

## Democratising Public Services

Here you will find a selection of blogs around the theme of democratising public services.

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## Collaboration for radical change in public services and international development

Tamsin Fulton, 14 June 2015

Public World recently co-hosted with the Overseas Development Institute and Collaborate a [roundtable](#) that explored what international development and British public service policy and practice could learn from each other.

As a social enterprise that grew out of the work of its founders in international development and is now being transformed by the British public service specialists who have joined the Public World team, we knew the discussion would explore a rich seam.

Chaired by our own Brendan Martin, participation in the event was diverse, with a range of organisations including the World Bank, the Cabinet Office, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and the Leadership Centre at the Local Government Association.

The group agreed the starting point to reinventing public services are approaches that are locally-led, enable people to solve problems for themselves, adopt 'learning by doing' and embrace the uncertainty inherent in complex change processes.

Easy to say, harder to do, and fraught with danger when some politicians and public agencies use such terms as 'co-production' as a rationale for abandoning state responsibility rather than reinventing it.

The growth of Service Design as a practice has spread simple and effective methodologies to achieve change across the UK public sector and elsewhere. It has led to a diligent focus on service users and tools such as ethnographic research to really understand services from the perspective of users. We have also seen the rise of Citizens' Forums and Lay Partners, particularly in health and social care, that go beyond "getting the voice of the user into the room" and directly involve citizens in discussion about and design of new public services. This is beginning to shift public service models towards radical change.

The next step, and one in which we can draw on the experience of our colleagues in overseas development, is to support public servants to reconsider their own role, to shift their mental models from seeing themselves as "providers" responding to demand from citizens and the political environment.

Steve Commins, a Public World director who took part in the roundtable and is an author of the most recent World Bank World Development Report [Mind, Society and Behavior](#), raised the issue of professional bias in overseas development. He argued that well-meaning professionals can fail to help, or even inadvertently harm, the very people they seek to assist if they fail to take into account that their choices are subtly and unconsciously influenced by their social environment, the mental models they have of the poor, and the limits of their cognitive bandwidth.

Reimagining public services that are locally-led and that learn through doing to support communities to solve problems for themselves will require professionals to fully engage with citizens on a level and in a way not seen before.



They also demand a new approach to leadership, recognising that while people at the top of hierarchical public bodies certainly have particular responsibilities, there are people at all levels in all kinds of organisations and citizen spaces who can champion the vision and build capacity at a community level to collectively undertake radical change.

Public sector resources that grow the capacity of these leaders will facilitate communities to explore what works in the local context, and to test, learn, improve, grow and embed new services that work for the whole community — building on the passion for experimentation inherent in service design. This kind of leadership could create a movement that roots a new kind of public service in new kinds of relationships — between users and providers, between state and non-state agencies, and across professional and hierarchical boundaries within communities.

Participants at the roundtable made a renewed commitment to exploring more adaptive, creative and participatory approaches to both development and public service practice. While we have only scratched the surface of this important topic, we hope it will lead to deeper and wider collaboration in the future.

## **WHOSE BIASES COUNT? Steve Commins on the new World Development Report**

**Stephen Commins, 5 December 2014**

A few years ago, a major donor agency organised a nationwide poverty discussion with civil society organisations (CSOs) in Bolivia. While the meeting between agency officials and the CSO representatives was going on, indigenous people's organizations were out in the streets, invading government offices and setting up barricades, taking action against their sense of exclusion from the political system.

Their protest handed the donor staff a reality check. While they had reached out to many CSOs, these CSOs had been led by *mestizos* who spoke Spanish and were generally disconnected from the poorer and more marginalised indigenous communities.

This story — and many more like it from my long career in international development, with both non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the World Bank — came to mind over the last year or so when I have been on the team writing the Bank's latest World Development Report, WDR2015, [\*Mind, Behavior and Society\*](#), published yesterday.

The Report emphasises the enormous scope for psychologically and socially inspired policies and interventions to help people make choices that promote their own interests, and how behaviours, social norms and mental models shape individual and collective action in ways that do not fit 'standard' economic models.

One of the several ways in which the Report is unusual for the World Bank is its chapter on the biases of development professionals. The premise is first that it is easy enough for professionals to look at (or look down at) the behaviours, biases, mental models and cultural norms of 'poor people', patients, students, etc.. It is not so easy, however, to hold up the mirror to the limited cognition of professionals themselves.

Some examples of ways in which organisational structures and embedded institutions limit self-criticism came from a survey of World Bank staff, featured in the report, which found that development practitioners' models of how poor individuals think and behave are sometimes inaccurate. There are also numerous examples of how even well-intentioned approaches to development can go astray.

A former Peace Corps volunteer who had worked in Lesotho for a number of agencies wrote a superb paper for a course with me, asking if NGOs and others were *interlopers* or *interlocutors* in Lesotho. This distinction is a clear and crisp demarcation about the differences in mindsets and professional approaches to working with poor people and communities.

These professional biases affect lives in OECD countries as well. In the United States at the start of the Ebola outbreak, the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) assured the public that US hospitals were well equipped to handle Ebola cases. This was not an accurate representation of the realities, as confirmed both by nurses and other health workers. Similarly, there was an expectation that the 'public' nature of the British National Health Service (NHS) would guarantee quality care equitably, without considering how the system would promote certain behaviours and norms and replicate social biases.

At the organizational level, this calls for both transparency and accountability, as well as a culture that promotes learning and openness about errors. This is difficult because, despite the language of

'learning', any form of power is made nervous by facts and criticisms that reflect badly on its credibility.

Academics as much as any other profession are prone to a lack of self-criticism (despite the appearance of a critical environment) and to becoming increasingly narrow in their upward climb into the higher ranks. Too many papers and reports that in theory address complex and important social issues are burdened with jargon, insider debates and lofty phrases that signify membership in a club rather than wrestling with their limited knowledge.

This isolation from the muck and mire has been noted by Robert Chambers (Provocations for Development), Mike Edwards (The Irrelevance of Development Studies) and others.

One of the most recent illustrations of the importance of stepping outside the professional box or mindset is in the magnificent book, [\*Beyond the Beautiful Forever\*](#), by Katherine Boo. Stepping into one slum, she provides the type of voice that professionals need to hear. The centrality of this approach is emphasized in her comment: "Slums are over-theorized and under-reported." So, what to do?

The WDR suggests a number of ways to challenge professional blindspots, but the core lesson is that there is no substitute for challenging ourselves individually and collectively to keep narrowing the gap between what we think we are doing and the actual effects of our policies and practices.

