

Joined-Up Government: Rational Administration or Bureaucratic Politics?¹

**Paper presented to the Politics of Public Services Panel,
Public Administration Committee Annual Conference,
University of Glamorgan,
7th-9th September 2009**

Dr Alice Moseley
Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton
Email: A.Moseley@soton.ac.uk

Abstract: Joined-up government is often viewed as a remedy for coordination problems arising in the complex multi-organisational terrain of contemporary public services. Governments extol the virtues of formal coordination mechanisms as tools of joined-up government, both locally and centrally. Such policy exhortations conceive of joined-up government from a rational-administrative perspective which implies that actors adopt coordination mechanisms as a functional response to systemic problems. This paper explores the rationale behind the selection of coordination mechanisms from the perspective of policy actors at different levels of government, using evidence from a recent study of joined-up government in the field of homelessness. It is argued that decisions about joining-up are the outcome of strategic and instrumental moves between actors, with each pursuing their own organisational interests and the outcome favouring the most powerful, motivations that are better encapsulated by a bureaucratic politics model. Key aspects dominating collaborative decision-making include prioritisation of, and a desire to protect resources for, agencies' and departments' own client groups; the greater ability of the most powerful actors to gain the cooperation of other bodies in order to advance their own organisational agendas; and the adoption of coordination mechanisms to reduce risk and maintain organisational survival.

Introduction

Advocates of joined-up government usually frame their arguments by appealing to the greater functionality and effectiveness of this approach to the running of government. A familiar argument is that working in a joined-up way should deliver more holistic responses to policy problems, particularly ‘whole-of-government’ problems that transcend departmental boundaries. Joined-up government is also often construed as an administrative solution to the problem of departmentalism, providing incentives for departments to look beyond their own narrow departmental interests (Kavanagh and Richards, 2001). A further motivation for pursuing joined-up government is to reduce negative externalities or spillover effects which occur when one part of government fails to take account of the impact of its actions on other parts of government (James 2003; Painter 2003). At the citizen level joined-up government is said to lead to more seamless services. Lastly, it is argued to create efficiencies by reducing duplication across the departments and agencies of government. These technical and managerial justifications dominate the official rhetoric of joined-up government (Pollitt, 2003).

Political scientists and public management scholars, however, have identified a range of underlying difficulties associated with joined-up working both at central and local government levels (Hudson, 1995; Peters 1998; Arblaster et al. 1998; Huxham 2000). They typically underline barriers such as differing cultures, priorities and organisational structures. Others have examined the political rather than managerial motivations behind joined-up government reforms (Pollitt, *ibid*). Such contributors do not necessarily take a fatalist view of the prospects for achieving joined-up government, but frame the issue differently to the more technocratic and managerial perspectives.

The two approaches to the framing of joined-up government reflect two different strands of public administration theory, one of which can be termed a ‘rational-administrative’ and the other a ‘bureaucratic politics’ perspective. The former is the dominant framework within which policy prescriptions surrounding joined-up government are articulated, and has dominated the coordination and inter-organisational relations literature. The latter emphasises the competing interests and power dynamics at play in the context of joined-up government.

This paper empirically examines contrasting aspects of collaborative decision-making through the lens of these two rival theoretical perspectives. It attempts to shed further light on the nature of collaborative decision-making in one area of public services where joined-up government has been attempted. While joined-up government and inter-organisational collaboration more generally are well-researched subjects, the use of political science or public administration theory to frame such work has been less common.

The paper contributes to a growing literature on vertical and horizontal coordination within the context of intra- and inter-governmental relations. It focuses primarily on the use of coordination mechanisms such as joint coordinating units, joint protocols, joint bidding and co-location. Such mechanisms formalise joint working and can be considered the ‘scaffolding’ of joined-up government. There is a substantial international literature on coordination and collaboration in government generally (Verhoest et al, 2007; Skelcher et al., 2005; Scharpf, 1994) as well as joined-up government (see Bogdanor et al., 2005 for an overview). However, there is relatively little work focusing on concrete mechanisms of coordination, particularly empirical work which examines their operational dynamics. The paper therefore examines motivations for the adoption formal coordination mechanisms and the challenges of managing and sustaining these. It uses qualitative evidence from a study of joined-up government in the field of homelessness, a subfield of British social policy which has formed one part of a broader joined-up government agenda. Homelessness is a typical cross-cutting human services issue whose resolution is arguably best met through collaborative, multi-agency approaches. The importance of collaboration in the context of human services has been recognised by a number of authors (Weiss, 1981; Agranoff, 1991; Webb, 1991; Bardach, 1994; Hill and Lynn, 2003).

Joined-up government as rational administration

The rational administrative perspective is an ideal typical model of administrative decision-making. Two well known variations of the model exist, notably synoptic and bounded rationality. In the synoptic variant, decision-makers have a comprehensive overview of all possible policy alternatives and their consequences,

and pursue the course of action most likely to effectively and efficiently achieve their clearly defined ends (Lindblom 1965). In the bounded variant, time constraints, the costs of considering different courses of action and limits to information processing capabilities, mean that decision-makers employ heuristics and pursue merely satisfactory or 'satisficing' solutions (Simon 1997). While differing in the degree of information searching that is undertaken by bureaucratic decision-makers, these variants are united in their focus on means-ends decision making. The rational administrative perspective implies that decisions are largely evidence-led rather than value-led, and fits within the Weberian ideal of the rational, mechanistic, value-free bureaucracy characterised by clear and uniform goals. Although the rational-administrative perspective is rarely viewed as representative of the reality of modern bureaucracies, it serves as an influential ideal type. The rationalist tradition has been described as the 'mainstream' approach to policy analysis (Elmore 1978) and has been extremely influential within attempts to improve the machinery of government in various countries (Ham and Hill 1993).

