

Compass v2.0 beta

Commissioning as collective system learning

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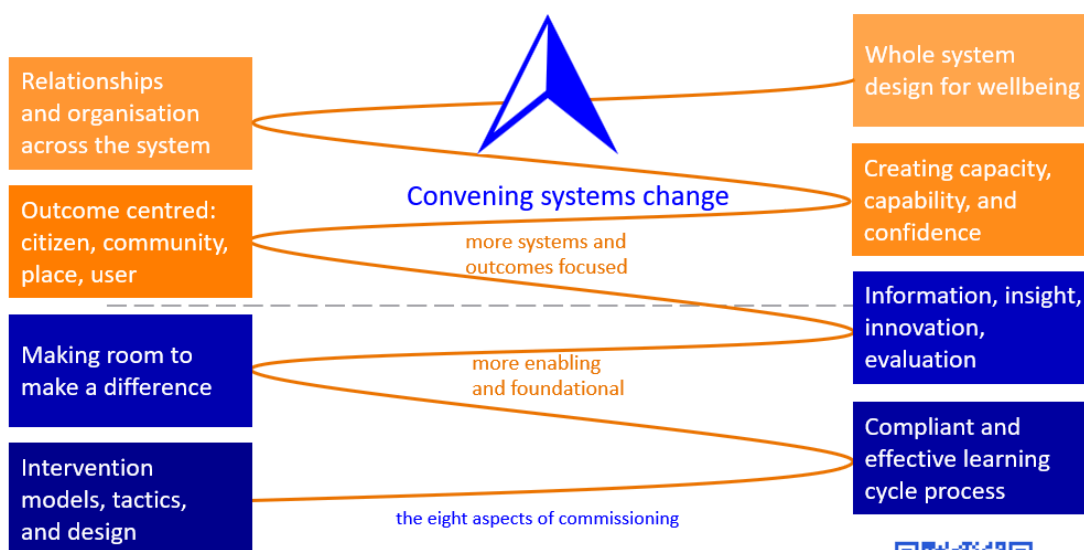
‘Commissioning is the public craft of helping a place form and reform the relationships, capabilities, arrangements and conditions through which people can live well, with the system learning from what happens’.

Our original Commissioning Compass

We developed the Commissioning Compass – free at link.redquadrant.com/SmartCompass – not as ‘a better commissioning framework’, but as a disciplined way for people in a place to notice what is happening, question how they are part of it, make sense of the patterns, choose where to act, and learn as the system changes.

The commissioning compass system assessment for change

Helping you navigate complexity and impact on outcomes for people and place



Free online at link.redquadrant.com/commissioningcompass

The goal was to offer a 'systems assessment for change', not a benchmarking or performance management tool. However, from its origins in adult social care, we found the following traps of language and thinking hard to evade:

- The 'service provision' default; so much of the work is about getting 'service provision' right, the focus can be inwards on 'the system of provision' rather than holistic, looking at people living their lives in place.
- The 'controller' default: since is it so important to think about 'how do we grip demand, manage the market, drive behaviour and deliver outcomes?', it is easy to see the commissioner as outside of the system being analysed, trying to exercise control. This is closely allied with
- The 'colonial' default, which says: 'how do we engage communities, capture insight, empower people, and roll out our model?', creating an alienating divide between 'the system' and people and communities.

And, realistically, with the pressures many commissioners face, the best we can hope for is to 'assess the eight aspects, pick an approach, implement change.'

Recognising these were all our failings, exacerbated by the very difficult conditions our clients live and work under, we wanted to keep the strengths of the Commissioning Compass but use the eight aspects as lenses in a recursive practice of opening up, sensemaking, strategising, making change, and learning – a subtle but important difference.

That keeps the strength of the Compass – it is meant to help a council, place or partnership see its system more clearly, understand strengths and constraints, and make better choices about where to intervene – but protects it from sliding back into procurement logic, and opens it up as a space- or place-based systems change tool for everyone.

