FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

How people want their public services to change

Natan Doron & Andrew Harrop

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Acknowledgements

Summary

This research reports on a series of focus groups and polling that were conducted in spring 2012 to find out what people think about public service reform. The views revealed in this research present some strong challenges to the government's 'open public services' programme of reforms. Some of the main findings were:

- Only a minority support the government's view that there should be 'no default', with the private sector as an equal provider alongside public agencies. 62 per cent of people thought that public services should be provided mainly or only be government.

- We also found concern regarding the practical implications of an enlarged role for non-state providers, and also strong support for the view that public services are inherently different from business and there are limits to the extent they should become more business-like. 64 per cent of people agreed that public services should not be run like businesses but rather depend on the values and ethos of the public good.

- When participants talked about choice they focused on the importance of being able to access the right local school or hospital for them. They almost never equated this to a greater diversity of provision or an increased role for non-state providers. This is illustrated by the fact that whilst increasing user choice was the third most popular method for improving services, allowing private companies and charities to deliver more was the least popular of eight options provided.

- We found very strong suspicion of public service reform narratives used by politicians, especially the terms 'reform' and 'choice'. Many participants thought that politicians intended to privatise services when using these terms. 53 per cent thought that 'public service reform' means lots of time and money being spent reorganising when a politician uses the phrase.

- The public place high priority on staff having more power to drive improvements for themselves, perhaps as a consequence of reform agendas that have often been pitched 'against' staff. 59 per cent thought giving staff more decision making power would improve services.

- The research suggests caution is needed when it comes to abandoning government accountability. People instinctively prefer user and staff led change to the perceived 'heavy hand' of Whitehall, but when they reflect they invariably see a place for ministerial action. 62 per cent of people thought that government ministers requiring national standards would improve services.

- Not all localisation is seen as positive and policy makers need to be clearer about what kind of devolution of responsibility service users actually welcome. Whilst there is some scepticism about the capacity of local politicians and public service managers to improve services, reforms that promote greater collective 'voice' are well received. 70 per cent thought increased user voice would improve services.

A deep understanding of public attitudes will be necessary for a public service agenda to carry majority support. There are clear challenges to the government's reform agenda in these findings, particularly people's enduring preference for the state as the main provider of services. But the Labour party also needs to take note of the hostile perceptions of local government and public service bureaucracies. More positively there are a host of opportunities to work constructively with service users and public service workers to deliver a public services agenda that goes with the grain of public opinion.

If public services in the UK are to remain of world-class quality we must understand how to balance efficiency with more relationship-focused delivery with a focus on the spirit in which services are delivered, not just the transactions they deliver. Above all, as public services change they need to preserve the essence of what the public say they value in government provision: 'the values and ethos of the public good'.

FOREWORD

Brendan Barber

TUC General Secretary

Under the guise of 'reform', this government is making sweeping changes to our public services. David Cameron says that state structures will be dismantled, "brick by brick" and will no longer be the default provider of public services. In the Open Public Services white paper, the vision is of services like health and education not as public goods nor institutions based on a collective ethos, but as "individual services".

At the same time, unprecedented cuts are changing the face of public services, as local councils, schools and hospitals struggle to deliver the high standards they take pride in with diminishing resources. In the 15 months from the end of 2010 to the first quarter of 2012, almost 280,000 jobs were lost across the public sector.

The portrayal of public services by ministers and parts of the media as monolithic and slow-moving, along with the demonisation of public sector workers as 'enemies of enterprise' has set the tune for this double attack.

But the vast majority of the public still have a deep-rooted commitment to the public sector ethos and affection for our public institutions. Danny Boyle's tribute to the NHS in the Olympic opening ceremony demonstrated the centrality of our universal healthcare system in the national psyche and the nurses and patients dancing in the ceremony showed the deep personal bond felt by those who work in and use the NHS.

This double attack also elects to ignore the huge innovation that exists in the public sector, much of it driven by staff and their unions, through formal arrangements such as the Social Partnership Forum in the NHS or through initiatives at the workplace level, like efforts to tackle climate change led by unions and managers in tandem at Bristol City Council.

The work set out in this pamphlet brings to life public attitudes to public services and discourses around 'reform'. Importantly, it sets out to challenge the assumption that the answers to our problems are individualist rather than collective. It finds that the public view, far from being aligned with the government's, is highly suspicious of market-based approaches to public service and of bringing in private providers.

This piece is only a snapshot of a complex cultural, psychological and political issue, but it is an important attempt to challenge common themes about attitudes to the state and the debate around public service 'reform'.

There are lessons to draw from this work for all of us who support the welfare state and public services.

We must be bolder about speaking up for the public structures that we all encounter, benefit from in our daily lives and might take for granted - from clean water to safe streets to school dinners and maternity services.

One of the striking findings in the polling was that there was a low level of awareness of the multitude of ways in which people come into contact with, and benefit from, public services.