- *Steve Commins is a director of Public World, a lecturer at the University of California Los Angeles, and a member of the team that wrote the [2015 World Bank World Development Report](#).*

## **[R]evolution Road – travelling the terrains of creativity, power and love**

**Veena Vasista, 11 July 2014**

The Centre for Welfare Reform, in association with Compass, recently published a paper [\*\[R\]evolution Road – travelling the terrains of creativity, power and love\*](#). The paper is the first one I've written about my journeys into being the change I want to see in the world, creating changes within myself and the relationship between individual internal change and a collective dismantling of oppressive systems, structures and institutions.

I think of this paper as a part of various experiments I am conducting, all of which are underpinned by a desire to live in ways that are more nurturing and restorative. I am experimenting with my relationships with myself and others. I am experimenting with my relationship with the planet. I am experimenting with rooting social activism in the practice of love. I am experimenting with how I write about these experiments.

For over fifteen years, I was a professional in the social policy industry. As time passed, I increasingly struggled with being in a culture dominated by rigid directives, manifestos and explicit, time-limited plans and for fixing social and economic problems. In contrast, I wanted to enter into meandering explorations of what is it about who and how we are being that is giving rise to the problems which keep plaguing us.

In 2010, I left the social policy industry and turned my attention to thinking about movement in hearts and minds - which I now think of in terms of evolution and shifts in consciousness. To paraphrase Einstein: the same consciousness that created the oppressive systems and institutions, which guide how we live together, is not the one that will create meaningful alternatives.

In the spirit of being experimental, I consciously chose in *[R]evolution Road* to focus on presenting reflections and questions rather than outlining a change model or making explicit recommendations. Some people – mainly male readers, I've noticed - have said they find the lack of explicit conclusions, recommendations or templates perplexing and awkward. One reader questioned the utility of such an honest personal disclosure. He suggested that, in the future, I go the route of anthropological Margaret Meade-esque cultural anthropology. He advised that personal stories can be offered up as useful lead-ins, but not be the main content.

So why have I written the paper the way I've written it?

I am inclined to believe that how we experience change in ourselves – shifts in how any of us go about being human – is mirrored at the collective level. In *[R]evolution Road*, I tell a very personal story about a radical shift (aka revolution) in how I relate to fear, hate and sadness. I tell this story to illustrate a type of struggle with oppression.

I tell this personal story because I believe that my, your, everybody's stories are heavily entwined with the oppressive cultural norms many of us say we are trying to dismantle. I tell it because I believe my story is non-unique and potentially informative about different journeys that might be part of collective liberation from the toxic and oppressive ways of living we have created for ourselves.

I also share my story in the hope that *[R]evolution Road* draws people to step into a set of questions which I do not explicitly pose within it:



- To what extent and in what ways, do we root our collective creativity and power in fear, hate, loathing and separation?
- What results from this kind of rootedness?
- How are these roots reflected in our organizations, systems and institutions?

*[R]evolution Road* is meant to be what it says on the tin – a discussion paper. I hope it encourages its readers (individually and within groups) to explore and reflect on its themes openly and with a sense of daring.

- *Veena Vasista is an associate consultant with Public World, currently based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She also blogs at [see and connect](#).*

## **Are private investors the best people to decide development priorities in poor countries?**

**Olivia Bryanne Zank, 22 May 2014**

In a blog post in March I reported that, more than six months after the launch of development impact bonds (DIBs), there are still no pilot projects to test the controversial model in practice. I argued that this might be related to a number of problematic issues with DIBs, and I explored the issue of performance by results in particular.

In this post I explore a second concern with the DIBs, namely their reliance on private investors to decide on funding allocations.

In effect, DIBs take funding discretion away from the current donor and developing country governments and NGOs, who, despite all their flaws, at least are development professionals and can be assumed to have some expertise on the matter.

Instead, financial investors will make the decision on what to fund and what not to fund. But how are financial agents and investors assumed to know what constitutes a good, feasible, impactful project with long-term benefits?

Proponents argue that the financial return offered on the DIB will send a signal to the market about the quality of the project. But actors in financial markets are not civil servants, teachers, engineers or doctors and it is highly unlikely that they will have the kind of expertise it takes to know what kind of project is likely to work at a specific time and place. (You could argue that people working in development don't know either, but that's a different issue).

Of course those currently making funding decisions will still have some say in that they create the DIBs offered, but investor demand will no doubt be influential on what projects are able to secure funding. The ultimate funding decision will therefore be made by actors who cannot be assumed to have any expertise about development.

Hopefully, some will be guided by legitimate ideas and rudimentary research about what works (after all a large amount of development impact research is publicly available from networks such as [3ie](#), [J-PAL](#) and their partners). Other investors, however, will not bother to research at all and will be guided only by the return offered on the bonds (indeed, that is the point, to use price signals). Furthermore, the payments-by-results structure of the DIBs will incentivise investors to take more interest in project management. Being the funders of a project, they will have significant influence on management decisions, but without having any development expertise to speak of, this may not be a good thing. Hopefully, investors will be humble enough to realise this. Some, however, will not. Related to this second point, therefore, is the concern that if DIBs acquire the liquidity their proponents hope for, by laws of supply and demand, returns will be higher according to investor perceptions and expectations of project quality. As such the cost of finance for development projects will wax and wane according to investor confidence and opportunity costs, just like it does for the rest of the economy.

Keynes famously compared investment decisions to a beauty contest, wherein contestants (investors) are asked to choose the picture (project) they think the average contestant will choose. Their own opinion on beauty (project quality) therefore does not matter as much as the average opinion (or more correctly, the average prediction of the average opinion). Of course, DIBs are far from having the liquidity that would create such mechanisms, but it is worth keeping in mind.



DIBs (and the Social Investment Bonds, SIBs, which precede them) do indeed offer ways of shifting risk burdens to private investors who arguably are better positioned to bear it and as such may significantly increase the amount of investment in the social good.

However, there is a concern that their introduction will exacerbate a worrisome trend present in the development sector today, namely a bias towards quantifiable, short-term projects. In addition they could introduce volatile changes in the costs of finance according to investor moods and expectations.

It is therefore necessary to be very critical about which projects are suitable for funding in this manner and which are best kept within state or civil society realms.

- *Olivia Bryanne Zank is a researcher with Public World and is completing a Masters in the political economy of development and finance at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London.*

## **Outsourcing and privatisation: time for a more thoughtful debate**

**Robin Stafford, 15 April 2014**

There are those who see privatization, outsourcing or PFI as the right solution in all circumstances, in the belief that someone else, preferably in the private sector, can always do it better.