Reform efforts aiming to improve coordination inside government largely sit within this conception of public administration, and the rhetoric of joined up government appeals to its logic. According to Booth (1988), early models of public service collaboration introduced by government, such as joint commissioning in health and social care, were built upon two assumptions concerning inter-organisational behaviour. They were underpinned by the belief that organisations will collaborate for altruistic reasons in order to meet the needs of the service users or communities they serve, and when they are convinced that they can achieve more working together than working separately (Booth 1988, see Hudson 1995, p. 236). Booth, however, expresses doubts about the validity of these assumptions, referring to such this conception of coordination as the 'naïve position'. A similar perspective is taken by Hudson (1995) who finds the assumptions of the conventional 'rational-altruistic' model of coordination unrealistic. The model, he argues, assumes that agencies have common goals, a systemic overview of client needs and problems, consensus about their problems, and agreement on the best methods for tackling them, conditions which are in practice unlikely to occur.

A substantial inter-organisational relations literature follows the rationalist and technocratic vein and specifies coordination modes and mechanisms suitable in different task environments. These contingency perspectives relate choice of coordination mechanism to contextual variables such as the level of task uncertainty, the degree of interdependence of the units involved and the size of the setting or number of units to be coordinated (Van De Venn et al. 1976; Alexander 1995). They imply means-ends decision-making, with coordination mechanisms selected according to the nature of the problem or context. Such applications have been made in the study of human services issues such as mental health (Alter and Hage 1993) and health and social care (Leutz 1999).

Joined-up government as bureaucratic politics

An alternative view is expressed by commentators who recognise the intensely political nature of coordination in inter-organisational settings. Wamsely (1985), for instance, argues that coordination requires negotiations in the context of competing interests and involves ‘major compromises, bargains and just plain deals’ (cited in Peters 1998: 300). Similarly, Agranoff and McGuire (2004) recognise that collaboration, either between different arms or levels of government, occurs within a broader context of bargaining and negotiation. Others have emphasised the political nature of coordination in relation to central and local government (Stoker, 1991; Peters, 1998). However, there is less consensus around which theories of political science best explain collaborative decision-making.

Public choice theorists have long-observed ‘departmentalist’ behaviour amongst bureaucrats seeking to protect their own budgets, turf and personnel (Kavanagh and Richards, 2001). Public choice theory itself sits within a broader bureaucratic politics paradigm. An interesting focus of inquiry is the extent to which the bureaucratic politics paradigm continues to be applicable in the context of joined-up government efforts which are at least partially designed to overcome the problems that public choice theorists identify.

The bureaucratic politics perspective on public administration views bureaucratic units as competing factions engaged in processes of bargaining, exchange and

compromise (Clifford 1990; Jordan 1994). Bureaucratic decisions are essentially the product of strategic interactions between units pursuing their individual and/ or organisational interests. Bureaucratic units use the resources at their disposal, such as information, finance, legitimacy or political capital, in order to secure these interests (Peters 1995). Furthermore, the outcomes of negotiations typically favour the most powerful of the actors involved (Allison and Halperin 1972). In the context of local government, these strategic interactions are often manifested in disputes over territory or ‘action space’, and protection of budgets, programmes and personnel (Stoker 1991). Games metaphors and colloquialisms such as ‘empire building’ are often invoked to characterise such processes.

The bureaucratic politics perspective is helpful in drawing attention to the power dynamics of interacting groups and the pursuit of individual rather than collective aims. It is closely aligned with the rational choice paradigm (as distinct from rational administration described above) in its concern with the pursuit of organisational or individual interests. However, it moves beyond rational choice theory by attempting to explain how actors seek to satisfy those interests through an explicit focus on the power dynamics of interacting groups. It implies conflict rather than unity between the goals of central government departments.

The differences between the two contrasting approaches are summed up in Table 1.

Table 1 Assumptions of the rival models: rational administration vs bureaucratic politics

| Model | Nature of decision-making | Nature of human behaviour | Nature of organisations’ aims |
|-------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| Rational administration | Means-ends search for efficient & effective solutions | Altruistic | Unified |
| Bureaucratic politics | Opportunistic/ Strategic | Individually/ organisationally instrumental | Conflictual |

The research reported in the remainder of the paper explores the validity of each of these models in the context of collaborating decision-making. Evidence of a rational-administrative approach would provide support for the following hypothesis:

Rational administrative hypothesis: Collaborative decisions reflect means-ends decision making where the most efficient and effective solutions are selected according to the particular problem at hand; altruistic concerns dominate decision-making; the aims of the departments or agencies involved are largely unified.

By contrast, evidence to support a bureaucratic politics perspective would confirm this hypothesis:

Bureaucratic politics hypothesis: Collaborative decisions are the outcome of strategic and instrumental moves between actors, each promoting their own interests; aims of different departments or agencies are not unified; the outcomes favour the most powerful local agencies.

Before proceeding to the research findings, the context of joined-up government and coordination in the United Kingdom is briefly reviewed in order to illustrate the contemporary relevance of the topic.

