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| Key Theme Report | |
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| Local Public Services  Policy Development Convention, 5-6 December 2013 |

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| Rationale and Context |

**Introduction**

If we are truly to win on welfare, we have to look beyond our institutions and into the local community. Just as the education zones seek to expand student influence within universities and colleges, the welfare zone aims to enable students to shape those public services students rely on to support them during education and beyond.

In this context, we use the term ‘local public services’ to describe those areas of government where significant decisions are made on a local level, including but not limited to such matters as health, crime and policing, planning, transport, refuse and recycling and the licensing of alcohol sales. In each case local people should be involved in making decisions about these services, whether through formal electoral processes or through less formal consultations.

The picture is complicated by differing public policy across the UK. In Westminster, the coalition believes market reforms can improve services, accompanied by greater local control – but within significantly reduced budgets. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there is greater wariness of market ideology but services still face many of the same pressures on costs. Regardless of geography, the structure of public services may appear complex, and the mechanisms by which they can be influenced little understood or utilised by students.

Students should be a key component in decision-making given that those in post-16 education make up over seven million of the UK’s citizens. Therefore, students and students’ unions need to engage if services are to reflect student need. The assumption is often made that students are essentially one single group: young, full-time undergraduates. Of course, even that category is far more diverse than is sometimes imagined, but the wider population is all the more so.

**Understanding the issues**

When asked in an NUS poll of FE and HE students across the UK how well students’ views were represented in different structures, students felt views were represented least well in their local authority (as compared to the SU, the university and national government). Only 23% felt student arguments would be effective in convincing the local authority to adopt a particular policy. In a separate poll for NUS, 69% felt they should be able to influence local public services, but only 14% felt they could actually do so. Therefore there is a desire to effect change, but a belief that students do not have the influence or ability to do so.

Yet there are a range of issues relating to each public service that need resolved. Input from members at the welfare zone conference helped define some of these for a few principal local public services:

***Transport***

The main issues in relation to transport arise around the issue of cost, including the overall expense, especially for learners in FE in England who lack fixed entitlement to support, but also the availability of student discounts at all times of the day and the exclusion of certain student groups from discount schemes. However, the reliability, frequency, sustainability, convenience and the safety of services are also all important. Students’ unions need to be able to articulate student needs and enable negotiations with local transport companies and others on these issues.

***Refuse and recycling***

Students are often identified in local communities as failing in their responsibilities to adhere to refuse collection rules, whether forgetting to put bins out for collection or neglecting to separate recycling. However, students equally feel there can be a lack of information on when and how refuse is collected and what is recyclable. There is also a feeling that collection timings do not serve student need, and that there are inadequate recycling facilities, especially in purpose-built accommodation.

***Crime and student safety***

Student concerns in relation to crime cover two main areas: firstly, student vulnerability to crime and the need to ensure protection – for example, safety in 24-hour libraries, engagement with community crime reduction partnerships or their equivalents, the provision of hate crime reporting centres and self-defence classes and so on.

Secondly, the attitudes and actions of the police can cause concerns, whether perceptions of racial profiling by police, the need for scrutiny committees for stop and search, issues around police registration for international students and a narrative of victim blaming in relation to some crimes. How students and students’ unions engage with police forces is critical in setting the right tone in the local area.

***Health***

Health is perhaps the most complex and challenging area within the category of local public services both to understand and to influence effectively. There are significant differences in structure and provision between the different nations and between different local areas, and one of the key challenges is for students’ unions to understand their students’ needs and map this across to the avenues to exert influence.

Access to services is a key issue for students. Questions here include: should there be more GPs on campus, a means for automatic registration with a GP on moving into halls of residence, can students access adequate dental treatment, are there enough sexual health clinics able to meet student need?

Specific concern about mental health also features highly, from the lack of capacity in campus counselling services and concern around extenuating circumstances guidelines to the lack of training for staff in institutions about student mental health and education on mental health issues for students.

Cost is a further area of contention, though here local policy may be less problematic than policy set centrally at Westminster or in the devolved administrations. Across the UK there are charges for some services whilst others are free, and despite the existence of the low income scheme charges may still be prohibitive. Charges for doctors’ notes are a particular concern. Meanwhile, the proposed levy on international students will create a significant cost burden.

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| What can be done? |

Neither the categories of service given above nor the issues summarised are exhaustive, whilst the exact challenges will vary from locality to locality. It is this variation, the very nature of local public services, which means that change cannot be made solely at a national level, and nor would that be appropriate even if it could.

There are two aspects to the change we might wish to create. Firstly, we can consider campaigning for a better framework in relation to each public service and its associated mechanisms for local input – for example, campaigning to challenge the NHS reforms in England. Secondly, we can work within those mechanisms which exist to create positive change, for example lobbying a bus company for a more frequent service on an existing route. We must decide the extent to which either local SUs or NUS focus on either of these two aspects.

In practical terms, the ability of NUS and the student movement to change national policy on public services on its own is highly limited, but there are opportunities for both NUS and local SUs to link up with wider campaigns, other campaign groups and trade unions to do so. The number of potential campaigns and competing demands on the student movement’s time also requires some level of prioritisation, or consideration as to whether the role of NUS and SUs is to facilitate grassroots campaign groups rather than lead on campaigns themselves, leading to potential joint work with other policy zones within NUS.

Changes on a local level and the impact we can create for students in their communities may have more immediate benefits and be easier to demonstrate. However, students’ unions and activists must understand the structures and how best these can be influenced. Partnership work is essential: the opportunity for joint work between students’ unions in their localities is obvious, and the potential influence multiple SUs could bring to bear on a local authority could be extremely persuasive.

NUS can help students’ unions and their members understand the issues and engage with the different mechanisms for different public services. Good practice and useful evidence can be shared across the movement in a meaningful way and local partnerships facilitated. The power of students to create change in their local services can be celebrated, encouraging in turn more to get involved to make those changes in future.

The Welfare Zone’s policy in terms of local public services cannot, and should not try, to account for the needs of every individual students’ union and their members. The critical issue is to determine how to facilitate students’ unions to work out the right approach for them, whilst identifying the key priorities for national change from the extensive list of options. Combining these two aspects in the right way will lead to exciting and important changes for all students.

# Questions for Policy Development

**Some key questions to consider are:**

1. How can we make our policy position on local public services coherent given the many variables?
2. Should certain local public services take priority over others in policy?
3. What is the right balance between NUS undertaking work at a national level on structures and the need for local action within existing structures?
4. Can NUS policy support joint work between SUs in a locality in a meaningful way, and if so how?
5. How can NUS and/or students’ unions do more to highlight the changes already secured?
6. Are there organisations that NUS should be partnering with to deliver this work effectively?