

Social productivity in a lost decade

In the face of a very tough decade for public service delivery there were some shining examples of citizen-service engagement.



Paul Buddery
Director of Strategy, Volunteering Matters
(Feb 2017– May 2020)
@buddypb

It has been a very bad decade for public services. For the people who depend on them and work in them, their experience has been dominated by cuts and closures. Unparalleled disinvestment has affected the least powerful the most grievously. This has not been the future that the 2020 Public Services Commission envisaged; and to begin a review of the Commission's legacy without acknowledging this unhappy – and for many, deeply damaging reality – would be obtuse.

The Commission had been well aware of the risk of service failure and retreat if fiscal and demographic challenges were not addressed. The coming crisis was part of our case for change. To avert it we rejected old style public governance as being paternalistic, centralizing and producer-led; and we rejected new public management as being transactional, consumeristic and market-led. Instead, we called for public services to be designed in order to increase what we termed their social productivity – they should be relational and citizen-centred. It was a change that would require fundamental and inter-related shifts – in culture, power and finance. Despite, and in some ways because of the deprivations caused by austerity, we have actually seen considerable progress against at least two of these – culture and power.

The shifts in culture we wanted to see were towards more participative, co-productive or even democratic forms of citizen-service engagement. In order to achieve valued social outcomes, citizens needed a stronger role in determining what these should be, and needed to be engaged more creatively in bringing them about.

Today, it is an approach that many services sign up to: the language of 'with not for' has become ubiquitous. Practically working it through is, of course, the bigger challenge, against which progress has been patchy. But the logic of the position is mainstream.

The recently published Independent Care Review in Scotland, which is looking at the care and protection of children, has involved children and young people at every stage and is proposing radical changes that reflects their priorities. In England, the NHS Long Term Plan includes major changes to system architecture, but these technocratic changes build on preventive and participative principles – the need to avoid 'care and repair' by engaging citizens and patients as capable citizens in promoting their own health.

In order to achieve valued social outcomes, citizens needed a stronger role in determining what these should be, and needed to be engaged more creatively in bringing them about

Over the last decade, much of the most exciting public service innovation has been in local government, where habits of municipalist planning and control have been giving way to new forms of system leadership and citizen engagement

The steady rise of youth social action, and the more recent promotion of local or neighbourhood ‘platforms’ through which individuals and communities facing multiple challenges can self-organise, share skills and experiences (Participatory City in Barking and Dagenham is one example) also express the culture shift the Commission proposed.

The shift of power that we proposed had several dimensions, but its main stage was geographic and administrative. There needed to be a shift of power away from an overly centralized state, down to more local control. Whitehall was, in language that has become popular since our report (Timms and Heimans, 2018), the quintessence of Old Power – top down, leader driven, institutional – characteristics that are sometimes useful, but are often overbearing and distinctly problematic if public services are to be judged and guided by their social productivity.

On this front, there has been a decisive, if complex shift. Devolution has been the most high profile change to our public service settlement over the last ten years. What that looks like in different areas of the country is very different – understandably given that it was introduced on the basis of ‘variable geometry’ and ‘deals’ between the centre and different local government and business partners.

How ‘Old Power’ or ‘New Power’ these new localities are in practice is still being worked through, but they are better placed to understand the strengths and priorities of their people and places, and to engage with them in implementing solutions, and to be held to account for outcomes than a Whitehall department. Over the last decade, much of the most exciting public service innovation has been in local government, where habits of municipalist planning and control have been giving way to new forms of system leadership and citizen engagement that bring together asset based service design and inclusive economic growth.

Progress in local government should, however, be read with a number of caveats in mind, most of which relate to the third shift proposed by the Commission – a shift in finance – against which least progress has been made. Local government innovation has been spurred by drastic reductions in funding, so the new ‘deal’ that some local authorities have been making with their citizens has been under the conditions of austerity. In other words, these citizen deals and systems of collaborations have been forged with very specific incentives. How much of them would survive the peace?

Many areas of public service decision making and provision remain firmly under Whitehall control in ways which cut across localist practice. The Commission had recommended localizing some welfare services, but welfare remains highly centralized. There are understandable reasons for this, but it does mean that local government services have often found themselves in the position of trying to mitigate the impact of central government programmes – the roll out of Universal Credit being the most jarring example.

Even more fundamentally, the funding base of local government is fragile. The local government funding formula determining the level of central government grant in England is a matter of ongoing political conflict, rather than a fixed constitutional agreement. Business rates, set in Whitehall, are increasingly problematic as business sites and business value go online. Council Tax is based on 30 year old property valuations – a can that cannot be kicked down the road indefinitely.

The Commission’s vision for 2020 public services was not realized. Austerity drained our social resources more rapidly than social productivity could renew them, and economic insecurity and social division have grown alarmingly. The Commission had warned against precisely these risks, but the limited implementation of some of its ideas provided only limited mitigation. Nevertheless, the vision remains strong, drawing our focus beyond sectoral improvement and towards broader, inter-related challenges of economic, social and environmental resilience.

Today, our resilience is being tested more painfully than at any time since the Second World War by a virus that has required massive state intervention, and has driven rapid self-mobilisation by communities. Given the dramatic scale of these upheavals, any suggestion that our public services will simply return to ‘normal’ once the horror of the epidemic has passed, and that our social contract will not carry the mark of events would seem fanciful. 2020 will, after all, turn out to be a historic moment for our public settlement. And in the long and difficult work of reconstruction, the Commission’s vision can still serve us well. ●