Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: PE1423

Main Petitioner: Gordon Hall on behalf of The Unreasonable Learners

Subject: Harnessing the undoubted talent of Public Sector Staff

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the considerable research into the thinking that underpins the approach to managing the contribution from staff that has been undertaken over the past decades and compare this with the assumptions that underpins existing management practice; and subsequently to use the findings to ensure that it harnesses the talent of its staff.

Background

The Petition calls on the Parliament to urge the Government “modernise the management culture of Scotland”. The name “unreasonable learners” comes from a quote from George Bernard Shaw—

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world, the unreasonable one persists in trying to get the world to adapt to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

The Unreasonable Learners had a stand in the Parliament in November 2011 to explain the thinking behind their work. The booklet produced for MSPs contains a useful summary.

In short, the group believes that there is a “inordinate waste in our public sector”, caused by the “command and control” culture, i.e. “our society believes we need leaders to provide direction and they should then be supported by scrutiny methods to ensure we comply.” However, they state that there has been extensive research over the past decades that is “pushing us toward structures that are based on—

- A belief in people;
- The need to understand and re-design the complex systems that characterise our society;
• A recognition that the driving force for progress will not come from central direction but from innovative people at the workface."

They state that our present assumptions are flawed – “that people are naturally lazy and require to be directed and controlled. We manage the whole by managing the parts. We abhor risk.” In future, our assumptions should be “fully researched” – “people like work and we manage the whole by designing systems to enable people’s spirit. We welcome experiment, learning and variety.” They go on to set out a range of examples, and explain their way forward. In conclusion, the Unreasonable Learners state that their “Fundamental Aim” is—

• “To make progress by unleashing the spirit and willing commitment of the Scottish people.

• In so doing to create a learning society that is continually improving the systems that characterise our society.”

Scottish Government Action

The Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, which reported in June 2011, contains a series of priorities for the future of public services in Scotland, many of which are relevant to the Petition, i.e.—

• Recognising that effective services must be designed with and for people and communities - not delivered ‘top down’ for administrative convenience

• Maximising scarce resources by utilising all available resources from the public, private and third sectors, individuals, groups and communities

• Working closely with individuals and communities to understand their needs, maximise talents and resources, support self reliance, and build resilience

• Concentrating the efforts of all services on delivering integrated services that deliver results

• Prioritising preventative measures to reduce demand and lessen inequalities

• Identifying and targeting the underlying causes of inter-generational deprivation and low aspiration

• Tightening oversight and accountability of public services, introducing consistent data-gathering and performance comparators, to improve services
Driving continuing reform across all public services based on outcomes, improved performance and cost reduction

Implementing better long-term strategic planning, including greater transparency around major budget decisions like universal entitlements

The Government formally responded to the Commission in Renewing Scotland’s Public Services, setting out four key “pillars”—

- a decisive shift towards prevention;
- greater integration of public services at a local level, driven by better partnership, collaboration and effective local delivery;
- greater investment in the people who deliver services through enhanced workforce development and effective leadership; and
- a sharp focus on improving performance, through greater transparency, innovation and use of digital technology.

Scottish Parliament Action

The Session 3 Finance Committee considered “systems thinking” in its report on the Budget Strategy Phase in 2010. The Committee's report stated that—

Systems thinking

99. Systems thinking is advocated by Professor John Seddon who, in oral evidence to the Committee, was a vociferous critic of certain central government efforts to improve performance in the public sector. In summary, he said that centrally-imposed targets could make performance worse, by leading professionals to meet all their activity targets without actually achieving the purpose of the service, for example, better social care. Inspectors could compound the problem by evaluating the “success” of targets that were wrong in the first place. He argued instead for greater innovation in public services, to “shift the responsibility for making choices about methods and measures to those managers who deliver the services”.

100. While Professor Seddon’s oral evidence often focussed on English and Welsh examples, he considered that similar lessons would apply in Scotland. From the various mentions of systems thinking in the written and oral evidence, for example by Unison, it seems that there is a growing move towards this type of analysis in Scotland. Scott-Moncrieff said—

“A whole system approach to looking for savings is required. For example, the connection between policing resources, the number of prosecutions, court availability and prison capacity needs to be considered as a whole. Without a full understanding of these inter-dependencies driving savings in one spending
area may just lead to more unavoidable demand for public spending in another area.”

101. The Committee considers that the importance of longer-term approaches to public spending should not be forgotten even when faced with immediate challenges and invites the Scottish Government to explain how it will continue to direct its spend towards more preventative programmes.

102. It is likely that the Committee will look to build on the work begun during this inquiry by undertaking a more significant piece of work examining some of the proposed longer-term solutions such as preventative spending. The Committee expects to be able to formally launch its new inquiry before summer recess with its findings contributing to a legacy paper to be published before the end of the parliamentary session. The inquiry will also assist the Committee in its on-going work to understand more clearly the links between spending and outcomes.

103. Given the evidence provided by Professor Seddon and others, the Committee invites the Scottish Government to provide an assessment of how systems thinking can help to address the budget deficit.

The Government responded to these conclusions, stating that—

“The Scottish Government welcomes the announcement of the Committee's inquiry into preventative spending. The Scottish Government has for some time been leading a considerable body of work across a range of public services looking at what are often referred to as early or preventative interventions, including in health, social care and education. Systems thinking is an established part of the policy development process undertaken by the Scottish Government. This is reflected in the budget decisions that are taken, for example in support of continuous improvements to patients' experience of treatment within the NHS, in ongoing reform of the criminal justice system, and in the consolidation within the Government Economic Strategy of measures and programmes that combine to provide optimal support to economic growth in Scotland.”

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