The relational revolution

Chapter 2

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A relational revolution in local public services

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Why do we need a relational revolution?

The challenge of enabling genuinely relational services is not new, but it is growing and becoming more urgent. It is a simple fact of demography that personal social care is going to become an even greater part of public service and (for the foreseeable future at least) a political reality that the financial resources available to support it are going to be even fewer. Working out how to meet the needs of vulnerable older people with humanity is one of the most pressing issues facing local public services. The relational challenge, however, goes much further.

Firstly, enabling relationships to flourish between public service providers and those they serve – individually and collectively – is an absolute necessity if our aspirations for co-production and behaviour change are to be realised. It is increasingly understood that achieving significant change in so many of the challenges facing society – obesity, living well into old age, educational attainment, training and employment in an uncertain job market (to which you can add the pressing issue of your choice) – requires the active engagement of all of us as citizens. It is therefore at this point of interaction between citizens and the public services they use that we should focus our attention (2020 PST, 2010: 31). As the new model of public services presented in Chapter 1 suggests, effective relationships, building trust and behaviour change are intimately connected.

Secondly, we know that the quality of the relationship between citizen and service provider can be a key determinant in the quality of the outcome of the service: evidence from fields as diverse as education, employment services and healthcare all suggest this (Bell and Smerdon, 2011: 44-52).

Finally, we are slowly coming to understand what writers such as Peter Senge have been arguing for over 20 years; the complexity of organisations like those delivering local public services and the rapidity of change that they face mean that only those that are flexible and adaptive will excel. The process of constant learning needed to enable success itself requires a fundamental shift of attitude towards the nature of work – a shift of attitude that takes seriously the need to create meaning for staff within our organisations such that they carry with them the motivation, courage and adaptability needed to face the challenges of their daily tasks:

'When you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative. It becomes quite clear that, for

many, their experiences as part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit' (Senge, 1990: 13).

In this context ensuring genuine relationships – relationships that carry with them more than a transactional or instrumental benefit – are not a soft option 'nice to have' but a hardnosed prerequisite for effectiveness.

In this chapter I shall explore the current debate over the 'relational state' and the extent to which it is genuinely possible for public services (as agents of the state) to develop relationships with the people they serve.

I then ask what we mean by a relationship in this context and explore the kinds of relational services and relational service models that we might seek to develop. I outline briefly some of the core relational skills required and indicate how these can be learnt and taught.

I close by identifying the positive potential for a genuinely relational approach to our work within and across local public services and conclude by arguing that the challenge facing us requires nothing less than a relational revolution.

Are relational local public services possible?

The 'relational state'
The need for a more relational approach to public services has become the subject of serious policy debate moving out of the realms of think tanks to practical service models. This trend is another outcome of the growing recognition of the limitations of the New Public Management as an adequate or even desirable approach to the current set of challenges facing citizens that forms much of the backdrop to this book.

The idea of the 'relational state' is most closely associated with Geoff Mulgan who has been making the case for a more relational approach to the design of public services for a number of years. Mulgan argues that the nature of governance in Britain has passed through three stages: in the first government stands *over* the people as enforcer or protector; in the second government provides services *for* the people who remain largely passive; and in the third, where we find ourselves now, government increasingly acts *with* the people to achieve common goals (Mulgan, 2010: 20). Our current challenge is that we are largely still using service delivery tools and mindsets developed for a government that seeks to do things for rather than with the people.

There are a number of reasons why we might seek a more relational state. The first has to do with trust. Governments wish to be trusted, not only for narrow political reasons, but also because high levels of trust enable certain outcomes to be achieved. One particularly contemporary driver is that Governments (central or local) that are trusted are more likely to be able to engage the public in discussion over radical changes to service provision. As local government knows only too well, increasing efficiency and success in external inspections, defining characteristics of the New Public Management approach to public services, does not in and of itself lead to higher levels of trust from the public (LGA, 2008).

The experience of recent decades has shown that, 'Effective and efficient delivery turned out not to deliver trust, and many governments observed that, although their own indicators of performance were continuing to improve, indicators of public satisfaction or confidence declined' (Mulgan, 2012: 22).

