

Public Services

Six Pillars of a Better Future

Public services can be made more innovative, personalised and accountable if we adopt a clear model for their reform. The pandemic showed us that innovation can be implemented rapidly when frontline staff are given more freedom to operate. Yet over the past decade, policymaking around public services has been ad hoc and overcentralised at a time of deep funding cuts and rising demand. A new model for public-services reform is needed to harness the opportunities created by technological innovation and new modes of citizen engagement to deliver self-improving public services.



Funding Pressure, Centralisation and Strategic Drift

From health and education to employment services, policing and the criminal-justice system, public services have faced deep budget cuts since 2010. Meanwhile, the demands on many services have grown. Funding pressures have eroded the spare capacity that enabled consumer choice and competition – the guiding principles of public-services reform in the 2000s.

But in the face of these challenges, debate about a coherent, overarching approach to reforming public services has largely stopped. Some areas, like education and health policy, are being driven by an increasingly centralising agenda, while others, such as policing, are facing the reverse problem of strategic drift.

Technological innovation has leapt ahead, offering new opportunities for personalisation and service-user empowerment that were unimaginable even a decade ago.

A New Model for Public Services

While policy innovation has stagnated, technological innovation has leapt ahead, offering new opportunities for personalisation and service-user empowerment that were unimaginable even a decade ago.

At the same time, evidence from around the world has shown that participatory levers to involve citizens in the shaping of public services are powerful tools.

There is a huge opportunity to capitalise on these trends, and to replace the model of centralised control and services provided to people with a new approach: one that releases innovation and empowers citizens to take an active role in shaping those services while strengthening accountability.

A vision of public-services reform based on personalisation and democratisation will look and feel very different.

A vision of public-services reform based on personalisation and democratisation will look and feel very different:

Power: Accountability for how public money is spent shapes how public services are designed and delivered. Whitehall leans too heavily on accountability to centrally determined targets and metrics, which hampers innovation and improvement. Instead, technological developments – from [personal-care pathways](#) in health to [digital learner IDs](#) in education – now offer powerful opportunities for patients and parents to hold service providers directly to account. This can empower choice and competition, strengthen accountability and achieve better services at a lower cost.

Personalisation: In education, adaptive-learning platforms and digital-assessment tools can personalise learning and help teachers support students to maximise progress. Meanwhile in health care, personalised medicine holds out the opportunity to move away from one-size-fits-all treatments and towards tailored interventions that are far more effective.

Partnership: In health care, technologies that capture data on our diet, exercise and mental stress create the potential for seamless health management between patient and care professional. In education, parents must have their voices heard rather than edged out in an increasingly industrial academy system that risks stifling its own innovative

promise. At the system level, participatory methods have been shown to be powerful tools in co-designing public services and winning citizens' consent for innovation-enhancing steps like health-data sharing.

Prevention: Post-war public services were primarily conceived to respond to an immediate need or problem rather than focus on root causes. This is no longer sustainable or desirable. The NHS is still predominantly a service for the treatment of illness, but emerging technologies offer more opportunities to prevent ill health than ever before, allowing health services to move away from the sickness model.

An ever-more centralised state cannot measure up to the challenges we face. Moving from adequate to great public services will require not only investment but also a radical shift in the role of citizens, from passive consumers to active participants in the services they rely upon.

Further Reading

[A New Deal on Autonomy and Accountability in Health and Care](#)

[Tech-Inclusive Education: A World-Class System for Every Child](#)