Economic and Social Research Council

'PUBLIC SERVICES: QUALITY, PERFORMANCE AND DELIVERY'

PROGRAMME SPECIFICATION

1. Why Quality and Performance in Public Service Provision Merits a Concentrated Programme of Research

1.1. The quality and performance of public service provision[1] merit a concentrated programme of theoretical and empirical research located within the UK at this time, for at least three related reasons.

1.2. First, public service provision comprises a set of problems that are undoubtedly central to quality of life, current political debates and economic performance. What public services are to be provided, by whom and in what way, lie at the heart of electoral and party politics in most contemporary democracies, including the UK - and are likely to continue to do so. Moreover, public services represent a significant share of public expenditure,[2] the management of which can substantially affect general economic performance.

1.3. Second, public service provision comprises a set of issues for which social scientists across a range of disciplines[3] are particularly well placed to uncover novel non-obvious and indeed counterintuitive processes. Those issues and processes include:

- the counterintuitive properties of complex systems with multiple goals;

- poorly-understood or perverse incentives;

- unintended consequences of both positive and negative kinds, and;

- the side- and reverse feedback effects of social interventions.

Such processes, and the mechanisms that lie behind them, have been central to the concerns of most social sciences throughout their history, and understanding more about how those processes work to shape quality and performance in public services in various contexts can make a lasting empirical and conceptual contribution to international social science as well as feeding into practical policy and institutional design in the UK and elsewhere over a 3 to 10 year horizon.

[1] . 'Provision' is here understood to mean co-production as well as straightforward delivery by organizations.

[2] . Even though the productivity or value of public services are capable of being measured in a number of ways, and those measures are controversial.

[3] . The disciplines relevant for such inquiries should be broadly interpreted and at a minimum include anthropology, economics, geography, history, law, the management sciences including operational research and accounting, political science, psychology, social policy and sociology.

1.4. Third, and relatedly, in the recent past major changes have been attempted or advocated in various public services across a range of jurisdictions (countries, service domains, levels of government), and the boundaries between 'public' and 'private' provision have shifted in a number of areas and may well continue to do so. Those changes, informed by a variety of ideas and doctrines, include new modes of delivery, new provider structures (for instance in 'third-sector' organizations of various types), new methods of rating, monitoring, evaluating and rewarding service provision, and new policy and legal developments over equality, transparency and human rights. Some, but by no means all, of those changes have been drawn from private sector practice, but have had to adapt to the different political and institutional context in which public services operate.

1.5. Dramatic claims and counter-claims have been made about the long-term effects on public service performance – positive or negative - of such organizational and other changes, and such claims deserve careful evaluation in various ways. In some cases conditions have developed for 'natural experiments' (between services or jurisdictions operating the same public services under different regimes or management styles). Much can be learned from judicious comparisons among front-line provider units, among the different countries of the UK[4] and among different countries. In other cases there is now a long enough period of experience (for instance with performance indicator and target regimes, performance pay systems, public-private partnerships) for meaningful evaluations to be made, and indeed for substantial datasets, albeit of variable reliability and validity, about performance over time to be available for analysis, for instance in health and education. And there is much scope for the development of theory relating public services and their organization to quality and performance.

2. General Desiderata for a Successful Research Programme on Public Services

2.1. Topicality or relevance to public policy on its own is not a sufficient condition for public services to merit an ESRC-funded research programme, because what ESRC does cannot and should not be quite the same as the work of think-tanks and consultants, and its programmes necessarily work in a different time-frame. Rather the programme aims to fund projects that concentrate on a limited set of analytic issues that

- are tractable to research over a medium term of three to five years;

- cohere together sufficiently for a concentrated effort (drawing on a range of disciplinary perspectives and encouraging inter-disciplinarity where that is appropriate) to have a reasonable prospect of yielding dividends in developing top-class research and answering important questions; and

- are of sufficiently enduring academic and policy importance for there to be an expectation that research on those issues will still remain salient to the long-term

[4] . Devolution provides scope for 'natural experiment' comparisons, but even before devolution in its current form in the UK public service provision varied across the countries of the UK in several ways.

concerns of a range of users and will be publishable five to ten years out from the start of any such programme.

