



Citizen–Consumers? the public and public services

Project team:
John Clarke
Janet Newman
Nick Smith
Elizabeth Vidler
Louise
Westmarland

The idea that people expect to be treated as consumers by public services has become a central theme in public service reform. Our research explored what people who provide and use public services thought about this idea and the changes it is bringing about. We surveyed and talked to the public, frontline staff and managers in three services – health care, policing and social care – during 2003 and 2004.

KEY QUESTIONS

- **How have public services adapted to consumerist ideals and pressures?**
- **Have the three services adapted in different ways?**
- **What relationships and identifications matter to the public when they use public services?**

- It's not like shopping. People see public services as different from the market-place and value the 'publicness' of these services.
- A more assertive public. People were becoming more assertive in their relationships with public services: less deferential, more willing to express their needs and to challenge providers.
- The people's choice. People who use services were rather more positive about the anticipated benefits of choice than service providers. But they were anxious about the negative consequences of choice.
- Public services that deliver. People wanted skilled people in whom they could trust, and services to provide assistance, attention and support at points of crisis or difficulty in their lives.
- Members not consumers. People have many relationships to public services. They are citizens, experts, tax-payers and voters as well as users and see themselves as part of wider communities.
- Who knows best. There are points of tension where professional judgment and authority encounter lay expertise and users' voices.
- Meeting need or managing demand. Service providers and users are anxious to promote efficient, equitable and transparent access to services. The emphasis on choice is seen to individualise issues that have collective or public dimensions.

ASPECTS OF CONSUMERISM

A survey of frontline staff and service users sought responses on four key aspects of consumerism. For each aspect, people were asked to agree or disagree with several statements. The maximum score on any issue would be 100 if everyone agreed strongly with a positive statement. The results are indicated in diagram 1, over. (More details can be found at the web address at the end.)

MORE THAN CONSUMERS? WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?

Asking people who use services to reflect on what words best describe themselves in their relationship with providers, the vast majority rejected the label of 'consumer' or 'customer' (see diagram 2, over for more detailed results). In health care many people contrasted the personal, ongoing relationship with providers (e.g. with a GP) with the anonymity and discontinuity experienced by customers. And ideas of 'consumerism' and 'choice' sat uneasily with the idea of public services among both staff and users:

'We are not Tescos, Marks and Sparks, or BT. We are not in consumables or domestic appliances. In short, we are the police service ... therefore we serve members of the public and members of the local community with the capacity of a public service'

Interviews with managers and frontline staff indicated that terms used in the past, such as 'patients' or 'clients', were problematic in the face of changing public expectations. Yet 'consumer' or 'customer' was perceived as difficult for several reasons: because some people, particularly in policing and social care, are obliged to

“

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”

identification and attachment in which services are – and should be – public. The local dimension of services is clearly highly important to many people.

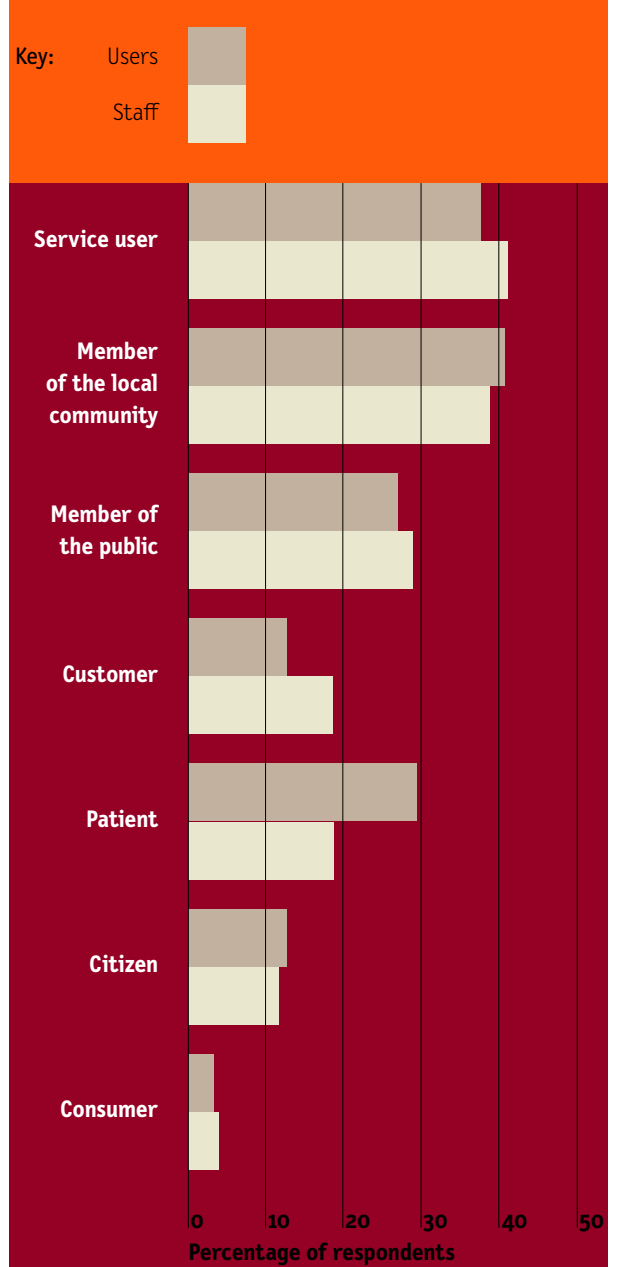
MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This project has identified some key dynamics around relationships and choice, and some tensions around needs, rights and resources that will continue to shape the future of public services:

Relationships to public services are critical for people who use them, a key concern for policy development, and central to the challenges facing organisations delivering public services.

- The quality of interactions (rather than choice of provider) is a critical concern for people who use public services.
- People place a high value on feeling part of a larger public entitled to use public services.
- There is an unresolved tension around the question 'who knows best?' – the expansion of lay voices and

Diagram 2: Identities (up to two choices per respondent)



ideas of lay expertise sits uncomfortably alongside professional expertise and authority.

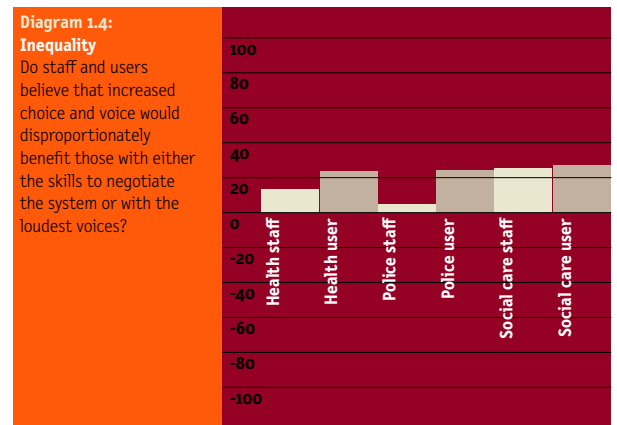
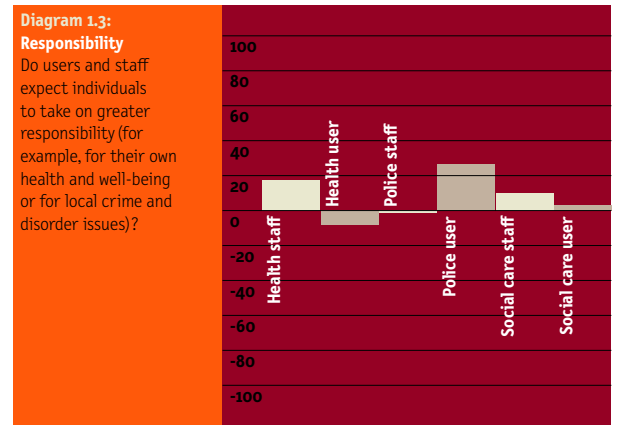
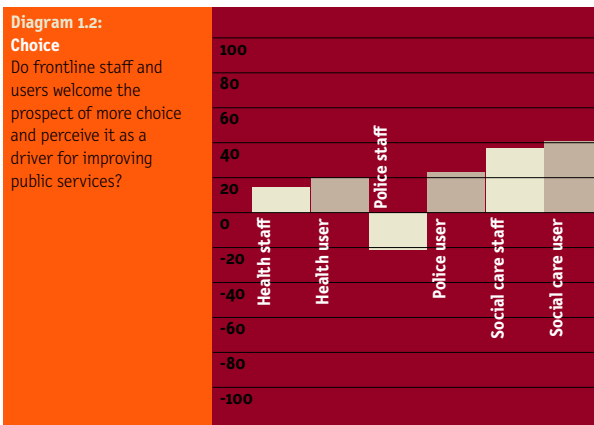
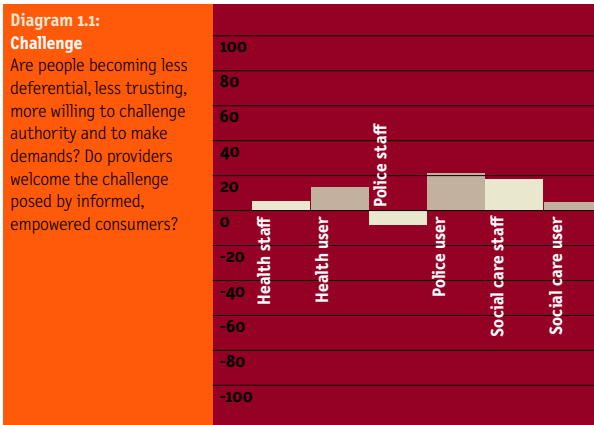
These raise issues about future investment decisions (e.g. between IT and frontline staff); about how to nurture wider attachments alongside delivering high quality services to individuals; and about how to develop future professional workers.