The context: coordination mechanisms and the joined-up policy agenda

It is widely recognised that coordination in government has been a particularly high priority of British Labour Governments of the past 10 years, branded under the joined-up government label (6 et al., 2002; Ling, 2002; Hood 2005). Numerous initiatives and funding streams have been initiated to improve coordination in local public services and in central government (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002). The concern to join-up public services and government has not abated in more recent times, with several formal coordination mechanisms introduced to assist with this.

Examples at local level include Local Area Agreements, strategic tools aiming to improve coordination vertically between central and local government and horizontally between local government and its partners. Additional coordination mechanisms include legal duties to cooperate in fields such as homelessness, health and social services and criminal justice. The community wellbeing power introduced under the Local Government Act 2000 facilitates cross-boundary partnership working between local authorities. Measures to encourage joint commissioning of services have been introduced in relation to healthcare, through the recent Joint Commissioning Process for Health and Wellbeing. Many cross-cutting areas of public service delivery are subject to compulsory multi-agency strategies which require the participation of local partner agencies. Finally, local agencies delivering frontline services are increasingly on the receiving end of exhortations to collaborate and to formalise joint working arrangements using mechanisms such as joint assessment procedures, information sharing systems and joint protocols.

The homelessness sector, the subject of this paper, has not been immune to these developments, and there have been significant attempts by the central state to encourage collaboration at local level (Moseley and James, 2008). Specific examples include funding streams to support multi-agency working in homelessness, official guidance relating to the use of coordination mechanisms, a legal duty to cooperate and a requirement to produce local multi-agency homelessness strategies.

Within central government a host of coordination mechanisms have also been introduced. Cross-cutting targets and objectives have been set under the Public Services Agreement (PSA) regime (James 2003; 2004). Inter-ministerial and inter-departmental working groups in fields such as children's services and criminal justice have been established (Kavanagh and Richards 2001; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002). Central coordination units have been formed to provide strategic leadership and to generate advice on joint working (PIU 2000; Better Regulation Task Force 2002). Various coordinating networks have also been introduced in the Treasury and Cabinet, including the Permanent Secretaries Group, the Civil Service Management Board and the Principal Finance Officers networks.

The above examples signify the UK Government's commitment to, and faith in, coordination mechanisms, viewed as technical fixes for unlocking the practical barriers to cross-agency and cross-government working, and for producing holistic responses to cross-cutting problems. After a brief outline of the methodology, the next sections of the paper assess the development and operation of these coordination mechanisms and the factors influencing collaborative decision-making more generally, exploring the relevance of the rival theoretical perspectives for explaining collaborative decision-making.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with civil servants working in government departments with responsibilities related to homelessness, and with 'street level bureaucrats' in three local authorities in England, including one unitary urban authority in the North West, one London Borough and one two tier urban authority in the South West. Authorities were selected to provide variation in terms of local authority structure, geography, and the presence or absence of government grants to support collaboration. All areas had significant levels of homelessness and were engaged in coordination efforts. In order to incorporate a diversity of views and settings, the local interviews were conducted with managers and practitioners in local housing authorities, as well other statutory bodies including health, social services and criminal justice agencies, and with voluntary sector agencies and housing associations. A total of 43 interviews were conducted and were tape recorded and transcribed. The sampling frame is illustrated in table 2 below, with the number of interviews from each type of body in brackets.

Table 2 Sampling frame for interviews

| Local level | | |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Statutory Agencies</i> | <i>Voluntary Sector Agencies</i> | <i>Accommodation Providers</i> |
| Housing Authorities (7) Supporting People (3) Other LA (1) Prisons (2) Probation Service (2) Police (2) Primary Care Trust (2) Health Outreach (2) | Day Centres (2) Housing advice projects (2) Night drop-in centre (1) Accommodation project (1) Meaningful occupation (2) Other homeless projects (2) | Hostels (2) Housing Associations/ Registered Social Landlords (5) |
| Central level | | |
| Communities & Local Government (5) | Department of Health (2) | |

The interviews with civil servants were used to provide contextual information on the setting for local collaborative working but also to explore the dynamics of inter-departmental coordination within central government, particularly themes related to the operation of central coordination mechanisms. The main aim of the local interviews was to explore actors' motivations for developing formal coordination mechanisms, the challenges of this, and perceptions of their effectiveness, as well as general contextual issues affecting collaboration.

The interview data were analysed using a thematic approach, involving the generation of themes from categories and codes (Smith, Harre, and Van Langenhare 1995). Transcripts were first scanned to gain an overall feel for the data. The text was organised into tables using the broad headings used in the interview schedules. The data under these headings were then systematically coded using labels which summarised the meaning of the text. Where these codes began to recur they were clustered into themes. The themes reported below are presented in tabular form beginning with the most recurrent.

Collaborative decision-making in central government

Interviews with civil servants revealed a range of formal coordination mechanisms aiming to develop holistic approaches to homelessness in central government. These

included inter-departmental groups, a housing network to make links between departments, and regular inter-departmental meetings between ministers. In terms of the development of homelessness strategy, the National Homelessness Strategy and the Supporting People programme, the main fund for housing support, both had cross-departmental steering groups attached to them. A group had also recently been established to enable the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG), the department with the main responsibility for homelessness, to develop a more strategic and systematic approach to its work with other departments and to identify shared priorities. A joint work-plan had been established between the Department of Health and CLG to address the health component of homelessness.

