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The UK Core Executive’s Use of Public Service Agreements as a Tool of Governance

Abstract: The contemporary literature on governance notes the difficulties that core executives, central points for steering and co-ordinating public activity, have in undertaking this strategic function. The UK core executive, particularly the Treasury, has developed a regime of Public Service Agreements (PSAs) as a novel and ambitious tool of governance, particularly for public services. The tool incorporates improved priority setting, information about performance, and incentive effects for ministers and officials through a system of performance targets. However, systems for setting priorities are fragmented and include those focused on the Prime Minister’s Office and Cabinet Office. Monitoring has been improved, although measures often provide a limited, or sometimes even potentially misleading, impression of progress towards valued goals. The direct incentive effects of PSAs appear to be weak. Whilst the link between the system and the allocation of expenditure has engaged departments’ interest in discussing priorities, ministerial and other officials’ responsibility for performance has been limited. Targets have increasingly been seen as by ministers as minimum pledges of performance rather than tools for stretching and improving performance. Various forms of blame avoidance and blame shifting have occurred and the credibility of the PSA system is in danger of being undermined by frequent changes to targets and misrepresentation of performance in some areas.
Core executives are central points for the governance, or steering and co-ordination, of systems of public activity that entail state or collective authority, ownership or funding (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990, p. 4; Rhodes 1997, pp. 14-5). In the UK context, the core executive is usually identified as the ‘centre’ of a territorial nation state, consisting of the institutions of the Treasury, offices around the Prime Minister, Cabinet and its committees, and the Cabinet Office (Rhodes 1995, p. 12; Burch and Holliday 1996, p. 1). Steering by the core executive involves direction or influence over individuals and organisations involved in public activity so that they set and pursue priorities consistent with those desired by the core executive. Co-ordination entails the core executive’s direct efforts to bring about desired consistency between different bodies and promoting forms of coordination by these bodies themselves that bring about this outcome.

The literature on governance points to several well known difficulties that core executives currently have in steering and co-ordinating public activity. A diverse range of bodies are involved in public activity including public bodies at the local, regional, national, international and supranational levels of government. Some bodies are semi-public and have elements of private ownership, funding or control. These features of the systems of activity mean that bodies often have partial autonomy from the core executive based on their control of information, funding, organisational resources or by virtue of having their own political authority for action. Systems of public activity are more generally characterised as various forms of inter-dependent network relation rather than being part of a unified hierarchical system with the core executive at its apex. Even within central government, departments and their ministers often seek to pursue their own objectives rather than those of the core executive.
This article draws on interview material, an assessment of documentation and a survey of public sector activity to argue that the UK core executive, particularly the Treasury, is attempting to use the regime of Public Service Agreements (PSAs) as a novel and ambitious tool for steering and coordinating public activity. PSAs are particularly being used as part of the so called ‘delivery’ agenda of improving the performance of public services including health, education, social welfare and criminal justice. PSAs have so far attracted little interest from researchers of politics, partly perhaps because they are seen as too ‘managerial’ or as dry ‘administration’. Conversely, they have attracted little interest from researchers in public management perhaps because they are seen as too ‘political’ (for an exception, see Talbot 2000; 2002). But PSAs are far from being a peripheral issue for either discipline. Section 1 outlines how politicians and officials, particularly those in the Treasury, intend PSAs to be an effective tool of steering and coordination. Sections 2, 3 and 4 examine how far these ambitions have been consistent with the practice of PSAs since 1998, particularly in the area of public services and their delivery.

**Section 1: Public Service Agreements as a Tool of the Core Executive**

The ‘tool-kit’ perspective notes how government combines resources, especially information, authority, budget and organisation to produce tools for interacting with society, both to ‘detect’ what needs to be done and to ‘effect’ desired changes (Hood 1983, pp. 1-7). The core executive uses tools of governance for steering and
coordinating public activity although they are not always explicitly conceived of as ‘tools’ by the politicians and officials using them. Traditional tools include cabinet and cabinet committees, central review staff, selective intervention by the Prime Minister including the appointment of ministers, and centrally directed changes to government departments and other public organisations (Wheare 1955; Jones 1985; Burch and Holliday 1996). The Treasury has traditionally controlled the spending allocation process with control over civil service structures being passed back and forth between the Treasury and other parts of the core executive. The departmental and other Whitehall structures extend the tentacles of the core executive, operating at one remove, to enable intervention in large areas of public activity through the ownership of bodies, line management, regulation and the use of funding systems. However, the departmental structures in turn create the need for the core executive additionally to steer and co-ordinate central government (Heclo and Wildavsky 1981; Thain and Wright 1995; Deakin and Parry 2000; 2002; Richards and Smith 2002).

The core executive has, particularly since the election of the ‘New Labour’ administration in 1997, attempted to improve its capacity for steering and coordination in order to maintain the strategic direction of the Government. ‘New Labour’ insiders noted ‘The most difficult task of government is to construct a long term political strategy and a set of agreed goals and priorities, and to adhere to these in the face of the many problems and distractions faced by every administration’ (Mandelson and Liddle 1996, p. 236). One of the main items on the agenda at the first Cabinet meeting was a ‘lecture’ by Prime Minister Tony Blair on the importance of ‘avoiding the fate suffered by past Labour governments’ by not sticking to a limit on expenditure and a clear policy direction (Rawnsey 2001, p. 38). To this concern was
added an interest in boosting the core executive’s capacity to promote co-ordination between different bodies involved in public activity, loosely packaged under the label ‘joined-up government’. This initiative has included more ‘partnership’ working between departments and other organisations, especially joint budgeting arrangements, joint management boards and more staff rotation (Cabinet Office 1999; Performance and Innovation Unit 2000; Kavanagh and Richards 2001, pp. 2-8; Flinders 2002a, pp. 57-60; Ling 2002).

