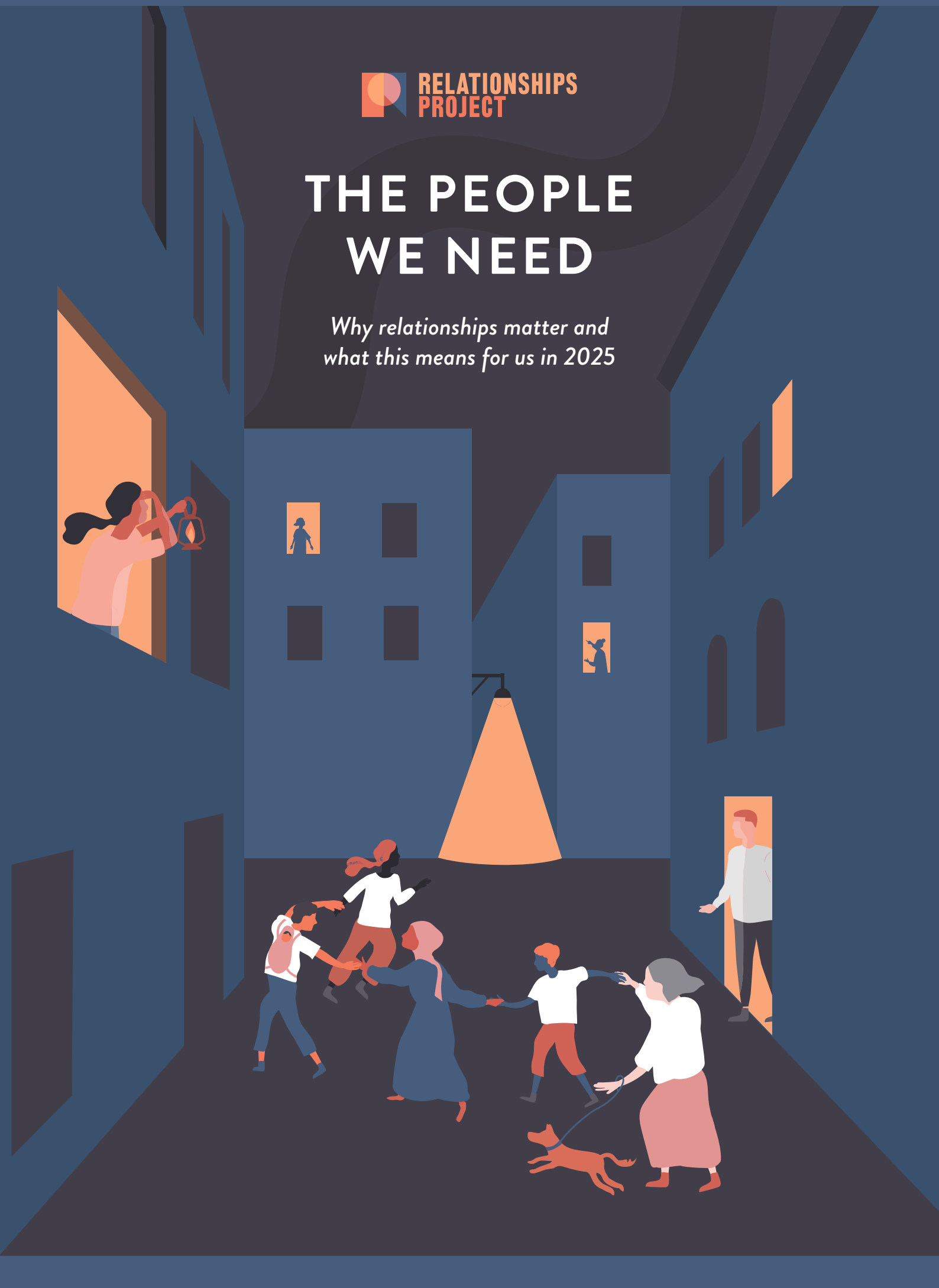
RELATIONSHIPS PROJECT

THE PEOPLE WE NEED

Why relationships matter and what this means for us in 2025



"To say that human beings require warm relationships is no touchy-feely idea. It is hard fact. We need nutrition, we need exercise, we need purpose, and we need each other."

– Robert Waldinger, Harvard professor and director of the world's largest and longest study of adult development (Waldinger & Schulz 2023).