Second, we need to talk in specifics and in ways that relate to people's experience. Abstract concepts and seemingly remote institutions do not necessarily capture the imagination. We know from the work of Ipsos Mori that 'local government', for instance, is not a phrase that inspires great warmth. But talk about specific services – the local youth centre, the carer, the people who clean the estate – and this resonates.

Third, we should not be afraid to talk about ideology either. We have a responsibility to expose the ideology behind the government's reform agenda. This pamphlet and polling by other organisations show that the idea that people just want what works for them, whatever the means, is flawed – there is a real understanding of the importance of public services as a public good, something that makes a better society. There is sometimes a fear of talking about ideology, but when we combine facts and ideology we have a powerful case to make about the damage that the government is doing.

Fourth, we need to be relentless in our pursuit of an alternative economic model focussed on jobs and growth and on fair taxation of the super-rich and corporations who for too long have not paid their way. Rebuilding our tax base in this way will enable us to invest in public services to meet the growing needs of an ageing and changing society.

Finally, we must promote our own vision. Some like to caricature unions and the left in general as anti-reform or as vested interests. In fact we have our own vision, of properly resourced, publicly delivered and accountable services, with a strong role for staff and users in developing approaches that work best for people – flexible, modern and innovative, but at the same time upholding the core values of public service.

1 INTRODUCTION

"So let me tell you what our change looks like. It's about ending the old big government, top-down way of running public services and bringing in a Big Society approach…releasing the grip of state control and putting power in people's hands. The old dogma that said Whitehall knows best – it's gone. There will be more freedom, more choice and more local control."
David Cameron, 2011

The coalition government is in the midst of delivering a radical agenda of public service reform. With this transformation accompanied by huge cutbacks in public spending, this parliament will mark a crossroads for public services in the UK. But is their reform programme something that the public actually want?

The short answer is no. The picture that emerges from new Fabian Society research is a rich tapestry of ideas and attitudes, which at times suggest that public opinion is directly opposed to the coalition government's proposals. There is significant public concern regarding the nature of providers and lukewarm feelings about the localisation of services. The research indicates that while many like 'choice' when it comes to their own use of services they are suspicious of the unintended consequences of bringing in new types of providers and creating markets for public services.

We asked people for their ideas on what would improve services and for the most part they preferred options close to home: more choice, voice and control for people using services and for frontline staff. While acknowledging a role for effective public service management, there was a sense of suspicion of or frustration with what we call 'the middle tier': local politicians, public service managers and corporate contractors. By contrast there was enduring faith in the role of central government – alongside support for frontline control people continue to believe it is often Whitehall's role to drive change from above.

This is something of a paradox as the research also reveals deep mistrust in the intentions of national politicians when it comes to public service reform. To the extent that people engage at all, they associate political rhetoric on public services with waste or covert privatisation . Even the vocabulary of 'choice', which people like when it comes to their own encounters with services, is greeted with deep mistrust when it falls from the lips of the political classes.

2 OPEN PUBLIC SERVICES: THE PEOPLE'S VERDICT

Diversity

> *"From now on, diversity is the default in our public services. What does that mean? It means that instead of having to justify why it makes sense to introduce competition as we are now doing with schools and in the NHS, the state will have to justify why it makes sense to run a monopoly... The old narrow, closed, state monopoly is dead."*
> David Cameron, 2011

The coalition government's Open Public Services programme seeks to move the default in public service provision from being the public sector to 'any qualified provider'; in other words to create a 'level playing field' between state and non-state providers of services.

We tested public appetite for this principle and as seen in Table 1 below, only 33 per cent of respondents who answered supported this principle. By contrast 62 per cent thought that public services should be mainly or completely delivered by government. This broadly reflects support for the status quo, since most services are today wholly or mainly delivered by public bodies. It suggests that the apparent 'common sense' of having no default when thinking about who should deliver a public service is nothing of the sort: there is strong popular attachment to a 'state first' view of public services.

Table 1: Thinking about the provisions of tax-funded public services, do you think they should be provided mainly by national or local government or mainly through private companies or charities?[1]

Only through government	18%
Mainly through government	44%
Both equally	33%
Mainly through private companies or charities	5%
Only through private companies or charities	0%

Survey respondents were also suspicious of the effects that increasing the number of non-state providers would have on services. Table 2 below shows that people are most likely to give negative answers when asked what an increased role for non-state providers would mean for services. 43 per cent believed it would lead to waste, duplication and profiteering. 40 per cent saw the diversifying of providers as unfair as opposed to 16 per cent who thought it fair. Only 13 per cent of respondents saw the increased diversity of providers as a means to improving services.

Table 2: Traditionally most public services have been delivered directly by government, local government or public bodies like the NHS, but some say there should be a bigger role for other organisations such as private companies or charities. Which TWO or THREE of these statements, if any, come closer to your view. Having a more numerous and diverse range of organisations delivering public services, including private companies and charities…?

