

Role of External Review

in

Improving Performance

Fieldwork Analysis

August 2001

consultancy firm or other area. Some inspectors fall back too readily to comparing work practices with their previous authority, taking a somewhat parochial view about what works best.

There is concern that the motivation of inspectors who came from private practice is to secure some of the new and innovative ideas being developed to their own personal benefit in due course.

Although there is no real consensus on the skills and background that make a good inspector, there is a demand for highly skilled people who will be insightful, demanding, inspiring and supportive. There are perceived to be benefits from bringing in more private sector secondees.

“why did they emphasise local government experience when (the outcomes being sought) are markets being developed and customer led services”

Section B – External Inspection generally

- 1. All regimes entail an external agency taking a detailed look at policies, practices and outcomes. It is apparent that the same contextual information is required on each occasion about strategic issues, corporate priorities (§9).**

“is it really necessary that the Chief Executive has to go through with all of them the same issues. Could some shared understanding not be generated?”

- 2. In response to the increasing number of inspection regimes, some authorities are becoming expert “at managing inspections”, investing in a significant level of detailed preparation and organisation for the site visit.**

Authorities are becoming used to evidence based approaches to verifying performance and achievement

- Charter mark
- Investors in People
- European Foundation for Quality Management
- Beacon Status
- Best Value Inspectorate
- Ofsted and Social Services Inspectorate
- IdeA peer review

“Managing” the inspection has obvious benefits; staff are briefed, papers prepared, timetables planned and meetings booked. However, it consumes resource, can be very repetitive, generating cynicism about what is required to get a “good report” (§26)

“collating all the paperwork, documentation and the process of getting everything done can get in the way. There are a limited number of people who can do this kind of work”.

The focus shifts from key strategic issues to the detail of correct paperwork and portfolios of evidence that are so heavy they

“need trolleys to get them to the inspector’s car”.

3. **There are many and varied experiences of “the inspectors” from all regimes. A suggestion is made in respect of the Best Value regime that the Authority should have a statutory right of response to the report. This could short cut some of the energy that has been invested in trying to get Inspection reports changed and make the relationship more balanced.**

Clearly some authorities have established a good relationship early on with their lead Best Value Inspector, others not so good. Some authorities have very positive experiences of Ofsted, finding the inspectors “*inspired, outstanding and first rate*” and others have not saying their approach will be different

“next time”.....”less honest”.....”more cynical”....”more defensive”

Section C – Contrasts between Ofsted/SSI/BVI

1. **Experience with the Best Value Inspectorate is contrasted with the Social Services Inspectorate, for example, who are carrying out a technical and professional inspection of safety and there appears to be more confidence in their ability (§1,61).**

“We found the whole thing valuable, reinforcing politically and locally”.

The annual reviews

“help you get on track”

SSI and Ofsted are however dealing with a single, if complex, service and generally are said to be ex-practitioners who have had direct and significant experience of that service. That makes a difference both to the way they are perceived and their relationship with the Authority.

Their role in supporting the current government’s concern with policy priorities and getting “everywhere as good as the best” is recognised and attracts little complaint.

“The inspection report (very negative) was a catalyst for change in a way that couldn’t be ignored and progress would have been slower” (without it)

“It wouldn’t have been possible to tackle schools without Ofsted”

However

“Inspection of itself cannot bring about improvement – it is a relatively blunt instrument with a lot of casualties on the way who were not justified”

“18 months later (we still have) plummeting morale, difficulty in recruitment and retention, enormous increase in management costs”

“In the end people, not procedures, deliver better processes and we can’t be on a war footing permanently. The cure has the potential to kill the patient”.

Section D – Strategic Issues

1. **There is considerable concern about the narrow focus of SSI and Ofsted. Most local authorities have now adopted cross cutting themes for their key**

strategic priorities e.g. 'Crime and Disorder', 'Employment and Regeneration'. These inspectorates are a referent for national quality standards in education and social services (§57).

"Ofsted for example "don't care about crime". SSI "won't care about the environment" and neither would inspect "neighbourhood renewal" but all those themes impact on young people and on care services for the vulnerable and disadvantaged".

The government requirement for information on adherence to national quality and safety standards is recognised and acknowledged as entirely appropriate (§16,17).

How ever there is clearly a balance to be struck in the drive for national and local priorities. More explicit mapping is required of those functions and services where government sets the standards and expects the local authorities to meet them and those w hich are truly a matter of local determination and abilities (§4,35,36).

To add value, how ever, the Inspectorate (in the broadest sense) needs to recognise explicitly that services are being delivered that may be unique to the social and political environment of the authority. The BVI currently look at the scope for improvement arising from a review w ithout any context of political leadership or a democratic dimension. In that sense 'one size doesn't fit all'. The outcome is seen by some as aggregation w hich is 'spurious', comparing authorities in a w ay which is not bespoke to their agenda but w hich is subsequently publicised to a national audience. An output w hich maximises the benefit to the authority of the Inspectors' opportunity to take a distinct and objective view of performance and achievement is sought.

I "want to know areas of strength and excellence objectively, where we should be moving the service from a national perspective and how I can move the service up" and at the same time

I "want to know where my local Members think the service ought to be".

- 2. The role played by the District Auditor in contributing to improved performance is seen as valuable and worthy of development (§46). The relationship is seen more as a partnership with an ongoing dialogue. It is, however, argued that this relationship which has continuous improvement as its focus and which could be expanded further, is more likely to generate incremental improvements than step changes.**

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