The design of these reforms reflects the current bi-polar operation of the UK core executive with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister the most influential ministers in the system. The PSA regime was initiated by Treasury ministers and officials. The Chancellor of the Exchequer since 1997, Gordon Brown, did not have a close personal role in the detailed design of the regime but his advisers were closely involved. The system is consistent with the characterisation of the current Treasury as a ‘strong’ Treasury that actively intervenes in public activity (Deakin and Parry 2002). Ministers and officials in the Prime Minister’s Office and Cabinet Office were consulted about setting up the PSA regime and Prime Ministers Tony Blair and his associates have become increasingly involved in modifications to the design of the system. Those involved in the initial design of the PSA regime appear to have had three main aspirations for the tool.

First, the PSA regime was set up as a detector and effector tool for setting the priorities for public activity in the UK as part of Spending Reviews that decide the allocation of public expenditure. PSA documents are statements of priorities with associated targets that embody the Government’s overall aims and objectives for
departments or policy sectors (Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2000, pp. 1-3). More
detailed targets are included in Service Delivery Agreements that, since 2000, have
accompanied each PSA. Whilst the objectives and targets cover most public activity,
the Prime Minister particularly noted their role in stating priorities for ‘delivery’ of
public services (Chief Secretary to the Treasury 1998, foreword).

Departments prepare draft PSA documents as part of their spending plans
which are discussed with the Treasury, especially the spending teams which each deal
with a designated portfolio of departments. The Public Services and Public
Expenditure Cabinet Committee (‘PSX’), formally chaired by the Chancellor with the
Deputy Prime Minister and Chief Secretary to the Treasury in attendance, discusses
the targets suggested by departments. Departmental procedures for objective setting
and performance appraisal, such as those set up between departments and their
executive agencies and other bodies, including those at the local level, are subordinate
to the PSA system. The Treasury and the PSX Committee arrangements entail
Treasury authority to intervene to negotiate consistency with the Government’s
overall objectives (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000, section 7.17).

The technology used in the PSA tool draws on earlier experience with systems
for setting objectives and targets for public bodies, particularly the performance
targets used as part of systems for controlling executive agencies in central
government since 1988, and the use of cost centres for specific activities in the civil
service since the Financial Management Initiative in the early 1980s (James 2003, pp.
142-3, Carter, Klein and Day 1992, pp. 5-6). The processes of priority setting draws
on the experience of Programme Analysis and Review in the 1970s which sought to
assess the efficiency and effectiveness of programmes and the Public Expenditure Survey which attempted to systematically plan spending priorities over the medium term (see Thain and Wright 1995, pp. 57-70; 107-40; 254-93). However, the architects of the PSAs claimed to have learned from the successes and failures of these systems in establishing the new PSA structures.

As well as a tool for negotiating changes with individual departments, PSAs were intended to improve the co-ordination of priority setting where policy or delivery issues cut across departmental boundaries. The problem of departmentalism, with ministers and officials focusing on their own activities regardless of the consequences for other parts of government has long been recognised. The fragmentation of Whitehall was further exacerbated by the creation of executive agencies, with each of the 138 agencies existing in 1998 having its own regime of performance targets. The performance targets in some cases encouraged those working in executive agencies to focus on their own narrow goals and not to take into account the systemic effects of their activities, setting up negative ‘public sector externalities’ affecting other public organisations. The externalities were especially significant in ‘mainstream’ executive agencies that were key to their departments or other bodies’ activities (James 2003, pp 56-7; 109-23). The PSA system was designed to bring all of central government under a system-wide performance regime to reduce fragmentation. Whilst most PSAs were set for individual departments, the PSA system was intended to specify objectives and targets to be shared between departments, with groups of shared objectives and targets for particular programmes set out in ‘cross-cutting’ PSAs intended to help to ‘break down artificial barriers in policy making and delivery: encouraging departments to think together about their
joint priorities, and work together to deliver change’ (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2000, p. 1). The co-ordination function was supposed to be further enhanced by PSA’s targeting of outcomes rather than individual departmental or organisational processes, with outcomes sometimes the consequence of several organisations’ activities.

The PSA system was intended to promote Treasury influence over the priority setting of bodies beyond central government. A national PSA for local government was set up to enhance the co-ordination of priority setting amongst the 14 government departments that have regular interaction with local government. Local PSAs for England were subsequently developed, consisting of objectives and targets for national priorities relating to individual local authorities’ work in education, social services, transport and the cost-effectiveness of their activities. Local authorities were themselves encouraged to sign up to objectives involving partnership working with other bodies at local level, making them a further tool of co-ordination (Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions 2001, section 3.55). However, in setting up the PSA system, the Treasury did not appear to be attempting to reverse the effects of devolution that have given more autonomy in priority setting to the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland, and, in an on/off way, Northern Ireland. Similarly, PSAs did not appear to be intended to extend influence over priority setting processes within European Union, international or private sector bodies. Instead, the PSAs seem to have primarily been conceived of as a way of enhancing Treasury steering and co-ordinating of activities in the more traditional contexts of central and local government and their emanations.
The second main aim of setting up the PSA regime was as a detector tool to allow the Treasury to monitor the performance of departments and other bodies against their objectives and targets, including monitoring shared objectives and targets. A series of technical notes attached to each PSA was established to set out the sources of information and details of the design of the performance measures related to each target. The targets were intended to be ‘SMART’, defined as ‘specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timed’ (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 1998, p.5). Performance against targets is supposed to be monitored by the Treasury and the PSX Committee is tasked with reviewing this information and calling departmental ministers to discuss developments. The performance information is provided to officials and ministers in the Treasury spending teams and published in departmental and other reports to provide information to Parliament, service users, taxpayers and citizens. This element of the system goes beyond its use by the core executive to monitor activities for its own purposes. The PSAs were described as ‘a contract with the people’ because ‘by making clear what is expected from each of our public services the PSAs add a new dimension to public accountability’ especially for the ‘delivery’ of public services (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 1999).

