

## The changing role of public service providers: why should scrutiny engage service users?

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Philip Cullum, Acting Chief Executive, National Consumer Council

- It's great to be here and thank you for inviting me to what I think is an important discussion.
- At the National Consumer Council, we see work on public services as a key part of our role. That's because consumers tell us how important they are to their lives. The quality and responsiveness of the local services that you provide can make a tangible difference to the quality of people's day to day existence.
- In fact, people tend to rate public services ahead of private services. In a recent NCC survey, we asked people about their views on a range of local services, both public and private. More people picked out a public service than a private service (36% vs 33%) as being best. And in terms of picking out the worst service, far more (59% compared with 18%) chose a private service.
- So people care about public services deeply. When things go well, they often talk about positive experiences using words like *wonderful*, *brilliant*, and *excellent*.
- But when things don't go well in public services, people talk about feeling *cheated*, *ignored*, and *made to feel small*.
- The difference is engagement and empowerment.

- People tell us they expect public services to work with communities and users, rather than just for them – a real partnership, to help shape the future.
- This is a theme that is now a standard part of the rhetoric of the leading political parties. Gordon Brown says that government ‘*must engage and involve people on the issues they face in their everyday lives.*’ David Cameron speaks of ‘*The revolution of freedom and control, of passing power to people.*’. And Nick Clegg calls for the devolution of ‘*power from the centre to communities and to individuals*’, with ‘*local solutions applied to local problems.*’
- But what does user engagement really mean? What does it offer to service providers? And how can we make it a reality?
- I want to say a little about three things:
  - User engagement as a top priority for local services, particularly in the context of scrutiny;
  - The essential characteristics of successful engagement; and
  - The myths about engagement which need to be overcome.
- In discussing these issues, I will draw on the NCC’s practical, hands-on experience of engagement in a wide variety of settings. We brought housing officers and tenants together to develop shared solutions to perceived challenges. We facilitated a dialogue between consumers, trading standards officers and businesses about the future of weights and measures rules – the results have shaped government policy. We’ve published the results of research with over 500 users of leisure services, housing and day care centres on when and why they get involved in shaping these services, as well as the perspectives of some of the providers of those services. We have assessed how well the Healthcare Commission engages patients. And I’m the chair of the new advisory committee on consumer engagement, set up by the Food Standards Agency.
- So, first, why is user engagement so important?

- I believe effective engagement leads to the best use of resources. It improves the way people value public services. And it makes your lives as councillors and officers easier and I hope more fulfilling.
- I know there's a debate about whether the language of 'the consumer' is appropriate in public services. Are people citizens, consumers, users, clients?
- I don't care what we call them. But I do believe that focusing on the attitudes and experiences of these people is vital to the development of our public services. This isn't about turning the public sector into the private sector, or imposing market values onto public services. It is about treating people decently – giving everyone access to essential services, ensuring they are of as high a standard as possible, and delivering them in a way that reflects the reality of users' lives.
- How can anyone really judge whether public services are any good without engaging the people they're meant to help? The people who experience services every day should be treated as the experts in evaluating them. Those who need public services but aren't getting access to them are equally expert in knowing why these services are failing them.
- People may not use same language as professional staff or understand all the technical issues. But in my experience, consumers can offer a great deal of insight into why a service is succeeding or failing, and what might be done to put things right.

- They are also remarkably good at taking tough decisions if you tee up issues in the right way. When we did our work on weights and measures, I remember the Trading Standards Officers talking passionately about why prescribed quantities were so important. Consumers told them they actually they weren't that bothered, and would prefer valuable resources to be focused on something else.
- So by engaging local people, you can get buy-in to tough decisions. This isn't about replacing the authority of councillors and officers, but allowing you to take decisions in a way that identifies and anticipates strong views, draws on expert insight into the reality of how services are delivered, and provides a new challenge to accepted wisdom on how things are done.
- This in turn can change perceptions about public services and the people delivering them.
- There still seems to be a popular narrative that many public services are failing. People see them as institutionalised, bureaucratic, and out of date. Above all, 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."*
- User engagement can help turn this round. It doesn't mean that local people will suddenly start agreeing with everything you do. But the evidence is that they are far more likely to have a positive view of public services if they've played a part in shaping them.