Leads to waste, duplication and profiteering	43%
Is unfair, because it means services become uneven and differ in quality, so some people will do better than everyone else	40%
Makes services worse for most people	26%
Drives up efficiency and improves value for money	17%
Is fair, because it gives everyone more choice and means services can be shaped to individual needs	16%
Improves services for most people	13%
None of these	3%
Don't know	17%

In the discussion groups, participants believed that the suitability of non-state providers was determined to a large extent by the nature of the service in question. Some participants suggested that private providers were not suitable for anything they considered to be a 'major service', defined by one participant as 'hospitals and policing', for example. This supports findings from previous research showing that the public care about who delivers services and how, not just the results. Research by Ipsos MORI has shown that people are willing to tolerate lower standards of delivery and efficiency in public services in order to preserve a 'public sector ethos' (Public Services 2020, 2010). When asked to explain why non-state providers were unsuitable, this participant argued that the profit motive would increase chances of corruption and reduce accountability.

Female 1: You've got more chance of corruption and things like that because nothing's accountable if it's a private company, it's just who makes the most money.
Male 1: And I think we touched on it over there, it would become

a profitable thing, not for the people basically, it would be 'well I'm in charge'
Female 1: And also if you let a private company take over then prices could go sky high after a couple of years.
[Gillingham]

It is significant that the participant in this exchange uses the language of 'for the people'. The research shows that people place an importance on whether the provider of a service is a for-profit organisation or not. Many participants stated that if a service involved human contact it was less appropriate for a private company to be involved in service delivery.

> **Female 1**: I think it often depends on which service it is as well, there's so many different services. Whereas most of them are dealing with things, but the NHS is actually dealing with people's lives isn't it?
> **Moderator**: Can you say a bit more about that?
> **Female 1**: Well you know if you don't get your waste collected you probably wouldn't die, but if you don't get a really good service in hospital you could die.
> **Female 2**: It's true.
> **Female 1**: And I just think, it's people, you know?
> [Carlisle]

This emphasis on the nature and motivations of providers was also reflected in the survey results. In our poll, we asked respondents to say how convincing they found a number of statements for and against government services. Two of the statements considered whether services should be run more like businesses. 60 per cent of respondents found the first statement convincing: 'services like health and education should not be run as businesses. They depend on the values and ethos of the public good' compared with only 29 per cent who were convinced by: 'Government does things very inefficiently. We should let private companies or charities run more of our services'. Responses to these questions are politically polarised but even among Conservative supporters more people found the first statement convincing (48 per cent compared to 46 per cent)

Table 3: Below are a number of statements about public services. How convincing or unconvincing an argument in favour of/against public services do you find each one?

	Services like health and education should not be run as businesses. They depend on the values and ethos of the public good.	Government does things very inefficiently. We should let private companies or charities run more of our services.
Very convincing	33%	8%
Fairly convincing	27%	21%

Total Convincing	**60%**	**29%**
Neither convincing nor unconvincing	18%	25%
Fairly unconvincing	10%	19%
Very unconvincing	6%	18%
Total unconvincing	**16%**	**37%**
Don't Know	6%	8%

These findings challenge conventional thinking about what people value from providers of public services. Many politicians have taken for granted that people's overwhelming concern is about waste in the public sector and want the best value provider for the job, whoever that may be. Talk of 'the values and ethos of the public good' has often been dismissed as special pleading by existing incumbents. It turns out that this argument attracts wide public support – and that people are far less relaxed about independent provision of services than the government appears to assume.

Localism and the 'big society'

Another central plank of the coalition's public service reform programme is a presumption in favour of more localised services. The research found that the public is divided on the general idea of giving more power to local areas to make decisions – with a slight preference against.

Which of these statements comes closer to your view?[2]

44% | **'Giving more power to local areas to run public services is a good way of making these services more accountable and responsive. I think it's a good thing.'**

56% | **'Giving more power to local areas to run public services means that the richest communities will have better services and there will be a postcode lottery. I think it's a bad thing.'**

This mixed picture is further complicated because people have different views depending on who in the local area is to get more power. One clear finding from both the survey and the discussion groups is that giving more power to local agencies was not as popular as service users gaining more direct involvement in holding a service to account.

The group discussions revealed that part of the reasoning behind this was that whilst direct involvement in accountability was popular, there was a mistrust of what can be termed the 'middle tier' (elected local politicians or managers of services). Some of this was built on an anti-politician sentiment. The criticisms of locally elected politicians were based on some participants' frustrations with experiences in their local areas.

Male: Basic flaw with that. Very rarely does the politician that we elect live in the borough.
[Gillingham]

For other participants, a frustration with current standards of service brought them to single out managers for criticism.

