



Public Services Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: One-off public evidence session with service users on the government response to the committee's first report, *A Critical Juncture for Public Services: Lessons from COVID-19*

Thursday 10 June 2021

10.35 am

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Members present: Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top (The Chair); Lord Bichard; Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth; Lord Davies of Gower; Lord Filkin; Lord Hunt of Kings Heath; Baroness Pinnock; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Tyler of Enfield; Baroness Wyld; Lord Young of Cookham.

Evidence Session No. 2

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 6 - 11

Witnesses

[I:](#) Agatha Anyiwo; Tamsin Phipps.

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Examination of witnesses

Agatha Anyiwo and Tamsin Phipps.

The Chair: Welcome again to Agatha and Tamsin, who are part of this morning's session. We are going back to hear the stories from people we talked to last year about their experiences since we last talked to them. We are delighted to see you again, Agatha and Tamsin. For this session, my colleague Claire Tyler will be in charge and lead off on the questioning.

Q6 Baroness Tyler of Enfield: A very warm welcome to Agatha and Tamsin. Thank you very much for giving up your time. We really appreciate it. I wanted to kick off by asking what your experience of the last 12 months has been like and, in particular, whether you have been able to get the support you needed from public services.

Agatha Anyiwo: Good morning, everyone. The general question is about what we got from public services. I do not really understand that question, because public services for people like us are totally different from voluntary services. When we think of public services, we always think of the council, the Government or people like that. Before the lockdown was eased in April, we were categorised as vulnerable people who are told to lock down. We are not able to see anyone. We are not able to communicate with anyone. We are just locked down, as I said in my last testimony.

Since April this year, the lockdown has been eased and a lot of things are now happening for people like us. We can see our families. We can communicate with them. The thing that has changed is the digital use. A lot of the services now are digital. Luckily for people like us, we can use the computer and emails. I have to learn how to use Microsoft Teams. I have to learn how to use Zoom, which I find very interesting. I have to call my son to come and teach me how to use this Zoom, how to install it on my computer and everything. They even got me a tablet.

Because of that, I have to use Zoom for health and exercise. Voluntary services have actually created Zoom exercises for people like us, so I go to Zoom exercises three times a week. It is very interesting. I noticed that the GPs use digital, Zoom, to have meetings and things like that. They call you on the phone. I have visited my GP only twice since the ease-down and for the rest she calls me on the phone for anything I want.

The same thing happens in hospitals. They call you at home. They give you the results of your tests. I have been to tests twice. They give me the results by phone. When I go to the hospital, I follow all the things that they do: wash your hands, wear a face mask and everything. They are very thorough in the way they move you from one department to another in hospital. That is the public services. They are very good. People who come into hospitals are monitored, from the entrance to

where they are going, and how they are going out again. Everything is very good.

I have noticed that, because of this digital use all the time, your eyes get tired. In one day, I might have four Zooms—go to one meeting or one exercise class. I have to go to the chemist to get a spray to spray in my eyes to make it easier for me.

Another thing I noticed is that, since the ease-down, I find it difficult to travel on public transport. I went to the bus stop. By the time the bus arrived it was too full, so I panicked and came out again. I told the driver. I said, "I'm sorry. There are too many people in the bus". Half of them are not wearing facemasks and nobody has stopped them. Maybe they are exempt; I do not know, but it panicked me, so I came out of the bus. When another bus came, it was about half full. Then I was able to come in, use my facemask and sit down. Those are the types of things that I have noticed. I have been out very few times to take a bus to the dentist or to hospital.

Another thing is the TfL bus stops. People like us have not been asked. When they want to go to the bus stop, they realise that the bus stop is closed, with no consultation. We wonder why they are closing some bus stops without consulting older people, who have already visualised that they will walk this distance to the bus stop with their walking stick. When you get there, there is a sign showing that it is closed.

I have told the local councillor about what TfL is doing. They said they will discuss it with them. This has been going on now for about four or five months. They just go round and remove bus stops, and I do not know why. That is one thing that I notice and I do not think that is very fair for older people especially.

Q7 **Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** That has been fantastic. You have already very helpfully anticipated a couple of other things I wanted to ask you about digital services. I wondered whether I could invite Tamsin to come in. To clarify the question, it was about what your personal experience has been like of accessing the help you need, whether it is from public services or the voluntary sector.

Tamsin Phipps: Good morning. Sorry, I am standing in a field in Devon, so I apologise for my connection and the very grey sky behind me. I have been really lucky. I have had amazing support from the voluntary services, who provided me with food to start off with and then remained in contact with me for several months. My GP has been tremendous. I have problems with my mental health and he would call me just to check how I was. I have had no face-to-face appointments with him, but I have had blood tests face to face, obviously. I had an operation in March.

