

Putting users and communities at the heart of public services

Speech to Unison and Compass

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Checked against delivery

Introduction

Can I start by thanking Unison and Compass for organising this event today and bringing together such a broad range of public servants and policy-makers.

Today, I want to say why I think public services are so essential to our vision of society, explain the journey I think we have made since 1997 and then look to one particular aspect of their future which I hope can inform today's discussions: the role of the user and communities in public services.

I do so particularly from the vantage point of minister for the third sector, where I see the difference engaging the user can make.

I want to argue that the battleground of the future will lie, on the one hand, between those who essentially want to reduce the size of the state by saying the individual must be responsible for their own welfare – the individual replacing the state—and those who believe the state can be genuinely enabling.

And my argument today is that our belief in equality should be reflected in the kind of services we believe in – from state education to Sure Start. And we see many areas where these beliefs should be more fully realised in the years ahead: in schools, where the Chancellor has set out an ambition to raise the level of per

pupil spending to the current level of private schools; or in youth services, neglected for many years; or in other areas.

But in addition, and this is really the main focus of my remarks, I want to make the case that it will be as important for the Left to ensure that our belief in equality is reflected in the way that we make these investments and the way these services are delivered. In particular, we need to build on some of the best examples of service improvement since 1997, which in my view have focussed on the central role of both users and communities, not as people to whom services are delivered, but as people who also themselves shape and contribute to services.

And essential to that is that we see users and communities in a new and co-operative relationship with frontline staff, not somehow fighting for control, but often working with them to deliver better services.

I will then go on to outline the challenges I think this poses in relation to users, communities and staff. I do so not in the spirit of providing all the answers but in the desire to raise a set of questions for us to consider.

Why do public services matter?

I think it's very important to talk about the ends of public services, not just the means – because the ends are central to the kind of public services we want to build.

For me, public services represent one of the essential ways in which we can equalise life-chances and counteract the inequalities of the market. And we can aim higher than the basic security of the past.

The Swedish social democrats have a metaphor they call the people's home: the ground floor is basic security, the first floor is self-realisation. For us, basic security remains an important issue in public services. However we can also aim for services that help people realise their potential – in education in particular but elsewhere as well.

But for the Left in my view, public services are not just about goods provided to the individual; they are not just like private services that happen to be provided outside the marketplace. They are about our shared experiences and our common bonds. Investment in the public realm is not just necessary to deliver the right services to each individual, but can create shared institutions that build community, civic pride and belonging.

I see this most of all as a constituency MP. The difference that Sure Start makes is not just in early years services, but in creating a public institution which creates a community and a sense of belonging. In our decisions about public services in

the years ahead, we should realise the impact we can have in building successful public institutions within the community.

If these are the aims of public services, what is the record of the last ten years? The headlines of what has been achieved are important: the dramatic fall in hospital waiting times, the ten-fold increase in school capital investment, Sure Start, the Lift programme in the NHS and a better rewarded, better staffed public sector.

But for me there is something bigger than this: ten years ago people wanted to give up on public services. They wanted to argue that the NHS, state education, the public sector in general was unsustainable. I don't believe that this is the general view today: and I think that is a sign of the platform that has been built.

Future Direction

The question is, where now? We have tackled much of the backlog, the under-investment of the past, and there is now an opportunity to build on what we have achieved since 1997.

But we need to be honest that while we have cut child poverty by 700,000 and halted the growth in inequality in our society, we have a long way to go to achieve the kind of society we want to see. If we are genuinely to create equal opportunity and tackle the large inequalities in our society, it requires sustained investment over the coming years in the public services that will be the key to this: childcare, education, skills, youth services and many others.

But – and this is my point – we must argue not only for continued investment in the public realm. It has worked so far but there is further to go. The question is *how* we make that investment.

Rather than a 'letterbox' model in which we see the individual as simply having the service 'delivered' to them, we must think in terms of a more collaborative model which understands the essential roles of users and communities.

Above all, this is necessary in my view because of our values. If we are serious egalitarians, then surely we must bury the hierarchy which was inherent in the vision of some of the founders of the welfare state between provider and user. The expert delivering to the under-informed individual, or Whitehall not the local community as the source of accountability for services. In truth, this argument – for the more accountable, empowering state – has been a traditional demand of the Left, well before New Labour.

For some on the Right, involving users and communities is an excuse for the withdrawal of the state – a form of DIY welfare. Patients will get less support, local services will get less funding. That is not my vision. As we look around and

see that our society still has injustice, inequality and unmet needs, we know that we need to mobilise users and communities for more and better services.

It is not just our values that demand it, it is the spirit of the age. The deference of the past is being superseded across our society and we should welcome that. People's expectations are higher, and you only need to look at the internet to know that old divides between producers and users, experts and amateurs, are being broken down and blurred.

So on the basis of our values and on the basis of people's expectations about the way we deliver services, part of our task is to rethink every interaction in the public services. And this poses three challenges:

How best to involve users
How to mobilise communities
And the role of professionals

Users

The first challenge is to involve users as people who shape and contribute to the service.

There are 12 million people in this country who suffer from chronic diseases and 80% of visits to GPs concern chronic conditions. Ten years ago, you could wait weeks for an appointment. Today, while not perfect, there is greater access.

But we need to be honest: getting to see your GP does not solve the deeper issues of well-being, and does not guarantee that people will get the information and support they need.

To do that requires patients being empowered to have high-quality conversations, the right conversations for them, when they get in the door.

This is about more than choice, though it can play a part. It is about the nature of the relationship between user and professional. Of course, doctors will often have greater information and expertise – we will always be dependent on them. But the question is whether that relationship recognises the users' role.

