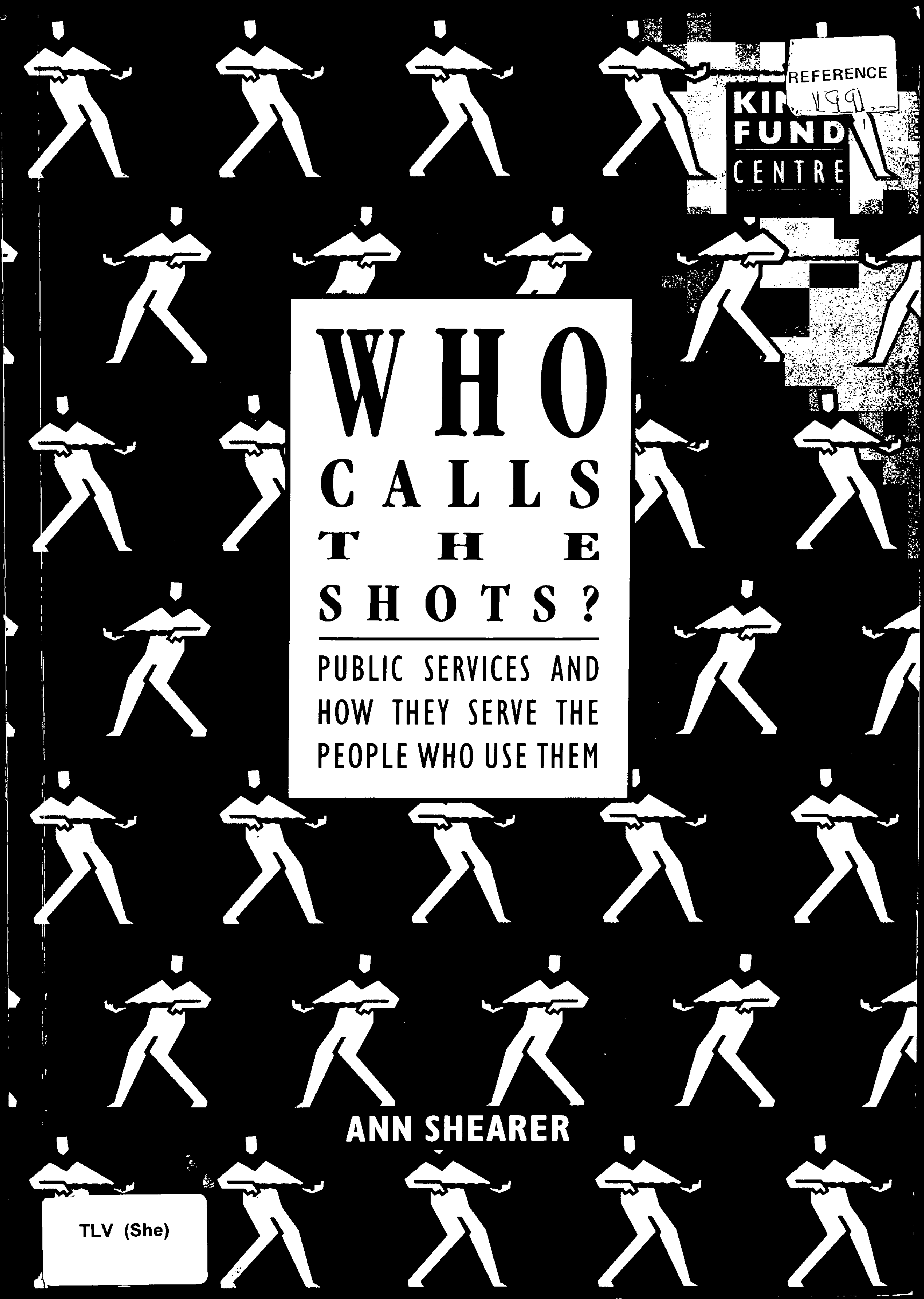

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WHO CALLS THE SHOTS?

PUBLIC SERVICES AND HOW THEY SERVE THE PEOPLE WHO USE THEM

ANN SHEARER

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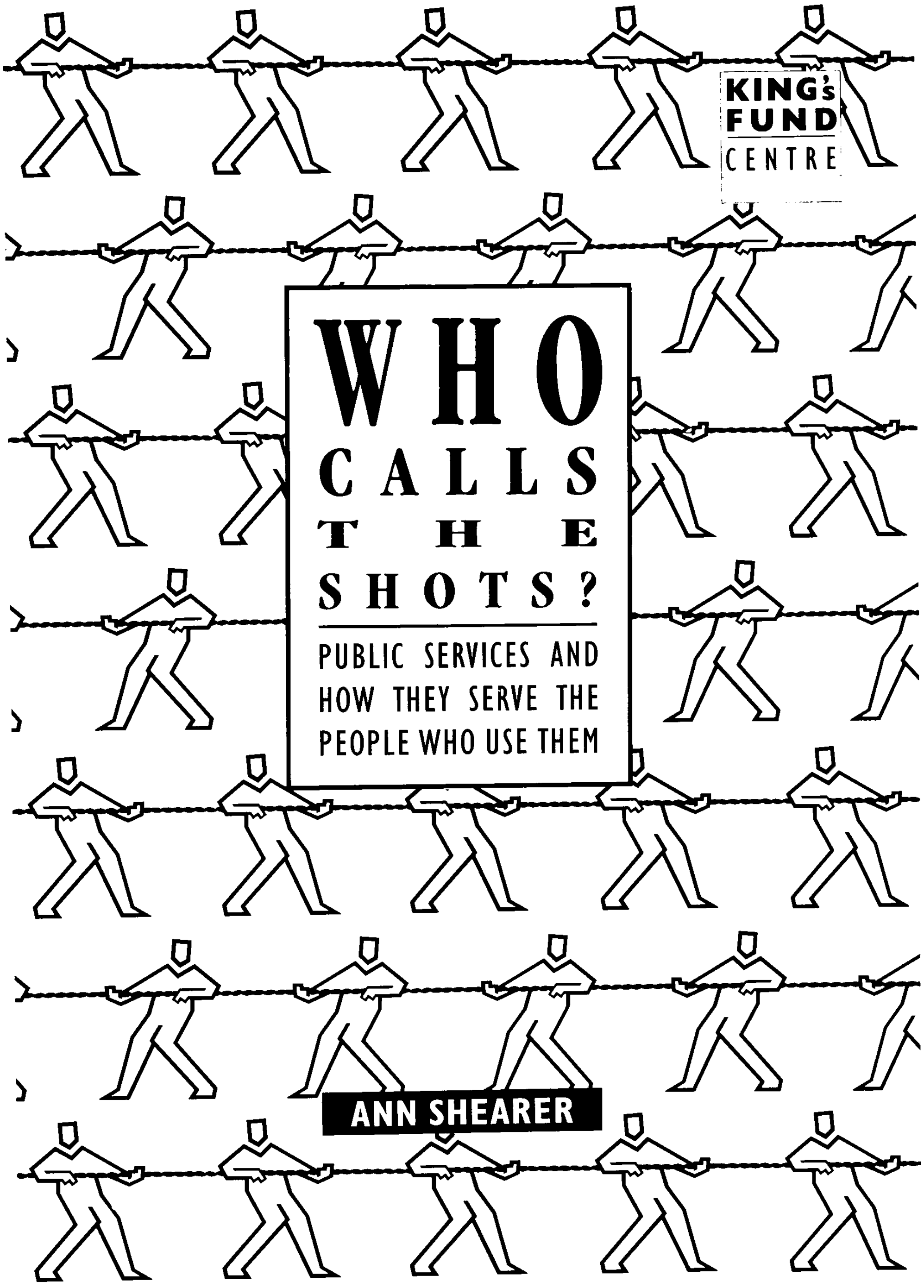

WHO CALLS THE SHOTS?

PUBLIC SERVICES AND HOW THEY SERVE THE PEOPLE WHO USE THEM

ANN SHEARER

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The King's Fund Centre is a health services development agency which promotes improvements in health and social care. We do this by working with people in health services, in social services, in voluntary agencies, and with the users of their services. We encourage people to try out new ideas, provide financial or practical support to new developments, and enable experiences to be shared through workshops, conferences and publications. Our aim is to ensure that good developments in health and social care are widely taken up.

The King's Fund Centre is a part of the
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Acknowledgements

This report is based on a conference which I organised as part of a programme of work in the Primary Health Care Group at the King's Fund Centre, aimed at making health services more user-friendly. The purpose of the conference was to learn from initiatives across the public sector and to learn about the practicalities as well as the politics of making public services more responsive to the people who use them. I am grateful to the following people in the King's Fund Centre who helped decide the content and style of the conference: Pat Gordon, Barbara Stocking, Helen Smith, Andrea Whittaker, Ian Hamilton, Janice Robinson, Tessa Brooks, Diana Twitchin.

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Liz Winn
King's Fund Centre

Acknowledgements are due to all the conference speakers and workshop leaders, without whose contributions this report would not exist, and whose details appear in Appendix 1. I have not necessarily used their material either in its entirety or in the conference's running order. But I have certainly tried to convey their main themes, ideas and information.
Pat Gordon and Liz Winn of the King's Fund Centre Primary Health Care Group have helped me to do it with suggestions and encouragement: thanks to them!

Ann Shearer

Ann Shearer was Editor of ***The Guardian***'s 'Society Tomorrow' page from 1983–1988. Her previous King's Fund publications include ***Living Independently*** (1982) and ***Building Community*** (1986).

Foreword

Ann Shearer's book draws upon a King's Fund conference attended by people interested in consumer responsiveness and performance assessment across a wide range of public services. Rather than following the conventional pattern of summarising what was said session by session she has been more ambitious and more creative, producing a collage of impressions that reappeared in the presentations about different services. The result is a colourful and stimulating account, without clear answers about how to make public services more responsive to consumers, but with plenty to encourage people to reflect on ways forward.

The topic is a difficult one, characterised by paradox. Everyone wants responsive public services, yet few if any public services rate highly in this respect. The decade of the 80s witnessed a sharp rise in the rhetoric about consumer responsiveness in the public sector, but the reality lags far behind. The main political parties, which agree about few things these days, actually agree in this instance about ends; what they completely disagree about is how to get there, and there is a real danger of tacking from one extreme political panacea to another, making little real progress in terms of more responsive services. As Ann Shearer points out this conference was itself paradoxical, with very little air time for users and the general public, and a producer-dominated discussion of what is being achieved for consumers in different services.

It would be wrong, however, to be too pessimistic. As this book illustrates, there is much to be gained by sharing experiences and ideas across the customary divisions among public services, and across the boundary with the private sector. It is not so much a matter of transferring 'solutions' as of understanding the environment in which better, more responsive public services are struggling to develop. If there is a long way to go, we should also recognise that, despite great difficulties in funding, in complexity, and in the volatility of British society as a whole, there is a real substance and quality in contemporary public sector management at its best. In most markets the single most important key to success — and even to long term survival — is to know what your customers want, how they rate you against competitors, and where they think your performance is weak and strong. Opinion formers in public sector management are at one in trying to develop an equally robust foundation for excellence in the management of public services, with the emphasis on listening to what the public wants, on advocacy and on public accountability. There is a long way to go, but at least we know the direction in which we want to head. That (as the Cheshire Cat pointed out to Alice) is fundamental to progress.

Robert J Maxwell
Secretary and Chief Executive
The King's Fund

Introduction

How are public services to became more responsive to the people who use them? That is the central question of this report, which is about a conference for senior public service managers held in Brighton in November 1989 by the King's Fund.

The question is hardly a new one. Concern to involve users of public services as more than passive recipients can be traced to a more general enthusiasm for citizen participation and the growth of the consumer movement in the 1960s. The efforts of a number of Labour-controlled councils to decentralise their services, the Great Debate in education and the introduction of community health councils are just three examples of how public services tried to be more open to the views of their users during the next decade. The political expression of concern had a moral base. As the World Health Organisation's Alma Alta Declaration put it: 'The people have the right and duty to participate individually and collectively in the planning and implementation of their health care'.[1]

Yet if the question about how such aims are to be achieved is not new, these days it has an added urgency. For the past decade, Britain has had a government whose model for public services is private enterprise and which emphasises the importance of increased individual choice as it restricts collective provision. So the 'choice' is increasingly, for a user who is now seen as a 'consumer', to be between public and private provision. 'People like to take responsibility for their own needs wherever possible', as ***Caring for People***, the 1989 White Paper on community care, puts it. 'We are fortunate in having a thriving voluntary sector and a rapidly growing private sector. The government believes that people welcome this mixed provision of care, and that it encourages innovation, diversity, proper attention to quality and the interests of consumers.'[2]

So public services are increasingly having to compete in a market where the competitive edge goes to the company which looks as if it cares most for its consumers' views, wants and needs. And it's a market, too, where consumers are no longer inclined to be as passive, even grateful, as they were before. When the Department of Social Security looked at standards of service in its local offices in 1988, for instance, it found that people were judging these by what they had grown to expect from banks and building societies. 'Shoddy public services should not be an option', John Major, then chief secretary to the Treasury, told the Audit Commission in 1989. 'Nor should they be tolerated'.

Public services are beginning to respond, and it's not easy. The tradition of public service does not, it seems, include a sensitivity to the public served. Some 95 per cent of the civil service, for instance, is concerned with the delivery of services; but as the 1987 Ibbs Report found, senior civil servants in particular simply weren't skilled in what that means.[3] The Historical Royal Palaces Agency offers a startling example of just how removed from the real world this can make the services: its inherited job descriptions laid down specifically that 'warders' were not allowed to speak to the public. This sort of approach seems the odder as the gap between private and public sectors widens: in one recent European survey, 75 per cent of managers saw customer service as the way to commercial success; service in the public sector came bottom of their rating.

So it's a sign of the times when the police force declares itself to be the police service, and another when British Rail's Network South East appoints its first quality manager last year. And it's surely no coincidence that the BBC, on the edge of deregulated broadcasting, appoints a senior manager specifically charged with responding to audience views and concerns, who says things like 'Our commitment to public accountability is a growth area at the BBC'. Yet the BBC's particular situation also has a relevance to public services as a whole. 'Being responsive to the audience is not an optional extra', says Howell James, director of corporate affairs. 'Without that support our case for continued survival and the special funding that makes that possible would be hard to make'.

How, then, are public services to become more responsive to those who use them? Clear away the rhetoric, and how useful is the analogy with consumerism in the private sector? Public services have to cope with very much more diverse pressures than striving for a bigger market share and the search for profit — and until very recently it was a matter of pride that this should be so. For them, there may not always be the straight equation of efficiency, economy and consumer satisfaction that seems so elementary to the government. Public services typically have not one but a number of 'consumer' groups; how are their interests to be reconciled? Issues of power between consumer and producer are not so easily resolved, either. Can we really say 'the consumer is king' in public services when he (and she too) is often — but certainly not always — weak, vulnerable and unable to take their custom to the firm across the road, either because it does not exist or because they can't afford to? And how much influence can they really hope to have when the government is exercising such determined and ever-increasing central control in the very services over which its rhetoric gives them sovereignty?

These are the main issues which came up at the King's Fund [RIPA] conference and which figure in the first part of this report, together with illustrations from specific services. The second part of the report takes up issues concerning the balance of power between providers and users of services, and shows some different approaches (usually local) to tackling these.

There is a clear progression in this part of the report: from consumer protection, through responsibility for management and finally to 'empowerment' or power-sharing. Hardly necessary, perhaps, to warn that life is seldom so neat and that many of these processes are likely to be happening at once — and necessarily so.

