

DEMOS

MODE SHIFTING

WHITEHALL REFORM THAT
LIBERATES PUBLIC SERVICES TO
SHIFT BETWEEN TRANSACTIONAL
AND RELATIONAL DELIVERY MODES

JOE MARTIN
AIDAN GARNER

JULY 2026

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15 Whitehall, London, SW1A 2DD
T: 020 3878 3955
hello@demos.co.uk
www.demos.co.uk

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All arguments represented here are our own and do not necessarily represent the exact views of our partners or contributors.

Joe Martin and Aidan Garner

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party policy think tank. We work to upgrade democracy, to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen. Public services are where the wear and tear in that relationship is happening every day and our work on **Public Service Reform** focuses on how we can achieve more relational, preventative and effective public services to help build back trust that democracies can deliver with and for people.

This paper forms part of Demos's *Powering Public Service Reform* programme, which looks at how the centre of government, particularly Whitehall, needs to change to achieve that shift and improve the quality of public services at the front line.

Previous reports in the programme have examined the cultural¹ and narrative² shifts needed and the most recent paper, *Powering Prevention*,³ set out a suite of measures which, if taken together, help develop a funding architecture that shifts resources towards preventative measures. Forthcoming work will reflect on how AI can be incorporated into public services without jeopardising either citizen trust in the service or in ways that undermine outcomes.

This paper considers the reforms needed to build a state that is more responsive to the diversity of citizens' needs and considers the barriers that are hampering reform at scale. It makes the case for reform to enable the government to "mode shift" and work in different ways to achieve different outcomes.

Joe Martin is Associate Director of Policy at Demos, and **Aidan Garner** is a Researcher at Demos.

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1 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-Human-Handbrake_Briefing_2025_Sept.pdf Gandon, 2025

2 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/The-Respect-Story_Tom-Webb_2026_April.pdf Webb, 2026

3 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Powering-Prevention_Report_June_2026.pdf Dodd, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With a new incoming prime minister and energetic cabinet secretary in place there is real reforming energy in Whitehall, and a growing recognition that public services must become more devolved, relational, preventative and shaped around the citizen, in order to be more effective and trusted.

The 2025 Spending Review committed government to organising services around people's lives, shifting towards prevention, and devolving power to those who understand local needs. Across health, local government and public service reform, the direction of travel is clear.

But that ambition keeps stalling. Promising approaches remain confined to isolated pilots and pockets of local insight that are more likely to be admired than adopted at scale.

The problem is not a shortage of ideas at the frontline. It is that the centre of the state is built around a single way of working, and quietly defeats every attempt to deliver differently. It runs in only one mode.

Innovations adopted from Wigan to Camden, reforms to the Whitehall's own policy development approach and the creation of a Test Learn and Grow unit in the Cabinet Office all testify to a public sector populated by public servants eager to reform how the state interacts and support citizens. The problem is that the operating assumptions and governing logic at the centre, including the legacy of New Public Management (NPM), are now so ingrained within our central institutions, the state struggles to accommodate any reform which by its definition is seeking to deliver differently for citizens.

This report makes the case that the British state needs to be able to shift modes and deliver in different ways using different models, depending on which method works best for the citizen. Government delivery needs to become multimodal, but it is currently held back by its unipolar architecture. Until this architecture is redesigned, to accommodate a multipolar approach to public administration, attempts at broadening how the state delivers public services will continue to collapse back into the logic of markets, metrics and outputs over outcomes. It would also help resolve some of the misplaced tensions between different reformers who back different approaches, within and around government.

The report makes three arguments.

First, the state needs to be both multimodal and multipolar. Multimodal means deploying different delivery models, relational, preventative, digital or transactional, according to what serves the citizen. There is no single approach that works everywhere: NPM delivers efficient transactional services but struggles where outcomes depend on relationships, judgement or institutional coordination. Multipolar refers to how the machinery and culture in Whitehall continues to evaluate innovative or relational public services as deviating from a default approach, which they must continually justify themselves against. The state needs to shift modes and deploy different responses to support the different modes of delivery.

Second, officials need the capability to choose between models, but capability alone is not enough. We recommend embedding different theories of public administration in core training through the new National School of Government and a reformed Fast Stream; recognising relational and preventative methods as distinct policy disciplines, with senior discipline leads, at the Director or Director General grades; auditing the balance of policy skills across departments; and equipping officials with practical diagnostic tools to match approach to context.

Third, accountability is the lever through which a multipolar approach is embedded in institutions. Officials respond to what they are actually held to account for. The state is unlikely to become genuinely multimodal if the officials who attempt to deploy innovations are penalised for deviating from an established baseline and where any public service which doesn't meet an expected mould is considered wanting. The current infrastructure - the Green Book, the spending review, the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee scrutiny - is designed to answer whether money was well spent by NPM standards, with an inherent focus on the short term outputs rather than long term outcomes, not whether a service improved people's lives.

Therefore the state needs to develop the capability to hold systems and services to account in terms that align with how they have been designed. This could mean population-level outcome frameworks for complex services, formal mechanisms that make citizen and community experience legitimate accountability evidence (such as citizen boards); a parallel Green Book track for relational and preventative programmes; and building the analytical capability at the centre, in HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office, to judge models that do not derive from NPM logic.

The benefits of reform will be felt most at the frontline. But the first step is to step back into Whitehall. Reforming the centre is the precondition for everything else. The centre needs to be able to shift gears and meet different challenges with confidence and to better effect.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

These are a selection of key recommendations for developing a multimodal state and to build a multipolar approach to accountability. See [Section 4](#) for full policy platform.

Recommendations to build capacity for mode shifting

- Introduce a training module on the different theories of public administration into the curriculum of the new National School of Government, so that public leaders understand the range of models available and when each serves the citizen.
- Establish a leadership development programme for senior officials running relational, preventative or systems-level programmes, recognising that leading these demands genuinely different skills from those required for NPM delivery. Add relational delivery to training for the fast stream.
- Develop recognised sub-disciplines within the Policy profession, so that expertise can be formally recognised and used as criteria for those looking to deploy relevant policy experience to key roles and teams.
- Establish a cadre of senior officials, at director level and above, designated as discipline leads for these fields.

Recommendation to enable mode shifting

- Develop a range of diagnostic tools that public servants at any level can use to reason about which mode best serves the citizen in a given context. These are aids to judgement, not substitutes for it.

Recommendations to build accountability systems for mode shifting

- Create a Theory of Public Administration Unit at the centre of government with a mandate to develop, maintain and advocate for the multipolar framework across Whitehall.
- Review and amend the Green Book so that it can accommodate and analyse relational or preventative approaches on their own terms.
- Introduce a new “Devo Rule” holding local actors – such as combined authorities and, beneath them, local authorities, Integrated Care Boards, and others – accountable for broad outcomes and missions rather than rigid compliance, reorienting accountability toward local democratic fora and evidence from citizens and communities.⁴
- Create formal mechanisms through which citizen and community experience constitutes legitimate accountability evidence, not merely background context for a process that accounts upward.
- Commission expert organisations, such as Government Outcomes Lab, to develop scalable evaluative approaches capable of assessing programmes whose benefits accrue across the system, are realised over years or decades, and measure outcomes rather than outputs.
- Reform business case assessment to require teams to identify and justify which model of public administration they are adopting and why. This makes the choice of model a deliberate decision with a robust rationale.
- Reform organisations with a role in assuming accountability, such as the NAO, so they can accommodate a diversity of delivery systems and support mode shifting.
- The UK could take inspiration from Denmark’s metagovernance approach, in which the central government sets strategic frameworks and outcome expectations while allowing delivery actors to design their own approaches.

4 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Threading-the-Needle_Paper_December-2024.pdf, Glover 2024

INTRODUCTION

About seven hundred thousand people turn eighteen each year in the UK. Upon their eighteenth birthday, the state designates that an individual leaves childhood and becomes an adult. They can vote. Serve in the armed forces. Set up a business. Marry without permission. Gamble. Should they apply for one, a passport can arrive within a week (if they used the expedited service). Companies House allows them to register as a director in a single day. Were they to go to A&E, they would, assuming the system operates as it should, be seen within four hours. These expectations apply regardless of whether they are rich or poor, whether they live in London or Leeds, and regardless of their ethnicity.

Of those seven hundred thousand, roughly forty five thousand, the precise figure varies slightly by definition and year, will have spent some part of their childhood in the care of the state. Their experience of the state will be different from those brought up amongst family or friends. For them, public policy and state intervention is not an abstract nudge from vaguely understood actors in Whitehall. It has faces and names and very tangible impacts on their lives. The teachers completing the care plan documentation. The social workers who ferry them between foster families and children's homes. The staff, increasingly employed by private equity, who run those homes. The mental health nurse treating the condition they are statistically more likely to carry. The police officer they are statistically more likely to encounter. The court officer helping them navigate a building they are statistically more likely to find themselves in. The judge articulating the restrictions the state will now place on their liberty, in response to a transgression they were statistically more likely to commit. The good news, though: their passport arrives in the same five days. They get the same seven minutes at the GP. And, their bins get collected, barring industrial action, routinely and predictably.

Each of those state actors, for the most part, is doing their job as it is currently conceived. The social worker visits each child in their caseload at least once a quarter, as required, and updates the case management system within the mandated forty-eight hours. The EHCP is completed to template and filed on time. The children's home meets its Ofsted registration requirements and its staffing ratios are compliant. The mental health referral is processed within the eighteen-week target. The police record the encounter appropriately. The court lists the case within the statutory timeframe. The judge sentences within the guidelines. At every stage, the system is, by its own set of parameters, working. Targets are being met, forms are being filed; the boxes are being ticked.

