

Public sector targets: doing less of the wrong thing is not doing the right thing

This paper was sent to Ruth Kelly, Minister for Communities and Local Government, on January 2nd 2007 with the following accompanying note:

Dear Mrs Kelly,

Firstly I should commend your recent White Paper for providing a framework within which the systems approach might be more easily employed by local authorities. I say this because much of government regulation has impeded the systems approach; regulation has acted as a barrier to improvement.

The White Paper's framework aspires to 'citizen-focused' local government and much of that can be achieved through what systems thinkers describe as 'designing against demand': citizens experience getting what they want quickly and efficiently; and costs fall as services improve. As some of your officials know, there are now many examples of the systems approach delivering performance improvements that would have been thought inconceivable if set as targets.

There are, however, significant issues with the White Paper that may only serve to obviate the purpose set out. As my time is limited and the need to influence matters urgent, I deal with the first issue – targets – in the attached paper. Later I shall send a paper on the issues and risks associated with citizen engagement, for I fear you may create specifications or regulatory requirements that are plausible but will instead undermine achievement of purpose.

This letter and the paper will be placed on my web site to encourage those who have practical knowledge about the issues raised to engage in debate with your officials around the country.

Yours sincerely

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Are targets improving performance?

The White Paper asserts that targets have led to improvement:

6.8 There is strong evidence of rising performance within local government across a wide range of services and functions.

6.9 A basket of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) designed to give a balanced picture of performance over time, shows councils have improved by 15.1% between 2000/01 and 2004/05

I am reminded of Nick Raynsford's conundrum. Speaking to public sector managers he observed that while BVPIs were showing improvement, public satisfaction data were showing otherwise. He rationalised this dissonance by saying the public took time to change their views and their expectations were rising.

The truth is improving achievement of targets has actually been making services worse. I know this to be true for every service Vanguard has studied. One might think it remarkable that, for example, a target to see people who want housing benefits within fifteen minutes is the cause of poor service and high costs. The target results in people having to visit their local authority a significant number of times to get the service they want and deserve.



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