



# Choice About Voice: hearing the public in public services

Project team:  
Richard Simmons  
Johnston Birchall  
Alan Prout

**Processes of involvement and representation are particularly important in public services if consumer interests are adequately to be taken into account. Yet there are several different, sometimes competing ways of representing consumers' views and their interaction is not well understood. Our research explored these issues with service users and provider representatives in three public services – housing, social care and leisure services – during 2004 and 2005. We found that greater recognition of users' mix of individual and collective identifications, more viable opportunities for users to express their views, and a better balance between leadership and listening in public service organisations are all important if enhanced processes of involvement are to be achieved.**

## KEY FINDINGS

- 1 People care. Users care about public services and regularly make judgements on what should be done to maintain and improve them.
- 1 'Choice about voice'. Different users seek different channels through which to express their views on service issues.
- 1 Acting appropriately. What users consider the appropriate channel depends as much on their own personal norms and values as on institutional prescriptions or service charters.
- 1 'Not just about me'. People do not focus solely on their own needs but also on how the service works for users more generally.
- 1 Stifling voice. The absence or blocking of certain channels leads to voice being stifled. Thus opportunities for organisational learning are missed.
- 1 Broken connections. Users' sense of connection with the service can break, resulting in withdrawal.
- 1 Check the blindspot. Cultural blindspots exist within some public service organisations, prompting potential 'culture clashes'.
- 1 Leadership and listening. Users often want providers to take the lead, but not before providers have listened suitably to what users have to say.

## HIGHLIGHTS

Different mechanisms exist for users to express their views. These can be categorised as 'hierarchical' (e.g. contacting elected officials, ombudsmen); individualistic (e.g. complaints procedures, personal communications) or group-based (e.g. user forums, consultative committees).

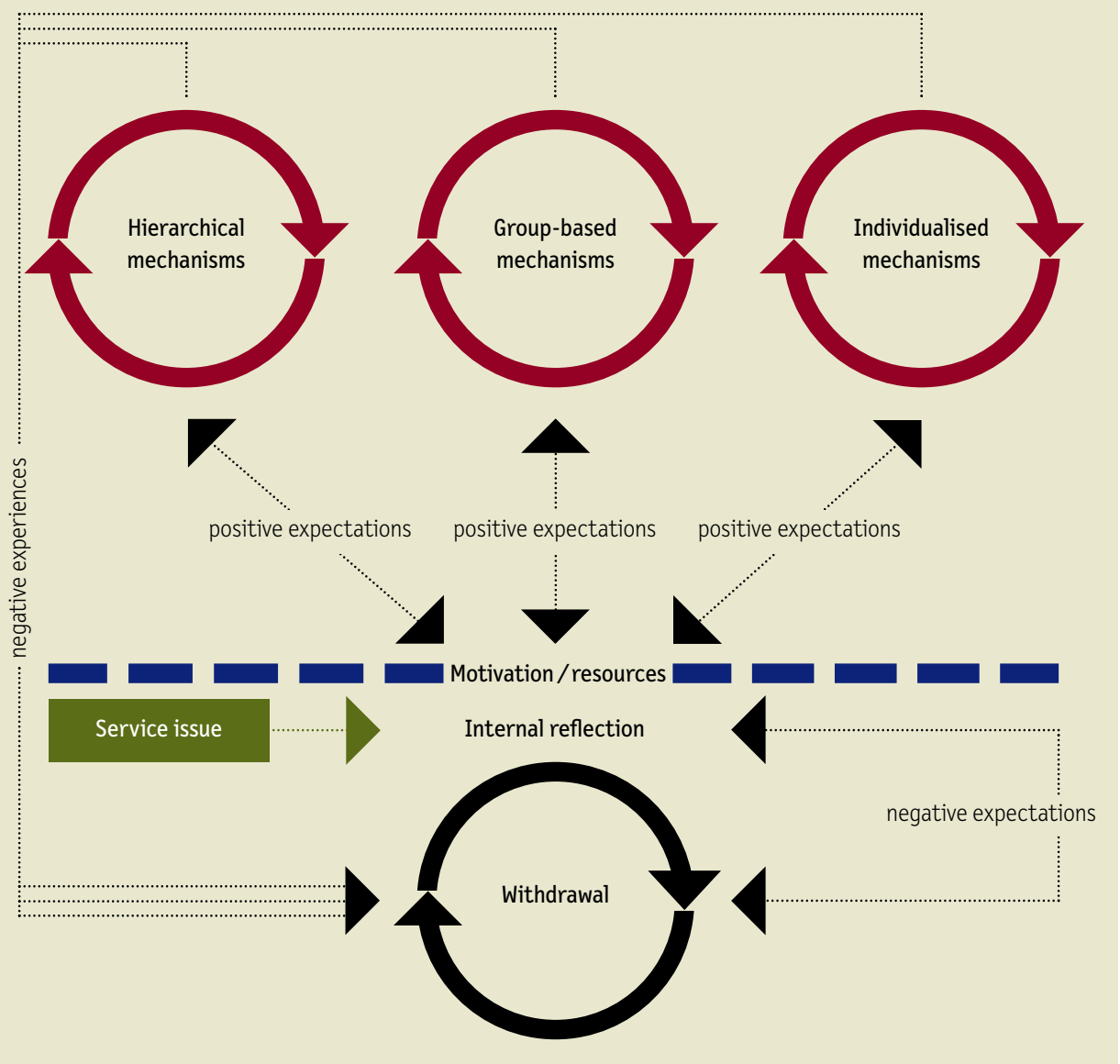
Users make assumptions about what channel is appropriate for particular issues in a particular context. However, their ability to communicate via their chosen channel is dependent on the availability of viable opportunities to do so. This idea of viability (or lack of it) goes beyond the simple provision of a full range of channels. It relates to the prospects of users' views being recognised and accepted – and to the sense of disconnection and withdrawal that often accompanies low expectations or disappointing experiences. The dynamics of this are shown in Figure 1. As service issues arise, users reflect on whether or not to express their views. At this point, some will simply drop the issue and move on. Those who have sufficient motivation and resources may communicate through one or more channels. Their messages are accompanied by positive expectations over the process and/or outcome. However, where users have negative experiences and/or negative expectations at the outset they may withdraw, feeling 'blocked' from saying what they want to say.