And yet a child who entered the care of the state has, in many measurable ways, arrived at adulthood worse off than those who did not. The state has failed this young person. But it is not clear that any individual, or even institution, within the current system can be held accountable for that failure. After all, they have delivered against the KPIs and targets that have been set for them by different parts of Whitehall.

The failure is in the over extension of a system of administration which is poorly suited to meeting these kinds of challenges, and disincentives frontline public servants from treating the citizen they engage with as a human with agency and multiple dimensions, rather than as a case to be processed or a consumer to be met with a transactional service.

This report does not argue that short term, transactional and output focused interventions don't have their place; they do. The fault is that these methodologies and mechanisms, which for the sake of this essay are grouped under the aegis of 'New Public Management', have been deployed into arenas in which they do not serve the needs of the citizen.

This report does not argue for the wholesale replacement of output and transactional systems; they serve citizens well in specific contexts. The objective is to make the case for a state that can deploy different systems of administration more intentionally, depending on the needs of the citizen in a given context. This means relational approaches - where they best serve the citizen. This means experimental systems - where they best serve the citizen. And digital governance systems - *where they best serve the citizen*.

Inside and outside of government, there is an increasing battle between these different public service reform agendas. Demos has been at the heart of these debates over the years. This report marks a departure point, it makes the case that this tribalism is misplaced, and we need to reform the system to enable mode shifting to meet the diverse needs of citizens.

A mode shifting state needs to be both multimodal and multipolar. The first section of this report sets out the meaning of these terms and articulates why a state without these characteristics will necessarily fail citizens. The second section develops a tool that can be used to ensure the right mode of delivery is adopted and the third section sets out how reform to accountability mechanisms can help develop multipolarity within a state's operating model.

SECTION 1

WE NEED A STATE THAT IS BOTH MULTIMODAL AND MULTIPOLAR

TOO STRETCHED, TOO PRESCRIPTIVE, TOO REMOTE

In a 2024 poll run by the National Centre for Social Research, 79% of citizens said the system of governing Britain could be improved “quite a lot” or “a great deal.” This figure was up 18 points since 2020, matching the record dissatisfaction last recorded in 2019.⁵ The sense that public services are becoming harder to access and lower in quality has been recorded across institutions, from the Local Government Association’s Insight Unit⁶ to the Institute for Government (IfG) to University College London.⁷ Demos has argued elsewhere that this dissatisfaction goes beyond a problem of public service delivery, to confidence in the state and trust in democracy.⁸

The limitations with our public services are well known; they’re not preventative enough, too frequently designed to meet acute need than serve citizens upstream, before need becomes more complex and harder to serve.⁹ Decisions regarding shape and design of services too often remain the purview of officials based in Whitehall, who have little lived experience in front line services and are remote from the citizens they’re trying to support.¹⁰ And, often reflecting where those design decisions are taken, public services are too frequently structured and delivered in ways that serve the administrator rather than the citizen, with more effective delivery approaches sacrificed for institutional convenience.

5 <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>, Natcen 2024

6 <https://lgiu.org/only-25-of-voters-trust-the-government-to-act-in-the-best-interests-of-local-people-finds-new-lgiu-poll/> LGiU 2024

7 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/sites/bartlett/files/new_public_management_and_innovation_policy_a_systematic_literature_review.pdf Kattel 2023

8 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/New-Deal_Public-Service-Reform_2026.pdf Martin, 2026

9 <https://www.health.org.uk/features-and-opinion/features/what-does-the-spending-review-really-mean-for-health-and-care> The Health Foundation, 2025

10 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/policy-making-crisis-civil-servants-guide> Dzimwasha 2026

There is recognition of all of this in government. The 2025 spending review set out three core principles for public service reform: services organised around people's lives, a shift towards prevention, and more power for local areas to shape support alongside their communities.¹¹ These principles are already shaping public services, and can be seen in the NHS 10 Year Plan, in reforms to children's social care and SEND, in the Test, Learn and Grow programme, and in new devolution deals.¹²

Prime Minister in waiting, Andy Burnham, is promising to devolve public services and more fiscal responsibility out of London to systems that are closer to people. The new cabinet secretary, Antonia Romeo, is reviewing how Whitehall works with ambition.

However, despite these principles commanding support across think tanks and front line leaders progress has been slow and uneven, too often sitting in isolated pilots or pockets of the system that have been able to wrestle back some degree of agency. Their worth is contested in government both by ministers and officials, who are more used to the command and control model of NPM. The new political and civil service leadership needs to understand these sources of resistance in order to change them.

The Powering Public Service reform programme (PPSR), of which this paper is a part, specifically addresses how Whitehall needs to change to better support liberated and more effective public services. Previous Demos papers in the PPSR series, including 'The Respect Story',¹³ which laid the groundwork for the power of a clearer political narrative to animate reform, and 'Powering Prevention' which set out a vision for the funding system that supports preventative reform at scale.¹⁴

Whereas The Respect Story focused on the value of an underpinning vision for public services, and Powering Prevention set out measures that could shift funding decisions in favour of prevention, this paper focuses on how systems of governance and accountability can be reformed. The aim is a state better able to deliver in fundamentally different ways, depending on what works best for the citizen in a given context, and one whose internal structures, processes and culture do not give primacy to any single delivery model or governing approach. This is a state that can mode shift.

THE BRITISH STATE: MULTIMODALITY UNDERMINED BY A UNIPOLAR SYSTEM

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 prosecutes the case for a governing logic that works well in some contexts but poorly in others. Both risk failing citizens.

The challenge is not to replace one governing logic wholesale with another across all facets of public services. There is no one size fits all approach that works in all contexts. Take NPM, characterised by market logic, output focused KPIs and procedural standardisation.¹⁵ As recent improvements in some services demonstrate, the Passport replacement service being a good example,¹⁶ this is an effective approach for developing highly efficient, high quality transactional services. NPM struggles, however, in those contexts where a strong relationship with the citizen is necessary or where addressing complex and overlapping needs requires coordination

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

12 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/10-year-health-plan-for-england-fit-for-the-future/fit-for-the-future-10-year-health-plan-for-england-executive-summary> 10 Year Plan for Health 2025

13 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/The-Respect-Story_Tom-Webb_2026.pdf Webb 2026

14 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Powering-Prevention_Report_June_2026.pdf Dodd 2026

15 <https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/PSPA108/4NMP%20all%20seasonsfulltext.pdf>

16 https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2024-0733/Accounting_Officer_Assessment.pdf 2024

across multiple disparate services.¹⁷ Relational approaches, by contrast, with their focus on citizen-centric design, peer to peer learning and local insight, are ill suited to delivering the standardised, transactional services that require little or no relationship with the user.

In simpler terms, when it comes to delivering goods and transactional services to the citizen, a state cast in the image of Amazon should be the priority. Whereas when it comes to helping resolve more complex issues such as supporting young people at risk of being taken into care, you want a state that feels much more personal and can consider the citizen as an individual and not a case.

There is a growing recognition that public service delivery should be adapted to place and context, with the advent of more relational approaches in various areas, and initiatives such as Test, Learn and Grow encouraging experimentation and innovation in management and delivery. However, an encouragement to explore different models can only be successful if officials have the capacity to determine the efficacy of more relational or more transactional delivery, and then the flexibility to act accordingly. An effective state – delivering effective services – must therefore equip officials to make these decisions well, and empower them to deliver on that basis. We need to replace our unpolar state with one designed and enabled to mode shift.

Mode shifting prioritises citizen outcomes over institutional convenience. To achieve it we need a state that is both multimodal and multipolar. Multimodal in that it delivers where citizens are, and in whatever guise secures the best outcomes for the intended beneficiary. Multipolar in that its administrative architecture, from funding rules to accountability mechanisms to analytical lenses, provides public servants the agency to adopt the right approach for the context, rather than penalising officials who depart from the dominant mould.

In recent years a number of public institutions have actively sought to become more multimodal, broadening how they serve citizens by running several distinct delivery approaches across the organisation, each suited to its context. From Wigan¹⁸ to Ealing¹⁹ to Camden,²⁰ local authorities are reforming established approaches or standing up new teams geared to serve citizens in markedly different ways.²¹ And it is working.

More encouragingly, there are signs that these ventures are finding hospitable ground within the institutions that house them, with the wider institutional architecture and culture giving teams the agency to deliver differently depending on which approach be it relational, NPM or otherwise, best drives citizen outcomes. They give an indication of what a multimodal and multipolar state could look and feel like to the citizens they serve: transactional where the citizen values efficiency and outputs, relational where need is complex and hard to address.

The problem is that Whitehall warily accommodates these pioneers rather than championing them. Demos's own research in *The Human Handbrake*, surveying leaders across Whitehall, identified several blockers to innovation: risk avoidance, the myth of the "policy hero", siloed working, the tendency to design for simplicity rather than complexity, and that politics is too often impatient for "quick, legible results" over long term reform.²²

Variation is still treated as a deviation to be corrected, not as evidence of local insight being deployed in the citizen's interest or an innovative approach seeking to improve outcomes. Whitehall's instinct, when it encounters actors, be they front line practitioners or local authorities, doing things differently, is to seek justification for why standard procedures haven't been adopted - even where they have been shown to secure poor outcomes.