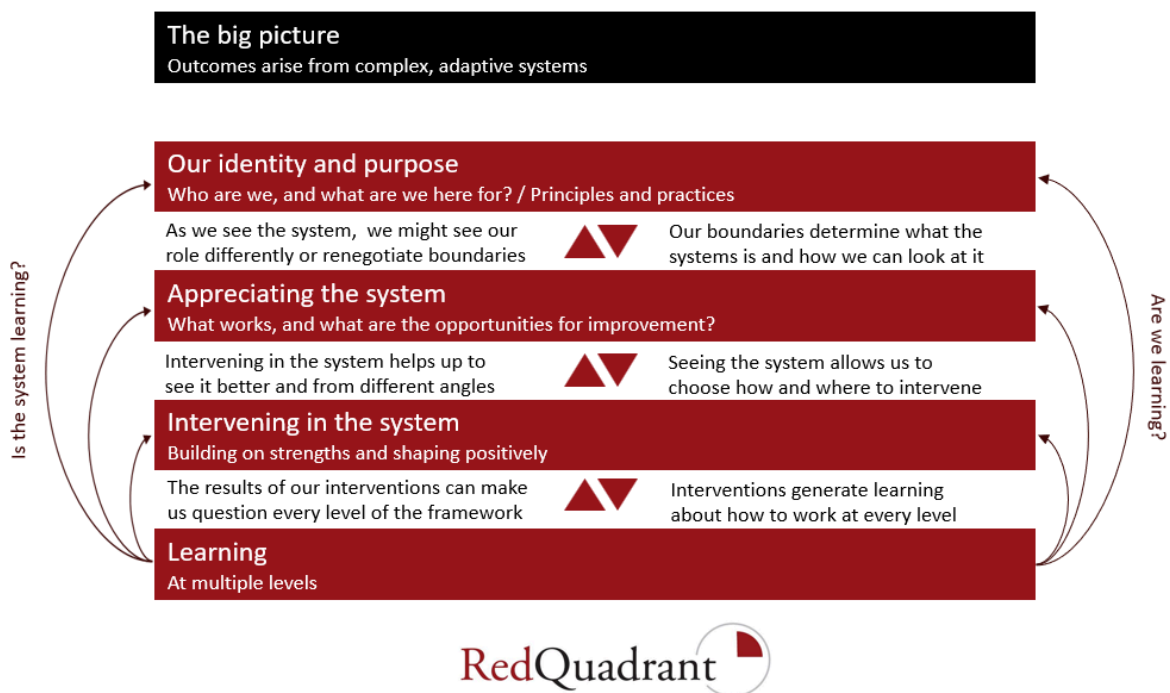
Compass v2.0: the proposition

Commissioning is the public craft of helping a place form and reform the relationships, capabilities, arrangements and conditions through which people can live well, with the system learning from what happens.

Public services start with a need for something to help people achieve their purposes in life, not with commissioning. Commissioning is always separated from the interactions where value is created and from the communities and lives where value contributes. So the Compass should be used from the edge: real demand, first contact, authority to act, what matters to people, and what the system itself is causing.

Systems change as the operating logic

The RedQuadrant systems change model gives the operating logic. Outcomes arise from complex adaptive systems. The levels are not steps. Identity and purpose, seeing the system, intervening, and learning are all active at the same time. Seeing changes what we think our role is. Boundaries shape what we can see. Interventions change what becomes visible. The results of action can question every level.



Therefore the Compass v2.0 is part of a practice of collective system learning. It starts from people living their lives in a place, not from services, budgets or contracts. It opens up the system boundary, makes sense of lived experience and system patterns, chooses strategic moves that fit local conditions, and makes change through relationships, capability, arrangements and forms of help. The eight aspects are not steps or domains. They are

lenses for seeing the same living system from different angles. Every use of the Compass should increase shared agency, practical wisdom, and the system's ability to learn.

Principles

To summarise:

- Start with people living well, not services being provided.
- Relationships, capability, arrangements and conditions are equally real and important.
- Commissioning is a learning practice, not a purchasing cycle; commissioners cannot stand outside the system and move pieces around!
- Use the eight aspects (set out below) as lenses in a recursive practice of:
 - holistic opening up
 - sensemaking
 - strategising
 - making change, and
 - collective learning.

That gives the whole model a strong discipline against the defaults we named earlier. Start where life is being lived. Work backwards. Do not start from budgets, structures, services, contracts, or institutional categories and then ask people to fit.

Compass v2.0: the architecture

The model has these axes:

First, the eight aspects. These are the lenses.

Second, the five moves: holistic opening up, sensemaking, strategising, making change. These are the actions. And collective learning at multiple levels is the engine.

RedQuadrant's five core leadership practices or similar development work are needed to support this kind of model by building honesty, shared sensemaking, productive conversations, clarity, purposeful culture, and good and true intent.

link.redquadrant.com/fivecorepractices

The eight aspects stop the work becoming abstract systems talk. The five moves stop the Compass becoming a scoring tool, with the learning engine stopping the whole thing becoming a plan-and-deliver cycle. And the five core practices lay the groundwork.

