
This article was originally written for The Times on 19th June 2006 but pulled hours before publication as the Home Secretary announced the postponement of Police Force amalgamation

Transforming public services takes more than good intentions

Earlier this month John Reid, the new Home Secretary, said his department was ‘not fit for purpose’ whilst Jonathan Baume, Head of the FDU senior civil service union responded by saying that the Home Office suffered lazy, less competent Ministers.

This public spat between the government and the civil service union illustrates one of the issues with public services. Ministers just can’t stop having good ideas, and their departments just can’t find a good way of delivering them.

The two groups are currently at loggerheads trying to pin the blame on each other but an increasingly frustrated public wants a solution, not another scapegoat.

The Home Office is currently planning another major change, this time involving the amalgamation of Police Forces later in the year. The process of imposing good ideas on an unsuspecting department is already underway. The civil service will do its best to manage the huge programme that will doubtless be complicated by cynical users and red tape. Politicians in turn will try their best to force the changes through and respond to the contradictory expectations of a fickle public.

The method too often employed to deliver major change is to make bold policy statements, set arbitrary targets and hope for the best. However, when change is managed primarily by dictat from the top, bureaucracy, slow response and high costs are inevitable.

This command and control thinking at the heart of government is one of the root causes of the malaise in public services. It simply can’t deliver the kind of transformation that everyone is looking for. The author John Seddon says that “fundamental change cannot come from a system that is designed around compliance”.

What is missing is the profound knowledge that the whole system of public service delivery must transform - including, and starting with, those at the top.

The odds are that many of the changes currently being discussed will be determined and implemented with little opportunity for Police Officers or Constables to contribute their knowledge as to what is most workable for the Force and most valuable for the public. Instead they might find themselves compelled to hit a new suite of lovingly-crafted but ultimately irrelevant targets.

The most dynamic organisations encourage staff at the front line (those who have some of the most up-to-date and detailed knowledge of what is really going on) to exercise a level of discretion. These staff are not always able to see how the whole system works end-to-end but they do have vital knowledge when it comes to making changes work in practice. Everyone needs to be involved in a collaborative team effort to improve their services and the processes that deliver them.

Peter Neyroud, Chief Executive of the National Police Improvement Agency and a former Chief Constable, echoed this recently, recognising that leadership at all levels is required to release the creativity and joined-up thinking that will deliver coherent change across the criminal justice sector.

This will require changes in culture, organisation, processes, employee relations, and leadership. Ministers must forge new relationships with civil servants and ultimately with the public too. Failure to do so will be a criminal waste of potential and hamper efforts to keep us all safe from crime.

This is a tall order, but unless these fundamental issues are addressed, civil servants will continue to be blamed for missing the target, and politicians will be blamed for missing the point.