Recently local government has shown a certain degree of *schadenfreude* at the relative levels of trust expressed by the public in local relative to central Government (Walker, 2013). During 2013 Ipsos/MORI has been reporting that the public overwhelmingly express greater trust in local government to make decisions about how services are provided in their local area than in the Coalition Government: by 79% to 11% in the latest survey (Ipso/MORI, 2013). But heartening as this may be, being more trusted than a Coalition Government imposing the most severe public service cuts in living memory, facing periodic scandals and internal divisions hardly provides a sound basis for complacency. In any case, the 'trust' referred to in an opinion poll is not the same as the more intimate interdependence that results from a genuine relationship.

For this to develop, what is required is an ongoing engagement with citizens and communities which creates a virtuous circle; relationships develop which build trust which themselves reinforce the relationships necessary to enable the radical shifts of thinking which create the conditions needed for co-production and behaviour change. The focus, therefore, becomes *developing relationships* rather than *building trust*.

A second reason why we might wish to pursue a more relational state is simply that evidence increasingly shows that relationships are themselves vital for personal and collective wellbeing and underpin successful outcomes for citizens and communities. One recent evidence-based study included a recommendation to, 'Connect with the people around you. With family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these as the cornerstones of your life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day' (Aked et al, 2012). If this is the case, enabling meaningful relationships to develop within communities becomes a legitimate and pressing concern of all those with a role in supporting individuals and communities to thrive.

Challenges to the 'relational state'
Yet, it is possible to agree about the importance and value of relationships for personal and collective wellbeing but to reject the idea that the state – or its expression through local public services – is well-placed to enable them to develop. This is the argument made by Marc Stears in direct opposition to Geoff Mulgan. In particular Stears argues that the state (by which he means the 'complex of agencies' that collectively provide governance) are inherently agents of standardisation seeking uniformity which stands in direct opposition to the necessarily messy and chaotic world of genuine relationships. Perhaps even more fundamental is Stears' objection that, beyond seeking uniformity, the state is able to use coercion to enforce it. This inherent imbalance in power makes the notion of a genuine relationship between the state and its citizens unrealistic (Sears, 2012).

When expressed in the language of everyday public services the significance of this theoretical objection becomes apparent; where is the 'relational state' in the interaction between a Housing Officer and someone facing the imposition of the bedroom tax?; or between an Employment Advisor and someone facing the removal of benefits if they refuse a job or training offer which they don't want? Of course one could add a list of counter examples where the state's relational engagement is more apparent. The many examples of compassionate care delivered throughout the health and social care system come readily to mind. But what about the more difficult cases that lie somewhere between these two extremes - attempts at local engagement in decision-making about services, the local environment or planning for example? There is a clear relational intent in this engagement but does the local authorities' power of decision fundamentally undermine its ability to develop the kinds of relationships that build trust? And what about a now common situation where services are being reduced or removed? How can trust thrive under these circumstances?

What do we mean by a relationship?

In the case of relational public services, the kinds of relationships that we are seeking have a number of clear attributes. Firstly, they build trust. Secondly, they are supportive of the development of personal wellbeing. Thirdly, they build collective resilience by being open i.e. each new relationship tends to lead to the development of others and so helps to develop social capital.

These kinds of relationships may be present within local public services but they are more commonly found within civic associations and social movements. If we are seeking more relational engagement with citizens and communities we could have much to learn from this parallel part of the public realm.

As social movements emerge, they tend to rely on the voluntary commitments that individuals make to one another to enable ongoing shared action. These voluntary commitments in turn depend on a willingness for individuals to exchange resources and interests (see Figure 1). On its own, however, this exchange does not create a relationship. As Marshall Ganz, the man who devised the community organising effort for the 2008 Obama campaign, puts it 'commitment to a shared future and the consequences of a shared past transform an exchange into a relationship' (Ganz, 2010: 514).

Relationships in social movements therefore have three distinct characteristics: an exchange of interests and resources creating a degree of reciprocity; shared voluntary commitments to some kind of action; and repetition of these exchanges and commitments over time. Under these circumstances relationships grow and in the process each party can begin to discover new interests and new resources in the other. As repeated commitments are made and met, trust grows and eventually the relationship itself becomes both an interest and a resource; social capital has been developed. Unlike the many of the interactions we usual think of a 'relationships', shared values are integral to relationships in social movements (Ganz, 2000).

