

Strictly performance:

Performance networks seminar 2010

Richard Reeves, director of DEMOS, opened the seminar with an amusing look at the current political framework in which he stated that 'all three main political parties claim to be 'progressive' but disagree on how, when and where to make cutbacks'. Mr Reeves referenced the inevitable conflicts of bringing public sector finances back into kilter and highlighted that it is now a question of 'where' cuts will fall rather than 'whether' they will fall and with commitments to protect NHS, police and education spending from across all the political parties the 'where' question could be answered 'within local government'.

Mr Reeves also highlighted that all the parties agree that spending needs to be cut – and, though they 'whisper this one - taxes will need to go up'. The question is where the axe will fall.

There are differences on the 'when' too. Mr Reeves argued that whilst the Labour and the Liberal Democrats want to keep fiscal policy fairly loose through 2010, fearing that turning the screw on public spending or pushing up taxes too soon would slow down the recovery, perversely make it longer to get ourselves out of the recession, through loss of tax revenues, Mr Reeves argued the Conservatives wanted to start 'digging early' on the basis of giving confidence back to the money markets by in effect saying that the UK is taking seriously its fiscal responsibilities.

Max Moullin, of Sheffield University delighted delegates with his knowledge of performance and performance management issues. Mr Moullin argued that the public sector has learnt some valuable lessons from performance target setting - including how if badly thought through 'performance targets can hinder real progress'.

Mr Moullin argued that to develop a performance management culture focussed on improvement, accountability and change, it should not be a 'top-down blame culture' but should instead focus on outcomes. He also urged the public sector to use a balanced set of measures and that the sector should 'measure performance across organisational boundaries'.

Integrated risk management was also another strong theme of Max Moullin's presentation arguing that 'identifying and addressing key risks are essential for any high-performing organisation' and that 'any evaluation of performance without considering risk is incomplete'.

Mr Moullin urged delegates to consider the main question that should be asked about public services which is 'What is the difference we are making to service users and other key stakeholders. These are the outcomes of the service, not our level of activity'.

Mr Moullin concluded that targets and measures must reflect the outcomes we are trying to achieve - or evidence-

based rivers of those outcomes - or they should be scrapped and concluded that we should ask:-

- What are the outcomes we really want to achieve for our service users and stakeholders?
- How effective are our processes in achieving these outcomes? How can they be improved? Are there innovative ways of achieving these outcomes better?
- How can we best support our people and processes to ensure that they achieve the outcomes required?

Simon Burrell of the INVOLVE network discussed citizen engagement and its linkages to performance improvement and argued that 'truly engaged citizens should be an asset to service design, delivery and ultimately improvement'. He urged delegates to 'avoid fads' and to ensure that when they set off on a route to engagement that they 'make local government relevant to local people'. He also added that getting buy-in at the right levels was of critical importance. Too often he argued we use the language of local government as opposed to the language of service users and this can of itself lead to exclusion from engagement.

Valerie Watts, chief executive of Derry City Council provided a strategic overview of the challenges facing local council leaders in balancing service user needs with limited and reducing budgets. Ms Watts argued that far from just getting 'more for less' we needed to get 'much better for less' if we were to meet the need for continuous improvement. Ms Watts praised APSE performance networks for concentrating on costs and quality issues arguing that the public sector needed 'a strong culture of performance management' to justify value for money. She also said that there were 'hard choices to be made'. The role of a chief executive was to explore all options and all consequences for elected members to then make informed choices. Inevitably she argued some services may not be provided at all whilst others may be prioritised and enhanced.

Mark Bramah, APSE assistant chief executive, received a rapturous response for his analysis of the current economic crisis arguing that whilst in the public sector a performance culture had led to 'detailed knowledge on cost and performance and risk management the same could not be said of the banking sector'. He argued that it was 'grossly unfair for the public sector to now pay the price for the failures stacked up by the banking system'.

Mr Bramah also praised delegates who he said could rely upon a 'trustworthy, secure and reliable source of performance information' which allowed local government to drill deeper in exploring their performance. He said it was ironic that only at a point of recession did it seem 'inspectories and other agencies appeared to realise the value of knowing the real price attached to services'.

'The hard data that provides the real evidence about how local services are performing.'

Mr Bramah also said that the use of performance networks data should not just be about examining what the bottom line is, he said that with 'an increasing emphasis on delivering value for money performance networks helps to put the case for service providers.'

Working with partners to develop the service was critical. Some of the key challenges that performance networks members face is to use data better in order to help manage scarce resources. But according to Bramah this was also about being able to demonstrate value for money and to build on the improvement agenda. Whilst some models of service transformation are seen as processes for improvement it was important, Mr Bramah emphasised to ensure that these models did not take the place of good performance management. Looking at why someone else performed better was just as much about process benchmarking as about data benchmarking and the two should be complimentary disciplines.

From top to bottom:

Richard Reeves, Director of Demos with Cllr Shaun Gallagher, APSE national chair and Max Moullin of Sheffield Hallam University

APSE national secretary Ellen Cavanagh leads the workshops discussions with Andrew Martin of Dorset County

Decisions, decisions as delegates get to grips with performance in the transport and fleet workshop

Pauline Syms of Chorley Borough Council

And finally... day two speakers Simon Burrell of Involve with Valerie Watts, Chief Executive of Derry City Council with Mark Bramah, APSE assistant chief executive who closed the seminar with APSE panel chair Paul O'Brien .