Others, perhaps concerned more with labour relations and rights, tend to be ideologically hostile to any form of outsourcing or private sector involvement in public sector activities.

Both schools of thought tend to ignore practical, operational advice from those who've actually done it, just choosing selective examples that support their ideological positions.

We have an ideological divide along the lines of private/good and public/bad, or vice versa. Both sides tend to ignore the very real lessons that have been learnt from what are now decades of experience. There are much more thoughtful and powerful arguments both against and for, once you move away from purely ideological perspectives. Try talking to a bunch of scarred practitioners in the pub...

Unfortunately, all too often it seems that those promoting the arguments have little experience of actually doing it in practice, and fall back on anecdotal and self-serving evidence – or equally self-serving consultants. As a result, the genuine strengths and weaknesses of outsourcing, and the associated arguments, are reduced to simplistic and often misplaced ideological critiques.

### **A view from out on the battlefield**

A first step is to recognise that people are often conflating Privatisation, Outsourcing, PFI and 'Off-shoring', and then to recognise that the same or very similar developments are happening, in both the public and private sectors.

What they all have in common is that an organisation takes something that it currently does for itself, and pays someone else to do it for them. Privatisation is in many ways just a public sector term for what the private sector calls outsourcing. In the case of off-shoring that extends to having the work done in another country, usually because of perceived low labour costs and very often, more limited labour rights, euphemistically referred to as 'flexibility'.

PFI is a slightly different case in that the primary objective is to get a third party to fund something that the government would otherwise have funded itself, typically infrastructure such as bridges and hospitals -- a little odd when government has by far the lowest cost of borrowing. However it also tends to mean that the management of the construction is sub-contracted, and possibly the operational management as well. We have seen this for example with NHS hospitals, where the staff may be NHS, but a third party runs the buildings and services.

Covering every plus and minus would need a long article. A search on the web will turn up plenty of good papers on outsourcing, drawing on many years of experience and examples. These provide thorough analyses of why it may succeed or very often fail, though one wonders whether those doing the outsourcing have read them. A number of consistent themes come through.

### **Why and where does it make sense – the positive reasons**

There are many things that organisations of all kinds get others to do that they might once have done for themselves. Examples include transport and logistics, IT infrastructure and maintenance, cleaning, and canteens. To claim that there are never advantages to employing an external organisation would be disingenuous.

There are situations where organisations insist on doing work themselves that costs them far more to do, with no advantages in service quality. An example was where a major government department that received high volumes of cheques insisted on having their own cheque-processing operation. Everyone else, including the biggest banks, outsourced the task to specialist organisations as it involves complex, expensive technology with huge economies of scale. This was a waste of taxpayers' money that could have been used to provide or improve services. Some sensible questions to ask about activities that might be outsourced are:

- Is this really at the core of what we do?
- How good are we at it, or and might it worth making the effort to get better?
- Are there others out there who are already much better at it and who could really provide us a better service for the same or less as we do it now?
- Is this a new service or activity to us that someone else is already geared up to provide more effectively and efficiently?
- If someone else did it, could we integrate what they do into how we work without slowing things down, adding costs, overheads, or bureaucracy?
- Do we have the ability to buy and then manage a service provided by someone else, and would we end up 'locked in' and potentially losing control?

#### **There are always hidden agendas...?**

There are other political or commercial drivers that all too often may be the real reasons for outsourcing - but are almost never declared as such.

When you outsource, a lot of people and assets are transferred off the books of the organisation. As a result, the turnover per head in the organization outsourcing the activities increases, 'productivity' is seen to have improved, and the return on assets increases as the value of the assets on the books has decreased.

At the same time you often get a payment from the organisation that is going to provide the service, for the assets that they are receiving. So if you are a business, that makes the financial results look really good for a year or two, the stock-market approves, and directors get bigger bonuses. It is uncanny how often this happens just before a financial year or half-year end, contributing to profits and keeping the stock market happy. However, by the time any increased costs or reductions in service quality come through, those directors are long gone to another job.

Similarly, the Treasury likes the reduction in Government borrowing that this produces, combined with reduced departmental headcounts, but again by the time the increased costs or poor service have come through, ministers will have moved on! Many a recent ministerial embarrassment has been linked to failed outsources, from the Criminal Records Bureau or Passport Office to more recent Olympics or prison scandals.

This may sound cynical but talk to business and outsourcing experts informally, and they will tell you that it is exactly what goes on, usually under the cover of improved service or reduced cost. Whether at the same time, the private sector is deliberately being given the opportunity to profit from government activities is another debate.

PFI is a particular case, driven by the Treasury wanting to reduce borrowing for capital projects, even though as we know, the Government can borrow money at lower cost than everyone else and over longer timeframes. The history of PFI is of massively increased running costs and not necessarily improved service, with numerous examples in the health sector alone. Arguably this is partially as a result of weak negotiating and commercial skills in the Treasury and spending departments, but it

also reflects the huge complexity and scale of many government services (health, taxation, social security, etc.) compared to the private sector.

One major factor in why public sector projects go wrong is that they tend to be particularly large, complex and unique. Outsourcing the accounts department of a company, when all companies do much the same thing in their accounts departments is one thing. Outsourcing activities that are unique to a government department, complex, subject to political driven change, and poorly understood is another matter.

So HMRC might outsource the processing of their cheques, as this is capital-intensive and essentially a generic, discrete, commodity activity. The activity of assessing and processing tax returns would be a very different matter, and HMRC have more 'customers' than even the largest UK bank or insurance company. On the evidence of recent years they also make a much better job of it. Surprisingly enough, buying services such as health is not like buying cornflakes in Tesco's, and running a major hospital is not like running Ryanair, whatever prominent politicians and media commentators might say.

### **How much is this about making change happen?**

It is inevitably the case that there will be some areas of the public sector where costs are greater and service levels poorer than they could or need to be, just as in any large private sector organization. What should *not* be inevitable is that perhaps through a combination of poor management and resistance to change, they continue to waste money that could be spent elsewhere and provide better services.

A reason for outsourcing in any sector may be the hope that a third party will be able to drive through changes that the internal organisation has not been capable of. However, there is an iron rule known to practitioners, that 'outsourcing a problem merely leads to a bigger problem'! Greater willingness and management capacity to change and improve within organisations, would remove some of the justifications claimed for outsourcing.

