Towards a Model of the Intervention Process

Abstract

This paper explores the challenging circumstances when one part of government decides that the performance of a subsidiary part is unacceptable and arranges some kind of remedial intervention. Following the detailed analysis of a series of four central-local government interventions we develop a model of the intervention process that combines the type of problem addressed (service-specific and/or corporate) and approach to intervention available (challenging and/or supporting). In addition to extending current conceptual understanding of this under-researched phenomenon, the work generates a number of specific practical insights for future intervention policy.

INTRODUCTION

Although notions of performance failure and improvement are inherently 'complex and contested' in the domain of public value (de Bruijn 2006; Harvey et al. 2010), inadequate local government performance frequently results in central government enacting some form of 'improving' intervention. Contingent discussion regarding the extent to which central government can legitimately appropriate and enact such powers[1], or whether such interventions are an inevitable consequence of the proliferation of public performance measurement systems enforced through audit and inspection (Moynihan and Pandey 2010) are beyond the scope of this work but to note that such interventions occur, and occur with reasonable frequency, is undeniable[2]. Various patterns of different service delivery problems and/or systemic governance concerns can initiate an intervention (or indeed interventions) and the subsequent processes can also vary significantly in scope, duration and conclusion. From informal guidance and requests for amended plans for example through to the mandatory use of external consultants (Glass 1998), introduction of new programmes (Rose and Haynes 1999) or imposition of external monitors to oversee changes (Turner et al. 2004) or even assuming full control of a local service or council (Coe 2008, Beeri 2013). It is this variety that motivates and bounds the paper. Although the research clearly builds upon and seeks to contribute to the broader literature on public service improvement (e.g. Lewis and Hartley 2001, Boyne 2004a, 2004b, etc.) and 'turnaround' in particular (Turner et al 2004, Jas and Skelcher 2005, Boyne 2006), the specific details of different intervention processes remain under-explored. The paper seeks to make both a practical and conceptual contribution by

---

1 In the UK, central government intervention powers (for Local Government, Police, Education and Health) are often presented as a function of mandate (i.e. turnout for national elections is significantly higher than in local elections) but there remain the "fundamental problems of democratic authority in the application of external pressure by one governmental body on another." Jas and Skelcher (2005, p.208).

2 They occur even where there are potentially significant constitutional obstacles, such as in the USA, or espoused ideological obstacles, such as with the UK Coalition commitment to a localism agenda.

addressing the following research question: What are the characteristics of an (successful) intervention process?

We address this question by investigating multiple interventions within a single governance context, specifically a series of interventions by the devolved Welsh Government in Cardiff into a range of different local government activities. The fieldwork explored the starting points, key activities and eventual outcomes of four cases. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: we outline the initial definitional model and present a number of more specific research questions; detail the research process and key findings; discuss these findings in the light of the research questions and highlight key conclusions for theory and practice.

EXPLORING THE INTERVENTION PROCESS

In most multi-tiered systems of public administration (where national, federal, state, regional, local governance co-exist) circumstances can arise where a range of 'higher level' political and professional actors including independent inspectors and auditors (cf. Wheat 1991) judge that the level of service being delivered at a subsidiary level is unacceptable. Occasionally, these judgements result in the decision to intervene and directly effect changes in the 'failing' organisation. In order to better structure an investigation of these interventions, a definitional framework is developed below; exploring initiating triggers, intervention processes and practices, and ultimate outcomes. In discussing these elements a series of more specific research questions are presented.

What triggers an intervention?

Although the decision to intervene is often based on a series of incidents and perceived unacceptable performance, specific circumstances will pre-empt the 'triggering' of

any intervention. There are corporate or organisational issues that can result in an intervention but, as highlighted in the examples above, the majority of triggers relate to service delivery..

A number of factors contribute towards such an emphasis on service delivery: the increased focus on measurement in public administration (cf. new public management: Kessler and Purcell 1996, Hood and Peters 2004) and the provision of key indicators which provide a clear cut means for assessing persistent underperformance and failure. Moreover, a focus on negative outcomes for specific service recipients (such as children, victims of crime) has provided a strong political and professional narrative that could help to legitimise any intervention.Iand in many countries central government may invoke specific powers to deal with child protection issues.

Conversely, corporate governance triggers are often based on more subjective judgements (for instance, an assessment of a blame culture); w if there is no evidence of service failure, the legitimacy of any formal intervention tends to be challenged. Although, service and corporate failure modes are generally strongly linked, it is unlikely that service problems would be consistently ignored in a strong corporate performance management culture. Therefore, the first research question seeks to establish:

RQ1. What are the differences between interventions triggered by service specific and corporate performance problems?