Finally, three points about the tone of the report. The first is that it is, in a broad sense, very political. There is a lot more in it about the balance of power and influence between providers and users of public services than there is about how staff and users actually interact and learn to listen to each other. There is very much more about organisational reform and the delivery of service than there is about how people feel when they are asked either to deliver or to receive, or about how mutual satisfaction can grow in the perception of mutual responsibilities, understandings and concerns. This is not my emphasis, it is the conference's. For me, that raises questions about what happens to perceptions when efficiency, economy and efficacy are emphasised at the expense of such notions as empathy, encouragement and equity, or even such administrative tools as epidemiology, education and eligibility. What ***are*** the values on which public services are based when the proud talk is of 'quick wins' and 'exploiting the flavour of the month'?

The second point is not unrelated. Those who gave accounts of the different approaches, aspirations and service initiatives were not, of course, unversed in the skills of gift-wrapping and marketing their product.

So what you read about it is a digest of what they said rather than in any sense an objective assessment of the product's worth. Sometimes, personal experience can come into that gap: 95 per cent of the British population, for instance, views or listens to some BBC product each week; very many people — especially in an audience at a Brighton conference — have had recent personal experience of British Rail's Network SouthEast. (Bad luck on BR that on the very day on which the conference was hearing about its prize network, ***The Guardian*** should have carried one article on exactly how appalling it is to travel on the 07.57 from Orpington to Charing Cross ('All stops to Hell', 24 November 1989) and another on the prospect of a complete transport disaster in the south east if the government doesn't invest more in the railways ('One Over the Eight Per Cent', 24 November 1989).

There is a point here, of course, about the difference between overall performance and the reality of individual experience, and behind that a question about how far providers of public services are able and willing to engage with the truth of that individual experience rather than averages of relative satisfactions.

The same questions could perhaps be asked of the organisers of this conference. There were no 'consumers' of service (billed as such and speaking from that perspective) on the platform; that high place went to the 'providers'. The conference itself was geared to an audience of senior managers. The only direct consumers of services even to run a workshop were people who had been defined as having learning difficulties — and that is perhaps worth pondering, because it is among this group of users above all that notions like 'participation' in the planning and running of services have been developed, often to a point of considerable sophistication. It's not to belittle their hard and honest work, or that of the staff and providers who have worked alongside them, to wonder whether the relative success of their initiatives isn't at least partly due to the fact that of all users, these are the ones least likely to be seen as a threat to existing power structures. Even now — as the workshop participants emphasised — their carefully considered views are too easily dismissed 'because they have a learning difficulty'.

Yet if we are looking for ways through the jumble of jargon that too often seems to go along with discussion of how public services can become more responsive to the consumer, we could maybe do a lot worse than to start with the directness of their approach.

Ann Shearer

'In the end I said "Shut up! I am going to tell you what I have been through because of rules and regulations." They were gob-smacked! They still treated me as a second-class citizen. "I am not a second-class citizen. I pay my taxes and I pay my rates." The way they talked down to me ... I said, "Don't talk down to me. Treat me as an equal. All that's wrong is that I am partially sighted, I have coordination problems and dyslexia. I am not stupid. I know what you are talking about".'

Simon Gardner
Member, Integration Alliance
and Wandsworth Disability
Alliance

'To say that we want "responsive", high quality services, that are concerned with the consumer, is not to say something new. The problem is that the perception of public services is that they are not responsive, not high quality and not what people want — that they are bureaucratic, paternalistic and inefficient. They do not have wide support. As rate-capping showed, people do not turn out in their masses on the streets for us. We have got to change. In public services, the key to inspiring change is consumer dissatisfaction'.

Margaret Hodge
Leader, Islington Council

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Issues and Arguments

Who is 'The Consumer' ?

Who Calls the Shots ?
The BBC • The Police

Private Lessons in the Public Sector ?
A Strategy for Quality • The Civil Service
Another Way to Run a Railway

But Who's In Charge Here ?
Local Government in Islington

Education for Change ?

Who is 'The Consumer' ?

Even when 'the consumer' is taken as the user of a service who pays for it either indirectly or — increasingly these days — directly, the concept is still a complex one in the public services. How far does it need to be clarified before services start to try to 'respond to the consumer'? How far is debate an excuse for inaction?

There is a ***political dimension*** to the debate. 'The consumer is high on all political agendas', says Margaret Hodge, leader of Islington council, 'but in the government's terms there is the notion of a ***market of individuals*** competitively pursuing material self-interest. In Labour, there is a concern with promoting the worth and value of collective service, with not simply those who can buy but those who need, with those who may need tomorrow and not just today, with a right regardless of ability to pay'.

And who are these people? The word 'consumer' may imply a homogeneity that simply doesn't exist; individuals will bring their own very different wants and needs to the business of consuming (which is one of the reasons that it is so hard to create individually-responsive social services). Even when the 'product' is more or less defined, it may be hard to come to a cohesive view of the people who 'consume' it. The government's ***Caring for People***, for instance, writes of ***consumers***, ***users*** and ***customers*** of community care. But it also writes of ***clients***, ***patients***, ***sufferers***, and of ***people*** who are ***in need***, ***dependent*** and ***vulnerable***. So two images are held simultaneously: of the strong and independent individual, exercising increasing choice among services, and of the person who needs the community's care.

Public services try to respond to ***individual*** users — to the person whose water supply is disconnected, whose house has been burgled, whose train has been cancelled, whose needs are assessed in an individual care plan. But they also have to be concerned with ***collective*** provision — for the overall water supply, the policing of defined areas, the pattern of railway usage, the demands of local epidemiology. How are these demands to be balanced?

Public services are also distinguished by the fact that they have so many ***reluctant consumers***. This may have to do with the nature of what they provide: most hospital patients and arrested crooks, for instance, would rather be somewhere else. It may also have to do with the fact that they are monopoly or near-monopoly providers: how many British Rail commuters would choose not to use the railway if the roads were better? How likely are reluctant consumers to be involved in their services? How far should their views be listened to?

And what about ***denied consumers*** — people who might wish to use public services, but have no chance to, like the homeless?

Consumers of public services may be ***in competition***. Sometimes their wants and needs may be closely connected: how are community services to weigh up the possibly competing demands of people who are direct users and those who care for them, or schools the demands of students, parents and local employers? Sometimes the competition may be more clearcut, and public services will have to weigh up the needs and wants of, say, those who use the maternity and the geriatric services.

What about ***representation***? Given the diversity of consumers, actual and potential, of any public service, just how 'representative' can any expression of consumer views become? Are service providers sometimes too scrupulous about this, using the 'unrepresentative' nature of expressed views as an excuse not to respond at all?

There's another question: how far can public services be responsive to their direct consumers anyway, when one of their distinguishing features is that they have to try to keep so many ***different interests*** happy? The complexities are undeniable, and the next section explores them. But can they too become another set of excuses for failing to take seriously consumers' wants and needs?

Who Calls the Shots ?

At the least, public services must respond to :

- their consumers
- the taxpayer
- the state

What then are their aims? 'To provide the best quality service at the most cost-effective price for the taxpayer' is the official view. But who judges quality? Who judges cost-effectiveness?

Where does the pressure come from ?

Two examples

The BBC must respond to:

- its viewers and listeners — especially since they do the funding
- parliament — which votes for it
- 'commentators'
- 'opinion-formers'

The police must respond to:

- the demands of legislation
- the (criminal) users — through the pattern of crime
- the (straight) users — through mandatory consultation

And what about the staff ?

'The BBC cannot just respond, it must try to lead. It must offer opportunities to creative programme-makers to enable them to get their ideas on the screens or on the radios.'

Howell James
Director of Corporate Affairs
BBC

'The police service can claim to have several users, some being incompatible with others. The state may have different requirements or expectations from the individual. The community can be viewed as both residential and business, and the aspirations of these may conflict ...
Is the user to be local, borough-wide, electorally-defined or regional?

'What must not be overlooked is that users are internal as well as external. The organisation's staff are essentially internal users of the resources and facilities available for delivery of the service to the external users.

'The loss of support or commitment from all users will have severe implications for the attainment of the organisation's purpose. It has to pay equal attention to all users.'

Clive Pearman
Chief Superintendent
Notting Hill Police

Who Calls the Shots ? The BBC

The BBC's board of governors is there to represent the public interest. Its network of regional and special subject advisory groups involve no fewer than 900 people across the UK. 'The BBC is fortunate', says Howell James, its director of corporate affairs, 'in having a structure which promotes responsiveness'.

There is no shortage of customers' views either. BARB — the joint BBC–ITV Broadcasters' Research Board — provides viewing figures and promises the monitoring of video-recorder usage as well. Every week a 'representative' 6,000 people across the land give their ratings to specified BBC programmes. The corporation's own research department (now a limited company inviting tenders from the private sector) does its own attitudinal research. The two information offices at Broadcasting House and the TV Centre are open every day for 18 hours and a digest of customer views harvested from the 5,000 calls they deal with each week is circulated daily to senior managers. Each of the 145,000 letters that the BBC receives from its public every year are similarly processed. 'The BBC', says Howell James, 'prides itself on knowing its viewers and listeners pretty well'.

The corporation is also becoming increasingly concerned to ensure that its viewers and listeners know it: commitment to public accountability is a 'growth area'. The annual report, ***See for Yourself***, is now broadcast and backed by written materials. The standards by which producers are expected to work are published and available in BBC shops. Public meetings are held.

And so ?

Sometimes the weight of viewers' and listeners' opinions can have a direct effect. Adjustments to the television weather forecast and reappraisal of the Radio Times format are two recent examples of that. Introduction of a programme for older viewers came out of a call in the course of the 1988 ***See for Yourself*** exercise.

But how far can responsiveness go ?

The BBC's research shows that it faces a huge diversity of views and feelings about its programmes; its aim must be to offer a real spread of choice, 'to make the best programmes available to all'.

It is not from response to existing programmes that new departures grow; what the public says it wants, apparently, and until it is offered something new, is simply more of the same. 'It is not for the BBC,' says Howell James, 'in trying to offer its audience quality programmes across a diverse range of views, to constrain its programme makers purely on the basis of research … In terms of satisfying viewers and listeners the BBC cannot just respond. It must try to lead. It must offer opportunities to creative programme-makers to enable them to get their ideas on the screens or on the radios'.

It is not simply by its programmes that the customers judge the BBC. 'They look at and judge the BBC not just on our output but on the way in which we respond on all fronts — be it related to government, be it errors leading to tragedies such as the Legionnaire's [disease] outbreak or be it responding to the wide range of special lobby groups that approach us. They look and they listen to the tone of voice, the reasoned argument, the points we choose to make and the way in which we make them. This jigsaw is important if we are to protect ourselves institutionally as well as establish a strong base from which to defend our programmes and our policies.'

Each week, 95 per cent of the British public uses a BBC product, either TV or radio. Each week (in the last quarter of 1989) we watched 22 hours of TV and listened to an average of 10 hours of radio. Half the first and nearly seven tenths of the second were put out by the BBC and it cost, in the BBC licence, the equivalent of the Daily Mirror each day. This is reckoned very or fairly good value for money by 70 per cent of the people. But add up the 'fairly good' and 'fairly poor' ratings and together they say that 60 per cent have their doubts.

Who Calls the Shots ? The Police

'In the past 15 years', says Bill Skitt, deputy chief constable of Northamptonshire, 'the police service has probably experienced more internal changes and external pressures than throughout its previous history. And those pressures continue to influence the future development of the service'.

New statutory requirements

In recent years, the police have had to deal with an unprecedented quantity and complexity of legislative changes. Data protection, safety at sports grounds, the Crown prosecution service, the police complaints authority and tape recording of interviews with suspects are some examples of new demands; the Transport, Public Order and Police and Criminal Evidence Acts are others. 'All of these', says Bill Skitt, 'gave rise to very significant implications in terms of police resources, administrative and technological systems, skills development training, operational strategies and our relationship with the community. The police and other institutions, in having to absorb the wealth of decision-making processes and support systems, found themselves under immense pressure due to their organisational structure which was designed for a slower and simpler society'.

The experience of implementing the 1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act illustrates what this pressure can mean. For a start, it demanded huge amounts of extra training for police. In Northamptonshire, for instance, over 1,000 officers had at least three days training over a period of nine months. If that is extrapolated to the 125,000 officers across the country, it means that 1,000 'officer years' of work were absorbed by this training need. Officers still have to be trained to meet the Act's requirements for tape recording interviews with suspects; facilities still have to be built and equipped.

The Act has also changed the relationship between the police and the public, introducing mechanisms for representation, improved information and redress, together with codes of practice for officers who deal with the public. Each police area must find its way of getting the views of local people and enlisting their help in preventing crime; all areas now have several community consultative groups whose members may include elected representatives of local organisations, community leaders, clergy, teachers, youth leaders, and the police themselves, and whose views go regularly to the chief constable and the police authority. The police complaints authority brings a new independence to the investigation of complaints against the police and can override the view of the chief constable if it feels that disciplinary charges should be brought. The introduction of 'lay visitors' who have the right (except in highly exceptional cases) to make unscheduled inspections of the conditions in which prisoners are held is another example of the new relationship between police and public.

Public order

Only 13 years ago, says Bill Skitt, police officers responded to a riot in Notting Hill with no protection except dustbin lids. Police equipment subsequently included defensive shields. Eight years ago, after rioters used petrol bombs, flameproof clothing and metal helmets were added. Three years ago, rioters shot at police and baton rounds were deployed. Public demonstrations and industrial disputes are getting more violent and so are sporting events; there is a general upward trend in assaults on police and the use of knives and firearms. 'Regrettably and to an extent inevitably', says Bill Skitt, 'the operational response of the police to major disorder has brought about a rapid change in our image. The average member of the public is still unfamiliar with the true horror of street rioting and mob violence. In an atmosphere of emotive opinion and partisan observations, it has been tempting, and in some cases convenient, to perceive riot equipment and the tactics employed by the police as contributing to the disorder. But neither should we as police officers be blind to the possibility that our own actions can and do add legitimacy to such beliefs when exercised without sensitivity and proper reflection'.

In February 1990, in his published report on the 1987 Wapping industrial dispute for the Independent Police Complaints Authority, Chief Superintendent David Wyrko of Northamptonshire police criticised both the overall command of the Met's policing operation and the actions of junior officers. When disorder broke out, 'no person could be considered to be in effective command and control' and 'tight supervision and a high level of discipline' were lacking. Although most officers acted in a disciplined and professional way in the face of extreme provocation, there was clearly 'indiscriminate use of truncheons' and the deployment of units using round shields seemed uncontrolled. It was this seemingly uncontrolled response, Wyrko said, that, to many observers, caused the violence to escalate. (***The Independent***, 16 February 1990).

Escalating workloads

Police now deal with not short of 20 million emergency and non-emergency calls from the public each year; recorded crime has more or less trebled within two decades. The Metropolitan Police would need to increase from its present strength of 27,000 officers to around 70,000 to achieve the same ratio of officer-time per crime as 20 years ago. The volume of traffic goes up and so does the mileage of roads to be policed. Involvement in schools and liaison with local consultative forums and community groups all take time. So do the demands of the new legislation.

Technology

Information technology brings benefits. But it also brings costs, and the police have been subjected to the government's financial management initiative. 'The dilemma for the police manager is to improve upon his rather tenuous control of finite resources, whilst pursuing goals which are sometimes unstated, unclear, paradoxical or controversial'.

The media and events

The media's focus on inadequacies and faults brings its own pressure for legislative and other change. The Cleveland child abuse case, the series of rail disasters in 1989 and the Hillsborough tragedy all focused on the need for the police (among others) to examine what was required of them, both by law and by the public.

'It is often only when such events occur', says Bill Skitt, 'that the failings of an organisation are clearly evident, and it is of paramount importance that, having been identified a positive response is given ... whether by training, greater expenditure on equipment, or improved management. The opportunities within the police service to respond to identified problems are restricted in many respects. It cannot simply recruit more staff to meet staffing deficiencies, and it cannot seek to produce immediate results by simply injecting more finance into the provision of equipment or facilities without regard for budgetary constraints. In reality, the service, in common with many other public sector services, has to rely upon a management of the resources it currently possesses, but with an ongoing and honest scrutiny of its methods and success'.

