



# **What can German and English Public Agencies Learn from Each Other?**

**Report of a Study Trip to London by  
the German Leadership College in Speyer**

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## Purpose of the study trip to London

This report sets out the key activities and learning points from the study trip of the German Leadership College to London in June 2011. Its aim was to compare the British government system with the German one. Governance International, as our partner in the United Kingdom, helped us to plan an interesting and challenging study trip programme.

## What the German Leadership College is about

The German Leadership College (Führungskolleg Speyer) is a further education institution of the German Länder and the Federal Employment Agency. Prof. Dr. Hermann Hill, former State Minister, is responsible for the design and organisation of its training programme, the objective of which is the preparation of the top civil servants, who are usually current Head of Divisions, for a future position as Head of Department in Ministries.

The training course runs for 2 years with 12 weeks of training. The main theme of this course is modern leadership, in all its facets. In particular, the course focuses on change management, decision making and problem solving in the public sector, and strengthening the capacity of participants for consulting and communicating with the political leadership. Furthermore, the course explores how to collaborate with citizens and the general public.

The College programme emphasises that it is very important not only to see how one's own organisation, and one's own civil service, works but also to compare it with organisations and with civil services in other European states. Against the background of European integration and of globalisation more generally, civil servants should be able to understand and absorb the lessons from different political and administrative systems. In particular, Europe is a very diverse area with many different cultural backgrounds and ideas of what the welfare state is about. So modern civil servants should be aware of the range of different beliefs across Europe about the appropriate relationships between politicians and civil servants, and to understand how these vary between cultural backgrounds and different administrative contexts.



*Hermann Hill und Elke Löffler*

## Key learning points – what makes the British public sector different from the German state

During the week it became clear that there are great differences between the UK and Germany—not simply that cars drive on the “wrong side” of road but in many more ways, too. The UK traditionally belongs to the so-called neo-liberal welfare states, whereas Germany belongs to the conservative-corporatist welfare states. The strong belief behind the neo-liberal welfare state approach is that the free market can deal with most problems more effectively and better than the state<sup>1</sup>. The main focus is on strengthening the sense of responsibility of individual citizens for themselves, rather than on strengthening their relationship to the State.

This became particularly clear in discussions during the study trip about the so-called “free school programme”. Even though there are similar schools in Germany which are run by the churches or which have special educational programmes, such schools are exceptional. However, the free school programme highlights a very different relation between the state and the citizen – one in which many citizens are expected to wish to free themselves (and their children) from the direct control of the State over their public services.

This demonstrates how the UK understanding of the relationship between citizen and State is very different from the German one. Citizens in the UK seem to be participating more in ‘civil society’ initiatives rather than consuming state-run benefits. Indeed, as *Governance International* found out in a survey of European citizens in 2008, UK citizens are doing more to improve their own health, the local environment and safety in their neighbourhood than German citizens. Good examples of this outlook were given by members of the Co-Production Advisory Group of the Think Local Act Personal Partnership who briefed the participants about co-production in social care and health in the UK.

The UK has obviously not yet found a sustainable solution to managing the impacts of the



*Group discussion*

1 Esping-Andersen, Gøsta. 1996. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

economic crisis of 2008/09. The conservative-liberal coalition which won the General Election in 2010 has proposed many programmes with the aim of solving the social and financial problems (e.g. the 'Big Society' initiative, budget cuts, etc.)

Since the 1980's German political parties across the country have agreed that there should be more active citizenship. The principle of subsidiarity and the idea of the 'activating state' became more popular<sup>2</sup>, based on the idea that citizens should participate in society in a more active way. So the ideas behind the 'Big Society' were not new for us. It will be interesting, nevertheless, to keep a close watch on what will happen to them in the UK—the outcomes cannot be predicted at this stage.

We found out that the civil service in the UK is not as large as the German one. Many professions which belong to the German civil service (e. g. teachers) are not part of the civil service in the UK, although they are part of the public sector.

Another important difference goes back to the German government system. Compared with Germany the British government is able to run the country in a straight top-down process, right down to the local authorities. After the change of government, local authorities instantly had to respond to new political issues and policies.

In contrast, in Germany the Länder (states) are on most issues independent from the Bund (federal level). The constitutional rights of local self-government and subsidiarity mean that the German system is more bottom-up than top-down. According to Article 83 of the German Constitution, the Länder are independently responsible for executing federal law, rather than acting as agents of the Bund. They are an autonomous administration level. This autonomy is assured in the German constitution.

