Innovations in decommissioning public services could play a key role in building a more strategic and productive welfare state

Laura Bunt *presents findings from a new report on the art of decommissioning existing public services and creating new improved ones in their place.*

Exit, closure and decommissioning are all challenging issues to discuss in the context of public services. The prospect of a hospital closure or of shutting down a school, prison or care home, of decommissioning social care or homelessness services, or of the state exiting from a previous role understandably provokes strong reactions from the public. The political opposition, disruption and job loss likely to be incurred creates strong incentives to protect current forms of provision.

Yet, as the financial constraints on public services tighten, the question of how the public sector can continue to innovate to remain effective and sustainable means asking what to stop doing. In austerity, it will not be possible to create new services that simply add to what public services already do. Introducing new approaches will require getting to grips with decommissioning in order to reinvest resources elsewhere.

This is the premise of a new Nesta report – the Art of Exit – that tries to explore this more difficult, contentious aspect of innovation that is perhaps more familiar in the context of private markets. Creations in technology and innovations in social behaviour can change the way we use a product or a service, prompting older, less effective models to be phased out of stock.

How does this aspect of innovation play out in the context of public services where it is not possible to simply stop or 'phase out' an existing approach? The difficulty of this process is illustrated by the fact that innovations can tend to remain as simply an 'add-on' to current service provision. NHS Direct, for example, did not replace our direct engagement with GPs or other hospital services – it became another channel through which to access advice and health care.

Yet in researching this paper we came across some examples of public servants who have attempted to take resources out of a less effective approach to fuel the development of a new one. They have attempted 'creative decommissioning' – a process of actively challenging incumbent service models and mindsets and supporting the development of (and investment in) new approaches. This is not to underplay the very real challenges of an extremely disruptive process, but to try and understand how these challenges might be overcome.

In New York, the Office for Children and Family Services has systematically closed the majority of their punitive centres within the juvenile justice system and has reinvested resources in a more holistic, therapeutic system of care for young offenders. Despite strident opposition from unions and politicians, ambition for better outcomes for the children in care has driven the process and allowed New York to cut the number of children placed in custody by more than half.

Closer to home in London, the Borough of Tower Hamlets has set about closing its older and under-used libraries and in their place created a group of Idea Stores – a reinvention of the modern library that brings together a whole range of learning and cultural services in a convenient location. Switching buildings was, if anything, easier than changing the culture of work and service. Some people disliked the new format and left. The leadership team had to work hard to embed the more flexible, customer focused culture of Idea Stores. But the hard work has paid off: Tower Hamlets now has one of the most highly rated library services in the country, with use of library and adult education facilities across the

borough having doubled in the past five years.

These examples – and others presented in the report – show where the public sector has made a deliberate, strategic attempt to decommission a service and create an alternative. These stories are not detailed blueprints for creative decommissioning. Indeed, one of the main lessons from the successes, and the failures, of these cases is that this is not primarily a technical and managerial process. This sits uncomfortably with much of the discourse and guidance on decommissioning, which tends towards the technical and apolitical.

Rather, these are stories of teams carefully planning and then driving through transformation, overcoming obstacles and managing risks, by building political and public support, and persisting over a long time period. They emphasise the importance of strong leadership and tenacity.

Both New York and Tower Hamlets also demonstrate the value of openness and engagement in driving through any creative decommissioning process. New York aimed to build public support for the closure programme by inviting the media into the juvenile prisons to report on their poor performance. Tower Hamlets asked the residents of the borough what they wanted from a library and co-designed the Idea Store concept, to help get buy-in to the process. What stands out across the case studies is that the people involved were active in using evidence and information about what was and wasn't working, rather than shying away from negative results.

This is not a technical guide to how to decommission, nor is it about managing cuts. In writing this report, we have been struck by how rarely decommissioning is discussed in the context of service improvement and innovation, and how little guidance there is on how to overcome the real barriers to decommissioning in the public sector. Given the financial outlook and the pressures of rising public demand now and in the future, it is vital to address this to understand how decommissioning can be a more strategic and productive part of how public services achieve lasting, systemic change.

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