

SMF – E-Government and Public Service Reform

This Government is passionately determined to reform public services. But we haven't been very good at explaining how we are going to achieve this goal. We talk about choice and contestability; targets and accountability – but we need to outline clearly why we seek to achieve and how our reforms will deliver the change that is necessary in our public services.

Public Service Reform is about our vision for a better society - it's not just change for change's sake. It's where everyone can enjoy high quality services. Where everyone can share in the greater prosperity and where everyone has power over the decisions that affect their lives. But we must clearly explain why we have chosen to take one route to reform as opposed to another.

Today's generations are paying the price of policy failures over previous decades. The life chances of the less privileged have not greatly improved the relative social mobility – the odds of a working-class child making good and earning considerably more than his or her parents – have actually worsened. Reversing this trend is a formidable task but we must make determined efforts to tackle the barriers to social mobility to ensure that future generations have a real opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Taken one by one, on occasions in the past our reforms have seemed unconnected. Our rhetoric has suggested that we wanted change for the sake of change. Politicians in all Parties appear focused on the process of *what* structure we want to change rather than the values of *why* we want change.

The extension of choice and contestability in our public services is not just about improving efficiency, quality and responsiveness, important though those objectives are. Choice is about empowerment, enabling people to take control of their own lives.

Our public service reform agenda is built on a determination to reform an entrenched system to improve it for all customers. To do this we have to tackle the characteristics of the system which do not adequately cater for the people in most need of support – those who have been less able to make their voice heard.

A clear commitment to empowering the individual, improving life chances and, ultimately, increasing social mobility should be a common thread running through all of our reforms. Future reforms should be judged against these criteria.

There are clear examples of how the extension of choice has led to improvements to the quality of life of those on low incomes. For example:

- Direct payments allow the user greater choice over their care.
- The role of **Patient Care Adviser** was created as part of the choice initiative in heart surgery in July 2002. The role of the advisers is to offer support and reassurance to patients.
- Choice-based lettings **offer potential for greater housing choice in social housing and a move away from a “take it or leave it” approach to housing allocation.**

We have begun this work, but we have further to go.

All evidence shows that social mobility is most influential in a child's early years. Today's socially immobile thirty-somethings are the result of stagnation in the 1980's. Much has been done but we have to ask 'Have we done enough?' The answer is no, not yet. We must relentlessly focus on improving the life chances of all children and providing second chances for adults. The further reform of public services is essential if we are to make lasting a change.

We must make determined efforts to prevent usually working-class children from falling into a cycle of failure from which too few escape. We must not rest easy until all schools have the high-quality, committed teaching staff that the 'best' schools enjoy and that all parents, not just the well-educated, have a real choice about which school their child attends.

The argument is often made that poorer families shouldn't have or don't want choice. It's almost as if they are not to be trusted to make the correct decision and that the State should simply provide an 'improving uniformity'. This is patronising too

many hardworking families who make a myriad of complicated choices every day of their lives. In fact the less money you have the more difficult the day to day choices you have to make. And surveys clearly show that people on low incomes or living in deprived areas are eager for more choice as a means of accessing better services.

There are people that have always had choice – and a louder voice. The choice to send their children to private school or to move house to qualify for a high quality state school; or the choice to opt for private healthcare. They have always been more able to protest, complain and assert their needs. That's fine. Those who are against choice are supporting the status quo; they are effectively denying the more disadvantaged the opportunity to receive services that are as good and responsive as the services enjoyed by the middle classes.

One of the great opportunities is how we deploy IT to drive change. And the future of public service reform has to use technology to give people a choice. Part of this is the use of technology to improve services – to ensure personalisation and design these services around people's needs, not the needs of the provider.

Services enabled by IT can be designed around the citizen or business. We can use technology to get better policy outcomes, reduce paperwork burdens and improve efficiency. Choice requires information, access, the ability to carry round data from one provider to another. All of these things are possible if we use technology as an enabler of public services.

Directgov and Business Link have started to introduce a different way of looking at online services, with the focus on customers rather than the service provider. Innovative local authorities have implemented customer relationship management systems, integrated contact centres and one stop shops to provide a similar focus on customers.

Technology has been an enabler of choice on *how* people consume – callcentres, online and face to face but critically it has to lead to more choice in *what* they consume. So once we move past how people use technology to book online, how public services use call centres to deal with clients, we can think about

the fact that opening up technology is also opening up information. And information is central to choice.

In short: if a person is told they have to wait locally six months for an operation, they can go online and find a place nearby where the waiting list is shorter.

As eGovernment Minister I am motivated by how IT can transform peoples lives. I visited an excellent example of this recently at the choice-based letting scheme in Newham, East London. This scheme has significantly changed the way social housing is allocated in the area by giving the tenants a greater say over where they live and which available accomodation best suits their needs.

Properties are advertised in the local press too but it's their interactive web-sites which the tenants have been most impressed with. Applicants can see the full range of available properties in detail and can apply for any home for which they are eligible. This more transparent scheme is enabling tenants to make much better informed choices.

By actively involving people in making decisions about their housing it gives the customers greater satisfaction as well as control. But also greater responsibility towards their housing and its self sustaining because it creates communities of people who have deliberately chosen to be part of the community.

As such, IT can also be the enabler of practical ways of linking and helping to build communities.

A great example, but not a unique one are the school children and crofters I met on the Isle of Lewis who are part of the wireless Western Isles project to reduce depopulation and bring people back to the island, making it competetive again. And if you think an island like Lewis suffers with particular problems associated with its location, I also met oil workers on the Elgin Franklin platform 240km off the coast of Aberdeen – half way between here and Norway – who are keeping up to speed online with their neighbours planning applications or booking their childrens driving tests online, during their shift change. Some of you may know the Eastserve project in the NW, a regeneration focussed wired-up community in East Manchester which has been a great success.

And I could go on and on about the inspirational examples I've seen but that doesn't detract from the fact that we know there is still much to be done. Reforms do not stop as we sit back and measure their success.

We must ensure that individuals can take advantage of an extension of choice by giving them clear, straightforward information and advice and we must ensure that providers don't limit choice by picking and choosing their least problematic clients.

We must also work harder to ensure that the third sector – voluntary organisations and social enterprise – have opportunity widened to them to deliver public services in partnership with the Government. We recognise that there are barriers in place, not least in the way we currently contract and we are committed to improving involvement of the third sector. To get the best providers we need a level playing field.

More fundamentally we should focus on tackling generational poverty, educational failure and lack of aspiration so that individuals are more confident about the new choices available to them. **Extending choice is about empowering people – but we also need to empower individuals to take full advantage of greater choice** and more opportunities to take responsibility for the decisions that affect them.

I sense that this Government will be judged as to whether we successfully recast public services so that they deliver for all and that they provide the foundation for individuals to fulfil their potential in life. This is the reason why we must begin by ensuring we fully and clearly explain our goals, our vision and routemap to reform so there is no doubt that social justice is a guiding principle for our reforms.