The system change slides already contain this logic. They connect identity, boundaries, seeing, intervening and learning. They also bring in critical systems, asking whose interests are served, what counts as improvement, who has decision power, what expertise counts, who speaks for those affected but not involved, and what worldview is shaping the work.

That is the direct antidote to provider, controller and colonialist language. The issue is not just vocabulary. It is who gets to define the problem, the system, the evidence, the measure of improvement, and the legitimate action.

The eight aspects as living-system lenses

Whole system conditions

Is this a space that is forming the conditions that generate and support sustainable wellbeing for people, communities and the wider living system?

Not fantasy 'whole system design'; looking at the conditions that make living well easier or harder: housing, care, work, money, transport, ecology, safety, belonging, time, institutions, mutual support, and the histories that shaped the place.

Good relations and patterns of organising

Are the people and organisations involved in good relation and patterns of organising? Can they act, disagree, repair, and learn together?

Not harmony; enough trust, honesty, conflict-capacity and shared purpose to do real work. Do current organising patterns help people act around lived situations?

Growing capability and confidence

Is the capacity, capability, and confidence of people, communities, practitioners, associations, organisations, and economies to help people live well growing?

Providers, workforce and markets are sometimes categories, but the local ecology of capability includes paid and unpaid care, mutual aid, peer support, civic association, specialist practice, neighbourhood infrastructure, and ordinary human reciprocity.

People, lived purpose

Are people authors of their own purposes, is success judged by whether they can live the life they want? Not users or even citizens – that excludes too many.

Shared sensing, insight, and experiments

Is what matters known to the people who can make a difference? Are curiosity, creativity, practical wisdom, and experimentation alive?

Wider than data: stories; repeated and failure demand; weak signals; silence; conflict and exclusion; workarounds; professional judgement; community knowledge; bright ideas; cost; and the evidence hidden in everyday irritation.

Agency, shared action, and convening change

Are law, policy, money, risk, governance and compliance being interpreted and managed in ways that create legitimate room for people with different stakes and different knowledge to act together without being absorbed.

Shared choosing, reviewing, and adapting action

Are there appropriate rhythms, decision rights, ethical tests, resources, and learning loops for choosing, resourcing, reviewing and adapting action?

Complex systems need more than plans, and more than commissioning. They need living arrangements for deciding, testing, noticing, adapting, stopping, and renegotiating.

Forms of assets, help, infrastructure, and action

Are the forms of assets, help, infrastructure, and action fit for the situation and open to learning?

'Contracts' and 'delivery models' are possible forms, not the point. Civic associations, neighbourhood practices, shared data, grants, social infrastructure investments, funding, partnerships, alliances, direct payments, family group processes, or simply stopping the system from making life harder also count.

The five moves

Holistic opening up

This is the boundary move.

It asks: what system are we talking about, who is included, who is missing, who is affected but not involved, what histories are active, what future costs are being displaced, what forms of knowledge are ignored, and what would change if the boundary moved?

It should come before sensemaking, but it also returns throughout. Every time the system changes, the boundary changes. Every time a new voice enters, the problem changes.

This is where critical systems thinking belongs. It stops the model from pretending that 'the system' is an innocent object waiting to be mapped. Systems are partly made by the boundaries we draw and the purposes we privilege. The system change slides are clear that definitions, perspectives, boundaries and context are sources of power, and that shared learning is how the system begins to learn about itself.

Sensemaking

This is the pattern move.

It asks: what is happening, what keeps happening, what is working, what is being carried by goodwill, what demand is real, what demand is created by the system, where are people being passed around, where is authority missing, where are relationships doing hidden labour, and what does the system know but not yet admit?

This is where the Compass scores can help, but only as prompts. The company summary explicitly says that the discussion is often more valuable than the number, and that differences in scoring reveal how people experience the system.

Sensemaking should combine three kinds of evidence: lived experience, operational evidence from the edge, and system evidence about flows, rules, money, capacity and consequences. Any one of these on its own will lie.

Strategising

This is the choice move.

It asks: given what we now see, where should attention, authority, money, relationship and learning go next?

Strategy here is not a grand plan. It is a set of explicit wagers. 'If we change this condition, with these people, in this part of the system, we expect these patterns to shift, and we will know by looking here.'