Female: It's the managers that are the sticking point isn't it, all these managers who have no idea about hospitals.
[Carlisle]

It is important to understand that when criticising managers, many participants were referring to those driven by business interests as opposed to professionals with deep first-hand knowledge of the service, a point we explore later in the report.

Concerns with the 'middle tier' were echoed in the poll, where respondents considered giving power to local politicians and service managers as among the least effective ways of improving services (see pages 17-18 for more detail). We can't however say from these findings whether these suspicions reflect a single source of concern (about distance from the frontline, for example) or whether it is a coincidence that people were hostile to different 'middle tier' options for a range of unconnected reasons.

Views were mixed on the government's flagship 'big society' idea – that people should actually take over services for themselves. When considering a variety of options for improving services this was the only proposal to receive equal levels of endorsement and opposition (see page 18 for full results).

In the discussion groups these mixed views were echoed, with cautious support from some participants invariably followed by concerns raised by others.

Female: I mean it's a lovely idea but ... you have got to have standards to measure things by; in education everyone has to work towards something.
[Peterborough]

One of the main problems that participants had with the idea of people taking control of a service was about the expertise needed to deliver a service effectively.

Female: And also as well, unless you're a teacher, and you've been to university and you know how to teach, how can you go ahead and say 'right, I'm going to open a school' when you don't know anything about education?
[Gillingham]

Interestingly, the above criticism of a 'big society' approach to service delivery is in many ways a defence of a role for effective public service managers. Like government targets, managers are at times derided in the groups as being part of the problem but are also mentioned as a useful brake

on high-risk innovations.

In addition there was also a concern that the ability to take over and deliver a service would only really be feasible to those with sufficient education, income and spare time. As one participant suggested, these would be people 'at the top' (although the concept was hardly more popular among people in ABC1 social groups than those in C2DE).[3]

> **Female 1**: The ones that have got money would be the ones at the top
> **Male 1**: Yep, and the people that haven't got money wouldn't stand a chance. It would split society wouldn't it?
> [Gillingham]

We can see then that both localism and direct service user control create mixed reactions: they are as likely to alienate as they are to inspire, and perhaps leave many cold. As the government has found over the last two years, neither has become an energising project which people can unite around.

Importantly these mixed feelings are not evenly distributed across the population but reflect political dividing-lines. Both user control and localism are significantly more popular with Conservative than Labour supporters (except that Labour voters seem to have similar levels of confidence in local councillors to improve services as Conservatives). People considering switching to Labour are rather closer to the views of existing Labour voters than they are to Conservatives. It's not of course possible to say from this data in which direction the causality runs: people may be picking up cues from politicians they identify with, or vice versa.

Choice

Respondents were generally very positive about the idea that people should be offered a choice of public services, and this is seen as an effective way to improve the quality of services by a majority of people. Some participants did, however, suggest that whilst they liked the idea of choice, what they really wanted was high standards across all choices.

> **Female**: ...I think we should be able to choose, it's a long time since I've dealt with schools, but I do think we should be able to choose where our children want to go. If [one school] is empty and everybody wants to go to [another school] … then there's something wrong with the system, because the standard should be the same across the schools. But as a citizen I want to be able to choose.
> [Peterborough]

The group discussions revealed that for participants, choice was primarily about the way in which they experienced a service and was sometimes about more than just standards. This is consistent with existing studies such as the work done by Ipsos MORI for the 2020 Public Services Trust.

Male: Well there's a lot of things that dictate choice of schools, it's where you live, things like accessibility... not just the standard. [Peterborough]

Invariably in the qualitative research when participants talked about choice they latched on to the importance of things such as being able to access the right local school or hospital for them, or a greater choice over aspects of the service experience such as appointment times. They almost never equated this to a greater diversity of provision or an increased role for non-state providers. The separation that people make between the idea of choice and the increased diversity of non-state providers can be seen in the survey data from this research. As shown on pages 17-18, choice is seen as a popular way to improve services whilst allowing private companies and charities to deliver services is the least popular way.

This research shows that choice remains important, but that doesn't mean people want more non-state providers. Indeed, increased choice within a public sector framework (i.e. a choice between different state providers) is likely to be more popular than choice involving non-state providers. Our research shows that this is especially true for those services involving human interaction. This is supported by British Social Attitudes research that showed respondents were positive towards the idea of choice whilst remaining negative towards the notion of non-state, particularly private providers (Curtice & Heath, British Social Attitudes, 2009).

Mistrust of politicians

The findings on choice reveal an important paradox. Whilst generally positive about choice people are also highly suspicious of politicians who talk about it. We asked respondents to say what they thought politicians mean when they talk about choice in public services and found that more than one third of people believe it is shorthand for privatisation.