In the early days of outsourcing, the assumption was that the supplier would bring deep expertise and experience, derived from being a specialist in the field. This is still claimed by promoters of outsourcing, both customers and providers. But what 'deep expertise' do the likes of G4S, Serco, Capita et al bring these days?

On a recent trip to the Orkneys I found that one of the main ferries was out of action for a month – and that it was being run by Serco! That well known shipping business...

It is little wonder that these organisations so frequently struggle to cope with the operations that they take on, when in reality they have little or no previous experience of them. It tends also to support the argument that the drivers are more about financial engineering than improving operational efficiency or service.

What is unquestionably true, again from talking to practitioners, is that when major, complex activities are transferred to third parties, it is extraordinarily difficult to bring them back in-house again, even assuming that those responsible will ever admit their mistake. This dramatically reduces the commercial negotiating power of the buyer of those services, as the supplier knows that in practice they have little choice but to continue. This myth of there being 'open markets' needs to be challenged.

There is further issue as to whether a service is really a 'public good', with potential examples being health, power, transport, or security. This presents a different philosophical challenge, which

Michael Sandel has eloquently addressed. As is starting to be recognized, it is also highly questionable as to whether there can ever be a genuinely 'competitive market' for these services, with both railways and energy providing glaring examples.

### **In conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the public sector has scored some own goals by making a poor job of procuring and then managing outsources. Equally their providers have too often failed to deliver the promised cost reductions service improvements -- not entirely surprising when the original drivers were really political and financial.

That said, it is acknowledged to be a very difficult task, which many private sector organisations also struggle with, even though their operations are usually smaller, much less complex, and without the political overtones. The examples are out there in many companies together with examples of operations being brought back in house, but the media tend to ignore them and there is in practice much less transparency. Shareholders ought to be much more challenging.

Overall, the arguments put forward, both for and against, are too often ideological and emotional, and miss many important points. Few if any of the politicians seem to understand the subject very well either, though Margaret Hodge has made some very perceptive observations and challenges in parliamentary committees.

The opportunity is there for a much more informed, thoughtful and honest debate, with tougher challenges both to proposed and existing outsourced operations. Far greater transparency on contracts and performance would be a very good start.

- Robin Stafford is an associate consultant with Public World, former Head of Programmes at Standard Chartered Bank, and former Head of Sustainable Consumption at the World Wildlife Fund.

## Will payment-by-results (PbR) scupper Development Impact Bonds?

Olivia Bryanne Zank, 27 March 2014

Last September, the [Development Impact Bond Working Group](#) (a joint initiative by the Centre for Global Development and Social Finance UK) launched an [interesting innovation in development finance, the DIB](#).

Modelled on the social impact bond of [Peterborough Prison](#) fame, a DIB is an investment vehicle whereby private investors pay the cost of a development project, recouping their investment plus a return (profit) if the project is successful.

Repayment and profit is determined according to pre-specified indicators, e.g. how many children vaccinated, how many jobs created etc., where a minimum threshold must be crossed (and independently verified) to trigger repayment. Profits derive from success above this minimum threshold.

As such, repayments and profits are only triggered if the project is successful; if not, the investors lose their money. Since the government or donor would have paid for the project anyway and may now avoid paying for project failures, the net effect on public budgets may well be positive.

Some readers will recognise this funding structure as payment-by-results or PbR. As such, DIBs are intended to kill entire flocks of birds with a single stone -- attracting private investment to a social good; ensuring public funds only go to project successes; increasing private oversight, and hence monitoring; transferring risk to investors; allowing developing country technocrats to gain experience of pitching a project to investors; and so on.

Judging by the amount of interest first SIBs and now DIBs have gathered, this innovation is indeed very exciting, for a multitude of actors in and outside the development sector. Several organisations are currently trialing DIBs, including [Social Finance UK](#), [Instiglio](#) and [D. Capital](#).

But no DIBs are yet in operation, which underlines that, like any other development intervention, the devil is in the detail.

As the [Social Market Foundation has noted](#), SIBs and DIBs involve several potential pitfalls, such as:

- potentially high monitoring costs for donors to avoid paying for statistical flukes;
- significant technical requirements in attributing impact to the project beyond reasonable doubt;
- initial capital requirements may be prohibitively high given the relative infancy of the market; and
- implementing organisations and governments may not have the absorptive capacity to handle large private capital inflows of the scale envisioned, should they materialise.

I want to draw attention to two further problems. Firstly, SIBs and DIBs signal project successes via short-term, measurable outcomes. This means they are only applicable to projects whose outcomes are quantifiable and give results within a few years.

This is a significant limitation to the scope of applicability for DIBs. If the commitment period is too long, the bonds become too illiquid and investors will demand prohibitively high returns, negating any public savings generated. Or, more likely, investors will not be forthcoming at all.

This short-term, quantitative bias will further exacerbate the [existing](#) and [worrysome](#) trend within [development](#) work introduced by payment-by-results.

Driven by a (commendable) desire to maximise value for taxpayers' money, payment-by-results has been [criticised](#) for being [inflexible](#) and [biased towards big organisations](#), [reducing quality of services](#), [discouraging knowledge-sharing](#) as know-how becomes commercial, and in some cases even [disincentivising innovation](#) by only focusing on outcomes, creating a dynamic of 'playing it safe' by default.

Many absolutely crucial development outcomes, such as empowerment and capabilities, are not amenable to this kind of funding structure and their funding must be secured by other means. As such, this seriously limits the range of projects that may be financed with DIBs.

The second set of problems with DIBs I want to address relates to their reliance on private investors to decide on funding allocations. I will explore those issues in a second blog next week.

- *Olivia Bryanne Zank is a research consultant with Public World*

## How to make every day NHS Change Day

**Roger Kline and Brendan Martin, 28 February 2014**

Next Monday will be [NHS Change Day](#), and already more than a quarter of million NHS staff have made pledges to “challenge the status quo and try something simple but different to improve patient care”.

It is a grassroots movement, started last year with a single tweet in the wake of the [Francis Report](#) into the Mid Staffs scandal. It produced more than 180,000 pledges in its first year and the 2014 target is half a million.

Do we need better proof of the determination among NHS staff to take responsibility for protecting and improving a service that some have brought into disrepute and the government is intent on privatising?

While celebrating this inspiring initiative, however, let's be clear that pledges and the determination of those who make them are not enough to produce the radical culture change demanded by Francis.

Indeed, the 2013 [NHS staff survey](#), published last week, provides a sobering reminder of how far we still have to go.