The third aim of establishing the PSA regime was as an effector tool to provide incentives for politicians and officials to undertake activities consistent with the priorities of the core executive. Pursuing these priorities includes responding to steering and co-ordination and co-ordinating their own activities with other bodies when necessary to pursue priorities agreed with the core executive. The incentive effects of the regime are the least comprehensively and explicitly defined part of the system. However, the PSA system appears to rest on a view of motivation implicit in
ministerial, civil service and other codes of conduct that was also often expressed in
interviews with officials conducted for this study. This view suggests that most actors
engaged in public activity accept the legitimacy of core executive steering and
coordination but that formal guidance, social norms of behaviour coupled with
individual incentives, especially those of career advancement, are necessary to
encourage people to respond. In particular, incentives are needed to prevent
tendencies for bodies involved in public activity to set priorities that are insufficiently
challenging and fail to make best use of resources available, tendencies to under-
perform against agreed priorities, and tendencies to drift away from agreed priorities
to pursue different agendas. This reasoning is reflected in the description of PSAs as a
way of ensuring a ‘commitment to deliver better public services’ and of promoting
‘effective’ use of Government resources through identifying ‘those responsible for
ensuring that this happens’ (Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2000, p.1 and 4)

Under the PSA regime, Secretaries of State are individually responsible for
performance against their departments’ targets. In some areas, responsibility is
partially delegated to junior ministers or, in areas of joint working, ministers share
responsibility for performance. There system further includes an element of collective
ministerial responsibility for the overall performance of the Government against its
key priorities. However, individual ministerial responsibility appears to be most
central part of the system and includes accountability entailing justifying activity,
providing information about performance, and explaining levels of performance to
interested parties, especially the PSX Committee. The importance of reporting of
performance to Parliament and the public is also emphasised. The system is suggested
as beneficial in ‘holding Ministers and departments accountable for the delivery of the
Governments objectives and targets’ (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000, Sec. 7.17). Personal ministerial responsibility for a department’s performance appears further to include accepting praise or blame both for individual’s contribution to departmental performance and the department’s overall performance regardless of personal contribution. The system does not state that ministers should resign if targets are not met. However, at the very least, assessments of performance would appear to have implications for ministers wanting to progress their careers through being seen to perform well, particularly in so far as this might affect the Prime Minister’s recommendations about ministerial appointments. The relationship between the responsibilities of ministers and officials were not set out in great detail at the start of the system’s operation. However, the PSA regime was suggested to be consistent with the convention of ministerial responsibility as set out in ministerial and civil service codes. On this basis, senior officials were allocated individual responsibility for particular objectives and targets within the convention of ministerial responsibility.

Whilst it is not clear whether or not performance against PSA targets was intended to help inform voting decisions, performance against targets seems to have been intended to influence the public and Parliamentarians’ judgements about individual ministers and the Government’s progress towards their stated goals. The Chancellor noted that PSAs included ‘the specific results on which we would be judged’ (Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2000, foreword) and the Prime Minister commented that ‘by publishing clear, measurable targets, we are making it possible for everyone to judge whether we meet them.’ (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 1998, foreword). In this way, the PSAs would appear to be public disciplining device for ministers both collectively and individually. In particular Parliamentarians, the media
and the public were expected to put pressure on individual ministers to pursue
priorities set out in PSAs through lobbying or public criticism.

The incentive effects also appear to have been intended to operate on
individuals through the organisational level, with information about performance
against targets being used in the process of allocating spending to public bodies. The
regime was not an attempt to develop a full system of performance budgeting, linking
allocations to desired outcomes, but is intended to improve strategic performance
information about the effects of government activity on outcomes as part of a strategic
system of spending control focusing on key parts of public expenditure rather than
detailed control of smaller line items (Parry, Hood and James 1997). Although there is
no clearly stated link between performance against targets and decisions about
expenditure allocations, the local PSAs initially gave local authorities a ‘pump
priming’ grant when signing up to the targets and a performance reward grant
proportionately linked to achieving targets up to a maximum of 2.5 per cent of the
body’s net budget (Greely 2002, pp. 36-7). This logic suggests that higher budgetary
allocations are seen as proving incentives for officials and politicians to reach targets.
However, the designers of the system denied that failing to meet targets would lead to
reductions of budget, noting instead that poor performers would get ‘support and
advice’ from the PSX committee (Chief Secretary to the Treasury 1998, p.2).

**Section 2: Setting Strategic Priorities**

The PSA system joined, rather than replaced, multiple mechanisms for priority setting
in government. The three main sets of PSAs issued in 1998, 2000 and 2002 sat
alongside statements including the Queen’s Speech, manifesto commitments, White Papers and other policy documents. The PSX Committee has partially integrated the PSA system with the broader Cabinet and Cabinet Committee arrangements although the Prime Minister has his own separate systems for examining strategic priorities including the Social Exclusion Unit and the Strategy Unit (Smith, 1999, p. 148-52, Public Administration Select Committee, 2002a). Most significantly, a Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit was set up in 2001 to ensure that the Government achieved its key delivery priorities across the key areas of health, education, crime and asylum and transport. The Unit’s remit was widened to encompass all areas of public services involving delivery in the summer of 2002 (Public Administration Committee 2002a). Whilst the Unit has strong links with the Treasury’s PSA arrangements, including staff movement between the two bodies and sharing of information, the arrangements offer the potential for conflict through their separate reporting lines.

