Managing it better: Can leadership and management improve public service performance?

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The UK public sector has performed comparatively poorly for a long time. Improving the performance of public services will help enhance the quality of life in the UK, boost longevity and make the country a fairer place to live. This review highlights some of the key ways in which the existing research suggests that leadership and management in the public sector can play an important role in helping bring about such improvements.

KEY POINTS

- **UK public sector performance has been poor for more than two decades, with overall public sector productivity (one metric) growing just 4%** in that time. This suggests that the efforts made to date to improve the public sector's performance have been marginally successful at best.

- **Leadership in the public sector in particular, but management too, are recurring themes in political and policy debates** as politicians return to the challenge of finding ways to improve public sector performance across the board.

- There is considerable evidence to show that **leadership and management can make an important difference to organisational performance**. A growing body of research suggests this is true in both public and private sectors.

- **Good leadership** includes articulating a mission that others buy into, inspiring colleagues and leading by example.

- **Effective management practices** include setting clear performance goals, underpinned by effective performance management, efficacious hiring practices and the retention of good staff, along with workforce development and effective "soft" management measures to improve motivation and enhance the work environment.

- Both leadership and management, and efforts to improve them, are **enabled and constrained by circumstances**. These range from "external" factors such as the national political context and issues of resourcing to "internal" elements, including workplace culture, individual personalities and the availability and quality of appropriate tools (e.g. information technology) that enhance service delivery.

- **In healthcare, individual leadership appears to be less important than the quality of the wider senior management team** and the nature of the priorities they set. Having clinicians and specialist managers in senior roles seems to be especially valuable.

- **For educational institutions, the headteacher or principal is vital.** In addition, recruitment, retention, target setting and performance management are also important.

- In local public administration, the adoption of methods such as performance management can improve outcomes. However, context is key and management measures must be implemented with sensitivity in order to deliver results.

INTRODUCTION

The long-running problems in the UK public sector are evident in the data on quality adjusted public sector productivity, which grew just 4% between 1997 and 2018.[1] This compares poorly to the 27% increase across the economy as a whole, in a period when private sector productivity is widely considered to be in crisis. Further, the COVID-19 and post-COVID experience has exacerbated many of the public sector's failings.

From the 1980s onwards, successive UK governments pursued reforms influenced by New Public Management (NPM) ideas. These took inspiration from the private sector and involved the breaking up of public organisations (often into more autonomous units), the introduction of competition into public services, and the greater use of incentive-based measures to motivate workers.[2]

The marginal overall change in UK's public sector performance[3] suggests that the general impact of NPM reforms has been modest, though their effectiveness and implications continue to be debated. Proponents argue that NPM has delivered greater transparency, more choice for the public and competition between providers. Whereas, critics have suggested that NPM measures have ultimately "crowded out" other reforms and values, with the pursuit of external targets for example, gaining ascendency over public service motivations.[4]

A different perspective on the public sector and its functioning has emerged in the public management literature in recent years. It argues that the NPM-inspired reforms of recent decades:[5]

- Were too focused upon intra-organisational processes, when the public sector's biggest challenges are inter-organisational
- Utilised management approaches more suited to the manufacturing industry than the public sector
- Failed to take sufficient account of factors beyond efficiency and therefore had a success criteria that was too narrow[6]

However, notwithstanding the criticisms of NPM's record in the public sector, it is indisputable that leadership and management remain central to improving the performance of organisations in general,[7] including public sector ones. Largely independent of any particular theoretical or political framing, there is a growing body of research showing that both leadership and management can make a difference to the success of public sector organisations, and how they do so.[8] [9] [10]

Box 1: The difference between leadership and management

There is an ongoing debate in the literature over the definition of "a leader" and the meaning of "leadership". The former is a figurehead, typically the most senior person in an organisation. They are usually in charge of strategising and endowed with ultimate authority over the workers and the operations of the organisation they lead. On the other hand, some have suggested that leadership is not necessarily tied to a specific position in a hierarchy. Rather, it is a set of skills and behaviours, which include being an effective communicator, motivating people, and having the ability to identify a vision (and goals) underpinned by effective strategy development.[11] This understanding of leadership sees leaders as those who have the requisite skills and display the relevant behaviours, irrespective of their position in a particular organisational structure.

Leadership is widely seen as a distinct function to management.[12] [13] Management is a more routine and technical exercise, focused upon organising resources towards achieving intermediate objectives which help deliver the ultimate ends that those leading an organisation have identified. Consequently, a manager is typically a technician, an administrator and problem solver.[14]

Despite the debate over exactly how to best understand leadership and management and the roles of leaders and managers, the reality in most organisations is that the leaders often have some management responsibilities. At the same time, many of the managers in an organisation are likely to have to display some leadership behaviours. For example, managing a team is not just a technical exercise in organising resources, monitoring performance etc, but requires, among other factors, communication skills and the ability to motivate staff.

