



Coordination practice

PUBLIC SERVICE AGREEMENTS AS A TOOL OF COORDINATION IN UK CENTRAL GOVERNMENT: THE CASE OF EMPLOYMENT

Oliver James and Ayako Nakamura
University of Exeter

The UK government introduced Public Service Agreements (PSA) in 1998 to improve coordination. PSAs were long-term performance objectives with associated targets and were set for both departmental and cross-departmental policy issues. The case of employment policy shows that PSAs helped to coordinate spending plans and policy-making processes across departments and improved top-down policy delivery processes, including through the development of consistent performance assessment systems. However, the employment PSA joint targets' effects were limited by the separate departmental structures for resourcing and ministers and civil servants' accountability. The PSAs became a stage on a move towards more fundamental organisational mergers intended to incentivise the coordination of employment systems. PSAs were de-emphasised across the public sector from 2010 following a change in government. However, many objectives and targets remain, and the lessons of PSAs have enduring and broad relevance beyond the case study.



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Preface

This coordination practice is a result of research within COCOPS Work Package 5: The Governance of Social Cohesion: Innovative Coordination Practices in Public Management.

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The COCOPS project (Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future) seeks to comparatively and quantitatively assess the impact of New Public Management style reforms in European countries, drawing on a team of European public administration scholars from 11 universities in 10 countries.

The specific objectives of Work Package 5 are:

- To search and identify emerging coordination practices and related steering instruments in public management in European public sectors.
- To compile a case study catalogue of such coordination practices with direct utility to public managers and the research community.
- To analyse the functioning of such coordination practices and to assess their value in countering public sector fragmentation and delivering public value.

Work Package leader:

Prof. Dr. Per Lægreid
University of Bergen
Department of Administration and Organization Theory
Norway

Please visit the COCOPS website: <http://www.cocops.eu/>

1. THE COORDINATION LANDSCAPE

Main country characteristics: UNITED KINGDOM

General political-administrative structure

The UK is a unitary state with some functions devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Westminster parliamentary model makes Parliament the site of formal political legitimacy, but party discipline creates political executive dominance. The party group which has the support of the majority of MPs (who are elected from constituencies using the “first past the post” system) form the government. Cabinet decisions are tied up with collective responsibilities with individual ministers formally accountable and responsible for particular areas of activity to Parliament.

The administrative structure of the UK government changes as a range of new and old governmental organisations either come or cease to be. The current core administrative structures consist of ministerial departments, executive agencies and non-ministerial departments. Ministerial departments work towards the most basic public policies: e.g. defence, education and justice. These departments are led by government ministers, known as secretaries of states, and civil servants who support the former as specialists in policy-making and delivery. Executive agencies are part of these ministerial departments, but treated separately from them in terms of their management and budgeting. Their main purpose is to carry out certain executive functions. Non-ministerial departments cover areas of public service where direct political control is considered inappropriate: e.g. food safety, and infrastructure policy and regulation. Unlike ministerial departments, these departments are normally led by senior civil servants, known as permanent secretaries. The UK also has local governments which are granted substantial control by central government. From 1994, the central government held Government Offices for Regions (GSOs) in order to solve local issues linked with national policy such as crime, housing, public health, education and skills, and employment. However, GSOs were abolished in 2011.

Coordination across government organisations is a long-term issue for the UK government. Within the state, departmentalism and sectionalism have long been concerns, and divisions in local government have made them difficult to coordinate locally and centrally to achieve policy goals. There are many previous examples during the post-war period. However, one issue is always mentioned inside UK government – the constant shortage of resources and tools for coordination practices which have often ended up as slogans. Since the 1970s, there has been outright privatisation of the ownership of many functions, notably telecoms, energy and transport, often with continued public regulation. In addition, especially for functions with continued public ownership or funding, New Public Management (NPM) was instituted as a major public service reform. NPM involves the private sector in delivering publicly funded services and increased