17 <https://mmuperu.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/429/2025/12/MMU2849-Relational-Public-Services-Policy-OP.pdf> Manchester Metropolitan University 2026

18 <https://www.wigan.gov.uk/Docs/PDF/Council/The-Deal/Deal-conference/TheDeal-Conference.pdf> Wigan 2017

19 <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/council-assurance-and-peer-challenge/peer-challenges-we-offer/corporate-peer-166> LGA 2025

20 <https://www.cqc.org.uk/care-services/local-authority-assessment-reports/camden-0225/summary> CQC 2025

21 <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/reports/wigan-deal> Kings Fund 2019

22 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-Human-Handbrake_Breifing_2025_Sept.pdf Gandon, 2025

So the innovating partner must rely upon the sponsorship of supportive leaders such as chief executives or local councillors for their continued operation. Whitehall, in refusing to meet innovation with curiosity and a learning mindset, fails to leverage its position at the center of public services to highlight and help scale best practice to ensure models from places like Wigan are adopted rather than admired.

This creates the pathology of pilotitis. Good practice fails to break out from isolated, discrete pilots that result in only a small segment of citizens benefiting from a more responsive state. Places like Wigan, Camden and Ealing despite showing the promise of multimodal states fail to become the blueprint for public institutions, relegating to being the exceptions.

To unlock the reforming energy at the front line of public services, Whitehall needs to become comfortable operating in different ways, and comfortable letting others do the same. A multipolar approach does not just mean a Treasury that says 'Yes' more, it entails a broader reform of the institutional architecture and cultural norms: until the funding procedures, accountability mechanisms and analytical frames of the centre stop privileging a default approach (which at the moment is NPM).

DEVELOPING A MULTIMODAL STATE

A multimodal state sounds, at first, self-evidently desirable. Of course a state and its institutions should use different approaches for different problems. And, of course, the state does already operate in different ways depending on the context to some extent.

However, the British state is one of the most centralised in the democratic world.²³ Decisions taken, and assumptions made, in Whitehall shape how local authorities and frontline services procure goods, hire and reward staff, and deliver for citizens. Yes, the state looks and feels very different depending on whether it is collecting tax or delivering GP appointments. But in both cases the operating model has been appraised through some form of cost-benefit analysis,²⁴ and in both cases public servants are judged, at least in part, on hitting outputs rather than securing outcomes, and on how faithfully they followed procedures designed in Whitehall rather than on whether the citizen left the encounter better served.²⁵

The good news is that a number of institutions are already demonstrating the power of a multimodal approach to public services. Local authorities in particular are adopting the approach. London boroughs such as Camden and Ealing, and larger combined authorities such as the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, have adopted markedly more multimodal approaches to shaping and delivering public services, deploying transactional models where they fit and relational ones where they do not. Camden's history of embedding relational approaches, such as its 'Family Advisory Board' project,²⁶ are the most well known. The borough has built a mature relational capability, housed in the Centre for Relational Practice, which treats the quality of the relationship between service and citizen as the mechanism through which outcomes are produced, while continuing to run conventional transactional services where those serve residents better.

Greater Manchester, as a combined authority operates at a different scale, with devolved powers over transport, health and skills. It shows that even when operating at scale it is possible to adopt a multimodal approach across its various public services. In both instances, these are organisations who have embraced a multimodal approach; the adoption of relational practices are not restricted to clearly bound pilots, they are deployed at scale in recognition they deliver for the citizen.²⁷

23 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/47789/html/> Travers 2025

24 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-green-book-appraisal-and-evaluation-in-central-government> The Green Book 2026

25 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/accountability-modern-government-what-are-issues> McCrae 2018

26 <https://www.relationlactivism.com/family-advisory-board>

27 <https://www.cqc.org.uk/care-services/local-authority-assessment-reports/camden-0225/summary> CQC 2025



MULTIMODAL DELIVERY IN ACTION

CAMDEN COUNCIL

Established by Camden Council in 2024, the **Camden Centre for Relational Practice** was created in direct response to the limitations of transactional approaches to public service delivery. Its premise is straightforward: public services are built on relationships, and the quality of those relationships shapes the quality of outcomes.

The Centre supports public sector organisations across relational leadership, service design, workforce development, and co-design with residents. It operates as a sector-rooted body rather than an external consultancy, designed by practitioners, for practitioners, and serves as a research and development partner for academic institutions and policy bodies seeking to test new approaches to relational public services.

Its work draws on Camden's own relational practice framework, deployed across council services and through the Department for Education's Sector Led Improvement Programme for children's services. The Centre's founding argument is that relational practice is not a "nice to have." It is a core capability for modern public services, with measurable effects on resident trust, staff wellbeing, and the quality of decisions.

The creation of the Test, Learn and Grow unit within the Cabinet Office, housed at the very heart of Westminster, and its £100 million in funding indicates recognition at the heart of the British state, that citizens would benefit from public services that took different approaches than is currently the norm.²⁸ This is a programme of stimulating place-based innovation, in which “new solutions will be built from the ground up, moving rapidly to learn and adapt ... the accelerators will identify blockers and barriers to delivering people-focused, preventive public services, and work to make change in Government to quickly scale learning”.²⁹

There is also encouraging evidence that the Civil Service’s own Policy Function, which so often shapes the delivery approach taken by front line services, is becoming more pluralistic and citizen centric, having published the Public Design Evidence Review in 2025.³⁰ Its 2025 Public Design Evidence Review contains a wealth of sensible recommendations for improving the citizen-centricity of policymaking and service design. Among the broader suite of design principles, three are particularly encouraging. Services should:

- work for the people who use them, and for those who design and deliver them;
- be attractive, accessible, and aligned with people’s needs;
- account for, and function effectively within, the context of communities, places and wider public services.

Taken together, these suggest a state that is beginning to question the rigidity of its operating approach. Maturing relational practice in local government, a policy profession opening up to plural approaches, and dedicated unit driving relational reform at the heart of Whitehall all indicate institutions slowly recognising the current system, in which policy is designed in Whitehall and standardised delivery is then mandated upon the frontline, is failing. The task for reformers is to accelerate this shift turning a set of promising green shoots into a new deal for public services. The answer to this is to become a mode-shifting state.

SHIFTING GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT DIFFERENT MODES

A multimodal state is not enough on its own. A council can stand up a relational team, a department can commission a preventative programme, an official armed with the diagnostics set out above can correctly identify that a given context calls for something other than a transactional, output driven approach. But the ability to choose the right model is worthless if the architecture of the state then penalises that choice at every subsequent stage. This is the distinction between multimodality and multipolarity. Multimodality is the capacity to deliver in different ways. Multipolarity is the condition that allows those different ways to survive contact with the machinery of the centre. Without the second, the first is permanently provisional.

The gap between ambition for public service reform and the lack of system change speaks to the need for a multipolar state. There has been broad recognition that public services are in dire need of reform. There was also enough support for the three principles for public service reform set out in the 2025 spending review that were referenced earlier for them to be included. And yet, despite this dual consensus, we have failed to see reform at scale. This is due to a lack of change in the fundamental operating assumptions and models that guide action in Whitehall. Take the Green Book, which is the authority on Westminster for what constitutes value for money. It remains a paradigmatic example of the overextension of NPM modality into all arenas of public sector decision making.

28 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/communities-across-the-country-to-benefit-from-innovation-squads-to-re-build-public-services> Cabinet Office 2025

29 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2025-07-16/debates/25071645000010/PublicServiceReformTestLearnAndGrowProgramme> Hansard, 2025

30 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69aed2b9bde9c3f213c899e7/PDER_Brief_guide_Final.pdf Cabinet Office 2025

By their nature, relational and preventative approaches are designed to secure benefits that are hard to measure and attribute, are realised over the long term and often manifest in diffuse ways across a citizen's life. A relational programme or policy platform is not intentionally penalised by "cynical civil servants". But the systems by which these initiatives are judged are fundamentally at odds with how these interventions are designed to operate and secure outcomes for the citizen.

This friction is the product of a unipolar system. It effectively embeds institutional sclerosis where the only reforming measures that find fertile ground are by necessity incremental tweaks to the current system, where the evidence base needed to secure buy-in for adoption at scale is already at hand and captured in ways the state currently accommodates. The result is a pathology of pilotitis, where truly innovative reform, that is capable of meeting the moment and delivering what services need, are forced to run a gamut of time consuming and energy sapping pilots, monitored by those a step away from public services, rather than being deployed at scale, based on the insight and assessment of those at the front line.

This change we are proposing does not entail a thorough rejection of the NPM governing logic that continues to shape much of how Whitehall operates. Rather, it aims to remove NPM as the unexamined and assumed default model for developing public service in order to allow the mode shifting we're arguing for in this paper. Ultimately, the objective is to develop the institutional, procedural and cultural conditions in which the right approach, be that relational, digital first or NPM, can be chosen for the right problem and operate and be evaluated on its own terms, rather than consistently needing to translate its methodology and systems to accommodate for a rigid system of administration. The goal is not to add relational approaches as an approved exception to an NPM baseline, it is to make the choice of administrative model a genuine decision, made on the merits of the context, without a thumb on the scale. This is true mode shifting as opposed to defaulting from the norm.

A MODE SHIFTING AND MULTIPOLAR STATE DOES NOT IMPLY AN UNACCOUNTABLE ONE

Removing NPM, with its focus on metrics and tangible outputs, as the default operating approach does not entail weakening accountability across the state. Every decision the state takes has an opportunity cost, and a system that fails to scrutinise how it spends taxpayers money fails citizens. The case for multipolarity is not a case against accountability. Rather it is simply making the case for accountability systems to reflect and map on to the delivery model that has been adopted.