What happens during the intervention process?

All interventions are essentially 'top-down'; part of a coercive process underpinned by resource (reward) and legal-political (legitimate) power[3] (French and Raven 1960). This directive nature was self-evident in the kind of structural interventions typified by the formal takeover. For example, in 2002 the state of Pennsylvania intervened in the running of

---

3 In the UK central government intervention powers (for Local Government, Police, Education and Health) have been presented as a function of national financial support for local government versus local mandate (i.e. turnout for national elections is significantly higher than in local elections).

Philadelphia's public schools following years of consistently poor test results, creating a new School Reform Commission (replacing the local school board).45 elementary schools were privatised and significant reforms were mandated for the remaining public schools, under the direction of a new CEO (Gill et al. 2007).

Due to the political, legal, administrative and structural complexities of such formal interventions accompanied by the dysfunctional effects (i.e. staff departures, depressed morale, psychological resistance: Bullock 1986), most interventions are less dramatic (Turner et al 2004). Any requirement to more closely monitor an organisation or transfer best practices can be fraught with difficulties.. The most effective solution is typically some form of enhanced horizontal interaction, possibly facilitated by peer organisations. It is relatively common to convene an external expert panel, , or to employ consultants to provide assessment, training and interim staffing solution.

Whatever the mix of specific practices, two distinct 'types' of activity appear to be associated with an intervention process. First, it has been explicitly recognised that any "recovering" organisation is undertaking a psychological journey (a 2004) that requires it to overcome any residual 'denial'. This will mean that the intervention process is likely to comprise substantial periods of challenging the organisation (such as monitoring/auditing, mandating of certain actions: Coe 2008). At the same time, in addition to these directive type activities, there is also evidence of a range of more supportive activities associated with an intervention. For instance, given that it is widely accepted that an organisations' leadership acts as a crucial change agent in any sustainable improvement program (Jones 1999, 2004; Sanger 2008), it has been concluded that the intervention needs to, at some point, afford local leadership the necessary 'space' to re-establish their own authority. This led to the second research question:

RQ2 What is the mixture of challenging and supportive activity in an intervention process?

Beyond a general recognition that organisations with a history of under-performance and/or a set of challenging contextual factors (such as small budgets or geographical recruitment problems) are likely to require a substantial time to achieve meaningful levels of improvement, there is limited insight regarding the specific dynamics of an intervention. Although any answers to questions such as the 'optimum' timeframe for an intervention are likely to be imprecise (at best) with our multi-case method, building on discussion of triggers and types of activity in an intervention, the third research question asked:

RQ3. Do interventions follow a generic trajectory? (i.e. initiation, activity and completion)?

What happens after an intervention?

It was important to adopt a critical approach to discussions of intervention 'success, yeti public sector change initiatives, it is difficult to determine what 'success' actually means.. Establishing counterfactuals, what would have happened without the intervention, is impossible and it is sensible to be cautious when evaluating improvement over relatively short periods. Rafferty and Griffin (2000) for example found that the larger the scale and scope of the intervention (the more organizational levels affected), the greater the chance of a positive outcome. The same authors also found somewhat paradoxically that the higher the initial morale of participants (potentially unlikely in the context of a large scale intervention) then the greater likelihood any change would be successful.

Although there have been high profile examples, such as the Pennsylvanian intervention (Gallard 2010), that had generated inconsistent results and resulted in significant residual acrimony between the various stakeholders, it seems probable that a sensibly designed and executed intervention could have a significantly positive impact (Boyne and Dahya 2002). Measuring performance in the public sector is hampered by the complexity of the services being delivered and a legacy of not engaging in performance measures that are meaningful (Rose and Haynes 1999, Jones 2004). This may in part explain the lack of outcome variables in research on public sector change - it is difficult to determine what 'success' actually means in public sector change initiatives. The soft improvements being realized are hard to quantify. Even after the introduction of a comprehensive assessment framework in the UK in 2002, public service performance is still complex, covering a range of issues that must be addressed, making management analysis difficult, although not impossible (Boyne 2004a).

Overall, given that interventions are often triggered by very low levels of performance, bring with them increased resources, comprise a wide range of different practices and types of activity, and, through continuous monitoring and measurement, are unlikely to come to an end before there has been demonstrable improvement, any assumption of positive impact needs more awareness of contingency

Connecting this to the first three research questions led to the final one:

RQ4 What influence do different triggers, types of activity and timings have on the success of an intervention process?