In the most successful organisations, leaders and managers recognise the co-dependence of their roles and the inextricable links between leadership and management.[15] Consequently, leaders and managers and leadership and management are best seen as complementary to one another. Failure to recognise this mutual dependency will ultimately be detrimental to any organisation.

Drawing on the existing leadership and management research and interviews with experts in public sector management,[i] this review aims to:

- Highlight how leadership and management can make a difference to public sector performance.
- Identify some of the key obstacles facing leaders and managers who want to bring about performance improvements in public services.
- Illustrate which aspects of leadership and management can help improve performance in education, healthcare and local government, in particular. These three have been selected because they the most significant parts of the public sector, in terms of both budgets and employment.

PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT AS A POLITICAL PRIORITY

Disappointment with the overall impact of NPM ideas has ensured that leadership and management in the public sector has been a recurring theme on the political agenda, albeit, typically of lesser salience than issues of public services funding and structural reform.

Leadership and management regularly come second to funding and structural reform issues

Leadership and management, while central to the success of any organisation, have tended to play "second fiddle" to questions of funding and structural reform both in the debate over improving public services and in the amount of policy effort undertaken. For example, the main focus of most of the public sector reforms that have been implemented since the 1980s has been upon organisational changes, such as making public sector organisations more autonomous[16] and establishing quasi-competitive environments among other changes. Whereas, specific efforts to increase public sector leadership and management quality have been less prominent. Some of the consequences of this subordinate position have been highlighted by a number of the investigations into significant public sector failures in recent decades, which have found leadership and management inadequacies to be notable contributing factors to the problems that occurred.[ii]

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[i] To complement the desk research for this Briefing Note, SMF conducted six in-depth interviews with public sector management experts.

[ii] The inquiry into the Mid-Staffordshire NHS scandal, for example, identified the poor quality of the leadership and management in the NHS as a cause of the deep-seated problems that the hospital trust suffered from. The final report of the public inquiry recommended changes to ensure better quality and more consistent leadership and management in the future. Source: Report of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry - Vol. 3: Present and future; annexes HC 898, Session 2012-2013 (publishing.service.gov.uk)

Leadership and management are recurring topics in politics

Despite being second order factors, both leadership and management do make their way onto the political agenda from time to time. Improving leadership and management was a component of the Tony Blair-led Labour government's public service reforms. However, they were less prominent issues than financial resourcing[III] institutional restructuring (often building upon changes made by preceding Conservative governments) and the development and deployment of national targets. The latter were underpinned by performance tools such as Public Service Agreements, which set out the agreed aims and objectives of government departments for each funding cycle.[17]

Since 2019, there has been renewed focus on leadership and management within the central civil service, with considerable debate around how to boost the civil service's leadership and management capabilities.[18] Consequently, a number of initiatives have been started that   are aimed at helping deliver such an outcome.[19] One of the most recent has been the new Leadership College for Government[20] and the publication of "Leading to Deliver: A Leadership and Management Prospectus".[21]

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP TO PUBLIC SECTOR PERFORMANCE

The essential functions of senior leaders in the public sector

A good leader undertakes a number of functions, which are important to the success of any organisation. These include:

- Developing and overseeing the implementation of a vision and strategy for an organisation.
- Coordinating the senior people in the organisation and holding them to account.
- Communicating key messages across the organisation, motivating staff[22] and engaging with external stakeholders.[23]

[III] Which encompasses controversial initiatives like the Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

Good leadership can drive up performance

A substantial body of literature illustrates that there is a persistent link in the public sector context between leadership and better individual and organisational performance.[24][25][26][27][28][29] A study of further education (FE) institutions in England over the period 2003 to 2015, for example, found that college principals had a clear influence on organisational success, distinct from any impact from management.[30] The research showed that switching from a principal in the 25th percentile to a principal in the 75th percentile[IV] raised the likelihood of students achieving a Level 2 qualification (equivalent to a GCSE) by 15.9 percentage points and a Level 3 qualification (equivalent to A Level) by 14.1 percentage points as well as increasing enrolment for a Level 4 qualification (for example, Higher National Certificate - HNC) by 3.7 percentage points.

Factors associated with successful leadership in the public sector

The cumulative evidence from the leadership literature suggests that there are a number of leadership characteristics, skills and actions that can make positive differences to the performance of a public sector organisation (see Annex 1 for a discussion of some of the ways in which performance tends to be measured in the public sector).[31] These include:

- Identifying a mission that is difficult but feasible, as well as clear, understandable and publicly valuable,[32] along with regular sharing of the vision[33] and other organisation-relevant information with staff.[34]

- Helping connect public sector workers to the users of public services and demonstrating the social value of their work.[35] Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that leadership is particularly effective in improving performance when staff in the organisation feel they are "making a difference".[36]

- Leading by example i.e. demonstrating their own effectiveness[37] and "modelling" public service values for staff,[38] which strengthens relationships and builds trust.