- Nowhere was the value of dialogue more evident than in our work with housing officers and tenants in Newcastle. The context for this was challenging – this is a relationship where tenants and officers are often perceived to have polar opposite views.
- The event got off to a pretty shocking start. When asked, for a gentle warm-up exercise, *“if you were an animal, what animal would you be”* one tenant chose a lion. The reason, he said, was *“I want to be a lion, so I can maul all these council workers to death.”* One housing officer initially left the room in tears, feeling that tenants were picking on her. The response from one of her colleagues was: *“Oh well, you will learn not to care anymore. If you are sensitive and too compassionate, then you are not made for this job. You have to build a wall of stone around your heart.”* Tenants in turn complained of feeling powerless in the face of what they felt to be the significant power over their lives held by housing officers.
- But after long discussion when it came to solutions, both sides were amazed to see how far the concerns of the other overlapped with their own. One officer said: *“They do seem to be the same problems, just crossing over”*. And one of the tenants remarked *“it’s as if we’ve all been looking at each other’s sheets, cos we’re all saying the same thing.”*
- This is a great example of one of the key characteristics of effective engagement – real dialogue and debate, with people on all sides opening up to others’ perspectives.

- Another essential element is that the engagement has got to be genuine. Users can smell “fake listening” a mile off. In some recent NCC research with people in some of the most disadvantaged communities in England, one person told us: *“They make a big deal about collaborating and listening... They’re communicating with us in the sense that they’re getting our views, but they’re not listening and responding appropriately.”*
- This means telling people the outcome of deliberations. People like to know what impact their involvement has had, and if they can see what difference they’ve made they’re far more likely to engage again. But if things just disappear into the ether, they’ll get frustrated and cynical.
- In another piece of NCC research, one leisure centre user said: *‘One does have a feeling... if there are constraints that make it much more important to do ‘x’ rather than ‘y’, that one wouldn’t be told the whole truth.’*
- It’s vital to be clear what’s up for grabs and what isn’t. Another person in our research with disadvantaged communities urged decision-makers to be honest about this: *“If you can’t do anything for people, tell them you can’t”*
- There’s a tricky balancing act needed here. Be open so that you’re not imposing your agenda on people and unduly constraining their ability to tell you what they think. But be clear with participants about the boundaries of the discussion and particularly any decisions that have already been taken.

- The good news is that it is possible to engage your local communities – they may be more ready to talk than you think. There are excellent examples of this happening on the ground...when people are not only consulted but are working with councils to design services that meet their needs. But it feels patchy.
- Getting this right, and more consistent across councils and throughout the range of local services, is really important. Particularly so in scrutiny. People tell us time and time again scrutiny is important to them – they want to hold services to account but often feel that being involved will make little difference.

### **How to engage people**

- We hear lots of reasons why councils and other organisations don't effectively engage local people. But many are myths that need to be challenged. Let me try to address five such myths.
- The first myth is that **most people don't want to be involved and all you end up with is the usual suspects**. As a leisure centre manager said: "*One customer did say that we should have more regular meetings and so on. And I thought, "I don't like the sound of that." You have got the possibility of a quango being generated, a little tight knit club that seems to have a lot of power. There was no way I was going to let that happen.*"
- In fact, around seven in ten people who use public services express views on their experience, in one way or another, at one time or another.