	<p>accountability and incentivisation of the efficient use of resources in government. The use of performance targets and output assessments for specific units were NPM tools to improve efficiency and economy of public service performance.</p> <p>Whilst the Labour government between 1997 and 2010 de-emphasised outright privatisation of core state functions, they did not reverse the changes that had been made. Their approach was to add strategic objectives for many public service areas, to increase spending using targets as a way of monitoring progress, and to continue the use of public-private partnerships, especially to fund projects using private finance.</p>
<p>Coordination discourse</p>	<p>In 1997, coordination across government organisations was prioritised as an issue for government. NPM worsened long-term coordination issues between performance and resources, and the performance target indicator systems created fragmentation in the delivery of public services in all policy areas. Short-term performance measurement systems led government workers to prioritise targets with more immediate impacts. Fragmented agency target systems also led organisations to concentrate on their own activities without consolidating systemic effects. Improving the coherence of public service delivery, using long-term performance targets, was a key objective of the government.</p> <p>The PSA initiative was introduced from 1998 across all areas of government policy. PSA was a large-scale performance target system intended to improve the whole process of public service activities: resource allocation, policy-making and effective service delivery with consistent policy outputs and outcomes. The PSAs were agreed upon by spending departments and the Treasury in exchange for resources. The targets were intended to show citizens what was being attempted by government and what outcomes were achieved. As well as targets for each department, many agreements were shared across different organisations as means of coordinating policy and implementation. The PSAs focused on targeting outcomes and thus moved beyond the coordination of policy, inputs and implementation structures. The PSA tool was used in particular to try and address the problems of departmentalism, long recognised in central government, and to impose a comprehensive framework on the fragmented sets of targets for individual organisations that had developed in a piecemeal fashion under the NPM reforms during the preceding years. This trend can be seen as part of post-NPM reforms that focused more on central capacity and control, coordination within and between sectors and value-based management.</p>
<p>Context: policy area</p>	<p>In UK employment policy, the delivery of employment services did not work as a coherent system. Services operated by several different organisations, including the Department for Social Security (DSS), the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the Employment Service, the Benefit Agency, local authorities, the Child Support Agency and</p>

	<p>the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency. Employability through getting claimants back to work became an increasing policy priority, alongside promoting efficient and effective payment of benefits. In response to this situation, the New Labour government launched the New Deal Programme for unemployed people in 1997. It was intended to bring working-age people back to work, improving service-delivery coordination and structures.</p> <p>In order to implement the new employment programme, two major coordination reforms were instituted in the employment policy area: organisational structure reforms and Public Service Agreements.</p> <p>In terms of organisational reforms, firstly, the government created a new agency, JobCentre Plus (JC+), in April 2001. JC+ is a “one-stop-shop” institution for coordinating all relevant employment services for the “working-age” client group. It merged the previous Benefit Agency and Employment Service. JC+ was an executive agency between April 2002 and October 2011. Furthermore, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) was created in June 2001 to replace the DSS, and took employment related works from DfEE. This organisational reform was intended to focus organisational boundaries around the new policy agenda, thus reducing the need to coordinate across organisations.</p> <p>Meanwhile, PSA incorporated sets of policy objectives for the bigger picture of the New Deal Programme and further employment policy. Targets and objectives were provided across all relevant organisations. The PSA system worked with the structural coordination reform.</p>
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2. COORDINATION PRACTICE: Public Service Agreements as a tool of coordination in UK central government: the case of employment	
2.1. Substance	
Country	UK
Area	Employment: the Effects of Performance Service Agreements (PSAs) on coordination in the employment policy between 1998 to 2010
Main characteristics of the practice	<p>The PSAs were incorporated in Comprehensive Spending Reviews (CSRs). In addition to the traditional format of ordinal spending reviews for each area of government activity, CSRs attempted to add more strategic processes to efficiently allocate resources into prioritised policy problems beyond existing organisational boundaries. The spending system incorporated policy delivery plans for more than one year with some end-year flexibilities in the timing of spending.</p> <p>The PSAs embodied policy objectives and performance targets for the</p>