There has been progress:

- 65% (up 3%) say that if a friend or relative needed treatment they would be happy with the standard of care provided by their organisation.
- 66% (up 4%) say that care of patients and service users is their organisation's top priority.
- 58% (up 3%) would recommend their organisation as a place to work.
- 69% report that their manager helps them with difficult tasks and 72% felt supported in a personal crisis.

But you only have to turn those numbers around — 34% don't think care of patients and service users is their organisation's top priority! — to be cured of any complacency those improvements might induce.

Moreover, only 41% of all staff were satisfied with the extent to which they felt that their employer values their work, dropping to 21% for ambulance staff, even lower than last year. What is going on there?

Only 30% feel that there are enough staff to enable them to do their jobs properly, dropping to 20% amongst ambulance staff. Only 28% of staff report that senior managers act on feedback from staff. In addition:

- 39% (up 1%) said they had been unwell as a result of work-related stress in the previous 12 months.
- 68% (down 1%) said they had attended work in the previous three months despite not feeling well enough to perform duties.
- Nearly a quarter of all staff reported being bullied by their line manager or colleagues (23%, down 1%).
- 85% (down 1%) felt encouraged to report errors but only 44% (up 2%) that they were given feedback on changes made as a result.



While only 14% felt that reporting of errors would lead to punishment or blaming of those involved, that is still a worryingly high proportion, given the evidence in the Francis Report that such a culture perpetuated the Mid Staffs descent from compassion to cruelty. And:

- As many as 29% were unable to say they would feel safe if reporting fraud, malpractice or wrongdoing, and only just over half (54%) would feel confident that their organisation would address such reports.
- Little over one third felt that communication between managers and staff is effective (36%) and even fewer (28%) reported that senior managers act on feedback from staff.
- Although only 10% of white staff do not believe their trust provides equal opportunities for career progression or promotion, the figure rises to 23% for BME staff.
- Similarly, while 9% of white staff report experiencing discrimination at work in the last 12 months, one quarter (25%) of BME staff do.
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The survey shows that some Trusts are outstandingly good, but to bring the rest up to the standards of the best we need to take the spirit of NHS Change Day and put it at the heart of everyday NHS culture through more systematic staff involvement.

Or as Francis put it (paragraph 1.118 of his report): “The patient must be first in everything that is done: there must be no tolerance of substandard care; frontline staff must be empowered with responsibility and freedom to act in this way under strong and stable leadership in stable organisations.”

That is why Public World is proud to have produced for Unite the Union a special edition of our Duty of Care handbook, [Putting Patients First](#), which offers practical guidance to staff about how to assert their right to do just that.

And it is also why we are introducing into health and social care in Britain the *Best Workplace* methodology of staff involvement — developed, tried and tested over 20 years by our Swedish partner, Alamanco.

NHS Change Day shows that NHS staff are up for it. The question is, are their national and Trust leaders as determined as they are?

## **Caroline Lucas MP is wrong: the Public Service Users Bill is a bad idea**

**Brendan Martin, 22 January 2014**

What with the [Serco and Group 4 scandals](#), the revival of [East Coast](#) rail under public management and the profiteering of [energy](#) and [water](#) companies, the case for public service outsourcing and privatisation in Britain has never looked so worn.

A generation after Conservative governments sold off telecoms, energy, water and the railways, and forced local government and the NHS to replace direct labour with cheap contractors, people have had enough.

The trend in public opinion is confirmed by polling for the [We Own It](#) campaign, and today Green MP Caroline Lucas presents the campaign's [Public Service Users Bill](#) in the House of Commons, with the support of MPs in the Labour, Lib Dem and Plaid parties.

I must declare an interest: I am a member of We Own It's [advisory group](#), a relationship that involves my being asked for advice for time to time by the campaign's energetic leader, Cat Hobbs, who then politely ignores it.

Admittedly, I am in a minority on the advisory group in regarding the Public Service Users Bill as a bad idea, and other knowledgeable commentators, such as John Tizard, have also welcomed it.

The Bill aims to force local authorities and other public bodies to:

1. Make public ownership the default option before any services, national or local, are contracted out to the private sector.
2. Require there to be a realistic and thorough in-house bid whenever a service is put out to tender.
3. Ensure there is full consideration of public opinion before any service is privatised or outsourced.
4. Give the public a right to recall private companies running public services poorly.
5. Require private companies running public services to be transparent about their performance and financial data (as in the public sector).
6. Make private companies running public services subject to Freedom of Information requests (as in the public sector).
7. Give social enterprises and mutuals, as well as public sector organisations, priority in tendering processes.

As the author of a critique of public services privatisation worldwide published more than 20 years ago (*In the Public Interest? Privatisation and Public Sector Reform*, Zed Books, 1993), what could I possibly object to in that list?

Well, for what it is worth -- and We Own It decided it was worth nothing! -- here is my view on each of those seven points:

1. Just when the case for privatisation and outsourcing has never been so weak, the idea that public ownership needs an administrative advantage is exactly the wrong message, and anyway this provision could and would be gamed so that democracy would be weakened not strengthened.

2. It beggars belief that Lucas is arguing that her bill would bring more democracy when this provision would be yet another central government imposition on the will of local authorities to exercise their judgement about what is best for their citizens.
3. What does that mean? Don't we already have enough examples of governments and public agencies staging phoney consultation exercises to justify their predetermined plans? This would bring more of the same -- at additional public expense.
4. Be careful what you wish for! There is no way such a provision could become law without it also applying to public providers, giving the very corporations this bill is intended to disempower yet another route to growing their market.
5. Great idea!
6. Ditto -- and about time too!
7. See my point 1, and add that Circle Health styles itself a mutual, the Coop Bank behaved appallingly when it was one, and the definition of what constitutes a 'social enterprise' is far from settled.

Clearly this bill is not an attempt to change the law, but is intended to raise the issues at a time of growing public concern. That's welcome -- except that the message it sends is so wrong for the moment!

The experience of privatisation and outsourcing have undermined both the case for them and their popularity. Now is the time to show how democratic governance and staff involvement can produce high quality and better productivity, and that they need no special favours to do it.

The alternative to the profiteering privatisers is democratic services of high quality that use public resources responsibly and efficiently. There is a growing understanding of how that can be done, and we need to share and grow that knowledge. That in turn will strengthen the political case for the resources they need to do their jobs properly.

We certainly need to get rid of the unfair advantages enjoyed by the privatisers -- see points five and six above, for a start -- but let's not undermine democracy in a different way instead with more diktats from central government.

