
IMPROVEMENT NETWORK

Briefing: [Putting the frontline first: smarter government](#)

Purpose of briefing: To provide an overview of the Treasury's *Smarter government* programme from 7 December 2009.

Section 1 - background

- 1 [Putting the frontline first: smarter government](#), released on 7 December 2009, sets out the government's programme for tackling the financial challenges of the next decade by streamlining government. *Putting the frontline first* can be seen as part of the wider debate around how public services should be shaped and delivered in the future. It discusses:
 - The accountability, use of information, and personalisation of services debate that has underpinned policy proposals over recent years. In his launch of the document, the Prime Minister argued that technological advances can enable services to be both responsive and more cost-effective.
 - The next stage of the government's efficiency proposals, building on the Gershon agenda and the targets set out in the Operational Efficiency Programme (OEP).
 - The financial challenges faced by the government. The proposals contained in *Putting the frontline first* are also intended to provide part of the government's plans to tackle the UK's budget deficit.
- 2 Published alongside *Putting the frontline first* were:
 - [Benchmarking the Back Office: Central Government](#), which sets out the findings of the review of costs of back office functions across public sector bodies; and
 - [Operational Efficiency Programme: Asset Portfolio](#), which sets out details on each of the organisations identified earlier this year for a potential government asset sale.

Section 2 – overview of: '*Putting the frontline first: smarter government*'

- 3 *Putting the frontline first* sets out three objectives for the next stage of public sector reform - to:
 - drive up standards by strengthening the role of citizens and civic society – through the creation of **open and accountable public services**;
 - free up public services by recasting the relationship between the centre and the frontline – through **devolved decision making**; and
 - streamline the centre of government, saving through sharper delivery – through a **renewed focus on value for money**.
- 4 Each of the objectives set in *Putting the frontline first* is underpinned by a series of key actions that the paper argues will be central to the delivery of smarter government ability to deliver better public services for a lower cost. As the report makes clear, this will be essential if the government is to achieve its commitment to halve the public deficit within four years.

Objective 1 - drive up standards by strengthening the role of citizens and civic society

- 5 The actions set out in order to achieve the first objective of *Putting the frontline first* focus on the need to use new technology to open up public sector information, creating informed and empowered citizens and consequently more legitimate decision making.
- 6 In order to **accelerate the move towards digitalised public services** the report makes specific proposals to:
 - invest £30 million with UK Online to support the development of the National Plan for Digital Participation
 - pilot 'Tell us Once' services with local government for recording births and deaths information, reducing the number of agencies the public have to notify
 - accelerate plans to increase the proportion of services that are personalised and available online with a target of having 100 per cent of transactions with government available online by 2014
 - produce a Digital Britain Roadmap by the end of 2010 that will set out plans for the online transition of key services such as student loans, Jobseekers' Allowance and Child Tax Credits
 - make it easier for public services to join up in order to provide the sort of personalised services people want.
- 7 Strengthening the role of citizens and civic society is also to be encouraged through **radically opening up public data**. Building on developments such as crime maps and NHS Choices, the government sets out proposals to ensure that the data the public have already paid for through their funding of the public sector is openly available to them. Of particular note are the commitments to
 - publish, by spring 2010, details of how the fiscal stimulus announced in the Pre-Budget Report 2008 has been spent, disaggregated to a local level;
 - consult, in early 2010, on how the government could publish further financial data so that it is user-friendly and accessible
 - make over 1,100 central government datasets free for reuse via www.data.gov.uk from January 2010
 - encourage local government to release local public data
- 8 Through opening up data, *Putting the frontline first* argues that **greater personal responsibility can be encouraged**, with government helping people to help themselves. In addition, proposals are set out to increase the level of preventative policy and risk modelling across the public sector, particularly around reducing incidents of fraud and poor health.
- 9 Finally, in order to achieve objective 1, *Putting the frontline first* sets out proposals aimed at **building a stronger civic society**. The report argues that through working together, government and the public better shape and hold to account public services. Policy developments from recent years such as community ownership of assets, and the encouragement of social enterprise are revisited. In addition, commitments are also set out to produce a Civic Health Index aimed at providing information to help assess how well civic society is thriving by early 2010, and to finalise the model for a Social Investment Wholesale Bank by Budget 2010.¹