The Compass helps because it refuses the idea that there is one best commissioning model. The company summary says the right approach depends on local conditions, history, relationships, capability, community strengths, markets, policy pressures and room for manoeuvre. It also warns that ambition must be matched with foundations.

This matters. A place may want whole-system wellbeing, but if information is poor, relationships are brittle, legal confidence is low, decision rights are unclear, or the practical forms of help are wrong, the strategy has to start there. Otherwise the aspiration becomes theatre.

Making change

This is the intervention move.

It asks: what can we now change in conversations, measures, rules, resource flows, roles, authority, agreements, data, routines, infrastructure and forms of help?

The phrase 'making change' is better than 'delivering change'. Delivery language implies a centre, a product, a recipient and compliance. Making change implies participation in a living situation.

The work may include experiments, but not pilots in the usual doomed sense. A useful test should alter a real condition and teach the system something. It should not be a decorative innovation beside business as usual.

The workbook material supports this developmental rhythm. It asks people to score, gather evidence, sense-check with others in the system, explore constraints and enablers, test intervention points, and use later workshops to explore approaches and improvements.

Collective learning

Learning must not be treated as 'just move five' – it is the engine of the whole model.

We use single, double and triple loop learning: learning about whether actions work, learning about how the system works, and learning about identity, purpose and boundaries. We also distinguish learning by 'us' as system changers and learning by the place-based system itself. 'Collective learning' is not evaluation after delivery – it is the system noticing what action has revealed about itself.

It asks whether people, practitioners, communities, partners and institutions have become more able to see, decide and act together. It includes single-loop learning about whether the action worked, double-loop learning about the assumptions behind the action, and triple-loop learning about identity, purpose and power.

The killer question is: 'What has this changed about who knows, who decides, who acts, and who learns?'

For the integrated model, use four learning questions after any significant action.

1. What changed in people's lived experience?
2. What did we learn about how the system behaves?
3. What did we learn about our arrangements, rules, measures, relationships and forms of help?
4. What did this reveal about who we think we are, what we think we are here for, and whose purposes count?

The last question is the one most frameworks dodge. It is also the one that stops system change becoming paternalistic improvement work.

Discipline on language and framing

The main risk is not one bad phrase. It is a whole grammar.

- Provider drift says: 'How do we get the right providers delivering the right services?'
- Controller drift says: 'How do we grip demand, manage the market, drive behaviour and deliver outcomes?'
- Colonial drift says: 'How do we engage communities, capture insight, empower people, and roll out our model?'

The integrated model needs a different grammar.

- Use 'people living their lives', not 'service users'.
- Use 'forms of help', not 'service provision', except where the legal or technical distinction matters.
- Use 'people and organisations who offer help', not 'providers', unless discussing formal contractual roles.
- Use 'make visible', not 'capture insight'.
- Use 'shared sensing', not 'data extraction'.
- Use 'decision rights', not 'engagement'.
- Use 'room for agency', not 'permission from the centre'.
- Use 'altering conditions', not 'fixing people'.
- Use 'learning from the edge', not 'consulting the frontline'.
- Use 'people with different stakes and knowledge', not 'stakeholders' when the humanity matters.
- Use 'making change' or 'intervening', not 'delivering change'.
- Use 'fit for the situation', not 'best practice'.

Of course, the real point isn't to police language. Our papers on relational public services <https://chosen-path.org/2026/03/21/collection-of-posts-on-relational-public-services/>, especially the 'ladder'

<https://chosen-path.org/2026/03/17/what-do-we-mean-when-we-say-relational-in-public-services/>, give a sharper test. Lower levels are organised around system comfort and control.

Higher levels are organised around people's lived purpose and shared power, with the state learning to be less of a machine and more of an enabling infrastructure. That's the kind of guardrail we need to be putting in for ourselves.

Power

Never forget to look at explicit decision rights. The Compass already has strong questions about people being in charge of their own outcomes, and the relationality ladder names co-governed place and citizen space. But if people define outcomes but institutions keep the real decisions, the language improves while the power relation stays the same. So the standing test across all eight aspects is: 'who can define, decide, resource, challenge, stop, and learn?' That one question will expose most provider, controller, and colonial drift before it hardens into your model.

Using the Compass v2.0 beta

Please see 'the matrix' below to explore. Meanwhile we expect to add aspects of v2.0 to our AI-assisted free smartCompass <https://link.redquadrant.com/SmartCompass>, and further develop this model following on from the upcoming Stronger Things and TRIPS (Towards Relational Public Services) conference.

