I expect inspection in the future to be more focused on outcomes, more informative to users, more proportionate, less routine, more joined-up and cost far less. People running public services should be noticing the difference, or have a right to ask ‘Why not?’

PMPA members need no reminding that inspection, along with targets, has been an important policy tool for the present Government. But since 2001, when the Public Services Productivity Panel’s report, *Role of External Review in Improving Performance* (Byatt and Lyons, 2001), criticised the increased scale and poor co-ordination of inspection, OPSR has been working with government departments to reverse the tide. It’s not been an easy process, but Ministers are sharpening their priorities, and inspectorates are changing their approach and reducing their costs.

The Policy and Principles of Modern Inspection

A review by OPSR in 2003, *Inspecting for Improvement: Developing a Customer-Focused Approach*, examined the place of inspection in reforming public services, and how it needed to change to be more effective. It identified three different types of inspection:

- Giving the public confidence that standards are being met.
- Telling the public about how their services perform, in comparison to others.
- Assessing the effect this is having on users, and showing what needs to be improved.

Best practice aims to deliver all three. A framework of principles were drawn together (see figure 1), after extensive consultation, and adopted in July 2003 in the Government’s Policy on Inspection of Public Services.

Progress

Progress in implementing the policy has been faster in some areas than others. The health sector has streamlined its approach with the establishment of the Healthcare Commission, and a review of its arm’s-length bodies. Ofsted is introducing shorter, sharper inspections with little or no notice given to institutions. The Audit Commission has adopted a more strategic approach to regulation and reducing its costs. Proposals for new arrangements for criminal justice inspection are expected shortly. So people working in inspection will be in no doubt about who is inspecting the inspectors, and may be reeling from the pace. But there is still more to do.

Public Opinion

When OPSR began its review of inspection, MORI asked the public how effective the inspectorates were at assuring the public and informing the service user. At that time, the results showed a low awareness—unprompted, 17% of respondents could name Ofsted, but no other scored higher than 4%. When prompted, the results were higher, but 13% ‘recognized’ a nonexistent inspectorate that was included in the list for control purposes (MORI, 2002). Even if perceptions have grown since 2002, there is undoubtedly some way to go for inspectorates to be the customer advocates that many aspire to become.

PMPA Members

As with any change, however well-intended, it takes a long time to make an impact on the front line. That is where PMPA readers can help bring some bottom-up challenge to the process. Next time you encounter an inspection, discuss how it will fit with the principles set out in the Government’s policy. You can be a positive part of the process of change.

References


MORI (2002), *Attitudes to Public Services Inspections* (London).