The Relationships Project is rooted in the belief that everything works better when relationships work well. We also believe that, as a society, we have created systems, structures and protocols that get in the way. We seek to understand what works, to collate knowledge and expertise and to share the lessons. We develop tools and run training to embed relational practice wherever we live, work, care, learn and do all the other things that matter in a thriving society.

Co-Lead David Robinson established the Relationships Project in 2018. He has been a community worker for fifty years, founding and leading Community Links from his mum's kitchen table to the UK Community Enterprise of the Year award.

Amongst other innovations, he also co-founded the award-winning Children's Discovery Centre, established and led the Prime Minister's Council on Social Action, headed the National Early Action Task Force and was the first Practitioner in Residence at the LSE's Marshall Institute. He was once described by the *Guardian* as "the godfather of the community sector, equally admired on the left and right."

RELATIONSHIPS PROJECT

Note: This essay will be published at www.relationshipsproject.org/understand. References to studies can be found at the end of this document. Other sources and resources are left underlined, please see the online report for full information.

Designed by Katie Slee.

THE PEOPLE WE NEED

Why relationships matter and what this means for us in 2025

David Robinson with Rich Bell and Rosa Friend

May 2025

When I worked with young offenders many years ago, I sometimes asked about the relationships that mattered to them. Most said none at all. If a relationship was mentioned, it tended to be a thin tie to the person who got them into trouble in the first place.

I remember thinking it was less remarkable that the majority were likely to reoffend, than it was that any of them might not. The few people they had were not the people they needed.

It is the kind of thought that has occurred to me many times, most recently when reading about the woman who pushed a burning wheelie bin into police officers protecting a hotel housing asylum seekers last summer. Her picture appeared on several front pages and trended briefly on social media. She was variously described as "a fascist", "a fanatic" and "the face of hatred". The facts, as they subsequently surfaced in the courts, told a different tale.

Like many others slowly winding through the judicial system, it was a story of essential relationships that were either broken or missing. Relationships with children, parents and partners, teachers, employers, and all the agencies that were there to help but consistently fell short.

Partly as a consequence and partly as a cause, desperation took hold. Persistent ill health, debt, homelessness, recourse to alcohol or drugs, and then to blame. Blame the politicians, blame the police, and blame the new arrivals.

The narrative is tragically familiar: a through line that is otherwise chaotic and formless, repeatedly pitted with broken or inadequate relationships. If there is ever a positive change in the direction of travel, it is invariably a significant relationship or series of relationships that swings the points.

None of this should be any surprise. We know that everything works better when relationships work well: when they are purposeful, positive, challenging, kind, trusting, sustained, and empathetic.

And we know that everything is more difficult, perhaps impossible, without this support in the home, across and between the communities in which we live, and from the agencies on whom we depend.

Our relationships with one another are the foundations, the bedrock, on which all else is built – peaceful, tolerant, thriving communities, stable childhoods, effective health care, good schools, just policing, a fair economy, responsible government, flourishing businesses, the list goes on.

In each and every corner of our lives, from the occasional consultation with the doctor through to deep and maybe lifelong associations with a teacher or a neighbour, we need each other.

THE COMMUNITIES WE NEED

Neighbourhoods, towns and nations are built from the aggregation and interweaving of these individual relationships. Inevitably whole communities will struggle if the foundational bonds are, in large measure, inadequate or broken. Instability causes friction, friction breeds distrust, distrust ferments polarisation, polarisation begets dysfunction.

Researchers Mags Lesiak and Adam Coutts surveyed the field (Lesiak and Coutts 2025 p.7) and concluded:

> *"The evidence is unequivocal that there is a link between social capital and reduced criminality. At an individual level, people with networks that contain positive bonding and bridging social capital are less likely to commit crime, whilst communities with healthy social bonds enjoy lower crime rates."*

Look at economic or employment data. Look at research into social mobility and mental and physical health. Indicator after indicator points to the same simple truth.

We can't separate the wellbeing of the individual from the wellbeing of the community, or vice versa. Each relies on the other. Every aspect of our lives individually and collectively depends on the quality and strength of our relationships.

COMMON SENSE, BUT NOT COMMON PRACTICE

Putting relationships first is plainly common sense, but it isn't common practice. We could trace this disconnect back to the industrial revolution, the flight from settled rural communities into teeming industrial cities, the sustained ascent of technology and automation and economies of scale and the consequential erosion of deep, reciprocal relationships.

