

LSIS Brief Guide

Engagement and Aspiration: Reconnecting Policy Making with Front-line Professionals



Introduction

1. As part of our continuing examination of public service reform, this Brief Guide examines *Engagement and Aspiration: Reconnecting Policy Making with Front Line Professionals*¹. This paper was commissioned by the Cabinet Office, and written by the Sunningdale Institute. It was published in April 2009.

Background

2. In 2008, the Cabinet Office published *Excellence and Fairness*², which serves as the blueprint for the next round of public service reform. Prior to *Excellence and Fairness*, the Government had focused on improving public services through a programme of strict control from the centre. This policy had, by the middle part of the decade, begun to produce diminishing returns.
3. In *Excellence and Fairness*, the Government adopted a new three-pronged strategy. The three elements of this strategy were:
 - **empowering citizens**³ who use public services: both extending choice and complementing it with more direct forms of individual control;
 - fostering a **new professionalism** across the whole public service workforce, and;
 - providing strong **strategic leadership** from central government (Excellence and Fairness, paragraph 16)
4. It is the second of these planks, the '*new professionalism*' that the Sunningdale paper is built upon. New professionalism calls for '*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*' (Ibid.) A more autonomous, proactive corps of front-line civil servants would be expected to play a more influential role in shaping the policies they implement. Therefore, the Cabinet Office commissioned the Sunningdale Institute '*to produce an independent report looking at how to ensure better engagement and connection with front-line professionals in the design and development of policy*' (Engagement and Aspiration, p. 6)

¹ <http://www.nationalschool.gov.uk/downloads/EngagementandAspirationReport.pdf>

² See LSIS's Brief Guide to this paper at:

<http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Documents/BGExcellenceandFairness.sflb>

³ Boldface is used where it corresponds to boldface in the actual paper – in other words, emphasis theirs, not mine.

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Good practice

5. *Engagement and Aspiration* examines current modes of work in the civil service to identify areas where the front line is contributing meaningfully to policy formation.
6. The paper borrows from a 1999 White Paper, *Modernising Government*, to define ‘good policy making, which is *‘the process by which governments translate their political vision into programmes and actions to deliver ‘outcomes’ – desired changes in the real world’*. The Sunningdale paper accepts that definition, because it *‘correctly sees policy making as a process that has to reach out to the front line and to the citizen to deliver outcomes’* (*Engagement and Aspiration*, p. 13). The paper also takes a definition from a 2000/01 Cabinet Office study, which lists nine essential features of good policy making:
 - *forward looking;*
 - *outward looking;*
 - *innovative, flexible and creative;*
 - *evidence-based;*
 - *inclusive;*
 - *joined up;*
 - *subject to review;*
 - *outcomes evaluated, and;*
 - *with lessons learned* (p. 18).
7. However, *Engagement and Aspiration* also quotes another report about the children’s sector⁴, which stated *‘many front-line professionals don’t know how policy making works while many senior civil servants don’t know how front-line institutions work’* (Ibid.). The Sunningdale report seeks to find a golden mean between these two positions.

⁴ The report doesn’t define ‘children’s sector’ – it seems to mean anything relating to public services provided to children. The magazine *Children and Young People Now*, which uses the term on its website, covers ‘children’s and youth professionals across health, social care, education, childcare, youth work, youth justice and advice and guidance for young people’ aged 0 to 19..

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8. The best practice the authors were able to find came *'when there is devolved authority given to the front-line to draw up instructions, produce guidance for the citizen, and to experiment taking account of local circumstances – within a strategic framework set by 'the centre'* (Engagement and Aspiration, p. 14). The paper goes on to note that the desired outcome – the *'political vision'* – can be determined by the central government, but *'the best set of detailed policies to give effect to those aims may not be so obvious. Sufficient time must be allowed for departmental policy staff to model which combination of policy levers can best produce the desired effect on the ground'* (Ibid.). Local input can also help harmonise new policies with existing programmes being pursued by other departments.
9. The paper notes that *'examples of effective policies at the sharp end of delivery have indeed usually involved better engagement and connection with front-line workers in policy formulation, and many succeeded precisely because those involved in the policy work in departments saw their role as at the bottom of an inverted pyramid supporting and facilitating the front-line work of the base and not as the apex directing downwards'* (p. 15).
10. It is also important to engage with personnel who, though not necessarily considered *'front-line professionals'* in the traditional sense, do put policy into practice. The paper gives the example of health care – policy-makers should talk not only to doctors and nurses, but also to technicians, cleaners and human resources personnel. *'Early endorsement by relevant professional groups'* can also aid the effective implementation of policy (p. 15).
11. The paper calls for *'more horizontal rather than vertical thinking'* to craft effective collaboration and innovation. At the local level, this is being achieved through Local Area Agreements (LAAs), *'but parts of government remain risk-averse'*. At the centre, *Engagement and Aspiration* advocates *'a team effort between the politically committed who share the vision and the politically impartial permanent staff whose job is to enable its execution through enabling appropriate lower level policies, regulations, contracts and instructions to be available to guide the front line'* (p. 15). This team approach should also be replicated by *'staff in departments themselves ... both with the professionals who are managing the issues on the front line, and those in other areas of governments whose efforts can help – or hinder – achievement of the vision'* (Ibid.).
12. Another example of good practice identified by the Sunningdale paper is where ministers question senior civil servants about the policy process, asking:
 - *Do those in their department with the key policy making roles have sufficient feel for the current circumstances of front-line delivery?*
 - *Is there someone 'in the room' when policies come to be discussed who will accept responsibility – and has the necessary authority – to enforce consistency in policy throughout the delivery system... ?*
 - *Do the proposed policies incorporate learning and fresh ideas from the front line about what will best secure the policy goal?* (p. 16)