Benjamin P Taylor, 13 June 2026

The matrix

Aspect	Opening up	Sensemaking	Strategising	Making change	Collective learning
Whole system conditions	What system of life are we looking at, above and below the visible service landscape?	What conditions are making wellbeing easier, harder, fragile or unsustainable?	Which conditions, if changed, would make the biggest positive difference without pretending we control the whole?	Change rules, resources, rhythms, infrastructure and relationships so living well becomes easier before crisis.	What have we learned about the conditions that shape whether people can live well? Which patterns are becoming clearer? What has changed in the place, not just in the service? What are we now seeing that our previous boundary hid?
Good relations and patterns of organising	Who is in relation, who is outside, and whose absence is treated as normal?	Where is trust strong, where is conflict hidden, where do interfaces break, where does goodwill mask bad design?	What relational infrastructure is needed: shared routines, repair, conflict work, joint learning, decision rights?	Create practical spaces where people act together around real situations, not perform partnership.	What have we learned about how relationships actually work under pressure? Where did trust grow, where did it break, and where did formal partnership conceal weak relation? What needs repair, renegotiation, or more honest conflict?
Growing capability and confidence	Whose capability counts: residents, families, neighbours, practitioners, civic groups, local enterprises, public bodies?	Where is capability growing, depleted, blocked, over-professionalised or made dependent?	Where should capability sit closer to life and where does specialist capability genuinely matter?	Invest in edge authority, community capacity, practitioner judgement, peer support, civic infrastructure and mutual help.	What have we learned about whose capability increased, whose reduced, and whose was ignored? Are people, communities, practitioners and local organisations more able to act now than before? Where did our help create dependency rather than agency?
People, lived purpose, and agency	Who defines what a good life means here? Who is named as a problem rather than	What do people actually ask for, in their words? What matters over time? Where is	Which outcomes should be defined by people and place, and what	Change measures, governance, conversations and accountability so lived	What have people told us, through experience not just consultation, about whether life is better? Who still isn't shaping

Aspect	Opening up	Sensemaking	Strategising	Making change	Collective learning
	recognised as a person?	the system making outcomes worse?	decision rights should follow?	purpose shapes action.	the definition of success? What outcomes are being claimed by the system but not recognised by people living with the consequences?
Shared sensing, insight, and experiments	What counts as knowledge? What is invisible because it does not fit current categories?	What patterns appear across stories, demand, cost, failure, weak signals, professional judgement and place knowledge?	What learning questions matter most now? Which uncertainties need tests rather than reports?	Build shared sensing, rapid feedback, open evidence, learning reviews and experiments that alter practice.	What did the experiment or intervention teach us? What signals did we notice too late? What evidence changed our mind? What should now be made visible to others in the system, and what should stop being counted because it misleads us?
Agency, shared action, and convening change	Which constraints are real, which are interpretations, and which protect important rights?	Where do law, policy, finance, risk and governance close down agency? Where are they being used imaginatively?	What room can be legitimately widened, and who must share the risk?	Create permissions, safeguards, delegated authority, pooled arrangements, ethical risk practice and lawful flexibility.	What have we learned about real and imagined constraints? Which rules, risks, policies or governance habits turned out to be more flexible than assumed? Where do we need stronger legitimacy, safeguards, or shared risk to widen room for action?
Choosing, reviewing, and adapting action	Who decides, who can challenge, who can stop harm, and who can call for learning?	What are the actual decision rhythms? Where do choices get stuck, displaced, escalated or hidden?	What decision architecture would fit the uncertainty and variety of the work?	Set up cadences for choosing, resourcing, testing, reviewing, adapting and stopping.	What have we learned about how decisions are made, delayed, displaced or avoided? Were the right people able to define, decide, resource, challenge, stop and learn? What decision rights need to move closer to the situation?

Aspect	Opening up	Sensemaking	Strategising	Making change	Collective learning
Forms of assets help, infrastructure, and action	What forms of help are imaginable beyond existing services and contracts?	Which forms actually fit people's situations? Which create dependency, fragmentation or avoidable work?	What mix of forms best fits the context: grants, alliances, neighbourhood practice, contracts, mutual aid, direct support, shared infrastructure?	Test and adapt the forms. Keep the form subordinate to purpose, relationship and learning.	What have we learned about which forms of help fit the situation? Which contracts, grants, alliances, neighbourhood arrangements, direct support, civic infrastructure or informal forms helped? Which created friction, dependency, exclusion or avoidable work?