

# Flexible, nimble and adaptable

## – an academy with a difference

Launched as part of the National School of Government in 2005, the Sunningdale Institute is poised to turn departmental capability review findings into “practical wisdom” through a new exploratory research programme, says institute chairman **Professor Cary Cooper**



**G**us O'Donnell wants to see a civil service that is flexible, adaptable, nimble and skilful. It must learn from the best examples of change, and have highly developed policy and strategic capabilities – continuing a trend of concentrating on how policy translates into public services, as well as the quality of policy making itself.

To this end, recent months have seen the publication of reports on departmental capability reviews – designed to assess each organisation's capability to meet its future challenges – with the Sunningdale Institute cited as a key source of expertise in developing leadership capacity and exploring issues of organisational design.

It has long been accepted that expert help is crucial if government organisations are to respond to reform imperatives. In the United States, university schools of government fulfil a vital function in this regard, and a study visit to US business schools some years ago raised the question as to why the picture in the UK had not been so clear.

This got me thinking. My sense was that it wasn't because there was a lack of talent in the UK but that it was scattered, and that getting these people together under one roof would be expensive and impractical.

To cut a long story short, discussions with the embryonic National School of Government then saw us join forces and commit to filling this gap in provision with a virtual academy loosely based on the Brookings Institution in the US.

Dedicated to helping public service leaders with organisational development and delivery issues, the Sunningdale Institute is an academy with a difference.

We are a network of fellows with no premises and no faculty. We all have day jobs, and bring our expertise and knowledge to bear on behalf of the institute as required. It is no coincidence that besides being skilful, we are configured to be flexible, adaptable and nimble.

Our fellowship includes academic and more pragmatic talents – people who have run large businesses and public service organisations, as well as leading academics. Between us, we are expert in public leadership and governance, organisation and system design, connecting strategy and operations, and fostering innovation.

We work with organisations in a variety of ways – building capacity through knowledge exchange, consultancy, and learning and development activities for senior public servants.

Our fellows lead research projects, participate in high-level consultancy interventions, and facilitate dialogue on topics of particular importance to government.

In recent months we have worked closely with a number of government organisations, for example on organisational inspections, a review of intellectual capital and studies of relationships between well-being and performance.

Regular lunchtime briefings by fellows have offered senior people the inside track regarding current thinking on relevant issues. Last month saw Professor Gillian Stamp speak on trust and judgement in decision-making, as well as a joint presentation from Professors Andy Neely, of Cranfield School of Management, and Rick Delbridge of Cardiff Business School.

Neely and Delbridge recently took up leadership of the first project to be undertaken as part of the Sunningdale Institute Action Research Network, designed to build competence and intellectual capital in the civil service.

I find this particularly exciting, as the national school and the institute are committed to developing new and creative approaches to organisation development, and to the generation of new practical wisdom.

The project – Effective Business Models – has been designed in direct response to the findings of capability reviews, which found that departments were too inclined to settle for inherited structures and systems at the expense of designing systems capable of delivering the required outcomes. It will see directors from departments that have undergone review meeting to share knowledge and experience, and to consider alternative approaches to design issues. Work-based investigations drawing on leading thinking will inform proposals for real-world solutions specific to host departments – crucial, in my view, if changes are to stick.

Besides benefiting participants and their sponsor organisations, the project will also see the production of materials such as concept papers and case studies, and will be incorporated into National School products and services – truly a virtuous circle of learning.

Ultimately, adding to the capacity of government organisations to self-sustain change is why we are here – whether virtually or otherwise – and projects such as this represent real progress.

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