Accountability mechanisms are not one size fits all. Different approaches value different things and structure the relationship between the actor and the desired outcome in different ways. Public servants respond to what they are actually measured against, rewarded for, and exposed to risk by. If public servants are held accountable in ways that aren't appropriate for the work they are doing and the outcomes they are trying to drive, then even if theoretically, the state is permits a multimodal approach, in reality anyone who adopts an approach which doesn't work to the time frames or provide evidence within certain parameters are to be found wanting and penalised.

This is why a single, uniform accountability architecture is incompatible with a multimodal state. Where every model - relational, preventative, transactional, digital - must answer to the same forum, on the same evidence, against the same metrics, only the model that the framework was built for will ever look successful. The others will appear to underperform, and be a poor use of public funds. This does not necessarily reflect reality, rather it reflects a system that has an overly rigid sense of how the government should operate. In light of this, the rational public servant

defaults to adopting an approach the architecture understands, even where it fails to drive the best outcome.

A genuinely multipolar state therefore needs a pluralistic approach to accountability architecture, capable of evaluating a relational or preventative programme in appropriate terms, recognising the evidence that shows whether it is working, and of attaching consequences that reward genuine progress rather than penalising the absence of short-term, attributable metrics. This requires Whitehall, and particularly the Treasury, to change. The centre must develop the capability to hold and deploy a range of accountability models depending on the nature of the public service or intervention they are holding to account,

Reforming accountability is therefore not a downstream technicality. It is the mechanism that turns multimodal permission into multipolar practice, and it is the subject of the sections that follow.

SECTION 2

TWO DIAGNOSTICS TO INFORM MODE SHIFTING

The previous section set out the value of mode shifting and a genuinely multipolar system of administration to support it. But as multiple administrative models become viable options, officials need to do two things reliably. First, identify the right model for a given context. Second, and often harder, make the case for it to the stakeholders across the system whose buy-in determines whether the shift succeeds, from spending teams in HM Treasury to peers in their own organisation.

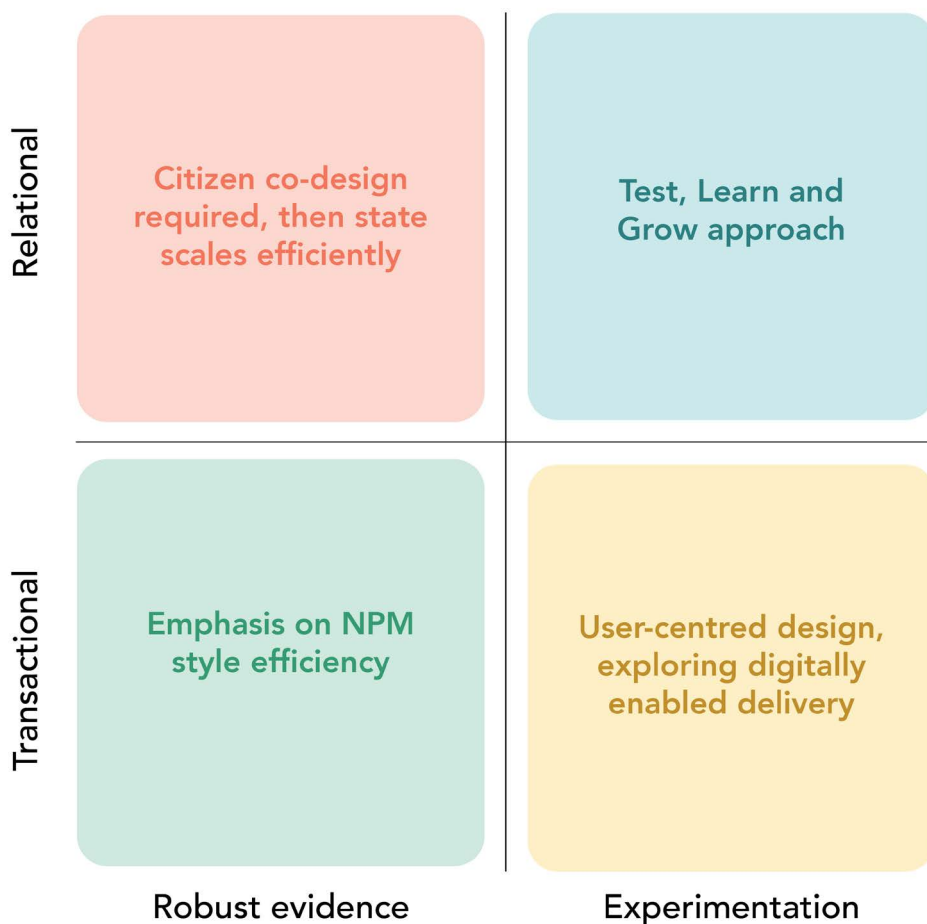
This section sketches two prototypes for simple diagnostic tools that can give officials the confidence to adopt a multimodal approach. Each offers a quick means of assessing which approach best serves the citizen in a given context.

These prototypes should be seen as illustrative examples of tools that officials should be developing for their own organisations. Their purpose is not to give a definitive methodology for identifying a specific system of administration; their primary purpose is to equip officials and public leaders with a means of opening conversations with colleagues about whether a service is currently structured and run in a way that genuinely serves the citizen, or merely designed to hit targets that bear little relation to driving better outcomes

TOOL A: A LIGHTTOUCH FRAMEWORK FOR INSTANT ASSESSMENT

This is a simple tool designed to help public servants to assess key elements of the operating context, by evaluating the policy and service context according to two dimensions. It is particularly useful for those officials who sit across broad policy portfolios and need to quickly assure different programmes of work from afar, such as those operating from organisations such as No.10, or other Whitehall departments. The first considers to what extent the evidence regarding what works is clear or if further experimentation and innovation is needed (x-axis). The second plots how transactional or relational the service is (y-axis).

FIGURE 1
TOOL A



The strengths and limitations of Tool A

The tool's value lies in its simplicity and the minimal effort it demands. An official can quickly sense-check the kind of intervention a context calls for, or recognise that the evidence is too thin to commit and that further exploration is needed before settling on an approach. The tool also surfaces whether there is a clear consensus as to what works in this context.

For very stretched teams whose role is to coordinate or assure services rather than deliver them, it offers an efficient way to gauge whether the broad delivery approach being taken rests on solid foundations. By allowing the user to 'plot' where they see a service, it also is effectively surfacing disagreement between colleagues. By surfacing disagreement quickly, it allows public services to critically evaluate elements of the service where there is a lack of consensus and address it.

Whilst the simplicity of the tool is a boon to stretched public servants, it does limit its application. The tool only considers two dimensions and therefore provides only a partial sense of which system of delivery should be adopted. Equally it could exude a sense of academic rigour to the assessment which ultimately rests on the perspectives of the individuals involved in the assessment. Equally, by having only four possible quadrants it does not provide a great degree of nuance to the assessment. And its current iteration has been intentionally geared towards choosing between transactional, NPM-style approaches and relational ones. However since it is relatively low effort to repurpose the tool by switching out the values attached to each axis, its application can be adapted.

TOOL B: THE KEY QUESTION DIAGNOSTIC

Tool B supports decision-making in a different way. Rather than plotting the context on a graph, the user works through a structured set of questions, addressing each element of the operating context in turn. This allows for a more nuanced judgement drawing in the political, institutional and temporal factors that a simpler tool leaves out.

TABLE 1

TOOL B

Questions for ascertaining the most effective way of service citizens

<p>Dimension 1:</p> <p><i>Is the citizen best served by a transactional or relational service?</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the recipient's role in the service, are they a passive consumer of a service or an active partner in shaping it? 2. Does the success of the intervention depend on the recipient's active engagement, behaviour change, or sustained buy-in? 3. Is this a point-in-time intervention or does it require a sustained relationship over time? 4. Does effective delivery require professional discretion and contextual judgement, or can it be standardised and rule-based? 5. Is the intervention designed to address a single, well-defined need or multiple interacting and complex needs?
<p>Dimension 2:</p> <p><i>How is the operating context best understood?</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Is there a single organisation responsible and accountable for delivery, or does it span multiple institutions? 7. How many organisational boundaries sit between the decision-maker and frontline delivery of this intervention? 8. Does the intervention require active coordination and joint working across multiple organisations to succeed? 9. Is the delivery organisation sufficiently close to the people it serves to understand and respond to local context, or does it operate at a distance? 10. Does the delivering institution have the capability, culture, and supervisory infrastructure to operate the intended administrative model?

<p>Dimension 3: <i>How immediate and diffuse are the benefits</i></p>	<p>11. How long is the period between delivery of the intervention and the realisation of the desired outcome?</p> <p>12. How diffuse are the desired outcomes, do they relate to a single service or organisation, or do they spread across systems and sectors?</p> <p>13. Can the success of this intervention be assessed at the point of delivery, or only by tracking what happens to recipients over time?</p> <p>14. How directly and causally traceable are the outputs of the intervention to the outcomes it is designed to achieve?</p> <p>15. Are the benefits of the intervention concentrated among an identifiable group of recipients, or are they broad, population-level, and long-term?</p>
<p>Dimension 4: <i>How politically sensitive is the area/or intervention?</i></p>	<p>16. Does the intervention constitute a specific and named manifesto commitment or ministerial priority?</p> <p>17. Would a sustained or acute failure in this intervention result in significant media or public scrutiny?</p> <p>18. Is an elected official personally and publicly accountable for the performance of this intervention?</p> <p>19. Is there broad political consensus on the approach, or is it actively contested across or within parties?</p> <p>20. How tolerant is the current political environment of ambiguity, experimentation, or deferred results in this area?</p>

The strengths and limitations of Tool B

This question led tool allows the official to consider a broader set of dimensions and contextual considerations. It could also be a means of developing consensus across stakeholders involved in different elements of the service design, delivery or evaluation. Particularly relevant is that the assessment can be broken up with specific teams being tasked with developing informed answers to each section. For example, Special Advisors in Whitehall or Councillors in Local Authorities could be tasked with Dimension 4, to give a sense of the political salience and sensitivity. This component adds value as, realistically, no minister or political figure is likely to accept any governing approach which doesn't incorporate some element of easily assessable target, to do so would leave them politically vulnerable and unable to hold deliver leads accountable.