Police and public: who sets priorities ?

What people want of the police is that they prevent crime, police the community and make themselves visible by walking the beat. The police, on the other hand, give priority to attending to emergencies, making arrests and solving serious crimes.

In a survey for the Operational Policing Review published in March 1990:

- 70 per cent of people thought there were too few police on the beat in their neighbourhood
- only 2 per cent thought there were too many police around
- a quarter said they had never even seen one on foot patrol
- many thought they should concentrate on preventing crime instead of patrolling in cars and controlling traffic
- 69 per cent of police thought that the distribution of foot and car patrols was about right
- a third thought that advising the public on crime prevention was important
- 56 per cent thought it was important to get to know local people
- 93 per cent thought it was very important to detect and arrest offenders

The Operational Policing Review 1990, based on the work of six forces, was commissioned by the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Police Superintendents' Association and the Police Federation. Traditional policing, it concluded, was under threat from government financial pressures. So much time was now spent on trying to be efficient that less practical policing got done and quality of service suffered. So did the police themselves: 'It is not possible to sustain productivity in terms of greater efficiency whilst retaining job satisfaction of police officers'.

'These are terrible admissions', comments ***The Guardian***. 'Someone, somewhere — the Chief Inspector of Constabulary? — should be asked how the nation's chief constables could lend their names to such nonsense.

'It is not ministers who manage the police, but chief officers. The whole purpose of improving police efficiency is to release resources to improve the service. To suggest that quality — some might ask what quality? — has suffered in the increase in efficiency is to admit to managerial incompetence. The idea that ministers have been eroding the role of the beat officers is untrue. The huge expansion of civilians in the last decade was designed to release uniformed officers from their typewriters. The recent Victims' Charter only reinforced "traditional policing" values, with its calls for more concern for victims ...

'The real charge which should be laid against the government is that it delayed unconscionably the efficiency measures which it has now introduced. No other public service has been treated with such benignity. Police expenditure has increased by 55 per cent in real terms since 1979 ...

'All three associations want more police officers. Numbers have increased since 1979, but earnings have gone up even faster. A Met constable with 15 years service now receives £25,000, compared to the £18,000 top rate in the classroom. Every one per cent squeeze on pay would release the resources to recruit 1,200 extra officers. A fair cop?'

'Traditional police roles
eroded' and
'A fit up on the beat'
The Guardian
9 March 1990

Private Lessons in the Public Sector ?

The view from the Cabinet Office leaves no doubt: 'It is a truism', says Caroline Bentley, 'that customer service is the current vogue in the private sector. Firm after firm is recognising that the pursuit of profitability alone is not enough and that it is customer service which gives the competitive edge ... The impact of the customer service message is also being felt very much in the public service. Our customers are increasingly sophisticated, with rising expectations of the quality of service in all areas of life. They are used to the private sector approach to "the customer as king" and are no longer prepared to accept low standards in the public sector'.

But how relevant is private sector practice to public services? The multiplicity of customers of public undertakings means, as Caroline Bentley points out, that the straight aim of quality customer service has to be balanced by cost-effectiveness for the taxpayer; and, she adds, 'the question of resources will be in the forefront'.

For John Stewart, professor at the Institute for Local Government Studies, there are three critical differences in the relationship between a public body and its public and a private firm and its customers (particularly when the service is not part of a trading relationship).

- Many services are in the public sector because there is more than one customer and so different interests have to be weighed. In the private sector, the customer is identified at the point of sale; not all the customers in the public sector are identified at the point of use. The customers of the education service, for instance, are the children themselves, their parents, all those the child will meet in later life and society at large.
- In the public sector, the criterion of need should usually override that of demand. A public authority must often ration resources in relation to overwhelming demand. So in the public domain, marketing for equity should replace the private sector task of marketing for demand. Equity should be the fourth to add to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- In the public domain, the public are citizens as well as customers, entitled to respect as both; there is a double obligation on a public authority. A citizen is a member of the community which governs and is governed by public authority. The citizens vote, and it is to them that the public authority is accountable. They have the potential to be not just passive subjects but active participants in the affairs of government. They have concerns about services even when they are not customers.

From the perspective of Hertfordshire social services, the differences between public and private sectors look like this: 'Public services management has to start from the perspective of what users need and match that to resources, rather than the other way round,' say Marcia Saunders and Maggie Pinder. 'This is different from the commercial sector's profit orientation and the two agencies' orientation to consumers is correspondingly and inherently different. The rights and powers of users and the responsibilities and powers of service providers relate directly to and necessarily influence or constrain each other. We cannot promise that we won't invest the most in those who "produce" the least; we cannot simply replace quality with "choice". If we are genuinely public sector, we add the values of accountability and effectiveness.

'In public services, there is less scope for market forces to operate or for services to be trimmed for the sake of profits, and the characteristics of our work — such as teams, planning, elected members — reflect this. Planning and standard-setting on the basis of need rather than demand, collectivism, our inability to discard difficult (read "unprofitable") customers — all these are central to our approach and likely to be uncomfortable or irritating in the market-place.'

And to some it isn't just the philosophy that's askew; the government's approach is also out of key with its rhetoric.

> *'Henry Ford told his customers that they could have any car they wanted, so long as it was black. This expression of a supply-driven philosophy almost destroyed the American motor industry. Too often the experience of users of our social care services has been very similar. But unlike Henry Ford's irritated customers, who can go elsewhere in search of a car of their preferred colour, people who use our social care services tend to do so precisely because their poverty, linked with other adversities, precludes them from the options available to customers in the commercial market. An abused child, a person suffering from long-term mental illness, cannot generally exercise the market consumer's "right of exit". Compare the approach of the community care white paper with that of the private sector. It is inconceivable that Marks & Spencer, for example, would revamp their retail outlets without careful market research to establish that this is what their customers wanted.'*
>
> Tessa Jowell
> Birmingham Community Care
> Special Action Project

But for others, the private sector offers valuable approaches for a public sector in search of greater ***accountability*** to the customer and a higher ***quality*** of service.

> *'The challenges facing the BBC, public bodies and the private sector are very similar ... All are accountable to their respective customers — whether statutorily as guardians of taxpayers' or ratepayers' money, or in the BBC's case because of the unique relationship we enjoy with the licence-payer, or through the dictates of the market-place.'*
>
> Howell James
> Director of Corporate Affairs
> BBC

> *'If the NHS has become a service managed and planned from a starting point of available resources, rather than starting with people's needs, is it really still a public service, even if it hasn't actually been privatised?'*
>
> Marcia Saunders and
> Maggie Pinder
> Hertfordshire Social Services

Private Lessons in the Public Sector ? A Strategy for Quality

'Service quality', says Stephen Fielding, head of business development, Midland Bank Personal Financial Services, 'is at the heart of any improvement in public provision. The high ground for any organisation, anywhere — whether the NHS, British Rail, the police, schools or local authorities — lies in the quality of services that it offers.

'Of course the public sector is not a homogenous entity ... Plainly some parts of the sector are monopolies, others are in competition with the private sector and still others are in competition with themselves.

'But if we focus, as I think we should, on the person who benefits from our service, if "the consumer is king", we may find that the differences between the private and public sectors are not significant enough to detain us.

'To make the consumer paramount is also to emphasise professionalism. For our value, purpose and meaning will be assessed by reference to whoever we benefit. So doctors will be justified by their patients, teachers by their pupils, councillors by their ratepayers, MPs by their voters.'

Why does quality matter ?

- **Consumer expectations are rising** — People of all backgrounds are saying that they will not tolerate mediocre standards of service any more.
- **Competition is increasing** — The quality of its service may be the only thing that distinguishes an organisation from others in its field — but that can be decisive. Market research underlines that it is service quality which decides whether customers come back — or not. Ninety six per cent of dissatisfied customers don't tell the organisation their complaints — but 91 per cent don't come back and they each tell 9 or 10 people why.
- **Good quality service improves efficiency by getting it right first time**
- **Good quality service has a moral dimension** — It matters because to do the best for the customer should be the mainspring of professional endeavour.
- **Good quality service improves customer satisfaction and staff morale**

What is quality ?

- Quality is delivering what the consumer requires and expects.
- It is ***wanting*** to deliver that.
- It is attention not just to the 'core product of the organisation but to the expected, the augmented and finally the potential level of the service that surround it.
- It is made up of key identified components (at the Midland Bank they are people, positioning, products, processes and premises).

How to improve service quality ?

- **Believe it matters** — This is the essential first step. Commitment must come from the top, and find an expression in the mission statement at the organisation's heart. Any policy should be communicated clearly and practically, with the money to back it, and there should be a supervisory body to ensure that it is carried out. Staff need to know that quality matters; incentives may help.
- **Work out a strategy** — Find out where the organisation is now and where it should be. How do consumers see the organisation, what are their expectations and how do we close the gap between current and desired positions.
- **Work out tactics** — Use 'quick wins' — aiming to do lots of small things a little better. Set standards which are achievable, affordable and meet consumer expectations.

How to measure quality ?

- Conduct internal audit, taking stock of performance against requirements.
- Check on what other organisations are doing.
- Ask the customers what they think.
- Ask the front line staff for information and evaluation.
- Ask the key questions: Has the organisation met quality aims and consumer expectations? Has it improved efficiency and lowered costs? Do standards need to be reset?
- Remember the search for quality is a continuous process, always shaped by what the consumer needs and expects.

Private Lessons in the Public Sector ? The Civil Service

The government's ***Next Steps*** initiative aims 'to improve management in the civil service to give greater efficiency, effectiveness and a better quality of service for the public'. Under the initiative, 10 semi-autonomous 'executive agencies' have been established, employing around 8,000 people. Another 38 operations, involving 180,000 people, and including giants like the social security and employment services operations, are candidates for agency status. In time, it's reckoned, about three quarters of the civil service will be covered by executive agencies. ***Next Steps*** is, says Caroline Bentley, head of the management policy division of the Office of the Minister for the Civil Service, 'a conscious organisational change designed to bring about cultural change'.

The emphasis on quality of service written into the initiative's aims is partly a reaction, according to Caroline Bentley, to rising expectations of public services. It is also, she says, 'a natural and logical result of the increasing emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness over the last decade'. One of the earliest examples of concern for customer service in the civil service, for instance, came out of the 1982 Rayner efficiency scrutiny of official forms: since then, 'tens of thousands' of government forms have been revised or scrapped and government departments have picked up 22 Plain English awards.

Rising expectations, together with the drive for greater efficiency, have led to growing dissatisfaction with standards of service among staff as well as customers — as the 1987 Ibbs Report made clear. Sir Robin Ibbs, then the prime minister's efficiency adviser, found that although some 95 per cent of the civil service was concerned with the delivery of services, there was no tradition of skill in this area; senior civil servants particularly lacked experience in managing service delivery. Ibbs also found that longer term planning was squeezed out and that there was neither enough emphasis on results, nor enough pressure for improving performance, for his taste. The civil service was simply too big and too diverse to manage as a single entity.

The ***Next Steps*** initiative was the government's response to this. As well as creating executive agencies, it emphasises the training of staff for managing and delivering services. For each agency, its essential factors are:

- a clearly defined framework of policy and resources
- an accountable chief executive
- pressure to meet demanding targets and performance measures
- a tailoring of systems and procedures to the needs of each business
- maximum delegation of managerial responsibility and freedom
- a clearly defined human resource strategy
- emphasis on the quality of service

'In short,' says Caroline Bentley, ***Next Steps*** is about tough targets, personal accountability for getting results, new and greater freedom to manage — all these for the benefit of taxpayers, customers and staff'.

Service to the Public, an OMCS (Office of the Minister for the Civil Service) 1988 occasional paper, identifies the key elements of a strategic approach to customer service as:

- **Management systems**

  These reinforce the required cultural changes, as when Performance Related Pay, for instance, is based on the achievement of quality of service targets.

- **Standards which are :**

  Specified — Each executive agency is governed by a 'framework document', together with corporate and business plans.

  Publicised — All agency documents are public and include an annual report and accounts.

  Monitored — The agency's chief executive is personally accountable to the minister, may have to appear before parliamentary committees and is likely to have a great deal of exposure to the media.

So what about the customers ?

The first few executive agencies are beginning, says Caroline Bentley, to yield examples of developments in customer service. For instance:

- The Vehicle Inspectorate, which is responsible for the testing of commercial vehicles, has introduced Saturday opening, voluntary brake testing as well as the statutory checks, and training courses for private sector mechanics.
- Companies House, which is responsible for the registration and annual returns of all companies, has set up new regional offices, a fax document service and payment by credit card.
- The stationery office has changed its bookshop opening hours and is investing in new technology to improve the quality of its products. It has also set up a programme of quality circles.
- The Historic Royal Palaces Agency is redesigning jobs to focus on customer service and introducing a major retraining programme to transform the previous inward-looking culture.

These are obviously just the first steps and further developments will need to be supported. Yet according to the occasional paper ***Service to the Public***, improving customer service need not be primarily about extra resources. It may have to do with:

- **Environment** — facilities, decor, furnishings and administrative arrangements
- **Access** — location, signposting, accessibility, layout, opening hours, queueing
- **Communications** — telephone systems, forms, counter services
- **Staffing** — recruitment, training, appraisal, employee involvement, work organisations, technology
- **Public relations** — publicity, marketing, corporate image, mobile advice centres, community liaison
- **Effectiveness** — customer surveys, complaints, targets and performance measures

Some delegates to the conference wondered whether improving customer service in the DSS, for instance, did not rather have to do with:

- more staff in local offices
- better paid staff in local offices
- improved benefits

> *'There is a danger that economy and efficiency get greater emphasis than effectiveness.*
> *It is more common to examine the internal arrangements for vehicle maintenance, for instance, than public satisfaction with the service received. Yet both are required.*
>
> *'Performance measures in most authorities throw more light on the quantity than the quality of services. The enclosed authority measures performance by the standards of the organisation rather than of the public it serves. Performance review committees often discuss without any input from the customers and citizens whose views are critical to any assessment.'*
>
> John Stewart
> Professor
> Institute for Local
> Government Studies

Private Lessons in the Public Sector ? Another Way to Run a Railway

Network SouthEast is the largest of the five businesses that make up British Rail and ranks 106 in the turnover league table of the top 1,000 British companies. It is the largest rail commuter network in Europe and the largest under single ownership in the world, ranking alongside the rail systems that serve Tokyo, Paris, New York and Moscow. At peak hours, it delivers one train into London every 11 seconds; it carries 2 million customers a day and accounts for 41 per cent of all commuting into central London.

When Network SouthEast was launched in June 1986, with its red lampposts and red, white and blue trains, rail travel into London had been declining for years, at a steady 1 per cent a year, even as road congestion was getting steadily worse. Peak trains were clearly essential to London, but the off-peak spare capacity was enormous. British Rail needed a fresh start to tap a potential market of 20 million people who were living in the south east at a time of rapidly rising prosperity.

The new image was that of a single railway for London for the first time since the tracks were laid more than 150 years earlier. 'Our strategy', says Charles Nichol, Network SouthEast's quality manager, 'was to give the railway a high and positive profile where a journey from, say Brighton to Bedford would not be seen as two, or possibly three separate journeys, but one, where our marketing strategy, especially through television advertising, would be as effective in Woking as in Romford or Watford or Orpington.

'Our vision was to use our new high profile to create a virtuous circle. By raising the pride and morale of our staff, we improve both quality and customer relationships. This, together with brighter trains and stations, leads to a greater number of off-peak customers travelling in existing trains at virtually no extra costs giving us a high degree of profitability and considerable extra income. Extra income can be used to invest in more clean trains, more bright stations. Staff morale goes up, quality goes up and so the spiral continues.'