In short, this bill is an administrative solution to a political challenge. Obviously it won't succeed, but more to the point it doesn't deserve to.

- *Brendan Martin is founder and managing director of Public World.*

## Think big, act small: Roberto Unger's vision and piecemeal change

**Brendan Martin, 15 November 2013**

Roberto Mangabeira Unger is in London just now and this morning kicked off the [Institute for Government](#)'s series of 'big thinkers' seminars in a chalk-and-cheese encounter with the Economist's Philip Coggan.

A Harvard professor and former member of the second Lula administration in his native Brazil, Unger certainly fits the 'big thinker' bill. Yet I came away more convinced than when I arrived that while big transformative thinking undoubtedly has its inspirational place, to realise such a vision we need to focus more on the small and routine.

The sweep of Unger's vision of 'empowered high energy democracy' is certainly impressive, and his critique of the flawed democratic arrangements that prevail to one degree or another everywhere is pretty well indisputable.

To fix the flaws and to give a "structural dimension to democracy", five interdependent sets of changes are required, he argued (according to my note):

- democracy must be both institutionalised and mobilised, rather than one or the other;
- the pace of politics must quicken, so that mistakes are made and corrected sooner;
- federalism and devolution must enable local experiments in nationally scalable initiatives;
- the state must "rescue" the excluded; and
- representative democracy must be enhanced with more participatory and direct democracy, while protecting individual rights.

But that's not all. The structural dimension of democratic change requires governmental support for innovation through:

- enabling "vanguardism outside the vanguard", to redesign rather than regulate or substitute for the market;
- finance must be a "good servant rather than a poor master" of the economy; and
- rather than privatisation being the only alternative to the "bureaucratised low quality public services" produced by "administrative Fordism", "we need to engage civil society and not-for-profits in experimental delivery of public services".

Discussant Coggan challenged Unger on a range of practicalities, which clustered around the implicit point that the central source of frustrated ambition for democracy is precisely the reason it is "the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time", as Winston Churchill put it: that different people have different interests and world views and want different things.

Coggan's probing exposed a core flaw in Unger's vision, expressed by Unger himself when he noted that "structural change takes place piecemeal, step by step, but cumulatively".

The trouble is that piecemeal changes do not necessarily combine to produce the ideal of Unger's imagination. Indeed, as he acknowledged, isolated from each other the reforms he advocates can have perverse unintended consequences.

The potential is illustrated by public service outsourcing. Whereas Unger's idea of public service innovation through social enterprises is borne out by experience on a small scale, the realities of relative power relationships (often, as in Britain, combined with political intent) lead to yet more takeover by the privatisation corporates.

That is no reason to retreat -- as many on left and right do -- into the dichotomy Unger rightly rejects, in which "administrative Taylorism" is seen as the only alternative to the privatised state, and vice versa.

But it does suggest that we need to improve the benefit/risk ratio in public service and democratic reform by focusing on relationships within as well between governmental institutions and public, private and civil society organisations.

Unger's response to my question around that point surprised me. He said that, while he agreed about the need to change relationships within public sector organisations, we don't yet know how to combine experimentation with administrative accountability.

But is that true? If the most innovative firms have found ways to combine accountability to principals with innovation by agents, surely governmental institutions and public service providers can do the same?

Which brings me back to the small and routine. Unger's vision is brilliant and inspiring, and he is obviously right about the need to combine top-down with bottom-up democratic change. But without as much focus on everyday relationships within institutions and organisations as between them it is hard to see how the social base to nurture and protect the kind of transformation he has in mind could be created and sustained.

- *Brendan Martin is managing director of Public World and author of "In the Public Interest? Privatisation and Public Sector Reform", Zed Books, 1994.*

## Could we have a sane railway system, please?

**Brendan Martin, 25 September 2013**

What on earth must first time foreign visitors to Britain make of the railway shambles greeting them at London's Gatwick Airport?

I live in London and have flown in and out of all London's airports far too many times, but the Gatwick chaos still got the better of me last Sunday.

It was bad enough that EasyJet were offering Gatwick Express tickets for sale during the flight, although we knew (and told them) that the service wasn't running, because of engineering work. Then, just past immigration, we came upon a desk offering rail tickets for sale. So we could avoid queues at the train station itself by buying them while waiting for our baggage to arrive.

But, as ever with Britain's privatised and fragmented railway, the simple business of getting from the airport to the city turned out to be anything but.

Although we specifically asked for tickets valid on any train, and were told that's what we had been sold, when we got to the train platform and studied the small print we found they said "FCC only". Did that mean they were valid only on slow First Capital Connect trains, even though the receipt for our payment for the tickets was issued by Southern Trains?

The next train was a fast Southern Trains service, so we were determined to take it. But an inspector on the platform told us we would have to buy new tickets, which would mean missing the train. So we asked a second inspector, who said that, because of the engineering works, all operators were accepting each other's tickets.

But half an hour later, when we arrived at London Bridge, a third inspector accosted us. He represented Southern Trains -- the very company that issued the receipt for our ticket payment -- but said the tickets only entitled us to travel on the trains of its rival!

Madness, and by this time we'd had enough of trying to negotiate our way through a chaotic system. So we defied the staff at the gate to stop us marching through. They didn't.

That was the fun part, but what would first-time visitors make of it all? What a way to greet visitors to our capital!

Fragmentation of Britain's railway has caused far more problems than the humiliating hassle we faced last Sunday, but somehow the episode summed up the sheer waste of human resources it has caused.

Instead of well-trained and properly informed staff helping travellers through an intermodal system and dealing with real fare dodgers, we have misselling of tickets, badly informed and competing staff, and intimidation of honest passengers just trying to get home!

These levels of organisational incompetence and bureaucratic bullying reveal Britain's railways as the bastard of the worst caricatures of public and private sector practice, when what we need is the best of both.



If the mayor of London really wants to welcome visitors to our great city, isn't it time he did something to sort this out? If not, can we at least have confidence that a future Labour mayor would do so?

So here's a question for the only person so far to declare as prospective Labour candidate for the next mayoral election, who happens to be the leading railway commentator, Christian Wolmar: could we have a sane railway system, please?

Then railway staff can get back to serving the public instead of annoying us, and the public can start treating them with the respect they would deserve.

## Would closing ticket offices improve London Underground?

**Brendan Martin, 19 August 2013**

A document said to have been leaked from Transport for London (TfL) indicates that every single ticket office in London Underground's 268 stations is to be closed.

TfL, the public body responsible for public transport in the English capital, has not confirmed the story, which was broken by the transport union TSSA.