2.2. Three general desiderata guide the design of the programme and the selection of projects and activities it comprises. First, it aims to sponsor research pitched at a level of methodological rigour and theoretical development that will place it in the top rank of social science publications. ESRC in other programmes and activities has placed much emphasis on developing methodology, and an important aim of the programme should be to raise the level of methodological rigour of work on public services as well as to foster fresh theoretical ideas that will attract international attention.

2.3. Second, the body of empirical research that the programme sponsors should have an appropriate comparative and/or historical perspective. Studies of public services can fail to make an impact if they are too present-focused (and as a result date quickly as the present slips into the past and today's fads, fashions and preoccupations are forgotten by the time the research is completed) or if they are too heavily focused on a single country, public service or jurisdiction to have a wider impact, or both. To help UK-based social science research on public services attract maximum international attention, work with a strong historical/longitudinal dimension and/or comparative dimension (across services, across service units, across jurisdictions (including the different countries of the UK), or all three) needs to be encouraged. Moreover, cross-national comparative work lends itself to co-financing among different national research funding bodies that can help to produce a concentrated international research effort.

2.4. Third, and above all, the programme aims to sponsor theoretical and empirical research on public services that is ingenious and has a prospect of genuinely original results that will add significantly to knowledge (such extension may of course include re-examination and re-interpretation of earlier studies or data). 'Surprise' (the making of counterintuitive or non-obvious observations or deductions) is of course not the only relevant test of significant addition to knowledge, but it is one important way that research can make an impact on policy-makers, the academic community and the public at large.

2.5. In addition to meeting those primary criteria (which could also be applied to regular response-mode research funding), the programme must be more than the sum of its parts. It needs to represent a focused, concentrated and interconnected set of research activities, linked with other activities, fora and discussions in multiple forms. Accordingly, on top of the general desiderata noted above, projects and activities within the programme need to be selected according to the following three criteria.

2.6. The first is their contribution to synergy and critical mass of research effort focused on a limited number of themes or approaches. Proposals need to be selected according to the extent to which they fit into the analytic themes the programme is designed to explore, and particularly in the extent to which they are directly related to issues of public service quality and performance in some way – the overall theme that should be common to all the programme's projects and activities.

2.7. Second, and relatedly, the programme aims to adopt a portfolio approach, in several ways. It will not aim to concentrate on one single theoretical approach or methodology, but rather to comprise a set of projects that explore issues of public service quality and performance from different perspectives. The programme's portfolio should comprise both theoretical and empirical research, and for the latter there should be a portfolio approach too, in the form of a set of complementary methodological or theoretical approaches. Methodological approaches that could usefully be included in the empirical part of the programme portfolio include ethnographic research, qualitative comparative methods, comparisons using larger datasets, and experimental or simulation work.

2.8. Third, the design of the programme and the selection of projects and other activities that comprise the programme – workshops, forums, links with international events – need to be directed to fostering a communication and learning capacity that enables dialogue and debate among the various participants and stakeholders in the programme to take place over time, and for the programme to be responsive to feedback, other discoveries and developments over time. That requires a phased approach to the commissioning of projects, adequate real-time response capacity, and project contracts that include effective and imaginative approaches to communication and participation.

3. General Analytic Themes: Three Groups of Issues

3.1. For a research programme with only a five-year life to reach an international research standard and make an impact on the international as well as domestic debate on public services, it must focus on a fairly limited number of analytic themes that can be pursued in depth from a number of disciplinary, theoretical and methodological angles. It seeks to focus on themes that seem particularly ripe for concentrated scholarly attention in a medium-term time-span, and are likely to be of enduring significance for the quality and performance of public services in the UK and elsewhere.

3.2. The selection of themes for the programme takes account of work done in previous ESRC and other research programmes and draws on consultation with government officials and social science academics (including the work of the 12 one-year public service fellowships that formed part of the ESRC/EPSRC AIM initiative and work done under the aegis of the UK government's Evidence-Based Policy Making Fund). It is also intended that the programme will work closely with the ESRC Centre on Public Organization at Bristol University (due to start in October 2004), which will include work under the themes of 'choice, benchmarking and incentives in the delivery of public services' and 'organization, culture and public service delivery.'