Table 4: When you hear a politician talking about choice in public services, which ONE, if any, of the following do you think they mean most?	
"I'm going to privatise this service"	36%
"I'm going to give people more choice between providers"	16%
"I'm going to make providers compete for work from the state"	15%
"I'm going to give people more choice in how they use a service on things such as opening times and locations"	8%
None of these	9%
Don't know	17%

Similar suspicions were apparent when we asked people about what politicians' talk of reforming public services would mean for local services. An overwhelming number thought that public service reform would lead to

wasteful reorganisation, worse services or privatisation. Only a small minority expected to see any of the possible positive outcomes of reform: better services, more useful personal choices or more control by frontline staff.

Table 5: When you hear a politician talking about 'public service reform', which TWO or THREE, if any, of the following do you think this means for services in your area?	
I expect lots of time and money will be spent reorganising	53%
I expect services to get worse	46%
I expect services to be privatised	39%
I expect services to get better	15%
I expect to have more useful choices about the services I use	11%
I expect local staff to be given more control over how services are	9%
Something else	4%
Not applicable, I don't know what they mean	12%

In addition to and perhaps because of the mistrust and negativity towards politicians when they talk about reform and choice in public services, respondents stated that they wanted to know the details of what politicians intend to do when it comes to making services better.

Hearing the detail on reform 'Which of these comes closer to your view?'[4]

73% | I want to know the details of what politicians are doing to reform public services and how exactly it will make things better

27% | I'm not really interested in the details of what politicians are doing to reform public services; I just want them to get better

This may mark an important shift in the public mood. In the heyday of New Labour, critics of the government's approach to public services suggested that the public was switched-off by the detail of public service reform 'management-speak' and just wanted to see improving local provision. With this in mind, we expected to see a fairly high response for the second statement 'I'm not really interested in the details'. But in the wake of the coalition's NHS reform debacle, it seems that people do not feel comfortable saying this, if they ever did.

Rather people seem to want to hear the detail in order to satisfy themselves that politicians can be trusted. This creates a bind for the political classes. The research shows that the public is highly suspicious when they hear politicians set out proposals for reform of public services. But anyone who thinks the alternative is 'don't talk about it, just do it' will find themselves on the wrong side of public opinion too.

One must be cautious about speculating too much from a single set of results. But these findings should sound alarm bells for coalition ministers. On the reform of public services the public are both highly suspicious and seem to want detailed reassurance. The government could face a scenario where its reputation on public services becomes seriously 'toxic'. If this happens then it would then take a big public shift to re-earn a hearing.

3 IMPROVING PUBLIC SERVICES: VIEWS ON WHAT WORKS

From both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research it was clear that views of what constitutes 'public services' were varied and somewhat distorted. For instance, in our survey, 19 per cent of respondents said that neither they, their family, nor their friends had used public services in the past few months. This sense of confusion as to what precisely constitute public services was borne out in the focus groups. All groups began with participants being asked to list public services they were aware of and some participants struggled to list any examples. In one group participants suggested that supermarkets were an example of a public service.

This has implications for the way that supporters talk about and advocate for public services, as has been explored in detail in the US context by American think tank Demos. This lack of awareness of the day-to-day impact of public services combines with other factors such as anecdotal evidence in the media or from friends about bad service experiences) to lead respondents to be more negative than positive about their experiences of using public services (a separate Fabian Society report will be exploring these findings in detail). What we have seen so far though, is that the coalition's position of more choice, more non-state providers and localised services are not necessarily the approaches that enjoy the strongest support from the public. So how do the public think services should be improved?

The first conclusion comes as no surprise - asking this question prompts high levels of confusion and doubt. In a series of survey questions asking people whether they thought different options for reform would improve services an average of 21 per cent answered 'don't know'. Similarly, in the group discussions some participants found it very hard at times to engage with the complexity of the options for reforming public services. This might not matter if more people had said they didn't want to hear about this detail but, as we have seen, a large majority say they want to be informed about reform of services.

Suspicion and frustration with politics provides the backdrop for public views on how services can be improved. In the discussion groups people often said they would support new forms of service delivery not because they thought they were superior in principle but because of impatience with current standards of delivery.

For example few people enthusiastically supported more active 'big society' forms of service delivery but many gave them their lukewarm endorsement as an alternative to the perceived failure of business-as-usual.

> **Female 1**: We don't really want control, no that's wrong, what I said was we don't really want control we want them to do it well, but as they're not doing it well, that's when you start...
> **Female 2**: Its despair isn't it?
> [Carlisle]

Similarly, support for greater public 'voice' in the steering of services was often the result of dissatisfaction with representative politics:

> **Female**: Yeah and that's the whole point of electing someone, they have the say for you, so if you'd done this you've put the local politicians out of a job, that's why they exist.
> [Gillingham]

We tested eight options for improving public services, of which four enjoyed positive net approval (ie more people thinking they would improve provision than did not). These were: groups of people holding a service to account, government ministers requiring national standards, people choosing between services and staff having control over services

Table 6: There are lots of ways it might be possible to improve public services. To what extent, if at all, do you think each of the following options would improve public services?[5]

