



2010/27

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In a bad week for activities defined by their initials, think BSF (Building Schools for the Future) and OBR (Office for Budget Responsibility) both of which suffered from the wrong kind of headlines, another set of initials entered the education lexicon last week which the Government hopes will attract better publicity. These initials are SRPs.

SRPs stand for Structural Reform Plans and they are to be the new planning tools for public spending Depts like Education and Business. As such, they will take the place of the Public Service Agreement (PSAs) system, the system of targets developed at the time of Spending Reviews under the previous Labour administration and used by the Treasury to ensure Depts remained accountable and on track. At their high point, the 2002 Spending Review for instance, there were some 250 such targets although these were refined to just over 30 at the last Review in 2007.

Now all that is going. " *We want to replace the old system of bureaucratic accountability with a new system of democratic accountability, accountable to the people, not the Government machine,*" the Prime Minister told members of the civil service in a [keynote speech](#) last week as he outlined the SRP system for the first time. So just what is this new 'democratic accountability'?

At the moment details are sketchy. This is partly because we only have SRPs for a few Depts at present including [Education](#) and Communities and Local Government along with some for the Cabinet Office but also because they are in draft form. Like everything else, they must await the outcomes of the current Spending Review before being fully completed. But what is more clear is that SRPs do two things, both emblematic of this Government.

First, they put the emphasis almost entirely on outcomes. So in the SRPs for schools, we now know, for instance, that the rate for the pupil premium will be set in November 2010, additional funds will be identified also in November, the premium itself will be introduced for schools in September 2011 and evaluated between Sept 2012 and Feb 2013. Clear milestones then but with no preset targets about reach or volume, no clutter of new machinery, just a list of chronologically listed outcomes, based on the Coalition Agreement priorities and now hitched into set dates.

Second, and less prosaically, they subtly shift the nature of the relationship between the state and its citizens. At least this is what David Cameron is promising even if he did wrap it up in his speech in the rather more messianic language of the Big Society and the post-bureaucratic age. " *We intend,*" he said " *to do things differently, very differently...take power away from Whitehall and put it in the hands of people and communities.*" The example he cited was education: " *instead of teachers thinking they have to impress the Dept for Education, they have to impress local parents as they have a real choice over where to send their child.*" The model is of 'open markets rather than closed systems' as new providers move into schools and potentially FE and HE as well, to offer choice. Also where competition is used to drive up standards and where, in some areas at least, payment will be by results: " *so we'll pay welfare to work providers not just by*

how many they get into work but how many stay in work.” The touchstone is social mobility, opening up opportunities and choice for all to benefit, the concern however is whether it really will be all who benefit or just those who know how to play the system.

Choice and opportunity feature heavily in the Structural Reform Plan for the School System. In terms of detail, this doesn't perhaps tell us much more than we already know but it does at least start to structure developments by setting out a series of milestones. So apart from the pupil premium already mentioned, we now know that a further White Paper will be published in October 2010 with the second Education Bill following the month after, that funding agreements with sponsors taking over underperforming schools this year will be signed by Sept 2010, that the Dept will start to work with the first tranche of new Schools from August 2010 with the first ones scheduled to open in Sep 2011, and that announcements on reducing bureaucracy generally for schools will be made shortly.

The Structural Reform Plan for Communities and Local Government has little on the world of education though does confirm that the position on Government Offices will be sorted out by October 2010 and the transfer of RDA functions will start this month with Local Enterprise Partnerships due to be fully in place by April 2012. Interestingly given the interest in the role of Local Authorities, the Plan also identifies the shift from Local Authorities reporting mainly to Government to reporting to local people. So Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAAs) and inspections will be cut by Oct 2010 and data sets on Local Authority performance published instead.

As for the Structural Plan for the Cabinet Office, this too has a few broad messages for the world of education notably in three areas.

First, quangos, where the Public Bodies Reform Bill is already being drafted prior to entry into the House in November and where moves to bring back into Depts those bodies with a non-statutory function is under way. Second, ICT, where negotiations have also already begun with suppliers *“to reduce annual ICT spend,”* where performance details on ICT projects above £1m will be published in Sept 2010 and where *“new processes for commissioning and running IT projects and services”* are under way. And third, in the area of more *“efficient”* public services where the emphasis is on developing better ways to manage large projects due to be in place by the end of the year and on developing the Big Society concept of mutualisation, in other words opening out the public sector market to private and voluntary sector providers. As the Prime Minister told the civil servants, *“it's our job, we as politicians, you as civil servants, to create the conditions in which the performance will improve, by making the professionals answer to the public.”*

Structural Reform Plans for other Depts will be published after October's Spending Review announcements hopefully with adequate columns for funding.

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SRPs

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