- Showing concern for colleagues,[39] focusing on staff wellbeing[40] and avoiding authoritarian approaches that decrease motivation and performance.[41]

- Ensuring there is leadership training and development available,[42] ideally tailored to individual needs.[43]

[IV] The percentiles refer to the performance ranking of college principals. The authors of the study had access to data which allowed them to build a novel dataset that tracked both the performance of principals across a sample of different FE institutions over time as well as the performance of individual FE institutions under different principals. By examining the educational outcomes of "young learners" (i.e. Students that did their GCSE exams between 2002 and 2014) at the FE institutions in the sample (under different principals at different times) the authors were able construct a unique "principal ranking" system. Source: Jenifer Ruiz-Valenzuela, Camille Terrier, and Clémentine Van Effenterre, "Effectiveness of CEOs in the Public Sector: Evidence from Further Education Institutions" (Centre for Vocational Research, 2017).

> **Box 2: The dynamics of leaders and teams**
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> An important factor determining the performance of an organisation is the relationship between leader and their senior team.[44] [45] However, the literature on how leaders create and handle effective teams is something of a "black box".[46] Perhaps the most that can be said is:
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> - The relationship between leaders and teams is not one-way. The dynamic is reciprocal. The mutual dependence means that all parties influence each other, potentially in positive or negative ways.[47]
> - Positive-sum interactions between leaders and teams can break down, and some leaders and teams never develop it. Reasons for the failures in such dynamics include "role ambiguity", "role conflict"[48] and leadership capabilities and style.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGEMENT TO PUBLIC SECTOR PERFORMANCE

Better management is linked to improved public sector performance

The literature on the public sector suggests that management quality does play a role in driving improvements in the performance of public services. To help illustrate how, the final three sections of this briefing summarise some of the research into leadership and management in education, healthcare and local public administration.

However, before diving more deeply into those three areas of the public sector, this section will outline some management approaches that seem to bear fruit across most parts of the public sector.

Management methods associated with better performing public organisations

The existing body of research into public sector management suggest that there are a number of specific management methods which have been found to positively contribute to performance across different types of public organisation (again, see Annex 1 for a discussion of how performance is measured). These include:

- Decentralised decision making[49] combined with appropriate overarching performance goals.[50]
- A focus on results through clear goals.[51]
- Creating and sustaining a positive organisational culture[52] e.g. a developmental one.[53]

- The use of a "balanced scorecard"[V] approach to performance management.[54]
- "Soft" management measures[VI] (as opposed to "hard" ones e.g. performance-related-pay) that boost morale and job satisfaction.[55]

THE SALIENCE OF CONTEXT FOR DETERMINING PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SUCCESS

Leadership and management do not operate in a vacuum. This section provides an overview of the findings from the leadership and management research showing that good quality leadership and better management approaches and the magnitude of their success or failure is often contingent on a multiplicity of factors.

The circumstances that leaders and managers in the public sector find themselves in are important enablers and constraints on them:[56] they condition the take-up and implementation of better management methods and how effective leaders are.[57] These contextual factors can be both "external" and "internal" to an organisation, for example, they can include the political environment and resourcing levels, as well as the training and development provided to or required of those working in a specific part of the public sector or public body and the nature of the work environment (see Table 1 for a more comprehensive outline).[58][59]

Further, the internal factors in particular, are themselves subject to the influence of the leaders and managers within the relevant organisation, resulting in situations where the obstacles and the enabling factors feedback on one another. This can lead to problems compounding over time, or virtuous circles emerging in more positive contexts.

The prevalence and magnitude of these enablers and obstacles help explain much of the "divergence" in the quality of the leadership and management that occurs in and between public institutions.[60] They are also key reasons as to why public sector and private sector leadership and management will always be somewhat different.[61]

[V] The "balanced scorecard" approach is an attempt to recognise the many different factors that are important in public administration beyond issues of efficiency, such as: fairness and access, quality, accountability and "value added".

[VI] For example, efforts to boost team cohesion and strengthen working relationships, ensuring there is effective "two-way" communication (having a dialogic culture), resolving conflicts, paying attention to the needs and aspirations of individuals and helping people "play to their strengths" in the workplace.

