Personalisation through participation
A new script for public services
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First, personalisation could mean providing people with a more customer-friendly interface with existing services: 24/7 call centres, booked appointments, guaranteed fast response times, better basic customer service.

Second, personalisation could also mean giving users more say in navigating their way through services once they have got access to them. Thus in the health service, ministers talk about 'patient pathways' through the system, and in secondary education, children will be given more choice over the pace and style at which they learn.

Third, personalisation could mean giving users more direct say over how money is spent. Users would be given more power to make their own decisions about how to spend money allocated to their education or operation.

Fourth, personalisation could mean users are not just consumers but co-designers and co-producers of a service: they actively participate in its design and provision. Good examples of this include community safety initiatives, recuperative care programmes for the elderly and many welfare-to-work schemes in which the 'users' actually do a lot of the work themselves because they want to find solutions that do not leave them dependent upon the state.

Fifth, personalisation could mean self-organisation: the public good emerging from within society, in part, through the way that public policy shapes millions of individual decisions about how we exercise, eat, smoke, drink, save for our pensions, read to our children, pay our taxes and so on.

The argument of this pamphlet is that once you start personalising public services people will get an appetite for it. They will want more. The genie will be out of the bottle. Rather than contain personalisation the aim should be to take it further and deeper.

Services should be seen as scripts. All services are delivered according to a script, which directs the parts played by the actors involved. The script for eating a meal in a restaurant is: reserve table, arrive at restaurant and be shown to table, examine menu, place order with waiter, food delivered to table, eat, ask for bill, pay, leave. Service innovation comes from rewriting scripts like this so the action unfolds in a different way. A fast food restaurant runs on a different script: read menu, place order for food, pay, take food to table yourself, eat, clear away your debris, leave. In a full-service restaurant you eat and then pay, and do very little else. In a fast food restaurant you pay and then eat, and contribute some of your labour by taking the food to the table and clearing away your mess.

Often radical innovation involves bringing together ideas from quite different scripts: the telephone service script (used in banking) and health care knowledge, when brought together, created a new script for accessing health advice in the form of NHS Direct. The old script was: phone GP, make appointment, visit surgery. Now there is a new script, which starts with a phone call to NHS Direct asking for help.

Many of the scripts followed by public services – such as schooling – have not changed for decades: enter classroom, sit at desk, listen to teacher, read from blackboard, write in exercise book, hand in work, run to playground. The scripts for user engagement with the police, health services and libraries are largely written by professionals, producers and regulators, not by users. The users are

expected to fit into the roles given to them by the script handed down from on high. How should we rewrite the scripts for public services?

One answer is that service scripts need rewriting to make them simpler, more efficient and responsive. Most people want reliable, timely basic services: trains that run on time, bins collected, housing repairs done swiftly, planning decisions taken quickly. It is not rocket science. Nor is it simply about more investment. The scripts by which services are delivered need rewriting. One problem with public services is that the number of people and departments involved makes services bureaucratic, unresponsive and slow moving.

Take just two examples. The children's social services team used to miss more than 50 per cent of the calls made to it, mainly because social workers were out making visits and the answer machine in the office got overloaded. If you called for help, it was a lottery as to whether your call would be logged let alone dealt with. Now the council's dedicated Careline service means that less than five per cent of calls are missed. Social services workers sit alongside customer care operatives in the call centre so that decisions can be made while the caller is on the line. It used to take two days to allocate a social worker to a case. Now it takes an hour.

Or take the more mundane example of bins. The council's refuse collection service used to miss thousands of bins, in a collection round of more than 200,000 a week. Now the proportion of missed bins is less than 0.1 per cent. Part of the explanation is that users can now get through to the council to complain about an uncollected bin. In the past most of their calls were not taken.

Consumer choice would be a challenge to the power of professionals and providers to allocate resources to services. But the extent to which public services can be driven by consumer choice also has limits.

Consumerism assumes competition that allows consumers to choose between competing options. But in some public services – policing for example – it does not make sense to have competing providers, using competing infrastructures. Competition would lead to waste and inefficiency.

Consumerism works where goods and services can be packaged and priced. Yet the goods and services the public sector provides are not always neatly packaged in the way that stereos, cars and computers can be. Many public services are fuzzy, difficult to define and pin down, for example the value of community safety. The qualities of these public goods cannot be assessed and encapsulated in the way that the features of a computer can be described in technical language.

Consumerism is based, at least in theory, on individual preferences. But in public services it is often difficult to separate one individual's preferences from another's. Parents choose schools in part based on what other parents do. Simplistic models of consumer choice fail to take into account these social and environmental factors.

Consumerism works when consumers have good information about service performance. But in the public sector most information, and the ability to interpret it, is in the hands of professionals and staff. Users rarely have all the information they need – about possible costs and benefits of different forms of health treatment for example – to make a fully informed decision.

As choice expands, the costs of searching across competing offers rises. As diversity expands it becomes more difficult to compare different services. Choice imposes costs on consumers as well as benefits.

Market consumerism applied to public services could threaten the principles of equity on which public services are based. Public service goods such as health and education are essential to the quality of people's lives and their ability to play a full role in society. These foundational goods should not be distributed by ability to pay but according to need.

