

When people feel they are not involved in shaping public services, this puts at risk the ‘social contract’ between citizen and state

By Democratic Audit

*The importance of public services to British citizens hardly needs to be restated, with the NHS and the welfare and schools systems at the heart of citizens lives. Here **Lord Victor Adebawale** and **Henry Kippin** argue that these services must be shaped with a stronger focus on relationships and engagement with what they term the ‘collaborative citizen’, rather than handed down from Whitehall by diktat.*



The schools system is a vital component of Britain's public services (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

What do the public want from public services? This is a tricky question at the best of times. What do we mean by ‘the public’? What kind of public services are we talking about? What is the right balance between needs, wants and expectations, and how do we account for obvious inequalities in expressing them? Perhaps most importantly, what should our public leaders be doing about this?

As pollster Ben Page often reminds us, the public view can be capricious. We want “Swedish welfare with American taxes”: a demand that might seem perfectly reasonable. but does nothing to help the tough choices politicians must navigate during a period of rising demand and constrained resource. Moreover, trust in politics and the market has taken a battering, with banking bonuses and duck houses still understandably high in the public mind. One recent poll put trust in politicians below trust in estate agents which seems a particularly low blow.

Agendas for public service innovation and improvement are frequently ‘citizen-centric’ in design but can be, at worst, lacking any real account of how the most marginalised citizens can play a role beyond articulating an increasingly un-met set of social and economic needs. Neither market forces (Government) nor a more ‘relational’ front line (Opposition) quite tells the whole story about how deeply entrenched systems might change in response to a shifting set of citizen priorities. Yet as Ipsos MORI’s Daniel Cameron argues, public disengagement from the

mechanics of public service delivery should not be taken as *carte blanche* to transform the state without really telling anyone:

“Most people do not understand the local authority funding formula. They are unfamiliar with the increasingly complex supply chains involved in managing public services. And they are almost certainly not up to date on the latest ideas for encouraging innovation and bringing new models of delivery to public services. But none of this should be understood as a lack of care...”

As we head into an election campaign in which headline figures on the economy will likely dominate, the risk is that the voice of citizens – and the nuance within it – will get lost under the numbers. This is a problem because, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s Julia Unwin argues in Collaborate’s latest report, “more than ever, it is relationships and the balance of risk and trust between service users, providers and communities which count.” So what of this relationship?

Collaborate and Ipsos MORI surveyed 1,000 UK citizens earlier this year on their needs, wants and expectations of public services. We think the following implications emerge:

First, citizens notions of public good appear increasingly out of step with reforms being made to our current public service model. The highest proportion of those surveyed see public services as ‘important to the whole community’ (33%), and ‘available for everyone to use’ (33%) – somewhat at odds with a dominant narrative that has focused on targeting, cuts and, at the extreme, ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ welfare recipients. No major party talks any more in terms of universal entitlements or the ‘same services for everyone’ – partly because of public finances, but also because a batch of studies tell us postcode lottery is already a reality. When Julia Unwin argues that ‘local shops and businesses are the new front line of public services’, she is pointing to a broader truth: that we need to think beyond traditional notions of what we consider to be a public service, and how we meet our collective needs in a challenging new context.

Second, new social risks cut across traditional sectors, and service provision is not keeping pace. For example, around 75 per cent of respondents feel that government has a responsibility to keep living standards manageable (31% think this is ‘mostly’ or ‘all’ government’s responsibility), help secure them a decent place to live and provide support with jobs and careers. Those at the bottom end of the socio economic spectrum feel this most strongly. Yet these are areas in which government is only one actor in a complex market. Collaboration across the sectors will thus be increasingly vital, with government playing a convening role that goes beyond the delivery of traditional public services.

Third, delivery is not enough. Citizens want to be treated as human beings: with dignity, respect, competence and understanding. In public services, both state and market is seen to be falling short against this goal – particularly for those at the sharp end of society. Future providers of ‘services to the public’ should be held to account on this basis – it is just as important as cost and risk to future sustainability. Almost 80% of respondents feel that treating the public with respect is as important as the outcome being delivered. Just under a quarter felt that providers ‘always’ or ‘often’ understand their needs. Only 16% feel they experience a personalised service or have their preferences (and not only their needs) understood.

Fourth, the ‘collaborative citizen’ may be alive and well, but policymakers and service providers struggle to engage her. We advocate a stronger focus on relationships and engagement because – in areas such as health, adult social care and early years – supporting what David Halpern calls the ‘hidden wealth’ of citizens will be increasingly vital. Our survey shows that over 30% of citizens would be willing to spend time with public service providers to improve the service they deliver: a significant number when set against the whole population. However, only 14% of respondents currently felt involved in shaping public services with providers. Across the board, public services need to get better at engaging, enrolling and inspiring the public. As Greg Parston argues in our report, the ‘social contract’ upon which public services are based “requires collective action from players on both sides [...] built on social capital, trust and shared values”.

So What?

Interpreting survey findings is notoriously difficult – and full of extrapolation and conjecture. Yet we are happy to base vitally important platforms of policy and practice on similarly speculative economic projections; the limitations of which we are also fully aware of. So with that in mind, what should those compiling their manifestos do to better engage and serve the ‘collaborative citizen’? How can this help to address the clear financial and demand challenges ahead?

Improving the role and voice of citizens in public service design must be the starting point. We need more integrated local commissioning designed with communities; clearer user-feedback mechanisms in public contracts; financial accountability linked to broader social and community value; and a new politics of welfare that makes the case for long-term social investment over short-term, conditionality-based savings.

Not easy, but much of this should be done at a local level because trust in government is higher (as LGA data indicates), the distance between communities and government is smaller, and the limits of central government largesse are already pretty clear.

It is not enough for future actors in public service markets to prove delivery competence, financial integrity and an appetite for risk. Private profit and producer interest has clearly been pursued over public purpose in some cases, and this must change – again, a relationship with two sides. The contracts and relationships with the public sector that have enabled them to do this are clearly no longer fit for purpose. Getting this right for citizens must be item number one for whom ever forms the next government.

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