*'I always try to pitch my enquiry or suggestion at the appropriate level. So I took it that the "Ideas and Implementation Group", by the very name of the group, was the group that I should be targeting to achieve the desired effect ... If I went even higher up and went to my member of Parliament, I've no doubt that they would try and help me but then you have to address the enquiry at the appropriate level.'*

*'The frontline staff don't seem to be that approachable... They are not interested in asking you "how are you finding things?"; you know, "is there any improvements?"; You*

## Findings: Choice About Voice: hearing the public in public services

Figure 1:  
Choice about  
voice



wouldn't know there was a proactive comments procedure there for you to write your comments out—unless you asked.

### 'Caring and sharing'

People want public services that are dependable, of decent quality and above all local to them. There is a widespread sense of attachment to public services; of having a stake.

'I look after my premises. Can't you see? ... I'd like the council office up the road to realise: "Oh, there is a tenant in that premises ... someone who does care for the premises, who does care for the area and not just anybody who's paying rent"'

People reflect on how things 'should be done,' whether at the more tangible level of service attributes or at the more abstract level of service values. It also leads people to reflect on how providers negotiate their stewardship of the service. Users are neither entirely self-interested nor entirely other-directed, reflecting a mix of individual and collective identifications. People want to share with

others in decent public services.

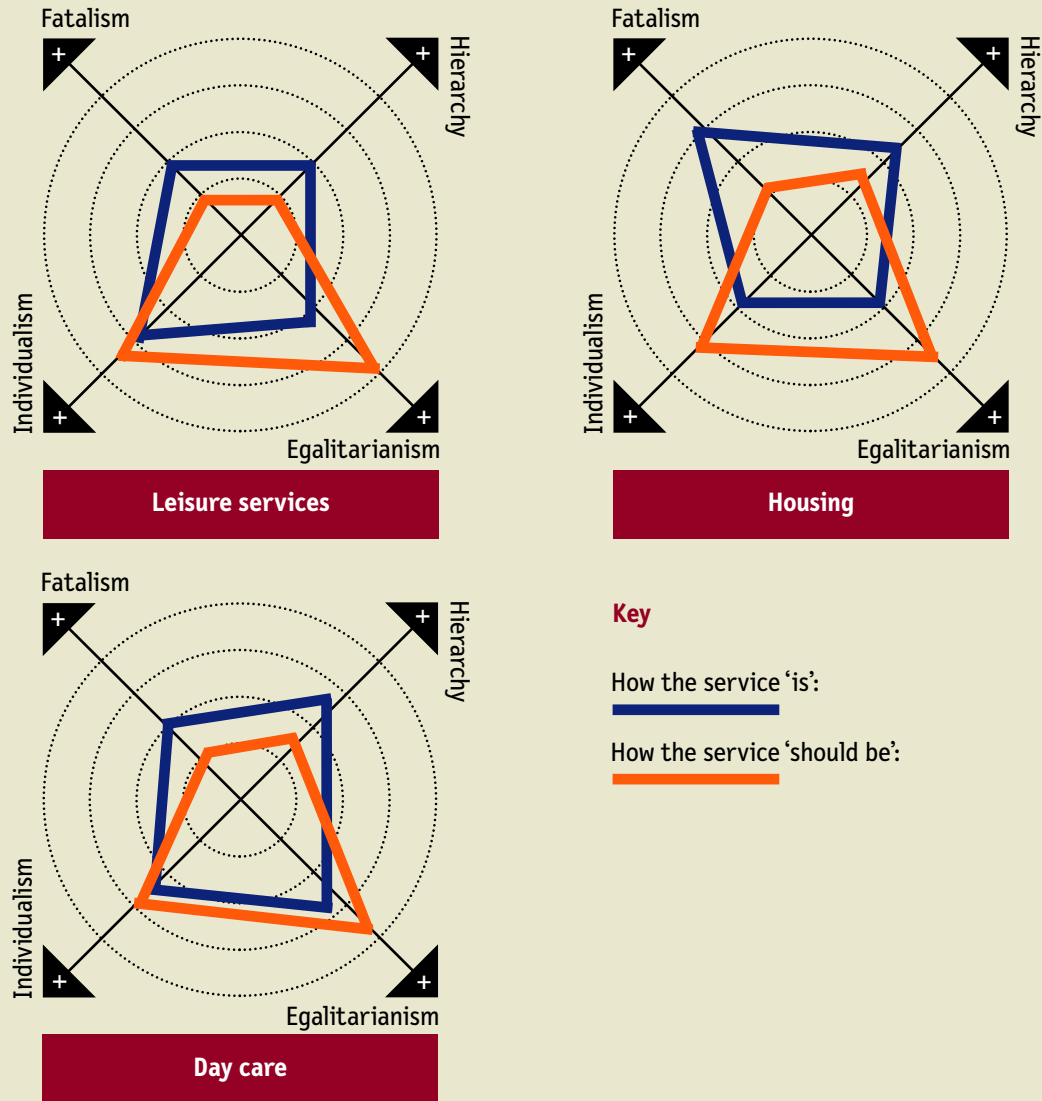
'I was swimming for seven years and I loved it... And then suddenly they started to play music in the pool.... I really blew my stack! I couldn't bear it. So I said "I really don't like this." And they went and turned it off. And I felt terrible because I thought "what about everybody else?" So there I was, I felt really embarrassed. So I asked a couple of people in the pool, and said "did they mind the music?" And they said "no". So I felt I had exercised disproportionate influence.'