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13. *Such considerations lead us to the conclusion that policy activity needs to be reconceptualised as a process of problem exploration with the front line and other stakeholders in which ‘the networked public officials responsible for policy formulation act as two-way translators and facilitators, tapping resources both of evidence and experience’ (p. 16).*

Obstacles

14. *Engagement and Aspiration identifies a number of conceptual and practical obstacles towards achieving the ideal qualities listed above. Firstly, traditional methods of public service management have focused not on the formulation of policy but its ‘delivery’. As a result, ‘thinking inside government about modern policy making in terms of bottom-up innovation took a back seat and the interest groups outside government came to be seen as barriers to change to be defeated rather than partners in change to be wooed’ (p. 19).*
15. The paper also sees the tendency to assign objectives to specific departments to be an obstacle to the sort of joined-up working it proposes. With some exceptions (such as the Government’s strategy against radical groups), *‘the holistic approach does not seem to have been mainstreamed into day to day policy work’* (p. 19). The paper did state that ‘cross-cutting PSA cross-departmental boards’ are an example of good practice in this area.
16. Media pressure also interferes with the proper development of policy, and consultation with the front line. *‘Several of those we interviewed pointed to examples where the media-driven world has led to dates being fixed for policy speeches and announcements, publication of policy papers and legislative proposals before departments had any idea of what would be sensible policy content’*. As a result, policy has to be cobbled together at the eleventh hour, meaning that there is no time for proper consultation with front-line professionals. *‘Like trying to build a wall from the top row of ornamental bricks downwards, such examples rely on the hope that later on someone will be able to dig solid foundations to hold the whole construction up. Such behaviours increase hugely the risk of failure of policies to be implementable and to generate the desired outcomes on the ground’* (p. 19).
17. Finally, the civil service itself is seen as too reluctant to *‘get out of Whitehall’* and mix with those who actually implement policy on the ground. In *‘some parts of the Civil Service’*, the predominant culture embraces *‘too much abstract analysis and not enough injection of practical common sense and the lessons of experience of those who actually have to deliver the outcomes sought’* – it is strong on theory, but weak on practice (p. 19). The chairman of the Public Administration Select Committee of the House of Commons is quoted as saying, *‘The top jobs should go to those who have successfully managed programmes and projects – in health, social welfare and taxation, as well as construction and defence. At the moment they are given to those best at helping their Ministers get through the political week’* (p. 20).
18. The paper acknowledges that these criticisms are not true of all Government departments, but they are true to enough of an extent to pose a problem: *‘The operating system of government is still dominated by the new public management [a theory that favours strong central control], expensive consultants and notions of delivery chains that start with policy and end with a one-dimensional ‘customer’*” (p. 20).

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19. The paper also notes that there are no existing models of how to accomplish this sort of reform. *'It is not clear what will be the institutions, financial mechanisms, structures and processes that will make many of these transformations happen. Much new ground will have to be broken'*. These will have to be developed in collaboration with the front line. *'The solutions will therefore have to be co-created across organisational boundaries of central and local government with the front-line professions of the many agencies, charities and companies involved'*. (p. 20-1).