THE RESEARCH METHOD

The research was carried out in the United Kingdom. Fieldwork explored the starting points, key activities and eventual outcomes of a series of local government interventions by the

Government of Wales. The Government of Wales holds devolved authority from the National Government in London. As such, there are parallels between this context and state government in the United States and regional government in Canada/Australia, as well as other many countries. A set of four cases is presented from a set of seven cases which were selected through discussions between the research team and senior members of the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), who identified councils that were currently exhibiting, or had a history of, performance concerns and had been to some form of support/intervention. Case studies were chosen for investigating the support/intervention phenomenon because of the need for sensitivity in assessing complex and intangible issues (i.e. relationships, power, trust, etc.) and to adopt a rich and contextualised view

The research employed a multiple case study method (Stake, 1995; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Although the research explored a diverse ecology of support and intervention processes (varied triggers, unique contexts, different timelines, etc.) two dimensions were employed that relate to the first two research outlined earlier, enabling the research team to categorise each of the cases into one of four types of support/intervention (Figure 1):

1. The initiating performance concerns and principal focus of improvement activity: service-specific or corporate governance.

2. The nature of the intervention activity: external to the council (e.g. via regulators, WAG, peer agencies) or internal through the political and managerial leadership arrangements (challenge or support.

The specific location on the sampling frame reflects the details of each case. The case study summaries are included in Table 1 but throughout the analysis of the findings, these types have been used as an aggregate shorthand for the individual cases For the purpose of this study, four cases were selected from the set of seven studies because, ex-ante, their descriptions fitted each of the four archetypes defined by the intersection of these two

analytical dimensions (see figure 1). In addition, to increase comparability, cases A and B had experienced problems with the same type of service (children's social services).

[Figure 1. Sampling the Case Studies]

Primary and secondary data was collected on seven possible cases. A total of 75 interviews with 63 different people were conducted lasting between 45 minutes and two hours. The questions covered: context and initiation; process (including exit decisions); overall timescales; assessments of success or failure, and; roles played by actors in broader network (including peers, members of the regulatory 'family'). In addition, Minutes of meetings, inspectorate reports, audits and results from self- inspection tools were reviewed. A longitudinal approach in its pure form (following events for 2-3 years) was impractical but data was collected over a nine-month period and retrospective insights collected using critical incident techniques. The draft cases were returned to the interviewees for review and commentary. In addition, a final workshop was held where a cross-section of key stakeholders were given the opportunity to reflect and comment upon a first draft of the case findings/conclusions. Table 1 summarises initiating triggers and intervention activities, together with key (inner and outer) contextual information for each of the cases.

[Table 1. Case Summary]

DISCUSSION

RQ1. Differences between service and corporate performance triggers

Due to the greater clarity around the legal powers used to enable the service-specific interventions they appeared – as anticipated - to be more 'acceptable' to the receiving organisations (hard data was available on service specific performance that was hard to challenge). With both of the corporate governance triggers there was noticeably more resistance: "at start we did feel it was unfair as we believed our major services were efficient… we struggled to believe corporate governance was so bad… by the end we knew how far behind we were" (Service Director, D). Both organisations went to significant lengths to try to avoid formal interventions. In case C for example, the new management team generated a range of specific programmes and initiatives to improve governance and service performance, explicitly "in order to avoid what we perceived to be the very real disadvantages of a ….. formal intervention protocol" (Senior Politician). In part this acceptability bias reflected the anticipated advantages of clear, service specific performance data and, with Children's Services in particular, the emotive nature of the subject (and its potential media sensitivities). For example, several interviewees stressed how "don't forget it's for the children" became a form of central mission statement. It was also interesting to observe that in both case A and C the services had become disconnected from (or in case A, had never been connected to) the rest of the organisation. Social Services in case A had become an area that was "insulated from its partner functions and organisations and was culturally uncomfortable with performance measurement and management" (Chief Executive). This disconnection allowed actors to talk (at least initially) about the performance issues being bounded inside one part of the organisation with the prima facie explanation for both failures being the lack of suitably qualified staff.

Despite this attempt at compartmentalisation, it was clear that service-specific failure modes also reflected significant problems with organisational governance (just as the corporate governance failures C and D were strongly associated with a range of potential

service-specific triggers). In sum, even those interventions triggered by apparently service specific issues were manifestations of 'whole systems' issues. Reinforcing the observation regarding differential denial, even in A and B where there had been the initial acceptance of the intervention, resistance emerged as soon as the receiving organisation was asked to accept that there was also a broader governance problem: "we had done everything they asked and now they wanted to talk about other issues" (Former Service Director, A). Across both cases, this shift in focus raised a number of concerns that the intervention had moved into a much more subjective area. From the perspective of the inspectors, they "required a longer-term evaluation of quality-based, outcome performance rather than simple process metrics" (Lead Inspector, A).