Both service organisations and people who use services are ambivalent about choice. Choice is the focus of both hopes and anxieties.

- People want improved services that meet their needs and that 'get it right first time.'
- People want these services to be locally accessible.
- People want services that treat them well and as individuals.
- But equity matters. Both staff and users express fears that current changes risk creating inequalities.

Here the challenge is to develop new forms of relationship with a changing public that take account of the multiple aspirations that 'choice' represents,

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receive services; because of the absence of genuine choices in a resource-constrained service environment; and because of the ‘public’ rather than the ‘commercial’ nature of public services.

These themes were reflected in interviews with service users:

“Customer” implies you toddle in, and you look at various things and you toddle off if you don’t fancy it. Or you demand the most expensive, perhaps’

‘I feel like I’m more than just a “consumer” because you are paying for a national service for everyone’s benefit. Whether you actually need to consume that service or not, is not the primary consideration. So it’s wider than just being considered a consumer. I feel more of a “citizen” than a “consumer”’

‘I don’t want to be a “customer”: I want to be a “patient” ... I think once you become a customer you are lumped with customers in a shop... whereas

as a patient you have that personal relationship’

‘You know if you went to Tesco and you didn’t like something you’d go somewhere else. That’s how consumerism works. But you can’t do that with the police. You can’t have a supermarket of police and one here and one there. You’ve got to have one body’

Finally, people regarded themselves as engaging in, and moving between, many different types of relationship with services – as users, carers, taxpayers and citizens.

These results are significant in a number of ways. The limited identification with consumer and customer, and with citizen, is striking. These are the two ‘big terms’ that have dominated the debate about public service reform, but are ones that lack popular reach or attachment.

Service specific terms, expressing a relationship to a particular service, have a much greater appeal.

Terms that invoke a sense of ‘membership’ seem particularly significant. They express relationships of

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rather than focusing on choice of provider as the single driver of change.

There are growing tensions between needs, choice, rights and resources.

- Managers and staff in service organisations are struggling to manage demand efficiently and equitably in the face of the current choice agenda.
- Many people who use services have become more assertive but also have an understanding of these dilemmas faced by service providers.

The current policy agenda conceals the tensions between needs, choice, rights and rationing and devolves them to service organisations. Choice appears to be making those decisions more difficult. More transparency about such tensions and how they are being managed would create more productive public dialogue.

THE STUDY

Creating Citizen-Consumers: changing relationships and identifications was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption programme and ran from April 2003–May 2005 (grant number: RES-143-25-0008).

The project team was John Clarke, Janet Newman, Nick Smith, Elizabeth Vidler and Louise Westmarland and was based in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Open University, UK.

We studied three public services (health, policing and social care) in two places (Newtown and Oldtown). We distributed 600 questionnaires to users and front-line staff (106 returned from users and 168 from staff: a 46% return rate). We conducted 24 interviews with managers; 23 with staff; ten with users and held six user focus groups.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

- Clarke J., Newman J., Smith N., Vidler E. and Westmarland L. *Creating Citizen-Consumers: Changing Identities in the Remaking of Public Services* (London: Sage, 2007).
- Clarke J., Smith N. and Vidler E. *Creating Citizen-Consumers: Inequalities and Instabilities*, in Powell M., Clarke K. and Bauld L. (eds.), *Social Policy Review* 17, (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2005).
- Vidler E. and Clarke J. *Creating Citizen-Consumers: New Labour and the Remaking of Public Services*, in *Public Policy and Administration* 20(2) (2005), pp. 19-37.

CONTACT

Professor John Clarke
Faculty of Social Sciences
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
telephone +44 (0)1908 654 530
email john.clarke@open.ac.uk
website www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/citizenconsumers

CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

or contact

Dr Frank Trentmann
Programme director
telephone **+44 (0)20 7079 0603**
email esrcConsume@bbk.ac.uk

or

Stefanie Nixon
Programme administrator
Cultures of Consumption
Research Programme
Birkbeck College
Malet Street
London WC1E 7HX
telephone **+44 (0)20 7079 0601**
facsimile **+44 (0)20 7079 0602**
email esrcConsume@bbk.ac.uk

