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# Sharper teeth mean higher standards

The public sector is too keen to move on rather than learn from mistakes and enforce accountability. And bodies such as the Audit Commission should have more teeth – especially in areas of business continuity and corporate responsibility – Chris Flint, crisis management adviser at risk management and insurance intermediaries Special Contingency Risks and Willis Group, tells Lynda King Taylor

Chris Flint says his soundings from the business boardrooms he deals and debates with suggest a growing concern that the UK is increasingly in danger of becoming not just mismanaged but in some respects unmanaged.

There are, he says, seldom really “strategic” responses to issues and incidents. Instead there is “too often a knee-jerk reaction”.

“The problem is there is too often little or no accountability inherent in our systems,” says Flint, who began his career in policing, including a stint with the special branch, before working internationally for Cadburys and going on to work at senior levels in business resilience and risk management.

Flint acknowledges that, on paper at least, there are bodies to promote accountability, such as the Audit Commission and a range of Parliamentary select committees. But for Flint, these “too often appear to be ineffective and are generally producing reports which are in many cases months if not years after the event – having put forward little more than recommendations and proposals for improvements”.

He claims there is nothing that would suggest such organisations have the teeth to impose accountability – both in terms of reputation but also financially – on organisations, groups or individuals. Instead there is a stampede for the “easy way out”.

“This attitude that ‘ok, we made a big mistake, we spent £5bn on some initiative which has not produced what we thought it would’ means that problems are too often regarded as bad luck, and let’s go onto the next thing,” Flint says. “The idea of ‘let’s move on’ is something which is frustrating to many.”

“Parliament should give more teeth to make individuals and organisations liable for failures.”

Greater attention should be given to promoting high standards of governance and accountability, and also to stimulate significant improvement in the quality of data available to decision makers and the effective use of such information. A lack of effective financial management both at central and local government levels is now a major issue, claims Flint.

He argues that accountable staff in both the pub-



FLINT: “too often a knee-jerk reaction”

lic and private sectors should face criminal charges when appropriate, for example if they put people’s data at risk through carelessness or impropriety. “Managers should also be obliged to report losses of data and other breaches.”

His views echo the recent report by the House of Commons Justice Committee, which urged extra powers for the Information Commissioner to carry out unannounced “spot checks” in firms and government departments. Flint believes this is long overdue.

Another area of concern is implementation of the Civil Contingencies Act, but in this case it is the

private sector that is proving slower to wake up to its implications, Flint says.

“Managements are slow to adopt the provisions of the Civil Contingencies Act and other moderating pieces of legislation in terms of how they should react in the event of a catastrophic incident.”

There needs, Flint insists, to be a greater requirement on companies from central government to improve their procedures and processes to ensure they are properly prepared with full contingency plans in the event of an unexpected incident.

“We are never going to know how, when and what that particular incident will be – although when a company does a robust risk and threat assessment this will initiate indicators which can determine how much resource will need to be directed and at least provide a reliable response to a critical incident.”

There are increasing obligations under the new business continuity British Standard BS 25999 Part 2, which provides a far longer list of contingencies compliance than previously existed.

“In my opinion this must have the force of law,” he says. “Enforcement must occur stringently and vigorously.”

Flint also argues that, even when fully implemented, the Civil Contingencies Act is too weak a piece of legislation. He would like to see the private and public sectors put under notice that business continuity is not something that should be delegated to junior levels but rather the obligation of the executive board.

“We are seeing some evidence of that attitude to directors’ accountability under the Corporate Manslaughter Act 2007, which came into effect in April. As such we should see some interesting cases before the courts for deliberation.

“I would hope that while that legislation can be used in certain circumstances it could be the forerunner of further legislation, which demands of companies and central government far better management and responsibility for everyday affairs.

“When things go wrong, issues need to be dealt with by using a properly researched and tested response procedure. At present this is not happening and will not happen without more teeth at centre.”

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