



## Power to the people!

*Can the personalisation agenda really create an empowered public willing to engage in a user-led public sector reform agenda?*

In the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons in May outlining his priorities for the next legislative programme, he was keen to stress that he would look at ways he could help families affected by rising fuel and food costs. But this did not detract from a key Brown theme – reform of public services.

Gordon Brown has consistently pushed the agenda for more personalised and responsive public services. But this announcement is marked out by a series of proposed legislative changes that will provide a regulatory framework to support the Government's objectives. Few in the public sector would question the need for a strong customer focus in delivery of public services. But what does personalisation really mean to the UK's public sector?

At 'bread and butter' level personalisation could simply mean better access to services and responsiveness when contact is made. Or, at a more far-reaching level, it could signal the introduction of rights to individualised budgets for people to spend on public services as they wish.

Councils have already taken personalisation on board at a bread and butter level; for example social housing maintenance services now offer appointment based systems with innovative practices such as text message reminders to residents so they don't miss appointments. The e-government targets, already met by councils, have also allowed for huge improvements in responsiveness – with out-of hours services allowing access to on line payments of council tax and other bills. Call centres, allowing working people the opportunity to contact the council when they need to, are another success story, as is the 'choice based' lettings system for social housing.

But are these welcome changes going far enough? Clearly, Gordon Brown thinks not. The legislative programme contains a number of ambitious changes to the way in which the 'social contract' will operate between the UK's public services and the public they serve. In return for taxation revenue and the on-going investment in public services the Prime Minister is determined to see 'fairness' as the guide for public sector reform. So, legislative changes will now include a new Education Bill, specifically aimed at dealing with underperforming schools, and a new NHS Reform Bill, which will establish an NHS constitution setting out entitlements to minimum standards of

access, quality, safety and patient information. But it is local government that will arguably see the greatest reform.

Communities and Local Government Secretary, Hazel Blears, has made no secret of the fact that, having devolved power from Westminster to local government and from local government to the community, she wants to see power in the hands of individual citizens. The Community Empowerment Bill aims to give people greater influence over local spending decisions, ownership and use of local assets and influence over council agendas that affect them. This Bill, coupled with individualised budgets in social care, means you could be forgiven for thinking we have witnessed the creation of a 'People's Nirvana' of citizen empowerment and engagement.

However, few in local government have yet bought into the ideal. It is not that councils do not want to deliver more personalised services – they do and in many areas have successfully implemented changes. The trouble is that, in the harsh reality of service delivery, truly personalised services could rocket costs and destroy the 3% year on year financial efficiencies that councils are obligated to make. Choice and voice are not always easy bedfellows with efficiency, fairness and sustainability.

For example, most residents would feel a personalised bin collection service would mean a weekly collection of all household and recyclable waste. In reality recycling targets would be more difficult to meet (chuck it in the bin because it will be collected anyway?) and many councils could ill-afford to double bin collections by maintaining weekly collections of household waste and introducing weekly collections of recyclable waste. Alternate weekly waste collections therefore, though markedly unpopular with Joe Public, can make all the difference to achieving an affordable service and increased recycling activity, not to mention the carbon footprint of the refuse wagons if collection rounds were to be doubled. Similarly in social care the fear amongst social care professionals is that despite the attractiveness of individualised budgets there will be a large volume of residual care cases that only the council can fill: namely the more complex care cases that the marketplace cannot deliver. This could leave councils facing the diseconomies of scale brought about by fragmentation of the care markets, as the volume of work they control reduces and so too the ability to negotiate on care package pricing. Local authorities are fearful they will need to deal with the most complex care cases but with less expertise and financial resources drained into bespoke packages that deliver for an individual but create problems for the 'collective' service users.

Responding to user satisfaction is now commonplace in the public sector. Citizen satisfaction is forever improving in individual council services. This indicates to me that most citizens are able to accept a sensible reason as to why a service needs to be delivered in a particular way. Perhaps on-going dissatisfaction in some areas of the public sector is more to do with communication than lack of personalisation, though they may be two sides of the same coin.

There is a real danger with the personalisation agenda that citizens will have their hopes raised about what they can expect from public services only to find that the

harsh reality of delivery and financial constraints means choice and greater personalisation of services will be inevitably limited. Councils must avoid at all costs promising something they are unable to deliver on. And Government must also avoid imposing unrealistic goals of 'personalisation' on councils if the newly reached concordat between central and local government is to remain intact and meaningful. Personalisation of public services is to be welcomed but it must be about evolution not revolution.

Mo Baines is Principal Advisor with APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence)

This article was first published in Public Servant Magazine