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Demonstrating Public Service Responsiveness

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For democracy to function effectively, public services must be responsive to citizen-user opinions and needs. Yet at the same time, elected officials and senior public managers must work to inform the opinions of the public so that their demands are realistic, fundable and something more than special interest. Democracy should thus be a two-way street.

Most of the traffic, however, remains one-way. Despite the rigours of 'New Public Management', the imposition of ill-conceived performance indicators and the orientation to consumer choice, public services remain stubbornly resistant to reform. Indeed, there is now a well-evidenced gap between public organisations and the publics they serve, with services widely perceived as being centrally and target driven, out of touch and failing to address the issues their citizen-users consider relevant. Even where services *have* significantly improved, the public often rejects the evidence for such improvements, and are cynical about efforts to consult 'consumers' and seek public engagement. Such consultations are widely seen to have to have little impact on decision-making.

There is a pressing need, therefore, to reconnect public services with their citizen-users. Indeed, a distinguishing feature of public services in a vibrant democracy is that they have high quality processes by which they interact with the public. Following such interactions, services must demonstrate their capacity to meaningfully respond to the needs and concerns articulated by citizen-users. The orientation to greater engagement with the public means more than conducting surveys of their preferences, or pandering to uninformed and unrealistic public demands. It must also include the careful provision of information, transparency of procedures, public engagement, chances for deliberation and concerted education. While it is certainly difficult to demonstrate responsiveness to informed public opinion in a methodologically defensible manner, in a democracy, no public service can afford *not* to be responsive to the informed opinions of the citizen-users they exist to serve.

An 'intelligent' metric on public service responsiveness would, however, be most revealing. Drawing on existing indicators, it would assess the quality of the interactive process between public service providers and their citizen-users/stakeholders, highlight the success with which service organisations inform public opinion and show how effectively they respond to such opinions. A Public Service Responsiveness Index would add telling insights to existing measures of service efficiency and performance, and enable comparisons of service responsiveness within particular sectors.

Responsiveness pertains to the quality of the interaction between a public service organisation and its citizen-users. Such interactions can include deliberative engagements with the public in goal-setting, planning, decision-making and service evaluation. They can also entail consultation initiatives to inform decision-making, satisfaction surveys and consumer feedback. Transparency of procedures and access to information are also constitutive of high quality interactions with the public and are key to knowing citizen-user opinions. To be responsive, therefore, requires public managers to *lead from behind*; in other words, to seek out, enable and listen to the needs and opinions to which they will subsequently respond.

Responsiveness, however, should not be confused with the extent to which an organisation reacts to the public's immediate opinions. There may be occasions when rapid reaction to public preferences is *not* an appropriate response. Organisational and policy leadership may be required to drive the process of informing public opinion or even resisting it. The task of informing and guiding public preferences thus embraces processes of education and information dissemination. Deliberative initiatives are of particular importance here, as open and informed debate is an important part of forming opinion, and changing it. Responsiveness requires such initiatives, as well as evidence that educational efforts have changed public opinions; and still more evidence on what has been done to respond to them.



A responsive public organisation needs leadership to be visionary; to be *from the front*. Indeed, just this occurred in the case of the MMR vaccine, where instead of withdrawing the programme in the face of ill-informed public opinion, the government redoubled its efforts to educate the public. Responsiveness to informed public preferences – in effect, how you close the gap between policy practice and what the citizen-users want – is thus about managing expectations, not just delivering more or better services. It does not mean merely pandering to uninformed public opinion or concerted special interests.

There is more than adequate existing data already available in the public realm that could, with this clarification of the nature of service responsiveness, be cherry-picked in order to demonstrate responsiveness and the informing of opinion. ‘Direct’ or ‘proxy metrics’ exist across a number of sectors, including local authorities, PCTs, train companies, universities and arts organisations, etc. The demonstration of responsiveness would thus require a conceptual focus to select indicators that show an organisation is interacting with the public, informing its citizen-users and responding to their concerns. Examples of such indicators might, therefore, include data on the following kinds of activities:

1. Listening to citizen-users	2. Informing citizen-users	3. Responding to public concerns
Public consultations	Educational initiatives	Changes in service provision
Customer and user surveys	Public health initiatives	Reallocation of resources
Deliberative initiatives	Availability of service information	Complaints procedures
Local needs assessments	Spend on service information	Complaint outcomes
Local partnerships	Spend on educational initiatives	Feedback initiatives
Choice initiatives	Availability of procedural information	Ongoing evaluations
Use of user-held budgets	Spend on procedural information	Impacts of service changes
Representation on committees	Transparency of procedures	Explaining why <i>no</i> change
BME engagement	Feedback on service changes	Tracking preference changes
Engaged Leadership (in interaction with the public)	Visionary leadership (from front)	Responsive Leadership (from behind and below)

Clearly, demonstrating responsiveness would require not only conceptual coherence to inform the selection of indicators, but also around how indicators might be weighted and combined. This is a political question, and would serve to test just how committed an organisation really is to responsiveness and to informing its citizen-users.

If we are serious about mending our democracy, engaging the public and improving our public services, then listening and responding are surely key. At the same time, however, elected officials and senior public managers must remember their core task: that of furthering the common good. Democracy is increasingly a forgotten art; long buried by technocratic management, complacent elitism, sclerotic public institutions and ignored by the public. Inquiring into the capacity to demonstrate responsiveness thus serves to remind us that democracy is a two-way street, and that the more traffic flowing in both directions, the better.