I cannot fault what has happened to me, but I am lucky. I have my own car, a smartphone and digital connections, so I have been quite lucky in what I have been able to do. I have been very lonely. I live on my own. However, I could not fault anybody for the support they have given me.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: On that point you raised about loneliness, have either your local authority or the voluntary groups been providing any friendship circles or anything like that for you?

Tamsin Phipps: Ironically, I work for a charity that provides a befriending service for older people. From their point of view, I have seen a massive increase in the needs and the requirement to support people who are lonely. However, it is slightly different. I cannot really say to them, "Could you actually support me as well?" Outwith me, we have been able to support a lot of people. I just miss the company, to be honest, and seeing people. Zoom is great, but actually you feel quite remote and there is a false atmosphere. As Agatha said, you get sick and tired of seeing people in little square boxes, to be honest.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Would I be right in thinking, from what you have said, that you were broadly happy? When you were receiving services digitally, not face to face, you were broadly happy with that.

Tamsin Phipps: I was. I had a problem. Obviously I would not have been shielding unless I had a health problem. They responded to my health problem instantly. I have a one-man-band GP in Reading and I have to admit that they have been absolutely brilliant.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Thanks for that. It is very good to hear that your GP and the local voluntary sector have been so good. Have you had any interaction with the local authority?

Tamsin Phipps: No, I have not. The local authority in our area handed over the responsibility to the voluntary sector, community groups, to deliver the food et cetera. Apart from the odd email from my local authority, I have had nothing from it whatsoever.

Q8 **Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** Right. Thank you for that. Agatha, I so sympathise with what you were saying about all those Zoom meetings and the impact it has on your eyes, but also the experience of getting a bus. I agree with you that that felt quite scary the first time I actually did it. How did you feel about the fact that those services were not being provided face to face? Would you be happy for that to continue, or do you want services to go back to being face to face when it is safe to do so?

Agatha Anyiwo: When it is safe to do so, I prefer it face to face. I volunteer a lot for my local charity, Age UK. They are actually working in their offices. They have not opened it to people like us who are volunteers. When everything is back to normal and we are able to continue to do all our voluntary services, people like us will be able to go out. Even in my local council, I volunteer as one of the appeals people during school admissions. We do that face to face, but at the moment we are doing it digitally, which is not very good.

People like me, who are so happy to do voluntary work, prefer them face to face. At the moment, we are learning to do everything digitally. I am not blaming them. That is how the situation is at the moment. It is not ideal. Face to face is better.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: You gave us a very full answer, with some really helpful thoughts about different services. You emphasised the point that it has been different at different points of lockdown. Overall, would it be possible for you to sum up whether your experience was better or worse during lockdown, or was it just different?

Agatha Anyiwo: I would not say that it was better during lockdown. It was just different. It makes you realise the importance of adjusting to every situation. As a human being, you have to adjust to any situation. During lockdown, a lot of us adjusted. Now that it is easing down, we are adjusting again. You embrace the change. That is what we are doing. To me, that is the only way to move forward with this terrible pandemic.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Because you raised the issue, what additional help do you think people who are not familiar with technology and computers need, in order to access services digitally?

Agatha Anyiwo: They need help. I have already pointed that out. The local council and Age UK are going through all the members of their group to teach them how to use digital access. Regardless of the pandemic, digital access is becoming very important in all aspects of our lives. It is so difficult if you do not know anything about that. People are scared. I belong to an organisation called Older People's Forum in Wandsworth. Half the people in that group have not used digital before.

It is one of those things that the council has now realised. It is now getting volunteering groups, like Age UK, Regenerate-RISE and KLS, to take on the role of teaching people how to answer emails or fill in a form, going into their homes. They then lend them an iPad or a small computer, to teach them how to use it.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: That is very good to hear, so thank you very much for that. Tamsin, do you have any points you would like to add about the help people might need in digital access?

Tamsin Phipps: We need to remember that there are a lot of people out there for whom the telephone and the computer are not a way forward. They may be deaf or have disabilities. We have to think more broadly about things. I actually work for Age UK. As part of my job, we have had to send teams out. I have not been able to, but my staff have had to go out into people's homes to help fill in forms like carer's allowances and attendance allowances, because they simply cannot do it digitally. There is still a place for face to face and we need to remember that.

We had a very sad story the other day. Somebody went out for a meal and they could not get served because they did not have a smartphone. The only way they could have been served was to put their smartphone against an app to do such and such. A lot of people do not have those. A lot of older folk do not have smartphones, so they are being cut out from society. We need to remember that there are a lot of people who cannot afford a smartphone, who do not have the capability of using it, or who

are deaf or blind and cannot see that. We really need to think about our older generation, in terms of how we support them as well.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: That is an incredibly important point. Thank you very much to both of you. I am sure some of my colleagues would like to come in as well.

Q9 Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: Thank you to Agatha and Tamsin. Thank you for being so positive. There have been many important changes you have made to your lives. Things are going back to normal, in inverted commas, but is there anything over the last year or so that you have seen that we should try to keep hold of? We have talked about some of the digital services, Agatha's exercise classes for example. Are there some things that you think you really could make use of going forward, as we come out of the pandemic?

