

The demand side of public services

What Boxer's asymmetric demand work adds to relational and place-based reform

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Abstract

Public services are organised mainly around what institutions supply: services, budgets, professions, contracts, and programmes. Citizens encounter the same system through a life. The difference matters most when demand is uncertain, connected across boundaries, or only becomes clear through engagement. This paper brings Philip Boxer's work on asymmetric demand into conversation with current relational public-service reform. We use three questions to separate how work produces an effect, how knowledge and capability are organised, and how both are held in relation to the person or community being served. We then distinguish four forms of response, from reliable standard provision to an open form of response in which the citizen's situation can alter the response and sometimes the task itself. The practical consequences are direct: hidden integration work is often displaced onto citizens and frontline staff; successful relational practice remains fragile when learning cannot cross a strategy ceiling; and devolution changes little if it moves authority without creating capability. The paper ends with a practical diagnostic and a deliberately modest claim. This is not an argument for making every service relational. It is a way of asking what form of response a demand requires, what the system can actually sustain, and what must change when the two do not match.

Keywords: asymmetric demand; relational public services; public service design; indirect value; strategy ceiling; place-based working; requisite agility; organisational learning

1. The mismatch between services and lives

Public services usually describe themselves through their own supply. They have pathways, eligibility rules, professions, contracts, teams, targets and budgets. Citizens encounter something else: a life in which housing, health, money, work, family, safety and belonging interact.

That difference is not solved by coordination alone. A council, trust, or department can be well-controlled on its own terms while leaving the citizen to carry delay, repetition, risk, and the work of joining the system together. An integrated pathway can still be a coordinated version of the wrong offer. A good frontline worker can still be trapped inside a bad boundary.

Boxer's work starts here. The question is not simply how to improve an existing service, but how organised capability can remain answerable to demand-in-context. What matters in a particular situation may depend on timing, history, relationships, informal support, risk, and purposes that no single organisation owns. The relevant unit is therefore not always the transaction, service, or organisation. It may be the combination of capabilities required to produce a valued effect in that situation (Boxer and Cohen, 1998; Boxer, 2012).

This is close to the practical starting point of demand analysis and relational public services: begin with what people are trying to do, not with the service catalogue. Internal measures of demand are already edited by forms, thresholds, channels, professional categories and previous contact. If we start with those categories, we can improve the machinery while losing the signal.

None of this makes standardized, transactional provision a mistake. Much public-service demand is predictable. Good transactions should be quick, clear, and dependable. The problem begins when a system built for what is predictable treats all variation as noise, exception, or non-compliance – or is simply blind to the difference. The more singular the situation, the more likely the citizen is to become the integration mechanism for the institutions meant to help.

2. Three questions about the same situation

A useful route into the work is through three 'cuts'. We use the technical term only because it marks a real distinction. They are three questions to ask of the same situation; none can substitute for the others.

Question	What it asks	Characteristic mistake
1. How does the work work?	What capabilities, resources, and practices produce an effect? Where does work wait, repeat or fail?	Optimising activity that does not resolve the citizen's purpose.
2. How is knowledge and capability organised?	Who knows what? How are capability, authority, data, budgets, and roles combined?	Knowing what would help but lacking the means, permission or organisation to do it.
3. How are both held in relation to an other?	What is the person, family or community trying to achieve? Can their situation alter the response or the task?	Translating the person back into the categories the institution already supplies.

The first question is familiar to most improvement methods. Lean, process redesign, professional improvement, digital work, and capacity analysis can all make work more reliable. They are necessary. As usually applied, they cannot decide, on their own, whether the task is the right one.

The second question is partly about knowledge and partly about organisation. A worker may understand the whole situation but have authority over only one fragment. A neighbourhood team may have discretion but no access to specialist capability. A partnership board may agree an outcome while each organisation remains governed by its own budget, regulator, and measures. The knowledge needed to act is often distributed; the authority to combine it is usually not.

The third question stops the first two becoming self-referential. The citizen is not simply a user of a predefined offer – an 'other'. The nature of their situation may reveal a missing response, a harmful rule, a poor boundary, or a purpose the organisation has forgotten that renders the way that other understands his or her situation different to that assumed by the service-provider. Such 'otherness' does not mean that every expressed wish can be met. Public services still hold law, evidence, rights, competing claims and finite resources. It means only that no supply-side description can be assumed to contain in advance everything that matters from the point of view of wanting to be effective in the life of that other.

