

# Time for a change

The National School of Government's Dr Su Maddock tells **Ruth Keeling** why Whitehall needs to do more to boost innovation in the public services

Dr Su Maddock has had a wide range of experience in a dazzling array of sectors – the third sector, local government, healthcare, television – all of which make her well-placed to lead the National School of Government's effort on public innovation. Currently on a two-year secondment from Manchester Business School, where she set up their 'change centre' and is a senior fellow, she is currently busy organising the government's November conference on public innovation.

Just how hot this topic is, is shown by the fact that the conference will be followed by *Whitehall and Westminster World's* own on the same subject just three weeks later. "There's a recognition amongst politicians and a lot of people in the public system that we can't just carry on improving existing practices, and that there's a

connection between what goes on in social innovation on the ground and what happens in government," explains Maddock.

But what is innovation? It is a completely different way of doing things, Maddock says, not just making things more efficient. "A lot of the solutions that in the past have been based on the notion that if we make what we've got work faster and quicker, that will be okay, but it just *isn't*, because you're just doing the same things like a hamster," she says.

Although innovation has "shot up the agenda", Maddock says there is still a lot more to be done. "The next stage is to reflect on not just being enthusiastic and having a lot of warm words but actually looking at what role senior civil servants have in supporting the spread of in-

novation," she explains. "In the past, there would have been an assumption that you get a good idea and then you roll it out... that you send out a diktat. Actually, that doesn't work. All these things rest on listening more to where innovation is already going and creating the conditions for it to spread."

That means adjusting the way Whitehall managers look at finance, performance management and communication – building relationships so that the centre is listening closely to what is happening on the ground. "It's no longer about a group of policy advisers deciding what a service should be; we have to get much closer to what the problems are to know what it is we're delivering," Maddock explains.

According to her research, at least 50 per cent of the innovative solu-

tions are coming from those working on the ground, seeing the issues up close. "If you are very removed from social realities, you're not very likely to think up what's a good thing to do about them. It usually takes at least two or three years for things to filter up the system.

"So, for example, most people in communities have known that bullying and gangs have been an issue for years. It's more in the news now because they've got access to guns, but the environment has been there for a long time it's just that we haven't been listening to what that experience is."

The government's conference will bring together innovation units from across Whitehall as well as innovators from across the country, who will explain the trials and tribulations of making an idea a

reality, with differing levels of official support. Maddock hopes that the senior civil servants in attendance will be listening keenly to what they have to say and taking some important lessons back to their departmental colleagues.

*Creating the Conditions for Public Innovation* will be held in central London on November 1, with the aim of generating awareness of public service innovations and discussing the role of government in creating the conditions for the future spread of innovation in the public sector.

*Further information and booking details can be obtained at [www.nationalschool.gov.uk/news\\_events/stories/PIC1.asp](http://www.nationalschool.gov.uk/news_events/stories/PIC1.asp), or by contacting Lucy Hosking MacLeod on 01344 634185*