

CEL Brief guide

Excellence and fairness: Achieving world-class public services



A policy paper published by the Cabinet Office, June 2008

1. This paper summarises '*Excellence and fairness: Achieving world class public services*'¹, a paper published by the Cabinet Office in June 2008.
2. The importance of this document is illustrated by the presence in '*Excellence and fairness*' of a foreword by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, in which he explains that the public services '*express our core values of fairness and common endeavour and ... underpin our strong economy*'.
3. The summary is organised under the headings used in the original paper, with a short section at the end about the implications for the FE and skills sector.

Introduction: a world class ambition

4. The introduction describes the Government's commitment since coming to power in 1997 to '*rebuilding public services*', (paragraph 5) to make them more efficient, effective and responsive to the needs of users.
5. In its narrative of this reform process in this introductory section, the Cabinet Office identifies '*two distinct stages*' of public services reform (paragraph 6). The first stage was focused on improving overall standards, which have suffered due to underinvestment in the public sector (paragraph 5) This stage '*used the explicit introduction of clear national standards and targets to drive up performance while increasing investment*' (paragraph 6). This process was effective, though it had a strongly centralising effect on the public services and government as a whole.

¹ See:

http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/~media/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/publications/world_class_public_services%20pdf.ashx

CEL Brief guide

Excellence and fairness

6. The second stage began around 2001, as Labour entered its second term. This stage *'complemented these top-down targets and standards, with clearer incentives to improve, generated from within the public services themselves rather than imposed from Whitehall'* (paragraph 7). These reforms also encouraged a greater *'diversity of providers'*, both from the public sector and from the private and third sectors.
7. These reforms, the Government says, have improved standards in public services. But, *'when taken as a whole are not yet able to offer the world-class service that the public increasingly expect'*. (paragraph 11) The education and skills system must be ready to meet the challenge posed by rising economies in China and India; welfare services need to be reformed to include more skills training; and the health, probation and criminal justice systems need improvement. Also, the report admits that *'Britain has not yet managed to reverse the reductions in social mobility of the last 30 or 40 years'* (paragraph 12).
8. The Government has come to the conclusion that its *'established strategies now need to be accompanied by a new phase of reform'* (paragraph 16) drawing on the lessons of the previous efforts in public sector improvement to create a truly world class system.

Principles and strategies of the third stage of public services reform

9. The report builds on the lessons learned over the last decade of improvement and restructuring in the public services. This acknowledges the need for *'clear standards'*, but recognises that *'persisting with too many top-down targets can be counterproductive'*. Professionals must be valued to *'foster innovation and excellence, and too much central government will stifle local initiative'* (paragraph 16).
10. The paper argues that the established strategies need to be accompanied by a new phase of public service reform, described under three headings:
 - *'Developing new approaches to **empowering citizens**² who use public services: both extending choice and complementing it with more direct forms of individual control, such as personal budgets in areas like care; opportunities for people to do more themselves, such as manage their own health; stronger local accountability, such as directly elected police representatives; and providing greater transparency of performance'*;
 - *'Fostering a **new professionalism** across the whole public service workforce, from the dinner lady to the head teacher, from the hospital porter to the consultant. This combines increased responsiveness to users, consistent quality in day-to-day practices and higher levels of autonomy from central government wherever those at the front line show the ambition and capacity to excel and greater investment in workforce skills'*;
 - *'Providing strong **strategic leadership** from central government to ensure that direct intervention is more sharply concentrated on underperforming organisations, while the conditions are created for the majority to thrive more autonomously. Government needs to give overall direction and purpose to public services, guaranteeing minimum standards and fairness, investing in outcomes, growing local capacity and promoting innovation'*. (paragraph 16)

² Boldface is used where it corresponds to boldface in the actual paper – in other words, emphasis theirs, not mine.

CEL Brief guide

Excellence and fairness

11. More broadly, the Government's approach is '*underpinned by an emphasis on the principles of excellence and fairness*' (hence the title of the paper) (paragraph 17). This implies that excellence extend to all segments of the public sector.

The characteristics of world class public services

12. In the foreword, Brown says '*I want world class to mean what it says: every element of our public services to be the best in the world*'. This section of the report goes into more detail as to what '*world class*' really looks like, drawing on several examples from around the world.