There are two main drawbacks to the tool. First: effort; developing detailed, verifiable answers to twenty questions takes time and attention that could otherwise go into designing and delivering the service itself, and the tool is therefore better suited to significant or contested decisions than to quick assessments. The second issue relates to the need to reconcile different perspectives. When different teams return different readings of the same service, someone has to weigh and resolve those judgments, and the tool itself offers no mechanism for doing so. Handled well, that tension is productive, surfacing disagreements that would otherwise stay buried and surface later down the line when it is hard to rectify, handled badly however, and it can stall and slow down decision making.

TABLE 2
EXAMPLE USE CASES FOR EACH TOOL

	SUITABLE USE CASES	UNSUITABLE USE CASES
TOOL A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid triage of a new policy area • Early sense-check before commissioning detailed work • Surfacing disagreement within a coordinating team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politically sensitive, high-scrutiny interventions • Complex programmes spanning multiple organisations • Final business case or funding justification
TOOL B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major cross-cutting programme design • Contested decisions needing stakeholder consensus • High-value spend requiring a defensible rationale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick, low-stakes operational decisions • Routine services with settled delivery models • Teams lacking time or analytical capacity

THE LIMITATIONS OF DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS

There are four primary risks to using tools of this kind, particularly given the culture public servants currently operate within.

First, over-complication: if an assessment generates competing judgements that must then be reconciled, the tool can slow the very design and delivery process it was meant to support. Second, over-prescription: a tool intended to augment professional experience can end up overruling it, displacing the discretion and insight it was designed to give agency to. Third, false reassurance: a completed diagnostic can absolve officials of the routine reflection that matters most, namely whether the chosen approach still serves the citizen as circumstances change. Fourth, the level-of-application problem. Public services are complex and multifaceted, and a single service will often contain elements best delivered through different models, some strictly transactional, others relational or digitally enabled. A tool applied bluntly at the level of a whole service will miss this, which is why those leading and delivering the system, who understand its component parts, are best placed to apply the tool at the right level.

SECTION 3

HOW CURRENT APPROACHES TO ACCOUNTABILITY RESULTS IN A UNIPOLAR STATE

This section examines the existing accountability systems, how they restrict the mode shifting we are making the case for.

A MARKET FAILURE IN ACCOUNTABILITY

Across disciplines, accountability is most usefully understood not as a single instrument but as a structured relationship. As described by Bovens, accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum in which the actor has an obligation to explain and justify their conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor can face consequences.³¹

The story told in the introduction to this paper is a story of accountability and its limits. Each professional is, by the formal measures of the systems, doing their job: the social worker visits, records, and files; the mental health referral is processed within the target window; the court lists the case within statutory time. Yet the child – the public service user at the centre of this activity – enters adulthood measurably worse off than those who were never subject to state care at all.

Why then, despite the presence of extensive accountability mechanisms across public services, do our systems consistently fail to produce the outcomes they are designed to secure?

Just 18% of children looked after continuously for at least 12 months achieved a grade 4 or above in English and maths at Key Stage 4, compared to 65% of their peers. A third of care-experienced children receive a caution or conviction between the ages of 10 and 17. Around

31 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0386.2007.00378.x> Bovens 2007

half meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental health disorder.³² Children in the care system are more than five and a half times less likely to achieve the grade 5 'good pass' threshold in English and mathematics GCSEs compared to children who are not in the care system (7.2% versus 40.1%); 41% of 19 to 21-year-old care leavers are not in education, employment or training.³³

These are not the outcomes of a system in which no one is accountable – plainly, each actor is held accountable in terms of explaining and justifying their actions and performance to fora that wield the power to ask questions, make judgements, and impose consequences.

These are the outcomes of a system in which accountability is active but misdirected and misapplied – shaped by a dominant paradigm of public administration and governance that has proved poorly suited to many of the most important functions of government.

The fundamental problem with accountability in public services is its mismatch with the nature of the work being held to account. Until that mismatch is addressed, the outcomes public services are designed to produce will continue to fall short, and public confidence in the institutions responsible for them will continue to erode.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN INSTITUTIONS

Understanding why requires a more precise account of what forms accountability takes and how they interact. Deconstructing accountability into the classic framework provided by Romzek and Dubnick – there are four distinct forms that often coexist in tension within public institutions:³⁴

- **Hierarchical Accountability:** The traditional, bureaucratic form – rooted in the chain of command, adherence to rules, and deference. Accountability is enforced through top-down supervision, performance audits, and compliance with directives. While providing clarity and control, it can foster risk aversion and stifle innovation.
- **Legal Accountability:** Involving the formal oversight of public bodies by legislatures, courts, and auditors, this focuses on adherence to statutory law and due process. This form is essential for ensuring legality and probity, but its procedural rigidity can be slow to adapt to emergent policy challenges.
- **Professional Accountability:** This form relies on the expertise and professional norms of public servants. It places trust in individuals to exercise judgment consistent with the ethical standards and values of their profession (e.g. medicine, engineering, policy analysis). Accountability is maintained through peer review, professional codes of conduct, and intrinsic motivation.
- **Political Accountability:** Concerning the responsiveness of public servants and agencies to elected officials and – ultimately – to the public they serve. It is regularly operationalised through ministerial responsibility and parliamentary oversight, while citizens hold governments and legislators to account through democratic elections. This form of accountability is often long and diffused across multiple actors and public institutions across different levels of governance.

32 <https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-0760/> Parliamentary Briefing 2026

33 <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1111/childrens-homes/news/171939/host-of-indefensible-system-failings-damaging-educational-and-employment-outcomes-for-children-in-care/> Education Committee 2022

34 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264039848_Accountability_in_the_Public_Sector_Lessons_from_the_Challenger_Tragedy Tomsek 1997

These insights are drawn from the 1986 Challenger disaster: the explosion of NASA's *Challenger* Space Shuttle after engineers' safety concerns were overridden amid pressure to proceed with the launch. None of these forms of accountability is inherently superior, but the presence of multiple, overlapping accountability systems comes with drawbacks – and the disproportionate emphasis on some forms at the expense of others invariably produces institutional failures.³⁵

Within NASA, the pursuit of political and bureaucratic accountability distracted the agency from its strength in professional accountability, with catastrophic consequences. Across public services, a comparable inflexibility in the form of accountability that is prioritised also leads to severe failings.

THE LONG SHADOW OF NPM

The accountability architecture of public services cannot be understood separately from the theory of public administration in which it is embedded. Since the 1980s, the dominant theory has been NPM: a governing philosophy, summarised by its three defining characteristics of markets, managers and measurement;³⁶ aiming to inject private sector disciplines and efficiencies into the delivery of public services. Through Thatcher's Next Steps initiative,³⁷ Major's Citizen's Charter,³⁸ and successive waves of reform under New Labour,³⁹ NPM has shaped the operational assumptions of Whitehall for decades: how public services should be organised, delivered, and held to account.

NPM has now run its course as a holistic national system of public service delivery: targets have been shown to lead to extensive gaming; markets have proved challenging to construct within public services; and it has often proven less effective at dealing with complex, multifaceted challenges – where presenting problems are symptoms, not root causes – than with the discrete, diagnosable problems for which its tools were designed. This is a system that over-prioritises hierarchical accountability – measured through compliance with targets, rigid reporting requirements, and overfocusing on KPIs – at the expense of the professional accountability that is most likely to produce genuine improvements in outcomes.

Despite these underperformances, NPM's assumptions continue to underpin the formal structures, procedural requirements, and cultural norms of public administration in England – persisting as a default way of thinking about how public services should work and how those who deliver them should be held to account. It is this persistence – structural, procedural, and cultural – that the remainder of this paper addresses.

35 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264039848_Accountability_in_the_Public_Sector_Lessons_from_the_Challenger_Tragedy Romsek 1987

36 <https://journals.openedition.org/osb/1714> Dalingwater 1997

37 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/case%20study%20next%20steps.pdf> Panchamia 2025

38 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01900692.2016.1262872> Kundo 2016

39 <https://historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/a-necessary-complexity-history-and-public-management-reform/> Cutler

HOW NPM DISTORTS ACCOUNTABILITY: FRAGMENTATION, UPWARD ORIENTATION, AND THE WRONG MEASURES

NPM's accountability failings manifests in three interconnected problems: (1) the fragmentation of responsibility; (2) a focus on outputs over outcomes; and (3) an inability to measure complex things.

PROBLEM	CENTRAL QUESTION	FAILURE
Fragmentation	Who is accountable?	No one owns system-wide outcomes
Outputs over outcomes	What are people accountable for?	Focus on short-term activities rather than long term impact
Inability to measure complex things	Can outcomes be measured?	Important outcomes are invisible to the system

Fragmentation

The first problem is structural fragmentation. Central to NPM reforms is the disaggregation of large, multifunctional public bodies into single-purpose agencies, with the devolution of many functions to the private and voluntary sectors.