That was the theory, and the new image was backed by a range of products designed to increase income: travelcards were aimed at the offpeak market and bolstered the single railway idea by offering the freedom of London Transport's central system in the same purchase. Off-peak business increased by 20 per cent between 1986/7 and 1988/9. During that time, when commuting increased by an unprecedented five per cent a year, Network SouthEast's share of the market went up from 39 to 41 per cent. Customers, who in 1983 paid only 66 per cent of the cost of their journeys in their fares, by 1990 paid no less than 92 per cent. And the forecasts are for a continuing growth in commuting, albeit at a slower rate, until the end of the century.

Network SouthEast has identified new market opportunities as well. It sees scope in increased commuting to satellite cities around London; already Reading imports more commuters than it exports. The leisure market, already bringing in 29 per cent of NSE's income, could bring, it reckons, a whole lot more, especially as its ideal market, the population over 50, is growing in size and prosperity. The renting out of NSE's property for commercial activities, like station trading, has helped to bring its subsidy down quickly in a 'customer friendly way' and brings in a continuing annual income, with an eye to long-term growth rather than short-term expediency.

This additional income has enabled Network SouthEast to double its investment in the railway over the past three years. No less than £1m goes into the network every working day, almost half of it into new trains, with eight new coaches going into service every week since 1988 and even more projected. There has also been investment in stations and in infrastructure, with the first of the projected tunnels through London running from north to south.

But what about the customers ?

'To achieve quality', says Charles Nichol, 'is to meet the needs and expectations of our customers. We must find out both what the customer sees as important in our products and how they see us delivering'.

Through a wave study at a representative 100 stations every six months since 1986 (and now every three months), Network SouthEast has an idea of both. It has, it seems, broadly the right standard of passenger terminal; on average, it is doing all right on ease of ticket purchase and journey time. But in terms of reliability, information and cleanliness of trains, the network is failing miserably in its customers' eyes — and these are their priorities. Its delivery falls far short of expectations.

What to do? For Network SouthEast, the need is now to concentrate on its 'software' — the attitudes and behaviour of staff. It is spending no less than £20m on this, at every level, working from the top down. By the end of 1989, all 750 senior British Rail executives had been on a week's attitude-changing course to impress the importance of the customer on them, and through them, on their teams. At the same time, individual groups like cleaners, station managers and customer-guards, who can change the image at ground level, are being targeted; a million pounds a year is going over the next five years into such things as training in the use of public address systems and assertiveness skills. 'By the end of 1991, every employee on British Rail will have been offered the opportunity to see their job in a new light where the customer comes first and quality is essential'.

At the same time, the appointment of route managers for each of the major routes out of London means the devolution of responsibility for strategy, procurement and marketing and a new focus in a 'mission for quality'. 'I see this,' says Charles Nichol, 'as the mainstay of our battle to deliver what we are all committed to — a high value to the customer, low cost to the taxpayer, railway'.

When passengers on an InterCity train from Plymouth to London protested at the appalling overcrowding, the guard explained over the intercom that this was because it was short of one of its 76 seat coaches. 'Honestly,' he added, 'it's not my fault. This service is a disgrace'. Passengers applauded. But a spokesman for BR South West was less enthusiastic. 'If the senior conductor said this', he said, 'We will give him appropriate guidance to make sure he doesn't say anything like it again in the future. We sympathise with the frustration he must have felt, but we expect our staff to show a certain amount of loyalty, which they normally do. We would have expected more support from him'.

Today
1 January 1990

But Who's In Charge Here ?

'Concern for the consumer', says Margaret Hodge, leader of Islington Council, 'is to do with a belief in democratic socialism. Empowering the consumer citizen is a way through to a more equal society'.

Listening to users of public services and acting on what they have to say can be very threatening to those who run and work in the services. Who, after all, likes to risk being told they are not doing a good job?

So professional responses start to proliferate:

- Isn't it an abdication of professional responsibility to let the consumers make decisions?
- Consumers can only argue from their own, individual, viewpoint; we have to look to collective provisions and balance other needs.
- It's only an unrepresentative minority of consumers who want a say anyway (as if professionals weren't an unrepresentative minority themselves).
- We do actually know what's best for people — that's what that exhaustive training we went through is about.

It may be easier for professional workers to keep a view of the consumer as intrinsically powerless:

> *'The bureaucracies of which we are part tend to regard service users only as casualties, as if the adversity that leads them to need the service we provide defines "the whole of them". This is also a way of keeping our distance and most particularly keeping the pain, which is the raw experience of the daily lives of service users and their carers, at decent bay.'*
>
> Tessa Jowell
> Birmingham Community Care
> Special Action Project

It is certainly often easier for service users to accept the views of those 'in charge' — as individual hospital patients and social services clients have found over the years. Sometimes — despite the rhetoric — even new 'participative' structures can be weighted against the users, as the new school governors, for instance, are finding out.

'In 1989', says Michael Golby of Exeter University, 'we have school governors wrestling with new relationships among themselves, with new and truncated relationships with the local authorities and with vastly increased new powers. There are signs that the strain is telling. Resignations run at about 10 per cent. The workload is intimidating. There is no remuneration or any expenses. Training, the responsibility of the local authorities, is with a few exceptions minimal ... Both the non-white collar population and the ethnic minorities are under-represented. In 1988, we found little evidence that parent governors wished to manage the schools or interfere in the work of the professionals. There is no reason to believe that this has changed'.

Empowering the consumer means providing :

- accurate and comprehensible information on services, access, standards and eligibility
- consultation processes
- advocacy, supported by complaints procedures, participative recording systems, market research, user/carer groups
- continual feedback and tangible responses in terms of local action and services

'Genuinely involving users has huge implications for our control and allocation of resources, often described as "resource constraints" and our power, often described as "professional practice and judgement". For it recognises that someone else — the user — owns the service, and that his/her view and wish is not only as important as professional assessment of need but may even transform that judgement. This is much more than saying that users need to understand the relevance of a service to them — the worthy objective of many information exercises. It implies that the users actually make the decision or have the right to challenge it. Thus they may even disrupt and slow down our fine-tuned processes.'

Marcia Saunders and
Maggie Pinder
Hertfordshire Social Services

But Who's In Charge Here ? Local Government in Islington

In 1982, the ruling Labour group of the London Borough of Islington decided that it wanted to work towards both more efficient and responsive services and the empowerment of local people. It embarked on a programme of decentralisation which at one level tried to respond to the fact, for instance, that half of all visits to social services were to do with housing; at another level, the reforms were about fostering of democratic socialism.

At first, says Margaret Hodge, leader of the council, 'everyone was against us'; it was only the strong commitment of a united Labour group that got the reform going at all. Trades unions and professionals still have their doubts. But now every Islington resident lives within a quarter of a mile of one of the council's 24 neighbourhood offices, at which they can pay their rent discuss all housing and welfare questions and find social services, environmental health and community development staff. Planning applications and some education services may be devolved in future.

There are also 24 neighbourhood forums, at which between 50 and 100 people meet regularly to discuss anything from local policy and social services to broken pavements. The passing down of budgets to these forums, which meet constitutional criteria laid down by the council but which are not necessarily Labour supporters, is happening now.

Are Islington's services more responsive and do its people — among whom 40 per cent turnout for a local election is reckoned high — feel empowered? The experiment is only halfway there, says Margaret Hodge; it will be another five to ten years before the questions can be answered. 'The difficulty is making people feel they own it. But the process of that is as important as the policy.'

Key concepts

Putting the consumer before the producer

This is easily said, but a whole lot follows from it. It means:

- **Challenging established working practices**

  Although many councillors in Islington oppose the dogma of compulsory competitive tendering, it did give them the chance to think out what they wanted from services and to set service standards. As one example: because Islington's refuse was collected at 6 am, dogs, children and others had had a full 12 hours to root around in it after the shopkeepers put it out, thus increasing the work of the collectors and of the street cleaners. By changing working practices so that rubbish is collected when shops close, Islington has not just saved a round of street cleaning but been complimented by its satisfied public.

- **Challenging the supremacy of professional structures**

  Professionals often think they know best when they don't. There's a need for mechanisms which will convey consumer preferences; consumer surveys can be key and in Islington have been underused. When they have been used, there have been some interesting findings. The degree of alienation from local secondary education is such, for instance, that to set up small groups to discuss it meant approaching 100 parents to find a willing two and paying participants £25 to attend.

- **Finding alternative sources of information**

  User and advocacy groups, particularly in social services, are examples of this. Law centres are another, although local authorities tend to cut funding if they threaten action against them. Funding for groups which are disadvantaged in the community is another way of putting the consumer before the producer.

Opening up institutions

The worst instances of consumer abuse occur in closed institutions. Mechanisms to open them up can include, for instance, using old people's homes as day centres for elderly people living at home, setting up management committees which include residents or their relatives and local people, and establishing advocacy systems.

Moving from obsession with input to concern for output

The Audit Commission's tendency to err on the side of economy and efficiency rather than effectiveness needs to be countered by the development of criteria of social efficiency and effectiveness. Indicators in education, for instance, need to include not just those introduced by government, but the measurement of graffiti in schools, of parent participation, of the development of social skills.

Concepts in practice

Working relationships between staff are changing and professional barriers are beginning to come down.

There is now quite a lot of generic working across administrative grades and people from housing, for instance, can act up into social work jobs. But there is a constant pull back to professional specialisation, because the centre is traditionally the source of funds. There is opposition to changing this, too; workers in the voluntary sector, for instance, are resisting the proposed decentralisation of funding for their organisations.

Yet services are improving. Housing repairs are increasing and Islington is one of the few authorities where rent arrears are falling. Job satisfaction is improving too, as people know the names of estate managers and repair teams and direct contact between staff and people increases.

The relationship of people to the local authority is changing. Islington has worked hard to involve local people, through considerable investment in training and ensuring, through the constitutions for local forums, that they include minority representatives; in the early stages particularly, this was backed by increased investment in community workers among minority groups. People are still not desperate to be involved. But the relationship between Islington and its customers is certainly not passive.

> *'As citizens, the public have the right to know the decisions of public authorities and the reasons for them. As customers, they need to know what services are available and their right to receive them.*
>
> *'Yet though the public can find out, that does not necessarily mean that they do. The enclosed organisation lets in those who ask, but does not tell those who do not know how to ask. Ignorance is inevitable and the enclosed organisation is grateful.*
>
> *'This sort of organisation is unlikely to tell the public the standard of service to which they are entitled, the choices available, the way to make suggestions or complaints procedures. Annual reports will do no more than conform to statutory requirements. It is up to the public to ask — and simpler if they don't.'*
>
> John Stewart
> Professor
> Institute for Local
> Government Studies

Education for Change ?

> *'Staff can only provide good services if they are helped and encouraged to do so. Those who deal directly with the public are often the most junior, and treated as such. This shows staff the weight that the authority places on services for the public.*
>
> *'Staff are not normally told what is expected of them in their dealings with the public. They are not told what priority is to be given to complaints, how far out of their way they should go to assist people, how far to help with problems that fall outside their remit. They may not even have the necessary information.*
>
> *'Some authorities have launched a major programme of training for front-line staff in service for the public and this is valuable as part of a wider strategy. There is nothing more frustrating, though, than for staff to be encouraged to provide better service without also getting the support they need. Staff training and development must involve the whole organisation.'*
>
> John Stewart
> Professor
> Institute for Local
> Government Studies

The Midland Bank knows that staff motivation is important. It has taken to heart the words of the chairman of Maritz, the leading performance improvement agency: 'Staff need to be given reasons, not slogans, to change their behaviour towards consumers'. All the bank's staff have been on a course on 'Putting Customers First'; 350 of its top managers have been on the week-long 'Managing People First'.

Public services are slowly picking up the message — particularly perhaps in the competitive market place. British Rail, has so far made the greatest investment, putting £20m into teaching staff the importance of customer relations.

But how far are staff in, say, health and social services, being educated in the new expectations of responsiveness to their customers? It is such a turnaround from the way they were brought up that education programmes would seem a priority — together with, as some local service people point out, non-punitive opportunities for job changes if they simply can't agree with the new approach. To judge by this conference, there is a long way to go before sensitivity to staff needs even touches these issues. No wonder they can be so defensive when asked to respond to the service users!

And what about educating people in the art and craft of being the sort of customers that services will have to respond to? In Islington, the council put a lot of time and effort into community work with disadvantaged groups when it first started building up its neighbourhood forums. At least one planning structure that is trying to involve customers with learning difficulties from the start has put effort into educating them in the intricacies of holding and attending meetings and the structures of local government.

Yet overall, how much attention is being paid to practical education as one way of redressing the power balance between providers and users of services? And how much should be? It has been suggested, for instance, that the pressure will soon be on to reintroduce streaming in schools. To tackle that one, it's been said, the new school governors would need to have done a course in educational theory. Is that really so — or an example of professional hijacking of the terms of debate? Is the real strength of the user of public services that they don't speak the same language as the professionals?

How do staff see the users ?

According to members of one conference workshop:

Sometimes they are ***customers***, ***parents***, ***staff***, ***citizens***, ***voters*** or simply ***people***.

They are also ***patients***, ***clients***, ***tenants***, ***suckers***, ***victims***, ***punters***, ***loonies***, ***inmates***, ***complainants*** or ***criminals***.

They may be described as ***satisfied***.

More often they are ***difficult***, ***critical***, ***vulnerable***, ***ill***, ***sick***, ***inadequate***, ***ignorant***, ***ill-informed***, ***manipulative***, ***dependent***.

On the whole, it seems, the adjectives that come up to describe the users of public services tend to be negative.

How are staff to pay serious attention to people that they see like this?

Joyce Kershaw, of Huddersfield People First, is keen on getting people to talk in words everyone can understand. If they use long words, she always asks them to speak in simpler ones. When she saw the word 'participation', she asked the group's adviser what it meant. 'Joining in', was the reply. 'Well, why can't you say that!'

Discuss the use of jargon in maintaining power balances with special reference to ***mission statement***, ***core product***, ***gap analysis***, ***quick win***, ***motherhood statement***, ***a clearly defined human resource strategy***, ***cost effective***.

Examples and Aspirations

Consumer Protection
Private Sector, Public Good ? The Water Industry

Collecting and Acting on Consumers' Views
On Community Care
Among Ethnic Minorities

Opening Up Management
In Education • In Housing

Empowering the People

Consumer Protection

> *'The hypothesis of consumer rights and protection derives from the powerlessness of the buyer or recipient of services and products, in the public or private sector, because decision-making is more or less monopolised by management and labour, either in combine or through contest. The aim of consumerism is to create a third cover or side of power and opinion, in the hope of constructing a series of "triangular" processes.'*
>
> Eric Midwinter
> Chairman, London Regional
> Passengers' Committee

'Consumer protection' as the redress of powerlessness has in theory at least found a place in the governing of many public services, through users' councils and committees. But how effective is this approach? Triangular relationships may be fundamental to human experience but they are also, as anyone with the slightest psychoanalytic inclination can attest, among the most problematic, involving as they must the exclusion of one party or another.

The ***1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act***, for instance, has been claimed as 'consumer protection' legislation by virtue of its provisions for representation (through community consultative groups) improved information and redress (the Independent Police Complaints Authority). The consultative groups, according to Bill Skitt of Northamptonshire police, deal with such issues as the maintenance of mutual trust between police and local people; the exploration of ways in which both sides can work towards a peaceful community; the general pattern of complaints against the police and the promotion of crime prevention. The groups are generally open to press and public; their views go regularly to the Chief Constable. But in general, Bill Skitt is not unduly optimistic about their achievements. 'Some are very much geared to action and have produced positive results. Others have become "talking shops". There have been challenges to the truly "representative" nature of the groups.'

In general, for Eric Midwinter at least, consumer protection in this country has made only patchy and intermittent headway. The bureaucratic machinery is gigantic and impenetrable. The lack of popular democracy in the UK, with its tradition of the 'representative' sort, brings its own problems. There is also a continual tension between the claims of ***individual*** issues and grievances and ***collective*** or policy ones: where should the consumer protection body put its energy?