Here we can build on what has worked since 1997 to allow users to shape the service. For example, in Bolton, the organisation RED have been experimenting with giving "agenda cards" to diabetes patients, so they can take charge of their consultations with professionals and receive help on the issues that matter to them.

And we can build on what has worked since 1997, too, in order to help users contribute, giving them the tools to improve their own well-being.

The Expert Patient Programme started by the Department of Health helps people with chronic health conditions to manage their situations better and interact with doctors. By bringing together patients, it creates powerful peer-to-peer networks.

The same analysis surely applies to other services. Take education. We need to do more to think about how we can engage all children in learning. Similarly, we need to do more to support parents' involvement in their children's education – particularly when we know it is a strong predictor of academic success.

Of course, we must continue to be determined to tackle background factors of inequality and class which shape parental engagement. But the task for the future must surely also be to systematically look at each public service and think about how the user can become an integral co-producer.

Community

Sometimes users will contribute individually, sometimes collectively and that takes me to the second challenge: involving communities.

Community involvement is essential because many services are inherently collective – from youth services to schools to the local environment. Public services, as I said earlier, are not the same as individual private services.

Part of the accountability and engagement we need in public services comes through local authorities. But there is also a day-to-day accountability, accountability at the frontline, which can come through groups of users and the wider community.

We shouldn't romanticise it. Many people don't like sitting on committees. In fact, many government ministers don't like sitting on committees.

But community involvement *can* make public services more accountable and more successful.

Take policing. The Chicago 'beat meeting' model shows the success the police can have if they establish a regular forum at which members of the public can engage and pass on information about their community. It is about giving people a sense of voice.

Or take schooling. Every day Britain's 450,000 school governors play a heroic role in many of our schools – and at their best, they are freed from administrative tasks to mediate with parents, represent their views and shape the character of the school. We should be talking more about school governors and the roles they can play.

These two examples show the way in which collective engagement can make a huge contribution to the outcomes of public services.

Yet there are many areas where we have not, up to now, taken collective engagement seriously enough.

Youth services are too often designed by adults, rather than the young people who use them. Too often, they do not engage wider communities.

So in every area, we should again be clear-headed about the role for collective involvement in shaping and contributing to services.

Professionals

The third challenge, and the most difficult, is to professionals. Let me start by talking, perhaps surprisingly, about MPs.

We face the challenge of involving users just as every other public sector worker does. Too often, we still operate on the old letter box model, suggesting that the job of constituency MPs was to 'solve' problems.

Sometimes, that's what we do. But I have learnt that the successful MP is also, and actually can most profoundly be, a catalyst for others, helping the community to create things and change the area. Two local examples I'm facing are a woman campaigning for a pedestrian crossing, and people who want a new mobile cinema. My job is not to solve these problems, but to work with them, facilitate their ideas, so that it is engaged and active *citizens* who are making the change happen.

Indeed, the best route to influence for MPs actually comes through greater humility about our role: the most powerful thing I can say is 'I can't solve the problems in this area on my own' because it makes people realise that they themselves can make the difference.

Crucially, I think this makes the role of the public services professional more not less important. Because the public servant must have the capacity not just to deliver a service but engage the user in the co-production of that service – a much harder task.

And we know from some outstanding examples of success in the public sector over the last few years the difference public service workers can make. Personal Advisers in Job Centres now engage and respect job seekers in a way the old system never allowed them to do.

And I know from my own conversations with people about their personal advisors what an incredibly positive experience it often is.

What I learn from this is that there are outstanding examples of frontline staff who are already teaching us in practice how they can share power with users. And crucially, what enables them to empower users is that they have been given the discretion and flexibility which empowers them.

But what I also know is that this approach could be far more widespread than it is. And also that many frontline staff could contribute far more to the service if they had the right means of communication and dialogue with the centre about the way the service is run.

So we need to examine where else the navigator and advisor function needs to be strengthened, and we need to recognise that the best people to redesign services are often frontline staff. We need to find new ways of enabling them to be part of the conversation about how services can improve.

And as we seek to redesign our services, we have to use all the means at our disposal. Sometimes this will involve the third sector, because of their closeness to users, in helping in that task. An example of this is the way that digital hearing aids were revolutionised by the RNID's advice because of their closeness to the user. They didn't take over the service, but they did help revolutionise it.

But sometimes we also have to recognise that the state, just because it is the state, cannot reach out to people in the way that the third sector can. The reason is not because of motivation or dedication but because of the suspicions people have of the state per se.

Therefore, we also need to be more willing to consider the role the third sector can play in helping deliver public services. But let me reiterate: the state must never use the third sector as an excuse to abdicate its responsibility to fund services. And the use of the third sector for me is about improving user experience not about services on the cheap.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with some brief reflections.

What distinguishes us on the Left is a belief that the power of collective institutions can be harnessed for individual well-being.

After nearly ten years of Labour in power, I am more not less optimistic that this fundamental insight is correct. But we have to realise that the fight is on with those who want to pretend they believe in public services but keep telling us the answer to Britain's problems is a smaller state.

We need to beat this argument, we do need to say loud and clear that collective action is not a drain on public resources, but a means of individual liberation.

But we also need to meet the great progressive challenge before us: involving users and communities, creating new opportunities for them to shape and contribute to services.

Services across the country must rethink how to support user involvement.

We must find new opportunities to mobilise communities.

Public service professionals, whether MPs or doctors or receptionists, must have honest conversations about the nature of our roles.

And I recognise, if we are to meet this challenge, that state must keep focused on outcomes, but rely less on top-down direction.

There is a huge prize: empowered individuals, mobilised communities and public services doing more to tackle the injustices and inequalities in our society.

This is the challenge before us. Together, I am convinced we can meet it and I look forward to our discussions.