Relational Productivity: A New Framework for Public Value in Children's Services

Briefing 1 of 4 from the series: Joining Up Services for Children in Glasgow — Public Service Reform, Integration and Productivity in Children's Services in Scotland

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Purpose

This is the first of four briefings developed from the Productivity Institute Insights Project *Joining Up Services for Children in Glasgow.* It sets out the paper's central conceptual argument: that productivity in public services can in part be understood as a relational achievement, generated through collaboration, trust, prevention and participation, rather than merely as a function of organisational efficiency. In the specific context of children's services targeted at families with children aged 0-5, it examines how productivity in children's services can be understood beyond efficiency and outputs, exploring the role of collaboration, integration, public value, participation, prevention and social justice. It proposes a framework of "relational productivity" as a developmental tool improving joined-up services for children and families as well as something that can be used for evaluation purposes.

Introduction

The TPI-funded project *Joining Up Services for Children in Glasgow: Exploring New Models of Collaboration and Integration* is examining how productivity is understood and experienced in public services. The project is a collaborative partnership between the University of Glasgow, Glasgow City Council, Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership, and Children's services. Using a participatory research approach in Glasgow's South-Central area, the project works closely with practitioners, managers, community organisations and families to explore how services can collaborate more effectively to support children and young people.

The research raises important questions about how productivity is defined in children's services. For several decades, productivity has largely been understood through the lens of economic growth and efficiency, with success typically measured through outputs, cost reduction and performance indicators. While these measures remain important, particularly in market-based settings, they do not fully capture the contribution of many public services, including health, social care, education and the voluntary sector. Increasingly, researchers and practitioners are asking whether productivity should <u>also</u> be understood in terms of the quality of relationships, collaboration and the experiences of service users, with growing interest in these broader perspectives.

Why Traditional Productivity Measures Fail Children's Services

Traditional productivity analysis defines productivity as the relationship between inputs and outputs: the volume of goods or services produced relative to labour, capital or financial resources committed. (OECD, 2001; Syverson, 2011) This approach has been highly influential in private-sector settings, where outputs are countable and inputs are relatively easy to isolate. Its application to children's services has proved considerably more problematic.

Children's services rarely produce immediate, easily measurable outputs. Their purpose is not to process cases, conduct assessments or deliver a fixed volume of interventions, but to improve wellbeing, development, participation and life opportunities - outcomes that may emerge over many years and depend on contributions from multiple agencies and actors simultaneously. Support provided during early childhood may influence educational attainment, employment and health outcomes decades later; collaborative interventions that prevent family crisis may generate benefits across education, health, social care and criminal justice systems at once. Much of this value is invisible to conventional productivity measures because it is generated outside any single organisation's boundary and over a timeframe that outruns annual reporting cycles.

Recent work within the Productivity Institute has begun to widen conventional understandings of productivity to include organisational capabilities, intangible assets and public value. Productivity in complex public services should be understood through the capacity of systems to mobilise knowledge, relationships and resources to create value, rather than through efficiency metrics alone (van Ark et al., 2023). Haldane (2018) emphasises the importance of social infrastructure and preventative investment in generating long-term societal benefits that cannot be captured through traditional performance indicators. Frontier Economics (2024) extends this line of argument specifically to preventative public services, framing them as investments in future productive capacity rather than costs to be minimised. Each of these contributions supports the case that complex public services need a different productivity lens — but none of them, on its own, supplies that lens. Our analysis of children's services in Glasgow is a contribution to that discussion.

From Output to Outcome: The Public Value Foundation

The concept that does the most work in resolving this gap is public value, developed originally by Moore (1995) as an alternative to private-sector-derived measures of government performance. Moore's central argument is that public managers should be understood as creating value in the same sense that private managers create shareholder value — but that the currency of that value is legitimacy, trust and improved outcomes for citizens, not profit. Applied to children's services, this reframes the central question away from one that asks, *how can this organisation produce more with less*, to one that asks, *how does this system of organisations, families and communities create lasting value for children* (c.f. Moore, 1995). This application of public value theory is not uncontested: Rhodes and Wanna (2008) argue that framing public managers as creators of public value risks positioning them as unaccountable arbiters of the public interest, substituting managerial judgement for democratic political process. The critique is a useful caution for children's services specifically, where decisions about what counts as 'value' for a child or family carry real weight, and are properly a matter for democratic and professional accountability, not managerial discretion alone.

The reframing changes what counts as productive activity. Under an output-based model, time spent on relationship-building, family engagement, information-sharing and collaborative planning could be perceived as an overhead, an activity that competes with service delivery. Under a public value model, these same activities are considered as productive tasks, because they are the mechanisms through which coordinated, effective, family-centred support is achieved, especially for those children and families identified as being vulnerable or living in deprived conditions.