Interests

Interests

Resources

Commitment

Resources

New Resources

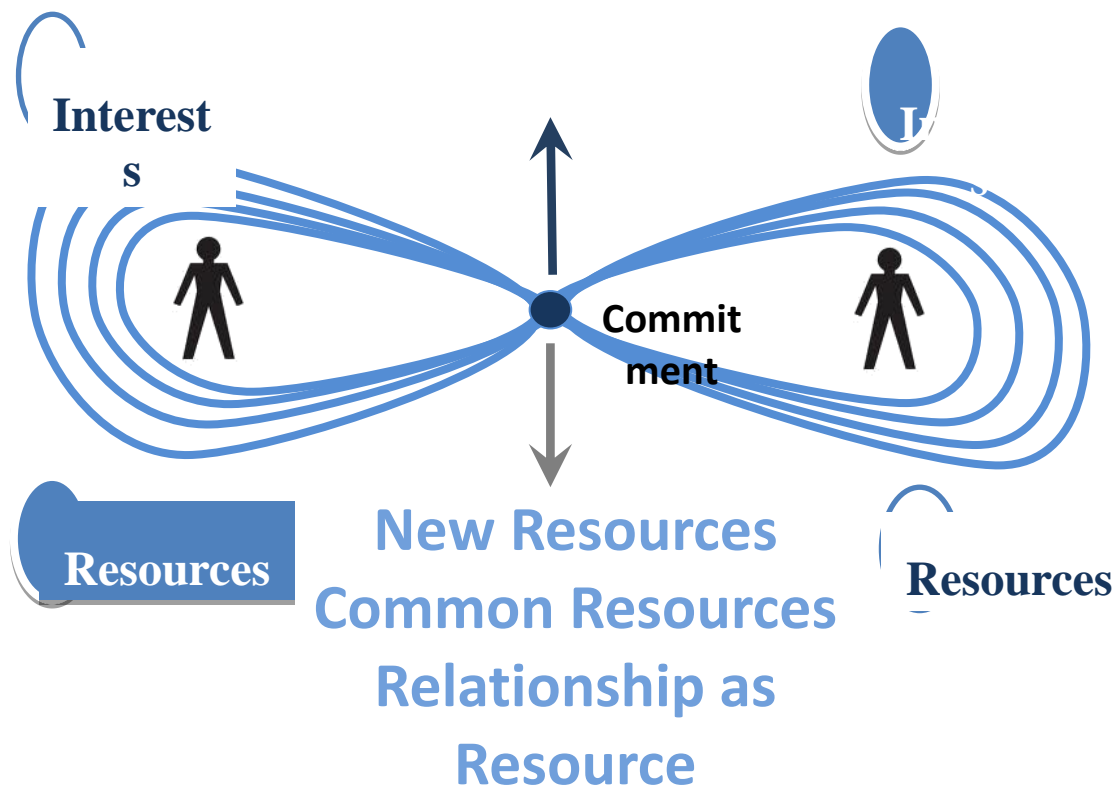**Common Resources**

Relationship as Resource

Figure 1. The nature of relationships in social movements

Source: adapted from Ganz, 2010: 513

If we aspire to local public services that build trust, support personal wellbeing and build collective resilience, we need to learn how to recast so them so that they encourage relationships based on a repeated cycle of reciprocity and commitment. The challenge this model of relationship poses to local public services should not be underestimated. Bringing mutual commitments and reciprocity into the heart of local public services suggests a substantial recasting of the role of the public servant (whether professional, managerial or political) and the form those public services take.

What could this look like in practice? Approaches to local public services that are based on these kinds of relationships are still small in scale but are proliferating fast. The examples below illustrate the core features of genuinely relational local public services, some of the practical challenges involved in developing them and how they might be addressed.

Relational services and service models

Relational social care: from transaction to exchange

An early exemplar in the UK for relational support for older people is Circle. This is not so much an approach to delivering care for older people in their own homes as an attempt to replace this traditional model altogether. Based on the conviction that older people have resources to contribute as well as needs to be met, Circle enables networks of individuals over 50 to connect with others in their community and to 'do the stuff they want to do in ways that they want to do it' (http://www.circlecentral.com/). Circle members can request practical support, contact others, and host or attend events with other members enabled by local Helpers and volunteers (paid and unpaid). Reciprocity is at the heart of the Circle model with an understanding that all those who participate in a Circle both give and receive. Circles therefore provide a framework within which reciprocity and commitment are enabled and both personal and individual resilience can flourish: 'the secret sauce is relationships' (Cottam, 2012: 51). For those with responsibility for service design, the Circle approach is a striking example of how different local public services can look when the starting point is relational rather than outcome or output driven.