achievement of goals within specific timeframes. Each department defined an aim whereby it set a high-level role for itself. Based on the aims of the department, departmental objectives set out in broad terms what it was looking to achieve. In response to the departmental objectives, performance targets specified outcome focused goals. The targets were required to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timed (SMART). These targets were set for most objectives except some policy areas in which it was difficult to define concrete performance targets and outcomes: *e.g.* foreign policy and defence. Each PSA was supported by Service Delivery Agreements (SDA) which set the details of plans in individual departments. Based on the PSA and SDA agreed upon at the ministerial level, individual departments developed further details in order to assure that targets could be measured by effective performance assessment systems. The department designed the performance measures by considering precise target levels, baselines, the delivery chain, advice from experts and intended policy outcomes. Based on the same structure, cross-departmental policy issues were defined as joint performance targets shared by multiple departments jointly working towards achieving specific policy goals.

For example, in employment policy for the 2002 CSR, the DWP defined its aims as to “promote opportunity and independence for all”, the objective of which being to “promote work as the best form of welfare for people of working age, while protecting the position of those in greatest need.” In response to this objective, the DWP defined a number of performance PSA targets including: to “reduce losses from fraud and error for people of working age – in Income Support and Jobseeker’s Allowance, with a 33 per cent reduction by March 2004 and 50 per cent by 2006 – and in Housing Benefit, with a 25 per cent reduction by 2006.” Additionally, these targets broke down into more detailed SDAs. With regard to joint targets, in the 2002 CSR, the DWP stated its joint target with HM Treasury as to “demonstrate progress by spring 2006 on increasing the employment rate and reducing the unemployment rate over the economic cycle”, and to “reduce the number of children in low income households by at least a quarter by 2004, as a contribution towards the broader target of halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020.”

Of the series of CSRs produced between 1998 and 2007, only the 2007 CSR had a very different structure from the others. PSAs were defined only for cross departmental issues, and the new agreement called the “Delivery Agreement” was defined in response to each PSA. Unlike SDAs, all Delivery Agreements were shared between relevant departments and set the leading department in response to each joint target. In order to cover policy targets for individual departments which were previously set as non-joint targets, the government also introduced Departmental Strategic Objectives (DSOs). DSOs defined the business strategies for individual departments, including the plan for shared targets. In the employment

	<p>policy, the DWP was responsible for leading two cross-departmental PSAs with relevant departments in the 2007 CSR: the targets of these PSAs were to “Maximise employment opportunity for all” and “tackle poverty and promote greater independence and well-being in later life.” Furthermore, DSOs for internal targets were set for the DWP such as to “reduce the number of children living in poverty, or pay our customers the right benefits at the right time.”</p>
<p>Background and initiation of the practice</p>	<p>PSAs are performance agreements. Hence they are considered consensus-based coordination at three levels of government activities: the allocation of resources at the ministerial level, policy-making at the departmental level and service delivery at the front-line level. PSA was a large-scale reform since it concerned all government policy areas.</p>
<p>Time frame</p>	<p>PSAs were published five times between 1997 and 2010:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the 1998 PSA (plan for the years between 1999/00-2001/02), - the 2000 PSA (2001/02-2003/2004), - the 2002 PSA (2003/4-2005/6), - the 2004 PSA (2006/07-2007/08), and - the 2007 PSA (2008/09-2010/11). <p>The period between the 1998, 2000 and 2002 CSRs saw most of the development of the PSA structure. The 1998 CSR focused on policy outcomes, and the 2000 CSR particularly focused on cross-departmental policy issues. The supplementary Service Delivery Agreements (SDA), which defined detailed targets in individual departments, also started from 2000.</p> <p>In terms of employment policy, the Department of Work and Pensions and Job Centre Plus were created in 2001.</p> <p>In the 2002 CSR, the government started focusing on policy-delivery issues. They found that policy delivery was delayed in cross-departmental PSAs. In order to solve this problem, the government created a new organisation, the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit (PMDU). The PMDU targeted some cross-departmental policy areas which the PM was particularly interested in, and supported policy delivery in them. However, employment policy was not targeted by the PMDU.</p> <p>The 2004 CSR made further refinements to the basic PSA structures, reduced the number of targets and abolished SDAs. The government found that SDAs enforced too large a number of performance measures and targets on departments and ministers. This change allowed for greater flexibility in departments and other bodies. The period of the 2004 CSR also showed a focus on the development of performance assessment systems that better reflected the PSA targets that remained.</p> <p>In the 2007 Review, the previous structures of PSAs were drastically changed as discussed above. The new structure made in the 2007 CSR caused great confusion inside government because not enough explanation</p>