¹ Aimed at providing capital to organisations delivering social impact and ensuring the long-term sustainability of social enterprises

Objective 2 - free up public services by recasting the relationship between the centre and the frontline

- 10** In order to achieve the second objective of *Putting the frontline first* actions are set out that are aimed at ensuring that decisions are made as close to the citizen as possible, responding to local needs. Building on concepts such as Total Place, the government suggests that the frontline can be freed up from central, prescriptive targets in order to develop the services that respond to the priorities of users. *Putting the frontline first* states that the government will recast the relationship between the centre and the frontline.
- 11** The report states that, although advances have been made in reducing the burden of compliance with central government, unnecessary assessment requirements can still prevent frontline services from operating as effectively as possible. In order to combat this, and in order to **let local areas have more control over setting priorities and guiding resources**, specific proposals are set out to:
- streamline the national performance framework by reducing the number of high-level priorities set out at the next Spending Review
 - reduce the number of national indicators more substantially from 2011
 - align sector-specific frameworks in order to increase the focus on joint outcomes^I
- 12** In order to ensure this rebalancing of the relationship between the centre and the frontline is achieved the government proposals acknowledge the need to **enable local areas to guide the use of their resources** through:
- reducing the use of ring-fencing, building on the current Total Place pilots^{II}
 - reducing multiple funding streams, with plans to bring together the most fragmented funding streams and synchronise grant payment plans for 2011/12 by Budget 2010^{III}
 - removing disincentives to align budgets, considering proposals such as Total Capital, and setting out recommendations by Budget 2010^{IV}
 - removing disincentives to invest in a much wider set of organisations in order to achieve long-term benefits
- 13** Of particular interest to the Commission under this second objective is the proposal to consider options relating to stronger local scrutiny of spending on public services, with publication of specific proposals in early 2010. No further detail is set out as to what form this scrutiny will take.
- 14** In order to free up public services by recasting the relationship between the centre and the frontline, *Putting the frontline first* sets out the view that, though reporting, inspection and assessment are powerful tools to guarantee quality, **reducing the burden on the frontline** needs to go further. Specific plans set out include:
- greater coordination of the timing of all assessment activity

^I The government will set out in Budget 2010 the key areas where frameworks for specific frontline sectors can be further aligned

^{II} Out of 52 specific revenue grants to local authorities totalling £76.3 billion, 36 are currently ring-fenced, to the value of £39.5 billion

^{III} There are currently 102 different local authority revenue funding streams, including 49 in education and children's services, 11 in adult social care and six in policing.

^{IV} Guidance on effective pooling and aligning of budgets at a local level will also be released by Budget 2010

- the consideration of options (to be firmly reported at Budget 2010) to coordinate and rationalise burdens on the frontline such as through a cross-governmental data gateway, and a shared web portal bringing together all regulations and guidance for local areas in one place
- an exploration of the costs of collecting data more equally
- an assessment of the burdens identified through Total Place and Whitehall obstacles to delivery reviews in order to draw up plans to remove as much burden as possible in time for the 2011/12 financial year

15 In order to underpin recasting the relationship between the centre and the frontline, *Putting the frontline first* argues that thought needs to be given to **harnessing the power of comparative data** and how it can be best used to drive up quality. The report goes on to set out how Oneplace¹ typifies better use of information, providing a single repository for independent information on local public service data. Specific actions in relation to improving the use of comparative data include:

- plans to consult in spring 2010 (and publish in 2011) on proposals to develop comparable measures of value for money across a range of local government services
- plans to publish data useful in the health, education, criminal justice, and police sectors in order to encourage benchmarking
- plans to introduce best practice tariffs in the NHS by 2010/11
- plans to introduce a presumption that, starting from 2011, public sector inspectorates begin to reserve top performance ratings for those service organisations that have performed well against value for money considerations
- enabling the best performers to mentor the poorest across local services

Objective 3 - streamline the centre of government, saving through sharper delivery

16 In order to underpin the focus on ensuring the public and local public service professionals shape services in their areas, the final objective in *Putting the frontline first* sets out the need to ensure greater efficiency at the centre of government.

