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# Evaluation of Quality Conferences

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# Evaluation of Quality Conferences

## Executive Summary

1. This review was commissioned by Ministers, at a meeting in the Hague in 2004, to help determine the future strategy for conferences beyond 4QC, as part of their overall programme for improvement.
2. The following table sets out a summary of the key findings and recommendations arising for Minister's consideration. The attached report and annexes contain the detailed findings of the review and recommendations, together with some practical guides for implementation.

### **Summary of key findings and recommendations**

#### **Key findings**

1. *The Quality conferences have done much to achieve the Ministerial objective set for them of spreading best practice;*
2. *There is great support for Quality Conferences across Europe;*
3. *There is a danger that the primary aim of spreading best practice can become lost in complexities;*
4. *The quality of the cases presented has been variable;*
5. *There has not always been enough time for discussion and true learning;*
6. *Little has been done to evaluate how learning has been implemented after the conferences;*
7. *The European nature of the conference remains important to all.*

#### **Key Recommendations**

1. *Quality Conferences should continue;*
2. *Simplify the structure and content;*
3. *Keep the theme/s simple and ensure titles of sessions reflect content*
4. *Improve the selection and quality of best practice cases through greater involvement of DGs and IPSTG members for quality assurance.*
5. *Allow time and space for proper discussion and learning.*
6. *Cases at the Quality Conferences should enable learning and transferability;*

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>7. <i>Evaluate success;</i></li><li>8. <i>Disseminate good practice and innovative ideas more widely.</i></li></ol> |
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3. From our research into past Quality Conferences and our analysis of the views of Directors General and IPSG members, it appears that much would be lost if the Quality Conferences were not held in the future, particularly the feeling of unity and common goals among European Public Administrations. It is also clear that the Quality Conferences have done much to achieve their prime objective set by Ministers in 1998: namely to *“make comparisons and to enable Europe’s public administrations to learn from each other.”*
4. However it is also our view that to achieve this aim in the future, those determining the content and organisation of Quality Conferences will need to keep the key aim of spreading best practice in mind. Some are of the view that this aim can inadvertently become lost when a conference becomes overly complex, in terms of organisation, subject themes and the practicalities of aiming to meet the needs of an overly diverse set of attendees.
5. For the future, the key determinants for success will be having clear themes and targeted audiences, high quality sessions and cases to discuss, excellent speakers, and more opportunities for true discussion and networking. And of course all of this has to be provided at the right cost to applicants. Detailed findings and recommendations follow at pages 6 to.10.

# Evaluation of Quality Conferences (add to title)

## 1. The Beginning: why a Quality Conference?

- 1.1 In order to improve the quality of the public services offered to citizens, EU public service Ministers agreed in November 1998 that there should be a best practice conference in the field of public administration, as part of a wider “best practice” quality initiative which included benchmarking and bench-learning. They proposed that Directors General should oversee the development of an overall framework for assessing the quality of administrative organisations “*in order to make comparisons and to enable Europe’s public administrations to learn from each other.*”
- 1.2 Guidelines were produced for the selection of best practice in public administration and these cases were presented at an international conference in Spring 2000, the first EU Quality Conference for Public Administrations, held in Lisbon. Since then, EU Quality Conferences have been organised on a biannual basis: Copenhagen in 2002 (2QC) and Rotterdam in 2004 (3QC). 4QC will take place between 27-29 September at Tampere in Finland. The established rule is that the Presidency country nominates a country to host the next EU Quality Conference and IPSPG members then oversee its development, reporting to Directors General and Ministers of EPAN.
- 1.3 The Quality Conferences have been designed to address the principles of the Lisbon Strategy (2000), i.e. to establish an effective internal market by 2010, by boosting research and innovation so that the European Union should become “*the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*”.

## 2. The Review

- 2.1 At a meeting in the Hague in 2004, the Directors General commissioned a review to help determine the future strategy for conferences beyond 4QC, as part of their overall programme for improvement.

### **Key aim and objectives**

- 2.2 The purpose of this review was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Quality Conferences and to make recommendations to Ministers and Director Generals (DGs) on the desirability and/or future strategy for Quality Conferences or alternatives. This will enable Ministers to consider the future of Quality Conferences before any decision is taken beyond 4QC.
- 2.3 The key objectives of the review were to evaluate:
  - The overall aims and objectives for past conferences and whether these were met;

- How past conferences have encouraged improvements in the delivery of public administration; and
- The impact of Quality Conferences in relation to national and international improvements in public administration.

