

GMCVO

# Opening public services?

## The Open Public Services White Paper: GMCVO's view

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# Opening public services?

**The government's new white paper on public service reform provides more questions than answers. GMCVO's Policy and Partnerships Manager, *John Hannen*, takes a closer look at the proposals**

The much-anticipated white paper on public service reform was launched by the government on 11th July. With the Prime Minister claiming that it would loosen "the grip of state control" and put "power in people's hands" many had expected a radical document with significant proposals. This has not been the case and rather than deliver a set of reforms the white paper mainly collects together existing proposals and builds a narrative around them.

With voluntary organisations and public sector commissioners having waited six months for this white paper, many will feel a sense of confusion and perhaps even disappointment. Having had hopes and even fears built up for so long, the actual arrival of this work may feel anticlimactic; however there is a real significance in the vision outlined in the document. The government in many areas over the last year has often lacked a coherent story and philosophy to explain its actions. How does the Big Society tie in with health reforms? How do health reforms tie in with the localism proposals? How do the localism proposals tie in with the deficit reduction plan? The white paper starts to create a narrative that brings strands of work together. There is a clear vision here and links are made to the policies being delivered by a range of departments. There is a desire to have departments work in a collective framework in the future when developing service provision. It's this that is significant.

## **A structure for change**

This paper, although drowned out by the growing media scandal, sets out the purpose of Cameron's prime ministership in a way that other policy launches haven't. He wants to reshape our view of public services and how they're bought. The government has categorised services into three areas:

Individual Services: Services that are delivered to individuals including healthcare, education and much of social care. The key issues for the government here are to understand and reward user satisfaction and to target funding at those most in need – the 'Pupil Premium' in education, which sees schools receiving additional funding for teaching individuals in receipt of free school meals, is seen as an example of that.

Community Services: Services delivered through local institutions such as libraries, community centres or even through a community owned shop or pub. Here the desire is to increase direct community ownership of these institutions and support the transfer of community services along with them. The main vehicle for community ownership proposed by the government is

the 'Neighbourhood Council', which the government describes as a "reinvigorated" form of parish or town council.

Commissioned Services: Those services delivered to the population on a wider basis where choice or local ownership is not deemed to be relevant. This would include prisons, the Work Programme and welfare benefits. Here the government wishes to devolve more service provision from the centre to local authorities but more importantly wants government to act less as a provider and more as a purchaser – setting specifications for services and enforcing minimum standards but only providing services directly where no external providers exist.

From this an underlying philosophy emerges:

- Where it is possible to have a choice then people will have a choice.
- If a choice isn't available then people will have a local voice in shaping services.
- Where it isn't practicable to have a voice or where engagement isn't a priority for local people then the use of a market approach or the implementation of payment-by-results will be used to improve outcomes.

This is going to be the driver for the development of new services in the future and for how public services are regrown after the government's deficit reduction strategy has done its work. The challenges we now face are how to engage with that philosophy and what will its impact be in the areas in which we live.

### **What this means for us**

GMCVO, whilst having concerns that will no doubt be shared throughout the sector, also sees a number of clear opportunities that our members and supporters would wish to take advantage of.

Every organisation will have to decide for itself as to whether its values are compatible with the concepts of competition built into this framework. Some may decide that it is not possible for them to maintain their ethos and compete directly with the public sector or work for private sector prime contractors, whilst others may view their role as achieving what is best for their service users within the context in which they work. GMCVO sees its role as helping people make that decision and in supporting their work whatever the choices they make, but does not seek to take a position on this particular issue. We believe that the vision contained in the white paper is something boards of trustees and directors should be considering and would recommend that time is taken to understand the implications as they emerge.

Whatever decisions are made by voluntary organisations it is clear that other concerns are evident. The white paper articulates a clear vision but is much

less certain about how that vision will be developed. Even where proposals have already been made, such as the 'Community Right to Buy' outlined in the Localism Bill, there is a palpable sense of uncertainty over the detail of new rights and powers and how they might practically be implemented.

What this white paper does is create a space for public service reforms to occur. This space will inevitably be filled but there is no sense that the government itself has a masterplan for how to do this. There is an opportunity here and a threat. GMCVO sees a chance for the voluntary sector to work with our local authorities and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to create a more local vision of public service reform that would deliver improved services and better outcomes for local people – a vision that may see the concerns many have with naked market competition eased, as we work together to identify more co-operative models of delivery.

For this to happen, a number of conditions will need to be met. Both voluntary organisations and our public sector partners need to have the will to work in a co-operative manner and to accept change in service delivery. We also need to understand our own and our partners limits.

Whilst many voluntary organisations may be frustrated by the processes and bureaucracy within the public sector, many of these processes are born from a desire to ensure standards are met and that the public can have confidence in local services. Many voluntary sector organisations have made no small progress in demonstrating their ability, but across the sector we often lack the means to demonstrate our impact. This demonstration of impact will be key to building local trust in voluntary sector delivery and in building our role.

Ultimately though there is a significant need for resources. In order to engage in greater partnership working, in the strategic development of new provision, in articulating the needs of those we work with and in demonstrating the impact of our work, we in the voluntary sector will need to devote time, energy and money to this process of engagement and not just in delivering the work we undertake. This comes at a time when direct delivery is being prioritised and capacity building initiatives and the support for strategic engagement are in decline.

This is where GMCVO's chief concern lies. Whether we agree with the philosophy or not, the government intends to change the landscape of public service provision. A space has been created that we can inhabit but without the means to do so we may end up as spectators as the public sector and possibly some of the larger private sector providers create the structures that will shape delivery.

## **Next steps**

In summary, GMCVO believes that individual organisations each have to take a view on whether direct engagement in public service reforms are compatible with their own values. However GMCVO does believe that there is a need for

the voluntary sector in Greater Manchester to engage positively with local government partners in exploring new, co-operative ways of delivering services and to build a local model for public service reform. We believe the priority in all these discussions is how best we further the wellbeing of the citizens of Greater Manchester and the communities they form.

The government is now opening a 'listening period' on the white paper which will end in September. During this time GMCVO will be working to develop a response to government over its proposals and it is important that this is guided by the views of local organisations. We will be creating opportunities for our members and colleagues to feed into our response but would also be interested in your views at any stage.

If you wish to discuss the issues raised by these proposals, have views on their impact on the local voluntary sector or are considering making a direct response to government yourself, then please contact GMCVO's Policy and Partnerships Manager, John Hannen at: [john.hannen@gmcvo.org.uk](mailto:john.hannen@gmcvo.org.uk) or on 0161 277 1013.

The *Open Public Services White Paper* can be downloaded from:  
[www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/open-public-services-white-paper.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/open-public-services-white-paper.pdf)