

Time and service

Time is not free, yet too often, the way service is organised suggests that it is.

Time is precious and limited. There is so much to do, see and experience in this world. And the more that we can spend our time positively, the better.

Why then do we sometimes treat the public as though they have unlimited supplies of this precious and limited resource?

This is not just an issue for the public sector. There are examples of good and bad service in both public and private sectors. My point today is that a consideration of time – the customer's and the citizen's time – should be at the forefront of thinking about how services are delivered.

Sometimes, when we call a government department or agency, perhaps not knowing if we're starting at the right place, we can get passed along, or have to make the call all over again because the process went wrong in the first place. It takes time and when it does not go well it can be frustrating and debilitating.

Then there is waiting at home for a delivery or an engineer to call when we have been told it is an all day appointment and the company cannot be any more precise.

Something that may take just a few minutes in terms of the delivery or the job needing done can end up taking the whole day, with people having to go through the inconvenience of taking time off work or time not being able to be spent on something more positive in order to wait all day for the person to arrive. It's even worse of course if the person doesn't turn up.

Service like this is time stealing.

The all day appointment, with no call to say the service is coming or no window within the day to say when it will arrive, is in a sense the hallmark of poor service. The terms of such a transaction are clear. The company will deliver in a manner geared to its convenience and the customer's inconvenience.

And this demonstrates that this is not just about time. It is about power. It gets to the heart of the question, who is working for whom? Who is important in this situation? Making people wait like this is a transfer of part of the burden of delivering the service from the provider to the user.

If the customer's time or the citizen's time is treated as precious, if every effort is made to ensure they don't waste time, then this says a lot about how the organisers of the service feel about their customers and their importance.

If it is thought this doesn't matter, that the citizen or customer can wait, then it is clear that those organising the service think that they, not the customer, have the power.

Of course some companies offer a fantastic service and do much better than the all day calling slot. They give a one or two hour slot and in doing so they are making clear that they understand the customer's time is not free.

They know people are busy and have a lot of demands on their time, and they are making an effort to do things at the convenience of the customer, even if that means inconvenience to them.

I recently noticed ads taken out by a major electrical goods supplier advertising narrow delivery slots, a call to let you know they were on their way and removal of the packaging after the products were delivered.

None of this was about the price of the goods. It was a realisation that their customers' time was precious and by taking out the ads, they are letting their customers know that they know this is the case and that they have, at least in part, organised the business around it.

Service like this is time giving.

And it's also an explicit acknowledgement that it is the customer who is in charge and that the service will be organised around them, not the other way round.

This issue of time and service is not just about deliveries and engineers calling but is also critical to public service reform.

And the reason it goes to the heart of public service reform is because it recognises that the essence of this is about changing the power relationship to one that empowers the public, the service user.

Now some public services do a great job of time giving, and some major changes have been made in this direction in recent years.

But before coming on to specifics let's just pause for a moment on the question of who benefits from a public service reform which seeks to save people time.

There is a stereotype that this is just an issue for the cash rich time poor section of the population, for blackberry man and woman. It certainly is an issue for them, and it is important that public services help to make life easier for hard pressed tax paying busy people. They have a right to expect that service will respond to the way they live their lives.

However it is also profoundly important for poorer income groups. It is often those with the least income and other resources who may be more likely to have to deal with a number of different government agencies and departments, who may be passed from office to office or call centre to call centre, trying to sort out the business they have to do with government.

For people in this position, it is not just a matter of being busy. It's often a matter of battling through the day to get the help they need and are entitled to.

A wasted trip to a public service office for a single mother could involve the expenditure of considerable social capital as well as very limited funds. She may have to ask a neighbour or a relative to baby sit. She may have to pay for this and to spend money on public transport. And if, through no fault of her own, all of that is wasted the cost to her can be very large.

Or the person who doesn't have a job where access to a phone or the internet is easy, who has to use their lunch hour to deal with a government office. They need the transaction to go well and the problem to be dealt with.

The Dutch Government recently measured some public service transactions in terms of their time cost to the public.

They found for example that the parents of a disabled child spent 124 hours organising the care, benefits and education for their child. This was just the parents' time dealing with the authorities, not the time spent actually educating their son.

A woman trying to organise care for her mother with Alzheimer's disease spent 31 hours dealing with government agencies.