The private and third sectors as models

20. *Engagement and Aspiration* note that the private sector and charities are often much better at engaging their front-line staff than the public sector is. *'The best of the private sector has invested in processes to capture relevant knowledge and learning about their customers and to ensure that it is shared where it is needed. Leading private sector firms are judicious in launching initiatives and will insist on driving the business through a limited number of major changes at any one time'* (p. 7-8). The paper notes *'Good companies ensure that new policies are fully market-tested on customers before rollout'* (p. 23), and also notes that charities have an especially close relationship between senior management and the front line, *'since it is the very nature of voluntary activity that services have to be driven by the needs of the user'* (p. 21).
21. *'What is clear in both the private and third sectors is leadership responsibility for policy formation and implementation, grounded in a culture of action rather than analysis'*. The senior management sets the policies, but makes sure these are disseminated throughout the organisation, and senior management is always *'visible'* to the front line (p. 21). The paper also notes approvingly that successful businesses have been working *'to break down the barriers between organisational silos'*, and *'to foster joint ownership of strategy, supporting this with explicit policies for sharing knowledge and learning'* (p. 21-22).
22. *Engagement and Aspiration* praises the tendency of private-sector executives to appreciate that policy is not implemented immediately – they are much less likely to issue amendments or new orders midway through the implementation of a project because they are impatient for results (p. 23) The paper also notes that *'successful companies ensure central initiatives reinforce rather than weaken local initiatives to improve service delivery and customer experience'* (p. 23).
23. One exemplar the paper cites is Tesco's 'Steering Wheel' model, a *'new structural mechanism to link its buyers and stores' staff so that they could come together to operationalise strategy'* (p. 23), reproduced below:

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The Apogee model

24. The Sunningdale paper suggests its own model for the future of collaboration between the centre and the front line. In their view, *'policy makers will have to see themselves as high energy networkers, mobilising, engaging and energising partnerships across government, local government and the front-line professionals themselves'*. They will *'synthesise and translate front-line experience (and good analysis) into good policy – so that front-line staff don't have to translate bad policy into good practice'* The paper adds that *'the orbit of the policy maker must be extensive enough to cover all the stakeholders including those in the professions that make up the furthest front line'* (p. 17).
25. The *'short-hand term for this pro-active networking, facilitative approach'* is the *Aspiring to Policy making Grounded in Evidence and Experience*, or Apogee. This process is visualised as a circular one (see the graph on p. 17 of *Engagement and Aspiration*, reproduced on page 8 of this document), with *'front-line professionals'* and *'users of public services'* at the 'apogee' – that is, the peak of the process. They channel *'front-line evidence, innovation and professional experience'* to the centre, which in turn provides *'strategic direction resources, connections and performance'* (p. 17).

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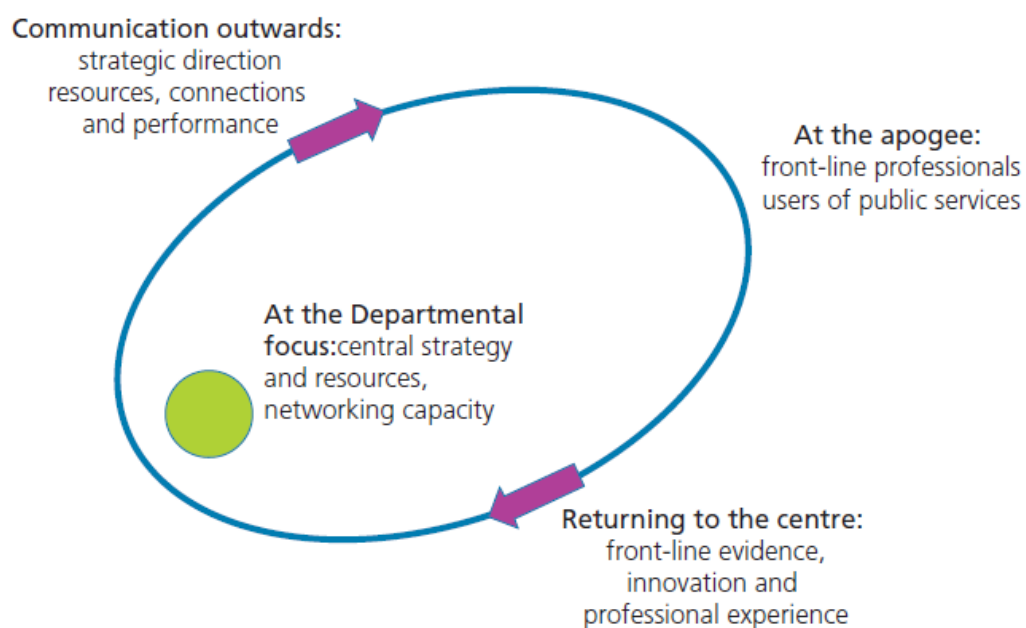
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26. Under this system, *'departmental policy officials need to see themselves as 'professional' facilitators and networkers, connecting up all those with a potential stake in the policy area including active frontline engagement and consultation in the synthesis and translation of convincing and coherent policy narratives'* They are to ensure that the evidence and analysis that is captured and synthesised contains qualitative, credible front-line experience and ideas', and deliver this to ministers to inform their policy making (p. 18).
27. The paper defines the role of departmental officials (that is, civil servants) as *'policy formulation'*, which is separate from the political choices made by elected ministers. Policy formulation is ideally *'involves encouraging the inward flow of innovation, networking with colleagues in other departments and agencies and with frontline professionals, and putting together proposals for consideration by government'* (p. 18).
28. The first, and according to the authors, most crucial step towards fulfilling the promise of the Apogee system would be *'implementing further reform is to develop a shared understanding along these lines between Ministers, their Permanent Secretaries and senior officials and their key front-line leaders of what good modern policy formulation in government must now involve'* (p. 18).
29. The paper proposes a five-step programme for the implementation of Apogee:
 1. *ministers and Civil Service Management Board to consider and agree the approach;*
 2. *preparation of explanatory and case study material in consultation with front-line stakeholders that captures the essence of the Apogee approach, under the supervision of the Cabinet Secretary and the board, and with input from the Number 10 Policy Unit and the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (p. 25);*
 3. *the Cabinet Office to organise the launch of an improvement programme including conferences and seminars, and new training opportunities, possibly alongside the next public service reform White Paper (p. 26);*
 4. *departments to cascade detailed awareness of the approach and engage their front line in developing it to suit their circumstances. This will include measures such as 'assessing systematically the current mode of the front line and their ability to manage fresh change', 'capturing local professional pride in their work and in the public service ethos', and 'exploring the inevitable constraints of time, staff, skills and money that will always apply at the sharp end' (p. 27); and*
 5. *departments to embed the new approach in the governance of day to day work including through Capability Reviews and the Professional Skills for Government framework (p. 8).*