Shared Lives is another equally relational approach to providing care. Shared Lives enables an adult requiring either support, accommodation or both to move in with a registered carer and so opens up the opportunity for them to become a meaningful part of each other's lives. Based on a genuine relationship, Shared Lives injects reciprocity into the traditional model of giving and receiving care allowing for the possibility that the 'carer' might also receive something of value (Fox, 2013).

While Circles are spreading from their original home in Southwark – they now exist not only in other parts of London but also in Suffolk, Nottingham and Rochdale – and the Shared Lives approach is growing, neither is by any means common and there remains a pressing need to enable the vast majority of existing care to become more relational. How might this be achieved in the short-term?

Simple changes could have significant impacts. An expectation of mutual commitment could be built into the heart of each interaction. At a basic level my carer might commit personally to treat me with dignity and to respond as I express my needs. I might commit to take one positive action each day that will help to improve my physical or mental wellbeing. Beyond this commitments could be as varied as it is possible to imagine and unique to each relationship: to share stories that make us hopeful; to discover an area of shared interest to chat about; to share a meal every so often.

If these 'commitments' sound strange, naive or impractical it is only an indication of how distanced we have allowed social care to become from the intimate human relationship that should be at its heart. Relationships of this kind do not necessarily require a single dedicated carer, but they do require a relatively stable team of carers willing to enter into shared and individual commitments. They do not necessarily require that each 'episode of care' has an open-ended amount of time allocated to it, but they do require that each engagement (as it might more properly be understood) allows time for an exchange rather than a transaction.

Relational political leadership: developing relationships across the system

The search has been on for the 'new role for local councillors' since at least the introduction of the Leader and Cabinet model – perhaps longer. Think tanks, Commissions, improvement bodies and others have all contributed to the attempt to entice, cajole and exhort elected members to take on a 'new' role within their communities (e.g. CLG, 2007; James and Cox, 2007; IDeA, 2010). Each of these has had its own particular point of emphasis but common themes have included learning to enable rather then direct activity in a local area, engaging with participatory as well as representative forms of democracy and being an advocate for their place within the Council rather than vice versa. This has been described as the councillor as 'civic entrepreneur' (Commission on the Future of Local Government, 2012) and there is evidence from all over the country of progress in this direction (e.g. LGA, 2011; LGA 2012; Francis, 2012). Yet standing back from this activity it is clear that much still remains unchanged.

One reason may be that the relational element to this 'new' role is often implicit with an assumption that councillors will naturally form the relationships needed to be successful. In fact, as we have seen, the kinds of relationships that are required to underpin and enable genuinely relational local public services require a high degree of intentionality. They are by no means straightforward to develop and, in the context of elected councillors, present specific challenges.

This is the context in which Reading Borough Council has begun to experiment with an intentionally relational approach to neighbourhood working led by local politicians (LGA, 2013). Based around a 'Call to Action' in two wards, the work has involved drawing together local councillors, officers and residents to address an urgent challenge in each location. Unlike many approaches to community engagement, this approach began with the intentional formation of relationships and commitments. Councillors, officers and residents went through a structured process that not only allowed them to get to know one another better but which more importantly gave them the skills and permission to identify shared values and motivations. From this, reciprocal commitments to take shared action were sought and made.

Based on a community organising model, this approach is seeking to mobilise people from across the local community, the council and other partners to participate in shared action. That mobilisation is achieved by a continual process of 'recruitment' to the Call to Action with each new 'recruit' engaged via the intentional development of a relationship. In this way the Call to Action is not only an end it itself (specific neighbourhood improvements will have been achieved) but also to create a new web of relationships that cut across the usual boundaries of council/community, officer/politician, service user/service provider and so provide new relational resources. Over time this can build not only greater community resilience but greater resilience across the whole system of local public services.

One of the most powerful effects of this approach is to create a practical way of enabling councillors to take action in their 'new' role while at the same time developing the new kinds of relationships needed to sustain it; the 'new' role for councillors implies also 'new'

role for officers, citizens, communities and many others including service professionals and partners.