13. '*Being world class*', the Cabinet Office says, '*should involve*':

- '*Delivering **excellent outcomes***';
- '*Offering **personalised approaches** that are responsive to individual needs*';
- '*Being **fair and equitable** – not simply delivering excellence for the most assertive or the best off*';
- '*Offering **good value for money***' (paragraph 19)



CEL Brief guide

Excellence and fairness

14. The report examines the dimensions set out in the model above.

Citizen empowerment

15. *'The best systems in the world treat each citizen as a unique individual, with his or her own family's distinct needs, and then tailor the service to meet these personalised requirements'*. So the Government defines its citizen empowerment agenda. It goes on to say that *'Local professionals and managers must have the power to respond to the specific priorities and needs of their own local customer base'* (paragraph 29)
16. More specifically, the Government believes that:
- *'Services should reflect **people's aspirations and lifestyles** to offer users the increased personal control they demand, and adapt to meet new demands such as more flexible opening hours or better online access'*;
 - *'Services must be designed around people's **complex and interrelated needs**, for instance providing those with long-term health conditions with greater continuity of care between their home and hospital'*;
 - *'A **stronger relationship** needs to be created between the citizen and public service professionals. Only when citizens are treated as equal partners do they bring their knowledge, time and energy to address challenges such as preventing ill health'*. (paragraph 30)
17. The Government identifies four main mechanisms by which citizen empowerment can be increased.
18. Firstly, the Government will give people *'**real choices** between and within services'* (paragraphs 34-44) Increasing choices between services will involve increasing the number and autonomy of providers; in education, this will involve *'accelerating the expansion of academies and trust schools'*. To provide choice within institutions, the Government wants to improve the information available to users and the choices of curriculum, qualifications and out-of-school activities. The 14-19 Diplomas are offered as a specific example of this greater choice.
19. Secondly, the Government seeks to give the public **a greater say in local services** (paragraphs 45-52). Measures in this area will involve increased use of opinion surveys and feedback from users, including online surveys. The paper also discusses Government initiatives to increase the powers of citizens to petition local councils, and the introduction of youth budgets so that young people can have more control over the local services orientated towards them.
20. Thirdly, the report focuses on **strengthening partnerships between users and professionals** (paragraphs 53-56). This will involve more one-to-one working between public service professionals and service users, and greater individual involvement in *'making decisions about the treatment and service they receive'*. Education-related examples given in the paper include the right of parents to stay in touch with teachers through e-mail, text message and progress reports. The paper also says that these stronger partnerships will *'provide the basis for extending the responsibilities of citizens'*.

CEL Brief guide

Excellence and fairness

21. Lastly, the Government seeks to provide more and **better information** to service users (paragraphs 57-61). This will involve making more public-sector information available for re-use by members of the public, including performance data. The range and detail of information offered to the public will be increased. One example given of good information services is New York City's practice of giving each school a report card that is publicly available (inset, page 25).

New professionalism

22. The Government is committed to inculcating a **new professionalism** in public service professionals. *'The next stage of public service reform will involve unlocking the creativity and ambition of public sector workers and establishing new relationships between the Government and professionals'* (paragraph 63). The Government notes that *'the centrally-led standards and tougher targets necessary to turn some services around over the last decade or more have inevitably created some tensions between the Government and some professions'*.
23. A new professionalism is the *'only way to achieve the high quality, responsive and innovative services that citizens want'* (paragraph 65) – only a revitalised public service can provide the creativity, enthusiasm and commitment to deliver the best possible work. The new professionalism will deliver public service leaders who are more innovative, form direct relationships with service users and develop the knowledge to properly manage the day-to-day operations of the system without direct central control.
24. The Government defines five main elements of new professionalism. Firstly, new professionalism will involve **raising skills and increasing consistency in the quality of practice** (paragraphs 69-75). The Government seeks to steer the best graduates into the public service, especially into teaching (the document explicitly mentions the Teach First programme that places high-performing graduates in low-performing inner-city schools). It also commits to providing more opportunities for progression and advancement. The public sector will also work to ensure *'continuous, regular, near real-time feedback'*, which will include coaching and mentoring services and, for teachers, a closer connection between continuing professional development and performance management.
25. Ministers are also committing to *'increased transparency of performance information'*, so that the public will be able to gauge how well or poorly public services are doing. Poor services will no longer be able to conceal underperformance. There will also be *'totally new and powerful ways for professionals to collaborate and learn from one another'*, allowing better sharing of best practice, including through more online resources.
26. The second aspect of new professionalism involves **greater freedom for high performers, both for high-performing institutions and individuals'** (paragraphs 76-81). The Government wants to give high-performing institutions and individual managers more power to manage and direct their own services at the front line. It has reduced the number of centrally set targets and inspection frameworks, and has created a number of autonomous public-service entities, including foundation hospitals in the NHS and academies.