The process of setting PSA objectives and targets in Spending Reviews mainly involves interaction between Treasury ministers, officials in spending teams, and individual departmental ministers and officials. Treasury staff have negotiated priorities with departmental staff rather than directing them, although the Treasury has more autonomy in setting its own objectives and targets. The PSX Committee’s role has been more limited, with the Chief Secretary of the Treasury rather than the Chancellor taking the lead role on a day to day basis. The Spending Review statements have been clearest an embodiment of priorities for change at the margin centred on certain sectors, especially social, health, socio-economic policy and, more recently, public services. A former Secretary of State commented that PSAs have been important in signalling a change in priorities from the previous Conservative
administration that was in power prior to 1997 (Public Administration Committee, 2003b, Q. 950). However, PSA ‘objectives’ have been a mix of goals, statements of activity and achievements and not always provided a clear definition of future priorities. Public services have had more clearly specified objectives and targets than policy areas such as foreign policy or defence where objectives have proved difficult to specify with much precision. The PSAs documents were supposed to embody priorities and targets for a three year period but, following the issue of the first set in two main batches during 1998-9, a new set of PSAs for the period 2001-4 was announced in July 2000. There was a substantial reduction in the number of targets, from around 600 to around 160, and there were changes to the content of targets. A further review in 2002 reduced the number of main targets to 130 and redefined a majority of the remaining targets (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2002).

Treasury negotiation of priorities with departments was initially limited because the PSA system was initially seen as largely the responsibility of the finance sections of departments, which normally dealt with the Treasury spending teams. The 1998 PSAs were put together in a rather hurried and ad hoc manner and not always integrated with the strategic planning processes in departments (Treasury Committee 1999). However, the policy sections of departments became increasingly involved when it become clear that spending bids would be assessed alongside PSAs. The Treasury’s ability to use budget as an incentive was increased because, after a period of sticking to limited increases in expenditure until 1998/9, an expansion of total managed expenditure was planned from £333,600m to 389,700m in 2001/2, a rise of 17 per cent (HM Treasury 1998, p. 16). However, spending allocations were heavily constrained by factors outside the Treasury’s immediate control. Whilst the original
review of spending in 1997/8 was supposed to be a ‘zero-based’ consideration of all options, historical positions and political priorities set the framework in which spending levels were decided (Deakin and Parry, 2000, pp. 198-200). Interviewees commented that departments where spending was already an explicit political priority, including health and education, had less need to discuss their priorities with the Treasury than other departments. They also noted that it was much easier to gain departmental cooperation to discuss priorities for new projects involving new allocations of expenditure than for the priorities of existing programmes. The Treasury’s capacity for negotiation of PSA priorities has been limited in part by its size, the spending teams and general expenditure policy sections amount only to around 150 staff (Parry, Hood and James 1997, p. 404-5; Deakin and Parry 2002). Many priorities for departments appear to be set largely outside the formal PSA discussions, instead bubbling up from a diverse range of sources as is conventionally noted, including ministers, political parties, lobby groups, think tanks and other sources (Smith, 1999, pp. 106-142; Burch and Holliday, 1997, pp. 255-76; Richards and Smith, 2002, pp. 13-37).

The PSAs have been partially successful in setting priorities for areas of cross-cutting working involving several departments. One of the most ambitious, in terms of the size of spending, cross-cutting PSAs for public services was set for the Criminal Justice System (CJS), involving about £8,500m of expenditure under the supervision of the Home Office, Lord Chancellor’s Department and Law Officers’ Departments (NAO, 1999, p.18). The cross-cutting CJS PSA for 2000 was set in addition to the three departments’ own departmental PSAs with the aim ‘to reduce crime and fear of crime and their social and economic costs; and to dispense justice fairly and
efficiently and to promote confidence in the rule of law’ (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2000, p. 49). The Treasury was able to insist on the inclusion of a value for money objective and target for the system as a whole despite initial opposition from the departments and the PSA was both a cause and a symptom of closer working between the departments. The PSA was associated with the development of a new inter-departmental Cabinet Committee on the Criminal Justice System and a Criminal Justice Joint Planning Group (Cabinet Office, 2001). However, there was no explicit ranking of objectives or targets in the CJS PSA and officials interviewed for this study tended to place more emphasis on joint objectives that were additionally contained in their own department’s PSA. A change of Home Secretary in June 2001 resulted in a change of priorities outside of the PSA process when David Blunkett put a concern with the ‘victims’ of crime at the heart of the system and emphasised this objective over others set out in the CJS PSA (Government News Network 2002).

Beyond Whitehall, local PSAs have been a way of structuring dialogue about priorities between central and local government. After a pilot project involving 20 local authorities the scheme was extended more broadly (Greely 2002, p. 36-7). The priorities were developed as part of a Central Local Partnership involving Treasury consultation with local government, particularly through the Local Government Association (Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions 2001, sections 3.1-87). The Local Government Association complained that targets were set in a ‘top-down’ manner by ministers and gave little freedom for local discretion (Public Administration Select Committee 2003, pp. 16-7). However, local bodies have, de facto, enjoyed partial autonomy in priority setting, particularly where the legitimacy of central target setting has been rejected by professional groups, or
Whitehall departments have had limited information about what priorities might be feasible. For example some court staff in local criminal justice systems interviewed for this study initially rejected the CJS PSA targets for speed of processing cases because they perceived that it might affect their judicial independence and felt able to resist some aspects of the scheme.

