



'Open Public Services' Briefing

August 2011

Understanding and supporting
women and their organisations

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About the Women's Resource Centre

WRC is a unique charity which supports women's organisations to be more effective and sustainable. We provide training, information, resources and one-to-one support on a range of organisational development issues. We also lobby decision makers on behalf of the women's not-for-profit sector for improved representation and funding.

Our members work in a wide range of fields including health, violence against women, employment, education, rights and equality, the criminal justice system and the environment. They deliver services to and campaign on behalf of some of the most marginalised communities of women.

There are over ten thousand people working or volunteering for our members who support almost half a million individuals each year.

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Introduction

In July 2011, the Cabinet Office published its strategy for reforming public services, *'Open Public Services'*. At the launch, the Prime Minister placed these reforms within the coalition's [Big Society](#) agenda, saying that the new approach to public services will lead to "more freedom, more choice and more local control". The White Paper sets out a comprehensive policy framework for public service reforms, covering some changes that are already underway - such as the Community Right to Challenge - and new policies that are yet to be finalised and must be consulted on.

The reforms set out in the White Paper are based on a set of five principles, which the government argues will put power into the hands of individuals and communities when applied to public services:

- Increased **choice** wherever possible;
- **Decentralisation** of power to the lowest appropriate level;
- Increasing **diversity** by opening up services to a range of providers from the public, private and voluntary and community sectors;
- Ensuring **fairness** in regards to access to public services;
- Better **accountability** to service users and taxpayers.

The White Paper separates public services into 3 areas, which are applied to these principles to develop the reforms framework:

Individual services: personal services, such as skills training or social care and housing support.

Neighbourhood services: local services provided on a collective basis, such as maintenance of public spaces, leisure and recreation facilities and community safety.

Commissioned services: local and national services that can't be decentralised, such as tax collections, prisons, emergency healthcare and welfare services.

The reforms outlined in this White Paper will have a considerable effect on how public services are delivered in the UK and will affect women's organisations of all shapes and sizes, some of whom may already be running public services locally. We believe it is urgent that we as a sector respond to this consultation to shape the areas of the reforms that are yet to be finalised and make sure that these policies provide adequate support to organisations that wish to act as a public service provider in their area.

Proposed Reforms

Commissioned services

- As a default position, local government will seek and fully consider a minimum of three service providers from any sector when commissioning for services.
- Using a payment by results system will act as a financial incentive for providers to deliver high quality services. The government will also consult on

extending the payment by results system to a range of national services, such as back office functions for prosecutors etc.

- Will consult on how best to ensure greater accountability of commissioners and providers, including publishing performance data on all service providers and increased user participation.

Ensuring diversity of provision

- The government will regularly assess the barriers to entry and exit for new potential providers and recommend actions to overcome these barriers.
- Will consult on how to support voluntary sector organisations to acquire current public sector providers that could benefit from being run as a specialised charity.
- The government will invite those on the front line of public service delivery to advise on reducing bureaucracy. Will also explore introducing transparent pricing where appropriate, to diversify provision and encourage competition by quality.
- Will consult on whether providers should have sufficient right to appeal to an independent figure if they believe they have been unfairly precluded from a commissioning process.
- Central government plan to launch a positive action programme to improve the awareness of public service opportunities to new providers, especially small and medium-sized enterprises.

Individual & neighbourhood services

- Funding should follow individual service user choice - will build frameworks where people are informed of their service options and funding is given to their chosen provider.
- Individual service providers will be licensed or registered by a relevant regulator to ensure minimum standards for service users and will also consult on establishing a zero tolerance of failure for services on a case-by-case basis.
- Individuals will be given a voice through participation in service design and management, and via elected and unelected representatives. Encouraging existing 'champions for consumer choice' such as *Which?* and *HealthWatch* to speak out on consumers' behalf.
- For neighbourhood services, using the Localism Bill will give local people the opportunity to be directly involved in local decision making and shaping public services (for more information on localism, please see our ['how to...' guide](#))
- Government want to give communities more ownership of their public services, by enabling community groups to buy public assets or go ahead with development without planning permission.
- Decentralisation of power of key local services that benefit a whole community to neighbourhood councils as much as possible and supportn for local residents to participate in the commissioning process.

What does this mean for the women's sector?

There are some opportunities within the reform plans for organisations that want to challenge authorities that are running services, where these organisations think they can do a better job. However, smaller specialist organisations must be supported to do this, to prevent being pushed out of the opportunity to run services by larger, more generic charities with more resources.

More transparency and publishing data could also be a beneficial tool for women's organisations to monitor the work of their local council. However, the government must ensure that this data is disaggregated by gender and other protected characteristics under the Equality Act, to enable the public and service providers to effectively hold local authorities to account.

We are very concerned about the payment by results agenda, which would have a substantial impact on the way that organisations work and their relationships with commissioners and funders. Some women's organisations do not have significant financial reserves and are often reliant upon contracts to cover immediate costs. This makes them more vulnerable to financial shocks, which are more likely under an unpredictable system such as payment by results.

We are particularly concerned that this has been identified as the primary and preferred method of paying service providers, and yet the process for payment by results has not been very clearly explained. For example, how will both measurable and deliverable results be identified for services that deal with very sensitive and complex issues such as violence against women?

We also have reservations about the localism agenda and its impact on women's organisations. We are concerned that the already diminished voice of marginalised groups in a community - such as Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) or Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (LBT) women - will be drowned out by louder sections of the community. Furthermore, we are concerned that the appeal of larger organisations that are low risk and more resilient will mean that women's organisations, which are usually small and specialised, will lose out in the commissioning process.

Consultation process

The consultation period on this White Paper will continue until September 2011. A copy of the full White Paper is available on the [Cabinet Office website](#). There is also a [separate website](#) on the consultation, with case studies and further information.

In November, the Government will set out its departmental proposals for taking forward the ideas in this White Paper. From April 2012, departments will publish regular process reports on the steps taken to implement reforms.

The Women's Resource Centre have published a template response to the White Paper alongside this briefing for women's organisations to use. If you do use our template in your response to the White Paper, please copy the WRC Policy Team into your email (policy@wrc.org.uk) for our records. Please contact the Policy Team at the email address above or on 020 7324 3030 if you have any queries about this briefing.