	Would definitely / probably **improve** public services	Would definitely / probably **not improve** public services	Net Approval
Groups of people hold a service to account: local people have a voice in the decisions about running a service.	70%	28%	42
Government ministers require national standards: ministers can set national expectations and intervene in the running of services if they are not being met.	62%	38%	24
People choose between services: people are able to choose between services which have to compete for their custom.	60%	40%	20
Staff have control of services: staff who are working in delivering a service have control over decisions.	59%	41%	18
People take control of a service: local people come together to set up their own service or take over an existing one.	50%	50%	0

Managers choose between services: the manager of a local service controls a budget and chooses how to spend it by selecting between different providers.	42%	58%	-16
Local politicians control services: people elected locally can have the power to sort out local services.	41%	58%	-17
Private companies and charities deliver services: companies or charities bid against each other for the contract to deliver a service.	40%	60%	-20

As mentioned already, enhancing choice is one of the four options which attracts a positive overall assessment. The other three are however much more collectivist in their different ways. Giving people shared 'voice' to influence decisions is by some way the most favoured means of improving services (not a result we particularly expected). There was also significant support for national government being able to intervene and for staff control of services. These findings suggest that simply appealing to 'choice' alone will be less attractive than a mix of ideas for reform which include a strong collectivist dimension.

Mirroring the survey findings, the discussion groups were strongly supportive of 'voice' as a means for improving services (parent governors at schools and tenants associations were the examples discussed). Participants felt users of services would have the most interest in seeing services meet their needs, but some also emphasised the additional benefits of collective engagement for the community:

> **Male 1**: How does it make them better? Because the people who are using the services are having a direct say in how it's run, and what I think they'll want is having it run in a way that they think is going to benefit those people most.
> **Male 2**: People should always be accountable for their actions shouldn't they?
> **Female 1**: But it unites as well, because we were talking about how we don't feel part of anything, so people just sit back with their arms folded and let them get on with it.
> [Peterborough]

The popularity of central government intervention is a surprising finding, since this aspect of New Labour's public service agenda has been highly criticised. Indeed many of these criticisms came out in the group discussions. A recurring pattern in the discussion groups was that national targets would often be derided at first (perhaps partly because central action was always the first method suggested) before people warmed to and then advocated for them as the discussion progressed. A critique made in every group was that targets had frequently had unintended consequences that at times lowered the quality of service delivery. This has been referred to by journalist Simon Hoggart as "hitting the target but missing the point".

> **Female**: Waiting times I think, with some things, with things like exploratory examinations and things like that, MRI's things like that, it used to be a 9 month wait now it's a 4 week wait because of government targets. But on the other hand, patients aren't allowed to wait in A&E for over the time, so they come banging through the doors, 'this patient's going to breach' and they try and stick to them for the wrong reasons sometimes.
> [Carlisle]

Targets were often praised in response to concerns about other methods of service delivery. When people expressed concern about decentralisation leading to uneven levels of quality, participants often stated that national targets and standards would be an effective way to address such concerns. This echoes research by Ipsos MORI which has also shown that standards are a strong priority for the public, particularly in services such as health where 73 per cent preferred a national standard, over 23 per cent who thought a more locally-tailored approach was appropriate (Ipsos MORI, 2010).

> **Male**: If you don't have a national standard, you're going to get bigger discrepancies between areas, hospitals or whatever.
> [Carlisle]

Giving staff the ability to exercise more control was the fourth most popular method for improving services in the survey. This was reinforced in the discussion groups, with participants often seeing staff as having a better idea of how to improve services because of their day-to-day experience. Some participants defined this against the knowledge of government ministers.

> **Female**: The staff know what they're talking about because they're on the front line, whereas I think if you're speaking to a politician up in Westminster, they don't really care about what going on.
> [Gillingham]

A recurring theme in our groups was discussion of particularly powerful staff who could run a service efficiently. The groups featured discussion of matrons who were talked about with an element of respect and a sense of nostalgia.

> **Male**: I feel we've tried the old system for many years and it hasn't worked, we need to get, like we said, years ago hospitals were run by one woman, and she was a matron. And when she walked around it didn't matter whether they were surgeons, they ran for cover, because she ran the hospital, but she ran the hospital not for her benefit for the patients. Same as the head teachers, the head teachers had respect, you couldn't just go and do what you wanted to do…
> [Gillingham]

Many of the discussions about matrons and powerful head teachers were in the context of criticising distant managers. This suggests that the public

believe that previous frontline experience and high visibility are key components of successful public service leadership. People were positive about these 'practitioner managers' because they were clearly identifiable, known to service users and as a result seen as more accountable.