In theory, this deliberate fragmentation produces clear lines of control. This concentrates accountability in its hierarchical form: running internally and vertically – upwards to line managers; to ministers; to the Treasury – rather than outwards and downwards to the citizens and communities whose lives public services are designed to improve. Such systems of control and incentives actively discourage collaboration across departmental or agency boundaries.

Complex social challenges such as homelessness, ill health, or unemployment rarely fall neatly within the remit of a single department or agency, yet accountability systems continue to operate largely within organisational boundaries. The result is a system in which individual actors can be held accountable for their own performance, while no one is clearly accountable for outcomes that emerge across the system as a whole.

Outputs over outcomes

The second problem is the systematic prioritisation of outputs over outcomes. NPM's operationalisation of accountability through performance targets is not arbitrary: measurable outputs are, almost definitionally, easier to observe and verify than complex, long-term outcomes. An over-emphasis on explicit standards and measurable output indicators gives rise to the rapid growth of the "performance indicator industry",⁴⁰ and accountability systems that focus more on ascribing blame than prescribing improvements,⁴¹ that fail to promote learning, and that create high-stakes environments where officials are incentivised to obscure poor performance rather than address it.⁴¹

40 <https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/PSPA108/4NMP%20all%20seasonsfulltext.pdf> Hood 1991

41 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/IfG%20accountability%20discussion%20paper%20april%202018.pdf> Guerin 2018

This forms a perverse incentive structure: when actors are held accountable for hitting short-term, measurable targets rather than achieving genuine outcomes, they rationally invest effort in managing the metrics, not in improving the service.⁴² In Lipsky's foundational account of street-level bureaucracy, he describes how public policy is actually experienced by those who deliver and those who receive it,⁴³ observing that public service workers – teachers, police officers, social workers – interact directly with citizens and wield considerable discretion in the day-to-day implementation of public programmes. They are thus effectively policy decision-makers, not merely policy implementers.

Hence their performance relies heavily on experience, knowledge, and intrinsic motivation – yet the accountability systems designed to govern their activity are largely directed at formal compliance with rules and fulfilment of targets, rather than at the quality of the discretionary judgements that constitute the substance of their work. This manifests as professional accountability being systematically displaced by hierarchical compliance.

Inability to measure complex things

The third problem is the analytical and evaluative mismatch between NPM's accountability tools and many of the outcomes that public services are supposed to produce. NPM accountability frameworks perform well where outcomes are attributable to a specific actor or programme, realised over a short time horizon, and measurable in ways that are meaningful and resistant to gaming. They perform poorly where outcomes are diffuse across a system, or systems, rather than attributable to any single intervention; where benefits accrue over years or decades rather than within a spending review period; and where the most important aspects of service quality are relational and qualitative rather than quantifiable.

Take prevention. By its nature, prevention involves things not happening – crime not occurring, sickness not arising, crises not materialising – outcomes that are genuinely difficult to measure, that take years to realise, and whose attribution across a complex system of interacting services is inherently contested. NPM accountability frameworks were not designed for this kind of work, and their application to it produces the predictable result: under-investment in prevention relative to crisis response, and a system that consistently fails to learn.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BLAME

Ultimately, accountability cannot be separated from the political environment in which public administration operates. Political and administrative accountability are not the same thing – but their connection creates structural pressures that persistently distort the latter and inhibit reform.

The media - and the public - holds politicians accountable on timescales that bear almost no relationship to the timescales over which public service outcomes are realised: a policy designed to reduce reoffending over a decade, or to prevent chronic health conditions over twenty years, will be subject to political scrutiny within months of its launch, assessed against early indicators that may be weakly related to long-term outcomes, and is thus vulnerable to being abandoned or redesigned in response. The incentive for politicians is not to build accountability systems that support learning but to build accountability systems that insulate them from blame when things go wrong, which typically means short time horizons, clear targets, and a visible person or institution that can be held responsible for failure.

This creates a cycle of blame, rather than a cycle of continuous improvement: the accountability frameworks designed in response to political pressure are optimised for blame attribution rather than learning; those frameworks incentivise officials to manage metrics and suppress

42 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gove.12502> de Walle 2020

43 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447713> Lipsky 1980

honest reporting of failure; when things go wrong, the response is the tightening of targets and another layer of reporting requirements. The person in the care system is at the bottom of this cycle, subject to the cumulative weight of accountability processes that have been designed, layer by layer, in response to each successive failure, without any one of them addressing the fundamental mismatch between the framework and the problem.

Hence reform of accountability in public services requires political reform as much as administrative reform. This demands political leaders who are willing to articulate a different standard of accountability to the public: one in which honest acknowledgement of difficulty is understood as a sign of effective governance rather than of weakness.

We are not arguing here against accountability - which is absolutely critical to the public trust and faith in government. We are arguing for more appropriate and effective accountability. At the moment the system is restricting the innovation public services need because public servants feel accountable for the wrong things; such as procedural compliance over outcomes, and the public feel like there is no accountability when things go wrong. It's failing on all fronts.

ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES THAT ARE FIT FOR ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS

Demos's work on public service reform has consistently identified the need for accountability systems that are designed for the nature of the work being assessed, rather than retrofitted from a framework built for different purposes.⁴⁴

In practice, this requires broader changes to how government operates and how it evaluates specific activities. We have previously argued for a 'devo rule' in which local actors are given genuine flexibility over the methods of service delivery while being held accountable nationally for broad outcomes and missions, rather than for compliance with centrally determined process requirements.⁴⁵ As well as proposing minimum service standards as a floor – protecting against the worst failures, while allowing missions to drive ambition above that floor rather than micromanaging the methods by which it is pursued.⁴⁶ This is a reorientation of the role of the centre from an enforcer of uniform process standards to a steward or enabler of outcome-focused accountability, and requires a willingness to treat variation in method as a feature of a learning, improving system, rather than a deviation to be corrected.

The fundamental problem is not the absence of accountability but rather a mismatch between the form of accountability applied and the nature of the work being held to account. This is recorded in the academic literature (Romzek and Dubnick established it at the institutional level in 1987;⁴⁷ Lipsky established it at the street level in 1980⁴⁸) yet successive governments have failed to draw the right conclusion from this diagnosis, defaulting unhelpfully to the assumption that the solution to accountability failure is more accountability of the same kind, applied more consistently.

What public services have not been subject to is an accountability regime designed for the problems they face in achieving outcomes: complex, relational, long-term challenges that require professional discretion, cross-system coordination, and sustained human investment over decades. The argument of this paper is that until accountability is designed to fit the nature of the work – rather than the nature of the performance management system that sits above it – public service outcomes will continue to underperform, and public confidence and trust will further erode.

44 <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-reform-dividend-a-roadmap-to-liberate-public-services/> Glover 2024

45 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Threading-the-Needle_Paper_December-2024.pdf Glover 2024

46 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Balancing-Act_Paper-2_Dec-2024.pdf Glover 2024

47 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264039848_Accountability_in_the_Public_Sector_Lessons_from_the_Challenger_Tragedy

48 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447713>

A MULTIPOLAR APPROACH TO ACCOUNTABILITY

Theories of administration manage how public services should be organised and what they should optimise for; while they imply particular behavioural priorities, they do not themselves determine behaviour. A relational model, by itself, doesn't instruct a social worker on how to weigh-up a difficult decision for a family, or tell a department how to justify a spending bid. Public servants do not respond directly to an administrative model, they respond to what they are actually held accountable for, as that is what is observed, judged and consequential for them – individually and collectively. Administrative theories describe how a system ought to operate; accountability systems determine how actors within that system actually behave.

Accountability is therefore not a downstream feature of an administrative model, it is the core institutional mechanism through which the model is operationalised and acquires the capacity to shape behaviour. An administrative model that has not been translated into an accountability architecture remains aspirational rather than practically functioning.

Where accountability is unipolar, an apparent willingness to explore administrative multimodality lacks coherence: services described in relational terms, while the people delivering them remain accountable, in practice, only to NPM's forum, content and consequence structure. Government at all levels – from the Cabinet Office to local authorities – can strive to enact more relational, preventative, place-based public services, but until the accountability system changes, ways of working will naturally follow the path that has been laid by NPM.

To make the necessary shift away from the dominant paradigm of centralised, unimodal governance toward a multimodal approach in which professional judgement, citizen experience and local democratic authority carry real weight, an essential lever is reforming accountability structures.

Five dimensions carry this distinction into practice:

1. the purpose accountability serves;
2. the nature of what an actor is held accountable for;
3. the direction in which accountability runs;
4. the consequences that follow from it for the actor concerned;
5. the impact each architecture produces over time.

NPM and relational governance answer each of these questions differently as they are built on different institutional logics. Comparing NPM and relational governance across these five dimensions reveals what needs to be reformed within the architecture of accountability to truly reform the public service governance, administration, and delivery.