A man who lost his job spent 81 hours sorting out his benefits and jobsearch help.

I recently met with representatives of a charity called Headway which helps people with acquired brain injuries. One of the issues they raised was the time it takes for carers to chart their way through the system of getting the information and help their relatives need.

So time matters, and it matters for everyone, though the hardest pressed sections of the population are often more likely to have to have more contact with more government agencies and less likely to be able to buy time back by hiring domestic help, having a car to get from A to B quicker or spending money in other ways to free up time.

There is then, I believe, a link between time giving and enabling people to have more opportunities. If Britain needs to use the talents of all the people to prosper in a competitive global world as I believe we do, then we need to waste less of our people's time to enable them to spend it more productively.

In the past, labour saving devices like the washing machine liberated people enormously from some of the drudgery of day to day life, allowing more time to be spent positively, be that in work, with family, on leisure or whatever else we are doing.

But for today and the future a critical question is not just new inventions but how we organise things, how we ensure that the services we provide free up people's time. Because to do so is profoundly empowering for those who can benefit.

In the public services, there are already major timing giving reforms under way.

Let's take the example of the NHS. This is a system which has been close to the hearts of the British people ever since it began. Our health

care is based on need not ability to pay. This is seen as fair and offering vital security to people. Whatever else goes wrong in our lives, the NHS is there for us and our families if we need it.

The advantages of the system are familiar and huge. But there has always been one problem with a system provided free at the point of use yet with limited capacity and that is that in the past, people had to wait, often for long periods, for non emergency treatment.

Before 1997, this problem had gotten so bad that people were routinely waiting 18 months or two years for operations like knee and hip replacements.

This was time stealing on a grand scale. It was also security and peace of mind stealing as the months went by and people waited, and waited, in pain.

The centrepiece of government health reforms has not been to do away with the good parts of the NHS like the free treatment or the treatment based on need.

Instead, when it came to reform we chose to tackle this issue of waiting. The aim was a fundamentally progressive one – a system of health care free at the point of use but also one with vastly reduced waiting times. And of course it was those who could not opt out who had most to gain from the reduction in waiting.

And this desire to reduce waiting times drove a lot of other changes too.

It meant a bigger system all round, with more doctors, more nurses and more modern hospitals.

It meant sometimes controversial reforms like bringing in extra capacity from outside the NHS – though the patients' treatment continues to be free.

It meant offering choice so that if there were long waiting times at one hospital, the patient could go to another where they would have to wait less.

And it is working. As waiting times have fallen, first to 12 months, then 9, then 6 months people have been given time back. And the hidden time issue is also being tackled. The government's target for this parliament

of treatment within 18 weeks is 18 weeks from referral by your GP to the surgery itself taking place. It measures the whole journey, not just a part of it.

This change is a huge exercise in giving time back to thousands of patients who in the past would have been waiting in pain.

There are other examples of public sector time saving too.

For example, the government gave people a choice of continuing to renew the tax disc for their car in the traditional way during office hours or doing it online whenever they wanted. Nine million people have chosen to do it online. The ability to offer the service meant matching up databases from both public and private sectors for the convenience of the car owner. It not only saves the public time on the actual transaction but like all online services it means it can be done at a time of people's own choosing not just during normal office hours.

This aspect of online services is crucial to time giving. Online transactions have rendered obsolete the concept of opening hours for those transactions. Twenty four hour availability means transactions can be carried out a time of the customer's choosing, not hours of service defined by the provider.

Another good example of public sector time giving is the reformed pension service.

In the past, when people approached retirement in this country they had to fill out a number of forms and the whole process took significant time. Recently, that process was reorganised and is now done mostly on the phone, with home visits for the minority who need them. It usually takes about 20 minutes.

Moreover, as extra time saving help, if someone is entitled to pension credit, the pension service now offers to talk to the local authority to make sure the person also gets the council tax benefit which is based on the same information.

Here, time giving has been taken an extra step, not only to ensure that the particular service you are dealing with operates well, but also to talk to another part of government – in this case your local council – to save you time on another transaction.

This aspect of time giving - the sharing of information between different parts of government - has huge potential because one of the frustrations of dealing with government is giving the same information over and over again. This was explicitly cited by the couple in the Dutch study with the disabled son.

