



**CBI Public Services Summit - Panel debate: 'Improving outcomes for people through performance, collaboration, innovation', 26 June 2008**

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- I met an expert in public service reform last week. I was doing a speech to an audience of people from the social care world, and he came up for a chat afterwards.
- He lives in a residential home. He told me he is irritated that the people running his home don't treat him as a consumer. He feels 'done to' rather than being in control of his own life. But he isn't putting up with it.
- One recent bone of contention was where he could leave his wheelchair. He liked leaving it in the hallway. They said that he couldn't, because it was a fire risk. So, he told me, I called the fire brigade and got them to come round. They said it was fine to leave my wheelchair in the hall.

- I found his story inspiring. It reflects a wider change, in terms of how people relate to public services these days. People want to be engaged in how services are run. They want public services to be personal to them, but also meet the needs of the rest of the community. They are the experts, because they know what is or not working and what might be done to put things right.
- The title of this session talks about improving outcomes for people. People tell us they don't just want public services to work for them. They expect services to work with communities and users – a real partnership, to help shape the future.
- NCC asked people about their experiences of housing, employment services and care in the home. We wanted to see if things varied depending on whether the provider was from the public, private or third sector. There were some differences – but we found across the board that there was rarely enough dialogue. People want to be listened to – but most service providers are much better at providing information than engaging users.

- When public services get it right, people are incredibly positive. One consumer told us: *‘They’re different from anywhere else. They actually remember conversations you have. They’re listening to what you say and not just sound like they’re doing it for the job and that.’*
- But in some recent NCC research in the most disadvantaged communities in England, the big message from consumers was about what they called ‘fake listening.’ One person said: *“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.”*
- Around seven in ten people who use public services express views on their experience, in one way or another, at one time or another. Our research suggests that most people are willing to help service providers improve what they do, but they doubt this will make a difference so they don’t bother. The message for service providers is why not engage people to help make services better.

## Shared solutions

- Nowhere was the value of talking to each other more evident than when NCC and Unison brought together housing officers and tenants. The context for this was challenging – tenants and officers are often at loggerheads.
- As part of the project, we held a workshop in Newcastle. The meeting 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 a day's discussion, when it came to thinking about 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 collaboration – real dialogue and debate, with people on all sides opening up to others' perspectives.
- This shouldn't come as a surprise – or certainly not if you read McKinsey Quarterly. A recent McKinsey article picked out eight technology trends for businesses to watch. Number one was distributing co-creation, forging new links between organisations. Number two was using consumers as innovators. They commented: *"Companies that involve customers in design, testing, marketing... and the after-sales process get better insights into customer needs and behaviour and may be able to cut the cost of acquiring customers, engender greater loyalty, and speed up development cycles."*
- There's a big lesson here for public services too.
- It means engaging consumers as early as possible, and in different ways right throughout the decision-making process.

- For example, as you'd expect we're great supporters of user focus in commissioning public services – but we also want to see greater user engagement in the commissioning process. Intelligent commissioning means getting more insight into the diversity of consumers and communities, and what they need – then building the user perspective into service design and specifications. But this isn't just a paper exercise, it should also involve direct discussion and debate wherever possible.
- And then consumers should also be involved as lay inspectors, to assess whether services are actually delivering what was promised.
- As one tenant put it to us, *'But who is the expert living in your area? It's you.'*

## **Conclusion**

To sum up...

- Users want to work alongside providers to make services better and to innovate – but this depends on organisations being open to new ideas and to different ways of interacting with users. Innovation is too important just be left to the professionals alone.
- Engage people as early as possible, and in as many different ways as possible

- Together, users and providers can create the top notch, innovative public services that we all want.