3.3. Accordingly, this programme will focus on three sets of related themes, all of which are closely related to issues of public service quality and performance and which are discussed further in the following three sections

- issues relating to the link between quality/performance of public services and transparency, target regimes, trust and responsiveness;

- issues relating to the link between quality/performance of public services and incentives, rewards, and the handling of liability, litigation and blame;

- issues relating to metrics of performance, evidence of quality and performance, and the link between quality/performance of public services and management and innovation.

4. Transparency, Targets, Trust and Responsiveness

4.1. 'Transparency'[5] is much advocated and widely perceived to be a key to better public service provision today. The doctrine of transparency in one form or another has figured large in attempts to reform many public services. But hitherto most work on transparency in politics and economics has focused on the design and operation of subsidy and central banking regimes, not much work has been done comparing levels and types of transparency across public services, the mechanisms that link transparency to public service quality and performance have been only limitedly explored, and relatively little in-depth work has been done on the way that institutions and organizations respond to attempts to increase transparency in public services.

4.2. Further, by comparison with the broader and much-discussed notion of accountability to which it is clearly related, transparency merits further analysis to distinguish its different dimensions. Its meaning in complex multi-unit structures of governance has been little explored, and trade-offs between transparency and other design/operation principles for public services, particularly in the context of gaming by some or all of the players, have been little discussed. Conflicts among different aspects or conceptions of transparency (for instance as 'audit-trail' accounting and as direct face-to-face accountability of service providers or officeholders) have also had little attention. Accordingly, some concentrated empirical and conceptual work seems to be needed on the link between quality/performance of public services and transparency in its various forms.

4.3. Closely related to transparency, targets, ratings and indicators[6] have been a central and controversial plank in attempts to improve public service quality and performance, particularly but not only in the UK, over a range of service domains in the recent past, and the UK is particularly rich in its recent data on public service performance indicators. Targets and related devices for governing public sector performance have an earlier (and nowadays mostly ignored) history in forms such as World War II production regimes and socialist planning systems, and they have long been a disputed instrument in general management theory.[7] They offer substantial scope both for theoretical work on targeting for public services (as distinct, say, from macroeconomic targeting) and for empirical research on themes that could include unintended effects on public service quality and performance and gaming behaviour by the various parties involved in target regimes. Targets also lend themselves to study through a range of methodologies, including before-and-after studies, experimental work and natural experiments taking account of different regimes

[5] . An idea that goes back at least to Jeremy Bentham's famous 'transparent-management' principle for the design and operation of public services, and appears in numerous forms in a range of literatures including law, political science, accountancy and economics.

[6] . Another favourite theme of Bentham's, with his famous 'tabular-comparison' principle

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[7] . from Frederick Winslow Taylor to W. Edwards Deming.

governing the provision of public services in different jurisdictions within and outside the UK (since at the time of writing the countries of the UK differed substantially in the use of target and rating systems for public services).

4.4. Also related to targets and transparency is the link between public service quality/performance and issues of trust and responsiveness. Trust has been a major growth field in social science research and theory (for instance in economics, sociology, political science) in recent years, as in the much-discussed issue of the link between social capital and quality of governance. And, particularly given the pervasiveness of co-production in various forms in public service provision, the implications of different types and levels of trust for public service quality merit further investigation across time, jurisdictions and service domains, as well as issues such as the link between trust and scale or level or service provision. There is room for innovative work on public service provision that examines different dimensions of trust and responsiveness, that compares 'objective' and 'subjective' indicators of public service performance, and that develops public (or stakeholder) opinion and attitude research on trust and performance in public services, both in the countries of the UK and cross-nationally.

4.5. Similarly, the goal of increasing the responsiveness of public services to 'customer' demands through choice and voice in various forms, individually tailored provision, and other mechanisms has been a major theme of public service reformers in recent times.[8] There is scope both for theoretical work on the dynamics (and possible unintended effects) of more open choice-based systems and for comparative analysis across different public service domains. Such analysis might explore the way that the balance between choice and voice affects service quality and performance, and of how different public service providers respond to public opinion (and within that, to the opinion of the various different publics served by many public services) or that of clients or customers.