So the task for public service if we are interested in time giving is not only to make sure our own processes are more efficient but that where it can make life better for the citizen we make sure different parts of government co-operate with one another to save that person time.

Most people expect that to happen now but too often it does not.

This issue of information sharing can be controversial. Some campaigners believe information sharing endangers privacy. Whether you believe that, or whether you believe it is just good service improvement is a matter of opinion. Certainly, few pensioners have complained about the idea when offered the council tax benefit service by the pension service. I acknowledge concerns over privacy but I also believe that time should be a factor in the information sharing debate.

And some of this issue around information is about seeing the benefits and knowing what it is used for. People who take out supermarket clubcards do not normally object to the supermarket knowing their buying habits. And the vast majority of the population with mobile phones tend not to object to the fact that the technology allows the mobile phone companies to know where we are most of the time if they needed to find out.

It is easy to conjure up an image of a big brother state but it should not be a principle of liberty that different parts of government never talk to one another when to do so could save citizens valuable time.

I have cited some examples of good public sector time saving today. But I know there are also poor ones. Inefficiencies in call centres, with a large volume of calls being about problems which should have been dealt with elsewhere. Too many boundaries still in place between different agencies and departments. We have definitely made progress but there is much more to do.

One area government is working on is over critical moments in any family's life such as bereavement or childbirth or moving house.

At the moment, apart from the pain and personal loss of bereavement, it can also mean contact with many parts of government, local and national, for the family of the person who has died. More could be done to make this process easier.

The other day I visited the pioneering Bereavement Centre run by my own local authority in Wolverhampton. Staff there have developed a service which helps families in these most painful of circumstances. The Bereavement Centre undertakes to contact a number of government agencies for the family, not just giving them the numbers or the forms but taking care of the bureaucracy for them. In fact the philosophy of those who work there is “we’ll do that for you” – a very good principle in time saving public service reform.

The government also wants to do more on this issue at a national level so my colleagues at the Department of Work and Pensions are following through the process families have to go through when something like bereavement or childbirth happens to see if we can make this easier for people by reducing the need to give the same information over and over again.

Over the next few years, I believe this issue of service organisation and time will become far more important. As options open up for people, and in some respects, lives become faster, people will expect service both public and private to respond.

How important in all of this is choice? When different delivery companies offer an all day slot or on the other hand one hour slots, choice can play an important role by allowing us to choose the company which is going to go the extra mile to save time for us.

In a similar way, choice has been important in driving down waiting times because hospitals know that patients can choose to go where waiting times may be less than at the local hospital. In a different way, choice has played a crucial role in allowing people buying a car tax to do it in their own time. In this case the provider did not differ – the choice came in the means of accessing the service.

In some cases though, choice is not so easily available as a means of change. For example, we only get our state pension from the state. However here too big time saving improvements have been made thanks to good leadership and a willingness to reform how the service is delivered. Choice certainly can be a driver of time saving but we also

need to ensure that time saving changes are made in areas not readily geared to choice driven reforms. Good leadership and thinking about service delivery from the point of view of the public can save time in these areas too.

Why for example, should processing applications for free school meals take up to six weeks when a pilot study has shown it is possible this could be done in a day?

All of this is important not only for good service but also for the national interest. Often, when we talk about efficiency the image conjured up is one of the financial balance sheet. But consideration of the public's time is also an important dimension in efficiency. And not wasting time is crucial to Britain's efficiency as a country. There is, if you like, only so much time in our national time bank. And using it well can benefit us all.

For all the detail of changes made to public services in recent years, at the heart of it has been a single issue – that change had to happen because we were moving from a world where the provider of the service had often seemed in charge to one where the customer and the citizen are in charge.

This is not a process that can be stopped or reversed. Wider change in the world means that the days of the provider being in charge are not coming back. In many spheres of life people are more empowered than they were before. In public services the process has to be taken forward, to further empower citizens and ensure that services revolve around their needs and the pressures upon them.

We are already doing this through shorter waiting times, through putting services online and through reorganising others.

But there is much more to be done. The process of empowerment must go on.

Time is at the core of this.

We only live once. There are many more things we'd all rather do than wait in a boring queue.

Let those of us who care about public service see the freeing up of time as a liberating empowering good in itself, and let's change things so that we give people more of their own precious and limited time.

Ends