

Designing Services to Meet Citizen's Needs

There has been much talk in recent decades of making the delivery of government services more 'citizen-centric'. Unfortunately, as so often in public administration, the language of reform has often foundered on the rocks of political caution and bureaucratic inertia.

Too often the organisational silos of officialdom have served the interests of government rather than the people. Partly as a consequence, the best of political intentions has often resulted in the worst of outcomes. Programs intended to address social exclusion have been delivered in ways that actually reinforce the dependence and passivity that marks its worst features.

For that reason the recent report of the WA Economic Audit, and Premier Barnett's positive response to it, represents a significant step forward. There seems to be a genuine interest in how to redesign WA government programs so that they can be implemented in ways which better meet the needs of those they serve.

If 'whole-of-government' solutions are going to meet the multiple needs of the most disadvantaged, the relationship between the state and the individual needs to be rebalanced. Citizens need to be empowered to have greater influence over the government services they require to support them. In Western Australia today, well-intentioned public servants too often bear the burden of taking decision on behalf of beneficiaries. Those who are served learn helplessness.

There are two ways in which this failure can be addressed. The first is to place greater power in the hands of not-for-profit (NFP) organisations to deliver government services in socially innovative ways. As the Alliance for Children at Risk emphasised in its submission to the Audit, "NFP participation creates diversity ... a mono-culture supplier is never the right answer to the diverse needs of human beings". The fact is that community organisations not only deliver services more cost-effectively - they also, in the words of the Tenants' Advisory Service, have "far greater personal interaction with clients".

The key is for the relationship between officials and community representatives to be marked by genuine collaboration. Public services need to manage relationships not contracts. They need to ensure public accountability for public funds but to avoid the temptation to micro-manage community initiative. The prescriptive regulatory weight of bureaucratic red tape deadens creativity. In the words of the Cancer Council and Heart Foundation, the "management of government contracts for services can stifle the innovation they seek to encourage".

The second approach is to place power directly in the hands of individuals and communities. Citizens should be given greater control of the assistance they require to live full and fulfilled lives. They need to be engaged as 'co-producers' rather than treated as recipients.

Giving individuals the opportunity to tailor services to their needs and to control the personalised budgets to manage them, empowers those who face disadvantage. So, too, the opportunity for communities to ensure that publicly funded programs are more focussed on local priorities.

Citizen-directed care and individual purchasing of services should underpin social reform. It offers extraordinary opportunities. Indeed Western Australia, through its Disability Services Commission,

has been a world leader in this regard. It has enabled those with disabilities to have significant choice over the government-funded services that are provided to assist them.

The Commission, on the basis of its considerable experience, remains enthusiastic about the unfulfilled potential of individualised service delivery. It argues that the “time is right for fundamental change in the relationship between the Western Australian human services systems and the citizens who are users of those systems”.

That commitment is shared by NFP organisations. National Disability Services recognises “that the combination of individualised services and individualised funding has increased citizen control over service design and funds”. In Control Australia argues that “for the state government to meet the needs of the citizens there must be a shift to self-directed funding in human services ... to empower citizens and enable us to be in control of our lives and the decisions which affect us”.

The view of the Economic Audit is that the WA government should progressively implement pilots of self-directed service design and delivery in areas such as long-term health support, mental illness, aged care and job training. Similarly, public schools, childcare centres and remote communities should be given greater managerial control over the public funds that they receive. Perhaps most important, as Tim Marney has recognised, there needs to be “a shift in power to enable Indigenous communities to control their future”.

Of course personalisation of human services delivery has challenges. I was fortunate enough recently to attend a workshop on self-directed government services run by WACOSS. The difficulties were recognised by participants but so too the extraordinary benefits. In the word of CEO Sue Ash, the challenges are “doable”. Its political will – and a change in public service culture – that is required.

Government programs should no longer be designed to suit the administrative convenience of the public sector. Not-for-profit sector organisations, with their strong sense of community mission and public purpose, should be encouraged to pursue social innovation in their delivery of government services. Citizens, individually or in communities of interest, should be enabled to wield control over the programs that are designed to help them.

The WA government should set the policy directions on human services and, having done so, allow much greater flexibility in the way that policy is implemented. The conscientious public servants who serve the government should increasingly become facilitators and support workers rather than behave as controllers and compliance officers.

Such changes call for a bold new approach by government. It is one which could reframe the relationship between the state and its citizens, in highly beneficial ways. If one always does what one always did, one always gets what one always got. The time has come to do government differently.

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