While these formal mechanisms suggest a structured and rational approach to joining up government, in practice these mechanisms were subject to a range of challenges. The most important issues related to competing priorities and the dominance of particular departmental agendas, a lack of willingness to shoulder responsibility for homelessness which lay outside of the core remit of most departments, resource limitations and a requirement to react to the political priorities of the day (see table 3).

Table 3 Challenges of collaborating across government

| Challenge | Example |
|---|--|
| Competing departmental priorities; most powerful taking precedence | Home Office reducing re-offending agenda trumping CLG homelessness priorities |
| Unwilling to accept responsibility for policy issues outside of core remit | Failure of other departments (eg Home Office, DWP) to accept shared responsibility for homelessness immigrants |
| Resource limitations | Competition for resources leading to protection of funds for own client groups |
| Approach to cross-government working led by political priorities of the day | Inter-departmental agendas reactive to press stories around prisoners, asylum seekers and migrant workers |

The competing priorities of different government departments, reflecting their individual targets, created difficulties for collaboration, and there were tensions around which departmental agendas should take priority. Even within departments, different directorates had their own priorities, with each viewing its own client group as most important. These tensions were reflected within coordination mechanisms such as cross-departmental groups and inter-ministerial groups. While cross-

departmental groups facilitated a degree of collaborative working, interviewees suggested that the more powerful departments' priorities dominated these forums. Inter-ministerial groups were considered one mechanism by which the more powerful departments' interests were communicated to other departments.

An example concerned the Home Office's¹ reducing re-offending agenda which was particularly dominant. The Home Office was committed to prevent homelessness amongst ex-offenders in order to reduce re-offending. However, officials from other departments stated that their own priorities in terms of preventing homelessness lay elsewhere. For instance, CLG priorities centred on victims of domestic violence and refugees, groups which statistically accounted for a greater proportion of homelessness. While offenders represented less than 1% of statutory homelessness acceptances, pressure from the Home Office resulted in CLG's work being diverted towards this client group. Some interviewees considered there to be a lack of reciprocity, suggesting that while they assisted other departments such as the Home Office to meet their priorities, they received little assistance with their own agendas in return. The inter-ministerial and inter-departmental groups were viewed as channels through which the more powerful departments could pressurise others into assisting with their agendas.

A second issue related to departments' unwillingness to accept a share of the responsibility for homelessness. CLG officials believed that other government departments viewed homelessness as CLG's problem. Officials attributed to this partly to other departments' failure to recognise that homelessness was about more than housing, despite a national homelessness strategy emphasising its cross-cutting nature. An example involved homeless immigrants from the EU Accession States. CLG officials expressed frustration at other departments' lack of cooperation over this issue. This was a clear priority for CLG because large numbers of immigrants were finding themselves homeless in the UK, which in turn affected CLG's ability to meet its rough sleeping targets. Since the issue also related to immigration, benefits and employment, CLG officials suggested that the departments representing these issues, namely as the Home Office and the Department for Work and Pensions, should share

¹ During the period of the research re-offending lay within the domain of the Home Office, although this has since been transferred to the new Ministry of Justice.

responsibility for it. Yet there was little acknowledgement of this or support for CLG's prioritisation of this matter. Despite rhetoric around shared targets in central government, in practice departments' own performance priorities took precedence and were a major obstacle to their ability to support the work of other departments.

Resource pressures meant that officials had to make choices about which issues they could be involved in cross-departmentally, and had to manage other departments' expectations in this regard. These pressures generated competition between departments, which undermined coordinated working and led departments to protect and prioritise their own areas of responsibility. As one civil servant commented:

“I think resources are under increasing pressure and that creates tensions both centrally and locally...everyone is scrabbling around for their client groups”.
(Interviewee 35)

Finally, cross-government working was influenced by the political priorities of the day. Civil servants noted that the inter-departmental linkages they held tended to shift according to Ministerial agendas, which were themselves affected by the mass media and public pressures. Housing issues relating to prisoners, asylum seekers and immigration, for instance, were recurring themes in the media that came to dominate cross-departmental working. This highlights the difficulty of undertaking planned, rational approach to collaborative working in a dynamic political environment.

This brief depiction of the challenges of coordinating cross-departmentally illustrates ways in which the operation of formal coordination mechanisms was undermined by the broader context of bureaucratic politics. Several features of inter-departmental relations were indicative of this, including departments' pursuit of their own priorities, a lack of unity over priorities, conflicting rather than shared performance targets, and disagreements over where the responsibility lies for cross-cutting issues. Furthermore, power inequalities between departments resulted in certain coordination mechanisms serving the priorities of the most powerful departments, while competition for resources encouraged protection of budgets and client groups.

Collaborative decision-making at local level

At local level, the most common coordination mechanisms employed included joint protocols, multi-agency assessment panels, multi-agency homelessness fora, service level agreements and joint training events. Interviewees were asked to reflect both on their motivations for developing such formal coordination mechanisms and on the challenges of managing these. They were also asked to reflect more generally on the general context for collaborating.

Motivations for developing coordination mechanisms

Coordination mechanisms were adopted when they provided tangible benefits to the agencies concerned. Instrumental motivations appeared at least as dominant, if not more so, than altruistic motivations associated with helping clients or functional concerns to reduce externalities. In particular, mechanisms were viewed positively by interviewees when they had the potential to help agencies maintain organisational survival in a competitive financial environment, and to reduce risks in the blame culture in which they worked.