Consumer protection: essential elements

'The essence of consumer protection is ordinariness made articulate.'

This depends on:

- **Information** — Consumers need to be actively informed of all relevant data and materials. This means more than the free flow of information; it means a commitment to a lucid and outgoing approach from the information-giver. It also means a certain wariness among consumer representatives: they should not be seduced by management, for instance, by the promise of 'confidential' information.
- **Consultation** — Consumers, individually and collectively, need to be constantly involved, especially in decisions which touch on their interests, whether these involve policies or day to day practice. The London Regional Passenger Committee, for instance, meets in public, which is an incentive for managers to perform well.
- **Negotiation** — Consumers, again individually and collectively, need speedy and relatively informal means for the redress of complaints and grievances, with independent adjudication and reasonable advocacy written in. The LRPC finds that it generally tackles issues of the 'greater good' rather than individual grievances. And there are limits: it cannot, under the Act, talk about fares — one of the most significant consumer issues!
- **Representation** — What consumers really need is a share in the control of services or provision at the level of delivery, regionally (as appropriate) and centrally too — and all preferably through the working of democratic or civic processes.

Private Sector, Public Good ?
Consumer Protection in the Water Industry

The Office of Water Services is, according to Neil Jackson, its chief administrative officer, a key component in the new system of regulating the water industry. In its director general, consumers now have someone independent of government and the industry to exercise price control, monitor performance and protect their individual and wider interests.

The 1989 Water Act produces a three-way separation of functions between:

- the producers of water and sewerage services
- the regulators of water quality and sewage disposal
- the regulator of prices, performance and service

The separation is not complete; the Secretaries of State remain accountable to parliament for the whole regulatory system. (Their powers and duties, and those of the director general, are in Section 7 of the Act).

The director general is concerned with the water and sewerage activities of the 39 appointed companies (subsidiaries of the 10 former water authorities and 29 statutory water companies). 'My primary duty under the Act', says Ian Byatt, the first director general, 'is to ensure that the functions of water and sewerage undertakers are properly carried out and that appointees can finance them. Subject to that, I must protect customers, facilitate competition, and promote economy and efficiency. I see these duties as complementary. It would not be in the interests of customers if appointees were unable to carry out their functions'.

One side of the director general's work is very technical and includes economic regulation. The other side is to do with the protection of consumer interests (other than prices). It includes machinery to handle consumers' complaints, and to ensure standards of service delivery.

Customer service committees

These 10 independent committees, set up by the director general (under section 6 of the Act) have the duty to investigate customer complaints and help resolve these by making representations to the water companies with which they deal. They must also keep under review anything that affects the customers and may submit reports to the director general — who has said that he will invite advice on general issues as well as meeting the CSC chairmen regularly.

Ian Byatt's intention is that the CSCs will be 'streamlined and effective'. Members — appointed by him — are being drawn from the former water authority consumer consultative committees and other consumer bodies as well as from representative bodies like the local authority associations.

Codes of practice

Each of the 39 water companies is required to publish — subject to the director general's approval — a general code of practice which describes its services, charges and complaints and emergency procedures and gives information about paying bills and the role of the CSC. So the customer gets more information as of right. The companies also have to publish, again with the approval of the director general, codes of practice that cover disconnections of supply and leakage from metered supplies to domestic customers. So customers have protection — enforceable by the director general — in the potentially difficult areas of debt, disconnection and liability for leaks.

Standards of service

Companies have to declare service targets on such factors as water pressure, interruption of water supply and flooding from sewers. They also have to monitor performance against other specified indicators — like timelines of response to customer queries. And they have to report on their performance to the director general, who can ask the secretary of state to set legally enforceable standards if he is not satisfied that the company is going to improve its performance. Ultimately, he could recommend to the secretary of state that the company loses its appointment.

Customers also have the protection of a guaranteed standards scheme, a 'Customers Charter' which pays them £5 for every missed appointment with the company, every query unmet within a specified time, every day's disconnection unrestored within a specified period (except when there's a drought). It is up to the director general to settle disputes over this sort of payment. Companies have to give every customer a detailed statement of their rights under the scheme and how to claim. Payments do not affect the other legal rights or liabilities of the customer or the company.

And so ?

Already in its first three months the Office of Water Services was meeting important issues through its correspondence and customer complaints. Why do charges for basic services and for metered supplies vary so much between companies, for instance; and does this amount to unfair discrimination in which the director general should intervene? How are the companies going to charge for their services when the community charge replaces domestic rates? What happens when companies have not made refunds for pre-paid services that they have not delivered — as when they ban hosepipes and sprinklers during a hot summer?

'These and many other issues', says Neil Jackson, 'will occupy us in the months and years ahead as we review company policies, practices and procedures to ensure that the customer is getting the best possible deal from the industry ... We will be judged less by our performance than that of the companies. But I can say that Ian Byatt and every one of his staff in the Office of Water Services is convinced that we have the means and the will to secure that performance'.

Collecting and Acting on Consumers' Views

> *'Market research and the aggregation of individuals' views are not a substitute for enabling user groups and inviting them to analyse information, develop collective views, recommend priorities and set agendas. If users can make decisions by working as a team in the same way that we try to in public services, they are more likely to be able to influence our decisions and persuade us to provide services differently.'*
>
> Marcia Saunders and
> Maggie Pinder
> Hertfordshire Social Services

Collecting customers' views is increasingly fashionable in public services. Pilot projects, one-off surveys, complaints procedures and consultation exercises are thick on the ground; Griffiths recommended market research, among other methods, to find out what people thought of the NHS.[1] But the results of this activity have been disappointing. Many surveys, for instance, have been poorly executed and of limited value because not enough thought has gone into translating their findings into policy and practice.[2] Current approaches may even work against their own declared objectives to endanger the future of 'consumerism' in the service. By turning away from involving and developing community health councils and relegating them to pressure group status, say Marcia Saunders and Maggie Pinder, health authorities, in their reliance on market research, are becoming less not more accessible to locally-initiated public pressure and change — and this at a time when the NHS is increasingly centrally controlled.

The movement now, they argue, needs to be away from a piecemeal collection of consumer views to building consumerism into the very fabric of the service's day to day work. But for that to be possible, some questions need to be addressed.

Do we really want to know ?

- What is the precise nature of the assistance we are seeking from the consumers?
- Are we prepared to take on the inevitable disruption to professional assumptions and traditional ways of working that truly honouring their views will mean?
- Are we asking for their views because a service is underused, or no longer benefiting those it was designed for, or because we want to incorporate their contribution into plans for the future? Or is the real reason that we want to undermine other professionals, find a project for a student, or that we simply can't think of anything else to do?

Consumer surveys leave the organisation very much in control. Even assuming a properly constructed and conducted survey, the results can be ignored. Empowered consumers cannot.

Building on consumerism

- **In Hertfordshire,** joint planning has been established between health, social services and housing authorities. Strategic documents, agreed by members in draft, go first to staff for consultation and then to a variety of users and voluntary groups; efforts are made to involve the local media in the debate. Alongside this have been developed joint strategies for the community care of priority service groups; project evaluations that involve consumers; a client access recording system; an advocacy scheme for people with disabilities and a working group on participation to 'keep the dialogue going'. New services build in consumer participation as part of the routine; the perspectives of carers, the agency's staff and referring agencies (in mental health services) are also sought.
- **In Notting Hill**, the police have gone beyond the formal, borough-wide consultative machinery to set up their own cycle of collecting and incorporating views from a 'community' that includes local residents and business people, statutory and voluntary agencies, churches, the media, informants and their own staff. The 'collecting' process runs between November and March and the information is fed into planning in a three to five year perspective.

It's not easy !

- **In Hertfordshire**, where there are four health districts, 10 district councils and over a million inhabitants, three years of work have shown this approach to building consumerism to be lengthy and time-consuming — and they do not feel that they've yet got it right.
- **In Notting Hill**, where the local population and its concerns are very different from those of Kensington and Chelsea, in the same borough, there are questions about the nature of 'the community' that is being consulted, and how it meshes with the 'community' represented in the formal, borough-wide arrangements. And yet, says Clive Pearman, Notting Hill's chief superintendent, 'there is a clear recognition that, whatever the philosophical or constitutional issues yet to be resolved, policing is a service performed on behalf of and provided to people, whether they live, work or are visitors to an area. This is matched by a recognition that local people tend to know best when its comes to identifying problems facing them, or to judge on the quality of the policing service delivered to them'.

References

1. Department of Health and Social Security. *DHSS Management Inquiry Report* (The Griffiths Report). 1983.
2. Jones, L. and others. *Consumer feedback for the NHS.* King Edward's Hospital Fund for London, 1987.

Collecting and acting on consumers' views

Advantages	Disadvantages
Expectations may be raised.	Expectations may be raised.
Cost effectiveness may rise by identifying gaps in services; tailoring services; avoiding waste.	There's a danger of 'tokenism'.
Assumptions may be clarified.	And of turning vague 'wants' into clearly unmet needs.
New ideas and insights may emerge.	The organisation may feel it has to Do Something.
The organisation may find it is doing something right.	There may be a stalemate when professional and user perceptions clash.
User involvement means they bring their own resources.	Service development may be delayed.
The job may become easier.	The staff may feel threatened.
User satisfaction may rise.	User dissatisfaction may be crystallised.
So may staff satisfaction.	So may public opposition to services.
Users may become more committed to the service.	Organisation can find any number of reasons to ignore a survey.

Limits to action ?

- when the views collected are promoting racism or other illegalities
- when they express the aspirations of one group at the expense of another (as when property owners resist a community home in the neighbourhood)
- when to act on user views would lead to intolerable conflict with staff
- when service providers flatly disagree and can justify their stance
- when staff would sabotage reforms
- when there simply aren't any resources for action
- when the issues identified are the responsibility of another agency

Collecting and Acting on Consumers' Views : On Community Care

The Birmingham Community Care Special Action Project has, over the past three years, tried to involve service users and those who care for them in developing a corporate approach to community care. This recognises that people have a right:

- to be consulted
- to feel valued
- to see the development of community services as a partnership between users and providers

It tries to test the efficacy of the approach by asking some simple questions:

- Does the service encourage participation by people with special needs alongside others who are not disabled? Are individual needs regularly and frequently assessed?
- Do service users have real and informed choice?
- Do they have opportunities for continuing personal development?
- Are they likely to be stigmatised or seen positively if they use the service?
- Do they have chances for participation in the everyday life of the community?
- Do staff and users share the same kitchens, toilets, recreation facilities?

The project has tried to involve service users in drawing up its agenda for future service developments, and has incorporated their views in three major areas.

Informal carers

Through a series of 20 public meetings, which are part of a continuing programme of consultation, informal carers have identified some key needs. They want:

- **Accessible services** — which means that staff, for instance, leave calling cards with names, addresses and numbers that carers can contact.
- **Sensitive services** — which address the isolation and loneliness informal carers often experience.
- **Quality services** — especially important in services that offer alternatives to home care.
- **Open services** — which consult carers and involve them in plans for their relative.
- **Flexible services** — which includes approaches to service delivery and the organisation of respite care, which can be needed for anything between two hours and two weeks.

People with long-term mental health problems

In order to discover what services would be needed when one of Birmingham's largest mental hospitals closed, the project made a qualitative survey among long-term and recurrent users of mental health services. The users came up with these key needs:

- the restoration of their confidence and self-esteem
- the opportunity for ordinary (and so valued) activities alongside people who do not have mental health difficulties
- the opportunity for access to friendship and support
- the availability of help and support at critical times
- the need for occasional sanctuary

People with learning difficulties

The Birmingham Project wanted to offer opportunities beyond those of the traditional adult training centre and discussed the relevance of a policy that stressed citizenship, choice and accessibility of services with a group of people with learning difficulties. The service users brought a sharper definition to what these notions actually mean. They wanted:

- to choose what they do when they leave (special) school
- to be consulted about available options
- to be supported in their interests and hobbies
- to enjoy a more 'normal' social life — going out with a friend, for instance, rather than having to rely on their parents
- to have services that encourage self-confidence and support risk-taking
- above all, to be able to work and see themselves as workers

  (The recent decision to remove all contract work from ATCs without consulting the workers was very unpopular; they felt that this had arbitrarily stripped them of both a — small — income and their role as workers.)

'It is relatively easy to amass information about what people want', says Tessa Jowell, director of the Birmingham project, 'and we should not underestimate the power of the process of consultation and the sense of being valued that accompanies it. But the real challenge is to create results. The implications for organisational change are enormous and rely on more than a short term, innovative "hit and run" approach. The purpose and nature of the changes need to be recognisable to the bureaucracy and find a place in normal bureaucratic process. But the climate which promotes innovation, seeks to address new areas and relishes the tension generated by increased expectations of service users, is also crucial to sustain'.

Collecting and Acting on Consumers' Views : Among Ethnic Minorities

When Haringey Health Authority appointed Nirveen Chotai as its ethnic minorities development worker, this was the first appointment of its kind in the NHS. She was to be both policy worker, helping senior managers and service providers to develop policies on health care in a multi-racial community, and development worker, ensuring that the health authority started to make links with black and other ethnic minority groups.

Both health authority staff and community workers with and for black and other ethnic minority people viewed this appointment with suspicion. Health staff — still uncertain in the throes of the Griffiths management review — took two approaches. The first was the 'colour blind' approach: everyone was catered for already, there was no problem. The second approach was to look at what they already had to deal with and to question whether this issue really was a priority. On their side, community organisations questioned how one person could represent all ethnic minority groups and whether Nirveen Chotai was a 'token black'.

Her first task, as she saw it, was to familiarise herself with the health authority and assess what services were being offered and to whom. She also spent a lot of time building links with community organisations (her experience as a community worker was helpful). She soon realised that although the health authority said it consulted with the consumers, the reality was that a huge weight of consultation papers would be sent to community groups, together with a letter asking for comments within a couple of weeks. Given the universal reluctance to wade through mounds of paper, these documents were often conveniently binned.

Nirveen Chotai felt it was important for managers and planners to recognise that different approaches were needed if consumer participation were to be effective, and there were several discussions around this. One agreed strategy was 'outreach' work. Nirveen Chotai persuaded senior managers to visit community groups rather than expecting their representatives always to come to health authority buildings. At first, managers felt apprehensive about meeting the groups and worried about possible hostility from them. But with careful planning, the meetings began and in the long run proved productive.

To build on the collection of views from black and other ethnic minority people, Nirveen Chotai was able to set up two sub-groups of district planning teams, concentrating on mental health and services for black and other ethnic minority elderly people. Those involved in the groups came from a wide range of professional backgrounds and included representatives of the health service, local authority and community organisations. They were all concerned that this should not be simply a 'talking shop', and so focused on specific service improvements, in the knowledge that their recommendations would go to the district planning teams.

Nirveen Chotai also spent a lot of time putting race issues on different agendas, and became involved in the training and education of staff. In the early days, she was often asked why she was pushing for special services, and whether white people would not suffer as a result. Her response was that any improvement in services for black and other ethnic minority people would improve services for everyone; a change of behaviour among front-line staff, for instance, would benefit all users. Staff were able to recognise that they would have to give up some power.

Advantages of the approach

- By involving users and their representatives, there's a better chance of getting services right.
- Effective participation builds greater trust between service users and providers.
- Services can be better assessed.
- Improvements in services to black and ethnic groups have positive effects for other service users too.

Some key points

- Commitment is needed from both sides.
- So is a willingness to negotiate, to give and take.
- Agendas need to be clear.
- Communication paths into the system need to be clear.
- Research is needed to back up perceptions of problems in services.

  (In Haringey, for instance, a monitoring project sought to discover the extent to which afro-caribbean people were over-represented in psychiatric admissions.)
- Information in ethnic minority languages, tailored to particular cultures rather than simply translated, is vital.
- So is involving people other than the 'key change agent' at all stages. Then if that person leaves, change does not stop.
- Change takes time!

