

## Launch of the Accenture Institute for Public Sector Value, 8 June 2006

Philip Cullum, Deputy Chief Executive, National Consumer Council

- People are passionate about public services. They care about them deeply, and often talk about positive experiences using words like *wonderful*, *brilliant*, and *excellent*. That's when they go well.
- When they don't go well, people talk about feeling *cheated*, *ignored*, and *made to feel small*.
- The difference is user focus and empowerment. That's why I'm so pleased that Accenture is setting up its Institute for Public Service Value, with its dual focus on outcomes and cost effectiveness. Efficiency and value for money in public services isn't all about processes and bureaucracy. It's actually about using taxpayers' money wisely to provide the services that people need, in a way that most suits the users.
- There is a popular narrative that most public services are failing. People have low expectations of these services. They see them as institutionalised, bureaucratic, and out of date. There's a sense of detachment between services and users. One consumer told us "*Common sense has gone out the window. There needs to be a lot more listening.*"

- This may in part be the product of a perception gap between what is actually happening in public services, and how people feel about using those services. Investment and modernisation have undoubtedly led to some real improvements in public services. And there seems to be a growing acceptance that consumers matter. Yet positive personal experiences tend to be seen as lucky flukes, or applicable only to a few particular services.
- Another factor could be the shift in people’s aspirations. Research conducted for NCC’s independent Policy Commission, chaired by Sue Slipman, found that 69% of the general public think we all expect and demand more of public services than we used to.
- This should be welcomed. A growing number are no longer scared to quiz their GP, and most no longer just meekly accept what a provider graciously decides to give them.
  - In the 1970’s the BMA ran a poster campaign aimed at patients –‘*Be a patient patient*’. Thirty years later BUPA has a poster that promotes a different view of the doctor-patient relationship: ‘*The patient will see you now, doctor.*’
- This cultural shift is worth celebrating. It’s a fantastic step forward in our society. It means that millions of people are at last much closer to getting the services they want and need.
- There’s been a shift too in political rhetoric. An array of politicians of all parties have signed up to consumer power in public services – from parents in education and patients in health, to tenants in housing.

- The reality on the ground remains quite different. Services are still too often run in a way that suits the providers rather than the users.
  - We've done lots of research on consumer attitudes and experiences in this area. One person we interviewed told us, *“Generally the public services provide what they are supposed to, but not easily, accurately or helpfully.”*
  - Another said *“I've found no-one who is in a position to help me, it's like being sent from pillar to post. What will happen to me, I don't know.”*
  - These aren't just a few isolated viewpoints. According to the National Audit Office, there are 1.39 million complaints, appeals and ombudsman cases every year across public services.
  
- And look at the findings of one health service study:
  - 28% of hospital inpatients said doctors sometimes talked in front of them as if they weren't there
  - 59% of mental health service users said they would have liked more involvement in decisions about their care.
  
- People tell us they lack control over public services, with little openness or accountability. One person said to us that if there is a public service ethos, it is that service providers are doing you a favour.

- It's the most disadvantaged consumers who feel greatest anger about all of this. Providers often dub these people 'hard to reach groups.' This is plain wrong. In truth, it's the services that are hard to reach.
- So the shift in political rhetoric is welcome, but it needs to be backed by tangible action on the ground. There is good reason to be optimistic, and there are already many positive stories about public services. An NCC survey looking at different services put post offices and local health services top. Banks and credit card companies came bottom.
- It's important for all public services to learn the lessons of the top performers. We've listened to consumers around the country about what marks out the best public services – what is the public service 'X Factor' that differentiates them?
  - People spoke about empathy, compassion, warmth, respect – taking the time to listen and respond to individual circumstances.
  - People usually say that don't really mind who delivers public services, so long as they're good.

- People don't want to throw away what the best public services can offer, and they don't want them to become a caricature of a business. No matter who provides public services, people want them to be more like public services, not less. One patient told us *"We want someone who listens and cares."*
- They expect public services to work with people, rather than just for them – a real partnership, to help shape the future.
- One of the great myths about public service consumers is that they will look out only for their own personal interest, not the public interest. The welcome truth is that people will speak for each other, not just for themselves. As one mother said to us: *'My daughter goes to a good school, but it makes me angry that others don't.'* People speak from their own experience, but our research shows the experience is often shared. And when they can exchange views, they soon speak for each other.
- The point here is that consumer focus and empowerment isn't an add-on, some kind of valuable side-line. It is not a strategy or a policy. It is the very essence of what makes great public services great. It's also a big part of the story about efficiency.

- So how do we ensure consumers really are empowered, and that public services really are built around the needs of the people who use them? I'd pick out four themes:
  - Aim for service excellence
  - Value people working in public services
  - Be responsive
  - Value the contribution of people who use public services

### 1. Aim for service excellence

- Looking at the first of these, **aiming for service excellence** is all about leadership. Public service leaders need to create the right conditions and values within organisations, so that staff can listen and respond with care to the person in front of them. In the NHS, when the cry goes up, 'bring back matron', people are really talking about leadership and excellence.
- The evidence suggests that customer satisfaction is driven by five key factors. Top is **delivery** – the way the service kept its promises, the way it handled any problems, and the final outcome. That accounts for almost a third of satisfaction. Next comes **timeliness**, then **information**. All too often services think they communicate – but that's not how it feels to people on the receiving end. Fourth and fifth are **professionalism** – whether staff treat you competently and fairly – and **staff attitude**.