5. Incentives, Rewards and the Handling of Liability, Litigation and Blame;

5.1. Incentives and rewards are often taken to be the key to achieving better public services, and badly-designed or perverse incentive structures as the major reason why public services fail to achieve excellence. But incentives and rewards can take many different forms, and their effects may depend on social context.

5.2. Traditional hard monetary incentives, in individual or group performance-related payment schemes and in the design of contract arrangements for service provision, are often seen as the central explanatory factors in public service performance and as the main levers for improving performance or quality. Ever since Adam Smith's classic cost and revenue comparison of French and British tax-collection regimes, the effect of different kinds of contract arrangements has been a central question in the analysis of public services, and the development of different contract systems over time (for example in the 'third sector'), and differences in contractual arrangements among jurisdictions, provides plenty of material for both theoretical and empirical research.

[8] . As well as in the theory of 'public choice,' at least since Tiebout.

5.3. The same goes for monetary incentives to public servants. Pay for performance has been a central part of recipes for better public services from Adam Smith (who famously declared 'public services are never better performed than when... [public officials'] reward comes only in consequence of their being performed, and is proportionate to the diligence employed in performing them') down to the present day. It has been introduced in different forms and at a number of levels in public service organizations, affording scope for judicious comparisons. There are also jurisdictions in which performance pay for public services has not been introduced and numerous historical and contemporary cases where it has been abandoned (from the abandonment of performance pay for school teachers in England in 1902 to much more recent cases in state and local governments). That means there is plenty of scope for historical and comparative inquiry as well as other types of work, for instance of an experimental kind (where some earlier work has suggested there are major gender differences in responses to different forms of performance reward schemes).

5.4. There is already an established body of compensation research to build on. Many HR-based studies of pay for performance have revealed de-motivating effects of poorly-designed schemes, both in the public and private sector, and in the public sector the size of performance pay incentives has tended to be small (to the extent that the 1997 survey of UK public services concluded there were greater prospects of productivity gains from increased attention to performance appraisal rather than to performance pay). Some work on team-based incentives is being conducted under the aegis of the UK government's Evidence-Based Policy Fund. But overall, even more than a hundred years after F.W. Taylor's classic paper on incentive payment systems, there are few UK studies that include direct exploration of effects on the quality and performance of front-line public service delivery from changes in reward systems in public or private provider organizations, either at the front line or at leadership level (by comparison with extensive studies relating executive rewards to corporate performance in the private business sector).

5.5. However, the effect of other forms of incentives and rewards on public service quality and performance – such as the level of oversight, competition with and oversight by peers, the nature of the work environment, institutional and professional culture, and non-monetary recognition - also merit close attention, particularly in the context of recent declared British government policy (in England at least) to reward high performing public institutions, such as schools and local authorities, by reduced levels of oversight . Some US research has indicated that non-pay incentives can increase the organizational commitment of many public servants (but without any improvement in service delivery). Indeed, how management and organizational practices other than pay affect those motivations, the mechanisms by which and the extent to which, public service quality is affected by the motivations and attitudes of staff in provider organizations, deserves close attention. Developing ideas about public service organizations as matching organizational missions with employee preferences in a number of ways offer an alternative to the by now traditional principal-agent view of public service design and operation which merit theoretical and empirical development and imply rather different design principles.

5.6. The handling of liability, potential or actual litigation and blame is also a recurring theme in debates about the design and operation of public services, and a central issue in risk management. 'Negativity bias' is a long-term issue in discussion of bureaucratic behaviour (and indeed of human behaviour more generally), and the idea that public services would be improved by making public managers and officials less risk-averse and more entrepreneurial, has been canvassed in different forms for at least a century. Much work has been done on risk regulation and management, but the link between public service quality/performance and complaints or litigation deserves more exploration in comparative and over-time analysis. So does the role of insurance, risk pooling and financial liability arrangements in shaping public service provision, the role and interpretation of data protection, freedom of information and similar procedural rules governing service provision, and the more general issue of what shapes decisions by those providing public services over how to balance the risks of making Type I and Type II errors (broadly, errors of commission and errors of omission). The effect of regulation, inspection and a range of governance reforms on the quality and performance of public services has as yet been subject to little systematic testing.