Alternatively, we could start in the last century with the post-war Keynesian consensus. Alongside many good things, it also created large and complex bureaucracies subordinating our relationships with one another to our relationship with a usually well-intentioned but faceless state. The settlement then wobbled through a series of economic crises.

Milton Friedman's monetarism, Margaret Thatcher's property-owning democracy, privatisation, deregulation and the market solution began to shape a new orthodoxy. Individualism and self-interest became the guiding principles for government and bled into the ways in which we think about ourselves and others, attitudes if not policies which have governed our social behaviour for the last 50 years.

Or we could talk about the rapid acceleration of change in the last decade, the impact of mobile phones, and social media, galloping automation and the growth of AI, high streets, neighbourhoods and public services hollowed out with self-service checkouts, apps for the lonely and appointments on Zoom.

Wherever we choose to begin, we have reached a society today that ignores the simple truths and consistently undervalues good relationships.

We haven't lost the instinct or the ability to care for one another – during the Covid pandemic 10 million volunteers supported people outside their own family for at least three hours a week (Jones 2020) – but we have made it increasingly difficult.

We design relationships out rather than design them into our organisations and our communities. Our systems and services are increasingly remote, bigger, less human. Compliance regimes and management controls routinely suppress rather than support common kindness and meaningful relationships.

These trends were always counterproductive, but now, more than ever, we can ill afford an approach to public policy that marginalises the evidence and is blind to human nature.

> *"Relationship building is rarely seen as a priority but without strong societies and effective relationships we cannot hope to deal with the problems that we face as a country. This is the conversation that the world needs now."*

– Rt Hon Gordon Brown
May 2025

THE GOVERNMENT WE NEED

Our public services are broken. The sector has weathered several bad patches in my working life, but this time it is deeper. There is no gaming it out, holding out for the upturn. Too much is in borderline crisis. Some of our citizens, particularly those whose needs are greatest, and some of our communities, particularly the most vulnerable, are struggling badly. Bridges within and between our communities are battered and broken. Some of this distress will surface in hatred and violence. Many will suffer in silence but suffer nonetheless.

As the chancellor has made clear many times, spending more isn't an option. Further cuts in public expenditure are in train and this trajectory won't be reversed any time soon.

Growth may generate larger revenues in the longer term but increasing public expenditure without resetting the services on which it is spent would fail to address the underlying dysfunction. Too many people currently working in the sector hit targets week after week but miss the point, as part system efficiencies fail to combine into whole system effectiveness.

Atomised and transactional "services" fail to connect with one another and, especially, to reflect the individual needs of the people they serve. Staff are running like the Red Queen just to stand still. The system isn't working.

Paul Morrison has spent 30 years in operational and policy roles across several departments, serving as Head of the Ukraine Humanitarian Task Force, Director of the multi-departmental Directorate for Resettlement, Asylum Support and Integration, Head of Counter Terrorism in the Foreign Office, and Director of Prevent in the Home Office. He says:

> *"Instead of thinking of society as something that government administers, we need to see it as something that emerges from the relationships between people, institutions, businesses, and services... And if society is those relationships, then policymaking must focus on how those relationships function — how they can be strengthened, aligned, and made to work better in the public interest. This is not a call for vague community engagement or participatory exercises that have little impact. It is about designing policy in a way that recognises that change happens through networks of people and organisations, not simply through issuing directives."*

