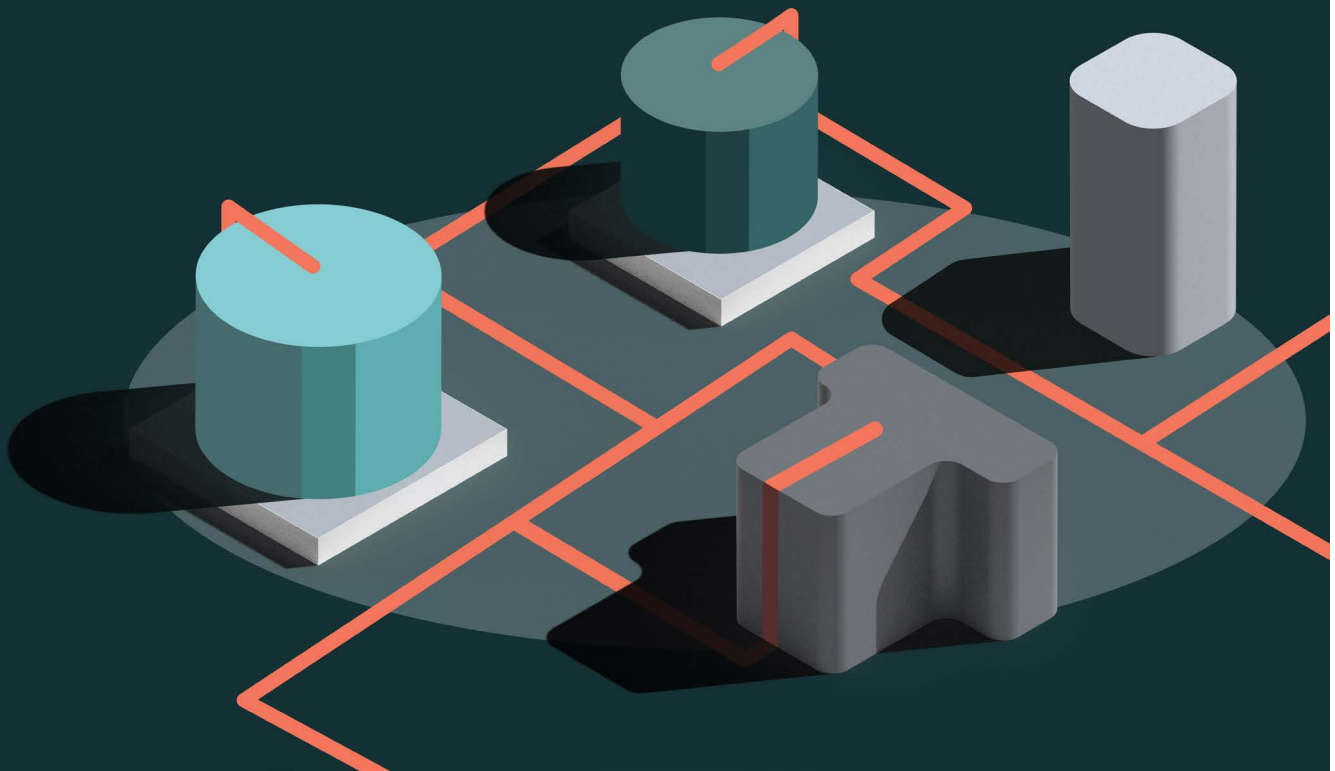
11 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Powering-Public-Service-Reform_Briefing_2025_July.pdf
12 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-Human-Handbrake_Briefing_2025_Sept.pdf

The conditions under which public services deliver often dictate the end result for the citizen, and on the surface those conditions are set by the relevant institution in Whitehall: The Department for Health and Social Care for the NHS, until recently through the medium of NHS England; the Department for Work and Pensions for Jobcentres; the Department of Transport for the DVSA. There is an appeal to scrutinising the contribution of these ministerially led institutions. But each of them, in turn, operates to strict conditions and oversight from their own centre: Number 10, Cabinet and HM Treasury.

The Treasury in particular holds a pivotal role, identifying which approaches are taken forward, which services must do more with less in the name of efficiency, and which receive investment. It also sets the horizons over which investments must make a return, and the evidence threshold required to secure that investment in the first place.