Table 4 summarises the main motivations for developing formal coordination mechanisms. In several cases agencies were considering co-locating services in order to reduce costs and pool resources. Sharing administrators, premises and office infrastructure were strategic responses to limited financial resources. Voluntary sector organisations were particularly attuned to the financial benefits of co-locating, and were wary of the prospect of the local authority, their major funding body, cutting services because of perceived duplication in service provision by different agencies. Co-location therefore represented a survival strategy for some. Similarly, joint case panels were viewed as a source of client referrals. Interviewees noted that their funding was dependent on maintaining a high throughput of clients. Increasing the volume of referrals was therefore seen as helping protect agencies' financial viability. Financial considerations also motivated staff to consider developing consortia to bid for funds. This was viewed as a means of reducing competition for limited funding within local areas. As one voluntary sector drugs project manager noted:

“money keeps coming down, it’s a ridiculous amount they want us to fight over, but we’re not doing that any more, so what we’ve decided to put together a consortium which will put in a bid for something like £300k”. (Interviewee 21)

Linked to this, coordination mechanisms were developed opportunistically in response to funding streams. Numerous interviewees commented that government funding increasingly required agencies to demonstrate evidence of partnership working. This had also encouraged them to engage in joint bidding and to develop consortia in order to obtain funding. Examples included the incorporation of several agencies within a bid to develop a new homelessness hostel and a meaningful occupation project for homeless people.

Formal coordination structures such as joint protocols were perceived as a means of protecting agencies against risk. Such protocols clarified the responsibilities of different agencies, and could be used to safeguard agencies against charges of malpractice when serious incidents occurred in relation to individual clients. As one Local Authority Resettlement Manager commented:

“We’ve had to introduce a protocol around discharge arrangements from the hospital because there is a potential for things to go wrong & I think both sides want to firm things up in terms of risk.” (Interviewee 5)

One local authority interviewee noted that they had managed to persuade their partner agencies to sign up to joint protocols by marketing them as risk management tools:

“We’ve got a protocol with social services. It was hard to get agreement on some things, but you can if you demonstrate how it benefits them. The obvious hook for them is they will have a children act duty towards that family if we find them intentionally homeless.” (Interviewee 1)

Similarly, risk management was an important motivation for employing information sharing protocols. These protocols typically incorporated client consent statements to enable information sharing about clients between specified agencies. Having such protocols in place offered agencies protection against possible breaches of data protection law. Information sharing protocols were also viewed as a way of protecting staff from risky clients by ensuring that they had access to any information held by other agencies on dangerous behaviour.

Despite these instrumental and strategic motivations, there was also some evidence of altruistic and functional reasons for developing coordination mechanisms. It was clear that local actors regarded certain coordination mechanisms as helping meet the multiple needs of clients. Temporary, ad-hoc groups had been established in case study areas to respond to the needs of homeless people. They were functional in responding to service users' needs, and the desire to tackle these was motivated by an altruistic concern to improve the lives of the individuals concerned. Multi-agency teams and case panels had been set up in many cases because staff viewed them as necessary for tackling homelessness in a holistic way. One homeless outreach manager commented:

“We are a multi-agency team and were deliberately formed that way to respond to the needs of rough sleepers.”

Coordination mechanisms were also employed in the belief that they would reduce externalities such as duplication and lack of coherence. Agencies had attempted to ‘iron out’ duplications and gaps in services, for instance, during regular multi-agency forum meetings. As a prison accommodation manager noted:

“There are all sorts of duplications that multi-agency meetings help to iron out. And I think at the moment that is a particular focus.”

While these altruistic and functional motivations were important, they appeared less influential as guiding reasons for adopting coordination mechanisms than strategic and instrumental motivations, as illustrated in table 4 which lists the themes in order beginning with the most salient.

Table 4 Motivations for adopting coordination mechanisms at local level

| Motivation | Example |
|---|--|
| Pooling resources in a difficult financial environment | Co-location of agencies to reduce duplication & avoid risk of service cuts |
| Levering in resources | Joint case panels as a source of client referrals |
| Rationalising available funding to reduce local competition | Joint bidding and consortium building |
| Protection against risk | Development of joint protocols to prevent malpractice claims, data protection breaches and danger to staff |
| Belief in their effectiveness for meeting client needs | Joint case panels a mechanism for tackling needs holistically |

Challenges of developing and managing coordination mechanisms

Developing and managing coordination mechanisms at local level is a key part of fulfilling the aims joined-up government at the frontline of public services. Table 5 outlines the core challenges of this in local areas. The most common difficulty concerned disagreements over which agency should be driving the process forward. The costs and time associated with developing coordination mechanisms, combined with the risk of failure if these efforts did not produce tangible outcomes, meant that agencies were wary of taking a lead role. This betrayed a lack of willingness to assume responsibility for homelessness on the part of some agencies. Those agencies that did take the lead, for instance by offering to host and organise multi-agency events and meetings, resented the lack of reciprocity from other agencies which were perceived as free riders.

The issue of priorities was raised by several interviewees. The local authority's priorities had militated against the development of coordination mechanisms and collaborative working in some cases. In one case the corporate prioritisation of local regeneration initiatives over affordable housing for low income groups conflicted with the homelessness remit of the housing needs section of the authority and had undermined collaboration between this department and the housing development section.

Certain coordination tools were opposed where they were perceived as posing a threat to organisational autonomy or survival. This applied to more ambitious forms of coordination such as mergers and integrated teams. While the benefits of such methods were acknowledged, there was reluctance to embrace these. As one community worker commented:

“There's degrees of collaboration. At one end of the extreme we could just jump into bed with each other and become one organisation that does everything for everybody ... but this is quite threatening for people.”