6. Metrics, Evidence, (Change) Management and Innovation

6.1. A third set of issues relate to measurement, evidence, change management and innovation in public service provision. The measurement of public service quality, performance, productivity and sustainability – such as medical 'episodes,' patient satisfaction, exam pass rates - has long been contentious and elusive. Not long ago a report to the UK Treasury concluded that 'currently there are no robust, comparable measures of public sector productivity.' That position is likely to change for the UK with the study being undertaken at the time of writing by Tony Atkinson and other work underway on public sector productivity. The programme would welcome proposals to challenge or develop such work, for instance at the micro-level of public services or in the form of developing the theories of value that (often implicitly) underlie 'subjective' or 'objective' measures of the quality of public service provision in the UK and elsewhere.

6.2. Further analysis of the range of methods and definitions for measuring quality and performance across the public services, which methods and definitions are preferred by which stakeholders, and the various ways and degrees to which quality and performance measures are subject to 'Goodhart's Law,'[9] would also be welcomed. Stochastic modelling of key elements in public service delivery may have important implications for the assessment of quality, and so may more other forms of analysis of the intended and unintended effects of particular forms of performance management on institutional behaviour in public service provision (for instance, in the effects of ill-judged metrics on service performance).

6.3. Closely related to the issue of metrics, evidence – whether in quantitative or qualitative form - about what constitutes excellent, adequate or failing public services, also merits careful attention in this programme. The notion of 'evidence-based' policy has understandably been much stressed in the UK in recent years and the issue has already generated useful research from the ESRC and the UK government's Evidence-Based Research Fund. As classic debates in social science at least since Durkheim have shown, evidence can come in different forms and from different

[9] . That is, the claim, originally made in the context of monetary policy, that statistics used for control purposes tend to lose their validity and reliability over time.

sources and may be looked at and weighted in different ways in different social, institutional and disciplinary contexts.

6.4. Indeed, as noted above, who counts what as evidence of 'excellence', 'best practice', 'smart practice' or 'failing' performance in public services, and what level or type of evidence is used, by whom, to justify what types of adjustment or intervention,[10] constitutes an issue that is eminently suited to further comparative investigation across different jurisdictions and public service domains. Such investigation also has strong practical implications, given the general growth of the evaluation community. That community comprises not only the official auditors, evaluators and inspectors of public sectors but also many national and international organizations and actors who are in the business of making judgements about public service quality and develop their own, often widely varying, conventions about the ordering of evidence, both in their reporting practice and in the information they note but do not publicly report on.

6.5. (Change) management and innovation constitute a final set of issues that deserve attention in a research programme devoted to the analysis of public service quality and performance. Much has been written about developments in public management within individual jurisdictions and cross-nationally and indeed there is now a huge general literature on this issue; but considerably less attention has been paid to careful investigation of the direct link between management factors (such as leadership style, turnover, management structures and processes) and public service performance across a range of cases. Even within orthodox public-service provision by public organizations, research can often reveal substantial variations in service provision across similarly resourced and constituted units. And within parts of the UK the policy, albeit limitedly applied, of compulsory transfer of management or other special measures for public services in some domains (such as schools that are found to be failing) offers some additional scope for assessing the importance of the 'management factor'.

6.6. Innovation – here loosely defined as the introduction of new practices, routines and policies, and their determinants, processes and effects, particularly in the often problematic application of new information technologies - is also a theme that has been extensively discussed for contemporary public services as well as in the business sector, and lends itself particularly to historical analysis. But in spite, or perhaps because, of the undoubted and much-discussed potential for cost reduction and service quality improvements from innovation in public services, there is no very well-established analytic terminology (as noted in a recent UK Strategy Unit paper on innovation in the public sector) and metrics of innovation can be elusive. Moreover, the academic literature on innovation, often linked to diffusion, is itself highly diffuse, ranging as it does from individual-centred studies focusing on individual entrepreneurship (in the Schumpeterian tradition) to broader social analysis (in the Mertonian tradition).