'Certainly in Haringey we were able to bring about change, and we did make many mistakes,' says Nirveen Chotai. 'But I believe we cannot go forward if we are not willing to take risks. I would urge everyone involved to be more adventurous.'

Far from being utopian, all these approaches — consumers' views of community care, the views of informal carers, the needs of people with mental health problems and learning difficulties, and the views of black groups — show that what consumers want from a public service organisation is reasonable and sensible.

Opening Up Management

Opening Up Management : In Education

> *'In school governors, we have an important experiment in local participation and professional accountability within a major public service. How the new school governors fare may well give clues to the prospects for the development of relationships between providers and consumers in other sectors such as the health service'.*
>
> Michael Golby
> University of Exeter

The 1986 Education Act, as Michael Golby sees it, balances the political rhetoric of parent power with something rather more reflective of the fact that education — like the health service — serves the interest not just of the 'users' of today but the community as a whole: the knowledge, skills and values promoted by the schools benefit the whole community. So governors (their powers strengthened in the 1988 Education Reform Act) consist of elected parent and teacher representatives, LEA nominations equal to the number of parent representatives and co-options from the local community; the head teacher could be a full governor if she or he wished.

The new system has come into force, says Michael Golby, against the background of 'the grossest planning measure in the history of education in Britain'. While local authorities have seen their responsibility to plan the use of resources across schools and communities 'unequivocally destroyed', central government, by introducing the national curriculum, has taken its power to plan into the very heartland of school activities. In the middle are the school governors. Parental choice has been strengthened by the restriction of LEA powers to plan enrolments and the provisions for 'opting out'; all but the smaller primary schools have the opportunity to control their own budgets.

Under the 1986 and 1988 Acts, the new duties and responsibilities of school governors are formidable.

Admissions

Governors are responsible for preparing the school's prospectus, which gives details of the curriculum, organisation and such policies as those on discipline and homework. Although local education authorities (LEAs) continue to decide admissions limits after consulting governors, the latter can request a higher limit and ask the Secretary of State for a ruling if they are not satisfied with the LEA response.

Curriculum

Governors share responsibility with the school head and the LEA for seeing that the national curriculum is followed and may adapt the LEA's curriculum as long as it remains consistent with the national one. Governors alone decide the school's policy on sex education. They also hear parents' appeals against a head's decision to suspend or adapt the national curriculum for a particular pupil and can instruct the head to alter the decision.

Special educational needs

Governors have to try to ensure that the right provision is made for children with such needs both by teachers and by the LEA, which has the duty to make a statement of needs on individual pupils where necessary.

Discipline and attendance

Governors can make a written statement of general principles of discipline, which guides the head. They must be informed if the head excludes a pupil and hear parents' representations about exclusions; they can direct the head to reinstate a pupil. They are also responsible for keeping an attendance register and for notifying the LEA of any pupils who do not attend regularly.

Financial delegation

In a school with financial delegation, the governors decide (after April 1990) how the budget is to be spent and are responsible for the school's accounts.

Staffing

In a school with financial delegation, the governors (rather than, as previously, the LEA) decide the complement of teaching and non-teaching staff. They appoint them (though the LEA still employs them) and can require the LEA to dismiss them, defining this at an industrial tribunal if necessary. They must have disciplinary rules and procedures for staff and arrangements for staff grievances. They also decide on the number and allocation of incentive allowances.

Charges

Governors have to draw up a statement of their charging policies and make sure that it meets the law's requirements.

Some key questions

- How does a governing body find the skills to cope with these duties?
- What help can it call on?
- What kind of people become school governors?
- To what extent are consumers' interests built into the system?

'In truth,' says Michael Golby, 'school governors struggle through their own agenda, one made up in about equal parts of accumulated common sense, great local goodwill and a common government-imposed predicament. It may yet be possible to rescue school governorship for democracy and the education of the people. The framework is there, probably for the wrong reasons, but the opposing forces are great'.

Opening Up Management in Education : In a Comprehensive School

From April 1990, this East Sussex school is going to have its own budget of over £1m, 80 per cent of which goes on salaries.

The school is relatively well placed for finding governors who can cope with the new financial and other responsibilities, including, for instance, teachers in tertiary education. But it is still hardly a glowing example of participatory culture: of a possible 1,600 attenders at the first (statutory) annual meeting, only 20 turned up. The governors and parent–staff association set up a working party to investigate home–school communications, and this made a questionnaire survey of all parents. What this showed was that parents wanted information about what went on in the school, but not many wanted to participate by, for instance, standing as a school governor.

Managing the workload

Governors are obliged to meet at least three times a year, but in this school it quickly became clear that even the five annual meetings held by the previous governors wouldn't be enough to cope with the workload. Its initial working party, on the curriculum, for the first time involved governors in finding out what was actually being taught in the school; and for the first time, the head and teaching staff had to explain curriculum policy to governors.

Now there are three governors' sub-committees: a development committee which oversees curriculum and staffing issues; a premises committee, which is concerned with the school's physical plant; and a finance committee to prepare for the 1990 budget handover.

Gaining the expertise

The need for expertise and training for governors has been causing concern in the school for some time, not least because the LEA has offered not one single training session for the previous three years to any one of the governors. (Its only contribution had been a glossy book on governors' responsibilities which almost immediately became out of date).

So the governors turned to self-help. They used their own expertise to train themselves, especially for the crucial task of staff selection. In the final year of the old governing body, they tried to co-opt people with the personnel, accounting and legal skills that seemed most relevant. A small group of governors also set out to identify and approach possible co-optees from local firms. In these ways, they were able to fill three of the five places, although they did not succeed in finding anyone with legal training.

The development committee nominated a panel of governors for each staff appointment. Some already had experience of selection and interviewing, but to ensure that as many governors as possible took part, they organised a four-hour training session with the help of the 'expert' governors, the head and senior staff. The committee also held a series of meetings with heads of departments to examine specific areas of the curriculum, so that governors could better contribute to discussion about the staffing plan for the school. They made one significant impact on policy early on: for some years there had been dissatisfaction with the music department, and the governors were able to force an alteration to the staffing plan and get the LEA's agreement to a new appointment.

The finance committee was also above all concerned with expertise and training. The governors were invited to take part in the LEA's pilot training for local financial management (LFM) and got an introduction to the world of balance sheets, financial targets, management by objectives and monitoring — language inescapably that of the bureaucrat and manager — and an invitation to think of themselves as like the board of management of a commercial company, with the school's head as the chief executive. They were reassured that governors did not have to know how to carry out the planning and budgetary process, but only to understand how it would be done. The heads present, however, did not seem entirely comfortable with the knowledge that it was they who would have to be able to do it.

Who are the governors ?

So far, the governors have shown a high degree of commitment and evening meetings have been well attended. But how long will this go on? The meetings regularly express concern about training and workloads. Acquiring knowledge on the working of the school and its curriculum takes a lot of time and effort and will have to be continually reinforced as experienced governors retire and are replaced.

What help do governors get? The LEA clearly recognises that the main burden of LFM will fall on heads and senior staff rather than on governors, and so has put more resources into training the first than the second. But if governors are to be more than rubber-stampers, then they too need far more intensive training. Otherwise it is going to be harder to recruit anyone to governing bodies, let alone people who are broadly representative of those served by the school.

The people best able to operate as governors within the new framework seem likely to be those who already have professional and managerial skills. The make-up of governors in this school is well in line with the national pattern: over 50 per cent of co-opted governors are from the business community and the chairman is an LEA nominee, middle-class and male.

'It is difficult to describe such a situation as consumer power', says Alan Cawson, parent and now chairman of the school's governors: 'But the entry of other professional groups and business people into school management does represent a significant shift towards countervailing producer power. In the past, school government was a very cosy partnership between teachers and administrators within the education profession; now they are having to share power with other groups of professionals. The extent to which such other groups effectively represent consumer interests can only be answered in the longer term when we have more experience of whether the mechanism of electing parent governors works once the initial publicity has faded, and whether the annual meeting will ever bring out more than the same few parents. In the shorter term we will find out how far competition in the labour market for school leavers will encourage the business community to take a much greater interest in schools than was ever the case in the past'.

Opening Up Management : In Housing

The government has recently been giving grants to housing associations to promote co-operatives, especially on council estates. Although the co-operative model has been around since the nineteenth century, and applied in housing on a larger scale since 1976, there is concern about the government's intentions as well as interest in the concept among many tenants and councils.

Does the co-op model really involve consumers ? And do consumers improve the services ?

Official encouragement was given in 1976 to two models of cooperative:

Par value co-operatives, where tenants and prospective tenants are £1 shareholders in a non surplus distributing friendly society, which lets houses to members at a rent. These use the same funding system as housing associations.

There are now many small par value co-operatives, spending between 5 and 10 per cent of Housing Corporation money each year on new homes. They tend to be small — with up to 100 homes — and specialist. They need to be registered with the Housing Corporation, which is the major source of funds.

Management co-operatives, which are also tenant-run friendly societies, but contract with the owner — usually the council — to manage the housing under an agreement.

Management co-operatives have been set up from scratch on new estates or created on existing ones. Some 10–15 per cent of Glasgow's 180,000 or so tenants are now in such co-ops, but there are only 30 or so in London. Many are large, with 200–1,000 tenants. DoE/Scottish Office agreement is needed.

Despite some severe internal and external limitations, says John Clark from his perspective as a housing development worker, housing co-ops have produced good housing — often better than that provided by associations and councils. They are less good at managing on a small scale, largely because of lack of access to previous mistakes.

- Inexperience can mean, for instance, that maintenance of completed housing may be inadequate, or that budgetary control slips when some item of expenditure — like external redecoration — is not anticipated.
- Maintenance and management may be better on larger scale schemes, but there is some loss of personal touches in the development of new homes.
- Levels of participation are often low after the initial development phase. Crises generate interest! Co-ops created by homeless people may have higher initial motivation but lower long-term involvement.
- Professional help may avoid errors and help the co-ops meet complex financial regulations, but it will also reduce members' involvement, understanding and control.
- Housing Corporation monitoring of the co-ops' internal management helps to keep them on their administrative toes, but often makes wrong diagnoses of real weaknesses. There might be concern about finance, for instance, when the real issue is the ability to hold to decisions; there may be a concern about probity when the co-op is simply unconventional.
- Support to the organisation — rather than to the co-op as a group of individuals with some common interest — is often vital — though some groups work better than others.
- Groups tend to recruit new members in their own image — by gender, ethnic origin, class, or education. They are too small to risk advertising their existence as housing providers.

Opening Up Management in Housing : In a London Borough

In social and economic terms, the London Borough of Islington is the seventh most deprived local authority in England and Wales, facing typical inner city problems. Martin Higgins, its director of housing, sees the housing service developing in two distinct phases over the past two decades.

Phase 1

The new wave of councillors who came into office during the 1970s responded to growing dissatisfaction over the previous decade with the appalling housing conditions in most parts of the borough, by instituting a very large capital programme of new building and, where possible, rehabilitation of existing stock. The second emphasis was in part a response to public pressure to maintain the interesting variety of much of the borough's housing, and so Islington was spared the worst excesses of multi-storey blocks.

From an early stage, the council recognised that traditional ways of managing its housing were unlikely to be satisfactory. So it embarked on considerable consultation with residents about how its programmes were developed and managed. Local meetings discussed how rehabilitation schemes would be organised. Day to day management was moved into offices on individual estates, which made for more direct contact between staff and tenants, quick responses from the council and maximum delegation of responsibility to staff. There was an emphasis on helping the public rather than telling them what to do. Special interest groups and consultation forums and networks grew up, including Tenant District Forums and the borough-wide Tenant Liaison Committee, which discussed housing policy as well as issues brought by tenants' associations.

There was a feeling that alternative management methods should be tried, and the housing department started to develop co-ops. Now Islington has more co-ops than any other local authority — 12 estate management co-ops, 15 homesteading co-ops and 16 short-life ones — all incorporating the essential ingredient that tenants manage their own homes.

How effective was this pattern of housing management and development ?

- The council's search for maximum flexibility brought its own drawbacks. For instance, it developed so many ways in which people could qualify for rehousing that very few staff, let alone the public, could understand the system.
- At the same time, one of the major strengths of the service was its delegation to the lowest level possible and establishment of networks across departments.
- Housing co-operatives take something like two years to set up and need a lot of support before and after the transfer of responsibilities; co-op management committees can underestimate the time needed to run them. In all, this sort of management is worth pursuing, though it can never contribute more than a small amount to the total need.
- During Phase 1, a great improvement in housing conditions was achieved and the estate management service became more sensitive. But it was often a question of implementing decisions which the council had more or less agreed already.
- The financial climate during this phase was very different from what it is today.

Phase 1 came to an end with the establishment of Islington's 24 neighbourhood offices.

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Phase 2

This started in 1987, when the council decided to develop a strategy which took account of the government's then proposed changes in housing legislation. These changes introduced competition into the provision of what was formerly public sector housing and restricted local authorities' ability to compete with the private sector on an equal footing. The strategy was to deliver a more customer-oriented service; the challenge was to do this in a time of financial constraint.

Key elements

- Establishing clearly what people thought about and wanted from the housing service.

  A MORI study during the last half of 1987 (covering more than housing issues) showed particular concern with repairs and caretaking (alongside relatively high satisfaction with many aspects of the council's service.)
- Achieving improvements by better value for money or better targeting of funds to areas the users think important.
- Checking customer views periodically through surveys by the housing department's research section.
- Attending to the attitude of staff who deal with the public. This includes:

  — ensuring that all staff know about the strategy and why it's there

  — encouraging their contribution both to helping its implementation and feeding in their own ideas

  — training them in 'public contact skills' — though making sure that training courses do not go beyond what is strictly necessary either in length or in content
- Offering tenants greater choice by matching different rent levels to different service levels, above the minimum on which the council insists.
- Improving communication with the public through the appointment of an information officer in the housing department and helping tenants' groups.
- Improving communication within the department through the services of the information officer.

- Remembering that neither tenants nor staff like change and that few tenants actually want to change their landlord, although they are keen for improvements.
- Remembering that what is important for tenants is that the basics — like repairs, cleaning, lighting and protecting access to their homes for their children — get done.

Much of this, of course, has only marginal relevance to those who are not already council tenants. 'The housing strategy for them,' says Martin Higgins, 'only concerns itself with explaining as sympathetically as we can why we are not able to help them at the moment and when and if in the future we may be able to do so. Although some staff in my department are working at developing alternative ways of gaining access to accommodation, at best this represents only a marginal increase in the availability of social housing allocated on the basis of need. Thus for those not having a home the priorities are somewhat different and nothing which my department is doing produces additional homes for the homeless, the elderly or the handicapped. All that is happening is that the existing, decreasing supply is being rejigged'.

Empowering the People

> *'It's no good just saying it once and thinking they will remember. You have to keep on until you get it through to them.'*
>
> Joyce Kershaw
> Huddersfield People First

Moves towards giving people with learning difficulties more say in the way they live and the services they use began in the early 1970s, with the growth of committees and user groups in day centres and participation events at which staff and users of services could meet on neutral territory and perhaps for the first time learn a little about the other's perspective.

The self-advocacy movement which grew from these beginnings has its strongest expression in People First, a network of groups and individuals around Britain. People First originated some 14 years ago in the US, where the first international conference of self-advocates was held in 1984. The nine British participants in that conference decided to start a similar organisation in Britain, and People First London and Thames now acts as the central focus of a growing network of groups as well as a national resource for information and advice on self-advocacy. In 1988 and after two years of planning People First in Britain put on the movement's second international conference, to which nearly 300 people came from the US, Canada, Australia and Switzerland, as well as from all parts of the UK. Delegates debated a wide range of issues — housing, jobs, leisure, education and how to influence services. As always when people with learning difficulties have the chance to speak out, there were many calls for getting rid of devaluing labels and language.

