Opinion: rethinking public services in a time of Covid-19

As the whole country is now combatting Covid-19, central and local government departments as well as public service organisations need to consider how to design and deliver effective public services to support citizens through the pandemic and into the 'new normal'.

Regrettably, 'oven ready' forms of public services currently prevail in many responses to service demands triggered by the Covid-19 crisis. Governments and public service organisations (PSOs) emphasise cost efficiency rather than effectiveness in such services. For instance, the most prevalent online learning platform in Scotland provided children with access to learning during the lockdown. However, it was not equipped with a mechanism to assess how well they have learnt online, which raised concerns from parents over children 'missing out' from online learning.

This is an example of fundamental flawed public services that have failed to value user experience at the heart of service design and provision.

Biden hails Philip's public devotion, environmental efforts and military service

Failure to address citizens' demands effectively will result in growing discontent with public services, and also impede innovation in the coming recovery period. So what can be done to prevent this possible failure? The Centre for Service Excellence (CenSE), based at the University of Edinburgh Business School is one of the seven partner institutions working on a European Horizon 2020 project, 'Co-VAL' that has explored new models of public service delivery that can create 'value' for citizens in their lives, rather than simply deliver 'oven ready' services to them. The project has investigated the types of value in public services, and has developed a two-step approach for governments looking to build capacity for effective public services during and after this pandemic.

The first step is to tease out the elements of value that citizens require in public services. Value means different things to different people. Public service users may refer to it creating or retaining a certain quality of life. Policymakers may see value embedded in service users' wellbeing, while government departments and public service organisations may emphasise 'value for money' to protect the public purse. In a time of Covid-19, we have seen conflicts between public and private value, such as public health concerns against individual freedoms – such as the demonstrations against social distancing and face coverings. This tension needs governmentsto clarify with local citizens – 'what is value of public services during the pandemic?' Our research has identified a number of elements that government can highlight to demonstrate the value of services to the public.

There are key elements of value across three groups: for the individual citizen, for public service organisations, , and for society, as set out in

Table 1.

The second step is to negotiate between different value requirements across the community. Not everyone wants the same thing and a crucial role for government is to arbitrate across these different value requirements and understand the service user's perspective is required'. Our research has revealed that value is not created and delivered by public sector organisations alone. Rather, value is *co-created* with service users. Put simply, government offers resources (in the form of public services) to service users, who combine them with their own needs, prior life experiences and public service expectations, to create (or sometimes destroy) value in their own lives.

Our research has indicated that simple changes, focusing on the user experience, can enhance the effectiveness of public services. For instance, the accessibility of services in the new Scottish Social Security Agency has increased because the agency has taken the simple step of replacing brown envelopes that frightened service users with white ones. A contrary example was the introduction of a new digital system in our case study of housing and social care provision. Poor digital education and confidence of service users led to low uptake of the new digital system. Some even found it off-putting and claimed that it diminished the service experience. These examples have demonstrated the appreciation of user experience offers great capacity for enhancing the effectiveness of public services. We believe that both governments and PSOs need to put user experience at the heart of the negotiation of the public and private value. Only by doing so, can governments and PSOs ensure public services are designed or redesigned to meet citizens' needs amid and after the pandemic.

This two-step approach requires governments and PSOs to be outward-facing and involved in a dialogue with the public. A key role for public service professionals here is to work closely with service users to unlock

their 'sticky knowledge' from their service experiences. This is not easy, but it is possible. The leading marketing scholar, Christian Grönroos, for example, has shown how the Finnish tax authority transformed itself over a decade from an unresponsive monolithic organisation to a citizen-centred public service, enhancing the effectiveness of tax collection and citizen satisfaction.

In summary, reorganising public services to address new and existing service demands is one of the most urgent imperatives for governments amid the Covid-19 crisis. We argue that a user-centred perspective on public service design and delivery now is even more important. Our two-step approach has the potential to shift the mindset or future transformation beyond the Covid-19 crisis.