

A Critique of issues concerning Public Services and Social Inclusion policies

1. Despite efforts to get agencies to think in a joined up way, the vast array of agencies and organisations remains an obstacle to many people. Even within agencies (eg Local Government) it does not feel 'joined up' for many users.
2. For people without refined communication skills (verbal and non verbal) getting anyone to listen and act is a real problem.
3. Call centre technologies are not found to be user friendly by many people.
4. There is anecdotal evidence of a reluctance to complain or report. The view that 'It is not worth it' or 'nothing will happen anyway' is a common problem in many deprived areas.
5. Risk aversion is creating the impression that no one wants to take responsibility. Policy manuals and procedures, even those aimed at ensuring equality and social inclusion, can instead be restrictive and fail to address real problems and issues.
6. Increased social mobility for some people at least, has had the effect of marginalising others even more. It has provided for some the ability to be able to move from one area to another, leaving many of the former areas, less socially mixed than before.
7. For a variety of reasons (school league tables, perception of crime rates etc), there is an increasing tendency for a well understood pecking order of neighbourhoods to be seen. This is reflected in house prices, transfer requests, and becomes self fulfilling.
8. The idea that you can go a local office and speak to someone you know, who would be able to deal with your needs and problems in a holistic way remains an ideal that is as far away today as it has ever been.
9. It is not a lack of public servants. Typically the average local authority will employ one person for every 15-20 households, and adding on other agencies suggests that there should be no shortage of professional support available
10. The social care system, aimed at supporting the most needy and vulnerable is visibly not working for many, and all too often does not feel connected with other services
11. The benefits system is complex and difficult to understand
12. Debt is an increasing problem amongst many of the disadvantaged, and becomes a real barrier for many people.
13. Many public policies have been aimed at assisting the individual. They have been successful for many, but this can leave in its wake increased marginalisation for others.
14. Performance indicator culture produces many perverse incentives, without an understanding of how they are affecting the spectrum of public services.

So what might be some of the answers?

1. Public services clearly need to be increasingly efficient. There remains huge scope for efficiencies. Two small examples. Why does it require numerous phone calls and visits to different agencies to deal with the consequences of bereavement, from benefits to probate, to registration of death, medical certificate etc? Housing problems often link into educational, health, social care and community safety needs, yet few people ever sense that their needs are being dealt with holistically. It is the gaps and duplication that cost huge resources and lead to inefficiencies.

2. We need to think in terms of a joined up advocacy and support services for many people. The idea of a 'personal advisor' may be a way forward.
3. Development of groups, organisations and facilities that can bring people together in an unbranded way at a local neighbourhood level, providing both social interaction, mutual support and signposting opportunities is both preventative, capacity building and supportive at the same time.
4. Local Government needs to feel more local. Parish Councils may provide one answer, but equally local public service offices, providing a full range of services or access to services provide another model. There can and should be greater community ownership of such services
5. There needs to be much more sharing of data. The data protection rules become an excuse to avoid a joined up approach
6. Information technology can provide many solutions or it can simply be yet another obstacle that leads to social exclusion. As more and more services can be accessed over the internet, this may leave those without the resources, skills or aptitude even more marginalised. The idea of a community resource centre, which can be used just like a library, with help and support on hand, but which can also play a large part in building local capacity, skills and knowledge is an attractive proposition at neighbourhood level.
7. Local people need to be much more involved in local decision making. Public services are far too often provided to rather than for a local community. Again Parish Councils offer one route forward, but there will be others
8. There are too many organisational requirements which impact on public services ability to operate in a joined up way. One small example is the requirement for each local authority to have a S151 (Finance) Officer and a S142 (legal) Officer directly employed by the Council. There would seem no logical reason why various public agencies at a local level, could not have a single person fulfilling these roles on behalf of different organisations. This would encourage and free the public sector to operate as single entities, at least in terms of how the public access and find them.
9. We need much better and frequently updated data on economic and social statistics, which would allow and encourage targets to address inequalities and deprivation and promote social inclusion. The measurements in place, the many changes to those measurements, their infrequency and time it takes to publish, all allow policy drift to occur.
10. Finally we need to incentivise people to participate. For many people dealing with complex personal problems (from debt, to drugs, to benefits etc) it often appears easier to disengage and opt out rather than to participate and engage with public services and local bodies and organisations. However it is not easy to show or demonstrate the advantages of engagement or even in accepting civic responsibilities. I have no easy answers here but I believe it to be a significant aspect.

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Woughton Ward is a particularly deprived area of South Central Milton Keynes.