

Secondments between central and local government

A review of central-local relations published in 1992 drew attention to the importance of mobility for officials of local and central government across the divide between the two levels of government. Secondments are an obvious way of doing this, are widely supported, but have proved difficult to achieve in significant numbers. A new study explores the inhibitions to secondment and what steps might be taken to overcome them. Interviews with key personnel revealed that:

- f** **The issue of commitment is key and needs to be matched by a will and determination to make secondment work. Politicians and senior managers, in particular, must want things to happen. Without this other difficulties may become insuperable.**
- f** **In central government there is a problem about the way in which local government is viewed, conditioned largely by the recent history of central-local government relations. Despite radical changes in the last decade, local government is still not seen as being as good a place to go as other sectors and organisations.**
- f** **There are a whole range of practical inhibitions and issues arising from differences in career structures and progression, the matching of jobs and the like. Difficult though some of these may be, none are insuperable. Even if the overall numbers are not large, there is a good record of successful secondment between central and local government, proving that it can happen.**
- f** **Experience has demonstrated that there are key elements of good practice in organising and managing secondment. In particular, both sides need to be clear what the purpose of secondment is and to pay careful attention to matching people and opportunities.**
- f** **While longer-term secondments are important, the objective of developing better understanding, awareness and contact between local and central government could also be achieved through a parallel programme of short-term attachments. The researcher concludes that such a programme should be strongly recommended to central and local government for development.**

Background

The 1992 report *A New Accord* expressed concern at the state of central-local government relations in Britain and explored ways in which these might be improved. The report noted the absence of career mobility between the two levels of government and urged practical steps to improve the position. Subsequent discussion of the report in a programme of seminars for civil servants and local government officers identified the importance of secondments, but noted that few seem to be achieved. Despite the launch of the joint Secondment Initiative Programme (SIP) in 1992, the position has not changed significantly. The number lags behind those to the private sector, other parts of the public sector and even the voluntary sector. This study looks at the factors which inhibit secondment. It is based on a series of interviews with key people involved in promoting and organising secondments in both central and local government.

The nature of central-local secondment

There is a long-standing belief that secondment of staff makes a contribution to improved understanding and better working between local and central government. There have been a number of ministerial initiatives to raise the profile of secondment. The most recent was the launch in 1992 of the SIP, planned jointly by the two sides and embracing all central departments with a local government interface. SIP provides a backcloth to the present study (though the study is not an evaluation of it).

The core objectives of secondments across the central-local divide remain the improvement of understanding, awareness and relationships. This is supplemented by objectives to do with individual management development and with gaining organisational benefit. *Secondments* are seen as longer term moves and so distinct from *attachments* (which range from a couple of weeks to, maybe, a month or two). *Exchanges* are where two organisations swap members of staff. While the symmetry of the latter is attractive, they are very different to achieve in practical terms.

The context and attitudes

There will always be tension in the relationship between central and local government. That said, recent years have been particularly difficult. This has had an impact on staff interchange. Local government is not viewed as a particularly good destination for secondment; more kudos is seen to

come from going to the private sector, or even elsewhere in the public sector.

This ignores the major changes which have taken place in local government in the last decade or so, the fact that local government has already implemented reforms which now face central departments, and the benefit of being exposed to government at the local level and the sharp end of service delivery. For local government, the disincentives are fewer, though the idea of working for a central government machine regarded as having undermined local government is clearly not attractive to everyone.

Fears of job insecurity engendered by the recession and the growth in white collar/professional unemployment create general nervousness about secondment. This is heightened in central government by the uncertainties which surround staffing redundancies and the Whitehall reform programme (the White Paper *The Civil Service: continuity and change* was published during the course of the research). In local government there are similar uncertainties; white collar compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) looms large, as the Local Government Review has done for the counties and shire districts.

Commitment

Strong commitment to the principle of secondment and a will and determination to make it happen are essential. Little or no commitment is the most important inhibiting factor. Considerable effort is required to set up a secondment; if an organisation is not serious, practical and other difficulties will be allowed to get in the way. Commitment - from politicians, senior managers and the organisation as a whole - is all the more important given the context and attitudes described above. On the central government side, it is important that the commitment stretches across all those departments that deal with local government. In the creation of the SIP strong commitment from the DoE led the process; the signs are that commitment was then variable or absent across the other departments involved.