Agatha Anyiwo: The digital exercise classes are very good. I know that sometimes face to face is good, but they should have both together, the face-to-face one and the digital one, because of the travel involved. It is a long journey to get to some places where they do the exercises for older people, such as council halls. A lot of people in the digital classes are quite happy to continue it. Those who can go to the classes can go and those who can do digital can do digital at home.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: You are a very good advert for it.

Agatha Anyiwo: We talked about it and they said, "Can we please keep both?"

Tamsin Phipps: I would agree with that. The digital exercise classes have been good. One of the things we should keep hold of is the community spirit and the community navigators, who have been helping link people together. If that gets lost, the community slides back into not knowing their neighbours or the people in their road, who are very important to know. From my point of view, with what I do for a living, they have really helped us out, in terms of making sure that the older person is safe in their road.

Q10 The Chair: Agatha, I wanted to ask you a little more about the public transport. It is a big issue, particularly if you live in London. Even if you have a car, it is quite difficult to get to some places, and parking is now not encouraged in a lot of places in London, so public transport is really important. How is your councillor following it up and are you confident that they will listen more to what you are saying at TfL? Have you had any feedback yet?

Agatha Anyiwo: The feedback I have from the councillor is that they are still talking to TfL about it. They are changing the use of some roads to pedestrian near restaurants, so they can put the chairs on the pavement. That is the one that is near me. I do not know about all other parts of London, but for the one that is near me that is the excuse the councillor gave me. They said that it is only temporary, for six months, to see whether it works, and they will return the bus stops to how they were

before, but I do not know whether they will do that. We are still within the six months where they say they are trying pedestrianisation of a road. That is what they are doing now. They did not consult us. That is why.

The Chair: No, they did not. I know that is a big issue at the moment. What about on the buses? Is it virtually impossible to get a bus now? Are they now as busy as they ever were?

Agatha Anyiwo: They are becoming very busy, actually. During the lockdown, I did not go on the bus at all. Because of the easing that is going on, I said, "Let me try buses". I had an appointment at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, so I said, "Let me take a bus", but I had to wait for two buses, which were full, before I could enter the bus, because I was scared of sitting beside somebody without a facemask. That is my experience. Sometimes I will be at the bus stop. I will be there until about two or three buses pass me before I enter. I am sorry; that is why it affects me.

The Chair: I have had that experience.

Agatha Anyiwo: They do not police those who wear facemasks or not. They do not.

The Chair: Yes, and one of the bus drivers got attacked early on for challenging somebody, so they do not want to do it any more.

Agatha Anyiwo: It is bad. It is really bad.

Q11 **Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:** I wanted to come back to this question of the problem where people cannot get access to smartphones and how they are being more and more excluded from all parts of society, particularly in so many areas in health and care at the moment. Do you think health and care services should give smartphones to people who, without one, would not really get anywhere and get access? I have been looking at the Age UK website, following the comments, and seeing the incredible work it is doing, but of course people also need to be able to get access to a smartphone to make it work.

Tamsin Phipps: We have a project in Reading, where I work with them. We have been able to help about 30 people with this. There are thousands of people who need some kind of smartphone access. Most of the older people we work with have one of the small Nokia type of texting-only phones. For example, if they are in conversation with their doctor and he or she says, "Please send me a photograph of the injury you have", they cannot do that, so they are cut off. We need, or the country needs, to look at a way of extending that. People simply cannot get hold of them and cannot afford to have them.

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath: Do we also need smartphones with big lettering? Certainly I find that it is increasingly difficult.

Tamsin Phipps: Yes, me too. It is, and there are different apps and stuff that can help people with digit problems—as in fingers—and eyesight problems. Again, you need to have that knowledge to be able to do that. It is a training process as well as a digital phone process as well. You need to have both.

Agatha Anyiwo: When using digital and Zoom, we found that many people prefer tablets or iPads to smartphones, because they are bigger. They are able to use a lot of the things that they were taught to use on an iPad or tablets. Most of them do not like the smartphones because they are too small. They cannot see anything on there. In all the digital training that is going on around here, they use tablets or iPads.

The Chair: Thank you very much. When we talked to you last time, I really thought that the supermarkets needed to be listening because of the amount they were charging for home deliveries. They did eventually reduce that. Today, the IT companies and the phone companies need to be listening to hear what you have to say to them. I would say to Phil that there is a way in which you can increase the size of your text, but that shows how much we need the training and education too. Thanks for reminding us of that, Tamsin.

We could go on talking with you the whole morning, Agatha and Tamsin. We are really grateful to you for sharing your experiences with us. We learn a lot from listening to people with the sort of direct experience that you have. We are very grateful for it, and hope we can reflect these things in the way we engage with people in the committee and what the committee says to Parliament and government afterwards. Thank you enormously.