Other coordination structures, particularly multi-agency fora, became arenas for disputes to surface and were regarded as adversarial and competitive. While they did serve a number of practically useful functions, they were also viewed as arenas where

culture clashes emerged, reflecting the disparate worldviews of the personnel attending, including voluntary sector and community workers, police, social workers, housing authority staff and health professionals. Agencies' different priorities came to the fore in these meetings, which were a reflection of different government targets and the priorities of different funding bodies.

In several cases these fora were dominated by particular agencies that were perceived as wielding considerable influence over proceedings. For instance, local authorities, as the strategic lead and body responsible for providing funding to many of the agencies around the table, were viewed as first among equals. Voluntary sector personnel commented that these forums often became public relations exercises with agencies using them to promote their activities and their performance to potential funding bodies around the table, rather than being used as an opportunity to tackle shared problems. In other cases there was resentment over the extent to which certain large voluntary sector agencies controlled the meeting agendas.

Table 5 Challenges of developing and managing coordination mechanisms at local level

| Theme | Example |
|--|---|
| Failure to accept responsibility for leading on development of coordination mechanisms | Agencies reluctant to lead on joint protocols without cooperation from other agencies |
| Resentment created by free riding behaviour | Costs of coordinating falling on proactive agencies |
| Conflicting or differing local priorities; prioritisation of own information needs | Council priorities lying elsewhere and thwarting attempts to develop joint systems; reluctance to establish joint processes which would not fulfil agencies own information needs |
| Certain ambitious mechanisms viewed as threatening | Co-location and multi-agency teams viewed as undermining autonomy |
| Perceived dominance of certain agencies and competitive nature of inter-organisational relations | Multi-agency forums as 'PR exercise' for agencies seeking to project an image of success towards the local authority to protect funding; Larger agencies dominating agenda |

In summary, many of the challenges of developing and maintaining coordination mechanisms at local level, for instance the differing priorities of agencies, and

agencies' reticence to shoulder the burden of leading on their development, are consistent with a bureaucratic politics perspective. The motivations held by actors pursuing formal coordination tools suggest that they help agencies to secure their organisational interests, particularly in terms of their financial viability in a competitive environment. Of course, it is plausible that the immediate concern to maintain organisational survival itself stems from a belief in the underlying importance of the work being carried out by the agencies concerned. Indeed interviewees demonstrated a strong client-centred ethos. Although less salient than instrumental and strategic considerations, functional and altruistic concerns did figure to some degree in collaborative decision-making. Once coordination mechanisms were established they continued to be affected by tensions associated with bureaucratic politics, such as competition between agencies, differing priorities and the perceived dominance of powerful organisations.

The general context for collaborating

The operation of these mechanisms occurred within a broader context which in many ways impeded collaboration. Four aspects which inhibited collaboration included a competitive funding system, scarcity of resources, the pressures of government bureaucracy including targets, and the parameters of government funding. All this created a challenging backdrop within which local agencies were operating and meant that even where there was a desire to work collaboratively, this was often not possible.

The competitive funding environment was a particularly strong theme. There was a perception that competition, especially in the voluntary sector, was undermining efforts to collaborate. Interviewees characterised the voluntary sector as affected by 'in-fighting', with agencies unwilling to openly share information with their competitors, or as one interviewee put it 'playing their cards close to their chest' (interviewee 12). The competitive edge of the voluntary sector also resulted in a lack of willingness to share successful outcomes. Changes to the way in which housing related support is funded through the Supporting People programme were underway during the period of the research, and there was evidence that the changes were further exacerbating the level of competition, especially amongst accommodation

providers. This fund was in the process of moving towards a tender-based system, and interviewees suggested this would result in greater tensions between agencies competing for this money.

Also illustrating the competitive nature of the sector, there were perceived power inequalities between smaller voluntary sector agencies and larger agencies that were more successful in obtaining funding. In some areas one or two very large homelessness organisations dominated the local arena and were regarded as being favoured by the local authority.

The resource constraints within which agencies were operating also created tensions between agencies. For instance, many found it difficult to provide the level of service required within existing resources, causing frustration and resentment on the part of other agencies that were referring clients to these agencies. Agencies referring to these services understood the resource constraints these services were under, but were nevertheless attempting to 'battle' with these agencies to obtain services for clients.

General resource constraints were reflected in the language of interviewees who commented that local authorities operated in a 'vice', that the 'screws' had been put on local authorities and that the system was 'on its knees'. Some interviewees noted how the efficiency drive in the context of the Gershon Review meant that public organisations had to maintain and improve services with less funding. Others commented that voluntary sector was 'scrapping around' for money, and that there were 'diminishing pots of money'. They described the unstable and short term nature of voluntary sector funding, which meant that some charities were 'there today and gone tomorrow'. These resource constraints meant that joint working was 'the last thing people thought about', according to one interviewee (interviewee 13). For organisations such as primary care trusts and social services departments operating under severe financial constraints, wider issues such as homelessness which were not their core priorities often suffered.