	was given to describing the relationship between the old and new systems.
2.2. Structure and actors	
Basic features	<p>The PSA regime developed over time. The number of PSAs set for employment policy reduced, and the quality of targets was improved between 1998 and 2004. In the 1998 CSR, DfEE set a total of 17 PSA targets, 5 of which concerned employment and included 2 joint targets. The DSS set 17 targets including 4 joint targets. In the 2000 CSR, DfEE reduced the number of targets to a total of 13 including 4 joint targets concerned with employment policy. In the 2002 CSR, the DWP reduced the number of targets by 10, only 2 of which were joint targets with HM Treasury. Following the 2004 CSR, the DWP stabilised the number of targets at 10, including 3 joint targets with HM Treasury and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The government learned that some targets in the early period were not achievable or measurable, and a large volume of targets tended to make policy delivery more complicated.</p> <p>Joint targets were developed to encourage policy coordination beyond departmental boundaries. Employment policy showed significant results from these joint targets, specifically in the early period of the regime. To illustrate, in the 2000 CSR, the DSS and HM Treasury shared a target to make substantial progress towards eradicating child poverty by reducing the number of children in poverty by at least one quarter by 2004. In response to this, the HM Treasury quickly planned the Work and Children Tax Credits, jointly working with the Inland Revenue in 2002. Later, from April 2003, this new tax credits system was delivered by Job Centre Plus (JC+). After 2002, the creation of the DWP changed the policy-making structures and the role of joint targets declined in employment policy because the main tasks were thereafter handled within a single department.</p> <p>PSAs were designed to set long-term targets for departments and reduce the fragmentation of performance target systems. In employment policy, the target relating to losses from fraud and error mentioned above was brought forward between 2000 and 2004. The JC+ set the annual key performance targets during this period. This target stipulated that in local JC+ branches total losses from errors and fraud should not exceed 7% of the monetary value of the total benefits paid out during the year 2003. Later, this target was dropped to 5.2% in 2006. Based on these targets, the total losses from fraud and errors in the JC+ actually improved from 7.6% to 4.7% of the total value of benefits paid between 2003 and 2006. In this way, the PSA regime provided top-down structures of performance targets and reduced the fragmentation of performance targets as well as improving actual performance.</p> <p>Although this top-down structure reduced the fragmentation of performance targets, it also often burdened frontline service units with a</p>

	<p>number of performance targets. In the employment policy, two sets of 10 PSA targets set by the DWP both turned into approximately 30 performance targets and indicators for JC+ during the 2000s. In this context, there was a further PSA for local government which set performance targets for local employment issues. As a result, although local government did not formally share joint targets with the DWP, the DWP and JC+ worked together closely, discussing policy targets and delivery with the Local Government Association (LGA) and individual councils. It is considered that these factors at the local and central levels moderated the tendency towards a top-down relationship in the implementation of employment policy.</p> <p>The quality of the performance assessment system improved between 2002 and 2007. In 2002, National Audit Office (NAO) Validation Reports evaluated that less than 50% of the performance assessment systems used by the DWP were appropriate for measuring the progress of the PSAs. Later, the NAO evaluated that more than 70% of DWP performance assessments were fully fit for purpose in 2007.</p>
Main tools	<p>PSAs were supposed to incorporate four functions for improving coordination practices: a driver for resource allocation at the ministerial level that took account of policies across departmental boundaries (including discussions between departments and the Treasury); a driver for policy-making at the cross-departmental level in the discussion of objectives and the specification of appropriate targets; and detector and effector tools for improving policy delivery and performance management processes.</p> <p>No sanctions flowed from failing to meet performance targets, although to do so was generally seen as undesirable by ministers and officials concerned about the effects it might have on their reputations. Additionally, there was a concern that targets were lowered once actors in the system learned about these consequences in an attempt to avoid blame.</p> <p>Since PSAs and departmental performance targets were only given to the relevant departments, they were remote from citizens. However, the chain of performance targets could connect to the front-line level. In employment policy, for example, the performance targets and indicators used by JC+ involved performance outputs directly concerned with customers (e.g. responding time against customer inquiries).</p> <p>The PSA does not essentially require particular technical solutions. However, some PSAs were focused on processes rather than outcomes. Notably, as part of improving the quality of employment services, one PSA target required the DWP and JC+ to improve the IT network and equipment for all staff dealing with customers.</p>
Main actors	<p>PSAs were designed by the core executive of the Labour Government, which was mainly led by officials in HM Treasury. After 2002, the system</p>

