

Review of Public Administration: Study Visits

Australia
Finland
Germany
Ireland
Michigan, USA
Netherlands
New Zealand
Ontario, Canada
Spain
Sweden

Each paper gives some background information on the country visited e.g. populations, history, basic structure of government. There is also a summary paper which can be found as an appendix to the main Review of Public Administration (RPA) consultation document.

Australia

- The Commonwealth Government is made up of 17 Departments, 45 Statutory Authorities and 7 Executive Agencies. Its powers include taxation, foreign policy, defence, trade, social services and immigration. Government is elected on a bi-cameral system – there is a Senate and House of Representatives.
- Each State has its own constitution, government and legislative framework, and has responsibility for all the main public services such as health, education, transport, state development, law and order, community services and housing. They receive funding from the Commonwealth Government based on needs and have some tax-raising powers.
- The State governments then have responsibility for local governments, determining the size, number and funding of local councils. Viewed as minor, their responsibilities include road maintenance, waste, town planning and libraries.
- The Council of Australian Government unites all three tiers on significant issues such as structural reform and the economy. There are around 40 specific councils within this, which aim to facilitate consultation and cooperation between governments.
- The paper gives the specific example of the State of Victoria and the city of Melbourne, and the division of services provided.
- Reform of the public sector came about due to a 1976 report that highlighted the inefficiency of government, and a perception that public services were ineffective and that government was bureaucratic and unresponsive.
- Reform has taken place throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The main aims have been to improve the transparency of financial and management

systems, to improve the responsiveness of public sector staff to change and to move away from the 'one size fits all' approach.

- The reform resulted in the removal of a culture of central control and substantial devolution of responsibility to individual departments and agencies and large scale privatisation. There was substantial reduction in staffing and the number of federal departments was reduced.
- The introduction of an outcomes and outputs focus has made a significant impact on the way in which the Australian public sector delivers services. This enables scrutiny of the ability of public administration to deliver results.

Finland

- Finnish government is considerably similar to that of Sweden, which previously governed the area.
- Many levels: State – State Regional Administration – Provincial State Offices – Regional Municipal Administration – Municipalities.
- The State has responsibility for foreign policy, defence, public order and the judiciary, higher education, social insurance, roads and communications and labour market policy.
- State Regional Administration has responsibility for regional economy, the environment and regional functions of ministries.
- Provincial State Offices cover education, food, consumer affairs, health and social services, police administration, sport and youth affairs and the arts.
- The Regional Municipal Administration has responsibility for health care, vocational training and Regional Councils.
- Municipalities have local responsibility for Education, Social Services, water and energy, waste, roads, commerce and libraries.
- There has been a considerable amount of work on improving services in Finland. 150 one-stop-shops have been established.
- The Finnish Local Government Act 1995 states that municipalities 'shall strive to promote the welfare of their residents and sustainable development in their areas.' It places more emphasis on citizen engagement than ever before. There is a sense that the commitment to local government and its considerable independence from the state allows services to be tailored more appropriately to local needs.
- There is recognition at all levels that there is a need to coordinate central policy as it impacts on local government organisations.
- Municipalities are now beginning to create their own structures – examples are given in the paper.
- Councils are required to ensure that local residents and service users have opportunities to participate and influence their local authority's operations. The right of initiative allows residents the right to submit initiatives to the local authority and residents representing at least 5% of the vote may propose referenda.