Pressure to meet government targets and fulfil bureaucratic reporting requirements were additional background factors which preoccupied agencies. While interviewees understood why monitoring and targets were important, these demands frustrated their

attempts to work laterally or flexibly across organisations. Targets meant that statutory services devoted their time to fulfilling these at the expense of pursuing wider issues, often the cross-cutting issues which were relevant to several agencies but were of lower priority. Similarly, bureaucracy and paperwork was frequently seen as leaving little time or opportunity to pursue the more creative cross-cutting work. The parameters of government funding and the rules of particular programmes regarding how money was spent also impeded the development of collaborative multi-agency approaches.

Despite these wider policy and funding issues impeding collaboration, certain government agendas were recognised as having contributed to greater collaboration. One example concerned a resettlement policy introduced by the National Offender Management Service which had ‘forced’ the prison & probation services to ‘talk to other agencies’ (interviewee 1). Another concerned the ‘Options Agenda’ introduced into housing and homelessness services, which one interviewee suggested was ‘what has brought us all together’ (interviewee 7).

These issues relating to the broader policy environment serve to underscore the important role of central government in terms of creating a framework which enables local agencies to collaborate. Such issues influenced the choices agencies made about collaborating and adopting coordination mechanisms.

Discussion of the evidence in relation to the theoretical models

Revisiting the rival theoretical perspectives and associated hypotheses presented at the outset of the paper, the evidence seems to be more closely aligned with bureaucratic politics than with rational administration. First, coordination mechanisms are developed more for instrumental than for technical or altruistic reasons. They are risk management tools, and are used to help maintain organisational survival. On the other side of the coin, agencies sometimes choose to reject formal coordination mechanisms when they believe that they will undermine their autonomy. Second, their development and management occur in the context of competing - and sometimes conflicting - rather than unified aims. The aims of the various bodies are themselves heavily influenced by government targets and funders’ priorities.

Third, while means-ends decision-making does occur, the ends which are sought are not always associated with solving problems related to client needs. The ends pursued were often associated with organisational survival and protection of budgets, although this in itself may have stemmed from a desire to carry out work deemed to be important for solving homelessness. Moreover, there was little evidence of a systematic and problem-solving approach to choosing specific coordination mechanisms; rather, they were adopted opportunistically in response to funding and reflected changing political priorities. Finally, the power of certain bodies meant that their agendas and interests took priority over others, something which created resentment and militated against collaboration. This was evident both at central and local level.

Overall, collaborative decision-making is much more complex than the rational administrative model would suggest. Contrary to the official rhetoric around joined-up government and much of the inter-organisational theory literature, adopting coordination mechanisms is not simply a matter of matching problems and methods. This paper concurs with the view that coordination is a significantly political activity. A bureaucratic politics perspective provides a useful framework for delineating the political dynamics involved. Formal mechanisms are the outcome of negotiations which reflect power differences between the units that are the focus of coordination. Moreover, they are most likely to be adopted where they serve the interests of the various parties involved. Once established, there is no guarantee that they will serve the parties concerned in an even-handed way, and tensions are most apparent when there is an asymmetry of power. Indeed, coordination mechanisms can be regarded as fora through which the tensions of inter-departmental and inter-governmental relations are played out.

Conclusion and Implications

Formal coordination mechanisms are a common feature of attempts to develop coherent approaches to complex policy problems. This paper provides evidence of concerted attempts by the British Government to achieve joined-up-government through initiatives to stimulate coordination at central and local levels. The case study evidence suggests that those involved in delivering local public services

recognise the potential of such mechanisms and believe that they can help to alleviate externalities and lead to better services for clients. However, the differing priorities of the organisations and units concerned, and the struggle for survival in a competitive environment with limited resources, can detract from the realisation of these benefits. Establishing coordination mechanisms is not in itself a solution to cross-cutting public policy problems. Such mechanisms require continual management and nurturing. Future work focusing on how to manage such mechanisms in the context of bureaucratic politics would be a promising avenue of enquiry.

There is a paradox in that while the features of the inter-organisational environment described in the paper sometimes impede the development of coordination mechanisms, they can also serve to encourage this. As the case study illustrates, instrumental motivations are a strong part of decisions to engage in formal coordination efforts. Coordination mechanisms can help agencies to secure their organisational interests, and are more likely to be pursued when they are perceived as contributing to these. Recognition of the mix of motivations affecting coordination decisions is likely to enhance the effectiveness of attempts to encourage the adoption of formal coordination mechanisms. The coordination message is most likely to be bought at a local level when packaged as contributing to agencies' own wellbeing, as well as to those of the communities they serve.

A central issue raised at the outset of the paper was that formal coordination mechanisms and joined-up government generally are at least partly an attempt to solve the problems of departmentalism and silo-working. The evidence from this study highlights the limitations of joined-up government in this respect. Collaboration does occur to some degree, but in the context of bureaucratic politics which reflects the continued departmental organisation of government. The departmental organisation of central government and the challenges this raises structures, and in many ways limits, the opportunities that local agencies have to work cohesively together.