## **2. Value people working in public services**

- That takes me onto our second theme, about staff. We need to value public service staff and equip them with the skills and tools they need to do their jobs excellently. Consumers empathise with the pressures that nurses, policeman and other providers are under, and they worry that they might be ‘paperworked’ to death.
- It is the individual relationships between patients and health professionals that most affect people’s satisfaction with services, and whether they feel involved and in control. So professionals need soft skills, such as listening and empathy.
- Valuing staff also means valuing their contribution, beyond the day-to-day practice of their jobs. In the best public services the interests of staff and service users are aligned. The evidence shows that NHS Trusts with staff reporting higher levels of direct involvement have better star ratings, shorter patient waiting times and lower patient mortality.
- We are currently undertaking a project in collaboration with the trade union Unison, looking at the common agenda between consumers and frontline workers. No-one goes into work in public services to do a bad job. As the Conservative leader David Cameron said at NCC’s public services summit earlier this week, there’s a real need to harness the skills and commitment of people working in public services – for the consumer good.

### 3. Be responsive

- My third theme is about **being responsive**. Talk to people about getting an NHS dentist or making a GP appointment, and they will say that the starting point has to be getting the little things right. It can be as basic as someone phoning back when they say they will, or getting a smile from the receptionist. You get updates on how long you have to wait, and someone takes responsibility for dealing with your problem rather than passing you on to someone else.
- Get the little things right and it sends a signal that this organisation respects and values the people who use it.
- We run a forum of organisations that represent different users of public services. One of them is Voice, which speaks for young people in care. For them, respect can sometimes be about a small but significant thing, which we'd all take for granted. When they move between residential homes, they want to be able to put their belongings in a proper suitcase or box, not in a black plastic bin bag. This is about treating people as individuals.

-

This takes me onto the issue of choice – one of the big battlegrounds in public services debates in the last few years.

- One of our current initiatives is a groundbreaking collaboration with the Confederation of British Industry and the voluntary sector organisation ACEVO, called the Future Services Network. We've got a conference of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, with Tony Blair and John Hutton as the keynote speakers. The Network has set out 6 key principles that we'd like people to sign up to. One of them is that people need more of a choice in public services. Research for the Audit Commission confirmed that people like to have a choice within public services where possible – and that it is people from lower socio-economic groups who value that choice most.
  
- But one of the issues at the moment is whether policymakers really understand the kind of choices that people want – and whether their vision of choice is about empowering consumers or putting a tool in the hands of managers.
  - NCC's work suggests that many people aren't that bothered about choosing which hospital to go to – they don't have the time, energy or expertise to make such decisions. They expect all hospitals to be of a high standard.
  
  - But they do want to be able to get to see a GP or have an operation quickly and at times that are convenient to them. Often when people talk about choice, they really mean responsiveness.

- So choice is best seen as a means to an end – and it needs to be more strongly focused on real consumer needs and experiences.
- There are also important issues about how information on consumer experience is gathered and fed back into services – using information from surveys and complaints data in feedback loops, to shape targets and improve services.
- One challenge the NCC has long campaigned on is for the take-up across public services of a consistent and rigorous way of measuring customer satisfaction. At present, just 13 public service agreements make any mention of people who use services and how they experience them. If this is not part of the performance framework, then all the talk of consumer power will mean little.
- Leadership on this might come from the local level.
  - One consumer told us recently: *“It’s stupid to say that there’s national targets, because every area and every city and every town and every village is all different, so why put them into the same category because they’re all in different situations.”*
  - The Local Government Association, eager to escape the restrictions of the current comprehensive performance framework, has signed up to a partnership with NCC to develop a customer satisfaction approach for local services up and down the country.

#### 4. Value the contribution of service users

- Last but definitely not least, we need to value service users. People who use public services are rarely passive recipients. Many already invest their time: almost 2 million of us are blood donors; and there are 170,000 volunteers across the NHS. Three quarters of a million people volunteer in schools, and 145,000 tenants in social housing are involved in users groups.
- We listened to consumers at a major Citizens' Forum that we ran in Nottingham with the CBI. They told us they wanted a greater say over how services are run, how resources are allocated and the standards that are set.
- But if consumers are going to get involved, they need to be confident their input will make a difference. There's nothing more disempowering than to be asked your view then see no change.
- This is about understanding and valuing the opinions and experiences of users. In turn it will change how users feel about the services. As one consumer said to us, '*If public services want respect, they have to give respect.*'

## **Conclusion**

- So that's our agenda, aimed at creating top notch, highly effective public services, with truly empowered consumers. Not trying to turn the public sector into the private sector, but cherishing what's best about public services. Learning from best practice, whichever sector it exists in. And having a diversity of supply, to meet the diverse needs of consumers.
- Our agenda is about leadership and service excellence; efficiency through single-minded responsiveness to user needs; and a partnership with consumers and staff. All aimed at bringing to life the services that people are passionate about.