The Treasury shapes the culture, funding and operating assumptions of the entire system. More than any other institution in our public sector it will determine whether the four conditions set out above are met. Yet, it is the institution most resistant to moving beyond output-focused governance, and the principal author of the unipolar architecture that inhibits innovation and reform at scale.

Reforming the operating logic of HM Treasury would form the bedrock of a New Deal for Public Service. A Treasury that operated from a posture of trust and partnership rather than suspicion; grounded in a shared sense of mission rather than paternalistic command and control, and adopted a learning mindset that can tolerate failure rather than risk aversion at all costs would provide fertile foundations for a state that could translate and operationalise a political vision for public service at scale and at the pace demanded by disillusioned citizens.



CONCLUSION

A NEW DEMOCRATIC DELIVERY MODEL FOR PUBLIC SERVICES

Public service reform is about delivering better for citizens.

For the family seeking support from CAMHS, it is the difference between being met by someone there to listen and to help them address the full swathe of challenges facing them, and being processed by a system with a sympathetic but disempowered public servant who sees a case file over the person.

The nature of the support this family experiences will directly influence whether their faith in democratic institutions waxes or wanes, and whether the democratic doom loop deepens or the hope loop begins to turn. These are the stakes.

Counter-intuitively, while the benefits of reform will be felt most acutely by those delivering and receiving services at the front line, the first step in delivering this vision requires stepping away from the citizen, back into Whitehall.

Without fundamental and systemic reform of the operating principles that animate central government, the green shoots of more relational, preventative and human public services will remain confined to pilots and isolated pockets of ambition, forever justifying themselves to a system that struggles to accommodate them. The surest way of helping the family supporting their child's needs is for the centre to return agency back to the frontline systems that best understand the plight and challenges that need addressing.

Citizens know the system isn't working. They share the secret with public servants who are diligently trying to find ways round a system designed by people far away, for institutional convenience rather than to meet citizens' needs. This essay is an appeal to get upstream and fix the problems at the centre in order to liberate these people from this creaking system.

Arresting the deterioration of trust between citizen and state is the defining challenge facing public servants today. But there is, at last, ambition to match it. From the officials, academics and community leaders fighting to inject vision and energy into the system from the periphery, to a Cabinet Secretary who has set out her stall on a revitalised Whitehall, to a political promise on devolution that has finally turned from whether to how, the opportunity for systemic change is real. There is not only an opportunity: there is no alternative but to change how these things work.

That is how the hope loop begins.

WHAT DEMOS IS DOING ON PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

Some of the roots of the relational public services movement are in decades of work carried out at Demos. Our Public Service Reform pillar builds on these foundations. In 2021 we set out the case for The Social State¹³ and in 2023 The Preventative State.¹⁴ Demos' Future Public Services Taskforce in 2024 explored the innovations taking place across the UK, and established a clear vision for reforming public services by delegating power to citizens, communities and professionals. We outlined how governance structures, funding, workforce, and accountability models of public services should be reformed to create more preventative, relational, and place-based public services. That vision of Liberated Public Services helped inject this preventative and relational zeal into the 2024 spending review. The government's Test, Learn and Grow programme has pioneered a new way of working to reform public services.

All of our work has acknowledged that the real innovation is on the frontline, led by professionals and empowered citizens. Some argue that the central government just needs to just get out of the way. The Powering Public Service Reform programme of 2026 is examining how the centre needs to change to liberate the frontline. That's not about absconding accountability, or the important role to enable and drive change - but about making government have a more powerful multiplier effect; government should be an enabler. Our work examines the need for a driving narrative to power public service reform - we have offered The Respect Story,¹⁵ the funding reforms¹⁶ it demands, and we will report more on the accountability and digital enablement systems it demands in the coming year.

The development of the New Deal for Public Services will sit at the heart of the Demos Public Service Reform pillar in the period ahead.

13 <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/The-Social-State-Report.pdf> Mackenzie, 2021

14 <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/the-preventative-state.pdf> Curtis, 2023

15 <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-respect-story-a-political-narrative-for-public-service-reform/> Webb 2026

16 <https://demos.co.uk/research/powering-prevention-how-to-reform-the-states-financial-architecture-to-enable-preventative-people-centred-public-service-reform/> Dodd 2026

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