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The Apogee Approach



Recommendations

30. As part of its overall strategy, and encompassing the Apogee approach, *Engagement and Aspiration* gives a summary of 11 recommendations in five categories. These are:

Support to and from Ministers

1. *make 'front-line insight' a compulsory part of all policy advice to Ministers on public service reform, to match and complement the increasing use of 'customer insight';*
2. *make time and space to develop and formulate long-term policies in partnership with key stakeholders (community and professionals), and;*
3. *ensure relevant front-line staff are engaged in the design of policies that they will be responsible for implementing before public announcements and formal consultations.*

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Policy making ethos and structures

4. *re-shape policy work in support of the new principles of Public Service Reform, and so ensure it is 'fit for purpose' for current and future policy challenges and their complexities;*
5. *organise policy teams so they have access to relevant insights, information and networks; set up specific arrangements to capture, develop and disseminate front-line thinking;*
6. *seek out ideas and practical experiences to improve the policy – optimise use of existing networks and develop routes to new sources of front-line information, and;*
7. *increase awareness of conditions at the front line within departments.*

Incentives, skills and capabilities

8. *policy making skills and capability to have a stronger emphasis on connecting with and drawing professional insights from the front line.*

Communicating with the front line

9. *capturing local professional pride in their work and public service ethos, and;*
10. *ensuring policies are accessible and understandable.*

Learning

11. *ensure an active circle of learning between the front line, intermediaries and central Whitehall departments so that relevant insights in both directions are captured (p. 9-10).*

Implications

31. *Engagement and Aspiration* marks the latest stage in the implementation of the *Excellence and Fairness* agenda. It demonstrates the Government's continuing commitment to a new form of public-sector management, with less proscription from Whitehall and more autonomy and input from those who deliver and receive services.
32. The paper, and indeed the public-service reform agenda as a whole, also reflects the Government's commitment to greater devolution to the locality, which can also be seen in the local government reforms announced over the past three years, most notably in the emphasis on Local Strategic Partnerships, and on the collaborative development on local lists of priorities in the locality. The Local Area Agreements these partnerships produce are based on the National Indicator Set, a national policy, but chosen by local partners and then agreed with the central Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) – a model suggestive of the reforms suggested here.

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33. In its emphasis on ‘co-creating’ policy with the front line, *Engagement and Aspiration* also echoes the thinking emerging from the recent LSIS seminar series, entitled *Self-regulation: Shifting the paradigm*. The major outcome from the seminar discussions was the desire of the learning and skills sector for co-design and co-ownership of regulatory arrangements (including standards, measures of performance, etc), to create a system of shared or co-regulation.
34. The final report of the seminar series is available at:
<http://www.lsis.org.uk/PolicyServices/Discussion/SeminarSeries/ShiftingTheParadigm.aspx>
35. It is interesting that the paper chooses to laud private-sector management practices, not because they are wrong to do so, but because the private sector has been more often lambasted in the public discourse for its management practices since the recession began.

Ben Margulies, Policy Research Officer

ben.margulies@lsis.org.uk

Telephone: 020 7297 8439

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