This is what makes demand asymmetric. Supply begins with an offer and a repertoire of capabilities. Demand begins in a life. The two sides do not possess the same knowledge, authority or freedom, and they are not mirror images.

3. Four forms of response

The three questions help diagnose a situation. A second distinction asks what form of response the system can sustain. Boxer's framework names four 'forms of dominance'. The terms matter less than the progression they describe. We give both below so readers can move between the plain-English account and the source literature.

Form	Plain-English response	What it can do – and where it stops
r-type	Reliable standard response	Handles a known, recurrent task well. The task itself stays fixed.
c-type	Classified variation	Selects or customises from recognised categories. Variation is handled, but only if it remains classifiable.
K-closed	Expert composition within a fixed frame (standard protocol)	Combines several capabilities around a case or problem. It can coordinate complexity, but the overall purpose and organising assumptions remain fixed.

Form	Plain-English response	What it can do – and where it stops
K-open	Open relational response (based on situational understanding)	Engages with demand that is only understood through the situation. The response, and where necessary the organising frame, can be re-formed around what is learned.

These forms are capability-ordered, not morally ranked. An organisation able to hold open, unclassifiable demand should also be able to make a simple transaction simple. The reverse does not follow. A scripted service cannot become open merely by telling staff to ‘be relational’. It needs different supervision, authority, information, resource, and ways of carrying risk.

This also avoids the common relational-versus-transactional trap. The question is not which side is virtuous. It is what form fits the effect wished-for on the underlying demand. A licence renewal should not require a life story. A person with unstable housing, trauma, debt, and a caring role should not be forced through four clean transactions that are called ‘integrated’ because the referrals are fast.

The same point matters for New Public Management. ‘NPM’ has become a loose label for targets, hierarchy, markets, standardization, and everything else reformers dislike. That is too imprecise to help. Some of those mechanisms pre-date NPM; some are useful in the right place, some were introduced to counter genuine pathologies in service delivery. The structural issue is whether the prevailing rules and accountabilities lock the organisation into a closed form when the demand requires an open one, and whether this can be changed without making matters worse.

4. The hidden work of making a fragmented system usable

When supply is organised in separate services but value depends on how they work together in one life, somebody has to do the joining. Often that person is the citizen, a carer, a voluntary organization, or a frontline worker. They repeat information, chase appointments, reconcile conflicting advice, bridge eligibility gaps, carry risk between decisions, and remember the history that no system holds.

Boxer calls the value created by reducing this burden ‘indirect value’ (Boxer, 2012). The phrase matters because ordinary cost accounts tend to see only the activities inside each organisation. They do not see the work required to make those activities cohere in a context of use. A local service can look efficient because the citizen is doing unpaid systems integration.

This changes the financial question. A saving in one budget may be a transfer to another service, another year, or a household. A prevention investment may make sense across a place while failing every local business case. A relational team may appear expensive because it brings hidden work back inside a paid and visible boundary. None of this proves that every integrative intervention is worthwhile. It means the account should include the whole pattern of work and consequence before it claims a saving.

For public-service reform, this is one of the most useful moves in the framework. It turns ‘joined-up working’ from an aspiration into a test: where is the alignment work now, who carries it, and what would have to change for the system to carry it deliberately?

5. Why good relational work so often remains exceptional

Many public services can already produce good relational work. The question is why it so often survives as a local bubble, a pilot or a heroic exception.

The familiar sequence is simple. People close to the situation giving rise to a demand learn what is needed. They develop a workable response. The response depends on permissions, relationships and workarounds which are not part of the formal operating model. The wider organisation likes the results but does not accept what they imply for budgets, thresholds, measures, data or professional boundaries. Pressure rises, a key person leaves, or assurance tightens. The work contracts back towards the old form.

The 'strategy ceiling' names the boundary above which the assumptions shaping the work are treated as none of the practitioner's business (Boxer, 2011). Below the ceiling, staff may change how they do the job. Above it sit the things that define the job: purpose, money, role, policy, accountabilities and what counts as legitimate evidence. The 'sponsoring system' is the set of people and arrangements that hold that ceiling in place – leaders, professions, regulators, contracts, finance, political commitments and institutional narratives.