Enhanced staff control was often associated with services being run for the benefit of their users. People perceived that close relationships and first-hand accountability would mean staff were well placed to improve things for users (in contrast to some of the literature on public services which presents staff and user interests as frequently opposed, e.g. see Le Grand, 2003). Staff empowerment matters because negative perceptions of public services among participants usually turned on concerns with how relationships were handled not what they are objectively achieving. Frontline staff are clearly well placed to drive change when the public's concerns revolve around 'how' services do things, rather than 'what' they do.

In relation to the role of staff and their unions in driving improvements, there are already positive stories to tell. For instance, the joint 'Drive for Change' programme between government, public service employers and unions demonstrates the value of putting staff engagement at the heart of service improvement which can provide a platform for future policy making.

Staff empowerment does not need to be the antithesis of Whitehall intervention. Indeed, in the updated edition of his account of New Labour's public service reforms, Michael Barber (often seen as the guru of New Labour government targets) laments that reforms often failed to take staff along with them. A mix of central accountability alongside increased power for staff was clearly popular in our research.

> **Male**: If you have a government regulator and the staff doing things
> then I suppose you the best of both worlds.
> [Carlisle]

Turning to the types of reform people considered least likely to improve services, two of the three options are different variants of 'marketisation' (the first intended to capture the commissioning process of an internal market and the second the specific case of open competition from independent providers). This negativity demonstrates public cynicism regarding competition as a driver of public service improvement. However, it may not the principle of competition alone but its association with large impersonal structures that combines to create suspicion.

This thought arises because the third option considered unlikely to be effective was giving greater control to local politicians (in fieldwork that predated the unsuccessful city mayor referenda). It is notable that all three options for giving control to 'middle tier' organisations met with resistance – be they elected council leaders, professional public sector commissioners or large independent providers. It may be the perceived size, inflexibility and facelessness of these organisations which attracts hostility. Whether justified or not, central government seems to avoid being tarred with the same brush, perhaps because of the highly personalised nature of ministerial accountability in British parliamentary democracy. Another perspective may be that blame for low standards in delivery is often pushed from Whitehall to local government or public service managers. The Baby P scandal in the London borough of Haringey in which a child known to social services was

killed is an extreme example. This culminated in the high-profile sacking of Sharon Shoesmith, the head of children services at the borough sanctioned by the secretary of state (Ed Balls).

In the qualitative work participants often suggested that managers didn't understand the nature of service delivery. Some of the hostility was couched in the same language of 'business' versus 'the public good' highlighted in the quantitative survey. The following quotation was prompted by a question on the nature of managers in the NHS:

> Again, my only concern is, if that was years ago when you used to have matrons, if that was a nurse or a doctor, if they actually knew what they were doing, not a guy that was brought in for business, then I would say yes.
> [Gillingham]

Similarly, while participants in the groups were very positive about the role of staff in driving improvements, they made explicit distinctions between 'front-line' staff and managers. In particular, much of the negativity towards managers was based on what one respondent termed a 'business manager'. This implies that organisation leaders are not themselves are not seen as the problem, but rather a particular image of a commercially-oriented manager. This distinction reinforces the earlier point about people placing an importance on the values and ethos of the public good.

> **Female 1**: But if they could actually speak to the doctors and nurse and have an input, then maybe that could work quite well.
> **Moderator**: So you could get a mix of knowledge?
> **Male 1** & **Female 1**: Yeah.
> **Female 1**: But if it was a man in a suit.
> **Male 1**: They don't care do they?
> **Moderator**: Do you think it would improve the service?
> **Male 1**: I think it would if the criteria was right to improve the service. If they took into account what people doing the job are telling them then yes, but not if they're just there as a business manager.
> [Gillingham]

As well as a mistrust of managers being based on their perceived motivations (business versus public good ethos), there was also an element of mistrust based on a perceived lack of accountability. The extract below demonstrates that people value the role of effective management. It is the possibility of an unelected, unaccountable 'bad manager' that concerns them:

> **Female 1**: If they're not elected they could be doing what they want. They could be making the decisions.
> **Female 2**: They could be a really bad manager couldn't they?
> [Gillingham]

Finally, the research indicates that some options for reforming services are far more divisive than others when it comes to people's party politics. Giving more power to local politicians and frontline staff are equally popular across

party identification. All other options were more popular with Conservative supporters, but to greatly varying degrees. The most divisive option was outsourcing to independent providers, but enhanced choice is also strongly polarising. On most of the options 'swing voters' sit roughly mid-way between the views of Conservative and Labour supporters, although they are significantly closer to a Labour perspective on outsourcing to independent provision and closer to a Conservative perspective on user 'voice'.