The approach taken in Reading is far from straightforward – frustration at being asked to spend time building relationships rather than moving quickly to action was common for example. Nevertheless, it signals a direction for a more relational form of local political leadership that through its fostering of social capital - not just within communities but across the whole system of local public services - has the potential to make a huge contribution to enabling co-production and community resilience. As one Reading councillor said, 'I would like to think that the community would feel much more positive that they can effect change in their local area without always hoping that someone in the council is going to do something – that good things can happen, and that it might not necessarily cost lots of money. That could be as simple as older people needing help with shopping on an estate and neighbours getting a rota together - simple things like that' (LGA, 2013).

From clients to citizens: developing relational institutions
One feature of many relational approaches to local public services is that they seek to develop new citizen-based institutions. Each new Circle, for example, is a local member-based organisation run democratically by and for its members; it describes itself as a 'member-based service' (http://www.circlecentral.com/). This is not simply a question of designing the most effective 'delivery model' but a more fundamental reworking of the idea of what it is to receive a service.

In his famous jeremiad against services, John McKnight stated baldly that 'services are bad for people' and that 'you are either a citizen or a client'. Central to his argument was the claim that services 'harness people's power to execute the plan of a central authority' and are therefore necessarily disempowering (McKnight, 1991: 41). In different terms he was making the same claim as Marc Stears – that the relational state, made real through local public services, is incapable of achieving the desired outcomes. What is needed is not a relational state, but rather a state that enables relationships (Stears, 2012). New relational institutions, like Circle, offer a model for what might be possible.

It is not necessary to agree that 'services are bad for you' or even that the relational state is an impossibility to see the value in 'services' which come from the people whom they benefit. One role for relational local public services, therefore, is to facilitate and enable the development of new relational institutions.

One of the most ambitious attempts to create citizen-based services around relational institutions is the work of Healthy Columbia in South Carolina, USA. This work was seeded by ReThink Health – an initiative of the Fannie E. Rippel Foundation that applies a community organising model to enable systems change within the US healthcare system (http://rippelfoundation.org/rethink-health/). This initiative is based in a highly deprived, largely African-American community with the highest rate of diabetes-related amputations in the USA. ReThink Health provided the initial support and training to enable this community to mobilise, build relationships and to identify and agenda for action. This has led to a Community Covenant, supported by community institutions, through which individuals both commit to actions that will help them to manage their health more

effectively and access the support they need to do so. Critically, the community mobilisation and institution building created the conditions in which other parts of the health economy, which in this context includes insurance companies and private healthcare providers, in which they made reciprocal commitments (Butcher, 2012; Foster, 2012).

Nearer to home, Lambeth Council has taken a leading role in enabling the formation of the Young Lambeth Co-operative which has taken responsibility for a range of services for young people previously provided by the Council. These include youth clubs, adventure playgrounds and stay and play clubs. The new institution is membership-based including young people aged 11-19 who take a leading role in decision-making (http://www.younglambeth.org/; Ford, 2013).Through participation in this new institution, new relationships will form and existing relationships will deepen. Not only that but young people are themselves 'providing' the services that they use: in McKnight's terms they become citizens rather than clients.

Both Healthy Columbia and the Young Lambeth Co-operative took months of dedicated work to get off the ground and both faced major obstacles and set backs. In both cases agencies which might previously have been seen as service providers – Rethink Health and Lambeth Council – played a pivotal role in agitating for and enabling change. Difficult and fraught with contradiction as it is, these examples demonstrate the key role that local public services could play in enabling the creation of new relational institutions. If they are to do so successfully, however, they will need to be able to learn, use and pass on relational skills and practices.

Relational skills and practices
Developing relational public services relies on 'the professional development of instincts that we all possess as human beings – to nurture, teach, protect, care' (Wilson, 2012: 56). To this list we must also add the skill of developing relationships based on shared values. It is a striking paradox that people who readily form meaningful relationships in their private lives find it much harder to do so in their public service. It is possible to spend a working lifetime alongside colleagues whose experiences, choices, motivations and sources of perseverance and hope remain completely unknown to us. This reticence is only greater when it comes to working with 'service users' or 'clients'.

This is not to make the case for unrestrained emotional outpourings. However, if shared values are at the heart of genuine relationships, we do need to understand better how we can identify them for ourselves and others. Here again local public services have much to learn from the world of social movements and community organising and in particular, the values-based organising associated with the work of Marshall Ganz (Ganz, 2010).