	<p>was led by HM Treasury, the Public Service Expenditure Committee (PSX), which is a sub-committee of the Cabinet chaired by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the PMDU, which worked together to develop a parallel system in some areas of particular prime-ministerial interest. The relationship between other departments and the aforesaid leading actors can be considered hierarchical since the departments were held responsible in several ways by them.</p> <p>The main actors involved in employment policy were HM Treasury, the DWP (formerly the DSS and DfEE (currently DfES)), the JC+, LGA and other smaller government bodies between 1998 and 2004. Exceptionally, in the 2007 CSR, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the Department of Health (DH), and the Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform (BERR) became sister departments under the DWP in addition to the existing actors.</p> <p>Also, the National Audit Office was involved to improve the performance assessment system in all policy areas between 2002 and 2007.</p>
<p>2.3. Impacts and effects</p>	
	<p>PSAs showed mixed results in general as a coordination mechanism.</p> <p>Firstly, the PSA successfully made progress in linking up resource allocations and policy plans. It increased the amount of joint work between HM Treasury and all departments in deciding coherent spending plans in policy areas. In employment, the PSAs were successful in joining up discussion of government spending programmes, but this was as part of a system of closer general organisational reform leading to the creation of the DWP. These achievements can only in part be credited to PSAs. Furthermore, it should be noted that the PSA regime lacked a clear relationship between past performance and allocation for the future and so was limited as an exercise in performance budgeting.</p> <p>Secondly, the government focus shifted to the issues of policy delivery in specific cross-departmental PSAs between 1998 and 2010. The PMDU from 2002 was part of this shift. Nevertheless, the emphasis placed by the government on joint targets gave limited influence on employment policy. Although joint targets helped to coordinate cross-departmental issues during the 1998 and 2000 CSRs, the creation of the DWP decreased the necessity of joint targets in the later period. Furthermore, employment policy was not selected as a priority area for the PMDU. Ironically, these contexts helped to maintain a coherent system development focused on existing PSAs in the employment policy between 2002 and 2004. In the 2007 CSR, the DWP took on more responsibility for setting shared targets in the new PSA regime. However, this shift rather revealed negative consequences in general.</p>

Thirdly, the case of fraud and errors in employment policy showed that PSAs played an important role in acting as a remedy to the fragmentation of performance targets and assessment systems. However, it should be noted that the performance management structure was too top-down, and local service-delivery units struggled to manage excessive burdens of performance targets and indicators. In terms of the employment policy, this top-down tension was reduced by the close work between JC+ and local government.

Fourthly, the performance targets regarding errors and fraud in employment policy also showed that the PSA regime worked to modify the policy output to some extent. In spite of this partial achievement, in general the senior officials in the departments nominally responsible for PSA targets often felt they were not in control of the factors influencing outcomes. Also, in comparison with policy outputs, it is difficult to measure policy outcomes. Although the DWP referred to improvements in the unemployment rate between 1997 and 2008, it is difficult to measure the extent to which the PSA affected those results.

Under the current Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, PSAs and DSOs were abolished in 2010. Therefore, no more PSAs will be published from the year 2012 onward. The rationale for this move given by the current government is that the structure of the PSA system is too top-down for managing public service performance. Nevertheless, the same government has also published the Coalition Agreements which sets out government objectives and performance targets. The structure of these agreements is similar to the PSA system, but with less emphasis on joint targets and cross-departmental issues. The 2010 Spending Review drew on coordinated submissions from departments in only three areas, strategic defence and security, overseas development and local government. The Treasury's guidance invited joint submissions, but it did not actively identify or coordinate spending on services between departments.