Many individuals will testify to the changes which have happened in their lives since becoming involved with People First. Group achievements include:

- improvements for day centres which range from the installation of a drinks machine to the provision of a pedestrian crossing nearby
- getting local authorities to change their official terminology from 'mentally handicapped people' to 'people with learning difficulties'
- getting rid of labels on mini-buses
- getting pay rises for people who go to training centres

Clearly some of these achievements will be more relevant to others with learning difficulties than they will to other groups who also use public services. But the essential mainspring of the work — enabling people who have been devalued and denied power over their own lives to find a sense of their own value and exercise their own rights and responsibilities — already has application for many other individuals and groups. These may include providers of services too.

Working through voluntary organisations

Simon Gardner is a member of the London-wide joint education sub-committee (Integration Alliance) and of the Wandsworth Disability Alliance, with which he first became involved in 1988, on the suggestion of his then boss in the Community Aide Programme. His particular interests are in integrated education, access for people in wheelchairs and facilities for teachers who are disabled. He belongs to Westminster People First and hopes to start a Wandsworth group. He has also been involved in disability awareness training.

What has been his experience of different services — and how has self-advocacy been important to him?

'I went to a special school for people who are partially sighted. I had a good teacher from the ages of 5 to 11. After that, for about two or three years, I had every teacher in the school! I got behind with my work and had a horrible time until the last two years when a special class was set up. I left at 16, and went to a Rudolf Steiner school. I hated it because there was no TV, no radio, nothing. I was there about a month and left. I rang up my uncle and he came and picked me up.

'I went to a school in Redhill for further education and training. The first month was fine, but after two months the education cuts came in so I had to leave because the borough wouldn't pay any more money. I was back to square one.

'Then I went to an ATC. I hated that and left after a year or so. I didn't like being pushed around by staff younger than myself.

'Being involved in self-advocacy gave me an interest. Before, I had only myself and four walls. I have been involved since the setting up of People First, although I took two years off to sort out where I was going.

'I like going out and speaking. I find it easier to speak to a large audience than to one or two people. To stand in front of an audience gives me a buzz. I want to pass on my experience of going through the system of education and proving practitioners, doctors and so on, wrong. They said I'd never be independent, that I would always have to be helped all the time. I had that round my neck and tried to take it away and keep on fighting for myself and other people less fortunate than myself.

'At Westminster People First we are doing a course on assertiveness training. This has been very successful. It will help us to be more assertive as a group and able to run the group better. I was also involved in a group at the Wandsworth Disability Alliance, studying assertiveness in trying to get employment, but it hasn't met for some time. There were five or six people in the group — all with disabilities but not learning difficulties.

'Recently I took part in a conference organised by Wandsworth Social Services, about community care. We discussed attitudes — with social workers, boroughs and local authorities as a whole, and health managers — and discrimination against people with learning difficulties coming out of long-stay hospitals.

'A lot of staff in the morning session used words like "mental handicap", "mentally impaired", "dumb", "imbecile" and so on. In the afternoon I told them not to use those words. I don't want to be ageist, but in my experience, social workers and practitioners who have been in the job for 25 years are not open to new ideas. They still stick to the same labels and the same methods as when they started. I tried to be as tactful as I could!

'In my group there were three social workers, one member of staff from an ATC, a member of staff from a group home. They still used the words "mental handicap". In the end I said "Shut up! I am going to tell you what I have been through because of rules and regulations". They were gob-smacked! They still treated me as a second class citizen. "I am not a second class citizen. I pay my taxes and I pay my rates". The way they talked down to me. I said, "Don't talk down to me. Treat me as an equal. All that's wrong is that I am partially sighted, I have coordination problems and dyslexia. I am not stupid. I know what you are talking about". I couldn't have said that four or five years ago.'

Simon Gardner
Member, Integration Alliance
and Wandsworth Disability
Alliance

How can committees and providers of services keep power to themselves ?

Participants at the 1988 People First international conference identified many ways in which power-sharing can be blocked. Delegates at the King's Fund conference added their own.

Committees and others can :

- decide it is 'too much of a burden' to have people with learning difficulties at their meetings
- tell self-advocates that they are not 'educated' and that the board would be sued if it allowed them to make decisions
- fail to reply to telephone messages or letters
- claim that there would be problems about confidentiality if self-advocates came to meetings
- say that 'if only' there was some sort of training, then self-advocates could join them
- organise their own meetings before the official ones and then not tell people what's really going on
- fail to provide a written record of the meeting
- refuse to allow people who have difficulties with writing to bring tape-recorders to meetings
- make sudden decisions without debate
- make dogmatic 'mission statements' with which service users don't agree
- quite simply, fail to see that there is any issue here at all

Self-advocates can find that :

- committee work can be scaring
- it can be very time-consuming and tiring
- it can be threatening and upsetting to be on a committee and feel that other members may not share your views

Users often say :

- 'You feel awkward — like a fish out of water.'
- 'There seems to be a lot of suspicion.'
- 'I don't really feel they are listening to me.'
- 'You have to fight your way through the "initials jigsaw".'

Working through a statutory service agency

The All-Wales Strategy is a Welsh Office initiative which aims to create comprehensive, locally-based services for people with learning difficulties, responsive to individual needs. Under the strategy, regions have to demonstrate that the involvement of service users is part of their policy framework before they can obtain funding.

Clwyd was one of the first regions to respond to this challenge. It has six districts, each with a planning and coordination group responsible for developing local services for everyone with a learning difficulty in the area. As well as aiming to have a service user on each planning group, Clwyd set out to establish user committees for each service. Representatives from these committees are invited to serve on the planning groups.

Clwyd has also provided further support:

- by making participation a training focus for both staff and service users
- by seeking written and verbal reports on progress and using these to disseminate experience
- by providing (modest) cash resources to back up these efforts.

  Several groups have used this money to enable service users to hire advisers to help tackle paperwork — whether this means reading documents or dealing with the secretarial load

David Roberts was selected from his local day centre to be a member of the Colwyn planning group. Although he found it very difficult to participate at first, he now attends conferences around the country and as been a member of an interviewing panel for citizen advocates. He is working towards changing the label from ‘mental handicap’ to ‘people with learning difficulties’ and feels that although parents were not keen, he has had some influence.

The Colwyn planning group has made a video of one of their meetings to help service users learn committee skills. It includes not only basic information on how meetings are run, but also information about power structures and the games people may play. Service users have also been helped to learn about local politics and how to get on with councillors and politicians.

How can power sharing start ?

Managers and others can :

- **Get to know service users**
  - — get to know one user personally
  - — become a citizen advocate
  - — offer work experience, or better still a job, to a person with a disability
  - — go to meetings of users
- **Agree a written statement of partnership**
  - — work out a clear statement of both sides’ role with mutually agreed boundaries
  - — involve service users right from the start
  - — build trust
- **Think imaginatively about service users’ involvement in meetings**
  - — allow use of tape recorders
  - — use pictorial methods of communication
  - — arrange ‘language breaks’ in meetings when service users from minority groups can comment in their own language
  - — brainstorm ideas ***together***
  - — use informal seating arrangements (tables can be a physical barrier)
- **Learn to listen**
  - — actively develop listening skills
  - — read one book on how to listen
  - — treat criticism as positive rather than something to fight
- **Build education in participation into service provision**
  - — so that providers and users have a mutual expectation that the users will speak out

(Box continued overleaf)

- **Build in awareness training for managers and professionals**

  — and involve users in it
- **Resource users' groups**

  — as under the All Wales Strategy
- **Withhold funds unless users are involved in planning**

  — a major carrot held out under the All Wales Strategy
- **Assess quality of life**

  — in terms of relationships, values and support networks
- **Have a go !**

  — instead of agonising for months over how to do it

Working through self help

Joyce Kershaw is a member of Huddersfield People First, which started when the manager of the local social education centre (SEC) brought some information on self-advocacy to the regular weekly meeting of the centre committee. This led to a meeting with the man who is now one of People First's advisers, and the decision to form a group.

Joyce Kershaw contacted people in social services and was told that if the group raised some funds itself, there would be an official grant. So the group held sponsored events and jumble sales and social services have made an annual grant. In 1988, it was £700 — larger than usual, to help pay for delegates to the People First international conference in London. In 1989, it was £400, £100 for the group and £300 for a part-time adviser who helps for four hours a week. Joyce Kershaw looks after the money and pays the adviser.

Becoming more independent

The group wanted to meet away from the SEC, and the community centre run by the local co-op seemed a good place. The group had to decide, though, whether to join the co-op, which would have meant using its name in front of People First. They did not want to do this, as they wanted to be independent, and they did not want either to pay their funds into the co-op's bank account. So the group now meets at the co-op's centre — but without any charge or any restrictions on what they do.

Getting known

Joyce Kershaw negotiates with staff at the local paper, which is helpful with publicity for the group. When the caption to a photograph used 'mentally handicapped', she wrote to complain. The newspaper apologised and now always uses the phrase 'people with learning difficulties'.

The mayor has been an enthusiastic supporter at each of the group's three birthday parties.

Finding a shared language

Self-advocacy has helped Joyce Kershaw to speak up when people use the term 'mentally handicapped'. 'It's not good just saying it once and thinking they will remember', she says. 'You have to keep on until you get it through to them'.

She is also keen on getting people to speak in words that everyone can understand. When she first started going, as a member, to meetings of the equal opportunities sub-committee of social services, they sent her a 'right pile of thick papers' which she couldn't understand. Now they send her a simpler version, concentrating on items of particular interest. (They also do braille versions of the papers).

Helping others with learning difficulties

When the group started, people used to be very timid and unsure of themselves; they used to get upset and run to staff for help. Now the group sorts out its own troubles and members' friends and relatives emphasise how much more independent and able its members have become.

One of the group's first campaigns was for housing and the chance of a more independent life. Senior people from social services met with them, and several group members now have their own flats or share with a friend. More people have found jobs, too. Members of the group also speak about self-advocacy and starting a group in different parts of the country, and have prepared a folder to help others become involved. Huddersfield People First is now getting together with other self-advocates from Yorkshire and arranging joint meetings with people from Lancashire.

A Framework for Public Service

'The phrase "public service" is too easily taken for granted', says John Stewart, professor at the Institute of Local Government. 'As a result, public service can easily become service to rather than service for the public: "the organisation knows best". There are too many enclosed authorities, looking inward towards the organisation'.

He contrasts the 'enclosed authority' with one that works by a 'public service orientation'. This orientation is outward, towards the public served. It points to a framework for action which recognises that public services are not identical with private ones, and that the concept of high quality service in their context has to do with more than a simple 'consumerism'.

Here is an edited version of his talk to the conference.

The public sector orientation focuses on the distinctive nature of the public domain.

- Many services in the public sector have more than one customer; this makes it the more important that the authority looks outward to the public served. If there are interests and concerns to be balanced, they must be balanced in understanding.
- A public authority often has to ration resources in the face of overwhelming demand, and this means marketing for equity rather than marketing for demand.
- The public service orientation means that the authority focuses on the public as citizen as well as customer. Citizens have concerns about services even when they are not customers. Through an active citizenship, government achieves its purposes.

Recognising the enclosed authority

Barriers to access

- How far do the public have to travel to obtain services?
- Do they have to overcome organisational as well as geographical distance?
- How easy is access within the authority offices?

Those inside the enclosed authority cannot easily answer these questions, because they already have access. It is hard for them to know what their authority looks like to outsiders. To insiders, 'this matter will be dealt with soon' means that it will go to committee and be referred back in the usual way; to the outsider, it means 'this will be dealt with next week'.

Distance to the office is important, especially for people who don't have a car. But there are other boundaries which maintain distance. It is by no means self-evident that a county surveyor's department deals with roads or an environmental health officer with pest control (or even what that means). Few people really understand how local authority functions are divided between county and district, or the role of the health authority.

The substitute for knowledge

- Does the authority know what services the public wants from it?
- Does it know what the public thinks of what it provides?

It seems elementary that the public authority should try to learn the public's view. But over time it can come to believe that it already knows it. Its picture of the public is formed by past experience, even though this can be limiting and misleading. Only the public can say what its views are.

The organisation as a barrier

- Do the organisation's structure and procedures help or hinder services for the public?
- Each level in a hierarchy that runs from committee and chief officer to those in direct contact with the public can be regarded as a barrier to communication to and from the public. In one housing department, for instance, there are eight levels in the hierarchy and many spans of control are over only four or five staff. Each level can sift information and distort learning. Each level is a potential point of control, limiting the freedom to act of those lower in the hierarchy. While control is necessary to achieve organisational purpose, as control increases, purpose can be lost.
- Boundaries between, and divisions within, departments are often defined more for the requirements of a profession than for those of the customer and citizen. In one local authority, over 20 inspectorate functions were found in environmental services.
- Central departments of public authorities (like finance, legal and administration) have often been structured more to control than to support their service departments.

Procedures can create barriers to services for the public if they unnecessarily limit staff capacity to respond to the needs of customers and citizens. Limitation is inevitable: no resources are unlimited, an authority must pursue its policies. The issue is not the existence of control procedures, but the extent to which they prescribe action in unnecessary detail or limit the capacity of those close to the public to use resources in the most effective ways.

The convenience of ignorance

- Does the authority inform its public, or does it wait to be asked?

As citizens, the public have the right to know the decisions of public authorities and the reason for them. As customers, they need to know what services are available and their right to receive them. Local authorities are probably the most open element in this country's government; apart from confidential matters, they have access to the decisions made and the underlying reasons for them.

Yet though the public can find out, that does not necessarily mean that they do. The enclosed organisation lets in those who ask, but does not tell those who do not know how to ask. Ignorance is inevitable and the enclosed organisation is grateful.

This sort of organisation is unlikely to tell the public the standard of service to which they are entitled, the choices available, the way to make suggestions or complaints procedures. Capital projects will start, with no notice to explain to the public what is happening (unless this is statutorily required). There will be no display of plans to explain the new road scheme. Annual reports will do no more than conform to statutory requirement. It is up to the public to ask — and simpler if they don't.

Performance as an organisational measure

- Does the authority judge performance by its internal efficiency or by the quality of service provided?

There is a danger that economy and efficiency get greater emphasis than effectiveness. It is more common to examine the internal arrangements for vehicle maintenance, for instance, than public satisfaction with the service received. Yet both are required.

Performance measures in most authorities throw more light on the quantity than the quality of service. The number of planning applications dealt with per member of staff is a useful indicator for measuring workloads or efficiency, but tells little about the quality of service. The enclosed authority measures performance by the standards of the organisation rather than of the public it serves. Performance review committees often discuss without any input from the customers and citizens whose views are critical to any assessment.

The experience of service

In an enclosed organisation, service is characterised by:

- buildings that do not invite
- the unhelpful response on the telephone
- the form that is difficult to complete
- the time spent waiting
- the letter that is hard to understand
- the reception that fails to help because 'we don't deal with that'
- staff who know only of their own work
- the department that has to consult another before it can respond
- the failure to explain why an application is refused
- the complaint that is only dealt with when a councillor raises it
- the new building which offers no notice to explain its purpose or design

The challenge of public service orientation

The challenge is to the whole working of the enclosed authority with its organisational orientation. If a local authority sets service for the public as the key value, there will be many changes in management practice. These might include:

- regular surveys of satisfaction with services
- a leaflet to every house soliciting suggestions about services
- replies to all complaints from the public within three days
- discussion of the design of all new buildings with those who will use them
- market-testing of new brochures, forms and notices to ensure comprehensibility
- hot-lines to chief executives and chief officers for public complaints and suggestions
- all chief officers spending some time each year on reception at council offices
- quality of service for the public as a major criterion in deciding promotion
- an annual quality appraisal meeting by each committee to assess the service provided, with public contribution invited
- all clients of a service receiving a statement of the standards towards which it aims
- senior management spending time walking their locality and listening to customers

A holistic approach

A public service orientation demands an approach that focuses on the whole working of the organisation.
It must involve:

- access for the public
- learning from the public
- informing the public
- staffing for the public
- organising for the public
- committee working for the public

Access for the public

Access can involve changes in offices and their layout, but it can also involve changes in guidance to staff. The authority determines access by the letters it sends, the notices it displays and the words it uses.

