

UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES: THEORY AND PRACTICE

A literature review

16th May 2019



The IGP Social Prosperity Network is pleased to present

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A literature review

By Anna Coote, Pritika Kasliwal
and Andrew Percy

16th May 2019

CONTACT

UBS-hub.org

 info@igpspn.org

 [@glo_pro](https://twitter.com/glo_pro)

 [@glo__pro](https://www.instagram.com/glo__pro)

 [@instituteforglobalprosperity](https://www.facebook.com/instituteforglobalprosperity)

PREFACE

'Universal Basic Services' (UBS) is an idea that has captured the imaginations of people around the world, and with this report, the Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) continues to lead the effort to promote a more socially orientated vision of the future. This is the second report of the Social Prosperity Knowledge Network of the IGP charged with developing innovative ideas upon which to build a sustainable welfare state that meets the specific challenges of the 21st Century

Supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, we have conducted a review of literature on existing public services to better understand what lessons can be learned from past experiences and the challenges we must face to bring this idea to fruition. The report makes it clear how much hard thinking and analysis remains to be done. It provides references to existing examples of universal and publicly accessible basic services, including descriptors that allow sorting by service area, type of provision, outcome and geography. The aim is to build a library of references regarding the provision and design of services, as well as more exploratory political and philosophical work around the accessibility of and justifications for public services.

It is one of the great strengths of UBS that it builds on our existing social structures, starting where we are now. This report provides a reference base that researchers and proponents can use to further their ideas for the expansion of existing services and the development of new services in areas like digital communications, transport and childcare. It explores the impact of existing public services and in so doing also reveals the complexities and inter-relations between different services.

The key take-away is that while each service area has unique characteristics that will require design specific to meeting the objectives of that service, all of the services feed into and support each other and result in a sum greater than the parts. This means that the quality of the democracy and the political commitment to the overarching goals of ensuring the safety, opportunity and participation of all will be determining factors in any UBS initiative. It also reinforces and makes evident that the purpose of investment in universal basic services is to extend and enhance the capabilities and capacities of individuals and communities, strengthening their resilience in the face of current and future challenges as processes of economic and social transformation accelerate.

We have only a short time within which to rearrange our systems of social support so that our societies conform with the narrow envelopes that define democratic and climate sustainability. Building on what we have to create fundamental change offers us the chance to make the needed adjustments in time. This report lays out the foundation we are building on, highlighting both strengths we can use and weaknesses we must address.

UBS is a simple concept based on the established ethos of public services that has embedded in it a sophisticated evolution of democratic power, social security, and environmental responsibility. We cannot shy away from the complexities and we must learn from our experiences, and this report is a guide to both.

With special thanks to Anna Coote from NEF and Pritika Kasliwal at the IGP for their work on editing and assembling this material, I am pleased to present this report as the next step in our project to make Universal Basic Services a concrete policy option for nations, regions and communities around the world.

PROFESSOR HENRIETTA L. MOORE

Founder and Director

The Institute for Global Prosperity

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INTRODUCTION

This report explores the hypothesis that strengthening and extending universal services is an effective way of tackling poverty and improving wellbeing for all. It draws on academic literature including conceptual thinking, political and economic analysis, case studies and evaluations, as well as some ‘grey literature’ and factual reportage. The main focus is on the UK, but there are implications for – and lessons to be learned from – other countries. It builds on earlier work by the Institute of Global Prosperity, summarised in the 2017 report, *Social Prosperity for the Future: a proposal for Universal Basic Services*.¹

The term ‘universal basic services’ encapsulates three crucial concepts. For the purposes of this review, we define them as follows, in reverse order.

1. Services, meaning collectively generated activities that serve the public interest.
2. Basic, meaning essential and sufficient, rather than minimal, in that these collective activities enable people to meet their needs.

3. Universal, meaning that everyone is entitled to services that meet their needs, regardless of ability to pay.

Our references to ‘public services’ in the rest of this report should be understood in these terms.

Central to the case for UBS is that the idea should be substantially developed in practice, both by improving the quality and reach of existing services such as healthcare and education, and by extending this approach into areas where essential services are not currently available to all, such as care, transport and information.

Our findings are not definitive, as they are based on a rapid, indicative review of relevant literature. We hope to shed more light on the subject and we also expect to reveal uncertainties, questions, knowledge gaps, and areas for further study and debate.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE RATIONALE

The term ‘universal basic services’ (UBS) was originally coined to signpost a policy alternative to ‘universal basic income’ (UBI). The latter is a proposal to give regular, unconditional cash payments to all individuals, regardless of their income or status. The former is a proposal to develop more and better collectively provided services that are free for all who need them, regardless of income or status. Both are put forward as ways of reducing poverty and inequality, and improving wellbeing for all.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the case for UBI in any depth. Arguments for and against are well documented elsewhere.² However, the case for UBS rests in part on whether improving and extending public services is likely to be more effective in addressing poverty, inequality and wellbeing than unconditional cash payments to individuals.³

SHARED NEEDS AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITIES.

Two principles are fundamental to the rationale for UBS: shared needs and collective responsibilities. We all share certain basic needs that must be satisfied if we are to be able to survive and thrive, think for ourselves and participate in society. Theories of capability and human need converge around this point. Nussbaum (2006) describes three ‘core’ capabilities: of affiliation, bodily integrity and practical reason. Doyal and Gough (1991) identify health and critical autonomy as prerequisites for social participation. This finds an echo in the goals

set out by the Social Prosperity Network when it argued the case for UBS to achieve a ‘larger life for the ordinary person’⁴ through security, opportunity and participation.⁵

Human needs are not context specific, but universal across time and space. While the detail of how needs are met will vary widely, they always require certain generic ‘satisfiers’ (or ‘intermediate needs’) that do not vary. These were originally listed by need theorists as water, nutrition, shelter, secure and non-threatening work, education, healthcare, security in childhood, significant primary relationships, physical and economic security and a safe environment.⁶ Some argue that access to motorised transport and to the internet have now become essential for participation in society.⁷ However, the latter are perhaps best understood as hybrid satisfiers, between specific and generic, because they have not always been essential but are increasingly felt to be so at a global level.

The social settlement established after the Second World War expressed a shared resolve that everyone’s basic needs should be met. People should be able to buy certain essentials for themselves and – where costs outstripped most household budgets - services should be provided to all who needed them. A national consensus emerged that responsibility for the welfare of the population was a collective function, conducted by pooling resources and sharing risks through the institutions of government. Marshall (1965) summed up the collective approach to social welfare in the concept of ‘social citizenship’ based on economic and social (as well as civil and political) rights.⁸

WHY SERVICES?

The concepts of shared needs and collective responsibilities beg the question of how responsibility should be exercised to meet needs: through income support or through public services and other forms of collective action? This is not a question of either/or but of the balance between them.

UBS advocates generally agree that adequate and accessible income support is needed, but that this should be augmented by a 'social wage' or 'virtual income' from collectively provided services that would otherwise have to be paid for out of individual or household budgets.

The notion of a social wage can be traced back many decades. RH Tawney (1964) said of public health and education services that 'the standard of living of the great mass of the nation depends, not merely on the remuneration which they are paid for their labour, but on the social income which they receive as citizens'.⁹ More recently, there have been calls to recognise public services as 'social infrastructure', no less essential than highways, the national grid and other aspects of the 'material infrastructure' on which we all depend. It is argued that expenditure on both kinds of infrastructure should be treated as investment that will yield social and economic dividends.¹⁰

As this suggests, public services create value that is routinely underestimated and should be taken into account. But we are not talking here about economic value alone. Our analysis suggests that the value of services can be understood across four dimensions:

Equity: services have a strong redistributive effect, as they are worth much more to people on low incomes than to those who are better off.