Integration and Collaboration: A Necessary Distinction

There is a fundamental distinction between integration and collaboration that guides the central argument of this paper series. Integration refers to formal organisational arrangements: pooled budgets, joint governance boards, shared planning frameworks and statutory duties to plan or commission jointly. Collaboration refers to the everyday relational processes through which people in different organisations work together in practice - information-sharing, joint assessment, collective problem-solving, and the negotiation and trust-building that make coordinated action possible in practice.

Structural integration can create the conditions for collaboration, but evidence from collaborative governance research consistently demonstrates that formal governance arrangements alone are insufficient. Effective collaboration depends upon trust, shared understandings, communication and the capacity for joint action across organisational boundaries (Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh, 2012). This distinction between structural integration and relational collaboration recurs throughout evaluations of Scottish public service reform, including Health and Social Care Integration, where persistent barriers include collaborative leadership, governance disputes and information-sharing difficulties (Audit Scotland, 2018). This recurs in almost every audit or evaluation of Scottish integration structures reviewed for Briefing 2 — from Children's Services Planning to Health and Social Care Integration.

Ansell and Gash (2008) set out an influential model of collaborative governance in which successful collaboration depends on face-to-face dialogue, trust-building, commitment to the process, shared understanding and intermediate outcomes that reinforce continued participation — conditions that are relational and cumulative as opposed to structural and one-off. Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh (2012) extend this into a more general integrative framework, distinguishing between the drivers of collaboration (such as consequential incentives and interdependence), the collaboration dynamics themselves (principled engagement, shared motivation, capacity for joint action) and the actions and outcomes that follow. Read together, these frameworks reinforce that collaboration is a process that has to be actively built and sustained, and it can fail even where the formal architecture for it is sound. This optimism needs qualifying, however: Huxham and Vangen's (2005) concept of 'collaborative inertia' captures how frequently, in practice, arrangements of exactly this kind progress slowly, produce little, or fracture into competing sectional interests, even where the formal governance case for collaborating is sound — a caution directly relevant to assessing Scotland's own collaborative reforms, discussed in Briefing 2.

Scotland's Christie Commission (2011) report remains a foundational piece of literature on this subject, more than a decade after its publication. The Commission's central diagnosis — that public services needed to reorganise around prevention, partnership, people and place rather than organisational silos — was itself an argument for collaboration over structural reorganisation alone, although Christie advocated both. Subsequent Scottish reform programmes, including the current Public Service Reform Strategy, continue to invoke the Commission's framing and its focus on prevention; the persistence of the same diagnosis across more than a decade of reform activity is itself evidence that structural integration has not, on its own, resolved the underlying problems that Christie identified. For a detailed analysis of Christie and the different ways in which the term ‘prevention’ is used by Scottish Government, and more generally in Scotland, see McNulty (2026).

Relational Productivity Defined

Relational productivity is the responsibility and capacity of a whole system, not a single organisation, to generate public value through collaboration, trust, participation and collective action. It is a property of the relationships connecting organisations, professionals, families and communities, not a property of any one organisation's internal processes. A productive system, on this definition, is one that enables cooperation, facilitates knowledge exchange and supports collective problem-solving across organisational boundaries; an unproductive system is one where information remains siloed, communication between organisations is fragmented and where families are left to do this coordination work themselves.

Three criteria follow from this definition, each of which distinguishes relational productivity from conventional efficiency measures.

- Relationships must be treated as productive assets rather than administrative overheads. Trust between practitioners reduces the transaction costs of coordination; shared knowledge improves decision-making; continuity of relationship enables earlier, and more accurate identification of need. Time spent building and maintaining these relationships should be counted as productive activity, not subtracted from it.
- Productivity must become a system-level, not an organisation-level, property. No single agency can claim sole responsibility for a child's developmental progress, educational inclusion or long-term wellbeing; the appropriate unit of productivity analysis is therefore the wider system of organisations, families and communities contributing to that child's outcomes, not any one organisation's throughput.
- Prevention and equity are internal to the productivity concept, not external constraints on it. Prevention is understood here in Christie's sense: as a shift in how the whole system organises itself to reduce the escalation of need over time, rather than as early intervention with individual children, which is a narrower and related but distinct idea (on this distinction, see McNulty, 2026). Because relational productivity depends on trust, prevention and participation, and because the capacity to build trust and participate is not equally distributed, a system that fails to address poverty, disability-related disadvantage or geographic inequality will systematically under-produce relational value, regardless of how well its formal governance structures are designed or how much is spent on individual-level early intervention.