CEL Brief guide

Excellence and fairness

27. The third part of the new professionalism project involves **rewarding success** (paragraphs 82-83), *'such as those who achieve outstanding results in tough areas'* and to *'recognise those that deliver the most outstanding results'*. The paper also discusses measures to address underperforming staff, including increased support and, if that fails, removal from the relevant profession.
28. The fourth plank of the new professionalism proposed is **excellent leadership and management** in the public services (paragraphs 84-85). *'Services must build on the success of organisations like the National College of School Leadership, which is widely regarded as world-leading, to ensure the highest-quality leadership development and support is available to all our future and current public service leaders'*. The paper also cites the Principals' Qualifying Programme as an example of excellence in this field. Government will *'encourage services to work more closely together, pooling resources, sharing experience and enabling future leaders to learn from the experience of those in a range of services'*.
29. Finally, the new professionalism means **professionals defining standards of excellence** (paragraphs 86-91), *'for example setting challenging objectives themselves'*. This will give professionals input into setting *'high but achievable objectives'* and giving front-line professionals *'more strategic influence over the future of services'*. The intention is to move away from a system in which *'professionals are consulted to one in which their views are at the heart of designing the approaches that deliver world-class outcomes'*. Forums might also be established for *'public sector leaders'* to decide what world-class standards are while professionals will be expected to challenge each other and share best practice to improve services.
30. In the conclusion to this section (paragraphs 92-94), the paper notes that the new professionalism *'rests on redefining the relationship between professionals and citizens'*, noting that the public services were now just as accountable to citizens as they are to their managers and to Whitehall. This will involve *'strengthening user choices and voice, but at the same time providing space for the best professionals to manage and run their own service.'* It also will require *'constant dialogue between government and professional staff'*.

Strategic leadership

31. The section sets out what is meant by strategic leadership in this new phase of reform. *'No country in the world offers excellent public services to all its citizens without active, enabling government'*, the Cabinet Office avers, and *'Governments cannot simply leave the provision of services to market or individuals. If left simply to private markets, excellent and equitable outcomes would not be achieved in health, education or welfare³'* (paragraphs 95-96).
32. Instead of engaging in the detailed, day-to-day management of front-line public services, the Government proposes here to take a *'strategic leadership'* role, avoiding micro-management. The centre will focus on *'setting out priorities and how they will be achieved'*, and producing a *'vision [that] should inspire and energise leaders and front-line professionals'* (paragraph 101).

³Paragraph 96 goes on to note: *'As the health care system in the United States demonstrates, such approaches can be more expensive, less equitable and lead to poorer outcomes overall'*. By the way, that hissing sound you're hearing is the deflating of the author's national pride.

Excellence and fairness

33. *'Excellence and fairness'* defines four primary roles for the central government. First, Whitehall will provide **vision and direction** (paragraphs 100-106) and sees its role as maintaining minimum standards and addressing inequities and localised failures. The Government acknowledges that central control can raise overall standards, but that a more localised approach becomes necessary to achieve the responsiveness to users that is desired.
34. Local leaders, the paper argues, are better placed to create a unified, responsive service for citizens, and *'direct intervention from central government is only necessary where local organisations lack the will or capacity to act'*. Whitehall also believes it has a valuable role in *'leading changes in people's attitudes and behaviours'*, such as through road safety and health campaigns that encourage people to take more care and responsibility for their well-being.
35. Second, the centre will act as a **guarantor of standards and fairness** (paragraphs 107-111), *'establishing the overall framework and accountability systems for the public services'*. It will **'set the standards below which providers must not fall, and clearly state the implications of failure'**. These are the minimum standards; achieving standards of excellence will be increasingly the responsibility of local actors.
36. Third, Government will act *'as a long-term investor'* (paragraphs 112-16), though it seems to define this role more as the creation of a series of mechanisms to improve productivity and support innovation. The paper notes that *'world-class systems achieve high levels of productivity but they do so without dictating how every pound is spent'*, going on to describe a system based on multi-year funding agreements where *'expected outcomes are described rather than inputs'*. The central government will also act to provide incentives for innovation and to *'prevent problems occurring rather than spend large sums on dealing with them after the event'*.
37. Finally, Government will serve as a **capacity-builder and connector** (paragraphs 117-122), *'encouraging leadership, unlocking talent within services, protecting and sharing information, encouraging skills development and building coalitions for change.'* It will make sure there are enough skilled staff, and encourage those staff to be innovative and risk-taking.
38. It will ensure that there is enough skilled staff and that these workers are encouraged to innovate. By utilising its unique **system-wide perspective**, Whitehall will also work to *'bring organisations together to broker agreements and build coalitions of change'* – for example, building partnerships with charities to fund research and work to reorganise and align public services in order to improve efficiency. Government will also continue to play a role in institutional reform, as *'government is best placed to change the organisational architecture, changing the type of organisations that deliver services and how they relate to one another'*.
39. Central government departments will also have to adopt new, more cooperative ways of working to mirror the cross-cutting approach of the latest Public Service Agreements (PSAs) and the Local Area Agreements at the local level (LAAs). Ministries will have to *'renew themselves and improve performance'*, and *'be able to identify long-term challenges; establish overall operating frameworks; develop external partnerships that can create change; understand the aspirations of citizens; foster a culture of innovation; and avoid the temptation to dictate change.'* As a result, it states, *'The next stage of public service reform will be as much about improving the work of central government as about change among front line services'*.

