

DBULLETIN

Public Services – Access to all, for all?

The Government's reform White Paper 'Open Public Services' was finally published on Monday, 11 July, with the weighty ambition of generating better services for less money. The Paper is in keeping with the Government's 'Big Society' vision, with the aim of shifting power to the people via five key principles.

The five key principles

- Increasing choice wherever possible
- Decentralising public services to the lowest appropriate level
- Opening public services to a diverse range of providers
- Ensuring fair access to public services
- Making public services accountable to users and taxpayers

So, what do these principles really mean?

1. Increasing choice

The Government intends to achieve this through a combination of giving people direct control over the services they use, and for those services where such direct individual control is not possible, allowing elected representatives greater choice as to who provides them. Essentially, the people, not politicians, are to be the driving force behind service provision and choice, ensuring that public services are responsive to people's needs. Funding will follow people's choices (see point 2 below).

2. Decentralising public services

It is intended that control of public services be placed as close as possible to the people. As with the choice of service itself, this will be achieved by devolving power to the lowest appropriate level. In so far as 'individual' services are concerned (education, childcare etc), power will be given to the people who use them. For

example, where appropriate (social adult care etc) individuals will be given personal budgets to choose services that best suit their lives. With regards to 'neighbourhood' services (leisure and recreation etc), power will be placed in the hands of elected councils. For 'commissioned' services (services that cannot be devolved, such as tax collection etc), commissioning will be opened up and decentralised where appropriate.

3. Opening up to a diverse range of providers

This is a necessity if the Government is to achieve the increased choice sought as its first key principle, be it via public sector providers, the voluntary and community sector, or the private sector. By breaking down financial and regulatory barriers, allowing a level playing field and creating an open framework, it is hoped that people will make the choices that are best for them. Performing service providers that achieve results will be paid accordingly – by results. The Government will ensure that clear minimum standards (for example, signing up to the Quality Assurance Agency in so far as higher education is concerned) are set and key data about services, performance and satisfaction is available such that choices are informed. Through licensing and regulation, the public will be able to have faith in individual service providers.

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4. Fair access

The Government recognises the limits of a pure market approach and will intervene to ensure that access to services is open and fair, so as to “advantage the disadvantaged and improve their outcomes”. To this end, a Pupil Premium of £430 (extra funding for pupils eligible for free school meals) has been introduced in schools to target resources in favour of pupils previously left behind. There will also be a weekly entitlement of 15 hours per week of early years’ education to assist the country’s poorest two year olds. It is hoped that targeting funding in this manner will promote social mobility.

5. Accountability to users and taxpayers

Public service providers must be held to account by the public and its elected representatives, ensuring that they are responsive to the people they serve. With time, information on the newly-opened services will become more transparent, enabling the public to make informed decisions in exercising their new-found choice and thus rewarding the most responsive service providers and driving out provider complacency. Ensuring service providers are accountable will result in better value for both the service users and taxpayers who fund them. To this end appropriate means of redress will be provided, and the Ombudsmen used where choice or standards are considered inadequate. The Ombudsmen (the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsmen for central government and health services, the Local Government Ombudsmen for council services such as social care and housing allocations, and the Housing Ombudsmen for registered providers) will play a greater role in supporting individuals to exercise

service choice. Furthermore, independent champions for consumer choice like ‘Which?’ will be encouraged to speak out on consumers’ behalf.

Prime Minister David Cameron hopes the planned reform will have the effect of “releasing the grip of state control and putting power in people’s hands”, giving people and communities the opportunity to shape services by opening up the majority of public services to competition from the voluntary and private sectors. The Government is “determined to create public services that are directly accountable to those who use them, and where providers stand or fall by their ability to deliver a good service”.

The White Paper is available on the Open Public Services website (<http://www.openpublicservices.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/>), through which views can be submitted until the consultation period ends in September.

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