Table 1: Enablers and obstacles to leadership and management making a positive impact

External factors
• Public perceptions of services and organisations,[62] and the media framing of issues and controversies.
• The political environment: the tenor of political debate, political initiatives/ directives [63] and the extent of the support from elected officials.[64]
• Legislative and regulatory obligations[65] and associated "red tape".
• Obligations on public services to be "accessible".
• An imperative to maintain relationships with an extensive array of stakeholders e.g. the public and users, suppliers, partner organisations, regulators and relevant professional bodies, trade unions and politicians, etc.
• The need for there to be multiple focuses i.e. public/user access to services, affordability, quality, accountability, value for money, equality,[66] etc.
• Budgets/resourcing constraints[67] (e.g. insufficient resourcing and inconsistency in resourcing), which, in-turn, mean that initiatives that might require upfront investment and which would be likely to deliver savings in the future are often deterred.
• Inter-organisational and sectoral coordination challenges, as a result of the interconnectedness of many public services to each other (e.g. the NHS and social services, etc.) and the split between direct public and private provision (under public auspices).
• The culture within a particular sector, which can hold back leaders and managers from taking the steps they might otherwise take.[VII]
• Human factors such as staff sickness (a big issue in places like hospitals).
• The presence of external competition from other entities[68] and competition from other public sector organisations and the private sector for the best leaders, managers and staff.
Internal factors
People
• The degree of managerial autonomy (which tends to be lower in public organisations).[69]

[VII] For example, it was suggested in more than one key informant interview that some parts of the public sector failed to get the most out of innovations and investments as a result of a "public sector mindset". This was posited as being in stark contrast to the private sector which was characterised as, more often not, maximising the opportunities associated with the innovations they adopt and the investments they make.

- The emergence of principal-agent problems.[VIII] [70]

- The quality of human capital (i.e. the skills of managers and staff and training and development requirements and opportunities).[71] [72]

- Having the appropriate number of managers[73] [74] and staff.

- The quality of the culture within an organisation, including the extent to which there is a positive work environment,[75] with high morale and a motivated workforce focused upon high achievement[76] underpinned by a clear sense of public service/"making a difference"[77] (i.e. respect for the public service ethos and the professionalism of public sector workers) as opposed to a culture of suspicion and division.[78]

- The characteristics of individual managers.[79]

- Respect for the professionalism of public sector workers, the ethics of public service and the associated motivations and of public services workers.

- The scope of employee involvement in decision-making.[80]

- The absence of positive attitudes/ scepticism/ not enough commitment and sometimes resistance to changes such as the introduction of performance targets and teamwork[81] [82] [83] and insufficient understanding of the possible gains.

Technical (tool-based)

- Insufficient/inadequate facilities and equipment (e.g. buildings, IT, machinery, etc) to implement change.

- Insufficient/inadequate knowledge sharing channels and little scope for learning best practice.[84]

- Internally generated bureaucracy ("red tape").

- The collection of adequate data[85] and its effective management.

- Sufficient information flow around organisations about the need for changes, the nature of any changes and the possible benefits.[86]

[VIII] "Principal – agent problems" describe circumstances where the "agent" fails to act in ways which align with the interests, aspirations and objectives of the "principal", despite the former supposedly being in-place to act on behalf of the latter. In the public sector context, for example, the "principal" might be Ministers in a government department who have specific public policy aspirations for the public services within their remit, and therefore try to implement measures which will deliver on those aims. The "agents" in such situations are the public sector workers that are supposed to implement the changes. However, they may not act in alignment with Ministerial wishes and requirements. Rather, they might pursue goals and objectives of their own, instead.

An example of context: skills and training

Skills and training is listed in Table 1 as an internal factor that influences the ability of leaders and managers to drive advancements in performance. A "skills and training deficit" among leaders and managers is unlikely to be anything other than a significant constraint on leaders and managers and their ability to help bring about performance improvements in the public sector.

Box 3: The focus of training for leaders and managers in the public sector

The example of the NHS is typical of the wider problem of inadequate skills and training among many managers.[87] The lack of high quality systematised approaches to management and an over-reliance on ad-hoc, often personality-led, leadership and management in healthcare settings is widely seen as holding back NHS care.[88]

Some of the key lessons about the "recipe" for improving the quality of leaders and managers in the NHS[89] are likely to be applicable to other areas of the public sector. Not least in education and local government, where management training appears to be even less systematic and standardised than it is in the NHS. These lessons include ensuring that leadership and management in the public sector:

- Meets high and consistent competency standards
- Is founded upon effective management protocols, procedures and competency frameworks
- Involves training and development pathways with adequate support for those going through them and providing relevant rewards for the successful.

However, there is a dearth of independent evidence about the specific training programmes and qualifications that might benefit public sector leaders and managers the most. There are some limited findings which suggest that senior managers with MBAs have played a positive role in the healthcare sector.[90] Beyond these findings, there is seemingly little to help guide those looking to identify what kinds of formal accredited training might be of most use, for improving leadership and management standards in a public sector organisation.