References

- Agranoff, R. 1991. "Human Services Integration: Past and Present Challenges in Public Administration." *Public Administration Review* 51(6): 533-542.
- Agranoff, R, and M McGuire. 2004. Another Look at Bargaining and Negotiating in Intergovernmental Management. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. 14(4): 495-512.
- Alexander, E. R. 1995. *How Organizations Act Together: Interorganizational Coordination in Theory and Practice*. Amsterdam, Gordon and Breach Publishers.
- Allison, G.T., and M.H. Halperin. 1972. Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications. *World Politics* 24:40-79.
- Alter, C. and J. Hage. 1993. *Organizations Working Together*. London, Sage.
- Arblaster, L., J. Conway, et al. 1998. *Achieving the Impossible: Interagency collaboration to address the housing, health and social care needs of people able to live in ordinary housing*. Bristol, Policy Press & the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Bardach, E. 1994. *Can Network Theory illuminate Interagency Collaboration?* Workshop on Network Analysis and Innovations in Public Programs, LaFollette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Better Regulation Task Force. 2002. *Local Delivery of Central Policy*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Bogdanor, V. 2005. Introduction. In *Joined-Up Government*, edited by V. Bogdanor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, for the British Academy.
- Clifford, J. G. 1990. "Bureaucratic Politics." *The Journal of American History* 77(1): 161-168.
- Cresswell, J.W. 2007. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. London: Sage.
- Elmore, R. F. 1978. "Organizational Models of Social Program Implementation." *Public Policy* 26: 185-228.
- Ham, C. and M. Hill. 1993. *The Policy Process in the Modern Capitalist State*. Hertfordshire, Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Hill, C. J. and L. E. J. Lynn. 2003. "Producing Human Services: Why Do Agencies Collaborate?" *Public Management Review* 5(1): 63-81.
- Hood, C. 2005 The Idea of Joined-Up Government: A Historical Perspective. In *Joined-Up Government*, edited by V. Bogdanor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, for the British Academy.

- Hudson, B. 1995. Joint Commissioning: organisational revolution or misplaced enthusiasm? *Policy and Politics* 23 (3):233-249.
- Huxham, C. 2000. "The Challenge of Collaborative Governance." *Public Management* 2(3): 337-357.
- James, O. 2003. *The Executive Agency Revolution in Whitehall*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- James, O. 2004. The UK Core Executive's Use of Public Service Agreements as a Tool of Governance. *Public Administration* 82 (2):397-419.
- Jordan, G. 1994. *The British Administrative State: Principles versus Practice*. London and New York, Routledge.
- Kavanagh, D, and D Richards. 2001. Departmentalism and joined-up government. *Parliamentary Affairs* 54 (1):1-18.
- Klein, R., and W. Plowden. 2005. JASP Meets Jug: Lessons of the 1975 Joint Approach to Social Policy for Joined-Up Government. In *Joined-Up Government*, edited by V. Bogdanor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, for the British Academy.
- Leutz, W. N. 1999. "Five Laws for Integrating Medical and Social Services: Lessons from the United States and the United Kingdom." *The Milbank Quarterly* 77(1): 77-110.
- Lindblom, C. E. 1965. *The Intelligence of Democracy*. New York, The Free Press.
- Ling, T. 2002. Delivering joined-up government in the UK: dimensions, issues and problems. *Public Administration* 80 (4):615-642.
- Moseley, A, and O James. 2008. Central State Steering of Local Collaboration: Assessing the Impact of Tools of Meta-Governance in Homelessness Services in England. *Public Organization Review* 8 (2):117-136.
- Painter, M.J. 2003. Intergovernmental Relations and Public Administration: Introduction. In *Handbook of Public Administration*, edited by B. G. Peters and J. Pierre. London: Sage.
- Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU). 2000. *Wiring It Up: Whitehall's Management of Cross-Cutting Policies and Services*. London: HMSO.
- Peters, B.G. 1995. *The Politics of Bureaucracy*. White Plains, N.Y.: Longman Publishers USA.
- Peters, B. G. 1998. Managing Horizontal Government: The Politics of Co-Ordination. *Public Administration* 76 (2):295-311.
- Pollitt, C. 2003. "Joined-up Government: a Survey." *Political Studies Review* 1(1): 34-49.

- Scharpf, F.W. 1994. Games Real Actors Play: Positive and Negative Coordination in Embedded Negotiations. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 6 (1):27-53.
- Simon, H. A. 1997. *Models of Bounded Rationality: Empirically Grounded Economic Reason*. Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press.
- Skelcher, C, N Mathur, and M Smith. 2005. The Public Governance of Collaborative Spaces: Discourse, Design and Democracy. *Public Administration* 83 (3):573-596.
- Smith, J.A., R. Harre, and L. Van Langenhare. 1995. *Rethinking Methods In Psychology* London: Sage.
- Stoker, G. 1991. *The Politics of Local Government*. London, Macmillan.
- Sullivan, H, and C Skelcher. 2002. *Working Across Boundaries: Collaboration in Public Services*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Van De Ven, A. H., A. L. Delbecq, et al. 1976. "Determininants of Coordination Modes within Organizations." *American Sociological Review* 41(2): 322-338.
- Verhoest, K., G. Bouckaert, and B.G. Peters. 2007. Janus-faced reorganization: specialization and coordination in four OECD countries in the period 1980-2005. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 73 (3):325-348.
- Webb, A. 1991. Coordination: A Problem in Public Sector Management. *Policy and Politics* 19 (4):229-241.
- Weiss, J. A. 1981. "Substance vs. Symbol in Administrative Reform: The Case of Human Services Coordination." *Policy Analysis* 7(1): 21-45.
- 6, P, D Leat, K Seltzer, and G Stoker. 2002. *Towards Holistic Governance: The New Reform Agenda*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

ⁱ The research reported in the paper was funded through an ESRC doctoral research award (PTA-039-2004-00006) and I am grateful for this support. I would also like to thank Professor Oliver James for guidance, and Dr Nicole Bolleyer and participants in the ESRC Seminar on Inter-Governmental Relations, University of Exeter (12/02/09), for comments on an earlier version of the paper.