SHIFTING OUR FOCUS

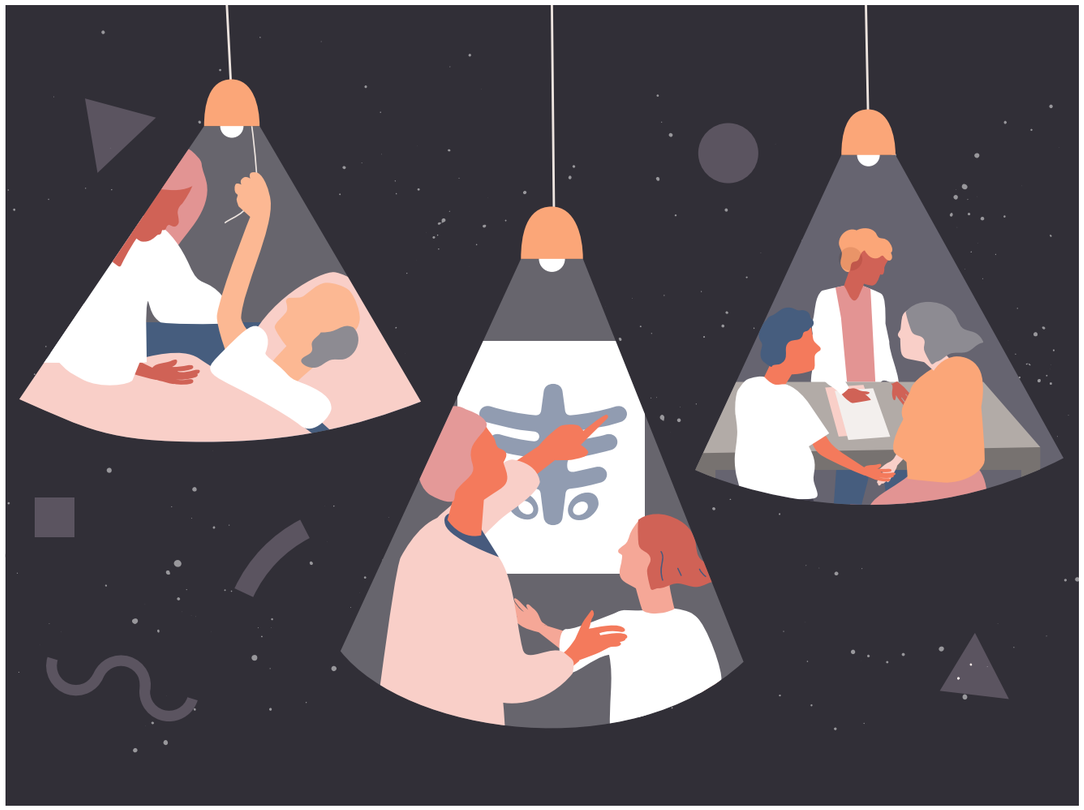
Government appears to recognise this need for reform and the nature of the statecraft required to deliver it. The five missions at the heart of the guiding *Plan for Change* call for a highly relational cross departmental, cross sector approach to policy development as well as to delivery, and many departmental plans have at least some element of this agenda, often front and centre.

The 10 Year Health Plan, for example, in envisaging a "*truly modern health service designed to meet the changing needs of our changing population*" sets out three shifts: moving care from hospitals to communities, focussing on preventing sickness, not just treating it, and making better use of technology.

Relational practice is vital to the success of the first two shifts: 8% of the UK population are chronically lonely (Reed et al. 2024). Lonely people are more likely to get sick than the rest of the population and less likely to have the support they need to recover at home.

Good relationships in the community prevent sickness and reduce hospital admissions, speed up discharge and support sustainable social care. Outside the mainstream these insights are already underpinning reform. In Frome, for instance, where work on building social networks has reduced hospital admissions by 14%, when admissions across the county increased by 29%. Healthcare costs were also reduced by 21% (Abel et al. 2018).

The third shift – better use of technology – is less obviously relevant to the relational agenda but



potentially even more important: experts estimate that public sector savings from the application of existing technology could be as high as £40 billion a year (Iosad, Railton, and Westgarth 2024). This opens the door for relational offset – taking out relationships in one part of a service and using the freed-up resources to double down on relational ways of working in another. Again, we already see this happening in localised examples.

In short, if you want to change the health service, indeed if you want to change the country, start with relationships. Look at the conditions in which one-to-one relationships thrive, look at how we do it, think about social capital, bonding, bridging and linking, and the context in which communities flourish, and consistently and systematically put relationships first.

Paul Morrison believes it can be done:

> *"Policymakers need to start by asking different questions. Instead of focusing solely on what rules should be put in place, they should ask: What relationships need to be strengthened? What barriers to collaboration need to be removed? How can we design policies that support the networks that make society function? This is a practical approach to making policy more effective in a world where complexity, interconnection, and rapid change are the defining challenges of our time. The civil service prides itself on adaptability and pragmatism. This is the next step in making policy that actually works."*

THE REVOLUTION HAS BEGUN

Governments don't lead revolutions. Revolutions lead governments. Away from Whitehall, there are now numerous exemplars supporting the argument that *everything* works better when relationships work well.