6.7. Well-crafted historical and comparative studies of public service innovation that evaluate the effects (intended and unintended) of new public service practices and

[10] . Including the point at which evidence is considered to be good enough to proceed to another stage, such as an action plan or a published report.

routines, that explore the extent to which innovation relates to type of organization, and explore the determinants of new routines and practices and what shapes their outcomes, can significantly add to knowledge. For example, how far is it empirically true, as some have claimed, that widespread adoption of benchmarking and best practice approaches within public service organizations leads to conformity and mimetic isomorphism rather than major innovation? How far and in what circumstances does the pervasive presence of regulation and audit in the public sector lead to 'management to audit,' and in what conditions do such processes foster innovation in public services? (Cross-national studies and studies across the different countries of the UK may well be illuminating for such issues, given the variety of audit, evaluation and inspection regimes that apply even within different parts of the UK.)

7. The Empirical Focus: Cross-Domain and Single-Domain Studies

7.1. The intellectual focus of the programme will lie mainly in the analytic themes it can illuminate. In that sense it should not be narrowly domain-specific. Well-framed analytic questions about quality and performance in major public services, developing the themes sketched out earlier, deserve to be pursued wherever they lead theoretically, empirically or historically. Moreover, many major public services have domain-specific sources of research funding (such as the King's Fund and the NHS Service Delivery and Organisation (SDO) Research and Development Programme in the case of health care), and the ESRC in earlier research programmes (for instance on criminal justice) has also singled out particular policy domains for study on their own. Accordingly, if all else is equal, cross-domain studies – those that explore analytic themes across different public service domains - will be particularly encouraged in this programme.

7.2. Nevertheless, the programme is expected to pay particular attention to those public service domains that are most salient, costly and institutionally complex, such as health, education and infrastructural provision. Policy domains of that type merit particular attention for at least three reasons. One is their centrality to politics and the economy in developed and developing countries alike. A second is their complex governance structures and system characteristics (in organizations, funding, legal and regulatory structures). The third, and arguably most important quality of policy domains of this type, is their capacity, when looked at in comparative and historical perspective, to provide a rich laboratory for the investigation and application of all the analytic themes that were sketched out in the previous section. For example, services such as the provision of public infrastructure[11] provide a laboratory for the exploration of reward and incentive structures through the analysis of alternative ways of financing and managing public service facilities[12] and for exploring the assumptions about risk transfer and the valuation of alternative hypothetical forms of provision (on which disputes over the value for money or efficacy of systems of financing and management tend to turn).

[11] . Such as buildings, utilities and transport facilities.

[12] . Including various forms of public-private partnership, such as the PFI and PPP initiatives in the UK.

7.3. Apart from their high politico-economic and quality-of-life salience and high system complexity, services of this type mentioned above will be important to the programme because they are characterized by deep-seated and continuing differences in provision arrangements across the various state traditions, a changing natural, social and legal environment (including issues of trust, litigation etc.), and a history of recurrent attempts at reform designed to improve quality and performance in a variety of ways (including competition, regulation, public-private partnerships). Services such as health and education comprise further elements of complexity in terms of high professionalisation coupled with extensive co-production by citizens or clients rather than simple service delivery. Some, such as health, involve dramatic potential changes in the production function coming from technological developments such as genomics. And cross-national comparative analysis of the link between performance and forms of provision in all of these domains is likely to be of continuing interest to UK policy-makers, given concerns about international competitiveness and the relative placing of UK provision in cross-national league tables such as the World Health Organization rankings for healthcare delivery efficiency.

7.4. As noted earlier, apart from studies involving countries other than the UK, many such services involve substantial variations in provision and management regimes over time and variations within and among the different countries within the UK, both before and after the current devolution arrangements. That variation provides a laboratory for many kinds of inquiry (or instance in exploration of incentive effects and forms of transparency, such as rating systems and associated monitoring arrangements). Accordingly, if all else is equal, projects that compare service provision across different jurisdictions will be particularly welcomed in this programme.

7.5. Accumulating data about performance variation at local-unit level (for instance on educational attainment) also provide scope for exploring the determinants of such variation (though changes in data forms over time present some tricky problems for longitudinal inquiries). That means that there is substantial scope for inquiries into the relationship between service outcomes, changes in management in first-line provider units, and other institutional factors or policy developments. Such inquiries may need to look particularly closely at the intended and unintended incentive effects of new institutional structures and into the gaming responses that such changes produce.