## **Methodology**

### 2.4 The review encompassed two key strands:

- Firstly, a review of all the paper documentation and other information on past Quality Conferences, including all official evaluations, minutes of Ministerial, DG and IPSP meetings etc. We also spoke with past conference organisers and also with Finnish colleagues as they prepare for 4QC. As part of this analysis, we looked at key aspects of the design and delivery of conferences including an analysis of who has attended and the cost involved for attendees and for host countries. A detailed analysis of the official evaluations and outline of the planned fourth Quality Conference is at **Annex 1**.
- Secondly, an analysis of two separate questionnaires, one for DGs and one designed for IPSP members. These questionnaires received a very good response rate with 19 countries submitting detailed responses;
- In addition, we have also liaised with a major conference organiser to determine their guidelines for success.

2.5 The review team would like to thank IPSP members for their detailed responses to the questionnaire and for the time they have taken to gather their DGs' views. The number and quality of responses has meant that we can be confident of overall views, with some very clear messages coming through, which we hope will help our Finnish colleagues in preparation for 4QC and for others beyond this. The review team would also like to thank the members of IPSP who volunteered to act as a "reference panel". These people advised on drafts of the questionnaire and commented on emerging findings.

### **3. Key findings**

3.1 The first key message is that all Directors General and IPSP members agree that Quality Conferences should continue beyond 4QC. There is great support for them. DGs and IPSP members mentioned a number of significant benefits, together with a number of suggestions for ensuring the success of Quality Conferences in the future. These benefits and suggestions for improvement are outlined below.

#### **Principal benefits**

3.2 DGs and IPSP members highlighted the following principal benefits of attending Quality Conferences:

- networking and the opportunity to build networks for future work;
- the sharing of best practice and the exchange of good ideas;
- putting quality firmly onto the agenda and reinforcing the idea that public services need to focus on the citizen and focus on quality from the citizen's perspective;
- acting as a forum for new methods, e.g. sharing of knowledge about quality improvement tools and how to maximise their potential, e.g. CAF, EFQM Excellence Model and others;
- the opportunity to hear from recognised experts;
- the opportunity to discuss tips and approaches, both formally and informally;
- acting as a stimulus and motivator for driving improvement in one's own country;
- adding an edge to national and regional conferences.

#### **The European nature of the Conferences**

3.3 DGs and IPSP members are strongly supportive of the European nature of the conferences. Indeed it is this aspect which makes the Conferences unique. They believe there are specific advantages in having a common forum for the European public sector in order to:

- raise awareness and contribute to a growing understanding of the challenges facing the public sector across Europe;
- promote effective cooperation across Europe; and to
- place and maintain quality on the agendas of all European public administrations.

- 3.4 All agreed that it is the opportunity to meet face-to-face with European colleagues which has enormous benefits in terms of inspiring and enthusing attendees and enabling them to establish European contacts.

### **Do Quality Conferences lead to public service improvements?**

- 3.5 It is difficult to give many exact examples of improvements to service delivery made as a result of attending the Quality Conferences. However many IPSG members and Directors General firmly believe that the ideas exposed at the conferences have helped drive improvement, albeit indirectly. A small number of DGs and others said that the QCs have actually led to improved public services and an increased transparency and trust in public agencies. A notable exception to this, however, is the example of CAF, where a significant number of IPSG members said they have implemented CAF in their own countries directly after obtaining information and talking about the framework at the QCs.
- 3.6 Some IPSG members said that the reason why they were not able to give concrete examples of service improvements was because they do not actually undertake this type of analysis and have no means of determining any improvements made as a result.
- 3.7 There was also a criticism made that the quality of the cases presented by some and the way these cases have been presented at the QCs have not always allowed easy transferability to other situations. The quality of cases presented has been variable. Past attendees, including IPSG and DGs, felt that more would be gained from hearing the full story of implementing change, rather than simply hearing about the successes, i.e. presenters should highlight the inevitable problems and difficulties which arise when innovative developments are made and explain how these were overcome.
- 3.8 There is also a very widely-held view that there has not always been sufficient time for practitioners (and these may well be senior practitioners) to discuss best practice cases in detail and for debate to take place. There were a significant number of requests for greater opportunities for more detailed discussions.

### **Focus of the Conferences**

- 3.9 Some DGs and IPSG members questioned whether the Quality Conferences were striking the right balance between theory and practice and wondered whether there was a danger of the conferences becoming too academic and drifting away from their principal aim of getting practitioners together. The overall feeling was that clear themes would help this and that, by having simply-defined themes, attendees would be able to identify clearly what they personally can obtain from attending and their expectations would be realistic as a result.



## **Format**

- 3.10 Although some DGs and IPSP members believed the present format for the conferences worked well, the overall view on the format of the conferences was that it needs to be simplified, i.e. by having a simpler structure, perhaps based around specific subjects. A popular suggestion was that there should be one clear theme for the whole conference, or perhaps a specific theme for each day. Although objectives have been set for each Quality Conference in the past, there was a widely-held view that these should be clearer in future and that they should not become lost in an overly-complex programme. Many IPSP members were of the view that a limit should be put on the number of participants and workshops, so that best practice cases could be explored more deeply. There should therefore be more focus on fewer crucial aspects of quality. This may well mean fewer workshops with a clearer orientation towards the conference's objectives.

