

PMDU case study 2: reducing unfounded asylum applications

Public Service Agreement target 7 was: focus the asylum system on those genuinely fleeing persecution by taking speedy, high quality decisions and reducing significantly unfounded asylum claims by 2005. Asylum was then and remains today one of the most sensitive and highest profile issues in the country.

In some ways it was quite a grown up PSA - clarity about direction of travel - not lots of targets. This shows that for the PMDU model it is actually measures that matter. Targets can be powerful, but they can also get in the way or lead to gaming. One big advantage of how this worked in practice (which the later spending review setting the next iteration of PSAs in 2004 learned from) is the value of having a dialogue about what is possible, and what would be a stretching but achievable target. As opposed to starting off with a target you don't understand and have no idea about whether its possible – often set by someone outside of the department responsible for delivering it.

2002 – a gloomy picture

Back in October 2002, when I joined the delivery unit and was leading our work on asylum - the picture was pretty gloomy if you looked at the performance measure.

Applications rising fast - up to 9,000 a month.

Reducing unfounded asylum intake

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PSA Target 7
Focus the asylum system on those genuinely fleeing persecution by taking speedy, high quality decisions and reducing significantly unfounded asylum claims by 2005.

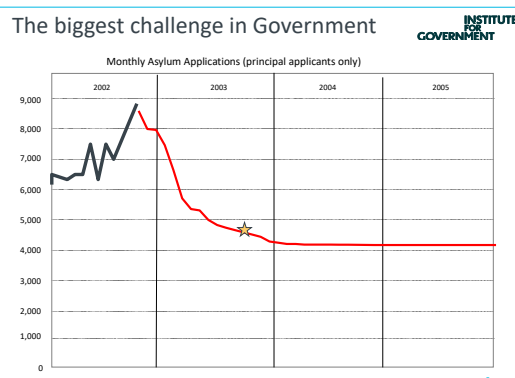
Focus Ambition Analysis & modelling Experimentation

Developing a plan

At this point the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) and the Department of Constitutional Affairs were constructing their first delivery plan - mapping out what they thought they could achieve.

The red line is their 'trajectory'. It was unusually ambitious - especially when at the point every week brought more bad news on the numbers of asylum seekers.

Several months in - a clear target was announced by the PM on TV. But he expressed his ambition as a point on the trajectory which had clearly settled in his subconscious - to halve asylum applications in the next 6 months.



Whilst that was what was being planned - rather than a finger in the air - it did emphasise the scale of the challenge and inherent risks in trying to hit the target in a system which can often be transformed by a new international crisis, or system breakdown.

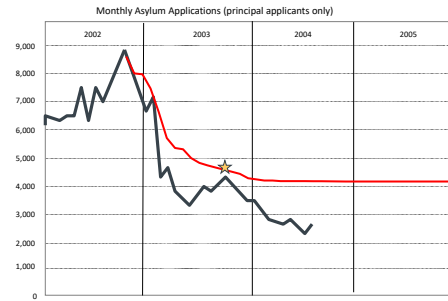
Astounding success

This target was not only met but exceeded.

How did they do this - when every previous push on asylum applications over the previous 10 years had ended in failure and embarrassment for government of the day?

Astounding success

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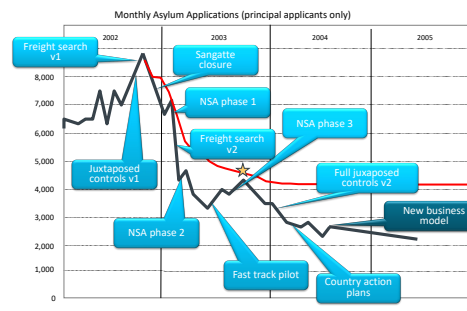
The power of trajectories...

They used the idea of trajectories to plot what actions they could take when – and how they could affect performance.

They modelled this. A great power of the model was conversations with front-line managers – backed by the clarity of their thinking about how the system worked. They needed the excellent data analysis team they had at the centre of IND.

Model and manage the impact

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This adds up to a great strategy – informed by real insights into the system – providing a sharp focus on which actions mattered most for delivery.

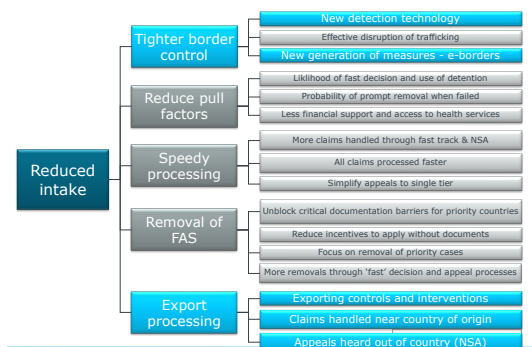
Fix the basics and be radical

They had developed a clear and focused strategy on some key elements which they thought would be key levers for an impact. This logic tree shows clearly the heart of that strategy.

In addition to sorting the operational basics (not at all easy) like speed of processing and some huge backlogs) they focused in particular on two fundamental and pretty radical areas:

Strategy: radical reform levers

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1. First having a border of significant integrity was key. So they took cutting edge heat detection and heart beat detection technology and applied it one what was then the high level of clandestine arrivals through hiding in trucks and freight. Building sheds was a challenge. Building fences. And even then they started investing in thinking about the potential of iris scanning and other biometric data - e-borders - so they could control and monitor who was entering and leading the country. Impressive foresight in the circumstances.

2. The second, more radical strand was thinking: Rather than try to better process people within the country - why not process them and establish controls outside of the country before they even get here. Export controls:

- Have English border control in France (since they can't then claim asylum in England if they are refused)
- Why not process claims processing claims in centres near where-ever there may be crisis. Cuts out the traffickers and trauma of some of the journeys refugees have to suffer before getting their claim considered. At the time this was still being explored in the EU, a long term proposal.
- But they moved more quickly on the idea of reducing the 'attraction of claiming asylum (at a point when it could take years before your appeal was heard). And they developed legislation which would mean that for people coming from countries designated as safe - they would have to return to their country of origin whilst their out of country appeal was heard.

Why they succeeded

I have covered the first 3 points from the slide above, two remain:

Ambitious leadership was key – not arguing about the target, but focusing on how to deliver it. The joint programme board was a model of working collaboratively between two departments. This owed a lot to the integrity and commitment of the respective senior officials – they accepted joint responsibility.

They were open to challenge – learned from outside – looked internationally for examples – and listened to what their staff were telling them.

Why they succeeded		INSTITUTE GOVERNMENT
Radical focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's the border stupid • Know the key levers - push radical reform • Integrating vision - the virtuous cycle 	
Do it - well enough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiment and pilot • 80/20 - take some risks 	
Analysis & trajectory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The best modelled trajectory • Draw on front-line insights and knowledge • Relentless focus on data - weekly (daily!) 	
Top drives delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambitious to improve • Top managers behaviour reinforced focus • New governance/programme management 	
Open to challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PMDU analysis of world-wide practice • Accept PMs/SoS concerns as legitimate • Use and work with external challenge 	

The nature of the IND is that they have a lot of frontline staff and their managers tend to be more operationally minded than is sometimes the default in Whitehall. They were able to get quick feedback from the frontline on what might work and what was working.

Source

The slides and supporting narrative are drawn from contemporaneous public slide decks used widely by PMDU staff internally and externally to explain, encourage and disseminate the PMDU approach and PMDU collaborated with departments to help them succeed.