Efficiency: services deal with market failures and achieve economies of scale.

Solidarity: services are a manifestation of shared interest and purpose; they can help to bring people together and build social cohesion.

Sustainability: services can produce benefits that are continuous and cumulative; they are organised in ways that can facilitate carbon reduction, respond to climate hazards and achieve longer-term environmental sustainability.

A great deal depends on how services are designed, funded and delivered, and on their scope and quality. We explore the potential benefits of services in Chapter Three. First we turn to what is known about public services in the UK today.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

A broad public consensus in support of free healthcare and education has endured since the 1940s. According to a 2017 survey for the King's Fund, 77% of the public believe the NHS should be maintained in its current form and around 90% support the founding principles of the NHS (that it should meet the needs of everyone, be free at the point of delivery and based on clinical need, not ability to pay).¹¹

A poll for the Department for Education in 2016 found that 80% of respondents had some confidence in primary level state schooling, while 28% reported having 'a great deal' or 'complete' confidence; 83% thought that state secondary schools taught basic skills such as reading, writing and maths 'well' or 'very well'.¹²

While healthcare and schooling continue to embody the concept of 'social citizenship', government policies since 1979 have chipped away at the post war consensus and at the scope and quality of public services. They have done this by promoting a vision of economic success based on individual choice and market competition, and – since 2010 - by cutting taxes and severely reducing public spending in a series of 'austerity' budgets. Between 2009 and 2018, the total limit of government departmental expenditure (DEL) 'fell by more than £45 billion, equivalent to a cut of 10.9% in real terms, or an average cut of 1.4% per year'.¹³

Schools and healthcare have suffered greatly as a result. So have policing and social work. Higher education has been largely commodified. Collective provision of youth services, housing, adult social care, rural buses, libraries and legal aid, as well as government support for countless community-based organisations, have been stripped down

to the bare bones, abolished altogether or left to the vagaries of voluntarism and philanthropic giving.¹⁴ This rampant felling of services in the name of 'austerity', combined with cuts to a range of social security benefits and the failure of 'universal credit' to streamline or strengthen the income safety net, have led to deepening poverty, widening inequalities and many thousands living in destitution. It was estimated in 2017 that more than 1.5 million people in the UK were 'destitute', meaning that they were unable to afford the bare essentials of life, including food and shelter.¹⁵

All this was noted by Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, who visited the UK in 2018. For the purpose of this review, his most remarkable finding was that the changes were a result of a deliberate political campaign to alter the prevailing values of British society. The driving force was not economic, but a commitment to 'radical social re-engineering', said Alston. Funds were available to make life much easier for those living in poverty, but 'the political choice was made to fund tax cuts for the wealthy instead'.¹⁶

There are now signs that the reaction against the values of Tawney, Beveridge and Marshall is waning. The idea of 'austerity' as a route to economic success has run its course and is now widely rejected by economists¹⁷ as well as by the public. As the Financial Times reported in September 2018, 'British people are fed up with austerity'; two-thirds now say they are willing to pay more tax in return for more spending on health and education, representing the highest level of support for public services since 2002.¹⁸ If this trend continues, the political climate may become more favourable for developing the case for UBS.

CHAPTER THREE:

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF UBS

Here we consider potential benefits of strengthening and extending public services, drawing on studies of existing services, across four dimensions: equity, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability.

EQUITY

Public services are found to reduce income inequalities by providing a 'social wage' that is worth much more to people in the lowest income groups. In the absence of public provision, for people on low incomes meeting basic needs is likely to consume the majority of their income. If not, basic needs go unmet with negative impacts on individuals and society.¹⁹ A study of OECD countries found that poor people would have to spend three quarters of their income on essential services if they had to purchase them directly. Services reduced income inequality by an average of 20%.²⁰

Modelling by the Institute for Global Policy found similarly that extending public services to new areas such as information and transport would have far greater value, proportionately, to low-income households than to rich ones.²¹

Services bring intrinsic benefits without which individuals and families are less likely to be able to meet their needs and flourish. Getting an education makes it easier to find work and earn money;

access to healthcare means there is less risk of becoming disabled by illness and dependent on care; access to transport makes it possible to get to work and gain access to other services, and so on.

The effects are not just individual: reducing inequalities will benefit society as a whole. As Wilkinson and Pickett have demonstrated, outcomes for a range of health and social problems (physical and mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teen pregnancies and child wellbeing) are significantly worse in more unequal rich countries.²²

Some studies have shown that public services are more likely to benefit those who are better off than the poorest.²³ Yet overall, there is strong evidence that public services benefit lower-income households disproportionately. A detailed analysis of the distributional effects of the social wage in the UK confirmed a consistent pro-poor bias in most services (higher education being an exception), which is borne out by more recent data from the ONS.^{24, 25} The ways in which universal services are designed and delivered – and how they interact with each other - are likely to influence the extent to which they benefit the poorest, as well as other income groups.

EFFICIENCY

Efficiency is usually measured in terms of the ratio between output and inputs: the greater the amount of useful output per unit of input, the more efficient the process is deemed to be.¹ Outcomes refer to the broader and longer-term impacts on individuals (such as poverty and mortality) or on social distributions (e.g. levels of inequality).²⁶ They will be influenced by how services interact with each other, as well as by a wide range of social, cultural and economic conditions. Given these complexities, measures of efficiency in the public sector are usually complex and contested.

Public services have often been accused of inefficiencies, which market theorists have linked to the vested interests of bureaucrats and professions. These shortcomings were used to justify introducing market rules into public services from the 1980s onwards. But competition between multiple providers, customer choice for service users and conventional cost-efficiency criteria for measuring success have largely failed to improve outputs let alone outcomes. These failings have been greatly exacerbated by public spending cuts, with decisions often predicated on the notion that simply reducing inputs is equivalent to increasing efficiency. Getting 'more for less' by cutting staff or increasing workload to compete in a quasi-marketplace has generally proved to be self-defeating.²⁷

Market processes deliver inefficiencies in public services. Transaction costs are often higher for both consumers and providers. Public sector organisations can keep costs down in ways that cannot be achieved by competing commercial organisations – for example, through sharing administrative, purchasing and research functions, by avoiding duplication and by working together to achieve shared goals.²⁸ *Moral hazards* are encountered when profit incentives combine with unequal knowledge in markets. For example, private medical providers have incentives to behave in ways that put others at risk by undertaking unnecessary medical interventions, while patients know too little to judge whether they are right or wrong.^{29,30} In addition – and crucially – a non-profit system does not need to extract funds to pay dividends to shareholders.

Turning to outcomes efficiency, there are further advantages to a public – rather than market-based – system of service provision. Where a range of collective activities are intended to serve the public interest, receive funding from public sources and share a democratic framework, they are, in theory at least, better able to interact in mutually beneficial ways – and they can be orchestrated to interact effectively by public authorities. An example is where schools encourage healthy eating and active pursuits, making people healthier and better able to benefit from clinical interventions; another is where high quality childcare helps children to get more out of primary education.