RQ2. Mixture of challenging and supportive activity in an intervention process

We have already discussed how, in cases A and B, the focus of the intervention shifted from its initiating concern with service-specific performance to a broader concern with corporate governance. As illustrated in figures 2a and b, all of the cases also followed another distinct trajectory where, regardless of the point of departure (i.e. where ex-ante we located the cases when sampling) both formal challenges, that were required to be answered and resolved as well as softer support type activities were evident through the intervention process

[Figure 2a. The Challenge-Support Trajectory]

In case A the process was clearly one of challenge from the outset [A1]. The Chief Inspector provided a letter detailing "month by month" expectations ("we needed them to largely complete a baseline assessment of performance by end December", Chief Inspector). A further letter setting out the oversight "that had to be put in place" was sent two months

later. Finally, a series of specific initial performance targets was set out (such as: reduce the waiting list of unallocated cases). Quarterly targets and meetings were agreed. Inspectors validated all information provided and produced quarterly progress reports for the Minister. After 18 months the intervention entered a second phase [A2], explicitly focused on the corporate governance aspects of the problem, and described as "taking off the stabilisers" by one former inspector. This phase was different in approach however, building on messages of congratulation and encouragement and characterised by significantly reduced inspection activity (e.g. quarterly reporting was ended). Case D followed a similar trajectory to case A, albeit with a consistent emphasis on corporate concerns. The key mechanism, an advisory board, was formed to "provide advice and direction to the Authority to (i) ensure effective management of its improvement program action plan and (ii) achieve specific key improvements" (Terms of Reference). Despite being constituted with dual role, at the start of the process the advisory board was predominantly concerned with challenging the organisation [D1] – leading to a number of conflicts - but after the first 12 months, in part as the scope and role of the board became better defined, it became more concerned with supporting a range of improvement activities.

[Figure 2b. The Support-Challenge Trajectory]

In case B the transition was in the opposite direction. After 15 months of informal support arrangements [B1], the shift to a formal intervention [B2] "…came as no surprise but it meant that [B] was jolted out of its false sense of security" (Interim Chief Executive). Interestingly, some respondents felt that a more challenging approach should have been adopted earlier. The first mandated task was to ensure the reliability of the performance data and establish an accurate baseline. After this, a series of performance targets (time to

complete, number of files in process and so on) - were developed by the inspectorate, in consultation with the Chief Executive, Executive Directors, political leadership and department as a whole. A quarterly progress report was submitted, verified by inspectors and discussed with the Chief Executive, directors and heads of service. After 18 months, with now widespread acceptance that the problems had corporate as well as service components, interviewees talked about the intervention entering its next phase [B3], where the relationship with the inspectorate was "cordial but still challenging" (Chief Executive).

The case C management team, in avoiding a formal intervention, generated a range of specific performance support programmes. For example, the 'Improvement Development Team' (IDT) led by an externally appointed manager worked on a series of improvement initiatives [C1]. Interestingly, in addition to these internal support mechanisms, a national improvement agency was commissioned to complete an in-depth review, eventually proposing a (150 page) change programme. Equally, over time, the work of the IDT was increasingly "to act and be seen as the corporate policeman" (Services Director). Although managers stressed that their 'forceful' consultants did not issue orders or instructions or take-over meetings, this work was clearly positioned for the key inspection and ministerial stakeholders as providing a form of complementary external challenge [C2].

RQ3. Do interventions follow a generic trajectory?

It is relatively simple to establish the formal duration of the externally co-ordinated interventions, which either had a definite start and completion point or clear points established for re-inspection to assess the success of any improvement efforts. The internally-driven cases focused on establishing an ongoing improvement culture, not just fixing specific problems, therefore the exact duration of the process was more difficult to bound, but examination of the external support and inspection cycles, revealed a similar number of months.

Different perspectives on the timings of the intervention featured heavily in all the interviews. With respect to the initiation of the process, there were interviewees - nearly all managers in the receiving organisations - who felt that in general terms the intervention had started too soon – thereby not allowing the in-house improvement efforts sufficient time to demonstrate meaningful results. Conversely, a few senior local authority managers and many of the inspectors talked of specific "unnecessary, infuriating delays" in starting the process[4]. Further investigation of these delays revealed some structural issues regarding the legality of any intervention (confirming the relevance and applicability of particular statutes) and, in the case of the Advisory Board model, putting together the requisite staff. There was also a sense in at least two of the cases (B and D) that the relevant authorities were "standing off" even in the presence of performance concerns that more than justified an intervention. One senior manager (in case B) talked about the regulators needing to "overcom[e] their self-denial" and recognise that "it was time for something to be done". As such, the delays reflected a form of mutual resistance to change. Inspectors (and ministers, peers, advisors) did not want to appear to be acting rashly but there was a counter argument that many of the aspects of internal denial could only be dealt with once the intervention "gave senior officers the reason for doing actions that were unpopular in the rest of [the organisation]" (Senior Inspector). In other words, there were circumstances where it would have been better to start with 'more serious' options earlier, challenging traditional 'ladder of intervention' models where intervention proceeds through increasingly formalised and extensive stages of activity.