Moreover, due to a strong tradition of local self-government, Bund or Land policies cannot be imposed top-down upon local authorities. This might not always be ideal, because it can allow inertia or bureaucracy, but on the other hand it also protects the local authorities in times of rapid political changes. In our opinion the federal system has a stabilising effect and provides continuity.

This is a big difference from the British system, where central government reigns at the peak of a top-down process and where, after every election, agendas change completely, even at local level. We heard about the latest British efforts to decentralise policies e.g. through the new Localism Bill. Clearly, this is not an issue in Germany where local public services are already 'localised'.

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<sup>2</sup> Bandemer, von, Stephan and Josef Hilbert. 2010. Vom expandierenden zum aktivierenden Staat. In: Blanke, Bernhard, Stephan von Bandemer, Frank Nullmeier and Göttrick Wewer (Eds). Handbuch zur Verwaltungsreform. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp.26–35.

## Lessons learnt from the study visit

Our programme was very well planned and on Monday Elke Loeffler, Shahana Ramsden and Frankie Hine-Hughes from *Governance International* gave us an introduction on the British government system and current political trends. We heard about devolution, co-production, 'Big Society' and the role of the civil service.

Afterwards Claire Holloway and Christina Dykes from the Local Government Group (LGA) explained their organisation and the aim of their work. In Germany there are some organisations which are similar to the Local Government Group, e. g. the Städte und Gemeindetag, therefore we were very eager to learn how they work. Especially interesting was the fact that, in the Local Government Group, it is not important which party you come from, but only that you are a local authority. It actually gave us an excellent insight into British society and the co-operative and non-party-political nature of some parts of the governmental system. Christina Dykes told us what the idea of 'Big Society' is about and how it should work. This highlighted that the 'Big Society' has its source in the neo-liberal welfare state and the idea of free markets and active citizenship. Some of our course members were not sure if the idea will work, even in the UK, in its ideal form, because we could not imagine so many people working voluntarily in their free time. Of course, we may have been seeing everything through the lens of our own cultural background! So we learned a lot about our own values and culture and began to understand to recognise the implications of differences between the German and English cultures.

A highlight was our visit to the National School of Government (NSG) in Ascot on Monday afternoon. The National School of Government offers training for the civil service, similarly to our own organisation. However, at first glance there appeared to be remarkable differences between our organisation and the National School of Government—it is not only a much bigger institution but trains a much wider cadre of public sector staff than just executives. Furthermore, the NSG does not receive public funding, unlike the German Leadership College which is entirely state financed.



*Winston Sutherland and  
Adrian Rossiter, NSG*

We learned from Adrian Rossiter, Principal International Consultant that the NSG has to survive in competition both with private organisations, which also provide training for civil servants, and with universities and colleges. This was the most surprising difference—in Germany the organisations that give qualifications to civil servants are mostly state universities or other public organisations. In the last few years, some public and private organisations have also penetrated the market, but they are rather smaller and provide training for people who would like to work as civil servants in the future, rather than current civil servants.

Dr. Winston Sutherland, Senior Executive Portfolio Leader and Organisational Consultant made a presentation on NSG's training methods, which were not different from ours. His method was to engage closely with the course participants, so we got a really inter-active session. During this session he explained the different course programmes for civil servants at all stages of their careers. However, he also mentioned that some radical changes were under way in the organisational structure of the NSG, due to budget-cutting and competition in the market. Finally, he told us about the design of NSG's measurement of training outcomes and course evaluation, which wasn't different from our own methods.

On Tuesday we visited the London Borough of Camden where we got some really interesting information on the use of social media in local authorities. We found out that Britain is much more up-to-date than Germany. The use of Twitter and Facebook is very popular in the UK. So the local borough council also uses these platforms to reach their citizens. For example, one day in winter last year, some parks were closed because staff could not get into work to open them. Some people complained on Twitter about this problem. The Camden Borough Council picked this up from its internet scanning system, and could contact them within a few minutes, using Facebook and Twitter, to give them the reason. Moreover, this response was then visible to all those who followed the people to whom this response was sent, greatly widening the communication at no extra expense to the council. Even better, when these citizens commented how pleased they were with the rapid response, this was also passed on rapidly through their Facebook 'friends' and Twitter 'followers', so that Camden council gained some really positive PR.