Definitive studies of the efficiency of public services are rare, and most that do exist focus on healthcare and cost-efficiency. A 2016 study for the Office for National Statistics compared spending on health care and average life expectancy in OECD countries. It found the USA, which is a mainly market-based system, outspent the UK by the equivalent of £6,311 per person, compared with £2,777, yet had an average life expectancy at birth of 78.8 years, compared with 81.4 in the UK.³¹

Other studies have found that, while the UK spends a smaller proportion of GDP on healthcare than other European countries, the NHS is regarded as the most efficient and cost-effective healthcare systems in the world.³² This is regarded as a 'vindication for the UK model of predominately publicly funded health ('free at the point of use' but funded mainly through taxation).³³

Where efficiency is assessed in narrow output terms, calculations overlook the multiple dimensions of value, the many ways in which value is experienced and how it accrues. The concept of 'social return on investment' (SROI) has been developed over the last decade and adopted by government in the 2012 Social Value Act, which instructs public service commissioners to consider how to 'improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of the relevant area.'³⁴

¹In public policy, inputs can refer to expenditure of resources, such as money or labour, as well as government regulation. Outputs refer to the implementation of legislation and the delivery of specific transfers and services, such as social care or health procedures.

Applying social value analysis to an assessment of service efficiency means taking account of indirect as well as direct effects. For example, if staff delivering meals on wheels to people who are housebound take time to sit and chat with them, this may reduce their sense of social isolation and generally improve their wellbeing, but it will increase costs by demanding additional staff time. If a school opens up as a community centre at weekends, it may improve opportunities for local residents to get together and help each other in various ways with positive long-term effects, but it will also eat into the school budget. Some forms of social value take years to accumulate, with no immediate tangible benefits; often, they accrue in ways that do not return dividends of any kind to the organisation that made the investment in the first place.

SROI has become a formula used to encourage private as well as public and third sector organisations to think about the 'bottom line' in public interest terms, and to seek innovative ways of achieving success. But market incentives tend to pull in the opposite direction for commercial organisations, except where achieving positive social outcomes directly boosts profits. When services influence and largely depend on the quality of human relationships, it is especially hard to square the circle.

SOLIDARITY

The concepts of shared needs and collective responsibilities embody the idea of solidarity, and the practice of UBS (as we have defined it) arguably has potential to develop and strengthen solidarity. For this review, we take solidarity to mean feelings of sympathy and responsibility between people that promote mutual support. It is an inclusive process, not just within well-acquainted groups but also, crucially, between people who are 'strangers' to each other. It involves collective action towards shared objectives.³⁵

As a policy goal, UBS calls for collective policy and practice: sharing resources and acting together to deal with risks and problems that people cannot cope with alone. It is not something that can be achieved by individuals or groups simply fending for themselves and pursuing their own interests. Society is not constructed simply through atomised choices spontaneously generating co-operation, but by mutual regard and consideration: people 'cannot live together without agreeing and consequently without making mutual sacrifices, joining themselves to one another in a strong and enduring fashion'.³⁶ These things are not nice-to-haves, but the 'fundamental basis' of social life.³⁷

Pursuing the goal of more and better public services not only requires solidarity but also contributes to it – in three main ways. First, it develops experience of shared needs and collective responsibility, which can build understanding of how people depend on each other and a commitment to retaining these interconnections. Secondly, where services bring people together from different social groups, they can provide opportunities for developing mutual sympathy and responsibility. Thirdly, the combined effects of more and better services, as we have noted, bring benefits to society as a whole and have a redistributive effect, reducing inequalities which otherwise create barriers to solidarity.

Some have argued that welfare states – and thereby public services – 'crowd out' social capital by inhibiting informal caring networks, mutual trust and social norms that favour civil commitment and trustworthiness. However, evidence contradicts this hypothesis, finding instead that Nordic-style welfare regimes, where there are more universal services, tend to have higher rather than lower levels of bonding and bridging social capital.^{38, 39, 40}

Much evidence and commentary relating to solidarity and public services focus how market-based systems undermine a shared sense of interest and purpose, and how 'calculations of individual self-interest diminish collective understanding and recognition of mutual need.'⁴¹ Richard Titmuss famously demonstrated that a market-based blood donation service is likely to be less effective than a collective one based on voluntary donations.⁴² When nursery staff decided to fine parents who collected their children late, to encourage good time-keeping, parents interpreted the fine as payment for services and felt able to 'buy themselves out of their social contract'.^{43,44} There is a rich literature on the ways in which neoliberal capitalism, based on individualism, choice and competition, weakens the values of social citizenship and undermines solidarity.⁴⁵

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability involves, at its simplest, an inherent 'capacity for continuance'.⁴⁶ That suggests a system that can function in ways that continue to achieve its desired goals over time. UBS could have positive impacts on sustainability through prevention of harm, through economic stabilisation and through helping to mitigate climate change and the depletion of natural resources.

Depending on how they are designed and delivered, and how they interact with each other, public services can prevent harm. They are arguably better able to do this than market-based systems, because their aim is not simply to sell specific commodities, but to serve the public interest. When people are healthy and able to think for themselves and function well in society, they are less likely to have problems that require costly interventions. Good education and decent housing can help to avoid illness, for example.⁴⁷ Preventative services not only help people to stay well and flourish; they also preempt spending in the medium and longer term. They generally cost less than downstream interventions that try to cope with the consequences of harm.⁴⁸ And they can reduce demand for a range of services, not just healthcare. Unemployment, anti-social behaviour and many forms of crime, for example, have roots in poverty and deprivation.⁴⁹

Public services can help to stabilise economic fluctuations by generating relatively secure employment. And, while they are vulnerable to government austerity policies, they are not directly linked to downturns in the market. By acting as a counter cyclical buffer, helping to offset the effects of market cycles and recession, they contribute to the economy's 'capacity for continuance'.

A move towards more and better public services is likely to prove more environmentally sustainable than a market based system. There is some comparative evidence that publicly funded health care has a lower carbon footprint than privately funded alternatives. For example, the US healthcare system directly accounts for 8 per cent of emissions in the US, compared with 3 per cent of UK emissions directly stemming from the NHS. This is due both to the greater macro-efficiency and lower expenditure shares of health in the UK, and to lower emissions per pound or dollar spent, presumably as a result of better allocation of resources and procurement practices.⁵⁰

Public services perform important precautionary environmental and climate functions in their own right. The impact of Hurricane Katrina on the poor and black populations of New Orleans, in contrast to the population of Cuba, affected by the same hurricane, demonstrated the importance of collective services in dealing with climate-related risks. They are also better able to pioneer and support environmentally sustainable practices, for example energy and resource efficiency in social housing and other buildings, and supporting sustainable travel for staff, and are more likely to spread these out among a wider range of institutions. They are more ready to follow guidance and directives from government to reduce emissions, because they share public interest values. Finally, there is some evidence that welfare states are generally better suited to adopting and implementing pro-environmental policies, especially where they embody ideas about shared needs and collective responsibilities.⁵¹

CHAPTER FOUR:

COMPLEXITIES AND CHALLENGES

UBS is a complex, multi-faceted idea, as we have noted. The term refers to collectively generated activities, funded or otherwise supported by the state, that enable people to meet their needs and are available to all according to need, not ability to pay. Since the goal of UBS is to strengthen and extend the range of services, much depends on how it is done in order to maximise equity, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability. In this chapter, we explore complexities inherent in the idea that point to options for meeting the challenge, and then engage with critiques of UBS that have been raised in the short space of time since the idea was first published.