An example of context: public service ethos and a motivated workforce

The provision of public services is heavily dependent on people, often with highly specialised skills sets. Consequently, intrinsic factors[IX] such as morale and motivation[X] are notable determinants of the performance levels of public service workers and in turn, the public sector organisations they work in.[91]

The exact size of the contribution of "Public Sector Motivation" (PSM) to public sector performance is debated.[92] Not least because its influence is conditioned by factors such as perceptions of management competence.[93] Nevertheless, PSM[94] is widely acknowledged to be an ingredient in organisational success.[95] [96] [97]

Underpinning PSM are influences such as professionalism[98] based (at least partially) upon a "public service ethos".[99] [100] The latter is more than just ethical behaviour at work. It is often depicted as forming part of a worker's identity. Dedication to the "public interest" and "mission accomplishment" are important components of it.[101] Among the components that shape the "public service ethos" are factors such as the nature and culture of the (public) organisation[XI] that the public servant is part of and organisational leadership.[102] [103]

The contextual contingency of the "public service ethos" means that it can evolve over time.[104] Consequently, it can be subject to change and its strength may wax and wane. Evidence for this can be found in what many see as a change in the "public service ethos" that has occurred following the introduction of NPM approaches to public services. It is argued that NPM has had an impact on the roles of many of those working in the public sector, changed norms of behaviour[105] and resulted in the emergence of cultures within public organisations very different to those that previously prevailed in them.[106] As a result, the traditional "public service ethos" is described by a number of analysts as having been displaced (to some degree) by values such as risk-taking, innovation and enterprise.[107] [108] Such changes have been condemned by some as detrimental to professionalism among public servants,[109] negatively impacting factors such as morale, motivation, trust and commitment.[110] [111]

[IX] In contrast, for example, to "extrinsic interests" like material reward or punishment. Source: Le Grand (2003) cited in Julie Rayner et al., "Public Service Ethos: Developing a Generic Measure," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21, no. 1 (2011): 27–51.

[X] Motivation determines the "...*direction, intensity, and the power of endurance of behaviours*". Source: Heckhausen (1989) cited in Adrian Ritz, Oliver Neumann, and Wouter Vandenabeele, "Motivation in the Public Sector," in *The Routledge Handbook of Global Public Policy and Administration* (Routledge New York, NY, 2016), 346–59.

[XI] Among other variables, organisational values, the nature of the relationships that the public sector worker is embedded in at work, as well as the formal structures (e.g. the policies, procedures and processes) of the organisation, all play a role in generating and reproducing the public service ethos among public sector staff. Source: Julie Rayner et al., "Public Service Ethos: Developing a Generic Measure," Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory 21, no. 1 (2011): 27–51.

Any negative impact on PSM from the changes wrought by the introduction of NPM may help explain why the overall effect of the latter on public sector performance (over the past two and a half decades) seems to have been underwhelming. However, the current ambiguity in the research over the likely magnitude of the influence of PSM on the performance of individual public servants, as well as organisational performance, makes it difficult to draw clear conclusions as to the size of the performance boost that might result, if levels of PSM could be increased.

An example of context: "red tape"

Political initiatives, legislation and accompanying regulations, official guidance as well as workplace policies, and the demands of professional bodies (that those in the public sector belong to) among other sources, can often generate bureaucracy for those working in public sector organisations. Consequently, "red tape" is one of the most salient contextual factors that shape the environment in which leaders and managers find themselves.[XII] Further, "red tape" is considered by most observers to be negative in its impact on leadership and management and, in-turn, organisational performance.

[XII] "Red tape" in the public sector describes the formal rules, policies and procedures (and the associated bureaucracy) that public sector staff are expected to follow in order to be employed by their particular organisation and carry out their assigned jobs.

Box 4: The impact of red tape on public sector leadership, management and performance

The impact of "red tape" across the public sector is a complex one. Some studies find, overall, a small constraining and hindering effect on performance, that can vary substantially across circumstances.[112] Another meta-analysis that looked at red tape across a broad swathe of public sector organisations found clear evidence of a detrimental impact on organisational performance and employee outcomes such as reduced job satisfaction, feelings of powerlessness, lower levels of motivation and less commitment.[113] Others suggest that internally imposed "red tape" has a limited downside impact on efficiency but sizeable negative consequences for equity (e.g. fairness in access and outcomes).[114] Certainly, research has identified that bureaucracy restricts managers in the English NHS in their ability to manage:[115]

> *"NHS managers have limited discretion in performing their managerial functions, being tightly circumscribed by official guidance, targets, and other factors outside their control".*

There is evidence from English local authorities to suggest that the right kind of leader, identifying and putting in place the right kind of strategy can ameliorate some of the problems that "red tape" can cause. More specifically, if a proactive strategy[XIII] is developed and implemented effectively it is possible to reduce the hindering and constraining effect of "red tape".[116] There are also indications that transformative leadership approaches reduce perceptions of "red tape" as problematic, albeit typically in the higher levels of the relevant public sector organisation, not necessarily at the lower levels. Further, internally generated "red tape" is more likely to be within the influence of the leadership of a public body, in contrast to externally generated "red tape", which for example, might be government-imposed. Therefore, the source and nature of the "red tape" is likely to be determinative of the extent to which any leader or manager can take steps against it.