This is not a story about bad leaders resisting evidence. Existing arrangements support identities and interests, but they also carry real obligations: legality, equity, control of public money, safety, professional standards, and political accountability. The challenge is that these protections can harden into defences. The organisation becomes able to absorb short-term, limited local exceptions precisely because and to the precise extent that the exception prevents it having to change.

Boxer's work on social defences gives a sharper account of this pattern. Institutions do not only fail to learn because information is missing. They can be organised so that inconvenient knowledge is translated away, localised or made safe. A defence against anxiety becomes a defence against innovation (Boxer, 2014b; 2015; 2017a).

6. Learning has to cross the ceiling

Relational practice becomes system change only when learning from particular situations can alter the conditions which produced the problem. This is the bridge between frontline work and governance.

The movement is not automatic. A practitioner can understand a citizen very well and still leave the institution unchanged. A navigator can become a humane workaround for a fragmented system. A multi-agency team can coordinate around individual cases while the thresholds, incentives, and data architecture that create those cases remain untouched.

The test is whether the particular can travel. What did this situation reveal that the existing frame could not see or engage with? Does that evidence change a rule, a measure, an allocation of resource, a contract, a service boundary, or the range of responses available next time? Who above the strategy ceiling is responsible for answering it?

A mature learning system therefore needs more than feedback. It needs a route from evidence to authority. Local judgement without sponsor-side revision is fragile. Sponsor-side reform without good sensing at the edge is blind. The two have to be coupled.

7. Requisite agility: standardise capability, not every situation

Boxer's work with colleagues on 'requisite agility' asks whether an organisation can assemble the combination of capability a situation needs at the speed it needs it (Anderson and Boxer, 2008; Boxer et al., 2008). This is more exact than a general call to be flexible. It means establishing a 'double delegation': delegating horizontal accountability for outcomes through the life of an intervention that is balanced with delegating vertical accountability for effective use of resources.

The practical design principle is to separate reusable capability from the local act of composition. Specialist skills, legal frameworks, data services, payments, equipment, and other capabilities can be standardised and made reliable. What varies is how they are combined around a particular purpose. The more open the demand, the more important it is that the person at the boundary can draw capability in without starting a referral chain from scratch.

This is also where authority matters. Capability without authority is theatre; authority without capability is abandonment. And capability and authority that are not aligned to situation (and therefore necessarily to through-the-life-of-the-situation) is closed. Giving a neighbourhood worker permission to 'do whatever it takes' without access to money, information, specialist support and shared risk does not create relational public service. It relocates the system's failure into one person's job.

8. Place, devolution and the representation gap

The same analysis scales beyond the organisation. A place is not one big organisation, and a state is not one subject. Capability is distributed across public bodies, businesses, voluntary organisations, communities, and households. Political authority can set direction and allocate powers; it cannot manufacture the local knowledge and practical combinations needed to make a promise real.

This creates a representation gap. A policy can be democratically authorised and still be undeliverable through the existing supply-side arrangements. The usual response is another target, duty, or funding condition. Those may be necessary, but they do not by themselves alter the strategy ceilings of the organisations expected to act.

Devolution can therefore move a ceiling without lifting it. A combined authority, integrated care system, or place board can reproduce the same closed logic at a larger scale. The relevant question is whether the new arrangement can repeatedly organise capability around heterogeneous lives, while keeping rights, redistribution, specialist capability, and escalation available across larger scales.

This leads to a simple recursive rule: hold decisions at the smallest level capable of carrying the demand and its consequences. 'Smallest' matters because knowledge and relationship decay with distance. 'Capable' matters because localism without resource, authority or protection merely downloads risk.

The same point applies to Total Place. Counting public spending and creating shared governance can be useful. They become transformational only when they change how capability can be assembled around citizens' purposes and how learning from those situations changes the rules above them.

9. What the reflexive turn adds

Up to this point, the framework can be read as a demanding piece of systems and organisational design. Boxer's later work adds a reflexive claim: the people involved are not outside the system they are describing, and no description can remove the need for judgement.

In plain language, there is no final rule that can guarantee what the right response to another person will be. Law, evidence, professional standards and democratic authority remain essential. They reduce arbitrariness and protect rights, but they do not make uncertainty disappear. Some situations expose a gap between what the institution knows how to do and what the situation seems to require. People then have to decide whether to defend the existing frame, stretch it, or help change it.