MEETING DIFFERENT NEEDS

The most obvious complexity is the wide range of services that express collective responsibility for meeting shared needs. Education, healthcare and policing are obvious examples of existing services that are free to all. Childcare and adult social care can be seen as partly – and inadequately – included. Housing, libraries, legal aid and youth clubs were once included but are now residual or non-existent. Public transport services vary widely between areas and are sometimes free. Household utilities (water, sewage, energy, telephony) are regulated but not publicly funded. Other essential services such as roads and railways, street lighting and management of parks and leisure facilities are part of the picture. It is beyond the scope of this review to provide a full taxonomy.⁵²

Here, we focus mainly on social - or what have been described as 'providential' -services, as distinct from 'material' services. These comprise '(mainly) public-sector welfare activity providing the universal services available to all citizens', rather than 'the pipes, cables, networks and branches which continuously connect households to daily essentials'⁵³ We are also interested in transport and information, which in our view span both categories.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND POWER

There are multiple ways in which responsibility is exercised to ensure that services are accessible to all according to need, not ability to pay. The post-war settlement located responsibility with the state, so that services were provided directly by national or local government. Many services are now commissioned by government from private or third sector organisations. NGOs have sometimes stepped in to provide services abandoned by government. Responsibilities are thus spread out in various combinations, with government, commercial businesses, non-profit, charitable and voluntary organisations playing different roles in different settings. Meanwhile, members of the public who use or may need services are cast variously as clients, customers, consumers, partners or participants, signalling different functions and degrees of responsibility.⁵⁴

The traditional top-down model of public provision has been criticised for disempowering people who use services, discouraging civic and familial mutual aid, and encouraging dependence on the state. Advocates of market values, as well as some groups of services users, have claimed that people are empowered by exercising choice. However, experience has shown that, unless everyone has adequate information, skills and confidence, choice will only empower the better off and better educated. It has also shown that choice is often illusory because there is little or nothing to choose between. Meanwhile, some commercial organisations have amassed power by growing their share of contracted-out services, where regulation is too light or ineffective; some have come to enjoy monopolistic power.⁵⁵

There is substantial support for devolving power to local areas. This ambition is shared by widely differing political tendencies. For those on the right, the aim is to shift responsibility away from the state to locally based charities, businesses and other non-government organisations, and to reduce state funding or withdraw it altogether.⁵⁶ Around the political centre, 'localism' means shifting power from national to local government and boosting the capacity of councils to raise funds so that they can ensure that their residents' needs are met – either directly or in partnership with other local organisations and residents.⁵⁷

Communitarians and supporters of the 'commoning' movement want to encourage independent, local groups to take control of services, which they define and manage for themselves. Within these groups, there is a strong anti-state strand of politics, which sees government as part of the problem not the solution, and favours local self-determination and self-organisation as an alternative, rather than a market-based system.⁵⁸ Others favour devolution of power to local areas and want much more control in the hands of residents than some protagonists

of localism, but they seek to achieve this within a social democratic framework where the state retains three key responsibilities: to collect and distribute funds, to set and enforce quality standards, and to ensure equity of access.⁵⁹

MODELS OF OWNERSHIP AND FUNDING

Beyond direct state ownership, there is a wide range of models for organisations providing services. These include multi-national corporations, small and medium-sized businesses, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals, user-led organisations, registered charities and community groups organised around neighbourhoods or shared needs and interest. Partnerships are often formed between public bodies and NGOs for the purpose of delivering services.⁶⁰

Arrangements for resourcing services vary across the range of ownership models. Major public services are fully funded through taxation, with levels of funding varying according to government policy. In some cases, those who need the service must make a financial contribution and the level may be means-tested. Sometimes public funds are distributed to individuals as fixed payments or vouchers, which can be used to buy services they need or want (and can afford).⁶¹

In many cases, government bodies fully fund contracted-out services; they also give grants to third-sector organisations to enable them to undertake various activities and encourage them to raise further funds elsewhere. Businesses sometimes invest but only where they anticipate future dividends. Philanthropic giving is an increasingly important source of funds as austerity kicks in. Voluntary activity (unpaid labour) also provides substantial – and routinely undervalued – resources.⁶²

DEGREES OF PARTICIPATION

Most providers these days have policies on user participation or personalisation, but the extent to which people actually participate in decisions about services varies widely. This ranges from receiving information and being consulted, to being actively engaged and co-producing services at the planning, design and delivery stages. Co-production involves users and providers of services forming an equal partnership and combining experiential and codified knowledge to develop ways of meeting needs. Advocates of ‘commoning’ envisage people taking control of identifying needs and the best way to meet them, as well as design and delivery. Co-production and commoning challenge the very idea of a ‘service’, because they focus on people being part of the action to meet their own needs, rather than simply having services delivered to them - hence our reference to ‘activities’ rather than just services in our definition of UBS.⁶³

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF UBS AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE

The quality and scope of collective activities – and how far they promote equity, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability - depend on how all these variables are combined and how they interact. Perhaps the most crucial factors are the ways in which people are engaged in designing and delivering activities to meet their needs, and the role of the state in distributing funds and ensuring standards and equal access.

Funding and participation are often interdependent. As Beresford observes, austerity has been a ‘poor bedfellow’ of participation, as policy makers pay lip service while implementing spending cuts. ‘Retreat from meaningful involvement impoverishes public provision, undermines accountability and creates a vicious circle of ever-diminishing engagement and support.’⁶⁴

A positive relationship between locally generated activities and state institutions is all-important if

the ‘vicious circle’ is to be turned into a virtuous one. This points to a new dynamic between ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ politics, and the need for significant changes to the culture and practice of public authorities. In a nutshell, public service professionals would need to encourage inclusive participation and local control, welcome innovation, facilitate diverse activities, actively support local organisations to meet quality standards, rather than simply police them, and distribute adequate resources equitably between different localities.⁶⁵

CONDITIONALITY AND ENTITLEMENT

Inherent in the idea of a universal service (as distinct from a universal cash payment) is that access is conditional in that it depends on need. Who decides who needs what will vary from one service to another: eligibility may depend on professional judgement, locality or age, or on a claim by the individual – or a combination of these.

Assuming universality is country specific rather than global, who within the UK is eligible for access to services to meet their needs? Would eligibility derive from citizenship or from residence, or something else? Atkinson put forward the idea of entitlement based on resident participation,ⁱⁱ ⁶⁶ which could be seen as ‘a move towards a reimagined social citizenship, based on plural identities and rights conferred on residents rather than on passport-holders’.⁶⁷

The concept of UBS implies that eligible individuals have rights to activities that meet their needs. These are *positive* social rights to gain access to services, as distinct from *negative* civil and political rights, which usually involve freedom from various kinds of intrusion or harm. Social rights are strongly linked with the vision of social citizenship that underpins the post-war settlement, but unlike civil and political rights, they are not well established in UK law and would need further development. Equally important are ‘procedural rights’: systems and protocols that enable people to know and claim what they are entitled to by means that are fair, accessible, timely and affordable.⁶⁸

ⁱⁱ Atkinson was considering eligibility for income support, but the concept can equally apply to services.

COMMON FEATURES

Taking all these factors into consideration and looking across the range of possibilities suggested here for strengthening and extending UBS (education, healthcare, childcare and adult social care, transport, information and housing) we can see that mechanisms for design and delivery would be customised to suit the character and history of each service area. Transport services, for example, would be varied according to local geography and are less individually tailored than adult social care (at its best) – and so forth.