The devolved administrations within the UK have produced their own separate statements of priorities for areas of fully devolved activity. However, the relationship between their priority setting and that conducted by departments with UK-wide responsibilities that work jointly with devolved administrations is less clear. For example, the Department of Trade and Industry’s work in promoting growth across the UK involves concurrent powers run in parallel in the devolved administrations yet the relationship between the different systems of priority setting is not set out in the PSA. The Treasury’s ability to use allocation of spending to engage devolved administrations in discussion has been limited because the bodies obtain their money through a block grant set by a formula rather than through negotiation (Adams 2002). Even within England, separate targets linked to Regional Development Agencies have been established for some regional economic issues (Public Administration Committee 2003b, questions 1046 and 1047). The fragmentation of systems is likely to become even more salient if there are further moves towards regionalisation.

Section 3: Monitoring Performance

The PSA regime has developed as an extensive detector, information gathering, tool reporting performance against PSA targets. This information is, in the main, provided
by departments at quarterly intervals with more frequent updates for certain targets, especially those relating to ‘key’ public services. Information about progress is held on Treasury and Delivery Unit databases and the PSX Committee has met, on average, about twice a year to discuss each major department. However, interviewees commented that it is sometimes difficult to get senior ministers to attend the Committee. The Delivery Unit is supposed to work with the PSA system but there was initially some duplication of reporting and the Prime Minister began to hold separate meetings with Secretaries of State every six to eight weeks to discuss performance against targets (Public Administration Select Committee 2002b, questions 392 and 396).

Measures of progress against targets give only a partial reflection of performance against objectives. Targets for outcomes were generally more directly related to the ultimate concerns of the Treasury than procedural targets. In the PSAs published in 2000, 68 per cent of targets referred to outcomes, 14 per cent to process, 13 per cent to outputs and 5 per cent to inputs (National Audit Office, 2001a, p. 21). In many cases it has proved difficult to measure performance in a way that assesses progress towards objectives in a meaningful way. For example, the ‘targets’ associated with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s objectives to promote ‘peace’ and ‘stability’ have included the completion of certain activities and targets including those of reducing the ‘number of people whose lives are affected by violent conflict’ and reducing ‘potential sources of future conflict where the UK can make a significant contribution’ (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2000, p.23). It is difficult to assess progress against such general ‘targets’ and the inclusion of activities appears to be ad hoc, for example the 2002 PSA did not explicitly note UK priorities for activity
in relation to Iraq, a country that was subsequently invaded. In other areas, especially social policy, education and health, the measures were developed more fully and a high proportion were of a quantitative form, but even in these cases they were often only a partial reflection of objectives (Public Administration Select Committee 2003c, pp. 20-3).

Acquiring data to measure performance was seen as a ‘great’ or ‘very great’ problem by over 50 per cent of senior officials (NAO 2001, p. 48). Performance information has come from national statistics, researchers, public bodies subject to targets, and from the army of organisations monitoring the performance of the public sector whose ranks have been further swelled since 1997 (Hood et al, 1999, pp. 21-42; James, 2000; Hood, James, Scott, 2000, p. 286-95). Measurement of performance in areas of joint-working was seen as a ‘very great’ or ‘great’ problem by over 75 per cent of senior officials (NAO 2001a, p. 22 and p. 48). In criminal justice, is has proved difficult to cascade the monitoring of shared targets down to the local level; most local systems for gathering information initially reflected the traditional separate ‘silos’ departmental structures (NAO 1999, p. 121). However, a trilateral group of statisticians was set up as part of the Criminal Justice Information Working Group to help systematise data and develop improved information collection. There have been incidents of distortion of activities and manipulation of information by public bodies in attempts to present performance in a more favourable light (Public Administration Select Committee 2003c, pp. 19-20). The manipulation of waiting list times in several National Health Service Trusts compromised reporting against targets included in the Department of Health PSA in events described by the National Audit Office as ‘a major breach of public trust’ (NAO, 2001b, p. 1). It is difficult to assess the extent of
these problems, although interviewees commented that they appear to be the exception rather than the rule.

Performance has been difficult to track over time because of changes to the definition of objectives and targets and delays in reporting, with seven departments not publishing their performance information as promised in autumn of 2002. In the CJS, progress against the 9 key targets set in 1998 and the CJS productivity target was never fully reported before these targets were replaced in 2000, and the target regime was again altered in 2002. Assessments of the Government’s performance against targets have adopted different time periods and definitions of what counts as achievement. In 2002, the Conservative Party claimed that 40 per cent of targets set in 1998, and 75 per cent of those set in 2000, had either not been met or were on course not to be met. However, the Government insisted that around 90 per cent of targets set in 1998 were on course to be met in 2002 (Grice, Russell and Morris 2002). Table 1 presents the principal departments’ performance against the 1998 PSA targets, indicating how the figure of around 90 per cent was calculated by including targets met and targets partially met but excluding joint targets. Counting only targets met produces a lower figure of 76 per cent, which is further reduced as a percentage of all targets if, following the method adopted in the Conservative Party study, judgements about targets with longer reporting horizons are included. In the CJS PSA, despite changes to targets, performance measures were available in 2002 for a majority of the targets set in 2000. Performance was on track for most of these targets, with the main exceptions including a rise in recorded robbery of 13 per cent hampering progress towards the targeted 14 per cent reduction by 2005, and failure to improve the
proportion of recorded crimes for which an offender is brought to justice (Home Office 2002, pp. 16-9).

**Table 1 Departmental Performance against 1998 PSA Targets in 2002**

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Source: Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2003
Section 4: Incentive Effects on the Pursuit of Priorities

Although incentive effects are difficult to assess, they have only partially resembled the ambitions of the system’s designers and various forms of ‘blame game’ have emerged around PSAs. The ‘blame game’ is described as the set of interactions between the ‘blamed’, consisting of ministers, officials and others involved in public activity, and ‘blamers’ consisting of legislatures, courts, citizens including service users, and the media. ‘Blame’, or alternatively credit, is allocated as part of systems of responsibility and involves mechanism including providing accounts of performance and being subject to the effects of criticism, sanctions, voting or lobbying. As well as avoiding blame by meeting expectations, which in the case of PSAs would involve meeting targets, other strategies for handling blame are suggested, including managing presentation of performance to avoid blame, blame shifting between groups in the system and changing policies or priorities to avoid the risk of blame (see Ellis, 1994, Hood 2000; 2002). All these strategies have been apparent in the case of PSAs to such an extent that they appear seriously to subvert the intended operation of this part of the system.

