

## Uniting users and staff in public service improvement

From housing to employment advice, providers of public services are trying to improve the quality of public services, increase user satisfaction and raise staff morale – whilst at the same time increasing the efficiency and productivity of service delivery. Public service improvement is particularly challenging given the landscape of sometimes difficult relationships in some areas between staff and users and the dissatisfactory impact of national targets. This can be especially demanding in the context of the rising expectations of users and the limited resources of providers.

Yet in working towards service excellence, reform efforts fail to capitalise on the one resource most readily available: the expertise of users and staff on the frontline. Often, staff and user interests are seen as pulling in contrary directions. Reformers consult either service users or frontline staff, but rarely both in a joined-up fashion.

In practice, it is staff and service users together who can provide the clearest perspective on how the service operates in the local area. Improving communication and building relationships of trust on the frontline is the key to empowering staff, engaging users, and ensuring that quality services are delivered cost-effectively. If public services are to improve, policy-makers and service managers in national and local public service organisations need to create opportunities for users and staff to come together and shape service delivery collaboratively.

**I think there's a lot of common concerns between the users and our organisation, that's been apparent from this morning, because it's the common vein that has run through the whole day, that our frustrations and concerns are also the tenants'**

(Housing Officer).



**If it wasn't for tenants then we wouldn't have a job. So, we are here to help tenants and the public so we need to all communicate with each other and that we know what you're not happy about and what we can do to help.**

(Housing Officer)



UNISON's Positively Public campaign celebrates the contribution public service workers can make to improving public services. UNISON has a clear and strong vision for delivering quality public services based on identifying and promoting examples of excellence.

For more information or to join UNISON call 0845 355 0845 or visit the website at [www.unison.org.uk](http://www.unison.org.uk). Textphone 0800 0967 968



Making all consumers matter

The National Consumer Council makes a practical difference to the lives of consumers around the UK, using its insight into consumer needs to advocate change. We work with public service providers, businesses and regulators. We conduct rigorous research and policy analysis to investigate key consumer issues, and use this to influence organisations and people that make change happen.

## Next steps

The NCC and UNISON are committed to working with public service providers to use *Shared Solutions* as widely as possible to improve services, benefit from staff and user expertise and to increase staff moral and customer satisfaction. The workshop is the beginning of an ongoing process to explore how dialogue between frontline stakeholders can improve local services. If you are involved in the delivery of public services that might benefit from *Shared Solutions*, contact us at:

[SharedSolutions@ncc.org.uk](mailto:SharedSolutions@ncc.org.uk)

**By taking these steps you can create opportunities for those who know most about frontline implementation – users and frontline staff – to come together to build respect, share expertise, negotiate change and agree shared priorities. You can call in the experts to improve public services.**



## Shared Solutions

UNISON and the National Consumer Council working together to unite users and staff in public service employment



# A new approach called Shared Solutions

## Impacts

By bringing users and frontline staff together using *Shared Solutions*, it is possible to:

- **Build respect:** *Shared Solutions* allows users and staff to overcome the hostility and frustration which marks their day-to-day encounters and develop more personal relationships based on understanding, trust and respect.
- **Share expertise:** Users and staff know most about what is happening in their local area and what service priorities should be. *Shared Solutions* provides a forum in which they can share their local expertise and experience.
- **Negotiate change:** Rather than consulting users and staff on their 'wish lists' for their public services, *Shared Solutions* facilitates dialogue and negotiation between both groups and helps to resolve differences in expectations and experiences.
- **Identify shared priorities:** With national targets often being insensitive to local needs, *Shared Solutions* is a dynamic technique to identify shared priorities for improvement that are tangible, realistic and of high priority to both groups. This ensures truly user responsive services that frontline staff are enthusiastic about delivering.

**We can't do without the tenants, the tenants can't do without us.**

(Housing Officer)

## Get talking

Without a doubt, improving public services is about positive outcomes that improve people's quality of life. And people who use public services are rarely passive recipients. They have valuable expertise, such as knowledge of 'what it is like to live round here'. Public service users are often very passionate and want the opportunity to influence their public services, get their voices heard, in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them, and in ways that will make a real difference to services. Users expect public services to work with them, rather than just for them – a real partnership.

But improving public services is also about valuing frontline staff, recognising their input to service improvement and user-responsiveness and allowing them to adapt to the people they are serving. After all, it is short-sighted to assume that what is in the interests of staff runs counter to the interests of users. In the best public services, they are aligned. No-one goes into public services to do a bad job. Frontline staff want to be proud of the services they deliver. It is time to value what they have to offer.

Only by harnessing both user and staff knowledge, experience and preferences can we achieve service excellence. Therefore, facilitating dialogue and negotiation between users and frontline staff of public services is the single most crucial step in identifying local needs and developing appropriate delivery. Good communication and trust make the difference between a responsive, personalised and satisfying service experience and a frustrated, disheartened end-user.

**Wardens on every estate to curb anti-social behaviour just by being there and their presence, letting people know what's going on and keeping them involved with the community.**

(Tenants/Housing Officers – combined)

It is striking that effective mechanisms through which users and frontline staff can work together to identify local priorities, and resolve differences in expectations and experiences are absent. The lack of such effective mechanisms too often means that interactions on the frontlines are cycles of mistrust and tension. Staff and users take on an 'us versus them' mentality because of the way that services are delivered – not because they have different ideas about what makes a good service. Rather than concentrating resources on isolated consultation exercises that separate staff from users, spending could be more effectively deployed in the development of dynamic techniques to facilitate dialogue and negotiate jointly agreed outcomes.

## Call in the experts: frontline staff and users

The National Consumer Council (NCC), UNISON and Catalyst hosted an all-day workshop to explore whether *Shared Solutions* can give staff and users an opportunity to engage in dialogue, reach consensus and agree principles for improving their services.