Yet there are certain features that should arguably be shared across all of them:

- collective responsibility for meeting shared needs, exercised through democratically elected governments;
- accessibility and affordability for all, according to need not ability to pay;
- devolution of power to the lowest appropriate level (according to the principle of subsidiarity);
- diverse models of ownership and control, with collaboration and partnerships within and between service areas;
- meaningful participation by people who use or may need to use services, alongside professionals and other front-line workers, in decisions about design and delivery;
- key role for the state in distributing funds and ensuring standards and equal access;
- clear rules and procedures for eligibility and entitlement.

CHALLENGES TO UBS

Because UBS has only recently been articulated as an option for public policy, there is so far very little direct challenge in the literature. Where it has begun to emerge, the challenges can be roughly summarised as follows. UBS would lead to big government, centralised power, paternalism and social engineering. The state is not competent to realise the vision. There is lack of clarity about how decisions would be made. It would lead to further accumulation by big business. It would be too costly to win support from the electorate and would run into strong resistance from those with an interest in the status quo. It is incompatible with capitalism and calls for radical transformation, not piecemeal reform.⁶⁹ These are all valid points. As the authors of *Foundational Economy* rightly note, ‘the devil is in the detail’.

The extent to which any UBS system enhanced the power of central government would be influenced by how far it adopted diverse models of ownership and by degrees of public participation. The state would be more or less competent to realise the vision depending on how far the development of UBS was accompanied by institutional learning and systemic change. A democratic framework for making decisions would be essential: one approach that may merit further exploration is ‘a dialogue that combines lay people along with professionals (in service delivery, for example) and other experts, and with democratically elected representatives.’⁷⁰ The challenge about maximising profits for big corporations could be met through tighter regulation and stronger commissioning criteria, as well as by making it easier for public bodies and other non-profit organisations to provide services. How far costs would meet voter opposition and resistance from current stakeholders would depend partly on whether changes were introduced incrementally, partly on voters’ attitudes to paying more taxes for public services (which as we have noted are more favourable now than they have been for some time), and partly on the political and economic environment in which changes were introduced. The question of whether UBS is incompatible with capitalism is worth asking but beyond the scope of this review.

There is clearly a great deal more work to be done to flesh out aspirations for UBS, its philosophical bases, costs and benefits, and the nuts and bolts of implementation.

CHAPTER FIVE:

POTENTIAL FOR EXTENDING UBS

Here we explore the potential for extending the principles of UBS into new areas - childcare, adult social care, transport and information. Each field is complex and marked out from the others in multiple ways.

5:1 CHILDCARE

THE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL CHILDCARE

The arguments for childcare being a shared need meriting collective responsibility are well rehearsed. There is strong evidence that childcare can have positive impacts on child development and longer-term life chances, and on employment opportunities for parents, especially mothers.⁷¹ If it is accessible to all according to need not ability pay, it can help to reduce poverty and inequality, through direct and indirect effects over time on children, parents, families and wider society. Poor children and families have more to gain from it – and are more disadvantaged without it - than those who are better off.⁷² However, the extent of these benefits depends on the quality of childcare, and poor children and families are more adversely affected by poor quality care.⁷³

The OECD points out that it is ‘part of society’s responsibility to educate children, to combat child poverty and to help children overcome educational disadvantage.’ It acknowledges a range of social benefits to individuals, which include better health, reduced likelihood of individuals engaging in risky behaviour and stronger ‘civic and social engagement’, with positive ‘spill-over effects’ for society as a whole.⁷⁴

CURRENT COSTS AND PATTERNS OF PROVISION IN THE UK

Childcare is expensive and costs are rising. For the UK, the average cost of a part-time nursery place for a child under two rose by 7% from 2017-8, to £122 a week, or more than £6,300 a year, according to the Family and Childcare Trust.⁷⁵

Some three and four year olds are entitled to up to 30 hours free childcare. Some two year olds in low income families get 15 hours free childcare. Some parents are entitled to tax relief on childcare costs. Childcare subsidy through the benefits system is very complex and parents have to pay fees upfront and wait to be reimbursed.⁷⁶

Childcare is provided by a mix of for-profit, public and voluntary organisations. Costs charged by providers vary across different parts of the UK. In most areas, the cost of full time childcare is higher than the upper limit for subsidy. Some providers reduce numbers of qualified staff, shorten opening hours or restrict availability of places to keep costs down.

Only half of local authorities in England and Wales have enough childcare for parents working full time; 33 per cent of local authorities in England, 40 per cent in Wales, and 14 per cent in Scotland, do not have enough early education for three and four year olds eligible for the universal free entitlements.⁷⁷

QUALITY

Quality of childcare is generally lower in poor areas.⁷⁸ There are no signs that quality is improving in step with rising prices, or that supply is sufficient to meet all families' needs. Experts warn that, if the aim is to maximise social and economic benefits, there should be no trade-off between quantity and quality.⁷⁹

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) and the New Economics Foundation (NEF) have argued that, in order to achieve high quality care, training and salaries for childcare workers should be comparable to those of primary school staff. Both organisations support free universal childcare available to all from the age of six months or the end of parental leave to the start of compulsory schooling. They have calculated staff training and building costs for centre-based care and considered two scenarios – one with workers paid at levels equivalent to primary school staff, and the other with workers paid at or above the Living Wage.⁸⁰ The most recent estimate finds that total gross costs amount to £55bn and £33bn respectively, representing 3% and 1.8% of GDP. Offset by employment gains, increased tax revenues and reduced income support payments, annual net funding would be £6.1bn (a reduction of 89%) for the first scenario, and £1.7bn (a reduction of 95%) for the second. The WBG points out that these net costs are smaller than those incurred by a range of tax breaks introduced since 2010 and fall far short of revenues lost through tax avoidance, which are conservatively estimated at £34bn a year.

RETURNS ON INVESTMENT

These calculations only take account of immediate outcomes, while investment in universal childcare 'would certainly provide longer-term improvements in productivity for both the children and their parents as well as reduced spending on education (on remediation, etc.)'.⁸¹

Longer-term social and economic dividends have been estimated using Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodology. One such exercise forecast the impacts of a scheme in Cambridgeshire, where funded childcare was provided for 1,200 disadvantaged two-year-olds. The cost over five

years was £3,642,624; the estimated return on investment over the same period was £30,585,208, 'delivering a value of £8.40 for every £1 of investment'.⁸²

FOR-PROFIT PROVIDERS

The role of for-profit providers has a bearing on both cost and quality, 'because resources are siphoned off for shareholders rather than invested in staff wages and other quality inputs'.⁸³ There is no evidence that competition between commercial providers drives down costs without impairing quality, while there is some evidence that state-maintained and voluntary sectors provide higher quality childcare than for-profit providers.⁸⁴ Where for-profit provision is combined with a demand-led, fee-paying system, the observed effects are 'a rise in the fees charged by providers, a drop in standards in poorer areas, and an increase in inequalities of access'.⁸⁵

PARENTAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Parents meet the costs of childcare by paying fees and sometimes by making in-kind contributions. Where fees are concerned, there is clear evidence that free and universal services have much higher enrolment rates than services with a fee.⁸⁶ Means-tested systems encounter a range of risks, including stigmatising poor families, reducing uptake, inhibiting social mixing, and creating work disincentives for families who may forfeit entitlement if their earnings rise. Distilling lessons from eight OECD countries, Stewart et al point out that in Norway where childcare is universal, very high participation among younger children from disadvantaged backgrounds has been achieved by combining 'a legal guarantee to a place for all children with fees that are both low overall and income-related'; however, 'even low fees appear to deter access compared to free provision'.⁸⁷

The Family and Childcare Trust promotes 'parent-led childcare', which can help parents to access high quality care that 'supports them to work and boosts their children's learning, particularly in areas where parents are underserved by the childcare system.' Parents can contribute by starting up and managing non-profit childcare, as well by carrying out 'day to day tasks of delivering childcare to help keep running costs low'.⁸⁸

NEF has argued for more parental involvement in childcare combined with shorter hours of paid work for all women and men. Assuming that parents spend the hours released from paid work looking after their children, NEF's calculations show that reducing the standard working week to 30 hours could cut the overall costs of providing higher quality formal childcare by some 44%, from £37.5 billion to £21 billion a year.⁸⁹

These options suggest ways in which services could be more closely integrated with everyday family life, combining paid and unpaid labour to reduce the risk of high prices and low capacity locking poor families out of formal childcare, while enabling parents – especially including fathers – to spend more time with their children.