A number of local authorities are establishing neighbourhood offices which are either based on particular services or more wide-ranging. Such offices gain their significance from their number; a limited number of area offices can still seem as remote from the public as the central one did. The attempt is to change the relationship between the office and the public served. But neighbourhood offices can only be successful if based on changed attitudes to service for the public.

Learning from the public

The customers and citizens of the authority are a rich and unused resource for learning. If an authority does not ask, it will only ever know the views of people who speak out. Yet complaints that go unheard, suggestions that go unmade and wishes that are not expressed are a loss to the authority's management. There is a need for continuing dialogue between an authority and those who use its services — and the view of the individual should not be overwhelmed in general public consultations or surveys.

General surveys of public attitudes to the local authority, its level of expenditure and its services have a value in indicating attitudes to such issues as the level of rate increases, the relative importance given to different services and general levels of satisfaction.

They give a general background to decision-making in the local authority. But the public service orientation requires surveys that are much more closely focused on particular services. Surveys are most valuable when they can involve the authority's staff in dialogue with customers and citizens and when the authority itself is ready to learn from the dialogue. 'It seems to me', says Richard Normann, 'that going out to talk to customers in the right frame of mind would usually be more effective than sending out a questionnaire to 10,000' (***Service Management***, John Wiley, 1984).

Once the need to learn is recognised, the method will be found — authorities can learn from complaints, panel discussions with service users, public meetings (especially if they move into discussion groups). But the real lesson is that learning is of little value unless it is used. Far more social surveys have been made than are ever used — and that means the organisation's barriers are still there.

Informing the public

The gravest danger in the public service is that customers and citizens are treated as dependent clients. As customers they have the right to demand good services and as citizens they are entitled to information. Yet too often the public is placed in the position of supplicant, asking for what is theirs by right. The client becomes dependent on the decisions of the authority. Once informed of their rights, they have the means to appraise and if necessary challenge these decisions.

An authority that states standards of service gives itself a means of monitoring performance. It can state, for instance:

- expected maximum waiting time in offices and clinics
- expected length of time to deal with complaints
- expected wait for repairs in housing or for treatment

Perhaps each citizen is entitled to a statement of the services available, the conditions to be met and the standards to be aimed at. The National Consumers Council, for instance, has developed a checklist for libraries to help consumer groups appraise the library service; it found that the groups had not known what to expect before visiting the libraries and so found the checklist a useful framework round which to base their questions. Such checklists could be devised for any service. At the moment, expectations can easily be set too low.

The right to choose is an entitlement of both customer and citizen, in the public as in the private sector. Increasing parental choice and extending its range in education, and vouchers to 'spend' on services for children with learning difficulties are just two examples of how choice can be increased in public services.

Staffing for the public

It is through its staff that the authority provides services for the public. But staff can only provide good services if they are helped and encouraged to do so. An authority that is concerned to establish the public service orientation must ensure that its staff appreciate the extent of that commitment. Staff are not normally told what is expected of them in their dealings with the public. They may not even have the necessary information.

The first step should be for staff to understand the authority's approach. There is a potential for service for the public waiting to be released.

Some authorities have launched a major programme of training for front-line staff in service for the public, and this is valuable as part of a wider strategy. There is nothing more frustrating, though, than for staff to be encouraged to provide better service without also getting the support they need. Staff training and development must involve the whole organisation. Communication must be both to and from the staff who work with the public. Positive staff policies are at the heart of the public service orientation, since it is only through staff that the orientation can be turned from ideas into practice.

The public services orientation requires a review of staff policies which can cover:

- induction training
- management development
- specialist training
- staff appraisal
- conditions of service
- consultation procedures
- staff suggestions
- communications

Organising for the public

The public service orientation must focus on the conditions under which service is provided. The support given to staff and the controls over them determine the quality of service. Unless organisational conditions favour service for the public, all that can be done is to alter presentation. A friendly and helpful manner at the front line does not by itself create a better service, unless there is a capacity to deliver such a service.

Is enough authority delegated to people at or near the front line? The number of tiers in organisational hierarchies that separate field staff from the chief officer and committee needs appraisal and so does the nature of the support given. Systems of financial control need to encourage management responsibility at cost centres, in part to achieve management efficiency, but also to achieve greater responsiveness.

Do the following help or hinder the public service orientation?

- financial control procedures
- establishment control procedures
- departmental, divisional and sectional boundaries
- the role of central support services
- the hierarchical tiers
- the basis of accountability

Starting to build a public service orientation

In many authorities, a service day which brings together groups of staff from all levels of the organisation has provided the starting point.

Some questions for a service day:

- Do we know enough about what customers want from our services — and how could we learn more?
- Do we know enough about what customers think of our services — and how could we learn more?
- Can we make it easier for customers to use our services?
- How can we improve public understanding of our services?
- Can we provide more help for people who find it hard to use our services?
- Could we do more to welcome the public and their ideas?
- Could we improve staff motivation?
- Is organisational change needed?
- Could the service offer greater variety to meet differing needs?
- Could the public be given more choice?
- What could be achieved with existing resources? Fewer resources? More resources?

In the end, a service day should lead to proposals for action. The public service orientation has to be shown in practice.

References

This paper is based on a series of five on the public service orientation by Michael Clarke and John Stewart, published by the Local Government Training board, Arndale Centre, Luton LU1 2TS.

1. *Local Government and the Public Service Orientation. Does a Public Service provide a Service for the Public?*
2. *The Service Programme. Report on a visit to Sweden.*
3. *The Public Service Orientation. Developing the approach.*
4. *The Public Service Orientation. Issues and dilemmas to be faced.*
5. *The Public Service Orientation and the Citizen.*

Appendix 1

Speakers and Chairs

John Beishon
Chief Executive
Consumers' Association

Caroline Bentley
Head of Management Policy Division
Office of the Minister for the Civil Service

Stephen Fielding
Head of Business Development
Midland Bank Personal Financial Services

Chris Green
Director
Network SouthEast

Margaret Hodge
Leader
Islington Council

Howell James
Director of Corporate Affairs
BBC

Robert Maxwell
Secretary / Chief Executive
King's Fund

Bill Skitt
Deputy Chief Constable
Northamptonshire Police

John Stewart
Professor of Local Government and Administration
Institute of Local Government Studies

Peter Westland
Under Secretary (Social Services)
Association of Metropolitan Authorities

Workshop Leaders

Alan Cawson
Parent / Governor
Varndean School, Brighton

Nirveen Chotai
Race Adviser
Southwark Social Services

John Clark
Housing development worker in East London

Simon Gardner
Wandsworth Disability Alliance

Michael Golby
Senior Lecturer in Education
University of Exeter

Martin Higgins
Director of Housing
Islington Council

Neil Jackson
Chief Administrative Officer
Office of Water Services

Tessa Jowell
Director
Birmingham Community Care Special Action Project

Eric Midwinter
Chair of London Regional Transport Passenger Committee

Clive Pearman
Chief Superintendent
Notting Hill Police

Maggie Pinder
Development Officer (Mental Health)
Hertfordshire Social Services

David Roberts
People First
Colwyn Bay

Marcia Saunders
Development Officer (General)
Hertfordshire Social Services

Andrea Whittaker
Project Officer
Community Living Development Team
King's Fund Centre

The aim of the King's Fund Centre for Health Services Development is to support innovations in the NHS and related organisations, to learn from them, and to encourage the use of good ideas and practices.

The Primary Health Care Group at the King's Fund Centre was set up to improve primary and community health services, particularly in inner London, and to contribute to debates about primary health care policy. The group provides information and advice about primary care developments; works with NHS managers to establish and evaluate demonstration projects; organises workshops and conferences; and publishes papers and reports.

RELEVANT KING'S FUND PUBLICATIONS

Power to the People

The key to responsive services in health and social care

Winn E (Editor)

1990 ISBN 0 903060 70 1 £7.50

Anthology of developments that empower users of health and social care services. Detailed description and analysis of the practicalities.

User Friendly Services

Guidelines for managers of community health services

Winn E and Quick A

1989 ISBN 0 903060 36 1 £9.75

Practical help on making services user friendly. Detailed case studies on 'getting started', common pitfalls and the particular problems of consumer surveys.

They Aren't In the Brief

Advertising people with disabilities

Scott-Parker S

1989 ISBN 0 903060 13 2 £3.50

Reports on discussions with advertisers, charity advertisers and people with disabilities. Makes recommendations about countering detrimental images of disabled people in advertising.

Changing Futures

Housing and support services for people discharged from psychiatric hospitals

Braisby D et al

1988 ISBN 1 870551 08 7 £6.50

Examples of good practice. Section on why involving users is important.

The Consumer's View

Elderly people and community health services

Cornwell J

1989 ISBN 0 903060 39 6 £5.00

Report suggests ways in which managers and professionals can make community care more responsive to elderly people. Examines ageism and its effects in health care and how elderly people from black and ethnic minority groups are affected by racism. Includes examples of good practice and sources of further information/help.

Consumer Feedback for the NHS

A literature review

Jones L, Leneman L and Maclean U

1987 ISBN 1 870551 05 2 £6.95

Reviews over 200 reports and publications on NHS consumer surveys, and explains how studies have been carried out and what benefits came from them. Special section on communication as it so frequently recurs as a major issue affecting consumer satisfaction.

Available from: Bailey Distribution Ltd., Dept. KFP, Learoyd Rd., Mountfield Industrial Estate, New Romney, Kent TN28 8XU. Cheques to Bailey Distribution Ltd., adding £0.50 for orders of less than £5.00, or 10% for orders over £5.00.

Making Our Voice Heard

Strengthening alliances between people who use services

Wertheimer A

1989 ISBN 0 903060 15 9 £2.50

A report of a workshop where people who use services met to explore ways in which service users might make links with each other across the traditional boundaries between different types of disability.

Self-Advocacy Skills Training

Wertheimer A

1988 ISBN 0 903060 04 3 £2.00

A report of two workshops where self-advocates with learning difficulties and advisers worked together to increase their own skills and shared experiences of how to help self-advocacy groups develop.

Working Towards Racial Equality In Health Care

The Haringey experience

Kalsi N and Constantinides P

1989 ISBN 0 903060 07 8 £5.00

Useful lessons from the experience of Haringey Health Authority, committed to equal opportunities in employment and racial equality in health care. Aimed at helping other authorities. Describes problems as well as progress. Includes description of black involvement in planning.

Public Participation in Health

Towards a clearer view

Maxwell R and Weaver N (Editors)

1984 ISBN 1 870551 69 9 £4.95

Anthology of viewpoints on different aspects of public participation: e.g. health authority membership, role of CHCs, participation in general practice.

Health Surveys

In practice and in potential

Cartwright A

1983 (reprinted 1988) ISBN 1 85551 033 2 £7.50

A critical view of their scope and potential. Includes examples of over 50 health surveys, outlining main techniques as well as problems.

Breaking New Ground

The Lambeth Community Care Centre

Winn E and King C

1987 KFC 87/138 £1.50

Describes a small, community-based GP hospital in inner London, with valuable lessons about patient autonomy, involving local users and the need to clarify and communicate objectives.

A New Deal For Carers

Richardson A et al

1989 ISBN 1 870551 91 5 £4.50

Chapter 10 on consultation.

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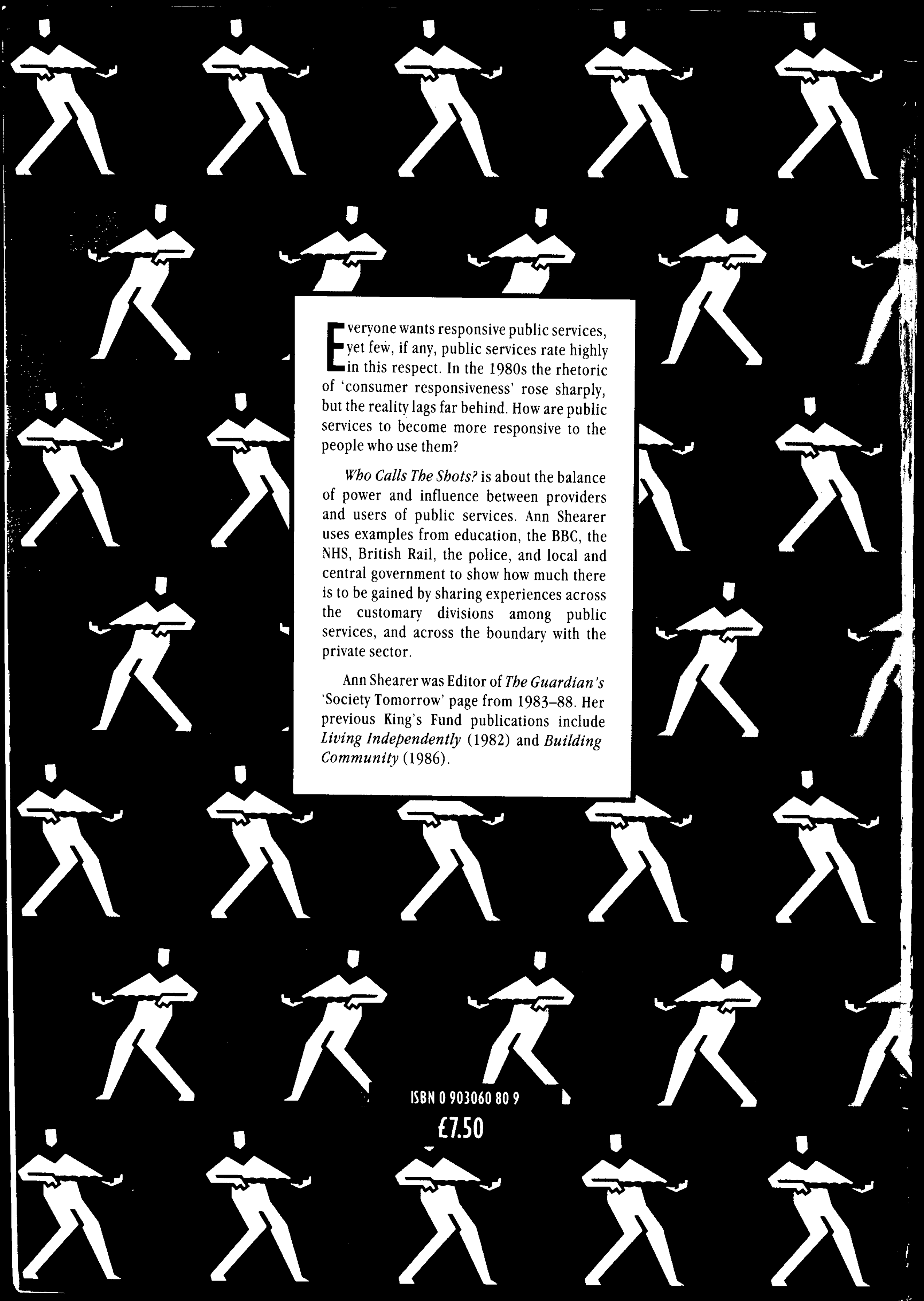

Everyone wants responsive public services, yet few, if any, public services rate highly in this respect. In the 1980s the rhetoric of 'consumer responsiveness' rose sharply, but the reality lags far behind. How are public services to become more responsive to the people who use them?

Who Calls The Shots? is about the balance of power and influence between providers and users of public services. Ann Shearer uses examples from education, the BBC, the NHS, British Rail, the police, and local and central government to show how much there is to be gained by sharing experiences across the customary divisions among public services, and across the boundary with the private sector.

Ann Shearer was Editor of *The Guardian's* 'Society Tomorrow' page from 1983–88. Her previous King's Fund publications include *Living Independently* (1982) and *Building Community* (1986).

ISBN 0 903060 80 9

£7.50