



October 2006

Briefing 06/50

TO: ALL CHIEF EXECUTIVES, MAIN CONTACTS AND EMAIL CONTACTS (Scotland)

CC: ALL CHIEF EXECUTIVES, MAIN CONTACTS (England, Wales & Northern Ireland)

APSE Response to Transforming Public Services – The Next Phase of Reform

Key issues:

- Contains a copy of the response to the Scottish Executive
- The consultation suggested 5 elements as fundamental to reform
- APSE welcomes the recognition of the value and importance of public services
- APSE recommends a longer term continuous improvement approach to successful transformation.

1. Introduction

The Association has recently responded to the Scottish Executive's consultation document on '***Transforming Public Services – The next Phase of Reform***', further to APSE briefing 06-47. The full consultation which is available at: -

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/130092/0031160.pdf>

This briefing outlines APSE's response to the relevant sections of the consultation.

2. Copy of Response

Introduction

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a not for profit local government association representing over 250 local authorities across the U.K. This response has been compiled following dialogue with member authorities in Scotland. All 32 councils in Scotland are members of APSE.

Overview

APSE welcomes the consultation document, in particular the recognition of the value and importance of public services, that real improvements have been achieved since 1999 and the integral part they will play in Scotland's future. We also support the aims of reforming public services in Scotland to make them more efficient, responsive and user friendly. However we feel that the document lacks an explicit intention of direction, which could have been contained within its pages. However we also recognise that it is a consultation and accusations of things 'being a done deal' would have followed if too forceful.

The document does however contain a number of suggestions that are similar to Best Value principals, in particular the five elements suggested as being fundamental to reform, that local government is delivering on at present and has done so for a number of years. The adoption of these principles has led to improvements in performance in a number of ways in local authorities. Best Value is an approach built around the concept of continuous performance improvement, incremental change and is the guaranteed way to achieve longer term transformation. However transformation as a concept is more about step change and more immediate approaches to reform. In APSEs view their appears to be a contradiction in the approach contained within the document which talks about transformation and reform but uses the language of continuous improvement to describe how this process may occur. The Executive needs to decide which approach it wishes too pursue. APSEs view is that the guaranteed way of achieving a successful transformation of public services in Scotland is via a longer term continuous improvement approach. If a shorter term step change approach to transformation is the route then this will require strong leadership, direction and structural reform legislated for by the Executive. There is also no guarantee that this approach will be successful.

User Focus

Whatever models are created the starting point needs to be from that of the perspective of the user, upwards through the service delivery mechanism and then into governance arrangements. Too often policy is designed by those who have no practical experience of delivery and therefore implementation can be problematic. It is therefore important that it is recognised that those who are

closest to the consumers of public services are the ones who are likely to understand what works for the public. Heavy investment in customer care training for all frontline staff will improve the resolution of complaints at the earliest opportunity.

The Best Value duty of responsiveness and consultation should be applied to all bodies that provide services to the public, without exception.

Enhanced communication of choices available to the public should be communicated to them by all means available. Society has changed significantly and is much more diverse in a number of ways, no single method of communication will be best for the various segments of society.

The public do want increased personalisation of some services to them, but in the vast majority of public services they merely want them to be reliable, efficient and effective. Diversity of supplier is an irrelevance to the achievement of this.

When considering what services are required it must look at what Scotland's needs and requirements will be in 2020 and the demographic make-up of the population. We are in a period of huge change in society at present, the ageing population, technology, skills shortages, immigration and environmental matters are some of the factors which require consideration.

Quality and Innovation

APSE would like to see a lead from Government in terms of the encouragement of a positive culture in public services one where employees are valued and invested in, where innovation flourishes, risks can be taken and knowledge is managed effectively. We are encouraged by the recognition that the best ideas come from those organisations and people that are closest to the customer on the frontline. This pool of knowledge requires to be harnessed through an investors in people approach, with heavier investment in staff training.

