

Involving residents in public service provision

An evaluation of public service delivery shows that it's feasible to involve residents – but primarily as an addition to regular service delivery.

Policy implications

- Randomised controlled trials can produce valuable lessons for policymakers, and are relatively simple to implement.
- Policy innovation with potential national application can feasibly be tested out in local communities, according to the evidence.
- Citizens can be involved in the delivery of some local services, but the degree of participation depends on the incentives; in the trial scheme a simple invitation from the council led to some activity, while offering incentives led to more engagement.
- Citizens' contributions can complement regular labour-intensive services – but not replace them altogether.

About the research

Cuts in public funding are forcing all areas of government to consider the most effective delivery of public services. However, there has been limited use of rigorous evaluation methods in assessing different models of service delivery in the UK.

Local government has the potential to be an ideal testing ground to trial new ways of

service delivery, for instance through 'co-production' of public services where citizens participate in providing the service. Local councils and policymakers across the political spectrum have become increasingly interested in ways of involving citizens in co-production – partly due to large budget cuts and new thinking around the way services are delivered, and partly as a recognition of the benefits from getting residents more involved in their local services.

In a trial scheme with Lambeth Council researchers designed and ran a randomised controlled trial to test new ways of involving citizens in the delivery of local public services. The scheme focused on environmental services and street cleansing – an area with high potential for residents to have an impact, not least because the effectiveness and benefits of the project are visible from their own doorstep. People were offered an opportunity to become a 'Street Champion', who would help co-ordinate efforts to improve the cleanliness and beauty of their local environment.

In all, 170 Lambeth streets were randomly divided into five groups: 'pure control streets' where business-as-usual was maintained; streets where Street Champions were offered no incentives; and three groups where incentives were offered alongside the invitation. The findings provided new evidence on ways to encourage increased co-production on a permanent basis.

Key findings

- It is possible to run a randomised controlled trial with a local council and produce findings that are both of scientific merit and relevant to policymakers.
- Residents are interested and willing to co-produce public services – but incentives help to ensure that initial enthusiasm is sustained and leads to actual activity.
- Different types of incentives led to different types of activities and outcomes:
 - Community-wide incentives led to more people being aware of the scheme and improved perceptions of social interaction in the local area
 - Incentives focusing on individual identity (as a Street Champion) led to higher satisfaction with the local area and a reduction in the perception of problems caused by anti-social behaviour.
- The trial shows the potential limits of citizen involvement. There was no evidence of an impact on overall street cleanliness, although some streets showed improvements in beautification (such as street planters). However, the scheme showed positive impact in community interaction and social capital.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Researchers from the Institute for Fiscal Studies partnered with Lambeth Council to design a randomised controlled trial testing the effectiveness of different incentives for citizen co-production in public service delivery. In the trial, residents on a street were invited to become a 'Street Champion', and those who accepted were tasked with co-ordinating efforts to improve the cleanliness and attractiveness of their street. The council offered ongoing support in the form of advice and physical equipment.

Daniel Rogger; Luke Sibieta: *An evaluation of different ways to incentivise citizens to co-produce public services in Lambeth*
Web: www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8352

FURTHER INFORMATION

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