Values-based conversations: the relational one-to-one
Most community organising traditions teach the skill of a 'one-to-one' i.e. a highly structured conversation in which shared interests and resources can be identified, commitments made and new people recruited. As part of the one-to-one there is an intentional exploration of shared values. Each partner engages with genuine curiosity asking questions designed to enable their partner to identify their own values and to articulate their sources of motivation. This is understood to be purposeful activity as, with repetition, it is one of the

primary ways in which relationships are deepened (Ganz, 2010; 514-515). One-to-ones of exactly this kind are at the centre of Reading Borough Councils Calls to Action and the institution building of Healthy Columbia.

Experiences suggests that unless skills like the relational one-to-one are actively built into professional, political and managerial practice the relational revolution that is required will not be possible.

Learn to tell stories: the power of narrative
Narrative is perhaps slightly more familiar territory. Certainly the idea of 'creating a narrative' for others has been adopted by the public sector from the political domain. Less familiar, though, is the idea of learning to tell our own story and enabling others to tell theirs.

The skill of narrative is important for relational local public services because stories enable the communication of values not as abstract concepts ('I value equality', 'I value care') but as real experiences that can be lived and felt. If rationality, logic and strategy explain *how* we can combine our resources to radically improve the quality of services, narrative explains *why* it matters to us in the first place (Bruner, 1986: 11-25). Stories provide sources of motivation quite different from performance incentives or market-based choice mechanisms because they enable the storyteller to express their values in ways that connect emotionally with their audience. It is through this emotional connection that shared values are experienced and felt rather than rationally understood (Ganz, 2011).

The intentional development of storytelling capacity is not entirely new to the public sector. Many managers and service professionals will have worked with story in one way or another and the NHS has now integrated Marshall Ganz's framework for 'public narrative' into its change model (NHS Change Model, 2013). However, the collective narrative capacity across the public sector remains low and there is no expectation that narrative skills – the ability to communicate values through stories and to coach others to do the same - should be core competencies. Developing this capacity is one of the most immediate actions that could be taken to develop greater relational capacity across local public services.

Working in relational local public services
This chapter has focused largely on the benefits of more relational local public services from the perspective of citizens and communities. But the benefits for those working across local public services could be just as great. For many there will be a straightforward motivational benefit in responding to the current challenges facing the public sector as a relational opportunity rather than a seemingly endless round of budget and service cuts. For others there will be the enhanced satisfaction that comes from working through a network of relationships that carry greater significance and meaning. If management scientists are correct, there is good reason to suppose that this in itself could enhance performance: 'the science shows that the secret to high performance...[is] our deep seated desire to direct our own lives, to extend and expand our abilities and to live a life of purpose' (Pink, 2009).

This more relational approach to work was reflected in the extraordinary success of NHS Change Day 2013 (McCrae, 2013). This service and quality improvement campaign used online social media combined with offline relational skills to seek and secure pledges from staff right across the NHS to take a specific action to improve their part of the NHS. The goal of the campaign was to secure 65,000 pledges – 1000 for each year of the NHS. In the event they secured 189,000. NHS Change Day was born out of a Twitter discussion between frontline staff and, while given considerable support from leading figures within the NHS (Bevan, 2012), it remained a grassroots campaign run on a shoestring. More evaluation is required before the full impact of Change Day is understood, but it provides a stunning example of what can happen when the shared values and motivations of public service employees are engaged and enabled.

More relational local public services mean more relational local public servants. New skills need to be learned and used and in the process new norms and cultures allowed to develop. For some this will seem a strange and challenging journey, but it holds out the prospect of a working life more infused with meaning and connection (Senge, 1990).

A social movement approach to public services?
The relational approaches to local public services explored here can stand or fall on their own merits and need not be adopted wholesale. Indeed the application of any one of them would, in many contexts, be revolutionary. What is signaled here is a direction of travel; a relational lens through which to examine the current challenges facing local public services, some indicative approaches and a set of skills and practices that can enable this change to take place. An uneasy place, perhaps, between Geoff Mulgan's 'relational state' and Marc Sears' 'state that supports relationships' but one that many practitioners will recognise.

However, the argument made here for a relational revolution in local public services has drawn heavily on the world of social movements and community organising for insight and inspiration. This suggests that beyond a relational revolution in local public services might lie something entirely new. The new institutional forms that are emerging, some of which have been touched on here, give a glimpse of what this could look like but this is terrain that remains largely to be mapped. Whatever lies in this territory will need to be built by those on the ground. Next steps can be hard to define, but any action taken to develop more relational local public services is surely headed in the right direction.

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