

Faculty of Public Health Briefing:

Universal Basic Services

Author: Cathy Gregory, Public Health Specialty Registrar, Cheshire East Council,
Cathy.Gregory@cheshireeast.gov.uk

1. Introduction

Universal Basic Services (UBS) is an idea for a form of social welfare in which all citizens receive unconditional access to a range of free, basic, public services, funded by taxes and provided by a government or public institution. It is based on the premise that everyone has a right to free access to facilities to meet their needs and enable full participation in society, increasing access to opportunities and enabling individuals to realise their potential (Coote, 2020, Gough, 2021, Statham, 2022).

Services provided could include healthcare, education, housing, public transport, food, childcare, and access to information such as the internet and a mobile phone. This contrasts with a system in which access to some or all of these services is determined by having the means to pay, with perhaps a minimum provided by the state. Central to the concept of UBS is co-production, whereby communities identify their own needs and how best to meet them. (Coote, 2020, Gough, 2021, Statham, 2022). This leads to a collective approach to the development and provision of services, as opposed to a top-down approach from government. UBS is distinct from the concept of a universal basic income (UBI), in which everyone in society receives a set amount of money. It is also distinct from the concept of an 'essentials guarantee', whereby everyone has access to the basics required to live, or is given enough money to cover these (2023). In contrast, within UBS everyone has access to the facilities they need to thrive, not just survive.

2. Potential Benefits

UBS is based on the redistribution of resources to the poorest in society, reducing inequalities in access to services and income by the generation of a 'social wage'. That is, access to public services is of value to individuals and can act as a replacement for financial income as it reduces costs to families and individuals who would otherwise have had to pay for the services (or may not have been able to afford to access them at all) (Statham, 2022, Portes, 2017). UBS can be viewed as a progressive policy which reduces poverty (Portes, 2017). An Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) analysis suggested that availability of publicly provided services reduces income inequality by between a fifth and a third, depending on the measure used (Verbist et al., 2012). We know that reducing socioeconomic deprivation is likely to result in improved health and increased healthy life expectancy, and reductions in health inequities (Marmot, 2020). Those in favour of UBS argue that it also benefits society as a whole, promoting social cohesion and sustainability (Coote, 2020, Statham, 2022). UBS has also been argued to have economic benefits. The shared responsibility, resources and risks inherent in UBS may provide a more efficient model of service provision than the alternative of market forces (Coote, 2020, Gough, 2021, Statham, 2022). UBS could also result in longer term cost savings, for

example reduced burden on the healthcare system, and increased economic productivity by increasing access to the labour market and providing incentives to work, for example individuals would not have to pay for childcare. It can be argued that UBS is a more equitable way of allocating resources than a universal basic income, as UBS is based on 'universally appropriate provision'- in other words access is based on need, rather than everyone being treated the same (Statham, 2022). There are also potential wider benefits to UBS, for example increased utilisation of public transport, if this were provided free of charge, could lead to reduced air pollution.

3. Potential Limitations

UBS is not without its criticisms. Although the emphasis of UBS is on co-production, some decisions would have to be made around which services to include, and how to provide and regulate them, and UBS could be criticised as verging on the 'nanny state', removing people's ability to choose (Standing, 2019); from a neoliberalist perspective, market forces are desirable and necessary to promote innovation. It could therefore be argued that UBI is a more appropriate means of enabling access to services, enabling people to choose how best to spend their money. If services are means-tested in some way, it can be argued that this is not truly 'universal', and could lead to stigmatisation, failure to reach certain groups and the creation of perverse incentives (Standing, 2019).

It is also difficult to provide evidence that implementation of UBS has led to tangible benefits to date as no country has fully implemented a UBS model. However, some countries have adopted elements of a universal approach to certain services. For example, in the UK we have universal access to (most) healthcare and education (although the existence of the private system calls into question where there is truly a universal offer). Scandinavian countries offer heavily subsidised childcare (Broom, 2019), and Denmark has an expanded offer of social housing (Pinto, 2022). The Estonian capital of Tallinn offers free public transport to residents. An analysis carried out a year after the scheme was introduced found that the number of trips made by public transport increased by 14% overall and more in those on a low income (26% increase) or unemployed (32% increase) (Cats et al., 2017). However, the number of trips made on foot reduced by 40%, whereas car use only reduced by 5%. This illustrates that the impact of an intervention can have unintended consequences. It is also unclear whether the increased use of public transport translates into a meaningful benefit for those individuals. It is very difficult to show whether a downstream outcome such as improved health is due to a particular intervention, as there will be numerous factors at play.