VOUCHERS OR SERVICES?

Government-backed vouchers for childcare were available to working parents until the scheme was closed to new entrants in 2018 having been described as a 'shambles'.⁹⁰ This voucher system offered tax relief as a partial subsidy for services. Vouchers can do little to iron out inequalities unless they are weighted in favour of low-income parents and extended to non-working parents. They help to generate and support a market in childcare. As we have noted, both means testing and for-profit provision have some negative impacts.

DISTRIBUTION AND EQUITY

There is almost always a risk of disadvantaged parents finding it more difficult to gain access to quality childcare. NEF and Action for Children – among others - recommend that universal childcare be combined with targeted interventions for vulnerable families, such as outreach programmes to encourage take-up, higher income benefits and programmes to support parents.⁹¹ In addition, all childcare should be culturally sensitive and flexible to suit different working patterns. This approach is seen as preferable to restricting publicly funded childcare to disadvantaged children, in view of the many risks associated with selective and/or means tested provision, noted earlier.

TOWARDS UNIVERSAL AND EQUITABLE CHILD CARE

Considering different ways of organising and funding a universal childcare system, what is the most promising combination of features to ensure that the effects are both equitable and positive for society as a whole? In brief, we suggest such a system would include:

- government regulation and support for well-trained and adequately remunerated staff and well-equipped premises to ensure high-quality standards;
- additional targeted interventions to encourage take-up by disadvantaged families;
- adequate and continuing public investment, with full account taken of longer-term social and economic dividends.
- direct government funding through local authorities, with minimal fees or none;
- minimal or no involvement of for-profit providers;
- encouraging more in-kind parental contributions, combined with a shorter standard working week

5.2 ADULT SOCIAL CARE

THE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL ADULT SOCIAL CARE



Adults who are disabled, frail or vulnerable need care from others. That care is essential if they are to maintain their health and autonomy, and capacity for social participation. Close relatives often provide the necessary care, but in many cases they cannot do so – either because they lack the skills or resources, or because it impairs their capacity to meet their own needs.

On these grounds, secure, good quality adult social care should be available to all, regardless of ability to pay. It is a collective responsibility for dealing with risks that we all share across our lifetimes. The wellbeing of society as whole depends on its collective capacity to care for those who cannot look after themselves.

CURRENT CARE PROVISION

Numbers needing adult social care are growing rapidly, largely because people are living longer and many have multiple chronic conditions that intensify as they get older. Around 3.5 million older people currently need care with numbers projected to rise to 5.9 million by 2040.⁹² Services include a mix of home-based care services, day centres and full-time residential care. What people need is almost infinitely varied, with different levels of intensity fluctuating over time.

The adult social care system depends heavily on a huge cohort of informal carers who work unpaid to look after their relatives and loved ones. Around 6.5 million carers in the UK provide care whose value has been estimated at between £57 and £100 billion a year.⁹³ Informal carers need varying kinds of support, too.

Services are provided by public, voluntary and private organisations, with for-profit companies rapidly growing their share of the care market. Some private firms go to the wall because financial pressures on local authorities mean they don't pay enough for commissioned services; others make large profits – thanks in part to local government subsidies – even when standards of care are unacceptably poor. As one care-related charity put it: “We have seen company after company making millions whilst on the frontline vulnerable people are left without the basics to sustain life. Care staff are paid a pittance and asked to do the impossible with too few staff every day.”⁹⁴ Concerns have also been raised about financialisation in the care sector, where private equity firms rush to acquire businesses that seem to promise rich returns, then run up debts that lead to closures.⁹⁵

COSTS

The cost of a place in a residential care home varies widely by location, averaging at around £600 a week and £800 if you need nursing care. The cost of care in your own home also varies by location and depends on what you need, with the price of a carer at around £15-18 an hour and a hot meal costing around £4.50.⁹⁶

Getting any of this paid for by government depends on a local authority assessment of needs, income and capital. If your capital is worth more than £23,250 you have to pay the full price yourself; if you have capital worth less than £14,250, you qualify for free care and in between you may get a partial subsidy. People needing care at home can claim an allowance from government, worth up to £85.60 a week, as can their carers, with eligibility based on need rather than income.⁹⁷

In Scotland, unlike other parts of the UK, you get free personal care if you are over 65 and free nursing care at any age, if you are assessed and found to need it by your local authority.⁹⁸

QUALITY AND DISTRIBUTION

Public policy has endorsed ‘personalisation’ in social care (as well as in healthcare), which is said to promote ‘choice and control... dignity and wellbeing...self-determination and self-direction’ and a relationship between those who work in and use services based on ‘based on respect and a recognition of equality’.⁹⁹ This was in part a response to the disability movement’s campaign for more choice and control. It led to some people being given personal budgets or direct payments rather than services, to enable them to buy what they need from private or third sector providers.

While personalisation is supposed to improve the quality of care, austerity policies are working in the opposite direction. Between 2010 and 2017, expenditure on adult social care fell in real terms by 5.8%, from £15.8 billion to £14.9 billion.¹⁰⁰ The scope and cost of available social care vary widely between areas and quality has declined overall. The combined effects of spending cuts, rising demand and the pressures of contracting out to for-profit providers, have made it increasingly difficult for local authorities to fulfil the promise of personalisation or meet quality standards.

Deteriorating quality combined with means-tested state subsidies and increasingly strict assessment criteria mean that all but the rich struggle to get the care they need. Lower and middle-income families, except the very poor, can forfeit all their life savings and property values to pay for care. Workers are put under increasing pressure to do more for less, and people using services at home experience ‘lack of continuity, never seeing the same person twice [...] rushed visits—maybe quarter of an hour rushing in and out—with no time to establish a proper relationship, let alone real communication’.¹⁰¹

The government watchdog, the Care Quality Commission, warned in 2017 that adult social care in England was ‘approaching a tipping point’, driven by ‘a growing and ageing population, more people with increasingly complex conditions and in a challenging economic climate a greater demand on services but more problems for people in accessing care’.¹⁰² And things may well get worse: a funding gap between what’s required for adult social care and what’s available is expected to rise to more than £2.2 billion by 2020.¹⁰³

LONG-TERM CARE IN GERMANY

Germany has a long term care insurance (LTCI) scheme featuring universal social rights within a strong cost-containment framework. The overall budget, contribution rates, ceilings, benefit levels and eligibility criteria are all fixed by Federal law. For those in work, employers pay half the premium while the retired pay full contributions, thus helping to address inter-generational equity concerns. LTCI membership is compulsory and non-employed people are covered by employed householder insurance contributions. The scheme acknowledges that long-term care is a social risk requiring social protection and has cross-party political support. After 25 years of operation, despite population ageing, an extension of the scope of LTCI, and increases in benefit levels, contributions have only increased by 0.8% of salaries.¹⁰⁴

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Although adult social care is as much part of the ‘social infrastructure’ as childcare, it can prove harder to argue the case for investment in terms of long-term social and economic dividends. Nevertheless, there are potentially multiple gains for society and for the economy. Good quality care services can improve the wellbeing of elderly and vulnerable people and their carers; they can help some family members who would otherwise be trapped at home to take paid work; they can enrich local communities by enabling more people to participate; they can prevent or delay conditions getting worse and needing more intensive interventions; they can help to reduce demand and free up beds in the NHS, which is estimated to cost the NHS around £3 billion a year.¹⁰⁵ They can also provide secure rewarding paid work for professional carers and others employed in the care sector, with multiplier effects for the economy.¹⁰⁶ All these potential gains, together with the ethical case for looking after disabled, frail and vulnerable members of society, add up to a strong justification for investment.