As a whole, the evidence implies that "red tape" does have negative consequences for the public sector as a whole and constrains the efficacy of leaders and managers in particular. However, the research suggests there are some ways to ameliorate its impact, albeit these are not guaranteed to improve the situation for staff at all levels of the organisation.[117]

[XIII] A proactive organisational strategy is sometimes referred to as a "prospector strategy".

HEALTHCARE

The NHS has taken an interest in leadership and management for a long time. An example of this is the NHS Graduate Management Training Scheme (GMTS)[118] which was established in the 1950s. More recently, the NHS Leadership Academy has been set-up to help improve the quality of leadership and management.[119] These are emblematic of the NHS's recognition, in principle at least, of the importance of both competent leadership and management. However, this interest has (so far) not translated into high quality leadership and management emerging across the board in either the NHS specifically or the healthcare sector more broadly. This failure is evidenced by the recent review by Sir Gordon Messenger and Dame Linda Pollard, which looked at ways that leadership and management across the health and social care sector in England might be substantially improved.[120]

Senior leadership and management quality are linked to better clinical outcomes

The absence of consistently high leadership and management standards across healthcare in the UK would appear to be something of a missed opportunity because there is growing evidence across a range of countries of the importance of good management to clinical outcomes e.g. lower mortality, infection rates and shorter waiting lists.[121] [122] [123]

In healthcare settings, the literature suggests a number of different elements of leadership and management are important for delivering better performing institutions. These include:

- Clinical experience at senior management levels.[124] Evidence suggests that more clinical knowledge at some of the highest levels in a hospital, is associated with better outcomes. However, clinical experience among healthcare leaders tends to be lower in the UK and US than in Europe.[125]
- Appropriate and clear objective setting by hospital leadership.[126] Research suggests that, while CEOs in the NHS have little direct influence on hospital success, a focus on clinical quality by the senior leadership can cascade downwards to better management performance at lower organisational levels.[127]
- Positive dynamics between senior hospital leadership (i.e. board level) and those at operational management levels.[128]
- Good quality training (e.g. MBAs) for health managers.[129]
- A positive culture in the healthcare organisation.[130] A US study into infections and their control in ICUs found that the key to improving performance was cultural change among the staff. Technical changes to operating procedures of the kind that might be traditionally associated with management decisions were only successful in the context of positive cultural change on the wards.[131]
- Competent and sufficient numbers managers (see Box 5).

Box 5: Is the NHS under or over-managed?

Whether the NHS is "under-managed" or "over-managed" has been a long-running debate in political, policymaking and media circles. It is undeniable that management roles in the NHS have grown in recent decades, following the introduction of professional management in the 1980s, followed by the spread of NPM reform initiatives in the 1990s and 2000s.

In 2021, there were more than 34,000 managers in the NHS in England, accounting for 2% of the total workforce. Of those managers, 12,000 were "senior". A third of managers are clinically qualified, managing part-time alongside their clinical work.[132]

The balance of existing evidence suggests that the NHS is not "over-managed",[133] though the evidence as to whether it is "under-managed" is more ambiguous.[134]

Some studies have indicated that the NHS may be under-managed".[135] One study identified that increases in the proportion of managers from 2% to 3% of the workforce was linked to a 15% reduction in hospital infection rates and 5% increase in efficiency.[136] Another similarly found that reductions in "administrative intensity" helped improve efficiency in English NHS hospitals.

Other research however, has found no relationship between the quantity of managers and hospital performance, but has emphasised quality as a key determinant of performance.[137]

While there may still be some ambiguity as to the optimal proportion of managers in the NHS, less ambiguous is the evidence that good quality management is linked to better healthcare performance.

Contextual factors influence management effectiveness in healthcare

As was observed earlier in this briefing, the circumstances in which leaders and managers operate are important determinants of their effectiveness. Illustrative of this point in healthcare is evidence which suggests that competition between hospitals seems to be linked to better management quality and in-turn better performance. For example, one analysis estimated that the presence of a rival hospital results in an improvement in management quality of 0.4 standard deviations, which in-turn delivers a 9.7% increase in survival rates from conditions such as heart attacks.[138]

EDUCATION

Efforts to boost leadership and management across the education system have been intermittent and gone through numerous changes, as governments have also changed. The introduction of the National College for School Leadership and its subsequent replacement, the National College for Teaching and Leadership,[139] were efforts to create a more professionalised cadre of school leaders. However, the college was wound up and most of the functions were redistributed to the Department for Education.[140] More recently, the introduction of National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) for the teaching profession is aimed at trying to standardise and further professionalise leadership training and practice in schools.[141]

