

# THE FLAG BEARERS

Wales can learn a lot from Denmark's thriving public sector. That's the premise of a pioneering scheme that has helped Welsh public-sector leaders to develop a new perspective on their roles back home

BY TIM SMEDLEY



In a classroom in a barn surrounded by shovels, axes, deer heads and various other spiky or flammable items, the group of visitors gasped – this would never be allowed in the UK! Children can come to this Danish farm on school trips and are allowed to tend the fields, build temporary structures from wooden poles and straw bales, and even cut down trees. With real saws!

“It is a dilemma,” Peter Laxdal, of the “From garden to stomach” initiative, told the assembled party of Welsh public-sector leaders and policy-makers. “The farm is a dangerous place and health and safety is strict in Denmark. Maybe even our hay castle is not legal.”

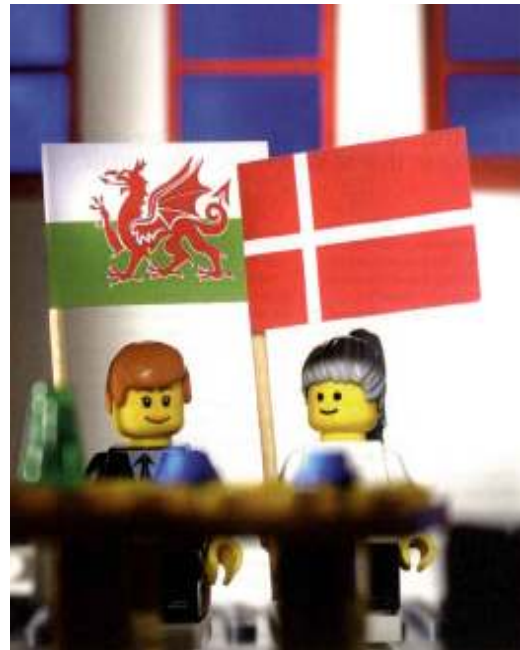
Later he presented some slides, including one of children getting a ride on a dilapidated tractor trailer. “The kids loved it – it was a highlight. We watched through our fingers hoping it wouldn't fall apart,” he joked. But, when one of the group pointed out that even a sharp knife to cut carrots with wouldn't be allowed in the UK, Laxdal realised that perhaps his country's regulations weren't that strict after all.

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The visit to Laxdal's environmental education project was one of several for the 17 senior Welsh public servants, who in March spent three eye-opening days in Copenhagen. Including a viscount, a lady, a knight, county council chief executives, police chiefs and NHS directors, they were taking part in a programme called “Beyond boundaries: a leadership inquiry in Denmark”.

Sue Pritchard, principal consultant at the Bath Consultancy group, organised the trip and helped to design the programme. A specialist in leadership development with over 15 years' consultancy experience, she knew all about the difficulties of running leadership development schemes in companies, with their internal politics and budgetary constraints. But the problems she now faced were in a whole new stratosphere: a leadership programme for the leaders of an entire country, with real politics and a national budget – not to mention a public-sector-bashing press – to contend with.

“This project has been quite tough to organise because it's broken new ground in Wales,” Pritchard says. “There was a risk that the politicians and public might have seen it as inappropriate for public-service leaders to be jetting off abroad. It raised all sorts of political issues.”



For Pritchard, a proud Welshwoman, the importance of the programme was keenly felt, both personally and professionally. “I was getting increasingly frustrated by people saying ‘we can't do this or do that in Wales because we're too small',” she recalls. “I knew from my professional background that some small countries rate very highly in international rankings for health and well-being, citizen satisfaction, engagement and so on. The idea took shape that it would be good for those in our public services to see what ‘good' looks like.”

“Good”, as it turned out, looked like Denmark, which was always Pritchard's destination of choice. Similar in size to Wales but with a larger population, Denmark has the highest citizen satisfaction ratings in Europe for its public services. Chosen for its exemplary “small country governance”, it had also recently restructured its public services (see panel).

But it was far from clear whether such restructuring would be possible, or indeed desirable, in Wales, or what the leadership challenges had been. “Then, as luck would have it, the Beecham review reported in July 2006 with very clear recommendations,” says Pritchard. “So the idea of exposing Welsh leaders to other small country leaders suddenly took off and we were able to develop the programme rapidly after that.”

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The concept of a leadership inquiry, however, was largely new to a group whose members may have thought that they had seen it all before. Neil Wooding, director of Public Service Management Wales and also the commissioner for equality and human rights in the principality, worked with Pritchard to set up the inquiry and subsequently participated in it. As he explains: “If you put people on a programme and say: ‘You're going to learn about such and such,’ and that isn't an issue that's resonating with their particular organisation at that time, the knowledge is often stored and then discarded.

A leadership inquiry is different, because people are in charge of what they learn themselves. The idea is that the heart of learning is finding the right questions to ask. And those questions will be relevant and meaningful to them in that context at that particular time.”