The allocation of responsibility for performance against PSA targets to individual ministers has largely been restricted to the provision of accounts about particular levels of performance rather than taking fuller personal responsibility for departmental performance against targets, including personal contributions to performance. There has been considerable ambiguity about the implications of failing to meet targets, in part, because of uncertainty about whether targets were set at a level to ‘stretch’ and challenge ministers and departments to improve performance,
such that circumstances outside of their direct control might mean that they should not always be blamed for failing to meet them, or at a level that should be achievable and should be thought of as a ‘pledge’ of a minimum level of acceptable performance. According to interviewees, ministers have been particularly sensitive to achieve targets given as election pledges, for example the five key pledges made in 1997. However, the consequences of failing to meet targets have generally not included effective pressure on ministers to resign. Instead, the long running characteristic that ministers do not resign because of poor departmental performance (Dowding and Kang 1998, p. 424) does not appear to have been fundamentally altered by the PSA regime. Only the resignation of Estelle Morris as Secretary of State for Education and Skills in October 2002 out of six Cabinet level resignations since 1997 could be said to have been influenced by performance against PSA targets, and it was just one of several factors that brought down the minister. Morris appeared to promise to resign if the PSA 2000 targets for school children literacy and numeracy were not met. Subsequently the targets were missed and she later noted ‘If there is a lesson to be learned it is for future ministers and present ministers not to promise to resign if targets are not met but –this is a serious point as well as a slightly lighter point –it is to engage in a proper conversation with the public about what progress has been made’ (Public Administration Committee 2003b, question 949).

Despite the limited implications for ministerial resignations, ministers have been concerned about the effect of performance against targets on their reputation for competence, both within Whitehall, and especially in the eyes of the Prime Minister, and amongst Parliamentarians and the public. Although performance against PSA targets featured in only about 1 per cent of questions by MPs in the 2001-2 Session
(Hansard 2002), the information has been used as part of the evidence base for Parliamentary Committee examinations of departments and as the basis for public attacks on ministers by opposition MPs (for example see Conservative Party 2002). A Cabinet Office minister, Lord Macdonald of Tradeston, acknowledged that ‘The difficulty with politics of course is, hit 80 per cent [of targets] and you will not get 80 per cent of the credit. You will get attacked by the Opposition on the 20 per cent you have missed’ (Public Administration Committee 2002b, question 391).

The potential for ministers to change policy priorities to avoid the risk of personal blame has been noted. Clare Short, a former Secretary of State in the Department for International Development, commented that in a ‘punitive’ environment, there would be a temptation for ministers to set their departments’ target levels low to ‘keep it easy’ and avoid criticism (Public Administration Committee 2003a, question 621). In an extreme form, this could lead to the abandonment of certain programmes, particularly if ministers are risk averse about the risk of being blamed relative to receiving credit. According to interviewees, there appears to have been a trend away from targets that are difficult in the light of a wave of ‘rash’ promises in the early days of the scheme. Taking the criminal justice PSA as an example, the 2002 version dropped difficult targets to reduce fear of crime, to speed up case processing and to ensure that no local authority area has a crime rate of three times the national average, and qualified the commitment to reduce robbery by 14 per cent (Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2002). Officials commented that the whilst PSX and treasury spending teams were supposed to check that an adequate range of targets was set and that targets were not set too low, a bit like uncovering cost padding in
spending bids, it was not always easy to form a view about what would be reasonable ‘stretching’ targets.

The incentive effects for ministers to pursue priorities that are expressed in crosscutting PSAs appear to have been even more limited than for those contained in departmental PSAs. A former Secretary of State commented that ‘the targets that you were being held personally accountable for as a department tended to take more of your energy than those which you shared with other departmental heads. That is bad and wrong but it is human nature. At the end of the day I was going to have to stand up and defend the targets that were under the name of my own department, but under the name of several of the departments there would be a dialogue and what we know about partnership is at its worst it allows everybody to share the credit and non-one to take the blame’ (Public Administration Select Committee 2003, question 972). In the field of criminal justice, the Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Attorney General were described as being ‘jointly responsible’ for the PSA. However, the Home Secretary increasingly took the lead with the Home Office giving up some non criminal justice functions and a Ministerial Committee on the CJS, chaired by the Home Secretary, being set up in 2001 (Home Office 2002, p. 228). In this case, the Home Secretary preferred to take greater responsibility, and to secure as many levers of administrative control as possible to pursue these objectives, rather than share the programme more equally with other Secretaries of State. Cross-cutting PSAs have not dislodged the dominance of individual ministerial responsibility in Whitehall which has, in a similar way, limited the success of other attempts to develop ‘joined-up’ organisational and budgetary arrangements across departmental boundaries (Flinders 2002b, p. 33).
The incentive effects of the regime for individual senior officials in departments seem limited. There has been little attempt to switch responsibility, and potential blame, away from ministers to senior officials through explicit delegation of responsibility for delivery in PSA documents. An exception has been objectives and targets relating to civil service management, with the PSA for the Cabinet Office explicitly noting the responsibility of the Head of the Civil Service and Cabinet Secretary, coupled with the requirement of this post-holder to report to the Prime Minister on these matters. Other PSAs are less explicit, appearing to adopt existing reporting arrangements between ministers, the Permanent Secretary and senior officials in each department. However, senior officials have been given personal responsibility for managing activity related to PSA objectives and targets in many departments. Their responsibility has centred on providing information and explanations for levels of performance. Senior departmental officials regularly monitor progress towards meeting targets, coding the results using a form of ‘traffic light’ system according to whether the targets are on track, at risk of being missed or at serious risk of being missed. This coding is then used as the basis for allocating management attention to the areas of most pressing need.

