

Anna Coote and Andrew Percy (2020), *The Case for Universal Basic Services*, Cambridge: Polity, £9.99, pp. 140, pbk.  
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Universal basic services (UBS) exist when everyone has guaranteed access to a socially agreed quality of life as a fundamental human right, and when services are provided that meet that agreed quality standard. UBS, therefore, incorporates ideals of living well, social equality, democratic decision-making and effective service provision. In this book, Coote and Percy argue that UBS should be more highly valued and that their scope should be more wide-ranging.

The models for UBS are the National Health Service and children's education: free (or at least affordable) and accessible for all at the point of use. The book argues that this principle should be extended to childcare, adult social care, housing, transport, access to digital information and food. Other possible UBS are mentioned, such as policing, but not discussed further. The authors recognise that each service is qualitatively distinct, requiring its own particular way of working. However, they also say that all UBS have certain common features: governmental responsibility for ensuring that basic needs are met fairly and inclusively, devolution of such responsibility to the lowest appropriate level, a variety of delivery agencies, and meaningful participation by residents and service users. (One could quibble with some of these: for example, do we really need a variety of delivery agencies in education or health or policing? And what counts as 'meaningful participation'?)

Chapter 3 is devoted to showing that public non-marketed services work better than marketed services: at least, for lower-income groups. Few would disagree, and much of this will be familiar to readers of this journal (but see also a useful critique of universal basic income on pp. 52-56). However, the chapter focuses on 'public services' (which are not necessarily the same as UBS), and only in general terms. Obviously, governments must regulate and intervene, particularly in order to tackle crises, set and enforce standards, mitigate climate change, and so on; but it does not follow that all basic services have to be provided entirely outside of markets.

Chapter 4 on childcare and adult social care contains a useful discussion of the difficulties in moving towards a system of free quality care for all pre-school children. The authors argue that 'the benefits far outweigh the costs' (p. 65), which are considerable. However, if the benefits to families are as claimed, then it seems reasonable that they pay something towards the costs. The question arises: where should the line be drawn between the respective responsibilities of government and parents?

The section on adult social care highlights the complexity involved in seeking a balance between quality, quantity and affordability, as affected by prevention measures, informal care, paid care, carer/caree participation, government regulation and political choice (of collective or individual responsibility). However, where or how is the balance to be struck? Clearly, the system is not working in England and Wales, but is it any better in Scotland? Germany sounded more promising but what can we learn from this in the UK? What about the governance of social care: for example, social care cooperatives? What about the wider roles of social work in supporting and policing families and individuals? What about community services?

Chapter 5 considers housing, transport, information and food. Housing in the UK is a long way from being a UBS. Contrary to popular belief, there is no right to housing. Rising house prices have made owner-occupied housing less affordable than ever. Social housing has shrunk while private renting has grown. Security of tenure has been eroded. Private rents have soared; and the local housing allowance has limited the extent to which the burden of higher rents can be alleviated by housing benefit (a key factor in increasing the number of homeless people). Turning around this deteriorating situation requires radical measures: for example, re-establishing fair rents and secure tenancies, higher taxes on capital gains and on wealth generally, and a national retrofitting programme to make all buildings low carbon by 2030.

The only transport mode that the authors discuss is buses: cars are mentioned only in relation to the need to reduce their use, and trains are not mentioned at all. They make a case for public control of buses, as privatisation has led to higher fares and reduced services. The obvious response, then, would seem to involve reducing fares and improving services, but this is not mentioned. Instead they talk about free fares subsidised by government, either with or without municipalisation. But surely, as with childcare, those who benefit from public transport should be expected to pay towards its costs? Maybe it could be free just for those who are unwaged or rely solely on a state pension?

The UBS for information is understood as internet services. The emphasis is on universal access to affordable quality services: for example, through high-speed broadband and a suitable connection device. But how much should users be expected to pay, how much internet use should be subsidised by government, and how much should government spend (or mandate) to roll out broadband to everyone?

The authors advocate universal access to sufficient, nutritious food: for example, sufficient income to buy that food (to avoid the need to visit food banks) plus appropriate legislation on food standards. But there is no public food service. The same could be said about clothing. And what about energy services, water, waste disposal, leisure services, environmental services, and so on? This is clearly a work in progress, but the response to the challenge in chapter 6 is disappointing because it doesn't address the key issue of developing a political programme that will deliver UBS. It is easy enough to show that UBS are affordable but 'transforming the policies and practices of public institutions' (p. 118) will prove (indeed has proved) rather more difficult. In a time of climate and ecological emergency, we need a well-developed policy on UBS as an integral part of a radical Green New Deal, in order to safeguard all our futures.

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