

Is choice just a weasel word?

Is the call for increased choice as part of public sector reform for real or is it about the marketisation of public services?

Most within local government have already accepted that we need to create more personalised and tailored services that meet the aspirations for a greater degree of choice by citizens. However, they still face the difficulties of ensuring both access and equity in service delivery is maintained whilst matching heightened public expectations.

Let us first deal with the myth that somehow choice is a big new idea that will transform public services in a consumerist society. Public choice theorists such as Milton Friedman were espousing ideas about consumerism back in the 1950s and concepts such as the Citizens Charter were enshrined in the principles of choice and a 'customer first' approach. Choice is nothing new. There are already many examples of choice that exist in services provided by local government at present. For instance in housing where some authorities are already offering potential tenants three choices in their desired area. When Council Housing is refurbished residents have a choice in terms of colour schemes for kitchens and bathrooms; local authority maintenance services offer repairs by appointment options. Local authority leisure centres offer a whole variety of sports and leisure activities that are not purely confined to those that are commercially viable, but invest in minority sports through development programmes. Local Parks offer a whole host of activities from nature walks to water sports and cultural festivals. Over the past few years' authorities have offered a range of methods of recycling from civic amenity sites, to composting, to kerbside collections, to bulky goods removal.

The point here is that in almost every service that local authorities provide consumers have a degree of choice. However, it is no bad thing to look at how the consumer's experience of public services can be improved and enhanced. So how can this be achieved?

Well actually it's not as difficult as some would have us believe, but it does involve a radical approach to the way in which local authorities think about providing services in order to co-ordinate a joined up thematic approach to delivery rather than the fragmented approach driven by service silos which has too often occurred in the past. There is nothing inherently unique in the private sector approach to consumer choice that makes private companies better at this than local authorities though within a commercial setting 'choice' is often based on the consumers ability to pay for a better product. However, the common theme of offering choice whether in a public or commercial setting is that it requires leadership, a focus on users, cultural and organisational change and the commitment and support of staff.

We must not however fall into the trap of believing that a slogan of 'consumer choice' can or should replace local democratic choice arbitrated through the ballot box. Councils and councillors often have to balance competing demands for scarce resources and unlike private companies cannot focus

exclusively on the highest returns. Rational decision taking needs to consider not only personal choice, but also wider community benefit in determining what is appropriate in any given set of circumstances. Local authorities are not supermarkets, nor should they ever become so.

Local Government cannot ignore the technological, economic and social change that has had a profound effect on had families, through work leisure and personal aspirations. Public services have to mirror these societal changes and evolve to tailor provision to modern needs. This means packaging services to meet the needs of diverse social groupings or individuals.

For families with young children this is about ensuring appropriate forms of care, extended nursery provision and family friendly facilities for leisure time to ease the strain of modern living. For the ever-growing numbers of elderly people and those with disabilities, it could be about all encompassing packages of cleaning, care, shopping, gardening and repairs. But can these new choices be provided free of charge? Sadly probably not! Whilst some universal specifications that underpin service levels need to be set as a gold standard it is likely that choice will lead to more strategic decisions to charge for enhanced services. Payments could be set on ability to pay but affordable pricing policies would need to underpin this approach. The recent charging powers contained within the Local Government Act 2003 enables authorities to experiment with some of these ideas and provides a staged approach for developing charging strategies that hopefully will not see choice becoming choice based on ability to pay.

The challenge for the future is to reinvigorate public services, rather than fragmenting the approach to achieving this through the illusion of choice based on quick win slogans or the concept of competing providers. It makes more sense to respond to the needs of modern society in a co-ordinated yet user-friendly manner. Recently appointed Communities and Local Government Minister Ruth Kelly MP could create the opportunity for modern public services that are highly regarded by all citizens by enshrining these principles as a fundamental basis within the much anticipated Local Government White Paper.

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