Table 7: Methods of improving public services (party political differences). Percentage of people thinking each option would definitely/probably lead to improvement (ranked according to level of political consensus)

	Conservative supporter	Labour supporter	'Swing voter'[6]
Local politicians control services: people elected locally can have the power to sort out local services.	34%	36%	37%
Staff have control of services: staff who are working in delivering a service have control over decisions.	46%	50%	57%
Groups of people hold a service to account: local people have a voice in the decisions about running a service.	64%	56%	65%
Government ministers require national standards: ministers can set national expectations and intervene in the running of services if they are not being met.	59%	45%	52%
Managers choose between services: the manager of a local service controls a budget and chooses how to spend it by selecting between different providers.	43%	27%	35%
People take control of a service: local people come together to set up their own service or take over an existing one.	50%	33%	42%
People choose between services: people are able to choose between services which have to compete for their custom.	63%	39%	49%
Private companies and charities deliver services: companies or charities bid against each other for the contract to deliver a service.	51%	20%	28%

4 CONCLUSION

This research has shown high levels of support for public services delivered with the state as the main provider. Only a minority support the government's view that there should be 'no default', with the private sector as an equal provider alongside public agencies. We also found concern regarding the practical implications of an enlarged role for non-state providers, and also strong support for the view that public services are inherently different from business and there are limits to the extent they should become more business-like.

We found very strong suspicion of public service reform narratives used by politicians, especially the terms 'reform' and 'choice'. A new language for talking about how to improve services is needed. But while people distrust politicians when they talk about choice, greater personal control is popular and seen as a good way of increasing the effectiveness of services. This is not a green light for 'marketisation' but rather support for a range of person-level drivers of change – greater collective voice and more staff control are popular too.

Support for people power has its limits however. Views on 'big society' services, where users take control, were perhaps the most inconclusive, with the public split (partly on party political lines). While many like the idea this is often an exasperated reaction to 'business as usual' not a positive preference. Every time an argument was made in favour of greater user control, a practical or principled objection emerged against. Importantly, the questions of who gets involved and who benefits from increased localisation hint at public anxiety with the 'big society' agenda.

The public place high priority on staff having more power to drive improvements for themselves, perhaps as a consequence of reform agendas that have often been pitched 'against' staff. This fits well with our finding that people's concerns with services often turn on day-to-day relationships and interactions, which frontline staff are well placed to address. A key aim for policy makers and providers should therefore be to create the conditions in which we can design more 'relational' public services. To make this happen greater staff empowerment is both necessary and popular with the public.

The research suggests caution is needed when it comes to abandoning government accountability. People instinctively prefer user and staff led change to the perceived 'heavy hand' of Whitehall, but when they reflect they invariably see a place for ministerial action. Not all localisation is seen as positive and policy makers need to be clearer about what kind of devolution of responsibility service users actually welcome. Reforms that promote

greater collective 'voice' are well received. More power for managers commissioning services or for elected officials at a local level are not – as the recent referenda on city mayors has shown. An important finding is that central government remains more trusted with public services than local politicians, public service managers or contracted service providers.

A deep understanding of public attitudes will be necessary for a public service agenda to carry majority support. There are clear challenges to the government's reform agenda in these findings, particularly people's enduring preference for the state as the main provider of services. But the Labour party also needs to take note of the hostile perceptions of local government and public service bureaucracies. More positively there are a host of opportunities to work constructively with service users and public service workers to deliver a public services agenda that goes with the grain of public opinion.

If public services in the UK are to remain of world-class quality we must understand how to balance efficiency with more relationship-focused delivery with a focus on the spirit in which services are delivered, not just the transactions they deliver. Above all, as public services change they need to preserve the essence of what the public say they value in government provision: 'the values and ethos of the public good'.

Endnotes

1   Figures recalculated without those who answered 'don't know'.
2   Figures recalculated without those who answered 'don't know'.
3   ABC1 and C2DE refer to the National Readership Survey (NRS) social grades and these are taken to equate to middle class and working class respectively. Only around 2% of the UK population identifies as upper class, and this group is not included in the classification scheme. The NRS social grades are a system of demographic classification used in the United Kingdom.
4   Figures recalculated without those who answered 'don't know'.
5   Figures recalculated without those who answered 'don't know'
6   'Swing voters' are defined as people who didn't vote Labour in 2010 who are considering voting for them now

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FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD |

**HOW PEOPLE WANT THEIR PUBLIC SERVICES
TO CHANGE**

Natan Doron & Andrew Harrop

The coalition government is in the midst of delivering a radical agenda of public service reform. But is their reform programme somethingthat the public actually want?

This report explores the question based on original research by the Fabian Society. The picture that emerges is a rich tapestry of ideas and attitudes, which at times suggest that public opinion is directly opposed to the coalition government's proposals.

There is significant public concern regarding the nature of providers and lukewarm feelings about the localisation of services. The research indicates that while many like 'choice' when it comes to their own use of services they are suspicious of the unintended consequences of bringing in new types of providers and creating markets for public services.

The report also explores views on what would improve services and for the most part they preferred options close to home: more choice, voice and control for people using services and for frontline staff.

Above all, as public services change they need to preserve the essence of what the public say they value in government provision: 'the values and ethos of the public good'.

A FABIAN REPORT