Across the four cases, despite their different focus and form, the total duration of intervention activities (i.e. to complete the trajectories detailed in figures 2a and 2b) was broadly similar (e.g. A=34 months, B=39 months (including 15 months informal phase), C=36 months, D=32 months). Comments on the dynamics of the actual intervention split

---

[4] Although difficult to accurately specify, the gap between an intervention decision being taken (i.e. by the Minister responsible) and the process starting was between 3-6 months.

across the different phases described above. From the perspective of the receiving organisation, the reaction to the challenge phase was that it should be in place for as short a period as possible. There was repeated concern that over-extending the process could easily become more de-motivating. The intervention teams argued that this phase could only end when there was no longer any meaningful denial of the problems and acceptance of the "whole systems nature of the failure". Equally, the regulators were concerned that a truncated 'close monitoring' period would not give sufficient time to demonstrate sustainable improvement. Unsurprisingly, the informal interventions (case B phase 1 and case C) had much less clarity regarding timings, in part because there was ambiguity regarding the nature of the process (and the 'threat of an intervention') and correspondingly, no specific conditions for exit.

The shift to the support phase and the impending completion of an intervention further changed the dynamics of the process. There was greater sense of comfort with a process that had already signalled improvement (such as case A's ministerial messages of congratulations) and was now focused on "equip[ping] the organisation to do the job themselves, not to do it for them… to build in sustainability to go on after they leave" (Case D Corporate Governance Director). At the same time, for many in all the cases this meant that the interventions had moved beyond the point where there had been marked improvement in performance on agreed indicators. Several interviewees felt that despite demonstrating improvements beyond those of their 'non-failing' peers they were not treated on the same level.: "at times we wondered if there would ever be an exit" (Case D Politician). The regulatory perspective on this issue was clear: the need for the continuation of monitoring – even if under a 'final phase' of a lighter touch form of monitoring – was driven by two factors. First, the need to establish sustainability in performance improvement simply required extended observation. Second, the

need to go beyond intermediate process measures, to understand performance outcomes, required a longer timeframe to establish cause and effect.

RQ4. Triggers, activities and timings and the success of an intervention process

Comparing the relative success of the different interventions is inevitably problematic; all of the cases resulted in improvements measured against externally set criteria and were deemed a "success"once there had been a demonstrable and verifiable change in the authority Table 2 summarises these performance outcomes and progress towards strategic or corporate governance goals.

[Table 2. Outcomes of Intervention]

In cases A and B, although the interventions did not finish once service performance (narrowly defined) had improved, managers and leaders were able to point to these objectives measures as a significant indicator of success. In cases C and D, the organisations were more reliant upon demonstrating intermediate outcomes such as organisational and political change.

Unsurprisingly, the relative legitimacy of the intervention trigger also appeared to influence internally and externally perceived success. We have already discussed the catalytic effect of focusing improvement on a specific service group (i.e. 'at risk' children) but this also fed through to the corporate changes needed to embed sustainable performance. Many of the whole system improvements were ascribed to new political arrangements, in particular enhanced oversight and scrutiny, and it was clear that the focus of the service failure (with its prospects for media and voter interest) contributed to their relatively rapid adoption.
In the public sector there has been lots of emphasis placed on the need to change leadership in order to achieve turnaround. In the education sector for instance, individual 'failing' schools are often reported as 'being saved' by newly appointed (super) head teachers. In this research

managerial and leadership capability gaps had been a significant factor in all of the cases and most of the councils underwent significant voluntary and enforced senior staff changes – although none following the explicit guidance of the regulatory family. In line with other research (e.g. Boyne and Dahya 2002) there appears to have been a positive impact associated with these changes – although establishing what would have happened without these changes is of course impossible. Some of the case data suggests that in some circumstances retaining and developing senior staff may offer the most potent internal and external signal of improvement butwhere cognition and leadership capability are absent, external intervention is required (Jas and Skelcher, 2005).There is also a real danger that fixating on key individuals, and key relationships, can easily become a process of 'scapegoating' and distract from diagnosing the total systems performance and problems.

