The Future of Local Public Services

1. A changing relationship – Localism and the Open Public Services White Paper

The coalition government has set out five principles for reforming public services, and in the Open Public Services White Paper describes how they apply to existing policies. The White Paper also outlines a range of further ambitions.

The principles on which the government want service modernisation to be based on are:

- **Choice** – wherever possible they will increase choice by giving people direct control over the services they use. And where it is not possible to give people direct control, elected representatives should also have more choice about who provides services and how.
- **Decentralisation** – power should be decentralised to the lowest appropriate level.
- **Diversity** – the government do not have an ideological presumption that only one sector should run services: high quality services can be provided by the public sector, the voluntary and community sector, or the private sector… Public services should be open to a range of providers competing to offer a better service.
- **Fairness** – we will ensure fair access [to public services] in order to advantage the disadvantaged and improve their outcomes
- **Accountability** – public services must be responsive to the people they to serve – held to account by citizens and their elected representatives.

Points which Our Society Steering Group members may wish to discuss could include:

- Whether the five principles support each other or have the potential to conflict with each other
- How these principles add to our thinking around Localism and community influence and rights – perhaps considering the analysis of power used by the government, and whether it is helpful to us, or whether other thinking around power and influence is more useful
- To what extent these principles and the government’s ambitions support our local commitments, such as those described in our Community Strategy, Local Compact and Comprehensive Community Engagement Strategy.
- Whether we might update or evolve some of our local commitments to take on board plans for service modernisation.
- Whether we want to respond collectively or individually to consultation on the White Paper

1 URL for open public services site: http://www.openpublicservices.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/
2. ‘When Tomorrow Comes’

Public service reform - the potential impact of a localist reform agenda – was the focus for the first University of Birmingham Policy Commission. University of Birmingham Policy Commissions bring leading figures from the public, private and third sectors together with academics to generate new thinking on contemporary issues of global, national and civic concern. The report of their findings and recommendations ‘When Tomorrow Comes: The future of local public services’ (July 2011) suggests that the scale of public service reform being driven by the Coalition requires that we review our assumptions about public services, and, crucially who should influence them or has a right to them. At the same time longer term trends indicate increasing demands on public services and finances, challenging us to rethink and reshape established approaches to what we deliver and how.

Four key questions shaped the Policy Commission’s work:

- How will public service roles and relationships be redesigned and what are the implications for citizens, service users and providers?
- What contribution can behaviour change approaches and techniques make to proposals for the future design of local public services?
- How can we reproduce success and mitigate failure in a localist system?
- What will local government’s role be?

In addition to recommendations - which are relevant to Dudley’s Our Society and Localism work and have the potential to help us develop the ‘how’ in relation to Localism - some useful and interesting challenges are made to current thinking. Three key ideas to highlight are:

A shift from ‘public services’ to ‘Local Public Support’: The report suggests that the combined impact of the Coalition’s proposals could bring into being a new settlement of ‘local public services’ - with implications for local government, public service providers, workers and citizens. This required that the Policy Commission consider: the nature and significance of the ‘local’ dimension to public services; what it means for services to be ‘public’; and whether the idea of ‘services’ is sufficient.

A shift in thinking may be required for some, from concepts and language of a ‘public sector’ or ‘public sector agencies’ to an understanding that people employed in private or third sector organisations are responsible for management and delivery of Local Public Support – requiring us to recognise that the boundaries drawn between sectors are becoming more blurred and increasingly out-dated. There is also a prompt to consider a mix of more than services and support, but of connections, ideas, interventions, products, resources and services.

Systems: In addition to the above idea, the report refers to a system of Local Public Support – something which could co-ordinate all available resources (public, private, civic and personal) to offer ‘helpful acts’ of various kinds (connections, ideas, interventions, products, resources, services) to promote individual and collective well-being. Systems thinking seems to thread through the thinking, so perhaps is fundamental as an approach.

Twenty-first century public servants: The Policy Commission suggests that these may be: professionals, managers and/or practitioners from across the public, private and third sectors who are working in a system of Local Public Support. It may be very helpful to read ideas about what roles these people might have (some new, some evolving and some longstanding). The ideas could contribute to a response to problems and concerns we have been articulating in Our Society and localism discussions.

In terms of taking things forward: the Policy Commission’s response is to propose a system of Local Public Support which continues to acknowledge the vital importance of an active state but also recognises that fulfilling citizens’ aspirations and meeting their needs in the future will require the provision of new kinds of resources, interventions and/or services, involving citizens in new ways as well as contributions from the public, private and third sectors.

**Local Public Support – a system for tomorrow**

The Policy Commission advocates a system of Local Public Support that co-ordinates all available resources (public, private, civic and personal) to offer ‘helpful acts’ of various kinds (connections, ideas, interventions, products, resources, services) to promote individual and collective well-being.

Seven re-design principles underpin the system of Local Public Support which should be:

- Citizen centred
- Cost effective
- Democratically accountable
- Legible to citizens and users
- Outcome orientated
- Socially just
- Sustainable

Points which Our Society Steering Group members may wish to discuss could include:

- What a the concept of a system of Local Public Support means to Dudley, now and in the future, and if we want to work towards it, how do we do that?
- Whether we agree with the four conditions of success for a system of Local Public Service support to operate successfully described in the report (see pages 54-57 of the report for details):
  - Citizens as co-authors of their well-being (nb. a holistic meaning of ‘well-being’ was used in this work, encompassing all aspects of human flourishing including physical and mental health, a sense of purpose, life and work satisfaction and acceptable levels of material resources)
  - Twenty-first century public servants
  - A connected and connective local government
  - A new national government/local government settlement

3. **Proposals**

1. That this group provides information to the LSP Board meeting on 22 September about where we think Dudley is in relation to emerging policy and thinking around public service reform, localism and the changing relationship. That this is discussed by Dudley LSP Board members and views used to inform Our Society Steering Group work.

2. That contact is made with UoB and/or members of the Policy Commission ref taking forward findings in the report which describe the role that universities could play to see if they would like to work with partners in Dudley (e.g. the report suggests that universities could work with different actors in the local system to develop collaborative research programmes where securing policy impact is integral and iterative – with an emphasis on systematic and shared learning.)

(Contacts: James Morris MP was a member of this Policy Commission, Will Leggett, Senior Lecturer in Political Sociology and Social Theory, UoB and contributor to the Policy Commission is a good friend of Lorna’s, other Steering Group members may have other contacts…)
3. That consideration is given to a practical output of any local research and learning, two examples include:

- updating our local Compact to reflect major changes and negotiating a new agreement between the VCFS and local government
- working with David Wilcox to produce a twenty-first century update to his Guide to Effective Participation (which was published by JRF in 1994)

There are opportunities to produce useful agreements or guidance utilising online collaboration and linking with other local authority areas e.g. Wolverhampton (who are doing work with University of Birmingham around behaviour change strategies).

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