TABLE 2**COMPARING ACCOUNTABILITY ARCHITECTURES: NPM AND RELATIONAL GOVERNANCE**

DIMENSION	NPM	RELATIONAL GOVERNANCE
<p>1. Role & Purpose of Accountability</p> <p><i>What is accountability for?</i></p>	<p>The centre specifies what it requires and holds delivery bodies to account through short-term performance measurement. This is well-placed to specify outputs and monitor compliance – allowing the centre to track the performance of many disparate public services across the country.</p>	<p>Accountability is primarily a mechanism for learning, improvement and trust-building. It supports adaptation, professional judgement and responsiveness to citizens, while holding actors responsible for contributing to shared long-term goals and outcomes – evaluating how the relationship between services and citizens has improved quality of life.</p>
<p>2. Nature of What You Are Accountable For</p> <p><i>What is the content of the account?</i></p>	<p>Focuses on measurable outputs, financial compliance and adherence to prescribed processes. Accountability is strongest where performance can be specified in advance, measured during delivery, verified after the fact, and is clearly attributable to a particular organisation or programme.</p>	<p>Accounts more qualitatively for the relationships built, outcomes across systems and between services, and the long-term trajectory of the people and communities served. This includes accountability for things not happening – crises averted, harm not occurring, needs not escalating – outcomes that are difficult to measure and typically cannot be attributed to a single programme.</p>
<p>3. Direction of Accountability</p> <p><i>To whom is the account rendered?</i></p>	<p>Accountability runs vertically through hierarchical chains, from frontline services to managers, departments, ministers, oversight bodies, and ultimately to Treasury and Parliament. This accountability flows almost entirely toward the centre and away from the citizen, who is the ostensible beneficiary of services but has no formal role in judging how services are working for them, beyond the crude verdict of electoral cycles.</p>	<p>Accountability is multi-directional, extending downward to citizens, outward through communities, and horizontally across partners. It is generated through structured, ongoing dialogues across multiple fora, including democratic institutions, communities, and professional peer networks.</p>
<p>4. Consequences for the Actor</p> <p><i>What follows from the account?</i></p>	<p>Underperformance is addressed through formal sanctions, inspection, reputational pressure, and funding consequences – built on the implicit assumption of self-interested public servants responding to extrinsic motivation. These incentives can encourage compliance but may also incentivise gaming and risk aversion.</p>	<p>Accountability is intended to support learning, professional development, and collaborative problem-solving; performance is more broadly driven by intrinsic motivation, supported by genuine feedback, and the recognition that comes from being trusted with meaningful discretion.</p>

DIMENSION	NPM	RELATIONAL GOVERNANCE
<p>5. Impact of Accountability Mechanisms</p> <p><i>What do the mechanisms actually produce?</i></p>	<p>Can establish minimum performance standards and identify poor performers, establishing an empirical, quantitative basis for intervention. However, this can also distort behaviour, crowd out intrinsic motivation, and weaken the professional cultures needed to address complex social challenges.</p>	<p>Lacks NPM's firefighting capacity to rapidly identify failure, but its impacts – strengthened professional motivation, deeper collaboration, long-term outcomes – accrue over years rather than reporting cycles. Public servants and services learn and grow over time, developing around the needs of the citizens and communities that they serve to be the most effective according to place and context.</p>

FLEXIBLE AND EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS FOR MODE SHIFTING

NPM emerges as a rational institutional response from a centre that needs to exercise meaningful oversight of a fragmented, dispersed public sector in which outputs can be poorly defined, costs are opaque, and performance varies widely across services and providers. The accountability system that NPM develops is the principal-agent framework: the centre specifies what it requires, directs or contracts with delivery organisations to produce it, and holds them accountable through performance measurement.

This solution performs well in the conditions for which it was designed: where services are high-volume, transactional, and standardisable – passport processing, benefits administration, elective surgery waiting times – NPM is well-placed to specify outputs, monitor compliance, and intervene when standards. This can establish performance floors (a minimum standard of service), identify underperformance, and provide an empirical, quantitative basis for intervention.

Relational governance emerged to address a different institutional problem. Rather than providing upward assurance to the centre, accountability must be primarily oriented toward learning, improvement, and responsiveness to the people and communities public services exist to serve. Where NPM accountability measures whether targets have been hit, relational accountability judges how the relationship between service and citizens has improved quality of life.

This can be understood as an expansion of the accountability forum – those to whom an actor is accountable: in NPM systems, the forum is the principal, the minister, the department, the inspectorate; in relational systems, the forum must include the citizens and communities whose experience of and contribution to service delivery constitutes the most direct evidence of whether the service is working.

The governance challenge our public services now face is universalisation: the application of an accountability model designed for transactional, principal-agent relationships to the full range of what public services do. When NPM accountability is applied to complex, relational, or preventative services, the principal-agent model provides a poor approximation of reality, and can actively misrepresents the relationship between government and the people delivering services: professionals whose effectiveness depends on discretion, relational skill, and long-term investment in individual and community relationships. We need accountability systems that support mode shifting.

CASE STUDY

DENMARK'S USE OF METAGOVERNANCE

Metagovernance, as established by Sørensen and Torfing,⁴⁹ describes a mode of governing in which the centre sets broad, strategic frameworks and outcome expectations while a great deal of operational independence and discretion is granted to those responsible for delivering services as to how they achieve the outcomes.

Metagovernance operates through two instruments: 'hands-off' tools – rules governing the composition, objectives, and procedures of local governance networks, and 'hands-on' tools – including direct consultancy and facilitation, which shape network behaviour without supplanting local judgement. Crucially, neither tool specifies how outcomes are to be achieved: that responsibility remains with local public servants.

Denmark's 2007 *Kommunalreform* (Structural Reform) consolidated 271 municipalities into 98 larger local government bodies with enhanced strategic capacity, and devolved responsibility for active employment policy to local government.⁵⁰ Local jobcentres were governed by Local Employment Councils (LECs) – *Lokale Beskæftigelsesråd* – tripartite bodies comprising employers, trade unions, and municipal public servants.⁵¹ Nationally, the Ministry of Employment sets outcomes expectations and management focus areas, then the LECs determine how to meet them.

Regions entered annual performance contracts with the Minister for Employment, specifying what outcomes were expected; LECs determined then how to meet them, monitored by the National Labour Market Authority. Comparative research across jobcentre networks between 2007 and 2009 found that LECs were functioning effectively and contributing to democratic governance of local employment policy, and that the central metagovernance framework preserved sufficient local flexibility to make participation worthwhile for social partners – thus achieving 'regulated self-regulation'.^{52,53}

The institutional architecture formally separates what central government is accountable for – strategic goals, outcome frameworks, enabling resources – from how local actors deliver accordingly. Accountability runs simultaneously upward to national outcome expectations and outward to the local democratic and civic forums that constitute the most direct evidence of whether services are working. The centre governs at the right distance, setting missions rather than methodology, and local public servants are more accountable for outcomes, rather than being accountable for process. This multipolarity requires both the analytical capability to engage with evidence that does not conform to NPM's principal-agent logic, and the institutional culture to treat local discretion as a feature of the system rather than a risk to be managed.

49 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2009.01753.x> Sorenson 2009

50 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03003930903560562> Vrangbæk 2010

51 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0958928710364435> Damgaard 2010

52 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233010902_The_Impact_of_Metagovernance_on_Local_Governance_Networks_Lessons_from_Danish_Employment_Policy Daamgard 2011

53 <https://www.atlas101.ca/pm/concepts/metagovernance/>

SECTION 4

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A MODE SHIFTING STATE

This report has argued that we need a new settlement for public service reform, that allows for different approaches to different problems. This is multimodality. It also argues for different accountability systems to allow these different approaches to flourish. This is multipolarity. This would create a mode shifting state. We now turn to recommendations to support this to happen.

Recommendations to build capacity for mode shifting

The shifts necessary for Whitehall to become multimodal can be grouped under four broad headings: building the skills to work in different ways, ensuring Whitehall recognises and accommodates multiple policy disciplines, deploying them where they are needed, and equipping officials with the practical tools to choose between them.

First, officials need a grounding in the full range of administrative and policy models, not just the transactional, output-driven approach that currently dominates. This means considering relational, preventative and systems-based policy disciplines as worthy of specific training in their own right. Training should be delivered, where possible through existing or proposed training routes, with key cohorts such as Senior Civil Servants, who often lead policy portfolios and Fast Streamers, who are likely to move around the system (and are therefore useful vectors of best practise) as well as having a greater chance of being leaders tomorrow.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Introduce a training module on the different theories of public administration into the curriculum of the new National School of Government, so that public leaders understand the range of models available and when each serves the citizen.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish a leadership development programme for senior officials running relational, preventative or systems-level programmes, recognising that leading these demands genuinely different skills from those required for NPM delivery.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Reform the Fast Stream curriculum to include specific training covering relational, preventative and systems-thinking.

Second, the Policy profession in Whitehall, and equivalent bodies in other institutions, should formally recognise sub-disciplines within their profession, that correspond to distinct approaches to public service delivery. This helps ensure domain specific expertise in relational or preventative methods is valued and visible and championed by a specific element of the policy workforce.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Develop recognised sub-disciplines within the Policy profession, so that expertise can be formally recognised and used as criteria for those looking to deploy relevant policy experience to key roles and teams.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Establish a cadre of senior officials, at Director level and above, designated as discipline leads for these fields. The relational policy lead might, for example, anchor the Test, Learn and Grow programme, providing visible leadership and championing the approach across Whitehall. They can also act as a useful escalation point where elements within the system inhibit innovative approaches.

Third, institutions within Whitehall should identify the make-up of their policy workforce, to ensure they have the correct balance of expertise and domain knowledge.

RECOMMENDATION 6

As part of the next strategic workforce planning exercise in Whitehall, the Policy Profession should audit the balance of skills held across policy teams in departments, leveraging the newly created sub-disciplines within the function, to identify where relational, preventative and systems capabilities are lacking and inform recruitment and development efforts accordingly.

Recommendation to enable mode shifting

Bodies such as the policy function need to develop practical resources that help policy and delivery officials identify which policy and delivery approach a given context demands.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Centres of expertise and other expert bodies, such as the Civil Service's Policy Function, should develop and disseminate a set of diagnostic tools, of the kind set out in the next section, that public servants at any level can use to reason about which administrative model best serves the citizen in a given context. These are aids to judgement, not substitutes for it.