Germany

- There are three distinct levels of government – federal, state (Länder) and local. There are approx. 15,000 local authorities for a population of over 83 million.
- Each of these administrative levels has its defined group of functions. The Federation and Länder do work together to create and administer legislation.
- The Federal administration is considerably smaller than most other European countries. Its main roles are the formulation of policy and the implementation of responsibility for areas including foreign policy, finance, defence, waterways and intelligence.
- Most Länder have a three-tier structure. Some of the functions include statistics, remuneration and pensions, regional finance and education, schools, health, roads, as well as local offices for federal functions such as waterways and agriculture.
- Local authorities are subject to the supervision of the Länder and deal with local matters as protected in the Constitution. When dealing with local matters within this definition they are on an equal footing with the federation and the Länder. Their responsibilities include law and order, schools, health and social services, housing, public transport, waste and utilities.
- The Indirect Public Administration has special tasks not incorporated into the direct state or local administration, mainly social security.
- A large number of public services are provided under 'private law'. The service has been subjected to a form of privatisation but this can range from state ownership and control to full privatisation.
- Some Länder carried out reforms aimed not only at promoting local self-government but also at strengthening the influence of citizens and giving them more scope for participation. The mayor and chief executive officer in almost all Länder are now directly elected.
- There is discussion ongoing about the future of federalism in a unified Germany as the political importance of local government has grown. Elected municipal and district councillors serve on a voluntary basis: they are not civil servants and therefore have a free mandate. They can at the same time be a member of the state or federal parliament.

Ireland

- There are 114 local authorities – county, city, borough and town councils. Within the county there may be borough or town councils. Councils are charged with providing a forum for democratic representation of the community and taking such action as necessary to promote community interest.
- Main functions of local government include housing, roads, water, recreation, arts and community development.
- Key responsibilities such as budgets and staffing are divided between reserved and executive functions.
- The system of governance supports the engagement of civic society in a manner not unlike that used in other parts of the EU on a partnership basis.

Michigan

- Michigan is one of 50 states subordinate to the United States government and as such this paper only examines the nature of Michigan State government. Due to the federal nature of US government (and in part because of historical arguments both for and against federalism), the states have a considerable degree of political freedom, yet also receive considerable funds from it.
- There are three main elements – the Legislature (which is bi-cameral), Administration and Judiciary. The Governor is the most powerful figure.
- The state delivers few public services itself – regulation of insurance companies, some taxes and the passing of state legislation. (The Federal Government has responsibility for foreign policy and defence, public order, the judicial system, higher education, social insurance and highways.
- Local government in Michigan is based on counties and townships, reflecting the 19th Century emphasis on a diffused executive function. There are two main categories – general purpose, that is counties, cities, townships, and special purpose units which are limited to the provision of specific services.
- General purpose responsibilities include elections, justice and prisoners, county roads, parks, water, waste, ports and airports, hospitals, libraries, property assessment and police and fire protection.
- Special purpose units cover local school and community college districts, library boards and joint hospital authorities.
- Each of the public sector bodies are undertaking a wide range of initiatives to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of services. A major drive is underway to improve accessibility to E-Government, and there are also opportunities for consolidation across municipalities.
- The system in Michigan provides significant opportunities for citizens to participate in the political process but still there is a strong commitment to community action. Community groups are funded through state and local government to undertake specific projects in areas such as housing and community development.
- County Councils have a choice of four structural formats, while cities and villages tend to use one of three models. More detail on these can be found in the paper.
- The whole system in Michigan is based on the development and engagement of local communities. 'In fact a possible criticism of the system is that it is too local to achieve the types of economy of scale required of the public sector in the United Kingdom'.
- The Voluntary and Community sector has access to a large number of wealthy charities and foundations, but still experiences similar problems to Northern Ireland – lack of skilled staff and some uncertainty over time-limited funds. Neighbourhood meetings are seen as the first step on the political ladder.

Netherlands

- There are three tiers of government – a standard central government with policy and financial responsibilities, a very limited provincial government which is mostly concerned with spatial planning (a key issue in this country) and a very strong municipal government.
- Municipal responsibilities include education, urban planning, housing, utilities and some health matters.
- There is a strong consensus culture in the Netherlands and coalitions prevail in local government.
- Improvement of services comes about by the municipality being very close to the electorate and the involvement and consultation of local people. There is a high level of cooperation between municipalities, facilitated by their local government association.
- Due to the consensus culture, a great deal of time is taken in striving for agreement. This has hampered the rationalisation of the number of councils.
- The voluntary sector is included in policy planning and development, as well as service provision.