MOVING TOWARDS UNIVERSAL, EQUITABLE AND HIGH QUALITY ADULT SOCIAL CARE

The challenge of how to achieve high quality services has dogged policy makers for several decades. There have been proposals, for example, to merge health and social care so that both are fully funded through taxation; to cap personal expenditure on social care at £35,000; to fully fund personal care (but not accommodation) through taxation; to recover care costs through inheritance tax down to the last £100,000; to introduce hypothecated taxation, and to raise extra funds through a ‘social care premium’ for employees over 40, to which employers would contribute. None of these has been implemented.

We suggest in summary that a system of adult social care that is universally accessible, high quality and equitable would:

- give high priority to upstream preventative measures that enable people to stay well and independent for as long as possible;
- make a long-term commitment to public investment, with full account taken of the wider social and economic benefits;
- build a well-trained, highly valued and appropriately paid workforce;
- create a system that complements and supports - but does not displace - informal carers, recognising their value and working closely with them;
- use 'personalisation' as a route to empowering service users, not a vehicle for marketisation;
- steadily reduce dependence on for-profit providers;
- make sure that contributions from people using services are transparent, fair and affordable, with public support funded through taxation to keep them at minimal levels for all;
- learn from other countries, e.g. Germany and Scotland.

5.3 PUBLIC TRANSPORT



THE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL, FREE BUS SERVICES

Mobility is essential for meeting basic human needs and attaining a reasonable standard of living.¹⁰⁷

If you cannot get from A to B, you cannot access healthcare and other services, find and keep paid employment, meet family and friends, and generally participate in society. People living in rural areas are far less likely to have access to public transport and often have to travel distances that are unsuitable for walking or cycling. People on low incomes spend a much larger proportion of their income on transport than those who are better off. They depend much more on public transport, and are affected more negatively if they cannot get access to it or find it unaffordable.

There is thus a case for transport being available to all who need it, regardless of ability to pay. Free local buses have been proposed as the best way to achieve this goal. There is also a strong sustainability case for universal buses, insofar as they discourage private car use and thereby help to reduce GHG emissions.

CURRENT PROVISION

Bus services are generally poor outside major conurbations. They are sparse or non-existent in many rural areas.¹⁰⁸ They represent a small and declining proportion of all travel modes: 5% compared with 62% by car. Yet they remain the most widely used mode of public transport, accounting for 4,941 million passenger journeys, or 59% of journeys, compared with 21% by rail and the rest by underground, tram or light railway.

The UK deregulated local bus transport (outside London) in 1985, a move that marked it out from other developed countries. The idea at the time was to ‘encourage competition between a multitude of small private operators, with positive effects on public transport provision’, but the opposite occurred. After a brief flurry of over-provision and fierce competition, ownership consolidated so that by 2011 the four largest operators (FirstGroup, Stagecoach, Arriva and Go-Ahead) together had a 65% market share. Smaller operators were pushed out, along with unprofitable routes; poor interconnections between services and lack of inter-ticketing made bus travel less convenient, while prices went up and government subsidies went down.¹⁰⁹

All this amounts to a form of market failure that calls for more, rather than less public intervention: ‘Providing high standards on the entire public transport network requires coordination and cross-subsidies between different modes, routes and operations, and in a competitive market there is no incentive for operators to do so.’¹¹⁰ Attempts to re-regulate bus services (outside London, see below) have so far failed, not least because they are locked in by powerful incumbents who benefit from the status quo and lobby against reforms.¹¹¹

COSTS AND SUBSIDIES

Most bus services are run on a commercial basis, but some are supported by local councils. Between 2010 and 2018, government spending on supported bus services fell by 45%, from £3.9 million to £1.9 million, and 3,347 bus routes were reduced or withdrawn altogether, with ‘dramatic impacts on accessibility for households without cars, notably in rural areas’.^{111, 112}

Some bus travel is already free: at the last count there were 9.9 million concessionary travel passes, giving rise to 970 million bus journeys.¹¹⁴ The concession, which is for off-peak bus travel for older and disabled people, is protected by legislation but inadequately supported by national government. It has proved very popular but many councils have struggled to maintain the services.

The Local Government Association warned: ‘Unless the Government commits to fully funding concessionary fares, elderly and disabled people will be left stranded with a free bus pass in one hand but no local buses to travel on in the other’.¹¹⁵

Analysis for the Institute for Global Prosperity found that extending the concessionary bus scheme to the whole UK population across would cost around £5.2 billion and would be worth much more to low-income families.¹¹⁶

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON

In Greater London, unlike anywhere else in the UK, a public agency, Transport for London (TfL), has strategic control, and contracts with private operating firms on the basis of quality as well as cost. This ‘natural experiment’ on the impacts of different models has produced clear results: while bus travel per capita rapidly increased in London over two decades, it declined everywhere else, including other metropolitan areas.¹¹⁷ Empirical studies across comparable countries show that public regulation is the norm and produces better results in terms of affordability and user satisfaction.¹¹⁸

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

The state of bus services outside London has a strong negative influence on poverty and inequality. Low-income households without access to suitable bus transport have little option but to get a car, in spite of the cost. They typically have high levels of debt, and are unable to reduce their car use when fuel prices go up, piling on the economic stress.¹¹⁹ Without a car they are even more severely disadvantaged when there is no public transport to enable them to get to work, to access services or interact with other people.