Senior officials have not tended to have their personal contributions to performance against targets assessed or taken personal praise or blame. A partial exception has been the assessment of senior civil servants’ performance against their personal performance agreements that are supposed to provide ‘an identifiable line of sight from PSA targets, through business plans to personal objectives’ (Cabinet
Reviews of performance under these agreements are fed into decisions about performance related pay, with up to 9 per cent of individuals’ base pay awarded according to performance (Cabinet Office 2003b, p.1). In extreme cases of underperformance, guidance to departmental staff notes that ‘steps may be needed to move people out of the Service with the minimum of delay’ (Cabinet Office 2003a, p. 10). However, whilst a senior official commented that ‘it brings it home to you when your name is next to a target’ he could not think of any cases where an official’s career had been damaged primarily because of an assessment about his or her personal contribution to poor performance against a target. Interviewees commented on the difficulty of separating the relative contributions of ministers and senior officials to performance, resulting in a form of shared responsibility. However, because there appear to be few sanctions for poor performance, this situation could also be described as a lack of individual responsibility.

The incentive effects operating on individual ministers or senior officials operating through the organisational level have been limited. There has been little direct budgetary or other sanctioning of poorly performing bodies and few attempts to reward good performers. The PSX committee does not have formal powers to impose sanctions and the Head of the Delivery Unit described its approach as ‘collaborative’ (Public Administration Select Committee 2002b, question 381). However, interviewees commented that ministers and staff in departments are keen to build a reputation for competence, particularly within the Whitehall village, and that this is achieved, in part, by avoiding criticism from these bodies. The core executive’s view of departments’ competence is influential in decisions about machinery of government changes and in decisions about allocating funds. The shared targets in the
cross-cutting PSA for criminal justice have informed decisions about allocating additional resources as part of a special cross-cutting budget that spans departmental boundaries to fund joint projects. Whilst the link between budgets and performance against targets is more explicit in local PSAs their operation is currently at too early a stage fully to assess the consequences (Greely 2002).

Beyond Whitehall departments, the association between individual officials’ pay and explicit, targeted, aspects of delegated ‘operational’ performance was already in place prior to the PSA system for executive agencies and their chief executives (James 2003, pp.3-4). Similarly, responsibility for local performance against targets that contributes to achieving national PSA targets has been allocated to public bodies including hospitals, local authorities and schools and for local units managed by executive agencies. Some of the perverse and side effects of some of these target systems have become apparent across a range of services, although their full extent is not clear (Public Administration Select Committee 2003, pp. 17-28). In the hospitals, resources have been diverted to meet targets at the expense of other services and long run modernisation (Audit Commission 2003a). Misrepresentation of performance has occurred, for example in reporting waiting lists for treatment (National Audit Office 2001b). In the Local Criminal Justice Boards that are responsible for delivering the CJS PSA at a local level, there have been difficulties in assessing the relative contributions of the different organisations to performance (Audit Commission 2003b). The system does not seem to have successfully pass the risk of being blamed for failing to meet local targets from the central government level to these groups. Members of these groups have not been passive recipients and have publicly criticised some targets as being unrealistically ambitious or as having undesirable perverse or
side effects if pursued to their fullest extent. This criticism has been used by them to suggest that they should not be blamed if the targets are not met (Public Administration Select Committee 2003c, pp. 13-9).

The provision of information about departments and other public bodies’ performance against PSA targets to citizens and users was, in itself, an aim of the system’s designers. The ‘contract’ with the public was also intended to put pressure on public bodies to achieve priorities agreed with the core executive. Information has been published in departmental and other reports and a Treasury PSA website was set up in April 2003 containing links to information about progress against targets. The television and newspaper media has had a growing interest in the system; PSAs were the main subject of 89 UK national newspaper articles in 2001 and 129 in 2002. However, these figures are a very low percentage of the many thousand of stories carried each year. Of the articles on PSAs in total, 40 per cent were primarily reports of poor performance against targets, 20 per cent were primarily reports of good performance against targets and 20 per cent were primarily reports of mixed or moderate performance. A further 20 per cent primarily discussed the system rather than levels of performance. The majority of articles reporting performance against the CJS PSA noted the failure to meet several targets. The asymmetry in overly reporting missed targets was noted by a former Secretary of State who commented that ‘’Government Meets Targets” is not a newspaper story’ of interest to journalists (Public Administration Committee 2003b, question 985). The consequence of this form of media coverage appears to be that ministers, in particular, have increasingly treated all targets as pledges that must be met rather than stretching targets of which a proportion could be missed.
The attention paid to PSAs by the users of national public services is difficult to assess. Compared to users of some local services, such as schools, they appear to have less incentive to become informed about performance in order to be able to exercise informed choice between different providers. Similarly, the direct use of information from PSAs to inform public decisions about individual ministers’ or the Government’s performance is difficult to judge. Studies of national broadsheet newspapers show that their coverage of political stories, including stories similar to those about PSAs, has a long term impact on readers’ knowledge about political events which has an effect on political mobilisation (Newton 1999, pp. 591-2). Effects on voting behaviour are difficult to judge but would, in any case, operate for the Government as a group rather than directly influencing the careers of ministers at the individual level. However, individual ministers failing to meet targets previously agreed with the core executive have been subject to media and public criticism which seems likely to encourage them to try and meet targets though their concern to be perceived of as making a positive contribution to the Government’s popularity.