But TfL hasn't denied it either, leaving [TSSA convinced of a real threat to the jobs of up to 2,000 staff and the safety of passengers](#).

I must admit that my first reaction to the idea of closing the ticket offices was "Why not?" After all, with nearly everyone now using the prepaid electronic Oyster cards, which can be topped up at machines, only three per cent of all London Underground journeys begins with a visit to a ticket office.

So wouldn't it be better to get the ticket office staff out from behind their sealed-off windows and in among the travellers, helping them with directions and whatever else?

The union points out that the ticket machines often break down, and that most of the work done by ticket office staff involves sorting out mistakes made by the electronic system. The closure plan also involves getting rid of most station supervisors, who have a safety-critical role.

These are good points, but surely the human touch could be provided more effectively by staff that are not hidden away behind windows, giving passengers the impression at quiet stations that they are twiddling their thumbs between enquiries while there are no staff on platforms?

On the face of it, reorganising the work of some station staff could produce more interesting and varied jobs, better and more user-friendly service, and perhaps financial savings that could reduce future fare increases.

Unfortunately, it's not as simple as that. In fact, an innovation that could produce wins all round if it was properly planned in consultation with service staff and users looks as though it could make services and industrial relations worse.

That is because there is no sign that London Underground does intend to redeploy the ticket office staff, and it certainly has yet to discuss the plan to get rid of their existing jobs with them or their union.

In a statement, London Underground managing director Mike Brown said:

"We are investing in London Underground to support jobs and growth in London and across the UK. We are committed to running more trains and that all Tube stations will continue to be staffed in future, with staff visible and available to help our customers.

"Learning lessons from the successful London 2012 Games, we are looking at how we can improve the service to our customers, while delivering the best possible value for fare and taxpayers money."

He added: "Any changes we propose to the way we staff our services in future will be discussed with our staff first."



Unless the leaked document is proved to be inauthentic that last point looks a little disingenuous, but if it is sincere then surely there is an opportunity here for a good outcome.

Last week TSSA launched a [Better London Transport](#) campaign, declaring “support for changes that lead to service improvements for passengers” as well as “staff rights, terms and conditions”.

In principle, therefore, the union supports the idea of replacing redundant jobs with others that improve services. But it fears that the ticket office plan won't have that effect and that even if some staff are offered other jobs they will have worse terms and conditions.

According to TSSA: "The company recently launched their 'Every Journey Matters' rhetoric trying to tell us this is genuine staff engagement on how London Underground will look and be shaped in the future. ... But it looks like the real decisions have already been taken in secret."

Isn't it time for Mike Brown and his colleagues to sit down with TSSA general secretary Manuel Cortes and his team to work out how best to achieve what both say they want, in consultation with staff as well as passenger representatives?

That way they could demonstrate an exemplary approach to public service improvement, whereas the alternative could be a damaging dispute that serves no-one's interests.

- *For more on Public World's work on public transport, please visit the [Quality Public Transport](#) website.*

## Social enterprise working for democracy and humanitarian relief

**Bradley Cleveland, 13 March 2013**

How do social movements, social enterprise and social media combine to strengthen democracy and save lives? The answer has been powerfully demonstrated in Kenya, where a group of volunteer software developers and programmers created the Nairobi-based social enterprise [Ushahidi](#) to map the reports of violence following the contested presidential election of 2007.

Having proved its international value following the Haiti earthquake in 2010, where its network, software and platform aided the relief effort, Ushahidi has gone on to create the Libya Crisis Map, which was used to coordinate humanitarian relief during the revolt against Moamer Kadhafi. The platform has since been deployed to monitor elections in Bulgaria and human rights in Nepal, to document environmental degradation in Brazil, and mining disasters in the Philippines, violence in Congo and human rights in India.

Back in Kenya, Ushahidi's staff and volunteers were on duty again in this year's election, of which Uhuru Kenyatta was declared the winner last week. Defeated candidate Raila Odinga filed an election challenge with the Kenya Supreme Court due to election irregularities that raise questions about Kenyatta's razor-thin margin. (According to the Independent Elections and Boundaries Commission, Kenyatta received 50.07% of the 12 million votes cast; the 8,000 vote margin allows Kenyatta to avoid a runoff.)

Last time, over half a million people were displaced and 1,200 people were killed in post-election violence that swept the country. This time, however, the country remains calm – so far – and that is no accident. Various civil society organizations mobilized thousands of Kenyans to monitor the election and ensure the peace. Prominent among these groups is Ushahidi.

After the 2007 election, when the Kenya government was downplaying the post-election violence, the Ushahidi "crisis mappers" took reports submitted from citizen journalists via SMS messages, Twitter and the web to map incidents of violence and efforts to keep the peace. Since then, Ushahidi founders have incorporated as a social enterprise to develop the free, open-source platform and enhance its features.

It went international and proved invaluable following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. While buildings and infrastructure collapsed, a mobile phone tower in Port au Prince remained functional amidst the rubble. Ushahidi aggregated the SMS and tweets coming out of Haiti, and organized members of the island's diaspora to translate these messages, so that volunteers in Boston could map the situation on the ground in near real-time. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and humanitarian organizations used the resulting map to coordinate their relief because it provided reliable, comprehensive and up-to-date situational assessments.

Ushahidi is both a community of "crisis mappers" and a web platform that creates online maps based on real-time reports from "the crowd". Its open-source tools now include Swift River, which filters text messages, Twitter feeds, and other social media to extract useful information from these crowd-sourced reports, and the web platform that visualizes data on an interactive, online map. Even with the most sophisticated online tools, "crisis mapping," defined as leveraging mobile platforms, geospatial technologies, and visual analytics to power rapid crisis response by the [International Network of Crisis Mappers](#) is a laborious, time-intensive process.

In the run-up to this year's Kenyan election, Ushahidi established partnerships with the [Election Observers Group](#) to bring the new high tech reporting and alert tools to the group that would train

and deploy 2,000 election monitors, and [PeaceNet](#), the coalition of civic groups working for peace on the grassroots level.

Ushahidi launched the website [Uchaguzi](#) last month, stating the goal of the project was “to contribute to stability in Kenya by increasing transparency and accountability through active citizen participation in the electoral cycles. . . By amplifying the voices of ordinary citizens, Uchaguzi allows citizens to continue to play a positive role in elections before and after voting.”

During and immediately after Kenya’s vote, citizen journalists submitted tweets and text messages via a “short code”, a free mobile phone number. While the Ushahidi platform filtered incoming messages, volunteers at iHub, Nairobi’s high tech incubator facility, then reviewed the reports. The reports then moved to a global network of 220 “crisis mappers”.