An important hallmark of commitment is to have a clear strategy for secondment and to know how and where it fits in to organisational and personal development. Without this sense of purpose it will, anyway, be difficult to make the best of particular secondments.

Practical inhibitions

There are a series of practical and logistic difficulties which can get in the way. None is insuperable, but they need to be worked at:

- lack of clear responsibility about who promotes secondment, looks for opportunities and starts the process off - together with confusion about whether it is an option for volunteers or something the organisation should deliberately set out to orchestrate.
- geography, the dominance of London-based opportunities and the apparent difficulty in opening up possibilities in regional offices.
- issues about the length of secondment: the most productive secondment may be for between 12-24 months in order to do a 'proper job'. This may be much more difficult to arrange than a shorter one. Different lengths of secondments will, of course, be capable of meeting different objectives, a fact which needs to be recognised.
- financial and logistic arrangements; these need to be sorted out in advance otherwise they can be allowed to become the point at which it all becomes too difficult.

Career patterns and job matching

There are significant differences in career patterns and career progression between central and local government; they are also different in the kinds of jobs potential secondees are likely to be doing - civil servants will most probably be in policy jobs, local government officers in managerial ones. Again, there is no reason why these problems should not be overcome. The differences need to be recognised and careful attention paid to matching people and opportunities. For many people, there is a worry about the extent to which secondment will assist with career development and, if it does, where best to go. If central and local government are serious about staff interchange both sides have to demonstrate to their personnel that they will benefit from working on the other side. There are also issues about how to deal with appraisal and the staff review process and, increasingly, performance-related pay during the course of secondment.

Good practice

Successful secondments are the best advertisements - and are an encouragement to overcome the inhibitions and practical obstacles. Experience to date suggests key elements of good practice to ensure success. The report identifies the importance of:

- a **strategy** for secondments
- clear **objectives**
- defining **work** areas and content
- getting the **logistic** details properly sorted out
- **monitoring and review** as the secondment happens
- good **management** of the secondment itself
- **building on secondment** and experience gained on return to the permanent work-place.

Short-term attachments

The study focused on inhibitions to secondment. There is clearly no intrinsic reason why more secondments should not take place. However, the research revealed the importance of looking at a programme of short-term attachments to increase the interchange between central and local government. Particular attention was drawn to a programme organised with the private sector by the Whitehall and Industry Group. These are three-week attachments competitively applied for and based on a project agreed between the individual and the two employers involved. The employers programme is judged to be highly successful. Although there are a number of examples of shorter 'visit' initiatives between central and local government there has been no serious attempt to mount this kind of programme.

Recommendations

The study makes a number of recommendations about ways in which the inhibitions might be managed or overcome. At the centre of these is the need for both local and central government to be clear about whether they want to see staff interchange. Assuming that they do, this needs to be made very clear and matched by a will and determination to see the commitment through.

The report also goes on to suggest that serious consideration be given to a formal programme of short-term attachments as a way of increasing awareness and understanding across the divide. This would probably need a small team of dedicated staff to negotiate and manage the exchanges. It should apply across government and include regional offices. It should be jointly funded on both sides. Modest expenditure should reap considerable benefits if there is serious intent to break down the barriers which separate the levels of government.

About the study

The research was undertaken by Professor Michael Clarke, Head of the School of Public Policy, Birmingham University. The research was based on interviews with civil servants in the principal central departments with a local government interest and, on the local government side, with officials from authorities both successful and unsuccessful in achieving secondments. The researcher also talked to a number of secondees themselves, to the national local government organisations which have hosted secondments and to people in the private and voluntary sectors involved in arranging interchanges with the civil service.

Further information

The full report, *Breaking down the barriers*, is published by the Local Government Chronicle in a joint series with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, priced £6.50.



Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End
York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
ISSN 0958-3823

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent, non-political body which funds programmes of research and innovative development in the fields of housing, social care and social policy. It supports projects of potential value to policy-makers, decision-takers and practitioners. It publishes the findings rapidly and widely so that they can inform current debate and practice.