New Zealand

- There is a single level central government with a House of Representatives and a cabinet, which spans 39 departments including defence, justice, health and education.
- There are 12 Regional Councils and four unitary authorities that operate as regional councils. Functions include natural resources and public transport.
- Local government is largely independent from central government and its roles are viewed as relatively minor, for example local roads, waste and libraries.
- There are 154 elected Community Boards which work in a similar way to the English Parish Councils. Their roles are determined by their local councils.
- Reform of the Public Sector began in the 1980s. The process was led by legislative reform and largely non-consultative. The key concepts were transparency, consistency, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency.

Ontario

- Canada is a decentralised federation with three levels of government – federal, provincial and local. Powers are separated between the federal and provincial levels. Municipalities are entirely creations of the Province and derive all powers and authority from the Province. Councillors have to stand on a personal mandate and are therefore directly accountable to the electorate.
- Federal government has responsibility for immigration, defence, federal justice, food and drugs, airports and highways, the environment and economic development.
- Provincial government covers education, health and social services, provincial justice, labour relations, consumers, natural resources and agriculture.

- Local government, such as the given example of the City of Toronto, has responsibility for waste, water, emergency services, local roads and public transport, local schools and public libraries, town planning and social and health services such as welfare, childcare and supportive housing.
- The number of departments and agencies in the federal government fluctuates largely at the will of the Prime Minister.
- Much intergovernmental work is taken forward through sectoral ministerial councils and there are also arrangements for working in formal partnerships with provincial and municipal governments on specific issues.
- The Provincial Government of Ontario has an independent constitutional basis of authority with few constraints on spending, taxation and the ability to borrow. It also has separate executive and legislative powers. It is organised much along the same lines as federal government with a Premier and cabinet.
- Public administration review in Ontario began with the change of Provincial government in 1995. The government recognised that the public's expectations are higher than ever and that people want greater transparency and involvement. The Citizen First survey is carried out across Canada every two years and the results help identify priorities.
- One of the key principles applied is the 'no wrong door' policy. The onus is on the public servant to ensure the customer gets the service required, therefore the official has to ensure that the referral is to the correct person and that the query will be handled without further delay. Ontario's e-Government strategy is an integral part of the overall quality service.
- There is a free information line available to all citizens to help them find the service they require, over all three levels of government. It is core funded.
- The Ontario Blue Pages initiative lists all public services as services that would be recognised by the citizens rather than just agencies, departments and divisions.

Spain

- The Constitution recognises and guarantees the right of self-government of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed. As well as the central state government, there are 17 autonomous regions, 50 provinces and over 8000 municipalities.
- Matters reserved to central government include foreign relations, defence, customs and excises, finance and transport.
- Each of the autonomous regions has an elected assembly and their powers include housing, agriculture and social welfare.
- The function of the provinces has been overshadowed by the growing power of the autonomous regions. Their role has increasingly evolved into one of cooperation and coordination between the state and the autonomous regions.
- Municipalities are responsible for public safety, civil defence, roads, utilities and recreation.

- There is a high degree of decentralisation and regions have autonomy in most areas of public service. Within the constitution the process of devolution of power to the regions is a continuing process.

Sweden

- In Sweden there is on average one elected member per 256 people (compared to 2,903 in Northern Ireland). The constitution protects regional and local authorities.
- There is a strong sense of civic and social responsibility and a desire to work on behalf of the community. There is an overall acceptance of the role of the state in people's daily lives.
- The state government's responsibilities include foreign policy and defence, the judicial system, higher education and housing. County Administrative Boards cover regional development and allocation of funds, while County Councils are responsible for health and dental care (including for people with special needs and learning difficulties) and support for culture and education.
- Municipalities have responsibilities for education, social services, emergency services, recreation and energy. Local government is strong with a clear delineation between it and the role of the state.
- The municipalities use not only directly employed staff but also private contractors and the voluntary sector, where appropriate. There is a culture of collaboration across municipalities. Residents have a wide range of choice of service providers.
- The sense of community responsibility is very strong. Citizens can challenge the decision making process of municipalities.
- The system is very party-led and consideration is being given to changing the voting system so that people vote for identified candidates rather than a party. There is also continuing debate over the size of councils.
- Given the pervasive influence of political parties, there is little evidence of the engagement of civic society.

One key issue that arises in all papers is the increasing use of e-Government to promote efficiency and transparency of services.