The usefulness of PSAs as a public disciplining device has been limited by collective and individual presentational strategies by ministers to avoid blame for poor performance. The current Government has a reputation for presenting its achievements to the public in a selective or overly positive manner, characterised as various forms of ‘spin’ (see Jones 1999). National newspaper articles in the period 2001-2 increasingly pointed out the limitations of measures of performance, the manipulation of figures, especially waiting list times in the health service, and the lowering or dropping of many targets (for example see Grice, Russell and Morris
A plausible hypothesis would be that such reporting damages the credibility of the PSA system amongst public service users or citizens. If this damage were to become severe, the PSA system may follow a similar course to the Annual Report on the Government’s performance that was launched in July 1998. The report received negative publicity as a document in which the Government reported favourably on itself regardless of underlying performance and was discretely discontinued in 2001.

Conclusion

The PSA system has evolved over time rather than emerging instantaneously as a fully fledged tool at the outset, with the main iterations associated with the spending reviews that reported in 1998, 2000 and 2002. The PSA tool enhances the core executive’s capacity for steering and coordination and its significance should be noted alongside other more familiar tools including cabinet committees, systems of ministerial appointment, civil service management and organisation, and expenditure control. However, the aims of PSA regime’s designers have in practice only been partially met, coming closest in the core executive’s influence over priority setting and monitoring of public services supervised by central government. The core executive’s influence over priority setting has been most effective where the Treasury, Cabinet Office and Prime Minister’s Office have cooperated to use PSAs alongside their other tools. Most of these tools are more easily operated in relation to central government departments, centrally run public services and local authorities than in relation to devolved administrations, European, other international, and privately owned or funded bodies involved in public activities. Although the literature on governance generally stresses the declining relative importance of the former group of
bodies in conducting public activity they remain significant in the provision of public services in England.

The incentive effects of the PSA regime were the least clearly articulated ambitions of the system’s designers. However, the system has been very far from enabling the core executive to steer public services at arms length through a tool of strategic influence. The targets do not reflect all the outcomes valued by the core executive and have changed frequently, making progress difficult to assess. Many targets are not fully incorporated in local or other systems where much activity affecting performance takes place. The notions of responsibility and associated praise or blame for those in the system have been different to those sketched by the system’s designers, and have reflected different strategies for dealing with blame for poor performance. Within central government departments, ministers and senior officials in individual departments have largely shared accountability, in terms of reporting and justifying performance. Responsibility for personal contributions to performance and for departmental performance, with associated praise or blame, has been shared between ministers and senior officials but has been limited. Ministers have been criticised by opposition Parliamentarians and by many sections of the newspaper media for their departments’ failures to meet targets. However, there has been little pressure on ministers to resign or formal sanctioning of senior officials following poor performance against targets.

An alternative model of Parliamentary, media and public oversight of targets would assess the levels of performance against targets rather than concentrating on the dichotomy of hitting or missing targets. It might examine performance levels in the
light of an assessment about the ambition of the original target and developments affecting progress during the period. Such a model might suggest that a certain proportion of targets for a department could be missed without invoking strong criticism, with the proportion perhaps depending on the ambition of the level of the target. However, the system of executive interaction with Parliament, the media and the public is not consistent with such a model. Instead, the current emphasis on targets as pledges and a concern with avoiding blame has led to the widespread use of blame avoidance strategies.

Ministers and senior officials have engaged in blame avoidance strategies by noting that progress towards targets is affected by factors outside of their direct control including the activities of local and other public bodies. Responsibility for shared targets has been particularly difficult to allocate, calling into question the desirability of PSAs as a ‘cross-cutting’ accountability arrangement as suggested by proponents of ‘joined-up government’, if these proponents simultaneously want to preserve the sort of incentives set out by the designers of the PSA system. The allocation of responsibility and associated blame between central government and other parts of the public sector has been less cooperative than allocation within Whitehall. There has been extensive public criticism of the target regime by those working in health and local public services. Increasing the participation of these actors in the target setting process might raise the legitimacy of the system amongst those responsible for delivery and make it more difficult for them to avoid criticism for failing to reach future targets. Senior officials in the Treasury have recently encouraged departments to consult more widely on targets when setting them, in part, so that responsibility for different contributions to their achievement can be
negotiated. Additionally, granting local bodies more autonomy for setting and delivering their own priorities might pass responsibility and blame to them. However, the Treasury’s recent proposals for ‘constrained discretion’ appear largely limited to ‘increased local flexibility in delivery’ of services rather than granting more local autonomy in priority setting (Treasury, 2003, p.20).

Presentational strategies for avoiding blame have been attempted, the most blatant of which has been the misreporting of performance in some health service and local bodies. However, selective presentation of performance against targets has been used by central government to suggest a more favourable pattern of performance than that suggested by opposition parties. Independent validation of information and judgements about performance based on the data might bolster the credibility of the reporting systems. Some PSA data already draws on national statistics that have, since June 2000, been monitored by the Statistics Commission which operates independently of ministers to ensure that the statistics are both of appropriate quality and trustworthy. The National Audit Office has recently been asked to examine the data systems underlying the reporting of PSA targets to check that they are ‘robust and reliable’. The Public Administration Committee has recommended that assessments of performance against targets that are based on this information should be independently validated by NAO (Public Administration Select Committee, 2003b, question 1012; 2003c, p. 36 and p. 40). The opening up of performance information to Parliament and the public may restrict the ability of public bodies to use presentational strategies for reducing blame, restrict central government’s ability to maintain a cosy shared system of blame avoidance, and clarify the allocation of blame between central government and other public bodies. To the extent that these
strategies increasingly become unavailable, it could be that public bodies will in future place more emphasis on the alternative strategy of avoiding setting ambitious policy priorities that entail a risk of failure and an associated risk of being blamed.

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