Many on the centre left are attracted to the idea that service providers should respond to the views of citizens. There are good reasons why public services should be organised around the priorities of the citizen:

- Citizens fund public services through taxation and their participation in the democratic process can have an influence over how that money is spent.
- Citizenship speaks to the ideals of equity and collective provision embedded in public services. People generally want good public services for everyone, not just for themselves.
- Using a public service is not just a consumer experience. Each engagement with a public service should deepen a sense of civic attachment and underpin a sense of citizenship: why it matters to be part of a democratic society.

No amount of talk about citizenship will empower consumers in their day-to-day engagement with public services. Nor does it provide public sector managers with a clear enough sense of purpose in deciding how to run services. Leading Labour-controlled councils, such as Gateshead, which displays a powerful sense of civic purpose embodied in the Baltic Flour Mills Centre for Contemporary Art for example, also have highly developed programmes to focus on customer satisfaction. Managers in hospitals, libraries, schools and police stations need a tangible set of goals linked to what users need, here and now.

Personalisation through participation makes the connection between the individual and the collective by allowing users a more direct, informed and creative say in rewriting the script by which the service they use is designed, planned, delivered and evaluated. In the case of emerging examples of participative services, this invariably involves these steps:

Intimate consultation: professionals working with clients to help unlock their needs, preferences and aspirations, through an extended dialogue.

Expanded choice: giving users greater choice over the mix of ways in which their needs might be met; to assemble solutions around the needs of the user rather than limiting provision to whichever institution in question – the school, hospital, social services department – the user happens to be closest to.

Enhanced voice: expanded choice should help to further unlock the user's voice. Making comparisons between alternatives helps people to articulate their preferences. This is very difficult to do from a blank sheet of paper. Choice helps to unlock voice.

Partnership provision: it is only possible to assemble solutions personalised to individual need if services work in partnership. An institution – for example a secondary school – should be a gateway to a range of learning offers provided not just by the school but by other local schools, companies, colleges and distance learning programmes. Institutions should be gateways to networks of public provision.

Advocacy: professionals should act as advocates for users, helping them to navigate their way through the system. That means clients having a continuing relationship with professionals who take an interest in their case, rather than users engaging in a series of disconnected transactions with disconnected services.

Co-production: users who are more involved in shaping the service they receive should be expected to become more active and responsible in helping to deliver the service: involved patients are more likely to attend clinics, students to do homework. Personalisation should create more involved, responsible users.

Funding: should follow the choices that users make and in some cases – direct payments to disabled people to assemble their own care packages – funding should

be put in the hands of users themselves, to buy services with the advice of professionals.

Personalisation will make sense most in services which are:

- Face to face: education, nonemergency health care, social services, housing.
- Services based on long-term relationships between users and producers, rather than a set of transactions, for example the management of a chronic disease.

Services that depend on a direct engagement between professionals and users where the user can play a significant role in shaping the service.

Personalised learning does not apply market thinking to education. It is not designed to turn children and parents into consumers of education. The aim is to promote personal development through self-realisation, self-enhancement and self-development. The child/learner should be seen as active, responsible and self-motivated, a co-author of the script which determines how education is delivered. The traditional script, largely written by producers and regulators, is that education proceeds through a series of stages, which set the rhythm for how people learn, at what pace and to what end. In many ways the standards agenda of the 1990s has made these scripts more uniform – the literacy and numeracy hours in primary schools – for example.

Personalised learning would start from the premise that learners should be actively, continually engaged in setting their own targets, devising their own learning plans and goals, choosing from among a range of different ways to learn. Experiments with pupil self-assessment and target setting – for instance at Nine Stiles, a comprehensive school in Birmingham – show that pupils do not set themselves targets that are easy to reach. They tend to set realistic but stretching targets. New approaches to assessment, for example 'assessment for learning', help learners work out how effective their learning was, what worked well or badly for them. That allows students to adjust and adapt their learning strategies. Traditional assessment tests the extent of someone's knowledge at the end of a period of learning and provides the learner with little information about which learning strategies were more effective.

Personalised learning would only work if students were engaged in continual, self-critical assessment of their talents, performance, learning strategies and goals. Personalised learning would allow and encourage learning to take place in holidays and outside normal school hours. It would make opportunities to learn available whenever the learner wanted to take them up. Children would be able to take time out for other activities that might add to their learning: voluntary work, drama and sports. This flexibility might be based on the principle of 'earned autonomy'; children who clearly do well and are self-motivated become more self-regulating. Students should have a choice – under earned autonomy – about where learning takes place: at home; at an individual school; moving among a network of schools; virtually through ICT in school, at home or in a third space such as a library; *in situ* at a workplace or voluntary group.

This implies far-reaching changes in the roles of professionals and schools. Schools would become solutions assemblers, helping children get access to the mix and range of learning resources they need, both virtual and face to face. Schools would have to form networks and federations which shared resources and centres of excellence. An individual school in the network would become a gateway to these shared resources. What does this mean for funding of education? Should each school get a set sum per child? Should the money follow the student? Should all students have an amount they can spend on learning materials from outside the school? All these options have complications. Yet if money does not flow with student choices then the system will not be truly responding to learner demand.