This “see but don’t tell; ask but don’t answer” approach was hard to sell at first. At the group’s initial exploratory meeting in November 2006, some people arrived wondering if they were wasting their time, according to Wooding.

“The first session was very much about what questions we needed to ask, but when people sat back and thought about it there were tons of questions,” he says. “There was a tremendous amount of energy – and already we were seeing this transference of responsibility for learning.”

## CHANGE MANAGEMENT, DANISH STYLE

While the 2006 Beecham review in Wales identified major themes to drive public-sector change, the Danes were lining up to implement their own 2005 review, simply titled “Local government reform”. Rather than looking at themes, however, this was a plan for what its authors described as “the largest overall reform of the public sector in our generation”. That was, if anything, an understatement.

Since 1970 Denmark had been divided into 271 municipalities (similar to British counties) for local government, ranging in population size from just over 1,000 to more than 100,000. In January 2007 this went down to 98 municipalities, encompassed within five new regions, literally creating, as the report says, “a new map for Denmark”.

The Welsh leadership inquiry group arrived in Denmark while all this was still very new. They visited Thomas Therkildsen, head of the OD department at the National Association of Local Authorities, whose role was to help public-sector leaders come to terms with these fresh challenges.

“There has been a process of flattening organisations and reducing hierarchy,” Therkildsen informed the group. “To cope with the cultural change, first you have to get the executives to describe their values, style, who has authority over what issues and so on. You also need ‘new value’ processes – which describe the new values they want to be known for as an organisation, and to map these out from the start. We offer texts on merger management and team-building activities, for example. At the moment, though, they have a strong emphasis on practical matters – things in these new offices are still in boxes, you know.”

Once the participants had come up with the questions they wanted to explore, the design of the programme was agreed. After a group meeting in January, three smaller groups or learning sets would meet a week before the visit to Copenhagen in March and again in April, with a final meeting of the whole group scheduled for late May.

According to Pritchard, the things that came up before, during and after the trip were the big national themes for Wales and for leadership. “But we were also keen to see them explore how change comes about when leaders do things differently on a day-to-day basis, at a micro level.”

So how do public-sector leaders in Denmark do things? “It’s clear to me that they operate with a high degree of intuitive skill. They understand where other parties are coming from and manage their leadership styles strategically,” says Wooding. But he is critical about some of what he observed, especially a “slight sloppiness” on gender issues. Citing the example of pictures of topless women used in posters promoting road safety, he remarks: “That’s unacceptable, really.”

During their stay in Denmark, the participants visited organisations in which they had shown an interest. Scattered around Copenhagen and the local area, these included the National Association of Local Authorities, a youth health awareness project, an ethnic minority lobby group and, of course, the “From garden to stomach” project, with its hands-on approach to environmental education. The somewhat laissez-faire attitude to health and safety that the visitors found on this trip to the beautiful farmland of Humblebaek, 40km from the capital, started a debate about whether Wales and the rest of the UK had become too risk-averse. This chance to stand back and consider British practices from a different perspective proved one of the most valuable elements of the whole programme.

As Isobel Garner, chief executive of Wrexham County Borough Council, puts it, by looking at the Danish approach to public-service delivery, the group members were able to “hold up a mirror” to what they were doing in Wales.

Certainly, if any participants had hoped to come back from Copenhagen with a blueprint for how to tackle the challenges facing Wales after its devolution, they would have been disappointed. “Some of the cultural differences are vast – the high voter turnout, the affluence – and if you don’t understand those, it’s pointless to try to apply the same structures and processes back home,” says Colin Everett, organisational development director for the Welsh Local Government Association. “This visit was always more about understanding ourselves better.”

It was also about giving participants much-needed time out to reflect, says Garner. But she doesn’t view the programme entirely through rose-tinted spectacles.

“For Wales to raise its game, it needs leaders who are prepared to take big risks. But the trip ended up being almost all things to all people. On reflection, if I had said: ‘I’m interested in what develops a culture of risk-taking,’ then perhaps my visits would have been more about asking the Danes for their evidence.”

Sir Adrian Webb, chairman of Pontypridd and Rhondda NHS Trust, another participant on the programme and co-author of the Beecham report (see panel), also has mixed feelings about the trip. “I think this kind of engagement with other countries that are not dissimilar in size to us is important,” he says. “This is a first try – I think there are things I would try to change. You could take a group that wholly comprises health and safety personnel, for example, to look at health and safety over there. Take a policy community so they come back and know each other better as a policy community.”

## **BEECHAM: FROM REVIEW TO REALITY**

In July 2006 Sir Jeremy Beecham presented his review of local government in Wales to the National Assembly of Wales. In his foreword, Beecham stated: “We have been unable, but nor were we asked, to inquire into every service. But we have identified some major themes.”

One such theme was leadership as a key driver for change. The report called for a new form of leadership, with “the Welsh Assembly government leading not through bureaucracy, but through engagement”. Its recommendations included “giving priority to developing a cadre of highly effective leaders and managers, capable of working across agencies and sectors”; “creating a culture that encourages learning”; and “developing effective problem-solving and innovating managers at every level and rewarding good performance with greater freedom”.