Boxer's language of an 'originating lack', the 'unconscious', 'holding' and 'double delegation' gives a particular psychoanalytic account of why this gap is constitutive – necessary – rather than a temporary obstacle. Readers do not need to accept that whole account to use the public-service distinctions in this paper. What should not be lost in translation is the ethical point: relational work asks people and institutions to sustain themselves without treating their own frame as the final measure of the other. The issue appears when the question is no longer only how a viable organisation adapts, but how its tasks, boundaries, and/or supported identifications may have to be re-formed in relation to situated demands it cannot predefine.

10. A practical diagnostic

The following questions can be used in a service review, finance exercise, operating-model discussion, place partnership or policy implementation review. The point is not to score the organisation. It is to find the mismatch between demand, capability and the rules that hold the current response in place.

1. **Start with purpose.** What is the person, family or community trying to achieve, in their own terms, before we translate the situation into service categories?
2. **Follow the work.** What actually happens through-the-life of any intervention from first contact to outcome? Where are delay, repetition, escalation and restorative work created?
3. **Locate knowledge.** Who understands the whole situation in its terms? Where is that knowledge fragmented, filtered or lost?
4. **Find the alignment work.** Who is joining up appointments, decisions, information, providers and risk? Is that work visible and paid for?
5. **Name the required form.** Is the demand best met by a standard response, classified variation, expert composition, or an open response able to revise the task and frame within which it will be delivered?
6. **Test actual capability.** Can the system sustain that form now, or is the good response dependent on exceptional people and workarounds?
7. **Locate authority.** What can the person closest to demand decide and commit and in relation to what outcomes? What happens when their judgement conflicts with a target, threshold or professional boundary?
8. **Find the strategy ceiling.** Which assumptions, budgets, measures or rules cannot be questioned from where the learning is occurring?
9. **Identify the sponsoring system.** Who has the authority and responsibility to alter those conditions, and what would make them take the evidence seriously?
10. **Make learning consequential.** What will change next time because of what this case or pattern has revealed? If the answer is only an evaluation report, the system has not yet learned.
11. **Track value across boundaries.** Who pays, who benefits, who carries transition risk, and what costs have merely moved to another service, year or household?
12. **Separate politics from design.** Which issues are failures of capability or organisation, and which are legitimate political choices about rights, priorities, redistribution and risk?

11. What this account does not claim

The framework is a discipline, not a doctrine. It does not show that every service should move towards maximum openness. It does not make relational practice automatically fair. Discretion can reproduce bias; localism can reproduce inequality; citizen participation can be captured by those with more time, confidence or status. Universal provision, clear rules and lawful authority remain part of a capable state.

Nor should 'NPM', 'bureaucracy', or 'hierarchy' become shorthand for everything closed. The useful diagnosis is more specific: what form of relation is being used; what form the demand requires; where authority and capability sit; and what prevents learning from changing the frame when the mismatch persists.

The empirical base is also thinner than the conceptual architecture. The published corpus contains important cases and a long consulting history, but public-service reform needs more comparative evidence on where open forms improve outcomes, cost, equity and trust; where they do not; and what forms of governance make them sustainable.

Finally, the current mathematical formalisation should be judged on its own terms. The higher-category and octonionic work is intended to formalise a reflexive structure; it is not required as a service-design technique, and this paper does not ask practitioners to adopt it.

12. Conclusion

The demand side of public services begins with a fairly ordinary observation: institutions are organised around supply, while people live whole lives. The consequences are less ordinary. When demand does not fit the existing frame, the system has to decide where the variation will be carried. It can reorganise capability around the situation, or it can push the work of integration back onto citizens, families and frontline staff.

The three questions keep the diagnosis straight: how does the work work; how are knowledge and capability organised; and how are both held in relation to an other? The four forms then ask what response the system can actually sustain. Indirect value reveals hidden coordination work. Requisite agility asks whether capability can be composed quickly enough. The strategy ceiling shows where learning stops. The sponsoring system shows who has to change if a local exception is to become normal practice.

The result is not an argument for relational good and transactional bad. It is a harder demand on design and governance: make simple things simple; do not force open demand into closed categories; give people at the edge enough capability and authority to act; and make sure what they learn can alter the rules that made the problem in the first place.

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