Given that all of the interventions comprised challenge and support phases, the key contributor to success appeared to be how organisations and the intervening authorities achieved this balance. The local resource endowment for example, appeared to have a direct influence on the success and mix of intervention activities. In case A for example, this larger organisation had the capacity to deal with a very formal challenge period whereas, in case B, there was a risk that this smaller organisation would "work to the test" and ignore other equally important priorities. One interviewee referred to "the bow wave" of intervention, whereby the response to the challenge phase can rapidly draw in a wide range of corporate and service resources with a net detrimental effect on the rest of the organisation. For example, several interviewees reflected on a scenario where an already heavily depleted Social Services department loses even more of its key staff when faced with a 'heavy-handed' intervention. Conversely, in those cases where a supportive phase was the 'point of entry', there was a corresponding (and sometimes much extended: 15 months in case B) failure to engage with fundamental concerns (even if widely recognised in the organisation).

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A MODEL OF THE INTERVENTION PROCESS

All interventions are an exercise in power. Central government draws on its resource and legal-political power (French and Raven 1960) to legitimate performance judgements, desired outcomes, the right to intervene, etc., etc. As one Improvement Board Chair emphasised, it was critical that all staff at the 'receiving' institution recognised that this "is an intervention" - comprising explicit and implicit criticisms of the organization. With respect to the specific legitimization of any particular intervention, our research suggests that there will be a greater emphasis on poor service performance as the primary trigger. The greater degree of measurability of service delivery when compared with broader governance issues (Hood and Peters 2004) provides part of the explanation but, equally, a focus on negative outcomes for specific service recipients (such as children, victims of crime, etc.) can generate a compelling political and professional narrative. Indeed, the greater sensitivities associated with service issues like child protection, education, etc. mean that central government intervention powers are often more significant in these areas. When an intervention is based on judgements about specific performance metrics and mandated improvements are articulated in terms of current and potential service users and their requirements (e.g. "it's all about the children") this can help to overcome any residual 'denial' (Boyne 2004).

At least one of the cases was a corporate failure without corresponding service performance problems (ie. corporate and service performance decoupled) but in all the cases initiated by a specific service problem, there was an associated (even if not articulated in the intervention protocol) concern over corporate governance. This evidence suggests an asymmetric refinement to the Jas and Skelcher (2005) proposition that service function and corporate centre performance are loosely coupled.

Boyne's (2004) widely cited 3R categorisation proposed that organisations 'in turnaround' typically *retrench* (ie. focus on stabilizing and re-allocating resources), and/or *reposition* (ie. redefining core missions and redesigning/introducing new services) and/or *reorganise* (ie. internal organisational change to support on-going improvement). His subsequent review of 8 recovery exemplars (Boyne 2006) suggested that reorganisation was the only R implemented in all cases. In other words, this model provides important context but it lacks specificity with respect to the nature of the intervention process. In this final section, we propose a generic model as the basis for further conceptual development and practitioner guidance. Based on our findings, and the evidence addressing each research question, we adopt a theory building approach to construct a new theoretical model of the intervention process; the interaction of three elements are represented in figure 3

[Figure 3. A generic model of the intervention process]

1. Service Point of Entry, Challenging the Organisation

All interventions, although an exercise in various forms of power, need to achieve legitimacy in terms of the desired outcome, people involved, the activities undertaken and the decisions reached. If there is no legitimacy, the potential benefits of the intervention are likely to be minimised. The evidence in these cases suggested that having a specific service focus helps to deal with many of these concerns. For example, by deriving judgements from accepted and comparable performance metrics and by articulating, where possible, all mandated improvements in terms of current and potential service users and their requirements. Similarly, the competencies of any external agents could be more precisely configured, ex-ante, for a specific problem set and an initially focused intervention probably helped to constrain resource requirements (the 'bow wave') and thereby helped minimise the

dysfunctional impact of the challenge process. The data suggested a series of operating principles for this most formalised and recognisably 'directive' phase.

First, recognise that "it is an intervention" (Board Chair), comprising explicit and implicit criticisms of staff at the 'receiving' institution. At the same time, from the outset be sensitive to the fact that responding to challenge (such as collecting data, drafting reports, attending meetings, and so on) requires substantial local resource commitment. Second, the intervention team (e.g. the Advisory Board in case D) must be comprised of credible, competent and committed people. Finally, work to a specific start and a reasonable expectancy, subject to performance, of a finish date. Given the formality of this phase, strategic use can be made of the 'run-in' and 'run-out' periods when local arrangements can be developed and relationships adjusted.

2. Corporate Points of Entry

Although the findings suggest the advantages of a service focused point of entry, this is an essentially pragmatic decision based upon resource availability/constraints and internal/external political context. What is strongly evident in all the cases is the extent to which all interventions have a very clear corporate governance dimension. The data suggested a series of principles for addressing service specific and whole system issues.

