

PRE-1997

The reforms actually began in the 1980s and 1990s which were also characterised by a flow of legislation, directives and regulations directed at local authorities in the UK. Discussing NPM in general and the period under the Conservative government in particular, Pollitt *et al.* (1999) divides public management reform into three phases. First, the period from 1979 to 1982 was characterised by a fierce but crude drive for economies. Second, the government moved to emphasise efficiency and there was a push towards privatisation of public services; this phase lasted until the late 1980s. Although the three 'E's of economy, efficiency and effectiveness were constantly referred to in this period, most of the procedures and national performance indicators concerned the first two – economy and efficiency. It was during this period that the Audit Commission was set up, in 1982.

The third and probably most radical phase was after the 1987 elections. The reforms in this period included: extended use of market-type mechanisms (MTMs); intensified organisational and spatial decentralisation of the management and production of services, (even some shifts from local authority control to independence), although not necessarily their financing or policy-making; and a rhetorical emphasis on service quality, exemplified by the launch of the Citizen's Charter programme. Rogers (1999) usefully summarises the themes that ran through the reforms from 1979 onwards:

- accountability – local government to central government, authority to citizens, services to users, managers to councillors, employers to senior management;
- the explosion of audit and inspection – the role of the Audit Commission in particular expanded from its responsibilities in relation to financial accountability to include inspection and determination of performance indicators;
- customer choice – the legislative provision of choice; even to 'opt out' of local authority provision; moving beyond limiting accountability mechanisms to elections, politics and complaints;
- competition and contractualisation – which was exemplified by compulsory competitive tendering (CCT), through which authorities were effectively forced to out-source certain specified services;
- centralisation and control of government – despite the increase in rhetoric about partnership;
- The Citizen's Charter – these proposals contained in a 1991 White Paper and intended to improve performance of public service organisations, included the principles of standards and targets publishing, user consultation in standard-setting and to ensure independent validation of performance to achieve value-for-money.

POST-1997

The publication of the 1998 White Paper 'Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People' proposed further local government reforms to strengthen the leadership role of local government within the community, whilst making it more accountable and providing better quality, cost effective services (Planning Officers' Society 2000). In his introduction to the 1998 White Paper the then Deputy Prime Minister outlined the scope for change:

People need councils which serve them well. ...There is no future in the old model of councils trying to plan and run most services. It does not provide the services which people want and cannot do so in today's world.

(DETR 1998: foreword)

The comments reflected what central government saw as the old culture of local government, a culture not conducive to effective local governance and leadership in the modern context, a culture typified by:

- a paternalistic view from members and officers that it is for them to decide what services are to be provided on the basis of what suits the council as a service provider;
- the interests of the public coming second to the interests of the council and its members;
- more spending and more taxes seen as the simple solution rather than exploring how to get more out of the available resources;
- relationships between the council and its essential local partners being neither strong nor effective;
- local people indifferent about local democracy;
- overburdening of councillors and officers;
- a lack of strategic focus concentrating on details rather than essentials.

Change under the 'Modernising Local Government' agenda sought to recast the culture of local authorities, and to transform how authorities undertake their statutory functions – principally through delivering and monitoring 'best value'. In reality the modernising agenda represented a continuation of public-sector reforms already in motion before 1997, albeit with a change in emphasis, including the introduction of a comprehensive system of performance related incentives and disincentives and tougher requirements for community and local governance.

This was elaborated in the 2001 White Paper 'Strong Local Leadership, Quality Public Services' which stated that the government will provide support to underpin local community leadership building on new well-being powers (wide-ranging freedoms for local authorities to act in the