CEL Brief guide

Excellence and fairness

Conclusion

40. In conclusion (paragraphs 126-33), the paper states that *'only strong, reformed public services'* can create the secure and upwardly mobile Britain that will be needed in the future. *'Achieving this will require a new set of relationships at the heart of our public services; between empowered citizens and professionals; between professionals and government; and between citizens and the state'*.
41. This will involve *'extending choice'*, *'unlocking the creativity and ambition of public sector workers to innovate and drive up standards in partnership with service users'*, and *'less micro-managing and more strategic leadership from central government'*.

Implications for the FE and skills sector

42. *'Excellence and fairness'* builds on a number of current Government policy agendas evident in the FE and skills sector. The emphasis on citizen empowerment reinforces the commitment towards greater devolution to the locality and the importance for the sector of engaging in mechanisms such as Local Area Agreements (LAAs) in order to contribute the education dimension to place-shaping and local community priorities. The report also reflects the impact of the new cross-cutting PSA targets which will demand more joined-up and integrated delivery across public-service boundaries in the locality, again emphasising the importance of FE leaders being fully engaged in their communities.
43. In the FE and skills sector over the recent period, Government has tended to highlight employers as the pre-eminent customer. The emphasis in *'Excellence and fairness'* on empowering citizens and customers and giving them more direct control and influence over services could be read as shifting this emphasis to include the citizen and community more centrally, again reflecting the devolutionary trend.
44. The commitment to developing a new professionalism resonates and gives greater impetus to self-governance at the individual, organisational and sector levels. This endorsement from the centre of government should give added impetus to the shift towards self-regulation. In particular, the following will be welcome as the FE sector moves towards self-regulation:
 - the proposal that professionals should be involved in defining standards of excellence
 - the intention for government to adopt a strategic role avoiding the dangers of micro-management
 - the commitment that the centre will play a more limited role in the day-to-day operations of the public services.
45. An issue that has resonated throughout our policy seminars with sector leaders has been concern about the energy and determination required to meet the needs of customers - individual learners, employers and communities - within the sector's regulatory and performance management arrangements. *'Excellence and fairness'* suggests that there will be a positive climate for the sector to engage in shaping those systems with government.
46. *'Excellence and fairness'* also shares with the Leitch Review a continuing, perhaps even nagging, worry in Government that the United Kingdom is not successfully competing on the global stage. There is a welcome recognition in the report of the value of examining overseas practice more systematically to inform thinking in England.

CEL Brief guide

Excellence and fairness

47. In summary, *Excellence and fairness* provides a gentle but significant touch on the tiller of the public service reform process. The emphasis on excellence and fairness and the three themes of *new professionalism*, *citizen empowerment* and *strategic leadership* resonate with the ambitions of the sector itself and with the shift towards self-regulation. The challenge for the FE and skills sector is to explore how these ideas can be exploited and translated into practice in order that the sector can be positioned at the leading edge of public service reform.

Contact the CEL policy team

Caroline Mager
Director of Strategic Policy
email: caroline.mager@centreforexcellence.org.uk
telephone: 020 7297 8438

Ben Margulies
Policy Research Officer
email: ben.margulies@centreforexcellence.org.uk
telephone: 020 7297 8439

Your comments on the Brief Guide are welcome – please contact Ben by email on ben.margulies@centreforexcellence.org.uk.

© CEL July 2008

Published by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL).

The purpose of these guides is to stimulate discussion and debate. While every effort has been made to ensure the information contained within this publication is correct, neither the publisher nor the authors or their companies accept any liability for any errors or omissions.

The text in this document may be reproduced free of charge in any format or media without requiring specific permission, on condition that the source is acknowledged, that the material is not used in a derogatory manner or in misleading context and that the findings are not misrepresented.