Recommendations to build accountability systems for mode shifting

The measures set out above are necessary, but not sufficient to achieve multimodality. Developing capability and an open minded culture equip an official to choose the approach that best serves the citizen, but they don't change the broader conditions which influence and inform policy design and delivery decisions. An official will still default to the transactional model if the funding rules, evaluative approach and accountability mechanisms remain designed in ways that cannot address and assure the approach on its own terms. We now turn to address the issue of accountability.

The current English accountability infrastructure – the Green Book, the Spending Review, the NAO, and Public Accounts Committee scrutiny – is designed to answer the question 'was the money well spent by NPM standards?' It has very limited capacity to answer 'did this service genuinely improve the lives of the people it was designed to help?'

We offer a series of recommendations to reposition the treasury's influence on public service delivery forms.

Recommendations to decentralise accountability:

RECOMMENDATION 8

The centre – primarily HM Treasury and Cabinet Office – must develop both the analytical capability and the institutional culture to engage with accountability models that do not derive from NPM logic, assessing what a relational programme is trying to achieve and evaluating performance on those terms.

RECOMMENDATION 9

The current English accountability system has no formal architecture for accountability that runs outward to communities or downward to citizens in complex services where relational governance is most appropriate. Building a multipolar system of administration requires creating formal structures for accountability alongside the existing upward mechanisms. Demos argues for a “Devo Rule” holding local actors accountable for broad outcomes and missions rather than rigid compliance, reorienting accountability toward local democratic fora and evidence from citizens and communities.⁵⁴

RECOMMENDATION 10

Formal mechanisms must be created through which citizen and community experience constitutes legitimate accountability evidence, not merely background context for a process that accounts upward. This should take place through putting the citizen at the heart of the process by which public services are reviewed; using participatory methods such as Citizens’ Panels.

54 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Threading-the-Needle_Paper_December-2024.pdf

Further recommendations to reform accountability can be bundled into **four distinct categories**, each targeting a different layer of the accountability architecture that sustains our unipolar state.

The first reforms the analytical tools that the state uses to assess value and impact. The second, reforms the fiscal processes and architecture through which money is allocated and reviewed. The third targets those organisations, units and teams which evaluate and scrutinise other parts of the system, to hold them accountable. And, the fourth tackles the institutional and cultural pathologies to allow officials to choose a non-NPM approach without facing penalties or risking their careers. Taken together, these are a suite of measures that embed a more pluralistic approach to understanding how actors in the system should be held accountable and what they should be held accountable for.

CATEGORY 1

Reforming the analytical tools that the state uses to assess value and impact

RECOMMENDATION 11

Review and amend the Green Book so that it can accommodate and analyse relational or preventative approaches on their own terms. This includes distinct methodologies that are relevant to the financial, economic and management cases found in HM Treasury compliant businesses cases, which can accommodate long-term, dispersed and relational outcomes. These accommodations should be developed to allow preventative and systems-level programmes to compete fairly in funding decisions, rather than being structurally disadvantaged by a framework built around attributable, short-term returns.

The aim is not to exempt these programmes from scrutiny - poorly developed ideas should continue to be rejected - but to appraise them on terms that reflect how they generate value in practice. The Green Book and the HMT business case which are informed by it are vital elements of our institutional architecture. Any changes should be made with caution; the good news is that recent reforms, such as the accommodation of place based appraisal, show it can be done.

RECOMMENDATION 12

Commission expert organisations such as the Evaluation Taskforce in the Cabinet Office or Blavatnik's GO Labs, to develop evaluative approaches capable of assessing programmes whose benefits accrue across the system, are realised over years or decades, and resist attribution to any single intervention. Developing this capability will ensure relational practitioners are able to retain their agency, even in low trust environments by providing them an established and recognised route of demonstrating their impact on citizens and communities. This should include the development and application of population-level outcome frameworks for complex services – analogous to Wigan's use of healthy life expectancy and looked-after children rates – that assess what is changing for people and communities over time rather than what activities are being delivered.

CATEGORY 2

Reforming the fiscal processes and architecture through which money is allocated and reviewed

These reforms target processes such as HM Treasury's spending review, business case reviews and funding processes.

RECOMMENDATION 13

In parallel with a review to the Green Book (as outlined above), review the HM Treasury Business Case model to ensure it can accommodate relational and preventative approaches. Ensure the business case format allows those submitting the proposal to make a case for these approaches on their own terms, without the need to translate them into output-based approaches that warp how they are designed to function. This should ensure officials have a business as usual route for securing funding and approval for relational programmes, without relying on overt political or senior sponsorship.

RECOMMENDATION 14

Introduce a mandatory theory-of-administration assessment at each of the various business case stages. For all major programmes or units of spend above a defined threshold, require teams to identify and justify which model of public administration they are adopting and why. This makes the choice of model a deliberate, defensible decision and ensures sup-optimal approaches (be they NPM or relational) are being adopted with a robust rationale.

CATEGORY 3

Reforming those parts of the system (institutions, teams and units) which evaluate and scrutinise other parts of the system

These reforms address actors such as the National Audit Office and, potentially, the Public Accounts Committee.

RECOMMENDATION 15

Broaden the role of the NAO (and other relevant actors), to include the assessment of the accountability model deployed in given contexts. Require these bodies to assess whether the accountability mechanism applied to a programme or public service was appropriate for the type of work being undertaken and the outcomes sought. This reorients external scrutiny from procedural compliance towards the more fundamental question of whether the right approach to serving citizens was selected in the first place.

CATEGORY 4

Dismantling the institutional and cultural pathologies to ensure officials can choose a non-NPM approach without facing penalties or risking their careers

These reforms address the cultural barriers to a multimodal state: that the rational official defaults to NPM because deviation carries disproportionate professional risk. Whilst equipping officials with tools and capabilities is important, without leadership cover, institutional memory and psychological safety, the architecture does not change in any meaningful way.

RECOMMENDATION 16

Create a Theory of Public Administration Unit at the centre of government with a mandate to develop, maintain and advocate for the multipolar framework across Whitehall. The unit would have maximum impact being a joint venture between the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury. This gives the agenda a permanent institutional home rather than leaving it dependent on individual champions.

RECOMMENDATION 17

The UK could take inspiration from Denmark's metagovernance approach, in which the central government sets strategic frameworks and outcome expectations while allowing delivery actors to design their own approaches.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of Whitehall, the way public services are structured makes sense. They are structured to ensure Ministerial departments have clear areas of accountability. To ensure each service meets a specific set of needs at a certain cost. To ensure practitioners operate to standardised operation procedures that provide homogeneity across different geographies. In certain specific contexts, this arrangement works well; the state has never been better at delivering simple, transactional services at such a scale.

In other ways though this leads to siloed delivery, unresponsive services and practitioners that are actively hampered from helping those who have to come to them for help. The young person who grows up in care and now faces a life that is likely to be harder than those of their fellow citizens has not been failed by any individual public servant. They have been failed by Whitehall over extending a theory of governing that has been designed to supply transactional goods and services rather than provide the holistic cross cutting support that citizens in acute need require.

We need a state that can meet citizens where they are, designed to give primacy to the needs of the citizens, not the convenience of the state. We need a state that can shift modes fluently depending on the context. We need institutional architecture that gives public servants across the system the agency and skills to identify, develop and deploy different systems of administration depending on what best serves the citizen.

This report does not argue for the wholesale replacement of NPM style accountability systems with relational ones. A mode-shifting state simply describes a state that provides the accountability architecture, the funding mechanisms, the evaluative frameworks, and the cultural permission that allow relational and preventative approaches to operate on their own terms alongside it.

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It is how we arrive at
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rather than endure.

Equally a multimodal state helps ensure public service reformers are able to engage with the full spectrum of expertise at hand. There is no shortage of voices competing to tell government which part of its operations is failing, the cause of deteriorating public services and declining citizen satisfaction. To some, the solution is an ever more efficient state, populated by fewer, more highly paid officials supported by a modern and powerful technical architecture. To others, it is the very structure of our institutions, which sit too far removed from the people they serve, that reduces the efficacy of services. More recently, others have begun to argue that it is a question of underlying state capacity that limits our ability to develop and deploy the capabilities citizens are crying out for. Each of these perspectives are credible, each makes valid arguments, and each speaks with a vision of the state in mind.

That, in many ways, is also the problem. These competing visions are underpinned by contrasting accounts of what the state should do and how it should do it. But the state, or even just the civil service, has grown too large and too complex for any single operating principle applied to drive improvements in all contexts.

This report argues for something different. It makes the case for a mode shifting state: one that can operate in one way in one context and in an entirely different way in another. A state that can meet a person in acute need and recognise the human being at the heart of that encounter, whilst also operating akin to a publicly run Amazon, distributing goods and entitlements in ways that seamlessly fit into citizen's daily lives.

Adopting a mode shifting state liberates this debate about public services. It allows officials and politicians to draw on reformers from every camp, and to hold each of their contributions to be true and valuable, without accusations of incoherence. The productivity champion and AI enthusiast, the relational reformer and the advocate of state capacity are not competing for attention and institutional influence; they are describing the different modes the state must be able to move between. **This is the foundation on which a genuine, systemic transformation of public services can be built. It is how we arrive at public services that the citizen can enjoy, rather than endure.**

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15 WHITEHALL, LONDON, SW1A 2DD

T: 020 3878 3955

HELLO@DEMOS.CO.UK

WWW.DEMOS.CO.UK