

Huge divide in joined-up departments



Public eye
David Walker

Bureaucrats, they say, want to maximise their empires, so the Home Office permanent secretary, Sir David Normington, ought to be a chastened man. Today, he waves farewell to 300 of his immediate staff and 70,000 prison and probation officials as they troop off to the new Ministry of Justice. Yet tears, metaphorically speaking, won't bedew his cheeks.

One prosaic reason is that the re-named Department for Constitutional Affairs is physically too small to accommodate the transferring civil servants and they will stay put at the Home Office's HQ, at least for the time being.

But it's also because Normington adheres to the theory that says top managers prefer "bureau-shaping" to size for its own sake, and what's on offer as the machinery of government alters are sharper lines. "It's a clean de-merger," he says. "The Home Office will be smaller but more focused."

The world changes, and with it problems of public policy. The new formation brings government up to 21st-century speed. As for the danger of losing collective memory, security questions aren't the same as they were in the 1980s, and the Home Office has things – such as failed ways of working – it needs to forget.

It becomes, effectively, the department for domestic security, more akin to interior ministries elsewhere in Europe. Last summer, amid the turmoil of Charles Clarke's enforced resignation as home secretary, the idea of downsizing took wing. John Reid dusted off old proposals for dividing up criminal justice, putting offenders and law-making on crime – including sentencing – into the justice ministry. The Home Office, scarred by allegations of gross incompetence, would simultaneously shrink and recast its big administrative tasks – immigration and passports – into streamlined agencies.

Normington says it's less of a change than some people have made out. He compares it with the two years of re-engineering he undertook as a senior official at the Department for Employment in the 1990s, merging his department into a new one for education and employment. "For a long time afterwards, there were still separate staff football teams from the two sides."

In reply to public criticism of the speed of the changes by the former cabinet secretary, Lord Butler, Normington says crisply that debate has to end some time, and decisions get made. He muses on the four big changes in machinery in which he has been involved during his civil service career, noting that at least this time staff didn't learn their fate on the evening news. He says: "The home secretary set out his stall some weeks ago, and there's been quite a public debate about the changes."

Maybe it's futile to search for grand principles to underpin the allocation of functions to offices and agencies in government; much will always depend on political personalities and the tenor of the times. Still, the new structure isn't what you would call a Norman Foster special commission. There's a flying buttress here and dry rot there.

Criminal justice is still riven – at the attorney general retaining the Crown



Prosecution Service – with how crime is detected and how it's disposed of in separate departments. The Home Office retains responsibility for drugs, which aren't just a crime matter. As a rubric, "security" sounds a bit grand for anti-social behaviour orders for neighbourhood jobs who may well end up with the Youth Justice Board, which is transferring to the Ministry of Justice. Oversight of intelligence is still shared with the Cabinet Office (and the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence), and in the woodwork there remain arm's-length bodies such as the Serious Organised Crime Agency, whose work will surely overlap with the new Office for Security and Counter-terrorism.

Normington makes no grand claims on whether the operation will solve Whitehall's dreaded problem of joining up. "Wherever you draw the lines you

Staff in one agency were apparently unable to speak to one another even in the canteen

create a new boundary." The Border and Immigration Agency will still have to find a way of communicating about foreign inmates with the Prison Service. Staff in one agency were apparently unable to speak to one another even in the canteen, and Normington says the new written protocols governing their relationship will work just as well between the Home Office and the justice ministry as within a single department.

David Walker is editor of the Guardian's Public magazine.

Leading questions

Paul O'Brien, chief executive, Association for Public Service Excellence

How does Apse make a real difference? We concentrate on helping our local authority members from across the UK put policy into practice in a way that delivers the best possible council services.

What issues have proved to be a particular challenge recently?

Delivering more for less. The recent drive for efficiencies has come about when there are even more pressures on local government including the impact of the ageing population on social care, climate change on waste disposal and recycling, healthy eating in schools, general skills shortages and the onset of consumerism.

What has Apse done to tackle them?

It has contributed to national debate on these issues, lobbied for effective solutions and provided benchmarking, research, briefings and advice.