APSE recognises the need for independent audit and inspection for public services too ensure accountability and transparency. However we also believe that any world class inspection service should work itself down to an optimum minimum level if it is to add value. Lessons from England show that Local Government in particular has responded well to the performance management challenge created by audit and as a result of the progress made it is generally recognised that the future direction will be one of national standards and self assessment.

APSE believes we can continue on the current track of Best Value and achieve continuous improvement which will ultimately lead to transformation over the next three to five years. If the Executive chooses to gamble with a shorter timescale on transformation then it will require strong leadership, direction and more

importantly structural reform. However there will still be no guarantees of transformation by this approach. The best way of strengthening Best Value is by extending it to all bodies operating within the public sector.

APSE fundamentally believes that efficiencies can be achieved through a more collaborative approach being adopted by all public agencies. At a minimum there should be clear encouragement for this approach, however a duty of co-operation could be legislated for.

The best way of ensuring minimum service standards across public services is by creating a small cluster of key performance indicators (K.P.I.s) that are reported on publicly on a regular basis. These K.P.I.s should be meaningful to the public and should be monitored by audit. Public Bodies should also be required to keep more detailed local sets of indicators for performance purposes and self assessment.

Efficiency and Productivity

It is APSEs view that it is time that the Executive gave a clear steer as to their intentions on reform. Public Servants want a clear statement of direction and then be allowed to deliver. The Public Sector is up for improvement, efficiency and reform through a collaborative approach. Local government has already demonstrated its ability too achieve efficiency savings targets.

The Executive should actively encourage public bodies to develop performance management frameworks for the purposes of benchmarking processes and identifying best practice. APSEs Performance Networks system has operated in local government for the last 8 years and has successfully moved beyond the early stages of data collection to that of comparison. 205 local authorities across the U.K. subscribe to this service across 16 different frontline service areas. A wealth of knowledge, data and trend analysis has been built up in developing this system. It has been independently evaluated by Birmingham University's local government studies, INLOGOV, on 2 separate occasions and has recently successfully passed an assessment by the Department of Culture and Media Studies for inclusion in the Audit Commissions Comprehensive Performance Assessment for local authorities in England.

Funding, planning and performance reporting can best be streamlined by a complete rethink and examination of all targets and reporting required. Starting fresh is the best way of ensuring that only the data that actually provides useful information is collected and not duplicated.

Strengthening Accountability

With regards to governance it is important that a model is created which brings the wider public sector under the accountability that democratic control allows.

Councillors can play a key role as community champions and place shapers if they are given responsibility for all public sector infrastructure within their areas, this will strengthen local democracy and the public's confidence in democratic institutions.

Local authorities should collaborate with other public agencies and they should all have a duty placed upon them to collaborate for the wellbeing of local areas. The local authority with its democratic mandate should take the lead role in many instances when joint initiatives are undertaken.

We also recognise that those involved in public sector management play a key role in the achievement of the aspiration of better public services and therefore require to 'raise their game' and become ever more accountable. A common public sector management performance appraisal system linked to outcomes and scrutinised democratically would go a long way to improving accountability.

APSE believes that the best way of enhancing emphasis on customer satisfaction and user experience is by ensuring that all public bodies are required to report publicly on key outcome based targets on customer satisfaction and user experience. Such a report could be published locally and delivered to every home in the area. This would also be open to scrutiny by Audit Scotland and reported to the Scottish Parliament.

Structures, Outcomes and People

APSE believes the best way to incentivise success is by linking it to enhanced freedoms and flexibilities for high performing organisations. However this could also prove inflexible and sometimes those organisations operating under the most difficult circumstances, such as in areas of high deprivation, could find it all most impossible to achieve thresholds. This could ultimately turn into a demotivational tool.

APSE believes that this could best be achieved by one public sector agency being created for each geographic area or by creating co-terminus boundaries for all public sector agencies and placing a duty upon them to work jointly under democratically accountable control.

Next Steps

In closing APSE would welcome the opportunity to be further involved in dialogue with regard to the reform agenda as the next stages of the process are rolled out.

Yours sincerely

Paul O'Brien
Chief Executive, APSE