Using Skype “chat” to coordinate their work, these international volunteers worked round the clock to find the geographic coordinates of the incident mentioned in the report, such as a polling station in Mombasa failing to open. Before an incident report would go public on the Uchaguzi map, people on the ground in Kenya would verify the accuracy of the report. If necessary, the report would be forwarded to the appropriate authority – election commission or the police – for action.

Last Saturday, 9 March, after the election commission declared Kenyatta the winner, Daudi Were, who managed the Uchaguzi project, called an end to the election “deployment” of crisis mappers. Uchaguzi received over 5,000 text messages, and incorporating over 3,800 of those reports in its interactive map.

Thanks in part to the work of Ushahidi and the global network of crisis mappers, Were was able to report: “So far Kenya is largely peaceful, and we anticipate that it will remain that way.”

- Bradley Cleveland, a former union organiser, has recently completed a Masters at UCLA and is working with Public World to develop a project to explore how informal economy waste pickers could improve their livelihoods by strengthening disaster risk reduction in developing country cities.

## London Underground at 150: the best and worst of public-private partnerships

**Brendan Martin, 10 January 2013**

One hundred and fifty years ago today the world's first underground railway opened to its first paying passengers when the London Metropolitan carried no fewer than 30,000 people between Paddington and Kings Cross.

"The 120 trains in both directions that day suffered no serious breakdowns and the only major delays were caused by the crush of people trying to get on the trains," writes Christian Wolmar, in a new edition of his highly enjoyable history, *The Subterranean Railway*.

It is tempting to suggest that little has changed since (despite the Londoner's default attitude of grumbling about the Tube!). There are still 'no serious breakdowns' on most days, but the system remains uncomfortably congested at peak times.

But much has changed, of course, and London Underground's history as traced in Wolmar's fascinating account can be read as a microcosm of the evolution of the meanings and political approaches to 'public service' through those 150 years.

The brainchild of the visionary Charles Pearson, who was the City of London Corporation's in-house solicitor from 1839 to 1962, today's London Underground links more than 400 kilometres of track represented schematically in the iconic map designed by Harry Beck in the 1930s.

Beck was then employed by the Underground as a draughtsman, and both his and Pearson's contributions underline a truth that is often lost these days -- that the public sector at its best is full of imagination, innovation and creativity.

Sadly, Pearson died a few months before that first trip 150 years ago, but at least knew by then that it would happen. Some of his other ideas -- such as recommending that consumer cooperatives rather than private companies should own energy infrastructure -- are as relevant today as they were then.

The ethos he displayed has resonance too. That first Metropolitan line was run through what would now be called a public-private partnership (PPP), but when the company offered Pearson a reward, his response, Wolmar records, was:

"I am the servant of the [public] Corporation; they are my masters and are entitled to all my time and service. If you have any return to make, you must make it to them."

How Pearson must have turned in his grave as the Underground's latest PPP ended in a fiasco that cost some £1.5 billion - around \$2.5 billion -- more than the same investments would have cost through conventional public borrowing.

Summing up that experience in a revised final chapter of his book, Wolmar notes that the PPP to upgrade the lines did mobilise a great deal of much needed investment before being scrapped only a quarter of the way through 30-year contracts, but he adds:

"The concept had been pushed through on the basis of extremely dubious evidence that suggested that the PPP would be cheaper than an entirely public-sector option, but in the event proved precisely the opposite.

“It is no exaggeration to say that billions of pounds were wasted in pursuing this ideological concept when the money could have been invested in simpler and more cost-effective ways of improving the Underground.”

- *For more of Public World's work on public transport, please visit the [Quality Public Transport](#) website.*
- *The Subterranean Railway: How the London Underground was built and how it changed the city forever, Christian Wolmar, Atlantic Books (London), 2012 (Revised and Updated Edition).*

## Britain's school reforms are leaving vulnerable children in the shadows

Roger Kline, 5 December 2012

I spoke last week at a national conference for education welfare officers and social workers in education. I was billed to speak about the individual duty of care of these professional groups, but I came away deeply concerned about something else: the impact of ongoing changes to schools regulation on society's duty of care of children.

Many conference participants reported that a scandal is already underway -- and it flows directly from British Government policy. I was told about children who are unlawfully permanently excluded from school by heads (especially academy heads) whose education welfare officers are fearful of raising concerns in case they lose their jobs or the local authority that employs them loses the education welfare service contract with that school.

I was told about academy school heads who tell families that if they don't opt for home education, their child will be excluded. I heard stories of such heads instructing an employee to advise a course of action that is both illegal and likely to be detrimental to the child's welfare. I learned of heads who used the "B" code beside a name on the school register, which signifies the child is educated elsewhere, but who had no idea if they are actually being educated elsewhere.

The [Office of the Childrens Commissioner is already investigating](#) why children with special educational needs and children with a recognisable visible disability remain more likely than others to be excluded. Professionals at the conference seemed convinced it will get worse.

Jacque Newvell of the National Association of Social Workers in Education told the conference that there is now real confusion about who is accountable for what in respect of children's rights to be educated and safeguarded. While local authorities still have the statutory duty to ensure children are actually educated, the funding for carrying out those duties has largely transferred to academies, which are outside local government control.

Academy schools have private sponsors and there are now more than ten times as many of them as when the current government took office in 2010. (See this [Guardian datablog](#) and *Public World's 2006 report* for more background.) Even before that wave got fully under way [Public Concern at Work was reporting](#) a sharp increase in the number of whistle-blowing calls from schools.

I asked my conference audience if they believed that in their own local area there were significant numbers of children who were not on school registers and who were not being educated. A quarter of the hands shot up.

One of the reasons it is likely to get worse is that the main statutory guidance on children's safeguarding is currently being revised, as part of the government's 'war on red tape'. A growing number of experts and child abuse survivors are demanding the changes be withdrawn. The draft revised guidance hardly mentions education, ignores health visitors altogether, and places even more pressure on social workers, whose numbers are being cut at a time of rising demand.

There is, of course, no merit in regulation for its own sake. But there are now real concerns that one of the unforeseen consequences of the government's reforms of schools and public regulation will be to push the welfare of some of our most vulnerable children into the shadows.



The conference delegates were concerned that many children will carry a lifetime burden as a result, because denial of education has that effect. By the time the consequences are fully visible Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove will have used his ideological stewardship of the country's schools as a springboard to wherever his career might take him.