No less important is the fact that substituting cars for buses is ecologically unsustainable. Greenhouse gas emissions from use of cars and taxis is more than seven times higher than from use of buses.¹²⁰

Free bus passes have been criticised for ineffectual targeting because they include wealthy pensioners and exclude others in greater need such as unemployed people; and for lining the pockets private providers, with pass holders apparently accounting for 45% of bus operators' revenues.¹²¹ Some schemes have been found to displace active travel by foot and bicycle, although there is evidence that free bus travel encourages people to be more active because they get out more and walk to and between bus routes.^{122,123,124}

Overall, there appear to be more positive than negative impacts, especially when account is taken of social and other non-monetary effects. A 2016 evaluation of the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS) concluded that the poor benefited disproportionately, that there were significant improvements in access to services and socialisation for pass holders, and that it increased their disposable income.¹²⁵ In addition, there was found to be non-monetary social value, calculated at '£3.84 per return bus trip for concessionary travel pass holders and £8.17 for other bus users (in 2010 prices)'.¹²⁶

Analysis by KPMG for Greener Journeys found that free bus travel led to 'substantial wider benefits, particularly health benefits from increased physical activity – as people taking public transport walk longer distances than people travelling by car, and improved labour market accessibility from improved service quality'.¹²⁷

Another study found that mobility for older people brought multiple benefits, including increased independence, reduced isolation and improved health. It was both intrinsically good for older people and facilitated much of their contribution to society. Improving accessibility to public transport for older people would thus 'be a good investment in a valuable asset'.¹²⁸

A study of the impact of TfL's free travel pass scheme has found that it successfully combats social exclusion by increasing the sense of belonging to the community and to London.¹²⁹

For the public at large there are also positive impacts. A social value analysis of the impacts of local bus services found that the economic, social and environmental return for each £1 spent by government ranged from £2.00 to £3.80 for revenue expenditure and from £4.20 to £8.10 for capital expenditure. Much depended on the nature of the intervention and local conditions, but it was nevertheless clear that 'investment in local bus markets generates significant benefits to passengers, other road users and the wider community'.¹³⁰

An econometric study by Leeds University found that a 10% improvement in local bus service connectivity in the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods across England would lead to increased income for more than 22,000 people; nearly 10,000 more people in work; more than 7,000 more people attaining adult skills; a 0.7% increase in post-16 education; and 2,596 fewer years of life lost.¹³¹

EXAMPLES OF FREE BUS SCHEMES IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Free public transport was introduced in the Estonian capital of Tallinn in 2013. A study of the first year of the scheme found that public transport usage increased by 14% and the mobility of low-income residents had improved.¹³² Studies of other free schemes in Belgium and Templin, Germany produced a range of useful insights. For example, where a goal is to reduce the use of cars, providing free public transport is not enough: there would also need to be strong disincentives for car users. Many people who made more use of buses would otherwise have walked or cycled: this reduced physical activity, but also reduced the volume of road accidents.¹³³ In Templin, there was a huge increase in ridership, much of it by children and young people, referred to as 'joy-riding by kids' and suggesting increased opportunity for anti-social behaviour.¹³⁴ But this finding should be seen in relation to the study of young people in London, where bus journeys were seen as a valuable social experience that could also encourage physical activity between bus rides.¹³⁵

The city of Luxembourg is due to lift all fares on trains, trams and buses in 2020. It is known to suffer from some of the worst traffic congestion in the world, with 110,000 residents, a further 400,000 commuting into the city to work and car drivers spending an average of 33 hours a year in traffic jams. The city authorities reportedly expect to save money on collecting fares and policing ticket purchases, but have yet to decide what to do about first and second-class compartments.¹³⁶

MOVING TOWARDS FREE, UNIVERSAL BUS SERVICES

Overall, the evidence suggests that a combination of measures is required to maximise social, economic and environmental benefits of free, universal bus services. These include

- adequate and sustained financial support from government
- strategic local control by public bodies, following the TfL model
- regulation to ensure that bus routes are conveniently placed, well connected and regular, with adequate coverage in rural areas, as far as possible
- routes and schedules planned to facilitate social interaction and access to other services, not just shopping and employment
- restrictions on private motorised transport in urban areas.

5.4 INFORMATION



THE CASE FOR ACCESS TO DIGITAL INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

Smartphones and laptops are now considered a necessary part of household expenditure.¹³⁷ The UK government is aiming to put as many of its services online as possible with a 'digital by default' strategy that is 'so straightforward and convenient that all those who can use them will choose to do so whilst those who can't are not excluded.'¹³⁸ The United Nations recognises 'the global and open nature of the Internet as a driving force in accelerating progress towards development in its various forms, including in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals'.¹³⁹ The EU has three strategic objectives for connectivity by 2025: 'for Europe's growth and jobs, Gigabit connectivity for places driving socio-economic 5G developments; for Europe's competitiveness, coverage for all urban areas and all major terrestrial transport paths; for Europe's cohesion, access for all European households to Internet connectivity offering at least 100 Mbps'.¹⁴⁰

Going online enables people to get access to public services, to learn, to find work, to connect with family and friends, and to participate in society.¹⁴¹ A systematic review of literature on unequal use of information and communications technology concluded that 'considering how much public value it can create, it can be seen as a public good'.¹⁴² On these grounds and others it is argued that access should be for all, regardless of income or location.

QUALITY AND EQUITY

Access to the Internet in the UK is extremely uneven across the country and often very poor in rural areas. While 'rural communities are most in need of improved digital connectivity to compensate for their remoteness ... they are least connected and included'.¹⁴³ Telecommunications companies are not prepared to meet the high costs of covering greater distances and 'rural areas are served last, if at all.' Governments have allowed market failure 'by promoting the free market rationale and using competition as the instrument for improving digital connectivity, instead of defining new technologies as utilities'.¹⁴⁴

Ensuring equity involves several factors: along with Internet connectivity; there is the speed and quality of the connection and the extent to which people are able and willing to make use of it. A 2018 survey found that 11.3 million people did not have basic digital skills, and 4.3 million had no digital skills at all. Age, gender and low income were the main predictors of low skills.¹⁴⁵

In December 2018, the UK government announced its intention to bring in legislation to ensure that universal high speed broadband is delivered by a regulatory Universal Service Obligation (USO), giving everyone in the UK access to speeds of at least 10 Mbps by 2020.¹⁴⁶ The spread, speed and quality of connection can only be distributed on an equitable basis through government regulation and – where markets fail – by governments taking control of provision. If strategies aimed at equipping people to maximise benefits from Internet connection are to be effective, they must be thoroughly inclusive, and must start from where people are, work with local knowledge and, where possible, put local people in control of development.¹⁴⁷

COSTS AND BENEFITS

The costs of being connected are estimated to be £5 a week per household for broadband and £3.50 a week per adult for calls. The overall aggregate cost of providing information services free at the point of use is calculated as between £16.5 billion and £19.9 billion.¹⁴⁸

ICT is seen as 'increasing important for everyday tasks such as shopping, banking and booking medical appointments'. It is said to lead to 'more efficient management of infrastructure and resources, and new business models.' The UK government has been making 25 public services 'digital by default', with the aim of making them simpler and faster to access. It estimates that digitizing services could save £1.7 billion a year.¹⁴⁹ A 15-year study of 35 OECD countries found a strong positive relationship between broadband investment and economic growth through information exchange, new services and telework, which together helped to increase GDP by an average of 0.38% annually.¹⁵⁰

MOVING TOWARDS UNIVERSAL FREE ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

In summary, establishing a universal service in this area would require:

- that it be recognised as a public good and treated as a utility rather than a consumer good.
- All other public services, including access to universal credit and other social security benefits, should be geared for use online in ways that are immediately accessible and convenient for all.
- Stronger regulation and government support aimed at equitable distribution of the spread, speed and quality of connection.
- Facilitation of locally generated initiatives to make access inclusive and to support appropriate learning, especially for those currently excluded.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

This is a resource for the growing numbers who are showing interest in UBS from theoretical and practical perspectives. It is intended to scope out the territory, to identify issues and complexities, to bring problems and questions to the surface, and to stimulate further scrutiny, study and debate.

The contents of this review do not amount to a definitive appraisal of the pros and cons of universal basic services. What is offered here is some analysis of selected literature on related subjects and discussions: there is very little on UBS itself, because little has yet been written on the topic. The Institute for Global Prosperity and the New Economics Foundation will continue working together and encouraging others to carry this forward.

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CONTACT

UBS-hub.org

✉ info@igpspn.org

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