8. Programme Design and Management

8.1. In line with ESRC's general objectives and with the objectives for its research programmes, this programme is intended to 'add value' to UK research on public services in several ways – by sponsoring a concentrated research effort on a limited number of topics, by bringing together work on different policy domains and from different disciplinary and methodological bases, and by helping to shape debate and build and develop capacity for research on public services.

8.2. To serve these purposes, the programme can be divided into three unequal and overlapping components, comprising primary research activity, seminars, workshops and conferences, and communication/dissemination and user engagement activity. As to the first part, building on the experience of earlier ESRC research programmes, it will be appropriate over the five-year life of the programme to have two separate calls for research project applications, though it will be necessary for those to calls to be spaced fairly close together to fit into the overall time-sequence. The first of these calls, which should be issued in summer 2004 with the aim of reaching decisions by year end, will be for full small grant applications and outline proposals for larger research projects. Successful outline applications for larger projects will then be invited to submit full proposals with the aim of reaching decisions in May 2005. Approximately £1.5m has been committed to the first call and it is intended that a small number of larger projects (approximately four) will be funded in the first round, for projects that are closely aligned with the analytic aims of the programme and in which it is particularly necessary for research to start early in the Programme (for example because of the longitudinal design of the project or because the early findings can be expected to inform work later in the programme). But much of the sum will be concentrated on relatively small grants for pilot projects or projects that are limited in scope and duration but bring earlier work to a head or offer the prospect of being developed in greater depth later. The small grant stage may also offer opportunities for applicants to develop links with scholars or project teams investigating the same issue in different countries (including the different countries of the UK) and to synchronize funding applications with those of other researchers. In addition, small projects may be appropriate for developing innovative inter-disciplinary approaches, new forms of collaboration with users that focus on long term enduring issues, and for building research capacity by drawing in and supporting new and less established researchers into the analysis of public services.

8.3. The second call for research project applications, probably to be issued in 2005 for decision in 2006, should be geared mainly towards a smaller number of projects of rather larger scale and scope. This phase of the programme should be partly based on experience with the first phase and seek to build on promising developments in the first round as well as funding new entrants at that point. Part of the second call for applications is intended to consist of a call for programme fellowships to be held in the final eighteen months of the life of the programme, to help bring the findings of the programme together in its closing stages.

8.4. A second component of the programme, partly linked with the research projects, will comprise a range of research seminars, conferences and workshops to pool knowledge, raise issues, report work in progress, discuss findings with scholars and practitioners and lay the groundwork for a future generation of research in public services. Some of these programme-related events can usefully be linked with other forums and the activities of other organizations within the UK and overseas, such as the IIAS, International Public Management Network, ECPR, APPAM and the Ditchley Foundation. Given the speed with which public service reform initiatives succeed one another and agendas change (both in the UK and overseas), it will be important for the programme as a whole to have adequate 'response' capacity, while individual projects will need to have means of reviewing the implications of policy changes for their longer-term research agendas.

8.5. The final component of the programme, comprising communication, feedback and dissemination activity, will rely heavily on the design and operation of an effective programme website into which all the programme activities need to feed as a contractual condition, though communication and dissemination will also need to take place through a range of other channels, including well-rated books and journal articles, programme seminars and workshops and contributions by programme participants to other forums. Moreover, given the importance of proper dissemination of research findings, it will be essential for each project proposal to contain an imaginative and realistic communication plan that should be integral to each project, and a plan for communication with other researchers within the programme, as well as for appropriate user engagement and dialogue through all stages of research. For example, well-thought-out proposals should give attention to the likely timetable for longer-term reviews of public services in the UK (such as the timing of different rounds of public service agreements or four-year policy plans) and consider how the outcomes of the research being proposed could fit into the expected timetable for such future reviews, to make the maximum impact on policy.

9. Concluding Comment

9.1. An opportunity to put the UK more firmly on the international research map for innovative social science work on public service delivery offers an exciting prospect, but it will certainly take imagination, goodwill and continuing cooperation within and between government and the academic community for the venture to succeed.