17 Through identifying new ways of working *Putting the frontline first* sets out plans to deliver in excess of another £12 billion in efficiency savings over the next four years. This includes £3 billion of new efficiency savings identified since the budget, of which over £1.3 billion will come from streamlining central government. The efficiencies set out build on the savings of £35 billion a year by 2011 already promised and the £26.5 billion a year already delivered through the Gershon review.

18 There are several plans to **reshape the civil service**. The report argues that through:

- reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and management layers, £100 million of savings a year can be achieved
- applying modernisation reviews to middle management, greater flexibility will be built into the civil service
- reviewing senior public sector pay, significant savings can be found¹¹

¹ <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk/Pages/default.aspx>

¹¹ The Prime Minister is writing to Bill Cockburn as chair of the senior salaries Pay review Body to commission a review of senior pay looking across the whole of the public sector, reporting to the government in time for Budget 2010

19 Added to this review of civil service structures are plans to **strengthen performance management and benchmarking** in order to promote greater efficiency. Specifically through:

- publishing departmental score cards in 2010
- ensuring value for money objectives are reflected in civil service objectives
- improving sickness absence levels
- strengthening the ability of departments to deal with under performance
- benchmarking with international partners in order to drive improvement
- working towards the creation of a virtual centre for excellence on value for money delivery in the OECD

20 Innovations across central government are also highlighted as a route towards achieving greater efficiencies. Plans set out include:

- support for all departments, from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, aimed at highlighting the best of central government innovation
- the development of a new corporate learning programme at the National School of Government
- the launch of a Social Venture Capital Fund to support third party organisations to generate innovative new ideas for using government data to create useful tools for the public

21 Efficiency plans also extend to the **rationalisation and reform of arm's-length bodies (ALBs)**. While rationalisation and reform is set out *Putting the frontline first* makes clear that in many cases the government sees the value ALBs and their ability to deliver value for money. *Putting the frontline first* plans to:

- reduce the overall number of ALBs by over 120¹, including the reduction in the number of regulators (specifically mentioning the abolition of HM Inspectorate of Courts Administration)
- reduce duplication between the work carried out by ALBs
- establish more rigorous processes for setting up ALBs
- introduce a sunset clause for and ensure greater transparency in the scrutiny of ALBs
- extend the capability review process to key ALBs

22 Through **improving back office functions** and the **better management of assets** *Putting the frontline first* sets out the government view as to how further savings could be made across the public sector. The government plans to use technology to improve procurement further.

23 In relation to the better management of assets, plans are set out to:

- explore different management and ownership options for the public sector estate

¹ abolishing 16 regional advisory committees relating to agricultural workers in England and the 15 regional committees in England that appoint each of them; consulting on rationalising the 101 Advisory Committees on Justice of the Peace to 49; reducing the number of Court Boards from 23 to 19; reducing the number of separate publicly funded bodies in the skills sector by 30 over the next three years; merging the sentencing guidelines Council and sentencing Advisory Panel into a single sentencing Council; and reducing the number of bodies whose primary function is service delivery

- further review the scope for civil service relocation with the aim of outlining how at least 10 per cent of all posts currently based in London and the south east can be relocated in the medium term
- require ALBs, including regulators, to demonstrate they are located in the most efficient and effective part of the country
- develop regional support strategies for the government estate
- publish at Budget 2010 initial conclusions as to which government activities should be managed as businesses.