A clear link between leadership and management quality and educational outcomes

The failure to embed widespread high quality leadership and management standards across education many years ago looks like a significant mistake given that cross-country evidence suggests that leadership and management quality are drivers of school and college performance levels:

- A study of 1,800 secondary schools in eight countries found a strong link.[142] [XIV]
- An analysis of management quality in schools in India identified a similar correlation between management, productivity and "student value added" (i.e. the academic progress students made given their starting point).[143]
- Research into English further education establishments similarly detected a clear link between management quality and educational attainment. The study estimated that, if the management score of an FE institution increases from an average of 4.28 (out of 5) to 4.64, the probability of a young person achieving a 'Level 3' qualification (e.g. A-level or BTEC) or going to university increases by 2 percentage points. [144]

The ingredients driving better performance

Leadership is particularly important to success in education.[145] The cross-national study mentioned above suggests that around half the variation in management quality is accounted for by senior leadership and in particular the headteacher (or principal) of the institution.[146]

Also important is the interaction between the senior leadership and subordinate management layers.[147] Further, as one study noted, management approaches are not just determined by leaders. To some degree, their emergence and adoption can occur (at least partially) independently of specific leaders as trends and practices diffuse across professions and sectors.[148]

Specific management approaches that the literature suggests work well in educational institutions, include:

[XIV] Those countries examined in the study were the UK, Sweden, Canada, the US, Germany, Italy, Brazil and India.

- Ensuring adequate pay levels, which is positively associated with "teacher effectiveness".[149]
- Recruiting good quality staff[150] and then retaining them.[151]
- Appropriate target setting and performance monitoring.[152]

Contextual factors influence leadership and management effectiveness in education

Education is no exception to the general rule that circumstances play a significant role in determining the ability of leaders and managers to improve performance. For example, research indicates that schools with more autonomy tend to have higher management scores, because of the discretion this allows for leaders and governance.[153] In addition, as with hospitals, further education institutions tend to be better managed if there is a degree of competition.[154]

LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

As with other public services, management approaches can have a bearing on the quality of service delivery by local public administrations. Both international and UK evidence indicates that better management can contribute to performance improvements in public administration, when appropriately adopted. For example, an analysis of the implementation of performance management measures by local governments across Australia and New Zealand found numerous examples of it helping to improve performance, particularly when implemented with sensitivity to the public sector context and complemented by other elements such as team-based learning.[155] Research into the impact of management innovation and performance management in English local public administrations found both could have a positive impact but that the latter was vital to the former making a difference.[156]

However, it should be noted that, the literature on management in local government specifically, is limited. There has been less exploration (so far) of the implementation and impact of different management approaches on such services compared to other parts of the public sector.[157]

What seems to work

The available evidence suggests that the management methods that will deliver performance benefits in local public administration include:

- Engaging in appropriate strategic planning[158] aimed at achieving clear strategic goals[159] [160] along with the regular monitoring of performance information by executives.[161]
- Adopting the use of incentives or sanctions.[162]
- Recruiting and retaining good quality staff[163] alongside minimising the turnover of people.[164]
- Building strong networks with other actors in the same environment.[165]
- Service deliverers that are demographically reflective of the local population.[166]

- Acquiring the management quality standard ISO9001. For example, adoption by local public sector organisations in Italy resulted in a number of benefits such as higher levels of citizen satisfaction with local government organisations, a reduction in service failures and claims against authorities and to greater awareness of the needs of citizens, among local government workers[167]

Contextual factors influence leadership and management effectiveness in local public administration

As the above description of the evidence on management in local public administration makes clear, and as is consistent with the other areas of the public sector, the implementation and success of measures to improve management in local government is often dependent on circumstances:

- A study of the deployment of management techniques in six European countries found factors such as administrative tradition had an important influence on success.[168]

- A 17 country study discovered that local institutional factors,[xv] were a strong influence on the implementation of performance management measures in local government.[169]

- Power, communication and "openness to learning" have been identified as determinative of whether performance measurement systems get implemented effectively or not.[170]

- Failures to implement routines to take advantage of the use of data were found to be a reason why some organisations failed to use performance measurement as a tool for management.[171]

[xv] For example, the organisational characteristics, the accounting and financial reporting practices and orientation of the local authority.

WHAT NEXT?

This review has provided an overview of some of the existing stock of evidence about how the quality of leadership and management impacts the performance of public services. It has found that, overall, there is a positive relationship between better leadership and management and the effectiveness of public services. Further, the evidence suggests that this association holds across the public sector as a whole and in education, healthcare and local public administration in particular.