The range of skills included in the intervention team should recognise the 'whole systems' aspects from the outset (including corporate governance and political leadership dimensions) and particular recognition should be given to the advantage of including independent 'voices'.

The timings of the intervention had a direct bearing on the change process (that is, when the process started, how long the challenge phase lasted, how long the support phase lasted and so on). These dynamics were particularly significant for corporate changes. From

the perspective of the failing organisation, the intervention should be as short as possible – providing performance targets were met. There was widespread concern that over-extending the process could easily become de-motivating. Conversely, it has already been noted how problematic it can be to measure governance performance and correspondingly regulators needed sufficient time to demonstrate sustainable systemic improvement.

Poor performance from a senior manager should not be acceptable; however some of the case data suggested that the retention and development of senior staff may be both the only realistic option available and, more optimistically, can offer a potent internal and external signal of improvement. There was also evidence that fixating on key 'failing' individuals could easily become a process of 'scapegoating' and thereby distracted from diagnosing the total systems performance problems.

3. Balancing Challenge and Support

The cases suggested that a successful intervention process required a balance of challenge and supportive approaches. Challenge (and focus) helped address questions of legitimacy and effectiveness but supportive approaches were more sustainable. They tapped into the knowledge in an organisation and helped achieve more ownership of the outcome: "it's easy to tell someone how to do something, but far better to work with people so they find out the solution themselves" (Service Director, Case B). The transition from one mode to another needs to be carefully considered and managed; it placed significant additional pressures on both parties to the intervention. This participative phase is reliant on local staff input and this process can be frustrating after the apparent clarity and dynamic of expert challenge: "part of the journey is dealing with how frustrating it is to 'advise' - you see what needs doing and how to do it .. but you need to help other people see how to do it themselves

which takes much longer" (Peer CEO, Case C). The data suggested a series of operating principles for this more 'facilitative' (advising, supporting, mentoring) phase.

It will only be successful if local leadership has a meaningful acceptance of the problems faced. This may be more straightforward if there has been a change in political and/or managerial leadership but an effective 'transition' from challenge to support is likely to require strong elements of individual support (one to one peer mentoring).
It is important to ensure that different interests and levels are represented but this must be balanced with the requirement that staff be both competent and engaged. At the same time, there were numerous examples in the cases where greater involvement in decision-making (being afforded, often for the first time, power) can increase engagement and help to develop the very competencies that are required.

Given that failure and recovery can reinforce isolation and an internal focus, this phase should emphasise development of a range of formal and informal knowledge transfer relationships (e.g. forming communities of practice, staff sharing, peer support).

This generic intervention model is not intended to provide an accurate representation of highly contingent 'reality' evidenced in either the four cases that make up the core of this paper, or indeed the US examples presented in the introduction. The intention of the model is to generate specific insights for policy maker and practitioner guidance and provide a meaningful template for further research into this fascinating and increasingly important public administration issue.

REFERENCES

Beeri, Itai (2013) 'Direct administration of failing local authorities: democratic deficit or effective bureaucracy?' *Public Money & Management* 33 (2):137-144.

Boyne, G. A. (2004a) 'Sources of public service improvement: a critical review and research

     agenda'. *Journal of Public Administration Review and Theory*. 13 (3): 367-394

Boyne, G.A. (2004b) 'A '3Rs' strategy for public service turnaround: Retrenchment,

     repositioning and re-organisation.' *Public Money and Management.*'24(2): 97–

     103.Boyne, G.A. (2006) 'Strategies for public service turnaround: Lessons from the

     private sector?' *Administration & Society* 38 (3): 365–388.

Boyne, G. A. and Dahya, J. (2002) 'Executive succession and the performance of public

     organisations.' *Public Administration* 80 (1): 179-201.

Bullock, R. (1986) 'The effects on attitudes of random assignments to OD interventions.'

     Public Administration Quarterly. 10 (3), 310-324

Coe, C. K.(2008) 'Preventing local government fiscal crisis: emerging best practices.' *Public*

Administration Review 68 (4): 759-767.De Bruijn, H. A. (2006) *Managing Performance in*

the Public Sector, New York: Routledge.

Dubois,A. and Gadde, L-E.(2002) 'Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case

     research.' *Journal of Business Research*, 55 (7): 553–560

EPA (2011) *Environmental protection agency 40 CFR Part 52*. Report submission for Federal

     Registrar, 22nd April 2011.