What impact have you had?

When I was appointed in May 1999, Apse was facing a closedown [at] its AGM. The resolution was defeated, but it acted as a catalyst to launch a range of new services and implement a turnaround strategy.



Apse recently proposed that local councils be allowed to introduce supplementary charges for waste disposal. Why?

The biggest creators of waste are manufacturers, who use excessive packaging. But it will take pressure from consumers as well as government to change manufacturers' habits. Giving councils the ability to introduce additional charges – in a way that's agreed locally – would help by boosting recycling and penalising those who ignore these initiatives.

What evidence is there that it will work?

In Germany, Holland and Belgium they recycle between 50% and 60% of waste as a result of proposals similar to those we would like to see used.

What kind of response have you had?

It was controversial even in our own organisation. However, it has now become more of a political issue.

If you could change one thing about frontline service provision immediately what would it be?

I would like to see those who deliver excellent services day in day out for their communities get the recognition they deserve.

What is the best piece of management advice you have ever been given?

Your own glory will be reflected through the success of your people.

Describe your management style?

Getting the balance right between giving people the autonomy to flourish while ensuring the systems and processes are in place to safeguard organisational aims.

Do you have a management 'no-no'?

Losing your temper in front of the staff.

Interview by Mary O'Hara

Ins and outs

David Edwards, head of regeneration policy at the Department for Communities and Local Government, is leaving to take up the post of director of English Partnerships, southern region. He is expected to start in the summer.

Best-selling writer Bill Bryson is the new president of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). The author of Notes on a Small Island will replace the current president, journalist Max Hastings.

Donna Covey has been appointed chief executive of the Refugee Council. She has been chief executive of Asthma UK since 2001 and takes up the post in July.

Hampshire primary care trust has appointed Katrina Percy as director of care services, starting this month. She was previously chief operating officer for Surrey and Sussex Hospitals NHS trust.

Richard Stilgoe is to take up the post of chair of the charity, Youth Music. He is replacing Gavin Henderson, who is scheduled to retire in July after eight years in charge of the organisation.

Four new commissioners to the Low Pay Commission have been announced. John Hannett, Frances O'Grady, Neil Goulde and Susan Anderson have been appointed for three years.

Policy briefs

Management loses out

The NHS Confederation has come out in defence of much-maligned health service managers with a new report showing a decline in their numbers and evidence of their effectiveness. The report, Management in the NHS, seeks to challenge the view of a service swamped by "faceless bureaucrats" who absorb precious funding needed at the frontline. It concludes that the number of managers has fallen by 6.5% since 2005 and emphasises that they account for only 2.7% of the NHS's 1.3m workforce. It also concludes that the service compares favourably with the private sector pointing out that overall, 15% of the UK workforce are managers.

www.nhsconfed.org

Voluntary downplay

A significant proportion of MPs believe local authorities are not treating voluntary groups and charities in their areas fairly, according to a new report by charity think tank, nfpSynergy. Just 53% of MPs surveyed think third sector organisations in their constituencies are appropriately valued for the work they do and services they provide for authorities. The poll, which canvassed the views of a cross-section of more than 150 MPs, has prompted nfpSynergy to launch a new pilot research project aimed at regularly surveying local authorities about their attitudes to the sector and to track any changes.

nfpSynergy.net

Unhealthy prospect

A report from the Department of Health outlines how the sector can plan to deal with the impact of climate change. Health Effects of Climate Change proposes a number of areas where more research is needed but highlights where the impact may be felt in the short term. It predicts fewer periods of very cold weather and a corresponding reduction in cold-related deaths while more exposure to the sun and higher temperatures is likely to increase rates of skin cancer. Meanwhile, flooding may trigger a rise in tick-borne diseases. The report will be on the DH website for six weeks for comment.

dh.gov.uk/en/index.htm

Why read nine magazines when you can read one?

Read **Public**, the monthly magazine that provides complete coverage across the public services.

It may be the only magazine you'll ever need to read. Register for your free subscription at guardian.co.uk/public/apply

Public theguardian