

Centre for Public Scrutiny – Annual Conference and Officer Development Day: 30 June and 1 July

This note provides feedback from the key speakers and workshops at the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) Annual Conference.

Matthew Taylor – Chief Executive of RSA Thinktank

Keynote opening speech

Aspirations v realism. Imported 'consumer is always right' into politics.

How do we get more people engaged?

- Govt dismantling CAA etc. Less to be scrutinised?
- Austerity – scrutiny needs to add value.
- Devolution/localism.
- Coins database. <http://data.gov.uk/dataset/coins> . Armchair auditing using raw data supplied by Government and it's Agencies.

Scrutiny is a form of policy evaluation. Deliberation – traditional surveys result in conflicting views. Need in-depth focus group discussion.

Experience of user. High level of public involvement. Exploring what the problem is - not just highlighting success.

Use collaborative lens to look a problem. Problems are always 'joined-up' with rarely one single organisation able to resolve something without the assistance of other agencies.

Public engagement – must take risks and be prepared to hear things that we don't like. Be clear on parameters of a decision.

Possible return to Committee system. Don't think it is part of the strategy. A populist measure. Believe Executive systems work well.

Easier to engage public at local level rather than national.

Recent work by Gerry Stoker and Peter John on 'nudging' - <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/ccd/events/SuppMat/Stoker/WI%20slides%20Jan%2009.ppt#16>

Darren Johnson – Former Chair of London Assembly

Accountability for people and places – what does it mean in practice?

Scrutiny has had more impact than any of the Assemblies other functions.

Some studies have led to changes of national policy – eg. paving over gardens/run off of water; helicopter noise issues; public toilets.

Public involvement/engagement leads to authoritative and credible scrutiny findings.

Jonathan Birdwell, DEMOS

Workshop – Winning back public trust: contributing to local democratic renewal

Just completed 3 yr project on trust in local government.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/trustinpractice>

People tend to trust local politicians more than MPs or Ministers.

Better service quality doesn't necessarily lead to improved satisfaction.

Trust is affiliated to the frontline worker and not the institution.

Trust affected by:

- experience
- dealings/word of mouth
- media
- socio-economic factors.

The benefits and willingness to engage:

- private sector – can opt out or not use;
- public sector – lumped with it/dependent on it.

Case study: Castleford Regeneration – engage the community 'on their own turf'. Councillors and officers can be on the same wavelength/understanding.

Create space for individual staff to earn trust. Face to a name – get out in communities. Open days for Council Offices?

Lord Victor Abedowale, Chief Executive, Turning Point

Getting to the heart of matter: tackling social inequalities

45% of women in employment in the North East are in the public sector. What price social cohesion in view of budget cuts?

Life expectancy widely different in Kensington and Chelsea (male = 81; female = 87) and inner city Manchester (male = 73; female = 78).

Predicts internal scrutiny will disappear – move towards scrutiny by service user.

Design services to meet needs of communities. Scrutiny needs to be focussed on what people in the community need.

Communities and families will be questioning service providers. Pressure for change and improvement will be bottom up.

Emma Maier, Editor of Local Government Chronicle and Richard Jeavons, Chief Executive, Independent Reconfiguration Panel

Workshop: Scrutiny – where professional evidence and public opinion collide

Journalism going through major changes. Increased prevalence of blogging where stories are 'tested out' before going 'live' in print or online as a finished article. Media no longer the 'gatekeeper'. Huge volume of information that needs to be analysed with professional opinion balanced against public opinion.

Independent Reconfiguration Panel provides Secretary of State with advice on local authority scrutiny referrals of health reconfigurations. The Panel's essential role is to separate evidence from opinion. The Panel's approach is to be transparent and up front that their finding is a trade off. The views of patients and carers are both the top and bottom line of consideration. Every Panel review will incorporate at least one engagement exercise with those on the receiving end of care.

John Seddon, Managing Director, Vanguard Consulting

The role that scrutineers can play in challenging the culture of targets

Used work done with Portsmouth City Council to reengineer housing repairs service as an example of implementing systems thinking rather than performance management to improve service delivery. Measure true performance in customer terms – not by a schedule of rates. Study transactional services:

- customer views;
- demand – value/failure;
- measure achievement of purpose;
- follow progress.

Don't wait for the centre to tell you what to do – clear message from Government. Managers conditioned by what's gone before.

Dave Briggs, Learning Pool

Community engagement through social networking

Media is changing. Eg. the once regional flagship, Birmingham Post, is now published weekly.

Local authorities could make more use of social networking sites including external blogs. Eg. The Sheffield Forum has now registered 4.5 million posts. Even a small site like the Amphill Forum in Bedfordshire has 38,000 posts.

Blogging seen as quick, cheap, mobile and scalable.

Learning Pool have been working with Central Bedfordshire Council to help them develop interactive mechanisms for their residents – Let's Talk Central - <http://www.letstalkcentral.com/>

BOB PULLEN

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