

Public Services Team
Office for Civil Society
Cabinet Office
Admiralty Arch, The Mall
London SW1A 2WH

6 January 2011

Dear colleagues

Modernising Commissioning: Increasing the role of charities, social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives in public service delivery

Consumer Focus is the consumer champion for England, Wales and Scotland and (for postal consumers) Northern Ireland. We operate across the whole economy, persuading businesses and public services to put consumers at the heart of what they do. Consumer Focus gives a strong voice to consumers on the issues that matter to them and works to secure a fair deal on their behalf. We work with consumers and a range of organisations to tackle the problems people face and to achieve creative solutions that make a difference to their lives.

Consumer Focus work on public service reform, public engagement and localism is highly relevant to the aims of the Green Paper and the wider programme of reform being planned and undertaken.¹ We note that the Green Paper is part of an ongoing process to which Consumer Focus can make a positive contribution. We are, therefore, keen to establish a working relationship with the teams responsible for the Government's programme for building a strong civil society.

Consumer Focus welcomes many of the aims outlined in the Green Paper, particularly on making commissioning a more open process, responsive to people's needs 'on the ground'. All too often the gaps in understanding between the different components of commissioning are too wide and deep. Commissioning, designing, contracting and delivering services are activities that should be closely integrated and need to be fully informed by service-user experiences. Each element should inform the others to make sure that services meet real needs. In practice these links do not exist, meaning that services are often – and unintentionally – ineffective or inefficient, wasting money and delivering poor outcomes for service users in the process.

Diminished budgets will force far-reaching changes in the way key public services are configured. At the same time a shift of control over services towards more community involvement is envisaged. In combination they may mean a period of fundamental change in the way people

¹ The Coalition: our programme for government and Building a stronger civil society, HM Government, 2010

interact with and experience services. These changes will present opportunities to redesign services around the people who use them and to give people a greater say in how the services they use are delivered and prioritised. It is important that the need to put consumers at the centre of services is not drowned out under the pressure to implement change.

Starting from where people are at is the key to getting services right first time, regardless of the type of organisation that delivers those services. As difficult decisions come to be made about local priorities and the form of local service provision people will need to be meaningfully involved in those decisions. This is critical if providers are to have any chance of defining the real priorities or establishing what optimal service reconfiguration needs to be. And engagement needs to be built into the commissioning process.

Public services need to be both effective and efficient. Engaging with consumers is critical to achieve effective services and the insight that engagement brings makes greater efficiency a more achievable objective. Consumer Focus has an extensive body of evidence showing services that are consumer-led and designed around the needs of their users are more effective and more efficient.

Putting the public into public services

Some of this draws on the National Consumer Council's (NCC)² work in a series of publications that deals directly with many of the questions posed in the consultation including:

- how to involve people more effectively in policy and decision making³
- the benefits of embedding consumer input into the commissioning process (intelligent commissioning)⁴
- a route map for action, to help regulators and others turn the rhetoric of people-focused public services into practical action that delivers tangible benefits⁵

Localism

Our current programme of work on localism and the Big Society explores the consumer appetite and preparedness for localism. It investigates the practicalities of localism, assessing how able citizens are to engage with decisions about the provision of local community and public services. Assumptions about what consumers and communities want from 'localism' must be balanced with the right information and understanding to make it a reality.

² One of our predecessor organisations

³ <http://bit.ly/fBPDCW> (PDF 611KB); <http://bit.ly/gRfp6a> (PDF 1.9MB)

⁴ <http://bit.ly/hxVsi7> (PDF 427KB)

⁵ <http://bit.ly/eC6yxe> (PDF 360KB)

Measuring the value of engagement

Engaging people will be essential for the coalition Government's localism agenda to succeed and yet investment in engagement activities is seen as a discretionary activity and could be vulnerable to cuts in spending. To help organisations to provide more concrete evidence of its value and benefits we have developed a toolkit on how to measure the value of engagement.

People power website

Public engagement has been very much a top-down activity, reliant on providers initiating and setting the parameters of dialogue at a local level. But moves towards a Big Society are likely to open up new opportunities for communities to have a greater say in service provision. To help empower communities in ensuring their voice is heard, Consumer Focus has examined a range of statutory and informal mechanisms that are available to individuals and their communities to lead the engagement process and open a dialogue with providers. We used the information to develop a 'people power' website. It will help to empower individuals and consumers by informing them about the mechanisms and signposting them to further detail on how to use them effectively.

This work is not yet in the public domain but we are sending you the draft toolkit on a confidential basis now, and will send copies of our other work when it is published.

Consumer Focus has much to contribute to this Government programme. We are more than happy to arrange a meeting to discuss our work in this area with the team responsible.

Please feel free to contact me for more information or to arrange a meeting date.

Yours faithfully

Alison Hopkins
Principal Policy Advocate

Tel 020 7799 7985
Email alison.hopkins@consumerfocus.org.uk