The Relational Ecology of Productive Children's Services

Bringing these arguments together, this briefing proposes a Relational Ecology framework identifying six interconnected dimensions through which relational productivity is generated. The framework draws on ecological theories of development — particularly Bronfenbrenner's (1979) account of nested, interacting systems shaping a child's outcomes — and on practice theory (Nicolini, 2012; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012), which holds that social outcomes are produced through recurring everyday practices rather than through structures alone.

1. Integrated governance

Governance arrangements — shared planning frameworks, joint boards, statutory duties — provide the structural foundation within which collaboration can occur. Governance is necessary but not sufficient: it establishes the conditions for collective action without guaranteeing it. Its function in the framework is infrastructural, not determinative.

2. Collaborative practice

Collaborative practice is the everyday, relational core of the framework: assessment meetings, referral decisions, information-sharing conversations, multidisciplinary reviews and family engagements. These practices are where integration is actually enacted or fails to be enacted, regardless of what the governance structure permits.

3. Evidence commons

An evidence commons is the shared knowledge infrastructure — common assessment frameworks, interoperable information systems, joint needs analysis — that allows partners to develop a common understanding of needs, priorities and outcomes rather than working from organisation-specific information alone.

4. Child and family agency

Children (in developmentally appropriate ways) and families are treated as active agents in service design, rather than passive recipients of it. For the very young children who are the focus of this project, agency is necessarily exercised largely through parents and carers, and through practitioners' attentiveness to infant and toddler cues, rather than through direct participation in the adult sense; strengthening parents' and carers' agency is therefore a central mechanism through which children's own agency is realised at this age. Agency is positioned here as a productive resource in its own right, not only an ethical principle: families and children possess knowledge about their own circumstances that professional expertise alone cannot generate, and services that draw on this knowledge and act to strengthen agency are better targeted and less wasteful of effort.

5. Social justice and inclusion

Poverty, disability, ethnicity, migration status and geography are treated as constitutive of how collaborative, well-integrated services operate and are experienced, not as external factors affecting demand. A system that reduces these inequalities is, on this framework, more productive — not merely more equitable — because it enables more effective engagement and support across the whole population it serves.

6. Inclusion outcomes

The ultimate purpose toward which the other five dimensions are directed, is whether children and parents are empowered to participate fully in education, family life and their communities, whether families experience support as coherent and accessible, and whether inequalities are reducing over time. This outcome is the overarching dimension against which the other five should ultimately be measured.

A Conceptual Proposition

The relationship between these dimensions can be expressed conceptually, in the following terms:

Collaborative Capacity = Governance Capacity + Relational Capacity + Knowledge Capacity + Agency Capacity + Equity Capacity

Relational Productivity = Collaborative Capacity × Prevention × Inclusion Outcomes

This proposition treats collaborative capacity as a form of public-sector intangible capital, analogous to the physical, digital and workforce capital organisations already invest in deliberately. The multiplicative relationship with prevention and inclusion outcomes is intended to convey that collaborative capacity alone is not sufficient: a highly collaborative system that fails to intervene early, or that fails to reduce inequality in outcomes, will not register as relationally productive on this framework, despite how well its governance and relationships may be functioning internally.

It should be emphasised that relational productivity is not a replacement for notions of productivity based on measurement of inputs and outputs and organisational efficiency. Those running public services will continue to measure performance using benchmarking and other tools for assessing productivity within and even across organisational boundaries. Our argument is for a balanced approach that takes account of the context, objectives and mechanisms appropriate to public service delivery and planning, to which a relational ecology approach is suited.

Conclusion and implications

This conceptual framework carries two implications that guide the rest of the paper series. First, because relational productivity is a system-level property, it cannot be assessed or improved by examining any single organisation in isolation. Briefing 2's policy review, and Briefing 3's measurement framework, deliberately reviews the local system of governance, practice, knowledge, participation and equity, not any one agency's performance.

Second, because the framework treats equity as internal to productivity rather than external to it, further recommendations in Briefing 4 are set out, based on whether they are feasible with current resources, but also on whether they address the uneven distribution of coordination burden identified throughout this series — particularly among families experiencing poverty and families of children with disabilities and additional support needs.

This framework is not only a conceptual proposal. On 18 June 2026, the Scottish Government announced that child poverty legislation and associated measures would be reviewed, opening discussion about whether existing income-based targets adequately capture broader drivers of long-term change for children and families. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing confirmed to the Scottish Parliament an intention to review the types of targets used to measure progress on child poverty, on the grounds that income-based targets alone do not capture policies that drive systemic change across our public services. (Scottish Parliament, 2026) This argument supports the notions discussed about children's services and productivity in this briefing. Briefing 3 turns the conceptual proposition set out above, into a measurement framework capable of informing that review directly.

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