This paper is the first in a series of outputs looking in-depth at the topic of public sector leadership and management. The remainder of this project will see the publication of the results of a survey of public sector leaders and managers. The research will involve "deep dives" into the role that leadership and management currently plays in the provision of education, healthcare and local public administration services and will explore how these two factors might be enhanced to bring about improved performance across each of these three parts of the public sector in the UK. As part of those "deep dives", this study will produce a number of case studies, which will highlight examples of good quality leadership and management in education, healthcare and local public administration and how they positively influence the delivery of such services.

ANNEX 1: MEASURING PUBLIC SECTOR PERFORMANCE

Consistent, accurate and comparable performance measurement is important for successful organisations of all kinds.[172] The Atkinson Review, published in 2005, set the tone for the subsequent endeavours of the ONS and others in the UK to measure public sector performance.[173] Despite such efforts, public services performance measurement remains challenging owing to its multidimensional nature.[174]

Box 6: Obstacles to efforts to measure public sector performance

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has aggregated a list of generic difficulties with trying to measure public sector performance:[175]

- Identifying objectives when they are multi-faceted and could be conflicting.

- An absence of a single, specific metric that can sum up the desired objective(s).

- Often there is an insufficiently close correlation between overall objectives and specific targets.

- Unfamiliarity among the public sector workforce with the practice of setting objectives and meeting targets.

- The absence of an interest among senior leaders in developing objectives and targets and seeing them met.

- Insufficient/inadequate expertise among staff and a lack of accompanying resources to build and operate an effective performance measurement system (including putting in place the necessary processes, training, technology, etc).

- Operating within a system where, frequently, there is an inflexible budget envelope that often sees the deployment of resources in one area result in a squeeze in resourcing elsewhere.

- Resistance to objective setting and performance management among the public sector workforce e.g. because of the constraints on professional autonomy, the implicit questioning of the PSM of public sector workers, the undermining of the "public service ethos" and the ultimate impact on morale and motivation, among other reasons.

The attempts at performance measurement in the UK public sector have focused upon one or a mixture of the following categories of activity and effects: inputs, process (including operational policies and practices), outputs or outcomes. The debate continues as to whether outputs are, for example, a better benchmark for measuring public sector performance, compared to outcomes.[176]

Many of the attempts, in the research, to measure the impact of public sector leadership and management on performance focus upon output metrics. In education for example, these include formal educational achievement as measured by PISA test scores or nationally recognised qualifications. In official analysis such as the approach taken by many of the official inspectorates of public services in the UK, a focus upon process (including operational policies and practices) remains prominent (see Boxes 7 and 8 for more). Process can be particularly important where issues of access and fairness are of concern. Further, practices can be something of a proxy for outputs and outcomes. The latter was implicit in the findings of one analysis of the difference and similarities in performance measurement preferences between the public and private sectors.[177] The most preferred approach among private sector workers was for performance metrics based upon best practice and identifying processes for improvement.[178] In contrast, among the public sector, productivity, "mission effectiveness" and aligning strategic activities and plans were preferred.[179]

Box 7: Measuring performance in state education

The official education inspection regime is a good example of the primary focus being placed upon process (and practice in particular) in the education sector. In its inspection activities, Ofsted for example, tends to focus most on process factors such as the quality of teaching. Leadership and management is one element of the Ofsted framework for evaluating the quality of a school. However, the focus of the latter remains largely pedagogical with only high-level references to factors that are reflective of the kinds of good leadership practices that this paper has highlighted. For example, the guidance for Ofsted inspectors around leadership and management is to look to see whether:[180]

> *"…leaders have a clear and ambitious vision…realised through strong, shared values, policies and practice…leaders engage with their staff and are aware and take account of the main pressures on them. They are realistic and constructive in the way that they manage staff, including their workload…".*

The Ofsted focus on the quality of educational practices is complemented by the publication, by the Department of Education, of output based performance evidence in the form of exam result data.

The publication of both process and output information about educational institutions means that performance can be examined and understood from two different perspectives.

> **Box 8: Measuring performance in public healthcare**
>
> In health, the Care Quality Commission's (CQC) "fundamental standards" are process (and in particular practice) focused.[181] The CQC largely judges healthcare provision by factors such as:
>
> - Fit and proper and sufficient staffing.
> - The extent of the dignity and respect provided in the delivery of care.
> - The provision of sufficient food and drink for good health.
>
> Similar to education, there is data (Hospital Episode Statistics) published by the NHS in England for example, which provides a number of metrics on both hospital processes (e.g. waiting times in A&E), outputs (e.g. completed consultations) and outcomes (e.g. mortality rates). These data are available for anyone to look at.
>
> In addition, NHS England publishes its priorities annually, which include a plethora of detailed process and output targets across a wide range of areas of healthcare that the NHS is responsible for.[182]
>
> The publication of process, output and outcomes information about healthcare, along with annual priorities and targets, provides an opportunity for NHS efforts and accomplishments to be understood in the context of what levels of performance the NHS is trying to ultimately achieve every year.

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