## **Length of the Conferences**

- 3.11 All agreed that the Quality Conferences need to be of a sufficient length to allow time for reflection and true discussion – and that three days seemed about right.

## **The people attending the Conferences**

- 3.12 On the whole, DGs said they believed the right people attended the QCs and the overall view was that a mixture of people is needed at the conferences: i.e. practitioners as well as leaders and decision-makers. However there was also a strong message that the main target group for attendees should be the practitioners: the people directly responsible for the development of public administration in their countries. It is these people who can really make a difference in their own countries.
- 3.13 Many DGs and IPSP members emphasised the continuing need to ensure that Quality Conferences are as cost-effective as possible, to ensure that as many European colleagues can attend.
- 3.14 For the future, the key determinants for success will be having clear themes and targeted audiences, high quality sessions and cases to discuss, excellent speakers, and more opportunities for true discussion and networking. And of course all of this has to be provided at the right cost to applicants. With this in mind, the following recommendations are made.

## **4. Key recommendations**

### **4.1 Quality Conferences should continue;**

We recommend that Quality Conferences continue to be held on a bi-annual basis. There is enormous support for them across Europe.

## **4.2 Simplify the structure and content**

Less may be more, especially taking into account language differences, cultural diversity and time-consuming logistics within the conference space. We recommend that conference organisers consider running an appropriate number of keynote speeches, workshops and plenary sessions which allow a greater time for discussion and reflection. This recommendation was raised by participants, organisers and IPSG members following each of the Quality Conferences, including the first in Lisbon, but still does not appear to have been addressed to participants' satisfaction.

## **4.3 Keep the theme/s simple and ensure titles of sessions reflect content**

It is imperative that prospective attendees are not inadvertently misled about the overall aims of the conference and the content of its constituent parts. When expectations are raised by complex descriptions, attendees will invariably be disappointed if their expectations are not met.

- We recommend DGs set the themes for the quality conferences;
- We also recommend that course organisers and the presenters of best practice cases ensure that the theme/s and titles of all sessions accurately reflect content.

## **4.4 Improve the selection and quality of best practice cases;**

Building on the suggestions of IPSG colleagues, we suggest that whilst the responsibility of selecting best practice cases remains the responsibility of each member state, a more objective and rigorous selection process is adopted to maximise the value of best-practice cases, for example, by:

- IPSG member states agreeing a common approach to assessing the merits of each best practice case, e.g. through the use of a common evaluation form, such as annex 4, and/or through means already being explored in preparation for 4QC, such as IPSG members performing a "critical friend" role;
- IPSG having a "workshop-style" session set aside at an IPSG meeting so that IPSG members can discuss the key themes of the conference. In this informal way, IPSG members can ensure that the case studies adequately support the themes of the conference;
- DGs discussing how the case studies put forward by IPSG support the overriding themes of the conference. This discussion would help inform the preparations being made by conference organisers and in the longer term help to identify key themes/issues or exemplars which signpost possible subjects for future medium and long-term work programmes.

#### **4.5 Allow time and space for proper discussion and learning**

Feedback from each of the previous Quality Conferences and from the questionnaire completed as part of this review reveal that the desire to discuss subject matter and different approaches is still strongly felt.

#### **4.6 Cases at the Quality Conferences should enable learning and transferability**

We recommend that transferability is viewed as a key part not only of the selection of case studies for the Conferences, but also as a key part of the briefing for the presenters of the cases. A number of IPSG members and DGs, as well as attendees of previous conferences, have commented on the difficulty of translating the knowledge and skills they have heard about at the Conferences into real action when they return back home. The recent development of a “critical friend” role by IPSG for 4QC should be a practical means of ensuring that maximum benefit is drawn from the case studies.

#### **4.7 Evaluate success**

There should be a greater emphasis on evaluating Quality Conferences and a greater, more structured follow-up of the impact they make so that future conferences address the needs of attendees. For example, evaluation forms or other mechanisms should focus on asking the right questions, i.e. are you planning to implement any changes as a result of attending the conference? This wider questionnaire may be used in addition to simple questionnaires used to obtain attendees’ views of each individual session at the time of the conference.

#### **4.8 Disseminate good practice and innovative ideas more widely.**

We should ensure that maximum exposure is given to the very best practice cases through a gateway or other means on the EUPAN website, and perhaps through other mechanisms. Many IPSG members commented very favourably on the publication produced by colleagues in the Netherlands following 3QC “Quality Journeys in the European Public Sector”. Some IPSG members said that they publicise best practice cases in their own country after they have attended the QCs and others may wish to adopt this approach to encourage innovation.

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