*Visit to the London Borough of Camden*

Very innovative was the presentation of Felicity Shaw from the Cabinet Office, who told us about the idea of a new website (AlphaGov) which works in the same way as Google. All these methods are of assistance in achieving a connection between citizens and the different levels of government. We saw these approaches as really innovative and less bureaucratic. The social media consultant Will Perrin presented his project “Talk about Local”, where he helps local citizen groups to provide their own e-platform to show what is going on in their neighbourhood. This idea arose from his own experience, when he lived in Camden in the early 1990’s. He found out then how some active people can change a whole neighbourhood in a positive way, just by showing that they are there and are interested in the local community. Now, his websites help other local citizen groups around the country to develop a platform which helps them to organize themselves, to stay in contact and to show the world what is going on in their neighbourhood.

In the afternoon, Shahana Ramsden of Governance International, presented the concept of co-production with her Advisory Co-Production Group. The Department of Health has been working with this group for two years and been consulting them on health and social care issues. It showed that co-production is a good method to achieve better outcomes and work more efficiently. Citizens are seen as experts on the issues which matter to them, e.g. their own health and social well-being. They often have much more experience on what they really need and have good ideas on what could work. This approach is also one way to make the ‘Big Society’ work and to embed citizens’ views in public agencies.

On Wednesday we got the chance to see how innovation is implemented in the UK public sector. We visited the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) and talked to Halima Khan, Director of the Public Service Lab, about NESTA’s work on innovation. It was very interesting to hear that the Endowment (a national charity) was founded to solve existing problems through new and unusual ideas. We were very impressed by the basic idea “Innovation with people for people”, because again it became clear that active citizenship plays an important role in the British public sector. One focus of NESTA is on ‘Mass Localism’, which means that solutions should be found individually at the local or even neighbourhood level, rather than in a top-down process by central and local government. NESTA gave us some really good suggestions.



After our visit to NESTA we were pleased to have the opportunity to meet David Davies, MP, at the Houses of Parliament. We listened to a discussion in the House of Commons and then talked to David Davies off-the-record. It was eye-catching that the Government is situated in the very traditional Houses of Parliament, close to the River Thames and, of course, Big Ben. The interior design is stamped by traditions and the impressive history of the United Kingdom. In contrast, the Members of Parliament discuss very current themes. So we saw the bridging between tradition and the modern spirit. This bridge was also apparent when David Davies, MP, talked about his view of the European Union. He told us that most British people, of course, are not against people of different European nations. But society in the United Kingdom is shaped by its history and geographical position. The British Isles were, over hundreds of years, isolated from the European Continent. So British society developed in a more individualist way. This development is one of the reasons why the UK has some problems with the organisational form of the European Union and its bureaucracy.

On Thursday we went to the Well London Project, whose offices are situated at the Greater London Authority. We could enjoy not only the wonderful modern architecture (full of modern symbolism, unlike the Houses of Parliament!) but also a brilliant presentation from Alison Pearce, Programme Manager. She told us how the Well London Project was initiated to increase the quality of life, health and well being of the most deprived citizens in London. It also works through the concept of co-production. She told us that the project is organised locally in very small neighbourhoods. Mostly, third sector organisations work with the people in the neighbourhoods and help them to organise meetings or festivals or just to clean up the streets and playgrounds. The outcomes of the project are

being evaluated by the University of East London. Dr. Gemma Phillips gave us a good outline of the evaluation design.

At the Institute for Government, a private think tank which provides strategic analysis for the Government and civil service, Jill Rutter, Programme Director, told us that British politicians have rarely such huge experience in leadership that Germans have. Julian MacCrae gave us a short presentation on the British financial situation and possible solutions. Afterwards we spoke with Ian Moss and Kate Blatchford about “Making the ‘Big Society’ work”. Unfortunately we heard nothing about concrete methods through which the ‘Big



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Society' could be made to work or how the budget-cutting process will be managed.

On our last day we had a concluding session with Tony Bovaird, Director, *Governance International* und Professor of Public Management and Policy, University of Birmingham. He answered our questions and set our impressions in perspective.

The whole week was very profitable and we learned a lot about ourselves and our German system, as well as about British society, Government and Civil Service. The UK is in many ways very different from Germany. But these differences gave us new insights into our own problems, indicated possible solutions for old problems or just enriched our thoughts. We are sure that the aim of our study trip, to learn from another culture and to get a better understanding of different ways of governing and working has been achieved.

Obviously the new conservative-liberal coalition in the UK has not yet solved all the problems caused by the financial crisis so far. However, the ideas currently being developed in the UK are brave as well as challenging. We will have a close look at the UK again in a few years and see what has happened to co-production, the budget-cutting process and the 'Big Society'.

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