French, J. P. R. Jr., and Raven, B. (1960) 'The bases of social power.' In D. Cartwright and

     A. Zander (eds.), *Group dynamics* (pp. 607-623). New York: Harper and Row.

Gallard, F. (2010) 'School district of Philadelphia launches major turnaround school initiative

     - renaissance schools.' *School District of Philadelphia News Release*, 27 January

     2010.

Gill, B., Zimmer, R., Christman, J. and Blanc, S. (2007) 'State takeover, school restructuring,

     private management, and student achievement in Philadelphia.' Rand Education, Santa

     Monica CA.

Glass, P. (1998) 'A benchmarking intervention into an executive team.' *Total Quality Management*. 9, 6, 519-530

Grant, B., Dollery, B., Kelly, A. (2009) Regional development and local government. University of Wollongon Research Online. http://ro.uow.edu.au/scipapers/234Harvey, G, Skelcher, C, Spencer, E, Jas, P, & Walshe, K (2010) 'Absorptive Capacity in a Non-Market Environment', *Public Management Review*, 12 (1): 77-97.

Heinrich, C.J. (1999) 'Advancing Public Sector Performance Analysis.' *Applied Stochastic Models in Business and Industry*, 24 (5):373 – 389.

Hood, C. and Peters, G.. (2004) 'The middle aging of new public management: into an age of paradox?' *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 14 (3): 267-282.

Hurley, L. (2011) 'Texas faces uphill legal battle against EPA's greenhouse gas regs.' *New York Times*, January 5th 2011.

India Today. (2010) 'Chronology of Ruchika Girhorta Case.' *India Today*, 25th May 2010.

Jas, P. and Skelcher, C. (2005), 'Performance Decline and Turnaround in Public Organizations: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis'. *British Journal of Management*, 16: 195–210

Jones, R. (1999) 'Implementing decentralised reform in local government: leadership lessons from the Australian experience.' *International Journal of Public Sector Management,* 12 (2): 63-76.

Jones, S. (2004) 'Improving local government performance.' *Public Money and Management*, 24 (1): 47-55.

Kessler, I. and Purcell, J. (1996) 'Strategic choice and new forms of employment relations in the public sector.' *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 7 (1): 206-229.

Madden, D. (2011) 'Local officials resist state takeover of Atlantic City's casino districts'. *CBS Philly*, April 17th 2011.

Megerian, C. (2010) 'N.J. has a history of state takeovers of local governments, agencies'. *NJ.com*, July 20th, 2010.

Miles, R. and Snow, C. (1995) 'The new network firm - a spherical structure built on a human investment philosophy.' *Organisational Dynamics*, 23 (4): 5-18.

Minvielle, E. (2006) 'New public management a la Francaise'. *Public Administration Review*, 66, 5, 753-763.

Moynihan, D. and Pandey, S. (2010) 'The Big Question for Performance Management: Why Do Managers Use Performance Information?' *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 20 (4). 849 - 866

Nagourney, A. (2011) 'Plan would erase all business town.' *New York Times*, 1st March 2011.

Nutt, P.C and Backoff, R.W. (1995) 'Strategy for Public and Third Sctor Organizations' Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 5 (2):189 – 211.

Parry-Langdon N.; Bloor M.; Audrey S.; Holliday J. (2003)' Process evaluation of health promotion interventions.' *Policy & Politics*, 31 (2): 207-216.

Radin, B.A. (2000) 'The Government Performance and Results Act and the Tradition of Federal Management Reform: Square Pegs in Round Holes?' *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 10 (1):111-135.

Rafferty, A. and Griffin, M. (2000) 'Beyond the single intervention study: a collaborative research project to investigate organisational change.' In S. Havlovic (Ed.), *Proceeding and Membership Directory of the Sixtieth Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management Toronto* 4-9 August: C1-C6 CD ROM. Whitewater, USA: University of Wisconsin.

Rose, J. and Haynes, M. (1999) 'A soft systems approach to the evaluation of complex interventions in the public sector.' *Journal of Applied Management Studies*, 8, 2, 199-216

Sanger, M.B. (2008) 'From measurement to management: breaking through the barriers to state and local performance.*' Public Administration Review*, 68: S70-S85.

Stake, R.E (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*: Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications,

Turner, D., Skelcher, C., Whiteman, P., Hughes, M. and Jas, P. (2004) 'Intervention or persuasion? Strategic for turnaround of poorly-performing councils.' *Public Money and Management*, August: 217-226

Vives, R. (2011) 'Bell seeks help from state to find an auditing fims.' *Los Angeles Times*, 29th May 2011.

Whitcomb, D. (2010) 'Mayor, officials arrested in California pay scandal.' Reuters, Los Angeles, 22 Sept 2010.