

## Summary: Roundtable on Relational Reform with Mark Smith

23 May 2025

The Centre for Relational Care (CRC) and the Possibility Partnership convened a roundtable with visiting UK public service reformer Mark Smith, bringing together senior government and policy leaders. The focus was on reimagining child protection, out-of-home care, and broader human services through a relational lens - moving away from transactional models of service delivery and toward approaches grounded in human connection, understanding, and trust.

The key areas from Mark's presentation are summarised below:

### 1. Making the case for change

Mark opened by describing the long-standing efforts in the North East of England to rethink public service systems through the lens of complexity and relationships. He shared insights from an ambitious, four-year program designed to support people experiencing multiple and complex needs - including homelessness, addiction, mental ill-health, poverty, family breakdown, and contact with the criminal justice system.

Central to this is the story of *Brian*, a former train driver who spiralled into crisis after a traumatic event. Over a nine year time period, it was found that Brian had interacted with public services nearly 3,500 times, including 800 formal assessments and contact with more than 5,000 public servants across emergency departments, housing services, police, mental health, probation, and more. The cost of his service usage was around £2 million - and yet, his life continued to deteriorate.

This case, and others like it, illustrated that the issue is not a lack of services or professional care; all services Brian encountered had been inspected as "good" or "excellent." The problem was systemic design failure - one that fragments responsibility, defaults to compliance, and makes it difficult to respond to real human needs in a coordinated, relational way.

### 2. Designing for complexity: Why current approaches fail

Public service systems have been built around linear, transactional models - with rigid assessments, eligibility criteria, and service silos that make navigation difficult and responsiveness rare. Mark describes this as *pixelation* - where people's lives are broken into fragments by disconnected specialisms, each seeing a different part of the picture, but few holding the whole story.

This fragmentation leads to cycles of referrals, repeat assessments, missed opportunities, and deep inefficiencies - both human and financial. It also fosters a culture where professionals are under pressure to act within tightly prescribed rules, discouraging the relational judgement that real support often requires. Performance indicators overwhelmingly measure industry (how busy are you?) rather than impact (what difference are you making?). This creates what the Mark calls a "defensible position" mentality that locks organisations into survival mode rather than service mode.

### **3. Introducing the Liberated Method**

Mark shared the development of the *Liberated Method* - an approach grounded in values, trust, and understanding rather than standardised process. The method is structured around:

- A simple but profound shift from assessment to understanding, asking “what matters to you” rather than “what’s the matter with you.”
- Low caseloads and continuity of relationship: Workers have the time and trust to walk alongside individuals.
- Specialist expertise on pull, not referral: Where needed, specialists are brought in by invitation, not by bureaucratic handoff.
- Learning and iteration: Teams journal, debrief, and regularly reflect on what works and what doesn’t.

In Brian’s case, this approach led to a profound turnaround. Within two years, the cost to the system is estimated to have dropped to under £5,000 annually. He gained housing, purpose, stability - and most importantly, agency. The key wasn’t doing more; it was doing differently.

The work revealed that approximately 50% of effective interventions were “system agnostic” - things that could be implemented immediately without systemic change. These included the “gloriously ordinary” activities like sitting with someone during a medical appointment, helping furnish a flat, sorting benefits, or registering someone to vote.

### **4. Embedding practice, shifting leadership**

To support this kind of practice, culture and structure must shift together. Professionals need space and trust to work relationally, but they also need permission and support from system leaders to do so.

Insights for embedding practice include:

- Most systems are purely rule-based, but working with complex human needs requires principles as well – these provide guardrails without constraining practice and allow for the contextual, idiosyncratic responses that actually help people thrive.
- Look at the underlying human aspects - loneliness, isolation, confidence, and connection – issues that are invisible to specialist assessments but obvious to human relationships.
- Invest in “sense-making capabilities” - the ability to learn, iterate, and proliferate effective approaches. Reform requires treating sense-making as equally important to service delivery, not as an optional add-on.
- The work requires “system diplomats” - senior leaders with time to work across organisational boundaries rather than managing large budgets and headcounts. Current leadership structures inadvertently prevent this crucial systems work.
- Investing in learning infrastructure opens up more ability to evaluate, adapt, and scale. Mark emphasised that relational reform is as much about iteration and sense-making as it is about delivery. Partnerships with academic institutions and frontline workers have enabled rigorous developmental evaluation of the Liberated Method, allowing insights to be fed back into practice in real time.

## 5. Insights for System Change

**Systems resistance is predictable:** When creating liberated approaches, systems fight back in systematic ways. Understanding these countermeasures reveals what needs changing to make relational practice normal.

**Relationality must be systemic:** It's not enough for caseworkers to work relationally with citizens - all parts of the system must work relationally with each other.

**Commissioning for Learning vs. Productivity:** Traditional commissioning approaches create problematic incentives such as busy work and assessments (outputs without meaningful change) and overlooking wider determinants (outcomes beyond the service's control). Mark explained how commissioning for learning proved more effective, with data showing that focusing on learning is more productive than focusing on productivity because it spots and eliminates waste early.

**Invest in 'relational space':** Moving from transactional commissioning to investment in relational thinking enables the flexibility needed for complex human problems.

## 6. Moving forward: The role of CRC and partners

While the current system design often gets in the way, roundtable participants recognised that change is possible, and is already happening in parts of the sector. Examples emerged of teams within government and service organisations already using relational approaches, albeit under the radar or against structural constraints.

Mark reminded us that reform doesn't have to wait for perfection. It can begin by creating space for small teams to work relationally, capturing the learning, and scaling through careful iteration. He also noted that the goal is not simply to replicate a model, but to proliferate a mindset and create flexible, adaptive environments where relational practice can thrive - "start somewhere and go everywhere."

There is clear momentum in NSW. Government is signalling its commitment to relational reform in child protection and out-of-home care. The CRC is building the connective tissue needed to progress reform through linking practice to policy, spotlighting what works, amplifying the wisdom of lived experience, supporting the people who are already doing the relational work and collaborating with groups like the Possibility Partnership with the shared purpose of relational systems change.