- **We know that putting relationships first in school improves behaviour and performance.** "*Through prioritising relationships… student to student and adult to student, and focusing on hope, happiness and social justice, our school has not only increased its achievements but also, over the last two years, achieved a two third reduction in fixed term exclusions*." Les Hall, Headteacher, Mounts Bay Academy in Cornwall.
- **We know one supportive, trusting relationship in our early years can transform our mental health in adulthood.** In Wales, a study showed that high levels of support from any trusted adult in childhood halves the prevalence of low mental wellbeing among adults who faced high levels of childhood adversity (Bellis et al. 2017).
- **We know that social mobility improves when we connect across divides.** Children from low-income families growing up in areas where there is more mixing among income groups are likely to earn £5,100 more a year as adults. They will also be happier and have higher levels of trust (Harris et al. 2025).
- **We know that trusting relationships boost the economy.** Increasing social trust in the UK to Nordic levels (an increase of c.30%), would generate growth of £100 billion a year (Haldane and Halpern 2025).

We know that this is how we get the good stuff done because, all over the UK, we are doing it already. But if the revolution has begun, it still has far to go. Many of the exemplars are small scale, perched perilously on the periphery of complex structures or big organisations, and led by people who are dancing around the edges of the dominant orthodoxies and established systems, sometimes regarded as visionaries, sometimes as the last speakers of an endangered language.

Proving value and building out from the trailblazers is patient work; prevailing behaviours and protocols are resilient and deep-set. Widespread change, even common sense change, is rarely easy and never inevitable, but it is most likely when three forces align:

- First, when there is evidence of need, pressing crises, and inadequate provision.
- Second, when there is popular demand, translating into political direction.
- Third, when there are practical, proven alternatives.

All three are plainly visible in every corner of the public realm in 2025.

The Relational Practice Academy

SETTING A DIFFERENT COURSE

I think back to the mother with the wheelie bin, now serving a 20-month prison sentence. I think of all the agencies, the professionals, who had crossed her path in years gone by. I think of those young people who couldn't name a single worthwhile relationship. We let them all down.

Better relationships, at home and in the community, could have set a different course many years ago. Reliable, meaningful, as-long-as-it-takes, professional relationships could have diverted the trajectory in more recent times. Empathetic individual support and determined community building can yet help towards a more settled, fulfilling future.

All this is as much about the policymakers and the politicians, the planners, managers, commissioners, funders and inspectors as it is about the kith and kin and the caring professions. We need each other and we all have a part to play.

Industrializing social change – taking a project that works in one place and plonking down a replica in another – rarely works well for something so intrinsically personal. "Rolling out" from Whitehall with directives and sanctions is similarly flawed. We need hearts and minds, not, what Alex Fox would call, hostages to a system.

Like candles lit from a single flame, it is through preserving the essence without depleting the source that we spread the light, sharing ideas, teaching and learning, igniting other fires.

Relating well, one-to-one, consistently, and systematically is a learned skill. Making the policies and creating the conditions for thriving relationships in our communities and our institutions is a learned skill.

We can all learn to do better.

LEARNING TO DO BETTER

Over the last six years, the Relationships Project has helped to redesign and support communities, organisations and services to prioritise relationships.

We have amassed a substantial body of knowledge regarding the importance of good relationships to social and economic outcomes and what works in fostering them; convened an extensive network of practitioners with deep experience of centring relationships in their work; and built a range of tools to support others to do the same.

Most people get the idea. They remember a teacher, friend or colleague who helped them through a tough patch. They talk about the doctor or the carer who took time to listen. They recall the Covid lockdowns, or a particular personal crisis, and how neighbours supported one another. These are universal experiences but transferring them into how we organise and run our shared lives is more difficult.

There is both a need and demand for learning and support but nowhere to go. Relational skills are typically given little attention at school. They are skills for life that transform how we live and work together, but most professional training doesn't cover it either. And there is no dedicated training institution anywhere in the world that fills the gap.

Our response is a new centre for applied learning in relational practice, a centre for the people we need. We are calling it the 'Relational Practice Academy'. It will build on experience, ours and others, and it will be a collaborative venture. If you would like to play a part, please contact david@relationshipsproject.org.

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Be in touch

We would love for you to be involved in our deeply collaborative work, and welcome you to get in touch.

Whether you have ideas, critiques, resources or something else to offer, we'd love to hear from you.

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"Relationship building is rarely seen as a priority but without strong societies and effective relationships we cannot hope to deal with the problems that we face as a country. This is the conversation that the world needs now."

– Rt Hon Gordon Brown

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May 2025