- People are not apathetic. It's true that they have hectic lives, with other responsibilities and interests – but our research suggests that people will engage if the topic is sufficiently relevant to them and it's pitched in the right way.
- But the way providers try to consult often puts them off. Many people don't feel comfortable with formal methods of engagement. They just are not interested in your questions and your language. And too often engagement is run in a way that suits the provider. One day centre user said: *'What I object to is that only the people who attend on a Tuesday are the people who are really consulted about how the centre runs... and basically the manager is inflexible, he's not prepared to meet on any other day. And as someone who only comes on a Monday and a Wednesday, I think I am being disenfranchised. Of course I'm able to put pen to paper. But that's not good enough, it's just not good enough.'*
- It's particularly important to engage people who aren't currently using services that are intended to meet their needs. As one person in our research in disadvantaged communities said, *"It's difficult for us to get anywhere, to say what we want."*
- The second myth is that **people will be too demanding** and that engagement will give them **unreasonable expectations**.
- In our experience, the reality is that people are remarkably undemanding, because they've got pretty low expectations of public services. One tenant told us, *'All I was asking for was one decent path for my wife to go up, my kids to go up, which they've not been able to do, and [the housing manager] really did fire at me, you know: "It's none of your business"... I ain't asking for gold...'*
- The campaign group A National Voice launched its "No bin bag" campaign after consultation with young people in care, which found that too many of them were having to move their belongings around in bin bags and not given suitable or appropriate luggage.

- A cancer charity was called in to help find reasons for why patients were dissatisfied with the level of service at an outpatient treatment centre. The answer was simple: the hospital car park only took two-pound coins. People didn't know, had to scramble to find one, some were late and became distressed. The simple solution of writing this clearly in their appointment letter meant that people were informed and better prepared, improving their whole experience of the service
- The third myth is that **people are individualistic and only interested in what they can get for themselves.**
- Well of course people are usually interested in the service they are getting – not unreasonably. A growing number are no longer scared to quiz service providers, and most no longer just meekly accept what they are given. This is a fantastic step forward in our society, and it means that millions of people are at last much closer to getting the services they want and need.
- But it is wrong to characterise consumers as simply self-regarding, particularly when it comes to public services. One of the main messages that comes across loud and clear in our consumer research is an understanding that public services are different. People know that there are resource constraints. They know that providing a service to one person may have an impact on someone else, and that there are important issues about fairness to be considered. And they think that a public service should be focused on the people who need it most.
- 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 fourth myth is that **you already know what users think.** Silence doesn't always mean approval. As a senior housing manager told us: *"We tend not to get many complaints of that nature, and perhaps because of that you get a bit complacent and*

*think ‘oh well, everything must be alright.’ But maybe we do need to stand back from time to time and just think about it a bit more carefully.”*

- Of course, councillors already provide an important means of gathering and communicating information about how local communities feel. Some councillors might feel undermined by the creation of different routes of user engagement. But I strongly believe that these should be seen as complementary rather than in opposition to one another.
- The fifth and final myth is that **internal systems of scrutiny are enough**. These are important, but users bring a different perspective and can challenge accepted views. One user put it like this: *‘You’ve got to challenge the provider to make the service better because if they think it’s OK they’re just going to sit back and on their laurels. You’ve got to push for them to provide a service because the service is supposed to be for us, not for the staff... They sometimes think that they know better than us. And that’s not always the case.’*
- That’s why NCC has been working with the Local Government Association to look at how key performance indicators and satisfaction measures best relate to local conditions. What we found was that they don’t measure the things that matter to people and their services.
- We have developed common data protocol, providing a baseline of consistency in measuring customer satisfaction without constraining councils which want to do more. This would allow far more sophisticated benchmarking.

### **Concluding remarks**

- I’m passionate about user engagement because I think it can have enormous benefits to local services – making them more efficient, effective and focused, increasing value for money and ensuring that taxpayers’ money isn’t wasted, and informing the work of officers and councillors.

- When we've asked consumers around the country about what marks out the best public services – what is the public service 'X Factor' that differentiates them – of course they want efficient delivery. But above all, people speak about empathy, compassion, warmth, respect – services that take the time to listen and respond to individual circumstances.
- That's why I truly believe that user engagement should be at the heart of how local public services operate and are evaluated. It shouldn't be an add-on, some kind of valuable side-line. User engagement is not a strategy or a policy. It is the very essence of what makes great public services great.