Despite the current reaction against formally recognising PSAs and the undoubted lessening of the attention paid by HM Treasury to overlapping issues, the PSA system has left a legacy in terms of attempts to target performance of policy, to relate policy objectives to activity at lower levels and gather data to help performance management. However, the system was overly ambitious in its attempts to set targets for areas of policy where it is difficult to do so, and it was not always possible to use targets to improve coordination, leading to reorganisation of organisational boundaries in the case of employment as an additional and necessary coordination solution.

2.4. Lessons learned and policy recommendations

First, as a driver for coordinating resource allocation, the PSA regime showed itself to be a useful way of coordinating spending across all policy areas. However, it is very important to add a feedback system which directly reflects past performance in relation to given targets for the purposes of planning future spending. The PSA system was not intended to be, nor did it become, a fully fledged performance budgeting system. Such systems appear to be difficult to implement in practice as the problems with using PSA information in subsequent spending rounds shows.

Second, as a driver for coordinating cross-departmental policy-making, the case of PSAs in employment policy shows that joined-up targets were used to improve coordination at the start of the period and had some success. However, they were felt to be inadequate as a means of tackling the scale and scope of the coordination required. A related but more fundamental organisational reform was adopted after the initial PSA period, which changed the basic coordination practices in policy making. The creation of the DWP substantially changed the service-delivery process so that the need for cross-departmental coordination in the employment policy decreased in terms of both policy-making and service delivery after this body was set up. However, PSAs were still useful in negotiating with the Treasury and for linking up performance systems within the department.

Third, in regard to the detector role of managing performance inside departments, PSAs were a useful tool for reducing fragmentation in performance assessment systems. The structure of the PSA system helped to develop the performance assessment system which effectively monitored progress at the policy-delivery level. The case of employment policy also showed that this monitoring function worked to improve the policy output; however, it also revealed that the PSA structure was top-down and brought the burdens of complex performance targets and indicators to lower-level units in the government. Yet the case of the employment policy also suggests that this top-down tension might be moderated by setting separate targets that define the same policy goals for both the central department and local government. In this structure, the central department and local government would be independently responsible for the target and both equally need to achieve the same policy goal. As a result, local and central organisations would work together closely to share information. This kind of collaboration between central and local organisations would reduce the top-down tension to some extent.

Fourthly, in regard to the effector tool for modifying policy performance, the PSA system showed that it is difficult to use PSAs to incentivise those responsible for delivery in a way that achieves policy objectives in general (beyond achieving specific narrow targets). Senior officials were nominally responsible for target performance, as were ministers, but it was not

	<p>appropriate to hold them responsible because of the range of factors outside of their control affecting policy outcomes, and this was understood by those operating the system. As well as the output assessment, it was necessary to develop a performance measurement system which was capable of effectively measuring the policy outcomes. The aims of the policy are difficult to capture in simple targets and to over-incentivise performance on narrow target measures risks crowding out action to achieve policy goals that are difficult to target but which are still important.</p> <p>Overall, the limitations of PSAs as a coordination mechanism necessitated the more fundamental organisational changes such that PSAs can be seen as helpful in coordination of employment policy. The PSA itself is insufficient to deal with fundamental, deep coordination where major structural changes are more effective. Additionally, the development of PSA also showed the complex development of several new targets or objectives over the decade. The system showed problems from too many changes to the system in a short period and the need for more stability at both the policy and delivery level if progress towards objectives is to be measured and achieved. The contemporary focus on fiscal restraint has been partly responsible for de-emphasis on co-ordination which may risk potential economies from better policy development and delivery across current organisational boundaries.</p>
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<p>2.5. Further information</p>	
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Contact	<p>Oliver James Professor of Political Science University of Exeter o.james@exeter.ac.uk</p> <p>Ayako Nakamura Associate Research Fellow University of Exeter a.nakamura@exeter.ac.uk</p>