Although the Denmark leadership inquiry did not happen as a direct result of the Beecham review, the common goals were obvious and helped to sway political opinion in favour of the programme, as did the calls within the report for a focus on “small country governance” and “collaboration with other countries”.

So was the attempt to learn from Danish systems futile, was the leadership learning too unstructured, and, indeed, can the leadership inquiry help bring about any change in Wales?



“I think it’s quite powerful using your Denmark experience, your personal learning, and operating at those three levels: the individual, the organisation, and Wales-wide,” says Garner.

The learning set meetings after the Danish experience, which gave group members the chance to share their personal reflections, left her feeling optimistic both about her own learning

and about the future of the inquiry group. Yet she also believes that it will be difficult to hold the group together now that the formal leadership programme has ended.

“But I don’t necessarily think that will be a bad thing,” Garner adds. “I think that actually there’ll be far more energy and momentum if people cluster around the things they are passionate about – because what you can’t do is get 17 people equally excited about everything.”

If the original group does now splinter into several smaller groups, that won’t be a coincidence. It will be the outcome of many months of pre-planning and Pritchard’s and Wooding’s faith in self-managed learning as a driver for senior leadership development.

When asked about the future for the group, Pritchard responds: “I’m imagining that we will form ongoing self-managed action learning sets. Where people feel strongly motivated to gather around themes and issues, they will continue to meet to progress those issues. Whereas the structured programme might come to an end, the impact and effect of the programme will continue.” And this is exactly what seems to be happening.

Wooding believes that the inquiry process of raising questions and learning with people from a diverse cross-section of public services could mark the start of a new approach to leadership education in Wales.

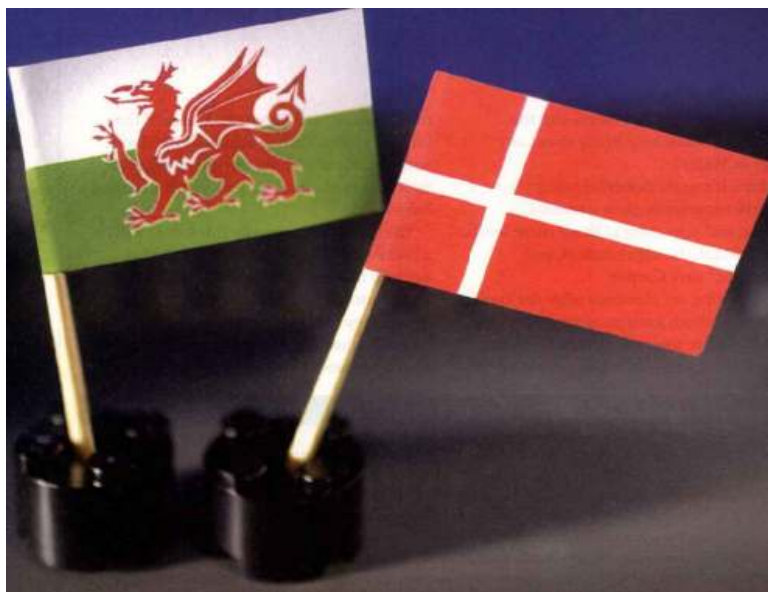
“We’re working with a group of 17 individuals at the top of their organisations – and that’s a powerful community,” he says. “You build continuing relationships on such unique experiences and I think it has a bearing long after the event.”

Mirroring the complex nature of this leadership inquiry, the future that Wooding refers to covers individual leadership styles, leadership development programmes, the group – “the Copenhagen set” – and Wales itself.

“I think the success of the trip is about the calibre of the people and the opportunity to spend quality time with them in a loose framework,” says Garner. “You take off your job hat and you put on your head-and-heart hat – you go back to who you are, as opposed to what job you do.

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That's perhaps even more important than the process of going to Denmark." However, she adds: "It worked!"



Group members will shortly be producing a pamphlet based on the blogs that they kept during the inquiry. Some are also planning to speak at various conferences, including those of the Welsh Local Government Association, the NHS Confederation and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers.

Meanwhile, Sue Pritchard is weighing up her choices for her next leadership inquiry: "New Zealand and maybe, just maybe, Botswana," she says. "My next plan will be to see how we can

work with the group that's been to Denmark to support the next group to connect with another country, so that we have lots of people in Wales who have had experiences in lots of different countries, and that experience becomes shared and widely available around the Welsh system.

"That's my fantasy future. We call it the widening circle of inclusion – you start off with a small nugget and you widen it and widen it, and in the end you build such a powerful critical mass for change that you pass the tipping point."

We can only wait and see whether the Copenhagen set and subsequent inquiries will lead Wales towards a new form of "small country governance". But a devolved Wales is undoubtedly changing, and such initiatives can only help to build momentum.