### 'Cultural considerations'

Factors relating to the culture of public service organisations are important for the 'possibility spaces' they are felt to either open up or close off. Public service organisations have different combinations of cultural perspectives. These do not always match the perspectives of users. This affects how users feel they are treated by the organisation. We asked users to assess their service organisation against the four dimensions of a popular model of culture—hierarchy, individualism, egalitarianism

## Findings: Choice About Voice: hearing the public in public services

Figure 2:  
User perceptions  
of how the  
service 'is'  
compared with  
how it 'should be'



and fatalism. First they rated how they thought the service actually was, then how they thought it should be (see Figure 2). Our case studies include examples where these ratings are both relatively congruent (social care), and where they display more of a 'culture clash' (housing). For example, in our housing case we were regaled with stories of broken promises, lack of access to senior staff and opaque decision-making – the sense of fatalism was tangible. Ratings in leisure services are relatively congruent, but exhibit a particular cultural 'blindspot' on the dimension of egalitarianism. Here, managers sometimes seemed almost pathological in their attitude towards any form of 'collective user'.

'One customer did say that ... we should have more regular meetings and so on. And I thought, "I don't like the sound of that". You have got the possibility of a quango being generated, a little tight-knit club that seems to have a lot of power. There was no way I was going to let that happen.'

User-provider relationships and service evaluations are considerably more positive in cases where user ratings are

more congruent. Overall, most users want greater freedom from heavily-prescribed rules and regulations. However, being given greater choice as individuals is only seen as one way to achieve this. There is also strong support for more inclusive processes that recognise users' status as members of communities and the wider public.

'There were forever letters about the council not listening to us, and why should such and such happen and we aren't getting answers back and this, that and the other... So one does have a feeling, if there are financial constraints that make it much more important to do X rather than Y, that one wouldn't be told the whole truth. I think that is part of the general culture'

### MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

#### The importance of voice

Voice provides a way of tapping into a range of important inputs for public services: knowledges, ideas and individual/collective sentiment. Often there is a 'default assumption' of user self-interest in the expression of voice – that it represents 'voice about choice'. However, that is

## Findings:

### Choice About Voice: hearing the public in public services

not borne out by our findings. Users also acknowledge a need for more inclusive processes of engagement over service issues and service-related values.

#### Users want 'choice about voice'

Service users want a full range of different channels through which to express their views on different issues. These channels need to be open (and the reception clear) if users are to be persuaded that the opportunities are viable. The absence or blocking of certain channels leads to voice being stifled. Opportunities for organisational learning are being missed. Over time, a sense that service providers are only interested in talking amongst themselves holds the danger of disconnection and withdrawal – as noted already in wider political life.

#### 'Leadership and listening'

Service users do trust providers to take the lead in running public services. However, this trust is limited and conditional, not absolute. Users often feel a need to keep their eye on the ball, and to make sure that important matters do not go unchallenged. If they wish to retain users' support, public service leaders can little afford to allow themselves to become disconnected.

#### Avoid cultural tensions

The multi-dimensional model of service cultures provides a helpful way to understand the differences between public service users' aspirations and experiences of how they are treated, and how these reflect cultural tensions/blindspots. 'Modernisation' of producer-consumer relationships should aim to rebalance service cultures so these aspects are more congruent. This necessitates addressing both 'lower order' issues of policy and practice,

and 'higher order' issues of values and attitudes.

#### THE STUDY

*Cultures of Consumption and Consumer Involvement in Public Services* was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme and ran from July 2003 to December 2005 (grant number: RES 143-25-0040). The project team was Richard Simmons and Johnston Birchall in the Department of Applied Social Science at Stirling University and Alan Prout in the Institute of Education at Warwick University.

#### PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Birchall J. and Simmons R. *User Power: the participation of users in public services*, (London: National Consumer Council, 2004).

Simmons R., Birchall J. and Prout A. *Open Channels: hearing the public in public services* (London: National Consumer Council, 2006).

Simmons R., Birchall J. and Prout A. *Cultural Tensions in Public Service Delivery: implications for producer-consumer relationships* (Working paper O26, ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme, 2006).

#### CONTACT

Dr. Johnston Birchall  
Department of Applied Social Science  
Stirling University  
Stirling  
FK9 4LA  
telephone  
+44 (0)1786 467 981  
email  
johnston.birchall@stir.ac.uk



## 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:

- 1 to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- 1 to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- 1 to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- 1 to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- 1 to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- 1 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](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk)

or contact

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