

Public services as a platform for giving



Philip Colligan is the executive director of the public service lab at NESTA, the UK's foremost independent expert on how innovation can solve the country's most pressing social and economic challenges. Philip joined NESTA in May 2010, prior to which he worked for the London Borough of Camden and the Home Office. For more information about the Lab's work go to:

www.nesta.org.uk

Given the current fiscal context, it's entirely understandable that debates about the future of public services are dominated by how to make fewer financial resources go further – how to get more with less. But a different – and more radical – approach to the financial crisis starts somewhere else. Rather than focusing on what can be done with less money, should we be asking how public services can harness the untapped capabilities and assets that exist in all communities?

It's well known that our public services faced unprecedented challenges even before the immediate financial crisis. Time and again we have seen the limitations of our approach to meeting social needs in the face of rising and more complex demands. Take just one example, if we continue to think about the needs of older people in the same way then the net deficit will reach 100% by 2050.¹

Along with all of the demographic, social and technological changes, there is a problem at the heart of how we think about public services that we need to confront. For all the progress that's been made throughout the past 60 years we have held onto an essentially passive view of the recipients of those services. We do things "to" people. They "consume" the services provided, even if we do offer more choice and personalization. Too often, this fails to address the causes of demand, creating a culture of dependency, disempowering people and reinforcing their reliance on services. Even more, it neglects the skills, capabilities, time and other resources that exist within the people who receive those services, in their families and communities.

Some of the most exciting public and social innovations are turning the old paradigm on its head and instead valuing citizens and communities as assets. They start from the simple premise that everyone – whatever their needs – has something to offer, and increasingly they are establishing public services as platforms for giving.

The emergence of platforms for reciprocal exchange

Over the past three years, NESTA has been working with a wide network of partners to develop imaginative solutions to big social challenges. We've consistently found that the most powerful answers emerge when we harness the potential of users, communities, frontline workers and collaborative technologies. It's an approach we call people-powered public services.

One strong theme across our work, whether inside or outside formal public service systems, has been the emergence of new platforms for reciprocal exchange – ways for people (and

increasingly organisations) to give their resources, assets, skills and time outside the traditional cash economy. What sets these approaches apart from traditional volunteering is the element of exchange – while it can of course be argued that all volunteers receive some intrinsic reward for their gift of time, the obvious point about systems of reciprocal exchange is that the act of giving is matched by a specific benefit received in kind.

Though the timebanking movement has been around in the UK since the 1990s (and has a longer tradition in the US),ⁱⁱ it has only relatively recently started to gather real momentum with social innovators and public service pioneers looking for ways to harness the potential of citizens and communities in tackling big social challenges. Timebanks, complementary currencies and peer to peer platforms are all examples of reciprocal exchange mechanisms that are increasingly being applied to mainstream public services, particularly in the context of services that are being redesigned around the concept of co-production.ⁱⁱⁱ

Well-established projects like Fairshares in Gloucestershire, SPICE in South Wales and Participle's Circles movement have shown – in different ways – that creating a platform for reciprocal exchange leads to more people getting involved in their community, gives them a greater sense of control and agency, unlocks hidden capabilities and assets, and ultimately leads to better outcomes and improved social capital.

The Paxton Green surgery in South London uses time banking to get patients and local people involved in the local community, giving lifts, picking up medicines, visiting each other when they come out of hospital and all sorts of other small, but necessary acts. Paxton Green has reduced the demand for GP time by helping people to identify and respond to their own and others low level mental and physical health conditions. Similarly, Rushey Green Time Bank in Lewisham, again linked to a GP practice, provides a means for people with symptoms of depression and isolation to increase their contact with other people and demonstrate to themselves their value to the community.

As well as accessing previously untapped resources and building community ties, these and other examples show the potential for real clinical and social outcomes by transforming public services into platforms for people to support each other.

The Holy Cross Community Trust in King's Cross established a timebank as part of the transformation of mental health day care services in the Camden. Instead of defining a standard service offer for users, the team at Holy Cross work with their users and staff to explore their capabilities and aspirations, supporting them to build something that helps them achieve their goals. Everyone's time has a value at Holy Cross, recognised through a timebank currency.

Holy Cross is now pioneering a new model of organization to organization timebanking through CamdenShares, linking over 80 community, public and private organizations together to share, trade and exchange resources, generating value from idling capacity and leading to innovative collaborations. It's a new application of timebanking that's rightly generating a huge amount of interest.

Giving at scale

Are these admittedly small scale innovations capable of meeting at least some of the mammoth challenges facing our public services?

What we do know is that timebanks, complementary currencies and other mechanisms for reciprocal exchange are part of an explosion in new models for traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping that are being reinvented through network technologies and the web. It is a revolution that is sweeping the globe, touching on all aspects of life, through what has been described as a shift from 20th Century hyper-consumption to 21st Century collaborative consumption.^{iv}

Collaboration is now possible in different ways and on a scale that has never been considered possible before and, within this wider trend, “collaborative lifestyles” is a rapidly expanding field. Zopa the world’s first peer to peer lending platform, Landshare connecting budding gardeners to people with under-utilized gardens and a new generation of flexible workspaces including The Hub are all creating new ways of connecting people and matching supply and need. Set in this context, the potential for public services to be re-imagined as a platform for giving seems all the more credible.

There is already tantalizing evidence that these types of system can work at scale.

Complementary currency systems like the *Fureai Kippu* schemes in Japan enable people to earn credits for caring for elderly people in their community. These credits can then be used to “buy” similar person to person services by their relatives in another part of the country, or even save them for their own retirement. Developed over the past 15 years, the use of this currency is now nationwide, creating an alternative gift economy of shared time, skills and resources.

Scale in this context doesn’t mean a single national solution. As we’ve argued before, in the face of increasingly complex challenges policy makers need to embrace the idea of distributed solutions to problems.^v Mechanisms for reciprocal exchange could look very different in different neighbourhoods and still have the potential to transform the national picture. The challenge here could well be one of fungibility – can we find a mechanism for allowing a credit earned in one part of the country to be exchanged somewhere else. If I provide an hour of support for your elderly relative in Cambridge, can my elderly relative in North Wales get the benefit through a local timebank? The Japanese example suggests we can and that is surely an area ripe for experimentation.

ⁱ Office for Budget Responsibility *Economic and Fiscal Outlook* (November 2010) Cm7979

ⁱⁱ For an engaging history of the timebanking movement in the UK, see Martin Simon *Your Money or Your Life Time for Both* (2010)

ⁱⁱⁱ NESTA and the new economics foundation have published three reports on co-production: *Public Services Inside Out; The Challenge of Co-production and Right Here, Right Now*. Available at www.nesta.org.uk

^{iv} Roo Rogers and Rachel Botsman *What’s Mine is Yours: the Rise of Collaborative Consumption* (2011)

^v Laura Bunt and Michael Harris *Mass Localism* NESTA (2010)