

## **Cardiff Public Management Research Group: Research on public service performance**

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The performance of public services, from education and policing to healthcare and waste management is at the top of the policy agenda in countries across the world. Issues of public service efficiency, effectiveness and equity have moved to the forefront of political debates as the role of government in supporting the quality of life of citizens has become ever more important. As these issues have become increasingly important to policy-makers, so too has their evaluation by policy analysts and researchers. Across the spectrum of the social science disciplines interest in the strategies and interventions which are most likely to enhance the effectiveness of public services has grown rapidly, perhaps nowhere more so than in the field of public administration. In fact, a major quest of public management researchers in recent years has been to understand why some organizations perform better than others (see Ashworth, Entwistle and Boyne 2010).

Within this rapidly evolving context, teams of public management research teams in business schools, politics, economics, social policy and economics departments across the UK have turned their attention to evaluating “what works” in terms of improving public services. The Public Management Research Group (PMRG) in Cardiff Business School has been studying the causes and consequences of the performance of public services for more than a decade now. During this period, the group has attracted external funding worth over £4.5 million from the research councils and central government departments. Projects have focused on a diverse range of important topics, ranging from the role of external inspection, performance management regimes and executive succession as drivers of improvement to the impact of alternative organizational strategies, human resource management (HRM) practices and innovative governance and partnership-working structures. As a result of this work, the PMRG has become recognised as one of the leading global teams of public management researchers – an achievement acknowledged by the Business and Management RAE panel. Thus, as the fiscal austerity agenda begins to bite in countries across Europe, it is timely to reflect upon what the group learned during the foregoing period of unprecedented growth in interest in public service improvement.

Firstly, the measurement and management of public service performance is a very complex and politically sensitive activity. In the private sector, it is relatively straightforward to agree and measure financial criteria of organizational success and failure. By contrast, public organizations are typically required to meet multiple and potentially conflicting organizational goals. The creation of performance information, its interpretation, and its use are all subject to disagreement amongst interested stakeholders. Despite these political complexities, there are key tangible elements of performance that all stakeholders are likely to value (if to varying degrees), such as the speed with which services are delivered, the extent to which they meet the needs of service users and the capacity within public organizations to do this cost-effectively. Each of these elements of performance can be measured or gauged in a variety of ways. Our research has, wherever possible, utilised a

multi-method, multi-level comparative research perspective and design, in which the perspectives of multiple stakeholders are accommodated.

Secondly, management and policy both matter for public service performance. Although our research has confirmed that the context in which public organizations operate is undoubtedly a major determinant of public service outcomes, it has also indicated that there is scope for policy-makers at all levels of government to influence those outcomes. Whether it is achieved through the development of effective performance management techniques and inspection procedures by central government or through the introduction of rigorous strategic planning, high-commitment HRM practices or changes in leadership within organizations, there appear to be several routes to better public services. One especially striking example of this is the relationship we have observed between organizational strategy and performance. In numerous studies of local authority performance in England and Wales, we have found those organizations adopting an innovative strategic approach to service delivery are significantly more likely to achieve better service outcomes.

Thirdly, however, one major finding from the studies carried out by the Cardiff team has been to demonstrate that the one-size fits all approach of management reform often adopted by governments is unlikely to result in improved services because of the many variations in context faced by public service providers. In particular, reform programmes often tend to assume that the same kinds of interventions will be appropriate for a range of different types of service. However, it is clear that the organizational challenges faced by schools, nursing homes, hospitals and job centres are unlikely to be identical and therefore the notion that they are susceptible to similar reforms is likely to be misguided. A good example of this is the complex mosaic of relationships we have observed between the scale and efficiency of each of the different public services provided by local authorities in the UK. All of which illustrates that the costs and benefits of proposals for restructuring of public service provision within any given policy field or geographical area have to be evaluated extremely carefully.

Despite the considerable research effort that has been devoted to understanding the performance of public services in recent years, there is still much that remains unknown. Most of the evidence to date was generated during a time of public sector plenty, as budgets get tighter in the coming years it will be interesting to observe whether what worked in the past will continue to do so in a much altered context. In fact, what is required more generally for further progress in understanding the determinants of public service performance is the development of longitudinal studies of organizational change and performance. Research that seeks to help create better public services therefore would benefit most from the creation of quantitative and qualitative data sets, which could enable analysts to explain why organizations change and what difference this makes to performance.

## **Reference**

Ashworth, R., G.A. Boyne and T. Entwistle (eds), *Public Service Improvement: Theories and Evidence*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.