Social housing tenants and housing officers from Newcastle-Upon-Tyne participated in the workshop. As a public service, social housing is one of the pioneer services to implement the partnership and choice arrangements that all public services are now adopting. This makes social housing a valuable public service sector for *Shared Solutions*.

The lessons learned from bringing social housing tenants and housing officers together to understand how such workshops can improve other public services. The process of dialogue and negotiation turned *Shared Solutions* into a diagnostic tool to identify problems, a trigger to break down barriers and promote mutual understanding, trust and respect, and a vehicle to reach consensus on shared priorities for improving local services. This paper outlines how *Shared Solutions* can be used across public services to achieve service excellence.

**It's stupid to say that there are national targets, because every area and every city and every town and every village is all different, so why put them in the same category 'cos they're all in different situations.**

(Tenant)

**I think something we suffer is the abuse, that has to be really recognised, the abuse.**

(Housing Officer)

## Setting up the workshop

The full day workshop brought together fifteen tenants and ten housing officers in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It was recruited and facilitated by Opinion Leader Research.

Tenant participants were selected to reflect the profile of social housing tenants nationally, by gender, social class and ethnicity. They were paid a small incentive to cover their expenses for the day.

The housing officers volunteered to take part in the workshop, and were given permission by their organisation, *Your Homes Newcastle*, to attend the workshop during working hours.

**As far as I can see, if you've been a good tenant, looked after your property, paid your rent and you've been a tenant for years, you're penalised.**

(Housing Officer)

## Making an impact

Through a range of group exercises, tenants and housing officers worked separately and together to explore how the service was operating and how it could be improved. This process resulted in:

- **Building respect:** *Shared Solutions* exposed the difficult relationship between tenants and housing officers, based on normalised patterns of tension and suspicion. It also revealed the power of bringing users and frontline staff together to overcome experiences of abuse and mutual lack of respect. Through sharing perspectives it was possible to recognise common views and establish mutual credibility. Both tenants and officers reported feeling disconnected from decision-making, and frustrated by organisational complexity following housing stock transfer to an arms-length management organisation (ALMO).

**It's becoming adversarial, it's becoming them and us.**

(Housing officer)

- **Sharing expertise:** Housing officers and tenants knew what worked locally in terms of service delivery. They were aware of the aspects of terminology or service delivery that are perceived to be arbitrary or confusing. Common problems identified by tenants and officers focused on anti-social behaviour, perceived abuse of the priority system for housing allocations and a sense that people who 'play by the rules' don't get rewarded. Poor quality and inconsistent repairs were also a problem.

Going beyond the usual consultation exercises, surveys and public meetings, which give half the picture at best, *Shared Solutions* allowed tenants and housing officers to identify local priorities for improvement, and resolve differences in expectations and experiences. Hugely dynamic and collaborative, *Shared Solutions* gave users and staff an opportunity they had never before: they were able to explain their motivations and respond to each other in a neutral environment.

**They look down at you, they think that they are better than you.**

(Tenant)

- **Identifying shared priorities:** Existing national targets such as the government's Decent Homes standard were seen by tenants as rather basic and by officers as highly unrealistic. Both sets of participants agreed that national targets were too insensitive to local needs to be an effective basis for improving services. Solutions for a better service emerged at the end of the day. Housing officers and tenants agreed shared priorities and jointly shaped the agenda of tangible local service improvement. Housing officers were surprised to find out that tenants placed a higher priority on knowing when repairs were done as opposed to how quickly repairs were carried out.

## A new route to service excellence

The government has put four principles at the heart of its public service reform programme: accountability, diversity, flexibility and choice. These principles will only be meaningful for users if they feel engaged and supported on the frontlines.

*Shared Solutions* is a tool to engage users and frontline staff in service improvement and give both parties a sense of ownership. It can be used in any public service where there is an identifiable user group with an interest in improving the service. *Shared Solutions* is particularly useful in services which are characterised by impersonal or even hostile relationships between staff and users or where frontline staff are perceived as gatekeepers by a consumer group who is socially marginalised and characterised by low-income. Here users and staff are likely to operate under different sets of norms, and rarely if ever, are placed in a setting where they can share their expectations and experiences, explain their motivations and agree mutually beneficial priorities for service improvement.

In the workshop, tenants and housing officers moved from mutual suspicion and open hostility to collective discussion and agreed on the priorities for local service provision. It was the beginning of a process of improving communication channels between the arms-length management organisation, the city council and service users. *Shared Solutions* was both a diagnostic tool – to identify the main causes of conflict and frustration and negotiate effective means to resolve them – and a dynamic process for building trust and communication between participants, allowing users and frontline staff to explain their perspective and listen to others.

The National Consumer Council (NCC) and UNISON developed a unique partnership with Catalyst to explore a new approach to public service improvement which challenged the assumption that users and frontline staff in public services have rival interests. The partnership between the NCC and UNISON is exceptional in that it brings together the organisation that represents consumer interests and the organisation that represents people delivering public services. The partners tested the innovative approach called *Shared Solutions* – combining user and staff expertise to determine the scope for improved service delivery through collaboration.

During a one-day workshop using *Shared Solutions*, social housing tenants and housing officers were brought together to discuss existing services, identify problems, build relationships and agree shared priorities. *Shared Solutions* showed that although users and staff initially regarded each other with mutual tension and suspicion, by the end they had identified common aspirations, diagnosed shared problems and come up with agreed suggestions for improvement.

The NCC and UNISON recommend the use of *Shared Solutions* across public services as a key element of the service improvement and user-responsiveness agenda. A uniquely dynamic innovation, *Shared Solutions* identifies tangible, shared priorities and thus helps to achieve service excellence in local communities.