4. Conclusion

There are clearly challenges to the implementation of a UBS approach. A truly universal approach in the UK would require reconsidering the way we currently organise our society, with the need for buy in from politicians, industry and the general public. It would also require financial investment, a thorny issue in the current economic climate, although proponents of UBS in the UK have argued that it is financially viable, especially considering the longer term economic benefits (Gough, 2021, Portes, 2017). One proposal for the introduction of UBS in the UK estimates the cost would be 2.3% of UK GDP and could be funded through changes to the Personal Allowance (Portes, 2017), although these calculations have been disputed (Standing, 2019). There is movement towards considering this approach within the UK, with

the Scottish government having committed to exploring a UBS approach (2021) and the Labour Party expressing its support in a 2019 report. It may also be that elements of the UBS approach could be adopted, with some arguing for a mixed approach incorporating elements of UBI as well as UBS, recognising there is a place for monetary benefits to meet individual needs as well as collective action (Statham, 2022).

As public health professionals, our role is to consider the public health benefits of such a system (or indeed, alternatives) and advocate for a change of mindset and practical action, whether that be at a local or national level. If a partial approach to UBS is taken, we also have a role in the debate around which services, and groups, should be prioritised, to maximise benefits for society as a whole and the health of society in particular.

5. References and further information

2021. Scottish Government's response to the Social Renewal Advisory Board's Report "If not now, when?". Available: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2021/03/scottish-government-response-report-social-renewal-advisory-board/documents/scottish-governments-response-social-renewal-advisory-boards-report-not-now/scottish-governments-response-social-renewal-advisory-boards-report-not-now/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-governments-response-social-renewal-advisory-boards-report-not-now.pdf> [Accessed 30th October 2023].
2023. *Technical Note to Guarantee our Essentials- Social Security as a Human Right* [Online]. Amnesty International UK. Available: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/essentials-guarantee-campaign-technical-note> [Accessed 29th January 2024].
- BROOM, D. 2019. *Why Nordic nations are the best places to have children* [Online]. World Economic Forum. Available: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/03/nordic-nations-best-places-for-parents-children/> [Accessed 30th October 2023].
- CATS, O., SUSILO, Y. O. & REIMAL, T. 2017. The prospects of fare-free public transport: evidence from Tallinn. *Transportation*, 44, 1083-1104.
- COOTE, A. 2020. The case for Universal Basic Services. Available from: <https://neweconomics.org/2020/02/the-case-for-universal-basic-services> [Accessed 30th October 2023].
- GOUGH, I. 2021. *Move the debate from Universal Basic Income to Universal Basic Services* [Online]. UNESCO Inclusive Policy Lab. Available: <https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/analytics/move-debate-universal-basic-income-universal-basic-services> [Accessed 30th October 2023].
- MARMOT, M. 2020. Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review ten years on. Available: <https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Health%20Equity%20in%20England%20The%20Marmot%20Review%2010%20Years%20On%20executive%20summary%20web.pdf> [Accessed 30th October 2023].
- PINTO, E. 2022. *Housing for Everyone, the Danish Way* [Online]. SPUR. Available: <https://www.spur.org/news/2022-08-31/housing-for-everyone-the-danish-way#:~:text=In%20Copenhagen%2C%20just%20over%2030%25%20of%20the%20housing,provide%20existing%20tenants%20with%20the%20option%20to%20buy.> [Accessed 30th October 2023].
- PORTES, J. 2017. Social prosperity for the future: a proposal for Universal Basic Services. Available: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/igp/sites/bartlett/files/universal_basic_services_-_the_institute_for_global_prosperity.pdf [Accessed 30th October 2023].
- STANDING, G. 2019. Why 'Universal Basic Services' is no alternative to Basic Income. Available: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/why-universal-basic-services-is-no-alternative-to-basic-income/> [Accessed 30th October 2023].

- STATHAM, R. 2022. Universal Basic Services- Building Financial Security in Scotland.
Available: https://www.ippr.org/files/2022-03/1646753753_universal-basic-services-scotland-march-22.pdf [Accessed 30th October 2023].
- VERBIST, G., FÖRSTER, M. & VAALAVUO, M. 2012. The Impact of Publicly Provided Services on the Distribution of Resources: Review of New Results and Methods. *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*.