Providing a Sure Start

How government discovered early childhood

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How it all started: key features of a new govt

• New Labour
• New relationship between No 10 and 11
• New ways of making policy: Modernizing Govt
• New ways of allocating resources: the CSR process and PSAs
• New Labour and children
1997 Manifesto

- Commitment to free early education, all 4 year olds and eventually all three year olds
- Commitment to a National Childcare Strategy, relevant to welfare to work policies
- Anti poverty commitment largely about New Deals (child poverty pledge 1999)
- A ‘pilot’ programme of Early Excellence Centres, bringing education and care together
1998: The CSR on children under 8

Key findings:
• Poverty is bad for children, especially experience of poverty in the early years
• Most public expenditure on over 4s, once children are in school
• Several depts involved in services for under 5s, but no overall strategy
• Wide differences of quantity and quality of early years services across the country
• The right kind of services could help narrow the gap between poor children and the rest
Sure Start is born

• Announced in Parliament, July 1998
• Initial plan of 250 local programmes; allocation of £450 million over 3 years
• PSA set the overall aims and objectives but local freedom to design local programme to meet PSA targets
• Tight loose design consistent with Mod. Agenda:
  – User not provider led
  – Flexible, responsive services sensitive to local needs
  – Joined up across different agencies and professions
  – Focus on outcomes not inputs
  – Evidence based?
    • Yes, in terms of imp of early years,
    • no in terms of actual design
Innovative Governance

At the centre
• cross depts: DfEE, Health, and HMT
• Cabinet level minister SoS for Education, day to day control, Minister for Public Health
• Steering group from 6 depts
• Personal accountability through head of the Unit

At local level
• Lead body to organise the plan
• Acct body to hold the money
• Partnership board including all key agencies, vol sector and local parents
• Small area with no clear administrative borders
Innovative design

• Outcome not input funded, based on PSA targets
• Attempt to separate essential bureaucratic process of accounting for £ from decisions on spend (lead body and accountable body)
• Catchment areas not based on particular administrative boundaries, locally determined
• No competitive bidding process: support to write a plan, tap on when plan approved
The big debates

• Programme design
• Evaluation design: no RCT
• Expanding too fast (successful scaling up)
• **Handover to LAs**
  – Weakening of ring fence
  – Boards became ‘advisory’ weakening of parent role
• All children, poor children, the very poorest children, seriously dysfunctional families
What we got wrong

• Cross govt arrangements create over ambitious expectations: ‘Sure Start and global warming’ Every minister wants and expects something different
• Spending money fast and building a new infrastructure with local participation takes a long time
• The actual task was very difficult, no arrangements for programme manager support and devt
• All analogies were simply wrong: the implicit but unvoiced models of civil servants were unsuited to the task (not school, not health visiting, a new kind of public service offer)
• New kinds of civil servants (me) not well prepared for the complexities of Whitehall
What we achieved

• Wide acceptance that Govt does have a role to play after birth and before school
• A publicly funded universal early years and childcare service is established, and unlikely to be dismantled
• National network of Children’s Centres: embedded notion of integration at the front line; services from them will ebb and flow, but basic infrastructure in place, and very popular with public and voters
• Key factor in achievements: political will
Lessons on innovation

Key tension between maintaining nature of innovation, and scaling up quickly

‘This sort of new model can only grow if it has a fair amount of insulation and buffering from the rest of the system’ Geoff Mulgan

Going to scale requires some version of standardisation, hence dampening and diluting of innovation;

Success when what seemed innovative is just what we do everyday.
Lessons for the front line

– Engagement and parent satisfaction needs to be matched with quality of activity

– Data systems essential to know
  • Who is not coming
  • Are those who are coming engaged in activities that will make a difference

– Cross agency working requires *systems leadership* at local level

– It is hard because it is, not because you are not good enough!